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Relationships Between Siblings in The Opinion of Late Adolescents

Relacje między rodzeństwem w opinii późnych adolescentów

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Abstract

Aim. In pedagogy, the topic of siblings is rarely explored. The environment of brothers and sisters is the first place in which an individual learns cooperation, mutual support, tolerance, and attitudes that are essential for functioning in adult life. The aim of this article is to present a research, whose objective was sibling relationships from the perspective of late adolescents, taking into account factors that are significant to them.

Methods and materials. A survey study was conducted among young people aged between 18 and 23, therefore, people entering adulthood, with a research sample of 140 participants. The survey questionnaire examining family relationships consisted of closed-ended questions and open-ended questions, which gave respondents the opportunity to speak freely or justify their declarations. A part of the survey focused on relationships with siblings included questions about the meaning of having a sibling, its advantages and disadvantages, conflicts between siblings, and the role of parents in forming such a relationship.

Results and conclusion. Based on the study, a conclusion may be drawn that although

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the modernisation processes affect the family structure and its functioning, young people perceive their siblings as friendly, supportive, and helpful, despite occasional annoyances. The respondents attribute considerable significance to shaping sibling relationships to their parents.

Keywords: family, relationships, parents, attachment, siblings

Abstrakt

Cel. W pedagogice rzadko podejmowana jest tematyka rodzeństwa. Środowisko braci i sióstr jest pierwszym środowiskiem, w którym jednostka uczy się współpracy, wzajemnej pomocy, tolerancji, postaw, które są bardzo istotne dla funkcjonowania w dorosłym życiu. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie badań, których przedmiotem były relacje między rodzeństwem z perspektywy późnych adolescentów z uwzględnieniem czynników, które mają dla nich znaczenie. Badania sondażowe przeprowadzono wśród młodzieży między 18 a 23 rokiem życia, a więc wśród osób wchodzących w dorosłość. Próba badawcza liczyła 140 osób. Na podstawie badań można stwierdzić, że duże znaczenie w kształtowaniu relacji między rodzeństwem respondenci przypisują rodzicom.

Metody i materiały. Badania sondażowe przeprowadzono wśród młodzieży między 18 a 23 rokiem życia, a więc wśród osób wchodzących w dorosłość. Próba badawcza liczyła 140 osób. Kwestionariusz ankiety badający relacje w rodzinie zbudowany był z pytań o kafeterii zamkniętej oraz pytań otwartych, które dawały szansę na swobodną wypowiedź lub uzasadnienie swoich deklaracji. Część narzędzia poświęcona relacjom z rodzeństwem zawierała pytania o znaczenie posiadania rodzeństwa, jego dobre i złe strony, konflikty między rodzeństwem oraz rolę rodziców w ich kształtowaniu.

Wyniki i wnioski. Na podstawie badań można stwierdzić, iż mimo procesów modernizacji ingerujących w strukturę i funkcjonowanie rodziny, młodzież postrzega własne rodzeństwo, jako osoby przyjazne, wspierające, pomocne pomimo dokuczliwości. Duże znaczenie w kształtowaniu relacji między rodzeństwem respondenci przypisują rodzicom.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, relacje, przywiązanie, rodzice, rodzeństwo

Introduction

In the pedagogical literature, much attention is paid to the family and its contemporary transformations in structure, functions, and relationships. The family has traditionally been seen as an important reference group co-created by its members, from which they adopt its prevailing views, models of behaviour, and conduct. It is a platform for interactions that take different forms depending on the stage which the family and its

members are undergoing (Tyszka, 1993). When considering family processes, it must be acknowledged that the family is an emotional community in which emotions play a prominent role in building relationships. Emotions are spontaneous, based on mutual interest, help, and care, but are also linked to expectations of support, security, maintaining mental balance, or the possibility of telling about negative experiences (Szczepański, 1972). This is an ideal picture of how a family functions. It is worth remembering that emotions between family members can sometimes be negative, full of mutual resentment, characterised by grief and anger expressed in an intense way, often without inhibition. The family cannot be seen as a certain constant, as it goes through various stages of development, with changes in relationships, functions, interactions and also in numbers at each stage. It is also subject to alterations due to transformational changes (Kawula, 2007; Przybył, 2017; Tyszka, 1993).

