INSIDE THE WORLD OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS:
A WEBSITE GUIDE TO PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SIBLING CONFLICT

A Project

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by

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Department of Child Development
Abstract

of

INSIDE THE WORLD OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS:
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Kalina Jean Carlson Stogsdill

Developmental research indicates that sibling relationships are linked to children’s cognitive and social adjustment (Cutting & Dunn, 2006; McAlister & Peterson, 2006). Past research has shown contradictory results with regard to the effects of sibling conflict on a child’s social development (Perlman, Ross, & Garfinkel, 2009). Some research suggests that children who are exposed to sibling conflict may develop more positive strategies to resolve conflict, and other research indicating that exposure to sibling conflict may create a learning environment for aggression (Downey & Condron, 2004; Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007; Ram & Ross, 2008; Recchia & Howe, 2009a). Such contradiction may be explained by considering the nature of sibling conflict and the role of parents in their children’s interactions with each other (Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney, & Marsh, 2007; Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2008).

Research indicates that parents tend to guide their children through relationship experiences, and that parental behaviors may be a significant factor in children’s social and cognitive development (Updegraff, Thayer, Whiteman, Denning, & McHale, 2005).
These parental behaviors found in research include the quality of parent-child relationships, including parental differential treatment, the quality of parent’s marital relationships, as well as responses to sibling conflict (Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney, & Marsh, 2007; Mchale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995; Shanahan, Mchale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2008; Yu & Gamble, 2008). Parents may need to intervene or respond to their child’s conflict in order to promote higher social and conflict resolution skills (Kramer, Perozynski, & Chung, 1999; Randell & Peterson, 2009; Updegraff et al., 2005).

Although a significant amount of research examines the correlations between sibling relationships, sibling conflict, parental involvement and parental response, there are currently no useful programs or guides to contribute to parental knowledge on the subject. Thus, the current website project was created to provide parents information on the importance sibling relationships and sibling conflict in children’s development, their role in their children’s relationships, and ways to respond to sibling conflict. The website was developed through Microsoft Publisher and evaluated by 5 parents. A discussion of limitations and improvements to the web site, as well as recommendations for future projects of this kind, are offered.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Dr. Sheri Hembree

_______________________
Date
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without Him, none of this would have been possible. Thank you Lord, for teaching me the power of patience and perseverance. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”- Philippians 4:13.

This project is also dedicated to my parents, who, without their support, would have made this process much more difficult. Mom, thank you for teaching me the importance of pursuing my dreams, and that hard work always perseveres in the end. You are my best friend and the one I lean on the most to get me through the tough times. Thank you so much, and I love you. Wally, thank you for teaching me to never give up, to always keep going until I reach the top- it has saved me from more than a few predicaments! Your constant and loving support through this process has meant so much to me. Thank you again from the bottom of my heart, and I love you. Dad, you have always been so encouraging and uplifting, giving me motivation at some of my most frustrated moments. I love you so much. Thank you for always being there for me, it means so much.
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I would also like to thank my siblings, Joey and Katherine. Being your sister is what motivated me to really study and understand the importance of sibling relationships. After everything I’ve learned, I am certainly proud that I get to call the both of you my brother and sister. I love you both so much, do not ever forget that.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my Papa, Granny, and Granddaddy. I can’t tell you how many times your laughter and conversation allowed me to relax, enjoy myself, and learn to separate work time from family time. I love each of you so much! Thank you again for your constant, positive spirits.
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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Sibling relationships are virtually universal in family contexts, and the quality of these relationships has been linked to children’s cognitive and social adjustment (Criss & Shaw, 2005; Cutting & Dunn, 2006; McAlister & Peterson, 2006). Siblings can provide children with opportunities for social interactions and resolving conflict, which can benefit children’s future relationships with others. For example, past research has shown that children with siblings are more likely to have fewer externalizing problems and higher self-control than only children (Downey & Condron, 2004). Similarly, sibling relationship quality has been linked to higher emotional understanding and lower risk of depression in adolescence (Howe, Aquan-Assee, Bukowski, & Lehoux, 2001; Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005).

In regards to sibling conflict, past research has shown contradictory results as to the positive and negative effects of such conflict on a child’s social development (Perlman, Ross, & Garfinkel, 2009). For instance, some research has suggested that children who are exposed to sibling conflict may be more likely to develop positive strategies to resolve conflict, benefiting them in future relationships with others, including peers (Downey & Condron, 2004; Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007; Ram & Ross, 2008; Recchia & Howe, 2009a; Recchia & Howe, 2009b). In contrast, previous research has also indicated that exposure to sibling conflict may actually create a learning environment for aggression (Kim et al., 2007; Ostrov, Crick, & Stauffacher,
2006). These contradictory findings may be due to the influence of other factors, such as parent-child relationships and parental involvement in sibling conflict. The current project addresses these sibling and parenting variables by establishing a web site that disseminates research-based information about sibling relationships to parents.

Parental behaviors have been found to be a significant factor in children’s social development, as parents tend to guide their children through their relationship experiences (Updegraff, Thayer, Whiteman, Denning, & McHale, 2005). Research suggests that the quality of parent-child relationships, including parental differential treatment, have a significant influence on children’s future relationships with siblings and peers (Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney, & Marsh, 2007; Mchale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995; Shanahan, Mchale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2008). In addition, past research indicates that the quality of parents’ marital relationships may have a direct influence on their parenting styles, which could then change the parent-child relationship (Yu & Gamble, 2008).

With respect to sibling conflict, parents may need to intervene or respond in order for children to successfully develop optimal conflict resolution strategies. (Kramer, Perozynski, & Chung, 1999; Randell & Peterson, 2009; Updegraff et al., 2005). Although past research has examined different types of parental involvement and sibling conflict, there are currently no programs or helpful guides that contribute to parental knowledge on the subject. Thus, the current website project aims to provide parents information on the importance of their role in their children’s social and cognitive development, as well as appropriate ways to respond to sibling conflict.
The purpose of the current project was to create and publish a website developed to provide important information and resources to parents regarding their children’s relationships and conflicts with one another. The website provides parents with information on why sibling relationships are important, parents’ role in sibling relationships, the benefits and risks of sibling conflict, as well as issues related to parental involvement in these conflicts. The website also provides parents with different ways to respond to sibling conflict, and discusses potential questions parents may have. Parents can also access links to outside resources such as parenting.com and California first 5 for more information on family issues.

**Definition of Terms**

The current project focuses on five main issues surrounding sibling relationships: the nature and importance of sibling relationships, sibling conflict, sibling conflict resolution strategies, parent involvement in sibling relationships, and parent response to sibling conflict. For the purpose of this project, *sibling conflict* is defined as mutual opposition, arguing, or competition between brothers and sisters (Boyse, 2011). In addition, two types of sibling conflict are also discussed. *Constructive conflict* occurs when children use collaborative strategies, such as compromise, to resolve conflict. *Destructive conflict* occurs when children use physical or negative strategies to resolve conflict, such as coercion, name calling, or aggression (Howe, Rinaldi, Jennings, & Petrakos, 2002). Past research has suggested that sibling conflict has a highly influential
role in the value and benefits of sibling relationships and, more specifically, how siblings
resolve conflict with each other. Thus, sibling conflict resolution strategies are defined by
Killoren, Thayer, and Updegraff (2008) in three primary categories: Controlling
Resolution Strategies, Non-Confrontational Strategies, and Solution Orientation
Strategies. In addition, research has examined the importance of parent response in
sibling conflict, and suggests that parents may need to intervene in their children’s
conflict from time to time (Updegraff et. al, 2005). Hence, parent response strategies are
defined by McHale, Updegraff, Tucker, and Crouter (2000) in three patterns or main
strategies: Intervention, Coaching, and Nonintervention strategies. These terms will be
revisited and further elaborated on in chapter 2.

Method

Target Audience

The current website project is designed to target families with two or more
preschool-aged or school-aged children who may experience or have experienced sibling
conflict. This website also reaches out to those with a desire to learn more about sibling
relationships and conflict, as well as families and other professionals interested in how to
react to their children’s conflict and foster positive relationships between siblings. A
college student doing research related to sibling relationships or parent involvement
might also find this website useful, as all references are linked to footnotes throughout
the site.
Five families known to the researcher who met the above criteria were asked to access the website. In addition, these families were asked to fill out an online five question evaluation survey assessing the helpfulness and usefulness of the website. This evaluation survey was immediately available on the website (see Appendix B).

