

It's great to have siblings, but they're also hard work

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What do children think about their new families? A research project conducted by the Danish School of Education at Aarhus University focuses on what happens to sibling relationships when mum and dad get divorced and find new partners.

The truth is that we know very little about what children and young people in Denmark think about having brothers and sisters. Who do they regard as [siblings](#), what do they do together, and what do they definitely NOT do together? What does getting a new brother or sister mean to them? Are the children you live with your siblings, regardless of whether they have the same [parents](#) as you? Are some siblings more genuine than others? And can you ever stop being a sibling?

What do children think about their new families? A group of researchers at the Danish School of Education at Aarhus University have studied this question in a new research and communication project called (Ex)Changeable Siblingship.

"Siblingships don't just arise automatically. You have to make an emotional investment if it's going to work, and children are highly motivated to do this. But it's also hard work, and the more siblings children have, the more complex this work becomes," says Ida Wentzel Winther, project manager and associate professor at the Danish School of Education.

What do the children think?

The project provides insight into what it's like to have siblings Denmark today. The kind of relationships and competences that siblings develop vary a great deal, depending on whether they live in more than one home or in traditional families where there are relatively small age gaps between brothers and sisters.

"A good deal of research has been done on broken families and relationships between parents and their children, and on how parents handle sibling jealousy. But there has been hardly any focus on what the children themselves think. We think it's important to add a horizontal perspective - the children's perspective," says Winther.

Children of divorced parents are good at logistics One important objective of the study was to examine how relationships between siblings influence their living and coping strategies.

"A number of the children who have more than one home and more than one group of siblings are good at commuting, logistics and adaptation. They're also good at finding their way into and out of relationships," reports Winther.

The research results also show that all the siblings in divorced families are deeply affected when their siblings move in and out. For instance, the parents of a boy interviewed for the project were really surprised when he told the researchers that his parents were divorced, because they aren't! He said it because he also has two big sisters who live with their other family every third week. So he has to handle the challenge of being left by his sisters, and he wishes he knew more about their life in their other family.

"All in all, modern siblingships can be understood as potential sites of

social learning, where children practise having responsibilities, caring for each other and social coordination," explains Winther.

Let children sort it out themselves

Many new siblingships are strong and emotional. Even so, a good number of children feel that their parents are too keen to ensure (with the best of intentions) that all the siblings should spend time together and develop a bond. Their parents want them to develop a close relationship quickly, but this desire for closeness can have the opposite effect and may put the children under pressure. In other words, sometimes the adults need to stop interfering and let new siblingships develop naturally.

The research group challenge the prevalent notion that it's a shame for children who don't grow up in a nuclear family. The researchers don't address this issue and have no opinion about divorce and shared parenting. They point out that divorce and broken families where children are separated and get new siblings are a basic fact of life; and that it's important to focus not just on the consequences for relationships between parents, new partners and children. Relationships between the children are also very important, even though they're often ignored.

"Regardless of whether [children](#) live in multiple nuclear families and have siblings at multiple addresses, or whether they all live together, siblingships are characterised by a special dynamics, a kind of delicate balance between closeness and distance, dominance and loving care, continuity and change, similarities and differences, identification and independence," explains Winther.

More information: Read more about the project and download "Siblings - Practical and Sensitive Relations" as a free e-book at: www.edu.au.dk/siblings

Provided by Aarhus University

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