Following the transformation of the 1990s, the modern family has undergone a modernisation process. Alternative forms of marriage and family life, families of choice, second marriages and reconstituted families, the weekend family, and monoparentalism are contemporary family forms. All of them are the result of planning according to individual personal scenarios. On an individual scale, people have started to decide for themselves what kind of structure a family is for them, and towards whom they have obligations. They all require new competences: the ability to communicate, to negotiate, to compromise, to be tolerant, and to constantly make choices. The changes taking place in the family structure have also changed the nature of intra-family relationships. New forms of family life entail new ways of perceiving one's own obligations towards participants of family life. The increased importance of individualism, manifested in autonomy and the ability to make choices, results in the individual being able to base their relationships with others on the principles of partner exchange (mutual support, co-operation, honesty) or as a source of profit, maximisation of one's own well-being (Guzy-Steinke, 2013; Przybył, 2017).

There is a whole complex of forces operating in the family that attract and bind family members to each other or repel them by disrupting relationships. The family bond is the result of internal and external forces occurring in the family environment and affecting individual family members (Dyczewski, 2002). According to Elżbieta Sujak, the "essential conditions for the maintenance and development of bonds within the family are presence, time spent together, and joint participation in daily chores, as well as festive events" (1981, p. 85).¹

Family ties undoubtedly give this environment a unique shape, character, and atmosphere. The closeness of the relationship, love, care, concern, and the sense of duty and responsibility bind the family together into a single and unique whole. Interactions

¹ Author's own translation.

develop at the level of traditions passed on, values assimilated, duties, orders and prohibitions, and views discussed. The modernisation of families has introduced fundamental changes in this area; as Iwona Przybył has pointed out, the privileges and responsibilities of a family member now result not so much from the regulations contained in moral and legal codes or customs, but primarily from the autonomous choices of individuals (Przybył, 2017). “Close relatives are not necessarily seen as the most important source of support, of material assistance, of supporting interests, of fulfilling aspirations” (Przybył, 2017, p. 194).² So how do relationships between siblings develop?

Relationships Between Siblings – Theoretical Assumptions

The issue of siblings is rarely addressed in pedagogical research, and it is in relationships with siblings that we learn dialogue, tolerance, compromise, and co-operation. The family as a social unit is based on the family bond between individuals, which is the basic condition for the existence of the family. Its warp and weft are the moral feelings that generate a sense of duty. Children learn duties and obligations in family relationships primarily towards parents and siblings (Guzy-Steinke, 2013). Siblings are people who usually have the same parents and share the same family history; the relationships they share come first and take precedence over relationships developed in other friendships or love relationships. Good and satisfying relationships require the active development of bonds and working on mutual understanding or conflict resolution.

For this purpose, it is essential to refer to shared values and to engage in the up-bringing process in the family, as well as in one's own development. Siblings who respond to these challenges build a unique bond that sometimes lasts a lifetime (Gilski, 2021). Intimacy and closeness between siblings are generally formed in the space of the family home, which is the centre of family life (Nymś-Górna, 2018). The bond between siblings is described as a specific miniature world of the family environment. These ties are similar to relationships between adults, although they are governed by different laws and provide experiences that cannot be reproduced in other groups (Śledzianowski, 2008). What is important – the arrangement of roles and the child's position in the family, depending on the rights and responsibilities assigned to them and the expectations of their loved ones. The child's role and position influence the extent of their experience, the ways in which they learn and acquire habits (Zasańska, 2009). During childhood, siblings are constant companions who support each other and learn to cooperate, influencing each other's attitudes, school success, behaviour, and even the quality of friendship. The quality of relationships between siblings and their

² Author's own translation.

development during childhood provides the basis for their relationships in later stages of life, as well as relationships with other people in adulthood (Gurba & Franc, 2021).

Susan Murphy lists three types of relationships between siblings representing middle and early childhood. The first is the relationship involving the older sibling in the role of a quasi-parent performing and often enjoying tasks such as dressing and feeding their younger sibling(s). In this case, the sibling(s) act(s) as a guardian. The second type of relationship is the buddy. It is a close, collegial, friendly, and emotional relationship in which the older child engages the younger sibling(s) as an ally against the parents. The third type of relationship is the casual sibling characterised by a lack of interest in the younger sibling(s). The younger siblings are perceived as uninteresting compared to peers (Gurba & Franc, 2021).