**Development of Web Site**

The researcher consulted several sources in order to create the website. First, the author researched and reviewed scholarly literature on sibling relationships, sibling conflict, conflict resolution strategies, parent’s role in children’s relationships and parent response to sibling conflict. This review revealed that sibling relationships may have a significant role in the developmental outcome of a child’s social and cognitive well being (Criss & Shaw, 2005; Kim et al., 2007; Richmond et al., 2005; Updegraff et al., 2005). Further, research on the benefits and risks of sibling conflict has yielded contradictory results that may be due in part to differences in parent behavior, characteristics of the children, and qualities of the conflict itself (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Kim et al., 2007; Mchale, Updegraff, Tucker, & Crouter, 2000). In addition, the literature review suggested parents have a strong role in their children’s development and in children’s relationships with siblings and peers (Allen et al., 2007; Mchale et al., 1995; Shanahan et al., 2008; Yu & Gamble, 2008). Some research also suggested that how parents respond to their children’s conflict may influence children’s conflict resolution strategies later on (Mchale et al., 2000; Randell & Peterson, 2009). Finally, a review of the research indicated that sibling relationships and sibling conflict tends to be topic of concern for
several parents (Kramer et al., 1999; Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). Thus, the current project website was designed to provide parents an opportunity to access research-based information and learn about their children’s relationships, conflict, as well as their role on these topics.

Next, the researcher searched existing web-based information for families on sibling conflict, including local (northern California) agencies and services for families. Virtually no websites were found on the topic, emphasizing a need for the development of a website families could access on families and sibling conflict. Thus, parents known to the researcher were asked about what questions they would want to see on a website geared towards this topic.

The research gathered from the scholarly review and web search was placed on a website design program called Microsoft Publisher. The majority of the website is in a question and answer format, emulating the questions parents might want to see addressed on a website. Eight pages were created for the website, and were divided as follows: the home page, which provides a brief paragraph describing the project’s purpose, three pages reviewing research-based information on sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and conflict resolution strategies, two pages discussing parental involvement in sibling relationships and response to sibling conflict, and two pages dedicated to outside resources and contact information, one of which hosts the website evaluation survey.
Web Site Evaluation

The website was posted using a free host website (http://worldofsiblings.freeoda.com). After the website was posted, five parents known to the researcher who met the target audience criteria evaluated the site’s usefulness by completing an evaluation form on the website. The website evaluation form consisted of five 3 point Likert scale and open-ended questions, and assessed the accessibility, usefulness, and potential improvements of the website (see Appendix B). The results of this evaluation were considered in developing recommendations for future projects of this kind.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory was used as the theoretical framework for the current project. This theory suggests that a child’s development depends on four main factors, or the PPCT model: the power of the developmental process depends upon the characteristics of the person, the child’s surrounding context, and the time periods these processes take place (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). An example of process in a child’s development is sibling relationships. The quality of a child’s relationship with his or her sibling depends on the characteristics of the child (e.g., temperament, age), the contexts surround the relationship (parents’ and peers’ interactions in the relationship) and the current developmental time period of the relationship (preschool-aged siblings or school-aged siblings). This model would predict that a variety of factors influence the quality of sibling relationships, and supports a need to provide parents the opportunity to
learn the importance of these factors in an informative, easy to comprehend manner. Thus, the goal of the current project was to create a website that focused on children’s social and environmental influences in sibling relationships and conflict, as well as provide information and resources to parents on their roles and responses in sibling relationships.

Limitations

Although the current website project allowed for wide distribution to many different types of parents, the sample size for the web site evaluation was limited. Another limitation often associated with using a website to disseminate information is that parents may mistype the online access link or be unable to find it in a search engine. Also, any additional questions parents may have after reading the website would need to be e-mailed and the researcher may not be able to immediately answer questions. In addition, the researcher has little experience and knowledge in Java, a programming language that allows for animations and message boards on websites, limiting the potential display and communication features that could encourage parents to the site.

Organization of the Project

Chapter 1 has served as an introduction to the project. Chapter 2 provides a discussion of developmental theory that serves as a foundation for the project, as well as
a review of empirical literature relevant to the importance of sibling relationships to a child’s cognitive and social development, benefits and risks of sibling conflict, parents’ roles in children’s relationships with siblings and peers, and parent response to sibling conflict. From this literature review was drawn the content for the web site. Chapter 3 describes the method used in the development and assessment of the project website. Lastly, Chapter 4 provides a discussion and evaluation of the website, and suggestions for improving the website project.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The importance of examining sibling relationships in a child’s development has long been a topic of research, as the majority of families in the United States have at least two children (Criss & Shaw, 2005; Howe et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2007; Updegraff et al., 2005). Research reveals that siblings are important persons in children’s social networks and that siblings’ interactions are linked to social adjustment (Lockwood, Kitzmann, & Cohen, 2001; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Further, sibling conflict is considered to be inevitable in most families and part of everyday experiences in sibling interactions (Ram & Ross, 2007). Sibling conflict is often cited as a common problem parents face with their children (Perlman et al., 2009), and may provide children the opportunity to develop conflict resolution strategies. Past research has also indicated that siblings who learn these conflict resolution strategies can lead to higher conflict management skills useful to future relationships (Killoren, Thayer, & Updegraff, 2008). Parents may influence the quality of sibling relationships (Allen et al., 2007; Mchale et al., 1995; Updegraff et al., 2005;) as well as whether children effectively negotiate conflict with their siblings (Dunn & Munn, 1986; Randell & Peterson, 2009)

This chapter includes a review of relevant literature, beginning with a discussion of the theoretical framework for the project. The chapter then proceeds with a review of literature with a focus on sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and sibling conflict resolution strategies. Parent roles in sibling relationships and responses to sibling conflict
are also discussed. This review served to inform the content of the website developed for the current project aimed at providing parents with research-based information on sibling relationships, sibling conflict and sibling conflict resolution strategies.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for the current project is Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory, which focuses on how the environment, social relationships, and the developing child intertwine together to effect a child’s development, either directly or indirectly (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Thomas 2005). The theory asserts that development is a result of four main components: process, person, context, and time, or the PPCT model. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) explain that there are several reciprocal interactions between an individual and his or her environment, called *proximal processes*, that happens over time. These interactions can include other individuals or objects, and have a significant influence on an individual’s overall development.

The power of these proximal processes depends on the “characteristics of the developing Person, of the immediate and more remote environmental Contexts, and the Time periods, in which the proximal processes take place.” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 795). Although time refers to the time periods when proximal processes take place, the persons and contexts involved in these processes require further elaboration. There are three types of Person characteristics that Bronfenbrenner and Morris believed could influence the power and direction of proximal processes. First are the individual’s
dispositions or forces, which can start and sustain a proximal process in different areas of development. These can be an individual’s temperament, personality, or motivation. Second are an individual’s resources- the mental and emotional ability and experience one needs for proper proximal process function at any stage of development. These resources can include past experiences, level of intelligence, and access to outside resources, such as food, housing, education, and social experiences (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). Third is an individual’s demand characteristics that either invite or reject interactions with the environment and can either interfere or promote proximal processes. These characteristics are often more physical, such as age, gender, or race, but can also be defining personality traits, such as outgoing versus shy (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al.2009).

The context is the child’s surrounding environment, similar to Bronfenbrenner’s original ecological theory introduced in 1979: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem consists of direct relationships with the child, such as school, home, and peer groups. This would include a child’s relationship with his or her sibling, as well as the parent-child relationship. Next is the mesosystem, which involves the relationships or connections between the child’s separate microsystems, such as how the parent-children relationships influence sibling relationships. Next is the exosystem, which involves the connection between the child’s immediate environment and outside influences. For instance, if a mother is feeling stressed at work, she may take this stress home and may respond more negatively to her children’s conflicts, which can influence the quality of the siblings’ relationships (Mchale
et al., 2000; Milevsky et al., 2011; Perlman & Ross, 2007; Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). The macrosystem follows, and is considered to be a child’s culture. For example, if a child lives in a culture with a more positive view of aggression (i.e. fighting is necessary to survive or protect one’s self), he or she may be more likely to engage in conflict with a sibling. Finally, the chronosystem considers the effects of time on a child’s development. An example would be a child’s parents going through a divorce. Children may view their parent’s negative relationship as a learning base for relationships, thereby engaging in more negative interactions with their siblings and peers (Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). This effect is not only immediate; it consistently effects the child’s development throughout several years (Tudge et al., 2009; Yu & Gamble, 2008). Although each of the five layers is nested into the next, the current project focuses primarily on the first two contexts: the microsystem and mesosystem by focusing specifically on sibling conflict in sibling relationships (microsystem), as well as parent involvement and response in the conflict (mesosystem).

Sibling relationships are strong examples of interactions in which proximal processes occur. For example, although sibling conflict within the sibling relationship would be a part of the microsystem (context), how each child resolves conflict with the other (Person’s demand, force, and resources) would have an effect on each siblings’ development and their relationship with each other. In addition, research has suggested that siblings’ interactions in sibling conflict can also be influenced by how parents respond to the conflict (context-mesosystem) (Kramer et al., 1999; Randell & Peterson, 2009; Updegraff et al., 2005).
Bronfenbrenner’s theory and empirical findings related to sibling conflict emphasize a need to reach out and educate parents on the importance of sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and a parent’s role in their children’s relationships. Since Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory emphasizes the importance of the child’s characteristics and his or her surrounding environments and relationships, a goal of the current project was to target a child’s social and environmental influences (i.e. parents-Microsystem) and provide information on how children resolve conflict with each other (proximal processes). Hence, the current project is an effort to educate and provide resources to parents on sibling relationships and conflict using the web as medium.

