

The benefits of sibling rivalry, brotherly love

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Siblings, and even sibling rivalry, can have a positive effect on children's early development and their ability to form social relationships later in life, according to a new study.

The finding is one of a host of conclusions which have emerged from a five-year research project by academics at the University of Cambridge, examining children's cognitive and social development between the ages of two and six.

Entitled "Toddlers Up", the project was conceived after other studies showed that even by the age of four, some children already display the conduct and behavioral problems that hinder progress at school and beyond. This suggests that the causes and symptoms of such problems

may emerge even earlier, while they are still toddlers.

The need to intervene in the lives of vulnerable children at an earlier stage to address this was highlighted in a recent Government report, led by Graham Allen MP, who will publish a second set of recommendations on the subject later this year.

The findings from the Toddlers Up study appear in a new book, *Social Understanding and Social Lives*, by Dr. Claire Hughes, from the University of Cambridge's Center for Family Research. The book will be launched at an event in Cambridge on Friday, 8 April.

It aims to map out the causes and influences behind children's "social understanding" – their awareness of others thoughts and feelings – and to explain why that of some children lags behind that of their peers.

In all, 140 children were studied, starting when they were just two years old. The group focused on low-income and teen parent families, into which some of the children deemed most at risk are often born. 43% of the children surveyed had mothers who were still teenagers when their first child was born, and 25% of the families involved were living below the poverty line of £12K household income per year.

A wide range of tests were carried out over the course of the five year study. They included video observations of the children interacting with their parents, [siblings](#), friends and strangers; interviews and questionnaires carried out with parents, teachers and the children themselves; and various assessments designed to test the children's aptitude with language, their planning skills, working memory and inhibitory control.

One of the most striking conclusions concerns siblings, who researchers found can often have a positive effect on a child's early development,

even in cases where the relationship is less than cordial.

Although the project team warn that sustained sibling rivalry can result in behavioural problems and issues with relationship-building later in life, milder forms were shown, in the new study, to have a beneficial impact on development in childhood.

“The traditional view is that having a brother or sister leads to a lot of competition for parents’ attention and love,” Dr. Hughes said. “In fact, the balance of our evidence suggests that children’s social understanding may be accelerated by their interaction with siblings in many cases.”

“One of the key reasons for this seems to be that a sibling is a natural ally. They are often on the same wavelength, and they are likely to engage in the sort of pretend play that helps children to develop an awareness of mental states.”

Transcripts taken from video recordings in which pairs of siblings were involved in pretend play show that this is an arena in which children discuss thoughts and feelings in depth. Often they provide what the researchers refer to as the “emotional scaffolding” around which children construct a story that helps them develop their ideas about, and awareness, of different mental states.

Interestingly, even where sibling rivalry was evident, for example with one child teasing or arguing with the other, the exchanges still meant the younger child was often exposed to emotionally rich language from the older one. As a result, although younger siblings showed low rates of mental state talk than their elder siblings at age three, by the age of six their social understanding had increased rapidly, and they were conversing about emotions on an almost equal footing.

A similar lesson for parents also emerges from the study, which argues

that the quality, as well as the quantity of conversations adults have with their children concerning thoughts and feelings, helps children’s social understanding to grow.

The researchers found that mothers who were adept at developing a connected and constructive dialogue around their child’s thoughts or feelings again built a more effective “emotional scaffold”, which gave these children a consistently higher level of social understanding by the time they reached the age of four.

“The children who performed best on tasks designed to test their social understanding at the age of six came from families where the mother carried out conversations in which they elaborated on ideas, highlighted differences in points of view, or tuned into children’s interests,” Dr. Hughes said.

“A lot of attention has been given to the beneficial impact of [children](#) being exposed to lots of family conversation. This shows we need to focus on the nature and quality of that conversation as well.”

Provided by University of Cambridge

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