According to Gregory Godawa, siblings teach us to share, to apologise, and to deal with criticism (2021). The older sibling is a role model for the younger; even though they may live in conflict with each other, they learn many things, both positive and negative, from each other. The attachment between siblings develops over time. As siblings move from adolescence into adulthood, their relationship transforms from an imposed relationship to one that is more voluntary and similar to peer relationships (Rzewucka & Luber, 2021). The quality of the relationship between siblings depends on a number of factors, especially on the age of the sibling, the gender, the mutual relations between the adults (Ziemska, 1986), and the position in the siblings, *i.e.*, whether they are the first, middle, or youngest child in the family, or an only child or a twin (Jagiela, 2007). Research has shown that boys' attitudes to their brothers are completely different than to their sisters. Older siblings look after younger siblings much more willingly when their age difference is greater than one or two years. Good relationships between siblings foster the child's development and can influence future life attitudes (Ziemska, 1986). As Barbara Harwas-Napierała points out:

[...] older siblings are expected to take on the responsibility for younger siblings handed down to them, to provide direct services (including the formation of sibling coalitions to interact with parents), and to provide resources for themselves (including physical defence, skill teaching, *etc.*). (Harwas-Napierała, 2006, p. 67)³

In the family, there are clearly established rules of subordination, respect and obedience of children to their parents, a sense of community, a sense of belonging, and bonds maintained by family traditions or shared memory (Guzy-Steinke, 2013). During early adulthood, siblings are a support for each other, especially when coping with further new developmental tasks. In later stages of life, they help each other, *e.g.*,

³ Author's own translation.

by caring for each other's children or co-operating in taking care of their parents (Harwas-Napierała, 2006). Agnieszka Górna-Nymś emphasises the importance of time and attention dedicated to building closeness between siblings by playing together, taking an interest in each other's needs, or accepting the person with all of their strengths and weaknesses (2018).

In the 21st century, the bond between siblings has become particularly important due to the work demands placed on the modern parent, which often result in long absences during the day and less and less time for their children, thus posing new challenges for the children. In such settings, siblings must rely on each other, helping each other (*e.g.*, helping with homework), interacting, overcoming difficulties together, playing together, *etc.*, which brings them closer together and strengthens their bonds (Śledzianowski, 2008).

The relationship between siblings is defined as one that takes place between individuals who usually share the same biological parents and involves all actions between them, including verbal and non-verbal communication (Gurba & Franc, 2021). The family is a network of mutual expectations determining the way of interacting with each other. Each family produces its own system of interactions that are repeated and perpetuated in the form of patterns indicating how to behave towards whom. These interaction patterns regulate the behaviour of family members towards each other depending on their position (de Barbaro, 1999; Guzy-Steinke, 2013).

Methodological Assumptions of the Research

The survey was conducted among young people aged between 18 and 23; the research sample consisted of 140 people. The research sample consisted of young people in late adolescence at the time of forming their own identity and striving for independence, built largely on relationships with others, including their siblings and parents. The majority of the survey sample (68%) were women, 54% of respondents had one sibling, and others came from larger families. 36% had older siblings, 16.8% had younger siblings, 46% had older and younger siblings, and one person had a twin brother. The survey questionnaire exploring relationships within the family was structured with closed-ended cafeteria questions and open-ended questions that provided opportunities for people to speak freely or justify their statements. The section of the tool devoted to sibling relations included questions about the importance of having siblings, its good and bad sides, conflicts between siblings, and the role of parents in shaping them.

Research Results

When asked about the importance of siblings in their lives, young people declared that having a sibling was synonymous with receiving support (72.6%), feeling safe (45.2%), the possibility of playing together (35.7%), and unconditional love (29.8%). For respondents, having a sibling means as much as: “to have a friend, to have someone to rely on, to have support” (W: 20); “they make me feel loved and valued” (W: 19); “they give meaning to my life” (W: 22); “having someone to rely on regardless of the situation” (M: 20); “having a sibling is a nice thing, you have someone close to you who has known you since childhood all your life” (W: 21). “To have a sibling is to have a close person of a similar age who will understand something more than the parent” (M: 19). “One is never alone. A sibling is the kind of friend you get from birth, yours or his/her, and, as with a friend, you do not always agree with each other” (W: 21).