**Sibling Relationships and Child Development**

One aim of the current project is to provide parents informative, research-based information on the importance of sibling relationships in a child’s development. Research indicates that sibling relationships make strong contributions to children’s psychological and social adjustment (Criss & Shaw, 2005; Kim et al., 2007; Richmond et al., 2005; Updegraff et. al, 2005). However, the benefit of these contributions strongly depends on the quality of the sibling relationship (Howe et al., 2001; Richmond et al., 2005). Thus, the research portrayed on the website extends to how sibling relationships influence children’s cognitive and social adjustment, as well as the importance of the quality of sibling relationships.
**siblings and Cognitive and Social Adjustment**

Research suggests that sibling relationships can enhance children’s cognitive development skills in terms of perspective taking and theory of mind (Bengtsson & Arvidsson, 2011; Cutting & Dunn, 2006; Howe & Ross, 1990; McAlister & Peterson, 2006). For example, Howe and Ross (1990) examined the association between sibling relationship quality and first-born’s perspective taking skills. Thirty-two children, with ages ranging from 14 months to 5 years, were recruited for the study. Children were observed for two 40-minute home visits, as well as one laboratory visit to assess children’s perspective taking skills and the quality of sibling relationships. Results indicated a positive correlation between positive sibling relationships and higher perspective taking skills.

In a similar study, Cutting and Dunn (2006) studied the interactions between children and the development of emotional understanding and perspective taking. Forty-three 4-year-olds were visited and observed twice at their preschools and once at home. Children were observed for two 20-minute conversations: one with a peer and one with their sibling; the interaction quality was coded based on cooperative play, conflict, bids for attention, and unresponsiveness. Each child’s social-cognitive skills (perspective taking and emotional understanding) were assessed using Denham’s tasks, where children had to identify four emotions illustrated on facial pictures. These pictures were also associated with a puppet story, and children were asked how the puppet might feel in various situations. In addition, mothers were asked to assess their children’s relationship with each other using the Colorado Sibling Interview. Results indicated that with both
siblings and peers, children who experienced more cooperative interactions exhibited higher levels of perspective taking and emotional understanding. However, differences were found in the amount of communication and cooperative play between relationships: children experienced more communication, conflict, and cooperative play with their siblings than with their peers.

Additionally, McAlister and Peterson (2006) examined the relationship between having siblings and the development of theory of mind. The researchers recruited 124 children, with 19% being defined as having no siblings. Children received two visits a week apart at their preschools and were given different tasks from the Theory of Mind (ToM) battery, which involves three different tests: false belief, appearance reality, and pretend representation. Results showed that children with siblings were more advanced in their theory of mind development than children with no siblings, suggesting that siblings may play an important role in helping children develop advanced perspective taking and theory of mind, and can contribute to children’s social cognitive skills.

These findings suggest that siblings can help children learn to successfully understand perspective taking and the emotions of others, as well as develop an advanced theory of mind. For instance, the quality of sibling relationships may help create and develop higher perspective taking skills and theory of mind, as children with more positive sibling relationships are more likely to consider their siblings’ feelings and emotions (Howe & Ross, 1990). However, other research (Bengtsson & Arvidsson, 2011) suggests that these skills facilitate higher quality relationships, as perspective-taking skills may help children in regulating their emotions. Cutting and Dunn (2006) elaborate
on these findings, suggesting that siblings provide opportunities to share one another’s thoughts and feelings during play, which may guide children into developing and continuously improving their perspective taking skills. Further, these skills continue to be enhanced through play with peers, thereby leading to higher quality friendships. Thus, in order to provide parents with a better understanding of the importance of sibling relationships in children’s cognitive skills, the current website projects discusses these findings on the website.

Sibling relationships have also been linked to a child’s social adjustment, as siblings provide children the opportunity to learn how to be social with those near the same age. (Downey & Condron, 2004; Recchia & Howe, 2009a) Downey and Condron (2004) examined social and interpersonal skills in children with siblings and only children. Data were collected from 20,649 children from a previous study. Teachers were asked to rate children’s frequency in interpersonal skills, self-control, and externalizing behaviors in the classroom using a 4-point likert scale. Results indicated that teachers rated children with siblings higher in interpersonal skills than children with no siblings. In addition, teachers rated children with siblings as having fewer externalizing problem behaviors and higher self-control than only children.

Sibling relationships may also predict a child’s peer relationships, which can also be related to social and emotional adjustment (Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). For example, Lockwood, Kitzmann and Cohen (2001) examined the association between sibling relationship quality and children’s peer social competence in middle childhood. The researchers recruited 53 children in third through sixth grade who had between one
and four siblings. The sibling relationship quality questionnaire assessed sibling warmth and conflict with their closest in age sibling. Peer relationships were assessed through sociometric nominations and ratings (children’s rate of “likeability” of specific peers). Results revealed that there was a positive association between sibling warmth and positive peer relationships. In addition, sibling warmth was associated with more positive peer relationships for both younger and older children.

In sum, sibling relationships can contribute to children’s higher interpersonal skills and lower externalizing behaviors, and may predict the quality of children’s peer relationships later on in life (Downey & Condron, 2004; Lockwood et al., 2001; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Researchers suggest that children with siblings may be put into more situations where they are expected to control their negative feelings (such as during sibling conflict) than only children, thus resulting in better self-control and fewer externalizing behaviors (Downey & Condron, 2004). Further, as children develop these social skills with their siblings, they may begin to generalize these skills with their peers, leading to higher quality peer relationships (Lockwood et al., 2001). Research also suggests that children who experience positive sibling relationships may generalize this view onto relationships with their peers, leading to self-fulfilling expectations in peer relationships (Howe et al., 2001; Lockwood et al., 2001). Hence, in an effort to portray the importance of sibling relationships in children’s social development to parents, the current website project discusses and elaborates on these findings and how they contribute to children’s social development and future relationships.
Sibling Relationship Quality

Although the benefits of sibling relationships are clearly represented throughout research, the strength of these benefits depends on the quality (warmth) of a child’s relationship with his or her siblings (Howe et al., 2001; Richmond et al., 2005). Howe, Aquan-Assee, Bukowski, and Lehoux (2001) examined sibling warmth and emotional understanding in children. Participants included 40 fifth and sixth grade children, who completed the Sibling Relationship Questionnaire about their closest in age sibling. Children were then individually interviewed about their relationships with family and friends, and then completed the Hypothetical Relationships Picture Task to assess emotional understanding. Results indicated that children who reported higher sibling warmth (quality) demonstrated higher emotional understanding than those with lower sibling relationship quality.

Other evidence of the link between sibling relationship quality and adjustment is found in a study conducted by Richmond, Stocker, and Rienks (2005). Richmond and colleagues (2005) examined associations between sibling relationships and children’s adjustment as they transitioned to adolescence from middle childhood. One hundred thirty-three sibling dyads were recruited for the study. Each family visited a university lab for 2-3 hours at three different time points: the initial visit, two years later, and then again four years later. Parents answered information on their family relationships and children’s adjustment, and children were interviewed on their relationships and adjustment. The findings revealed “as sibling relationships became warmer and less conflictual over time, children’s feelings of depressed mood declined over time.” (p.
Similarly, for siblings whose relationship warmth declined over time, higher feelings of depressed mood were discovered.

These results suggest that the quality of sibling relationships may influence how beneficial sibling relationships are to children’s development. Children who experience higher sibling warmth may have more opportunities to be mutually supportive and open with their sibling, which can also establish a more secure relationship (Howe et al., 2011). In addition, research suggests that high quality sibling relationships may reduce the stress that is often associated with entering into adolescence, thereby improving overall social and psychological adjustment (Richmond et al., 2005). However, if the quality of the sibling relationship is low, these results are not as easily seen, thereby suggesting that the quality of the sibling relationship makes a difference in whether such relationships provide benefits for children. In order to better understand how the quality of sibling relationships influences children’s development, the current website project aims to inform parents about the importance of quality in sibling relationships in predicting children’s developmental outcome. More specifically, the website demonstrates to parents how the quality of sibling relationships can influences the amount of benefits children receive in these relationships.

**Sibling Conflict**

Sibling conflict is a common, sometimes daily occurrence in sibling relationships (Ram & Ross, 2008). In addition, it is also a primary concern among parents regarding
their children’s relationships with one another (Updegraff et al., 2005). Research has reported beneficial outcomes for children who experience sibling conflict; however, it is not necessarily the conflict itself, rather, what happens as the conflict takes place. Raffaelli (1992) created a framework that describes the process of sibling conflict as the onset, process, and aftermath. The onset of conflict is described as what happens before the conflict begins, and is generally the situation that causes the conflict, such as a disagreement over an object or idea. The process of conflict occurs over the duration of the conflict, such as the negotiation and resolution strategies children use to resolve it. This also includes those outside of the conflict who become involved, such as parents. Lastly, the aftermath is discussed as the emotions displayed after the conflict is resolved (Rafaelli, 1992).

