

A new study from BYU found that [parents'](#) beliefs about their children—and the comparisons they make—may cause differences to be magnified.

"Parents' beliefs about their children, not just their actual parenting, may influence who their children become," said BYU professor and lead author of the study Alex Jensen.

The study, published Friday in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, focused on [siblings](#) and academic achievement. Jensen and co-author Susan McHale from Penn State looked at 388 teenage first- and second-born siblings and their parents from 17 school districts in a northeastern state. The researchers asked the parents which sibling was better in school. The majority of parents thought that the firstborn was better, although on average, siblings' achievement was pretty similar.

parents' beliefs about sibling differences weren't influenced by past grades, but future grades by the teenagers were influenced by the parents' beliefs. The child parents believed was smarter tended to do better in the future. The child parents believed was less capable tended to do relatively poorer the next year. Specifically, that belief translated to a 0.21 difference in GPA among study participants.

"That may not sound like much," Jensen said. "But over time those small effects have the potential to turn into siblings who are quite different from one another."

Jensen cautions about a chicken-and-egg scenario here. By the time siblings reach the teenage years, parents may have formed their beliefs about siblings' relative smarts from years of experiences. So when parents compare adolescent siblings to each other, it may be based on differences that have existed for years.

"A mom or dad may think that oldest sibling is smarter because at any given time they are doing more complicated subjects in school," Jensen said. "The firstborn likely learned to read first, to write first, and that places the thought in the parent's mind that they are more capable, but when the siblings are teenagers it leads to the siblings becoming more different. Ultimately, the sibling who is seen as less smart will tend to do worse in comparison to their sibling."

The one exception in the study was when the firstborn was a brother and the secondborn a sister. In that case, parents believed the sister was more academically competent.

"Parents tend to view older siblings as more capable, but on average older siblings are not doing better in school than their [younger siblings](#)," Jensen said. "So in that case parents' [beliefs](#) are inaccurate. Parents also tend to think their daughters are more academically competent than their sons, and at least in terms of grades that seems to be true."

So what should parents do to set up all of their children for success?

"It's hard for parents to not notice or think about differences between their children, it's only natural," Jensen said. "But to help all children succeed, parents should focus on recognizing the strengths of each of their [children](#) and be careful about vocally making comparisons in front of them."

More information: "What makes siblings different? The development of sibling differences in academic achievement and interests." *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol 29(3), Jun 2015, 469-478.
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