The young people admitted that they spend much time with their siblings (very much – 27.4% and much – 38.1%) talking, watching TV together, playing computer games, doing daily activities (cleaning, eating), and doing homework. Older adolescents declared going out together with their siblings (34.5%). When asked about the advantages of having siblings, respondents indicated: “frequent support in something we don’t know how to tell our parents about” (M: 21); “support in really hard times” (M: 22). The good thing is the opportunity to spend leisure time together: “You have someone to laugh with, to talk to” (M: 21). “Company, shared fun, shared memories” (W: 23); “a great person to talk to about university or work” (W: 21).

Siblings are also people who try to understand their brother’s or sister’s problems because “it is a person who gets around in a similar world” (W: 21). “Learning to share, to respect another person or even to be tolerant of the other and different” (W: 22). This remark points to the educational functions that, despite the modernisation of the family, changes in its structure and modification of its functions, are still the basis for its longevity.

In their statements, young people also pointed out the problematic sides of having siblings. According to respondents, a brother or sister is “someone who annoys you all your life” (M: 23); “the family annoys and spites you.” It is “the need to share everything, a certain sense of competition” (W: 21); “conflicts, envy, and lack of privacy” (M: 20). One of the twenty-three-year-olds admitted that the annoying thing about having siblings is: “sharing a room, which has a positive effect on the child in the younger years; later in adolescence it takes away your own space and does not allow you to build a refuge and peace” (W: 21).

Having a sibling is also about learning co-operation and responsibility, and young people’s statements reflect a very mature approach to relationships with siblings:

“It is about being a role model or an authority. In the case of younger siblings, it is also about being responsible for someone. Learning to think about the other person” (M: 22); “you need to pay a lot of attention and be prepared to be used as an excuse” (M: 23); “learning to resolve conflicts” (W: 19). Learning co-operation and responsibility towards siblings is an important lesson for the social development of adolescents who are in the stage of “deferring” adult responsibility and are in the stage of life associated with carefree and fun times (Erikson, 1997; Leppert, 2010).

According to respondents, the situations that caused siblings to adopt a caring attitude or contributed to this happened when parents were away; 78.6% of respondents unanimously chose this answer. Siblings adopt a caring attitude in a situation that requires an intervention in a confrontation with peers (25%), but also when a brother or sister expects something in return (25%). There were responses critical of siblings; one respondent wrote that his siblings took a caring attitude, “when she wanted to show off in front of her friends, there was a time when caring was at a premium” (M: 18) or a 22-year-old woman’s response: “maybe in kindergarten she was so genuinely caring when I cried.”

Co-operation between siblings and within the family is fundamental to building relationships. This co-operation is unique but changes with age. Agnieszka Nymś-Górna emphasises that:

[...] co-operation at different stages of siblings’ lives also undergoes transformations. Initially, it will concern, for example, forming a coalition against the parents or trying to control an adult’s nervousness. Over time, there will be support in difficult moments, mutual help, and the willingness to share and to stand up for each other. (Nymś-Górna, 2018, pp. 147–158) ⁴

Situations in which respondents collaborated with their siblings were primarily to form coalitions against their parents to achieve their goals (56%). A slightly smaller number of respondents reported support in difficult moments (42.9%), mutual help (39.3%), and not telling parents about the behaviours they prohibited (36.9%). Eighteen-year-old respondents were the most likely to choose responses about forming a coalition against their parents when they did not want to go to school or attend *family dinners*. In contrast, adolescents over the age of 18 were most likely to select responses related to support, assistance, and hiding situations from their parents that would not gain their approval. There are also other answers; one respondent stated that “I do not remember a collaborative situation. Each acted for her own benefit” (W: 21).

⁴ Author’s own translation.