The benefits and risks associated with sibling conflict may follow Raffaelli’s (1992) framework. For example, when children enter into a conflict (the onset), they begin to negotiate and share emotions, in an effort to resolve the conflict (the process). Research has suggested that children in higher quality sibling relationships are more likely to develop positive conflict resolution strategies (Killoren et al., 2008), which can lead to more positive emotions after a conflict has been resolved (aftermath). Research suggests that positive sibling conflict experiences can lead to better social skills, moral development, and stronger relationships with siblings and peers (Killoren et al., 2008; Ram & Ross, 2008, Recchia & Howe, 2009a). In contrast, children in lower quality sibling relationships may not negotiate and practice successful resolution strategies during conflict, resulting in more negative emotions afterwards, as the conflict may not
be resolved efficiently. Research suggests that negative experiences in sibling conflict can lead to more negative developments later on, such as increased anxiety, depressed mood, and delinquent behavior (Kim et al., 2007; Stocker, Burwell, & Briggs, 2002). Thus, the current project aims to provide parents with information on the definition, benefits, and risks of sibling conflict, as well as discuss children’s conflict resolution strategies.

**Benefits and Risks of Sibling Conflict**

Research indicates that sibling conflict can have short and long term implications for a child’s social and moral development, although research has shown conflicting results as to the extent of these implications (Perlman et al., 2009). One of the benefits of sibling relationships is that conflict experiences with siblings have the potential to promote social and moral development, which can lead to more positive interactions in other significant relationships with peers (Ram & Ross, 2008; Recchia & Howe, 2009a). Previous research suggests that sibling conflict can provide children opportunities to learn how to resolve conflict. For example, Ram and Ross (2008) examined the influence of information-sharing on children’s negotiation and resolution strategies during conflict. Participants in their study included 32 sibling dyads between the ages of 4 to 8 years old. Each sibling dyad was presented with a toy division problem, in which the siblings had to decide together who could take what highly preferred toy home. These interactions were recorded and coded based on children’s negotiation moves (problem solving, contention and struggle) and resolution types (integrative, straight, or no resolution). The results
indicated that when children exchanged information about their goals during the conflict, they used more constructive resolution skills.

Research conducted by Recchia and Howe (2009a) also supports the idea that children’s experiences with sibling conflict can promote social and moral development. In this study the researchers examined how the quality of sibling relationships and children’s social understanding influenced sibling conflict behavior. Sixty-two sibling dyads aged 4 to 10 years old, and their primary caregivers were asked to participate in two sessions either in home or in a university lab setting. Children were asked to provide a narrative report on a conflict with their sibling, and then asked the same question again ten days later on another conflict. All interviews were recorded and coded based on children’s references towards perspectives (cognition, goals, and emotions). In addition, siblings were asked to perform false belief tasks to assess theory of mind, conflict interpretation, and sibling relationships. Results indicated that high quality sibling relationships were linked to positive conflict processing.

These findings indicate that sibling conflict may be viewed as a learning experience that develops negotiation and conflict resolution strategies, which can benefit children as they continue to develop socially and interact with peers (Ram & Ross, 2008). Further, sibling conflict may provide siblings with an understanding of another’s point of view, enhancing children’s perspective taking skills and thereby increasing the quality of the relationship (Cutting & Dunn, 2006; Howe & Ross, 1990). In turn, this may motivate children to resolve conflict in more constructive, socially acceptable ways (Recchia & Howe, 2009a). These findings demonstrate the importance of examining sibling conflict
in association with a child’s overall social and moral development. Hence, the current website project discusses this research in a comprehensive format for parents to access, specifically listing the benefits seen in research.

Past research has also indicated that experience with sibling conflict can result in negative consequences for children’s development. In one such study, Stocker, Burwell, and Briggs (2002) recruited 136 sibling dyads, aged 8-12 years, for a study that examined sibling conflict and children’s psychological adjustment. Siblings were interviewed at the beginning of the study (time 1) and again two years later (time 2), during the transition between middle childhood and adolescence. At each time period, families visited a university laboratory and participated in a 7-minute board game, as well as interviews and questionnaires. Parents were asked about family relationships and their children’s adjustments, whereas children answered questions on their sibling relationships and adjustment. Results indicated that sibling conflict was positively associated with negative psychological adjustment (i.e. increase in anxiety, depressed mood and delinquent behavior) over the two year time period.

Similarly, Kim, McHale, Crouter, and Osgood (2007) conducted a longitudinal study that focused on the linkages between sibling conflict and adjustment in middle childhood. The researchers interviewed 197 families in their homes once a year for four years. Each family member was interviewed separately on sibling relationships, parent responsiveness, and perceived peer social competence. The results indicated that children with less conflict (higher warmth) in sibling relationships were more likely to exhibit positive social competence, whereas siblings who experienced more conflict were linked
to more negative adjustments. Kim and colleagues provide two possible scenarios to explain the findings. Children who learn to resolve sibling conflict may have stronger sibling relationships and be better able to adjust to social opportunities within peers groups. Likewise, children who experience frequent sibling conflict that goes unresolved might not have developed the necessary social skills, and experience more negative social interactions with peers.

These findings conflict with other research suggesting that sibling conflict is beneficial to children’s development (Ram & Ross, 2008; Recchia & Howe, 2009a), and portray sibling conflict as having a more detrimental effect on children’s social and psychological adjustment. Some research (Campione-Barr & Smetana, 2010) suggests that sibling conflict may provide children with more negative experiences, making it more difficult for children to develop feelings of trust and closeness with their siblings and future peers. These negative experiences in relationships may also result in increased feelings of anxiety and depression, which may over time result in poorer psychological adjustment. Furthermore, sibling conflict may teach children inappropriate, aggressive behavior that is generalized to other relationships, reducing the quality of children’s relationships with others (Stocker et al., 2002). However, other research (Kim et al., 2007) suggests that it is it is not necessarily the sibling conflict that is beneficial or detrimental to children’s social and moral development. Rather, it is the experiences and formation of conflict resolution strategies children develop through sibling conflict that aids in social development and adjustment. Hence, children who learn how to resolve
conflict appropriately may not experience the same negative outcomes seen in sibling conflict as children who do not learn to resolve conflict appropriately.

Given the significant amount of research on the benefits and risks of sibling conflict, it is important to provide parents the opportunity to understand sibling conflict, both in terms of when sibling conflict is considered beneficial and at other times when they may need to intervene. For instance, if a parent is able to recognize when their children’s relationships may be negatively affecting their development, they can take the steps necessary to prevent this occurrence—either through direct involvement or outside sources. Thus, the current website project also discusses these research findings on the risks of sibling conflict in an easy to read format, so that parents may have the necessary information on the importance of this topic and an awareness of features of potentially negative sibling relationships.

**Constructive and Deconstructive Conflict**

The current website project presents the conflicting findings on the benefits and risks of sibling conflict while distinguishing between two types of conflict: destructive conflict and constructive conflict. *Constructive conflict* occurs when children use more positive strategies to resolve conflict, such as negotiation, collaboration, and compromise. *Deconstructive conflict* occurs when children use more negative strategies, such as name-calling, aggression, or coercion (Howe et al., 2002). In terms of research on sibling conflict, these concepts are an effort to explain the contradictory findings seen in research. As stated previously, Kim and colleagues (2007) suggest that the benefits and
risks of sibling conflict depend on how children resolve conflicts with one another. For example, children who learn to resolve sibling conflict in a positive manner (constructive conflict) may be better able to extend these skills to other social peer groups, thereby benefiting their social adjustment. In contrast, siblings who let their conflict go unresolved or take a more negative approach may also experience negative interactions when resolving conflict with their peers. These terms are also used in the current project in an effort to explain the contradictory findings seen in research regarding the benefits and risks of sibling conflict.

**Sibling Conflict Resolution Strategies**

There have been a number of studies examining sibling conflict, with a focus on strategies siblings use to resolve conflict in interpersonal relationships. One model of conflict resolution, the Dual Concern model, proposes three types of conflict resolution strategies (Killoren et al., 2008; Thayer, Updegraff, & Delgado, 2008). In *Controlling* resolution strategies, a person’s primary goal is self satisfaction, with little consideration for others. For example, this could be a child refusing to back down from their position in an argument until they get what they desire from the argument. *Nonconfrontational* strategies, such as avoiding or withdrawing from the conflict, involve low consideration for one’s self as well as others. *Solution Orientation* strategies consist of compromise and negotiation and are associated with having high consideration towards one self and others. Hence, the primary goal in solution orientation is to resolve the conflict mutually in order to preserve the relationship (Killoren et al., 2008). Killoren and colleagues
(2008) argue that it is through these sibling conflict resolution strategies that children develop valuable conflict management skills that can be useful to other relationships. Descriptions and information on these conflict resolution strategies are posted on the current website for parents to review.

