

Family favoritism: Younger siblings impacted more

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Treat your children fairly, not necessarily equally, says Alex Jensen, assistant professor in BYU's School of Family Life and author of a new study in the *Journal of Adolescence*. Credit: Nate Edwards/BYU Photo

A new study by BYU School of Family Life assistant professor Alex

Jensen revealed that the perception of favoritism may have more effect on a child-parent relationship than was previously considered.

Specifically, Jensen found that [favoritism](#) is linked more to [younger siblings'](#) parent-child relationships than with the older siblings'. If the younger [sibling](#) feels like they're the favorite and the parents agree, their [relationship](#) is strengthened. If they don't feel like the favorite and the parents agree with that, the opposite happens. Surprisingly with older siblings, whether they feel favored or not, it has no major impact on the relationship.

What could be the reason behind this difference? Jensen says social comparison—one sibling comparing himself to the other — is the culprit.

"It's not that first-borns don't ever think about their siblings and themselves in reference to them," Jensen said. "It's just not as active of a part of their daily life. My guess is it's probably rarer that parents will say to an older sibling, 'Why can't you be more like your younger sibling?' It's more likely to happen the other way around."

The data in the study were collected from a longitudinal study with more than 300 families, each with two teenage [children](#).

To measure levels of favoritism, researchers looked at responses from both the children and their parents. The children were asked what their relationship with their parents is like while their parents were asked how much warmth and conflict they experienced with their children. They found that children, on average, have more warmth and more conflict with their mothers, but the rates of change in relationship for both mother and father were similar.

The study looked at families with two children, but Jensen believes that

the data would show similar results for larger families as well.

"If you had to ask me, 'Do we see the same thing with the second born and third born?' I think probably so," Jensen said. "The youngest kid looks up to everybody, the next youngest kid looks up to everyone older than them, and it just kind of goes up the line."

While parents may think treating their children equally is the best way to mitigate any negative effects, Jensen says this is not the case.

"When parents are more loving and they're more supportive and consistent with all of the kids, the favoritism tends to not matter as much," Jensen said. "Some [parents](#) feel like 'I need to treat them the same.' What I would say is 'No you need to treat them fairly, but not equally.' If you focus on it being okay to treat them differently because they're different people and have different needs, that's OK."

More information: Alexander C. Jensen et al, Mothers', fathers', and siblings' perceptions of parents' differential treatment of siblings: Links with family relationship qualities, *Journal of Adolescence* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.08.002](#)

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