Young people learned from their siblings how to co-operate (58.3%), share (41.7%), and deal with criticism (51.2%). Some respondents (8.4%) admitted that they had learned from their siblings “to cheat for benefits” (W: 18), as well as “ingenuity and simplicity in action” (M: 19).

Conflicts within the family and conflicts between siblings are a normal part of everyday life. The modern approach to conflict assumes its inevitability in human relationships. A conflict causes suffering and consumes energy, but gives an opportunity to increase self-awareness, knowledge about oneself and the values one holds for oneself and others (Nocuń & Szmagałski, 1999). Siblings face various kinds of everyday challenges, have to confront different views and different opinions, and deal with quarrels and conflicts. According to Gilski, the siblings who are able to pass this test build a strong, unique bond, especially when they are able to reconcile their differences of opinion through compromise reached by way of a conversation. This is particularly difficult as the young respondents are at the stage of searching for their own identity and thus for understanding. It is a time of trial and error, of making independent decisions, taking account only of oneself (Zagórska *et al.*, 2012).

In the presented research, young people admitted that most conflicts occur on the material level (36.9%) and on the emotional level (32.1%): “the sister is great at pretending, she likes to be the centre of attention, so she interrupts us or does something we ask her not to do and there’s no way she would listen to us” (M: 23). The causes of conflict are: “little lies that are simply meant to do mischief” (M: 20); “seemingly humorous twists to the detriment of siblings” (W: 18), also situations in which “siblings dominate” (M: 18); “conflicts due to non-performance of duties” (W: 20); “unfair treatment by parents. Mainly, these are conflicts over resources: often the next children receive things from an older sibling” (M: 21). When asked about ways of resolving conflicts, young people declared trying to reach a compromise with their siblings (47.6%) or not resolving conflicts and forgetting the issue (47.6%). During late adolescence, relationships with other people, especially those defined as significant ones, are important (Levinson 1986), so the ability to resolve conflicts and conflicting interests between siblings is the foundation of preparation for adult independent living.

When asked about the reasons for sibling rivalry, respondents were given the opportunity to mark more than one answer and to write their own answer. The reasons for the rivalry are privileges (46.6%), parental interest in siblings (48.8%), and material things (44%).

Only 7.1% of the research sample cited the interest of older siblings as a reason for the rivalry. 4.8% of the respondents thought that sibling rivalry was caused by responsibilities, their division, and the time of completion. One of the young persons admitted that the cause of rivalry with siblings on a daily basis is the TV remote control, over which they are constantly in dispute.

On the question of “What are the reasons for your envy towards your siblings?” respondents’ opinions were clearly divided, especially considering the age of the respondents. Young people between the ages of 18 and 19 unanimously stated that the reason for their envy towards their siblings is the skills they have, the possibility of coming back home later and going to parties. In contrast, respondents aged between 20 and 23 stated that material things and their parents’ interest in their sister or brother were the cause of their envy.

Young people acknowledged that the resources they have developed through having siblings include, particularly, social intelligence (57.1%), diplomacy (52.4%), the ability to cooperate (51.2), standing up for oneself (48.8%), and the ability to compromise (42.9%). This confirms the notion that siblings have a significant impact on each other’s development, as they are at the same time social partners, role models and adversaries for each other (Godawa, 2021; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2006).

The Role of Parents in Sibling Relationships – Research Results

The family, regardless of its formal and legal nature, is the first and most important social environment for the individual. It is the parents who are the first caregivers providing for the child’s biological, psychological and social needs and the first educators preparing the child for an independent life in society. (Bakiera, 2006, p. 108)

The child’s envy of parental interest and attention is present regardless of age. Being envious of parents and their interest and attention was admitted by 95% of the sample. The reason for the envy is the time and attention dedicated to the siblings (57.1%) “[...] my mother talked more with my older sister, I was envious of their conversations and secrets” (W: 21), feelings shown (21.%) “[...] during an argument from my brother I heard, for example, that my parents love me less” (W: 19), material things that siblings received from their parents (29.8%). Only 7.2% of adolescents declared that they were not envious of their parents.