Research suggests that children’s conflict resolution strategies change over time, and that they become more cognitively sophisticated as they mature. For example, Perlman, Ross, and Garfinkel (2009) studied children’s conflict resolution patterns with their siblings. Thirty-eight sibling dyads were recruited for the study: nineteen 2-year-olds and nineteen 4-year-olds. Families were visited six times for 90 minutes each, and interactions between children were observed. Analyses of behavior revealed that younger children had more variation in their response to conflict, whereas 4-year-olds were more consistent in their strategies. These findings suggest that “as children mature through the preschool years their conflict patterns become more homogeneous” (Perlman, Ross, & Garfinkel, 2009, p. 504).

The researchers also argue that children do not select conflict strategies independently (Perlman et al., 2009). Rather, children respond to the sibling’s behavior as well as any third parties that have become involved in the conflict, such as parents. In addition, younger siblings tend to use fewer strategies, and are often dominated by older siblings when parents do not intervene (Kramer et al., 2007; Ram & Ross, 2008; Recchia & Howe, 2009a). These findings illustrate that children’s conflict resolution strategies do vary based on age, and that as children get older, their conflict resolution strategies may become more sophisticated.
In an effort to educate parents on how children’s conflict resolution changes over time and with age, the current website also provides information on sibling conflict resolution strategies. The conflict resolution strategies are described in detail with relatable examples; parents are then provided research-based information on variations in age and birth, which suggest that children’s conflict resolution strategies change over time, and become more sophisticated as children grow older.

**Parent and Family Factors and Sibling Relationships**

The current project addresses the role that parents play in setting a context for sibling interactions and relationships. Children’s relationships with parents as well as parental behavior towards sibling conflict have been found to be a significant factor in children’s social development, as parents tend to guide their children through their relationship experiences (Updegraff et al., 2005). For instance, the quality of parent-child relationships has been linked to attachment security with peers, as parents have been found to be significant predictors of school-aged children’s social skills (Allen et al., 2007; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD], 2009). Similarly, parental differential treatment may also have an influence on children’s development, as younger children have been found to respond more negatively when viewed as less favored and more positively when favored (McHale et al., 1995; Shanahan et al., 2008). Quality of parents’ marital relationship can
also influence children’s relationships with siblings and peers, as well as the family function as a whole (Stocker et al., 2002; Yu & Gamble, 2008)

**Quality of Parent-Child Interaction**

Past research suggests that a parent’s relationship with his or her child may influence that child’s future relationships with siblings and peers. For instance, Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney and Marsh (2007) examined the associations between adolescents’ attachment security and parental and peer relationships. The researchers recruited 167 seventh and eighth graders for the study; participants were interviewed twice every year for three years, with one individual interview and then an additional interview with a close peer. The parent-child relationship quality was assessed using the adult attachment interview (AAI) and the Q-set. Similarly, children answered the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment to examine overall quality of peer relationships. Results showed that attachment security with peers was significantly correlated with quality of parent-child relationships.

In addition to contributing to siblings’ social development and relationship quality, parents may also enhance their children’s social skills. In a study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Childcare Research Network (NICHD, 2009), 900 children were followed and assessed from birth to third grade to examine parent-child relationships and children’s later social skills. Both mother-child and father-child relationships were found to be significant predictors of children’s social skills at first and third grade. As the parent-child relationship quality increased, fewer
attention problems and higher social skills were reported. These findings suggest that both parents have an influential role in children’s development and social skills, including their interactions with siblings and peers.

The quality of parent-child relationships can also have a significant influence on children’s cognitive development (Schroeder & Kelley, 2010). Schroeder and Kelley (2010) recruited 100 parents with children 5 to 12 years of age to examine the relationship between parent-child relationships and executive functioning in children. Parents completed the Parent-Child Relationship Inventory scale to assess parents’ relationship with their children and the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Functioning (BRIEF) to assess children’s executive functioning. All questionnaires were provided online for the parent to access. Results revealed that the quality of parent-child relationships were significantly associated with children’s higher executive functioning.

Similarly, Bernier, Carlson, Deschenes, and Matte-Gagne (2011) examined the associations between child attachment security and children’s executive functions. Sixty-two families were recruited for the study, and visited when children were 12 months, 15 months, 18 months, 2 and 3 years of age. All visits lasted between 70 to 90 minutes, and varied between the home and researchers’ laboratory. Over the course of five visits, parents were recorded interacting with their children, child attachment security was assessed twice (at 15 months and 2 years) using the Attachment Behavior Q-Sort (AQS), and child executive functioning was examined at ages 2 and 3 years using a variety of tasks performed in past studies (Bernier et al., 2010; Carlson (2005); as cited in Bernier, Carlson, Deschenes, & Matt-Gagne, 2011). Results indicated that children with higher
parent-child attachments exhibited higher conflict executive functioning, which consists of working memory, set-shifting and inhibitory control, than children with low parent-child attachment.

These findings suggest that the parent-child relationship has a significant role in children’s developmental outcomes and relationships with others. The majority of research (Allen et al., 2007; Bernier et al., 2011; NICHD, 2009; Schroeder & Kelley, 2010) suggests that children with more secure attachments to their parents are more likely to exhibit higher executive functioning, which pertains to a child’s behavioral and emotional regulation. In addition, children’s ability to regulate their emotions has been linked to their perspective-taking skills, which can increase the quality of sibling and peer relationships (Bengtsson & Arvidsson, 2011; Lockwood et al., 2001). Thus, the quality of the parent-child relationship may influence children’s sociocognitive skills with their siblings and peers. Further, positive parent interaction has also been found to enhance children’s social skills, which has been linked to children’s higher interpersonal skills with peers and fewer attention problems in school (Downey & Condron, 2004; Lockwood et al., 2001). Thus, given the significant amount of research on the influence of the parent-child relationship on children’s social and cognitive skills, the current website project provides a webpage for parents to read about the importance of parental involvement in sibling interactions and children’s development. More specifically, how the quality of the parent-child relationship influences the quality of sibling relationships.
Parent Differential Treatment

Research indicates that parents’ differential treatment towards their children, that is the degree to which parents differ in warmth and conflict displayed with each child is linked to the quality sibling relationships (McHale et al., 1995; Scholte, Engels, de Kemp, Harakeh, & Overbeek, 2007; Shanahan et al., 2008; Tamrouti-Makkink, Dubas, Gerris, & van Aken, 2004). In one study, Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, and Osgood (2008) examined the relationship between parent differential treatment (warmth and conflict), birth order, sibling relationship quality, and youth adjustment. Data were collected from a previous cross-sectional, longitudinal study, and data from 201 families met the criteria for the current study, in which first-born children were in the fourth or fifth grade, with a younger sibling one to four years younger. Families participated in a 2 to 3 hour interview every year for six years. Parents filled out a subscale of the Child’s Report of Parental Behavior Inventory, which assessed parents’ warmth towards their children. Children filled out questionnaires assessing sibling warmth, parent youth conflict, perception of differential treatment and parental warmth. Results indicated that children who reported less parental warmth than their siblings did (differential parental warmth) also reported lower sibling dyad warmth. This association was greater for firstborn than for second-born children (Shanahan et al., 2008). Children who reported higher levels of parental conflict than their siblings also reported higher sibling conflict (differential parental conflict); however, this association was stronger in second born siblings than first born.
In a similar study, McHale, Crouter, McGuire, and Updegraff (1995) examined parent differential treatment and sibling relationship quality. Participants included 110 intact families and their firstborn and secondborn siblings. Each family was interviewed, with parent interviews lasting 2 hours and sibling interviews lasting 1 hour. Parents’ differential treatment was coded using a modified version of Sibling Inventory of Differential Experiences, and the Sibling Relationship Inventory Scale assessed sibling relationships. Results revealed that parents who participated in equal treatment had children with higher sibling relationship quality. There were stronger associations between differential treatment and younger children’s interactions with their siblings in that younger siblings responded more negatively when viewed as less favored and more positively when favored; these results were not found in older siblings.

The overall findings suggest that how parents interact with each sibling is linked to the sibling relationship quality as a whole, and that differential treatment may interact with birth order. In particular, younger siblings appear to be more vulnerable to parental differential treatment (McHale et al., 1995). Researchers suggest that older siblings may be less vulnerable to differential parental treatment due to advanced social and cognitive skills, which may make them more tolerant of the differential treatment (Scholte et al., 2007). However, some research has found that older siblings are more likely to experience adverse effects of differential parental treatment than younger siblings (Shanahan et al., 2008; Tamrouti-Makkink et al., 2004). Tamrouti-Makkink, Dubas, Gerris, & van Aken (2004) summarize the differences seen in research, arguing that the influence of parental differential treatment depend on “the gender composition of the
sibling pairs and the birth rank of the child” (p. 1403). However, regardless of whether older or younger siblings have more negatives experiences with differential parental treatment, all studies discovered that children who reported low parental warmth or high parental conflict were more likely to report lower quality sibling relationships as well (Mchale et al. 1995, Scholte et al., 2007; Shanahan et al., 2008). Thus, the current website project aims to provide parents an opportunity to learn about what differential parental treatment is and how it can negatively effect sibling relationship quality. The above research findings are listed online in a comprehensive form.

