

Jealousy of eldest child can be predicted before birth of younger sibling

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Parents who play with a doll and then ignore their child, elicit the same jealous behavior in the child as a newborn brother or sister can do later. The lack of attention from the mother elicits more jealousy from the child than the same lack of attention from the father. Psychologist Nóra Szabó discovered this during her PhD research project at Utrecht University.

During home visits, the psychologist investigated how the relationships in 87 two-parent families in the Netherlands changed with the arrival of a second child. Before the birth of a [brother](#) or sister, toddlers are already capable of exhibiting jealous behavior if their [parents](#) ignore them. Szabó's research has now revealed that this jealousy is stronger if the attention of one or both parents is demanded by a doll than if the parents are distracted by non-social objects, such as the reading of a book.

'Strategies' that the observed children used to regain the attention of their parents include distraction, seeking comfort, anger and hitting. Interestingly mothers elicited more jealous behavior in the child than fathers. "This might be because the mothers spend a lot of time each day with the child," explains Szabó. "That means that children sooner expect to be comforted by their mother than by their father and so react more strongly if that attention is not given." The researcher also discovered that the degree of jealousy the child exhibits towards the doll is a predictor for the jealousy the child will later exhibit to a newly born brother or sister aged one month.

During a house visit a year later the firstborn children were less jealous of their smaller brother or sister than they were a year previously. That could be because towards that time the child has learned to regulate its emotions better. This effect of decreasing jealousy is enhanced when parents indicate that they have a good marriage and a good rapport with their child. According to Szabó it is important to unravel which factors contribute to the rapport between young brothers and sisters, as these early interactions are defining for the later relationships the child will enter into.

The researchers made three house visits over a period of two years to each family who participated in the study. At the time of the first house visit, each of the 87 families had a child in the toddler age group and were expecting a second child. The researchers organized play sessions of two hours for each visit in which the mother and the father both individually and together played with the child or briefly ignored it. Besides the focus on [jealousy](#), Szabó also investigated the cooperation between parents in her research. This revealed that the more the second child cries and is harder to comfort, the less well the parents function as a team in raising the second child, but also the first. Szabó also determined how the care provided by the one parent changes in the presence of the other parent. She established that fathers withdrew more if the mother was already giving attention to the child but that the opposite was not true. However when the mother was not there the father once again took over the complete care and [attention](#) for the [child](#).

More information: On 10 April she defends her doctoral thesis at Utrecht University, the Netherlands.

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