Conflict situations arise from problems in relationships with parents. This occurs most often when I notice and acknowledge the fact that I am not listened to by my parents, while my younger sister is. Most often then I try to show that I am important, too, and choose a way of communication that will reach everyone until I feel noticed again. (M: 22)

The period of life relevant to the respondents is a period marked by changes in relationships with parents. Children are increasingly critical, stand up for their opinions,

and make independent decisions (Czerwińska-Jasiewicz, 2015). When asked about the role of parents in sibling relationships, young people highlighted the behaviour that contributes most to disagreements between siblings. One respondent wrote:

[...] parents influence, and can contribute, to conflicts between siblings. Parents do not treat their children equally – they favour some, and do not favour others; it is often the case that they compare one child to another, and a conflict ensues. (M: 22)

Parents contribute to conflicts between siblings through “unfair division of responsibilities, the child then feels treated worse and has a sense of injustice” (M: 19). “Siblings can be envious of their parents, especially when parents spend less time with them and give them too little attention or time” (W: 22).

Being envious that siblings can do something and I can't; different treatment because of gender – I can't stay up late or go somewhere because it's dangerous, but he could – I know it's a parental concern, but a few years ago I thought it was unfair and a reason to be envious. (W: 21)

It also happens that “parents pit children against each other, treat them unequally, and lie to them; especially if one of the children is favoured; if one gets more or what they want and others get something different than what they asked for.” Thus, “the problem with providing attention to each individual child arises” (M: 22).

Conflicts also arise as a result of comparing children: “my parents compare me to my brother – he was just better at some things” (W: 21) or comparing oneself with other siblings: “the first child is always guarded more strongly and each subsequent child has more freedom, but also often subsequent children receive things from their older siblings” (M: 18). When asked whether comparisons with siblings made things easier for them, 62.4% of respondents marked the answer in the negative, and 33.6% answered positively.

Discussion of Results and Summary

The research was conducted among young people who are only entering adulthood, so relationships with siblings are a significant part of their daily lives, emotions are present, and memories are still vivid. The picture of sibling relationships emerging from the research did not bring significant differences with respect to the existing research. Despite modernisation processes interfering with the structure and functioning of the family, adolescents perceive their own siblings as friendly, supportive,

and helpful despite annoyances. Conflicts between siblings, at least at this stage of life, do not pose major threats to their relationship.

Stephen Bank and Michael Kahn introduced the phenomenon of accessibility into the concept of sibling bonds. They found that factors that can directly enhance it are space sharing and living and spending leisure time together (Rzewucka & Luber, 2021). This accessibility emerging in sibling relationships is evidenced, for example, by the declared way of resolving conflicts; forgetting conflicts or searching for a compromise suggests that siblings learn the relationship of friendship and how to deal with enemies. Siblings are the first social environment in which children learn to relate to their peers. There is a differentiated division of authority among siblings (groups of older and younger children), which becomes a learning field for negotiation in social situations.

An important issue expressed in this research is the role of parents in shaping relationships between their children. Parents can be supportive but can also become a wedge that comes between children and leads to their insecurity in perceiving their position in the family. It is important to remember that age is a source of many differences within the family. An age-diverse family involves responsibility for family members and for the daily life of the family. The family brings forth duty and loyalty and even enforces action for the common good (Guzy-Steinke, 2013). It is important, and the young people stressed this repeatedly, that parents should not compare one child with another, because this can increase rivalry between them and create envy and feelings of inferiority, and it turns out that children are very sensitive to this. Parents should praise every child without favouring one, and children expect it. Every child, regardless of the number of children in the family, should know that he or she is loved, accepted, and appreciated, that they are important and unique to their parents (Błasiak & Dybowska, 2010).

The larger the family, the more interactions take place, which fosters the development of social contacts and the formation of empathy, co-operation, and partnership, but on condition that there are no disintegrating conflicts between siblings and that they are all treated appropriately by their parents. Co-operation between siblings can also have an impact on the child's functioning in the peer environment or in relationships in adult life. This is supported by research, the results of which indicate that warm and understanding relationships between siblings during childhood are very likely to translate into acceptance and appreciation within the peer group. Otherwise, when sibling relationships are turbulent, children may exhibit antisocial behaviour during childhood and adolescence, and parents may experience greater stress (Rzewucka & Luber, 2021). Therefore, sibling relationships should be nurtured not only by the siblings themselves, but also by parents and relatives.

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