**Family Functioning and Quality of Marital Relationships**

Not only do parent interactions with their children influence sibling relationships, but how the family handles conflict as a whole may also contribute to more positive resolution strategies and higher quality relationships. Brody, Stoneman, McCoy, and Forehand (1992) examined associations between family functioning and sibling conflict. The researchers recruited 152 families with children aged 5 to 14 years old. Families were observed in home and in the laboratory, and participated in the Family Problem Solving task, which assessed family involvement in resolving sibling conflict. Sibling interactions were also recorded, and parents completed a family relationships assessment. The results indicated that families who approached sibling conflict in a harmonious manner and with equal treatment towards each child were more likely to have children with lower sibling conflict levels.
Marital parent relationship quality is also associated with children's relationships with siblings and peers (Stocker & Youngblade, 1999; Yu & Gamble, 2008). For example, Yu and Gamble (2008) studied the relationship between marital relationship quality and the children’s sibling relationship with 130 mothers of preschool-aged children. Mothers completed several questionnaires, including Coparental Interaction Questionnaire, a modified version of Conflict over Child Rearing, and the Short Marital Adjustment Test to assess marital relationship quality. Mothers also filled out the Parental Expectations and Perceptions Relationships Questionnaire to assess sibling relationship quality. Results indicated that parents with higher relationship quality were more likely to have children with higher sibling relationship quality. The researchers also found that parents’ marital relationship may have a direct influence on their parent styles, which could then interfere with parent-child relationships, and therefore influence the sibling relationship quality. For example, if parents are facing high marital conflict, this could lead to more negative parent-child interactions, which could further leave to higher conflict between siblings.

Similarly, Stocker and Youngblade (1999) studied 136 intact families with two children to investigate the link between marital interaction quality and the quality of siblings’ interactions with each other. Each family was observed for 2 hours at a university laboratory. Parents completed the Relationship Problem Inventory, and then were videotaped discussing areas of conflict and positive aspects of the marriage. Families were then recorded playing a board game together and discussing fun activities and areas of conflict in the family. Parents were asked to complete additional
questionnaires about marital conflict and children's peer status. Children were also interviewed separately to assess their sibling relationship quality and interpretations of their parents’ marital conflict. Results revealed that children who reported higher sibling conflict, lower sibling relationship quality and negative peer relationships were more likely to have parents who reported higher marital conflict.

These findings suggest that families who can come together and discuss sibling conflict impartially and appropriately may significantly reduce sibling rivalry and lead to more positive conflict resolution strategies (Brody, Stoneman, McCoy, & Forehand, 1992). By discussing the conflicts and resolving them together, parents may be modeling an appropriate conflict resolution skill, which coincides with previous findings that children do not develop or select conflict strategies independently (Perlman et al., 2009). Similarly, how parents resolve conflicts with each other may also have an effect on children’s relationships with siblings and peers, as research has indicated that parents who experience high marital conflict may interact in more negative parent-child interactions, which may lead to higher conflict between siblings, reducing the sibling relationship quality (Yu & Gamble, 2008). Stocker and Youngblade (1999) suggest that children may "model their parent's hostility and negative affect with peers and siblings, leading to more conflictual and less affectionate relationships" (p. 605). Furthermore, children may view their parents’ marital conflict as a model for all relationships, and may react negatively to or avoid future relationships with siblings and peers. Hence, the current website project aimed to provide parents the opportunity to learn about how family involvement and parents’ relationship quality interacts in sibling relationships.
The website provides detailed, research-based information on why and how parent-child relationships, family involvement, and marital relationships might affect a child’s social and cognitive development.

**Parent Response to Sibling Conflict**

Parents may also have a significant influence in how children resolve conflict with their siblings. For instance, research has shown that how a parent views sibling conflict is related to how children respond to sibling conflict. Randell and Peterson (2009) examined how mothers’ attitudes towards sibling conflict affected children’s emotional state after an argument. Mothers’ attitudes towards sibling conflict were coded as either constructive and helpful or destructive and harmful; children’s affect was coded as negative, neutral, or amicable. The results indicated that children who experienced more positive emotions after sibling conflict often had mothers who viewed sibling conflict as positive, constructive, and developmentally productive. Likewise, children who experienced more distress after sibling conflict often had mothers who viewed sibling conflict as negative (Randell & Peterson, 2009). Hence, a mother’s view of the beneficial and/or detrimental effects of sibling conflict may influence her choice of different response strategies. The current project aims to provide parents with research-based information on responding to sibling conflict to promote a more positive management of the conflicts that arise in their children.
Many parents wonder whether they should respond to sibling conflict (Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). There are theoretical differences as to whether parents should respond to their children’s conflict. The Alderian theory (Dreikurs, 1964) suggests parents intervening in sibling conflict may create further sibling rivalry, especially if children perceive their parents interacting with differential treatment towards the other sibling. Dreikurs (1964) suggests that sibling conflict is in some ways an effort to gain parents’ attention, which may promote additional conflicts in the future (Mchale et al., 2000; Milevsky, Schlechter, & Machlev, 2011). In contrast, Dunn and Munn (1986) suggest that it is how parents respond to conflict, as opposed to how often parents intervene. These researchers argue that parents can be considered “mediators” in their children’s conflicts and can interact as a guide to resolve conflicts, leading to more positive conflict resolution strategies and higher quality sibling relationships (Mchale et al., 2000; Milevsky et al., 2011; Perlman & Ross, 1997; Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). The current website project supports the idea that parental involvement can promote positive sibling conflict resolution strategies and relationships, and provides supporting research on the website for parents to access.

Other empirical research also indicates that parents may need to intervene or respond in order for children to successfully develop optimal conflict resolution strategies; however, whether or not a parent needs to respond to sibling conflict may depend on the age of their children (Kramer et al., 1999; Martin & Ross, 2005; Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). For example, Kramer, Perozynski, and Chung (1999) studied parent responses to their children’s sibling conflicts. Eighty-eight families were
observed and recorded in three separate home visits, one week apart, for 30 to 45 minutes. Each home visit was coded as follows: The number, type, intensity, and length of each conflict that occurred, whether or not the parent chose to intervene in the conflict and if so, which parental strategies were used to resolve the conflict. Sibling interaction quality was also observed and rated on a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from rivalry/competition to warmth. Results indicated that the associations between parent response strategies and sibling interactions varied not only on the type of strategy, but on the age of the children as well. For example, younger children increased negative behavior during sibling conflict when parents chose not to intervene, whereas older children reported less sibling warmth when their parents were more likely to intervene. Thus, the researchers suggest that younger siblings may benefit more from parental intervention than older siblings. Hence, the current website project provides parents with research-based information on when and how to respond to sibling conflict using

Further, McHale, Updegraff, Tucker, and Crouter (2000) created a measure that identified three patterns or main strategies parents use in responding to sibling conflict. The first category is intervention methods, in which the parent uses strategies such as stepping in between the conflict or asking one’s spouse to become involved. The second strategy, coaching, involves helping siblings express their feelings or giving advice on how to solve the problem, without the parent actually solving it for the siblings. Lastly, nonintervention strategies are most commonly associated with parents ignoring the conflict or telling the siblings to work it out amongst themselves. In addition, McHale and colleagues (2000) found that mothers were more likely to use coaching or
nonintervention strategies, whereas fathers were more likely to use intervention strategies. These strategies, in addition to potential questions parents may have about these strategies, are listed on the current website.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this review was to explore research on sibling relationships and sibling conflict as well as parents’ involvement in these relationships in an effort to inform a web-based project for parents. The research suggests that sibling relationships are a significant part in a child’s psychological and social development, and factors that could influence the direction of this relationship should be examined. Past research has also produced mixed results in regards to the benefits and risks of sibling conflict, implying that there may be additional factors influencing sibling conflict that could have an overall effect on the sibling relationship. In addition, a review of literature on parent involvement in sibling relationships revealed that both the parents’ relationship and the parent child relationship have a significant influence on children’s relationships with siblings and peers. Furthermore, the research reviewed on parent response to children’s conflict indicates that parents may have a strong, influential role on how children learn from sibling conflict. This research indicates that there are several factors to be considered in deciding whether and how parents intervene, and that interventions that are child centered may have the most benefits for children.
Based on this review, a web site was developed as part of this project to provide parents with information on the importance of sibling relationships across development and how sibling conflict can affect these relationships. In addition, parents can also learn the importance of their role in children’s relationships and conflicts with others, as well as common parent response strategies seen in research.
Chapter 3

METHOD

The purpose of this project was to create a website that provides parents with important information regarding their children’s relationships, including the importance of sibling relationships for development, the role of parents in setting the context for sibling relationships, benefits and risks of sibling conflict, sibling conflict resolution strategies, as well as the importance of parental involvement in these conflicts.

