Research Update

Reciprocal and Complementary Sibling Interactions: Relations With Socialization Outcomes in the Kindergarten Classroom

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IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATIVE EXTENSION:

This study’s results indicate that sibling interactions may help with building social skills in young children. Kindergarteners in single- and 2-parent families were studied. It was found that kindergarteners’ social status in the classroom was associated with sibling interaction patterns. In single-parent families, if there was more sibling reciprocity kindergartners’ showed better social skills. This suggests that those working with divorcing or other single-parent families could provide skills that enhance certain sibling interactions to help build children’s social skills.

Overview: Past research suggest that sibling interactions help with children’s social skill development and the ability for them to participate in positive peer relations. The individual differences that predict positive social experiences at school could come from the levels of complementary or reciprocal interactions between siblings. A complementary sibling interaction would involve the older, more skilled, sibling teaching or dominating over the younger sibling. A reciprocal sibling interaction would look more like play among peers. Certain qualities of sibling interactions may lessen the effects of family stress on child adjustment. This study aimed to categorize the relationship among kindergarteners and their siblings, test whether these relationship interaction patterns will be associated with social status in kindergarten, and whether complementary sibling interactions will protect against the elevated risk for adjustment problems for children in single-parent families.

Method: Data were collected from 113 kindergarten children and their nearest age sibling. At the time, 30 children were living in single parent homes and 83 were living in two-parent homes. Kindergartners took part in 4 hours of observations at home with siblings, classmates participated in sociometric interviews, and teachers completed behavior ratings. Sibling interactions were coded using a 39-item checklist to calculate the relative amount of complementary and reciprocal sibling interactions observed in each dyad.

Results: This research found (1) complementarity sibling interactions occurred more in kindergarteners with young siblings than among kindergartners with older siblings, (2) higher levels of complementarity sibling
interactions predicted lower levels of internalizing problems, (3) kindergartners’ social status in the classroom differed as a function of sibling interaction patterns. There was evidence suggesting that sibling reciprocity was positively associated with kindergartners’ social skills in single-parent families whereas complementary sibling interactions were positively related to internalizing problems in two-parent families.

**Applications for Professionals and Parents:**

1. Those working with divorcing or other single parent families may want to provide the education on skills geared towards enhancing sibling interaction styles.

2. It is important that positive reciprocal sibling interactions are learned, which could be practiced by parents scaffolding peer-like interactions with their children.