Target Audience

The primary target audience for this project includes families with two or more preschool-aged or school-aged children. However, this website also reaches out to those interested in learning more about sibling relationships and conflict, and parents and other professionals interested in how to respond to their children’s conflict. A college student doing research related to sibling relationships might also find this website useful, as all references are linked to footnotes to the empirical literature throughout the site.

In an effort to evaluate the usefulness of the site for parents of children, five families known to the researcher who met the above criteria were asked to view the website and provide feedback on their perceptions of the site. These parents filled out a five question evaluation survey available online at the website (see Appendix B).
**Website Development**

**Literature Review**

To develop the website, the researcher first conducted a review of the scholarly literature on sibling relationships, including the importance of sibling relationships for children’s development, benefits and risks of sibling conflict and siblings’ conflict resolution strategies, parent involvement in sibling relationships and parent’s roles in sibling conflict. This research suggested that siblings’ relationships with each other have a significant influence on a child’s development, particularly in regards to sibling conflict (Criss & Shaw, 2005; Kim et al., 2007; Ram & Ross, 2008; Richmond et al., 2005; Updegraff et. al, 2005). The researcher continued to examine sibling conflict in a variety of studies, finding that the benefits and risks of sibling conflict are mixed. Whereas some studies suggest that sibling conflict is beneficial to sibling relationships, other studies have recommended that conflict may be more detrimental (Allen et al., 2007; Recchia & Howe, 2009a; Recchia & Howe, 2009b; Kim et al., 2007; Stocker et al., 2002). The conflicting results about sibling conflict led the researcher to explore sibling conflict resolution strategies, and found that how siblings resolve conflict with each other may be an underlying factor in how beneficial or detrimental sibling conflict is in sibling relationships (Killoren et al., 2008; Perlman et al., 2009; Thayer et al., 2008). The literature review also revealed a significant amount of research on parent involvement in sibling conflicts. The researcher further investigated parents’ role in sibling conflict, finding that how parents respond to sibling conflict may also affect how beneficial or
detrimental a parent’s role is in handing their children’s conflicts (Bernier et al., 2011; Schroeder & Kelley, 2010). Similarly, the researcher discovered that parents’ marital quality and how families respond to conflict as a whole may also contribute to children’s development of conflict resolution strategies as well as the quality of their relationships (Brody et al., 1992; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999; Yu & Gamble, 2008).

**Web Search**

A search on the web was performed for online information on sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and parent involvement in sibling relationships. Although the researcher did find various magazine, journal, and one page articles on these topics, no website was found that focused specifically on siblings’ relationships and their conflicts. In addition, the researcher did not find any websites geared towards parents finding information on sibling relationships and sibling conflict. The researcher frequently observed that most articles on these topics were difficult to find, as well as appearing disorganized or misplaced on the hosting websites. A goal of the current website project was therefore to provide parents with direct online resources about sibling relationships and sibling conflict, as well as information that pertained to how parents could respond to the conflict. Additionally, the project aimed to focus specifically on sibling relationships and sibling conflict, without parents having to access or navigate multiple layers to find it.
**Creating the Website**

The research gathered from the literature review and website search were combined into a website named “Inside the World of Sibling Relationships”, for parents to access (See Appendix A). The website was created using Microsoft publisher (www.microsoft.com/publisher). After the website was developed, it was uploaded on (http://worldofsiblings.freeoda.com).

The webpage structure included the following topics that were represented by one or more pages on the web site. These pages are reproduced in Appendix A.

**Introduction.** The “Home” page provides a brief, introductory paragraph restating the project’s purpose, including empirical research from the literature review that supports the need for this website to exist.

**Sibling Relationships.** Three web pages were used to describe sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and types of conflict resolution. The “Sibling Relationships” page is in question-answer format, and focuses on the importance of sibling relationships. Questions were created by asking parents known to the researcher what questions they would want on the website so that only relevant information would be provided. The “Sibling Conflict” page discusses the benefits and risks of sibling conflict, and is also in question-answer format. The “Conflict Resolution” question-answer page provides parents with information on the different ways siblings resolve conflict with one another. This page also discusses variations among age groups and birth order.
**Parent Involvement.** There are two pages for parental involvement, both in question-answer format. “Parent Involvement in Sibling Relationships” provides parents with research information on the importance of their role in their children’s relationships. Parent-child relationship quality, differential treatment, and marital conflict are discussed. “Parental Response” answers the overall question: “Do parents need to become involved in their children’s quarrels?” This page also includes different strategies parents can adopt in responding to sibling conflict, and research-based information on each topic.

**Resources and Contacts.** Two web pages are used at the conclusion of the website in order to provide parents with further resources and opportunities to provide feedback on the web page. The “Parent Resources” page provides links to outside sources for parents who want more information on family and family life, such as parenting.com or First 5 California. The last page is the “Contact” page. This page gives parents the opportunity to evaluate and rate the effectiveness and helpfulness of the site, as well as a comment box to provide specific comments on how to improve the site. All comment forms were e-mailed to the primary researcher and her sponsor. Footnotes are placed throughout the website and are linked to the research studies listed in the references section (see Appendix A).

**Website Evaluation**

The website for the current project provides parents with an opportunity to fill out and send a website evaluation form on the contents of the website. Parents and
professionals known by the researcher were specifically invited to view the website and fill out the website evaluation listed on the webpage. These responses were used to determine if the website met its goals: (a) to provide information on sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and parent involvement; and (b) to provide this information in an organized, clear manner that was easy for parents to read and use. Five parents who met the primary audience criteria (two or more children and experience with sibling conflict) were recruited from professional contacts and asked to view the website and complete the survey on the last webpage. Since the parents were participating in a program evaluation survey and not in a research study, the researcher did not collect any other demographic or identifying information.

Parents could access the evaluation form directly on the website; there was no specified time limit to review the website or complete the form. The evaluation form contained five questions: three questions were based on a 3-point Likert-type scale, and two questions were open ended. Parents were not required to answer each question, which is as follows: (a) How helpful was this website to you regarding Sibling Relationships? (b) How helpful was this website to you regarding Parent Response? (c) Was this website easy to navigate? (d) What was the most useful information on the site? (e) What would you like to see added to the site to make it more useful? (See Appendix B). The results of the evaluation are reported in chapter 4.
Chapter 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this project was to provide important information on sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and parent involvement to parents on an online website designed specifically for this project. Sibling relationships are ubiquitous in family contexts, and high quality sibling relationships can promote children’s cognitive and social development (Criss & Shaw, 2005; Richmond et. al, 2005; Updegraff et. al, 2005). Similarly, sibling conflict can promote positive conflict resolution skills, leading to better relationships with siblings and peers (Downey & Condron, 2004; Perlman et al., 2009; Ram & Ross, 2008; Recchia & Howe, 2009a; Recchia & Howe, 2009b). However, other research findings suggest that exposure to sibling conflict may actually create a learning environment for aggression (Kim et. al, 2007; Ostrov et al., 2006). Past research indicates that the quality of parent-child relationships, parent differential treatment towards siblings, and the quality of parent’s marital relationship may have an effect on children’s cognitive development, social development, and future relationships with siblings and peers (Allen et. al, 2007; Mchale et. al, 1995; Shanahan et. al, 2008; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999; Yu & Gamble, 2008). Although past research has continuously shown the correlations between sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and parent involvement, no programs or guides have been developed that contribute to parental knowledge on the subject.

The author accessed several references before developing the website. First, the
researcher performed a thorough literature review on sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and parents’ roles in sibling relationships and conflict. Next, the researcher conducted an extensive web search of parent-geared information on these topics. Lastly, parents known to the researcher were asked about their interest in sibling relationships, conflict, and parent involvement in order to provide the most relevant information on the website.

The information gathered from these sources resulted in a website focused on the definition and importance of sibling relationships and sibling conflict, as well as pertinent information on the role parents have in their children’s relationship and conflict. Additionally, the website provided parents with links to other literature and online sources, as well as an online website evaluation to assess the helpfulness of the website (see Appendix B).

**Website Evaluation**

After the website was published online, five parents known to the researcher were asked to access the website and evaluate its usefulness using an online evaluation form. Families were predominantly white, with two of the families being of Asian or Russian descent. Parents were between the ages of 22 and 51 years old, and had two to three children, ages 11 months to 22 years. Parent’s education ranged from high school to medical school. The website evaluation survey contained five questions using a 3-point Likert scale or open ended responses: (a) How helpful was this website to you regarding
sibling relationships? (b) How helpful was this website to you regarding parent response? (c) Was this website easy to navigate? (d) What was the most useful information on the site? (e) What would you like to see added to the site to make it more useful?

All parents who reviewed the website described it as a very useful tool for learning about sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and parents’ roles and strategies. One parent wrote, “I think the most useful information on the site concerns the different types of sibling conflict and the different ways in which parents can get involved. The site broke down the different conflicts very clearly, such as constructive versus destructive, and presented the definitions, examples, and consequences of both types in a very logical, simple and orderly fashion, which I very much appreciated as a reader. The same thing can be said about the conflict resolution strategies and the parent responses section.” Similarly, another parent wrote: “I liked the sections on conflicts and parent responses- the detail of the types and explanation and examples were helpful.” However, another parent suggested that although the website provided sufficient information on the specified topics, it might be helpful if the information was presented another way: “… I think adding a simple, colorful chart to the more clearly represented sections that involve ‘different types of’ would be visually helpful and would interrupt the monotony of reading text after text”

All parents reported the website as useful regarding sibling relationships. On a Likert scale from 1 to 3, (one being not helpful and three being very helpful), parents unanimously reported, “very helpful,” with a 3 out of 3 rating on the usefulness of the website regarding sibling relationships. One parent described the content of sibling
relationships as the most useful information on the site: “My husband and I have been discussing the positives and negatives of having another child and this brought new information to the table for us to disseminate. I also discovered that there are some benefits to being an only child, which I hadn't considered before.”

Parents also found the website helpful for information on parent roles and response. On a Likert scale from 1 to 3, (one being not helpful and three being very helpful), all parents reported, “very helpful,” with a 3 out of 3 rating. Parents especially liked the parent response section. One parent wrote: “It was interesting to learn that conflict intervention differed depending not only on age but on birth order as well.” Similarly, another parent mentioned “I liked the sections on conflicts and parent responses- the detail of the types and explanation and examples were helpful”.

Parents unanimously reported that the website was very easy to navigate, giving a 3/3 on a Likert scale from 1 to 3 (one being a very hard time navigating to very easy to navigate). When asked what could be added to make the site more useful, one parent wrote: “I find the site very useful as it is. The Parent Resources page has plenty of links to informational sites and literature regarding sibling relationships and even arts and crafts.”

However, the parents did offer several suggestions on how to improve the site. One parent suggested even more examples of parent intervention in conflict and tips on how to handle these conflicts: “As a parent, I am always looking for that great tip on how to handle a situation- that special wording or action that seems to help.” Additionally, another parent recommended a webpage dedicated to a forum or discussion board for
parents to come together: “I think it might be kind of fun (and useful) to have a forum for discussion among parents particularly with anecdotes about their children's various conflicts and the results of the parents putting different strategies to use. This could be a very helpful section to many parents who are reaching out to other parents for support and camaraderie.” Another parent recommended two questions not discussed on the website: “Any relationship between sibling conflict and bullying” and “Does anything change within blended families?”

In summary, the results from the evaluation survey suggested that the parents found the information very useful regarding sibling relationships and parent involvement, and found the website easy to navigate through. Parents reported that the website was easy to comprehend and provided an ample amount of information and sources about sibling relationships, sibling conflict, parent roles in sibling relationships, and parent response to sibling conflict. All parents who completed the evaluation reported that they learned something new about sibling relationships and parent involvement. In addition, parents also suggested ideas for new material to add to the website, as well as a message board for parents to communicate with each other.

Overall, the researcher considers the website project to be a success, as the parent feedback was highly positive. Feedback from the parents provided insight on how to further improve the sight. For example, parents suggested a message board where parents could communicate and share stories with each other, which would greatly enhance the usefulness of the website.

Although the researcher’s literature review supplied several sources of
information on sibling relationships, sibling conflict, and parent roles and responses, the researcher was surprised to not find any specific website designed to portray this information to parents. The researcher performed a thorough web search on these topics and did find some articles listed on the Parent Resource webpage, but could not find any website dedicated to these topics. Given the highly influential role sibling relationships and conflict have in children’s social and cognitive development (Cutting & Dunn, 2006; Doney & Condron, 2004; McAlister & Peterson, 2006; Recchia & Howe, 2009a), more websites should be created on the topic and advertised to parents. This would provide parents more opportunities to learn and understanding how their children’s relationship and conflict works within the family dynamic, as this was a question that came up in several conversations with parents while creating the website.

In addition, research indicates that parent’s relationship with their children, parental differential treatment, and the quality of the marital relationship can also influence the quality of sibling relationships and children’s future relationships with peers (Allen et al., 2007; Bernier et al., 2011; Brody et al., 1992; Shanahan et al., 2008; Yu & Gamble, 2008). More research and project efforts should focus on relaying this information to parents, as it may help parents become more aware of their roles in their children’s lives and development. Similarly, research suggests that when and how a parent intervenes in conflict could greatly influence the quality of their children’s relationships (Kramer et al., 1999; Mchale et al., 2000; Randell & Peterson, 2009; Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). Thus, it may be beneficial to create further websites or workshops that focus specifically on parent response strategies and to educate parents on
when and how to respond to conflict; this could guide parents to respond to conflict in ways that can contribute to higher quality parent-child and sibling relationships.

**Recommendations**

With consideration of the responses from the initial evaluation, several revisions will be made to site. Certain pages will be reviewed and, if deemed appropriate, content will be turned into an easy to read chart for parents to access. The researcher will also add a page for parent communication by posting a discussion board forum, so that parents may find support and seek advice from other parents, as well as share experiences with one another. This discussion board forum will also be used for parents to post questions for the researcher, who will answer questions on a monthly basis.

In addition, an “Updates” page will be created, in which the researcher can notify families when new research has become available and has been added to the website content. The researcher will update the website with new research as it becomes available, in which the researcher will check quarterly. The website will be maintained and updated by the researcher on a monthly basis, which will include updating related research information, answering and monitoring posts from parents on the discussion board forums. Similarly, the website evaluation form is posted on the website, and the researcher will continue to make efforts to revise and add to the website based on parent feedback. The author also suggests that the website continue to be distributed to larger populations and evaluated so website improvements can continue.
The researcher intends to distribute the website link to a professor’s classroom website, as well as other parent-child resource websites. This website may be of service to parents, students, and other professionals interested in sibling relationships, conflict, parent roles in children’s relationships and parent response to conflict. The website will remain available as long as one viewer accesses it every six months. The website will be reevaluated and maintenance reassessed every six months.

In regards to creating websites to portray research-based information to parents, the researcher notes a few things. First, it is recommended that researchers interested in creating websites have some knowledge of HTML coding and website development programs. Additionally, a wider sample to evaluate the website content to further improve the website before it is published is also recommended.
APPENDIX A

Website Content

(http://worldofsiblings.freeoda.com)

**Inside the World of Sibling Relationships**
Understanding Sibling Conflict and the Importance of Parent Involvement

**Parent Involvement in Sibling Relationships**

Welcome to "Inside the World of Sibling Relationships". Our website is dedicated to providing parents research based information regarding parental involvement in sibling relationships, including:

- The importance of sibling relationships
- How parents can influence sibling relationships
- Sibling conflict and its role in children's development
- Types of conflict resolution strategies
- Responding to sibling conflict
- Parent Resources

This website was created as part of the graduation requirements at California State University, Sacramento, for the Master of Arts-Child Development program. We hope you will find the information provided useful.
Please contact graduate student Kalina Stogsdill at kjstogsdill@gmail.com or her sponsor, Professor Sheri Hembree, at hembrees@csus.edu if you have any questions regarding the website and/or its contents.
Inside the World of Sibling Relationships

Understanding Sibling Conflict and the Importance of Parent Involvement

Sibling Relationships

Why are Sibling relationships important?

Sibling relationships are important because they play an important role in a child's development. For example, changes in sibling relationships, such as an increase or decrease in sibling conflict, were linked to changes in each child's development.  

Research indicates that sibling relationships contribute to children's social and cognitive development. For example:

- Children with siblings are more likely to have higher interpersonal skills, fewer externalizing problem behaviors and more self-control with their peers than only children.  

- Children with siblings are more likely to have advanced social skills, such as perspective-taking, than children with no siblings.  

- Children with siblings tend to have more opportunities to negotiate and resolve conflict than children with no siblings. These opportunities can help children learn to understand others' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, which can then lead to stronger social skills and relationships with others.  

Does the quality of sibling relationships matter?

Although the benefits of sibling relationships are clearly represented through research, the strength of these benefits does depend on the quality of a child's relationship with his or her siblings. For example:

- Children with higher quality sibling relationships tend to demonstrate higher emotional understanding than those with lower sibling relationship quality.  

• Children with lower sibling warmth exhibit less positive social skills than children who experience higher sibling warmth.¹
• When siblings relationships increase in quality over time, children are more likely to report low levels of depression in adolescent years. In contrast, siblings with a low quality relationships are more likely to experience higher feelings of depressed moods.²

What about only children? Are they at a disadvantage for not having siblings?

No, only children are not necessarily left out in developing social skills. Children with no siblings have been found to have high self esteem and perform very well academically. Peers often become the substitute for siblings, and only children can develop healthy, strong relationships with their peers.³
Inside the World of Sibling Relationships

Understanding Sibling Conflict and the Importance of Parent Involvement

Parent Roles in Sibling Relationships

Do I have an important role in my children's relationships with each other?

Absolutely! Research suggests that parents tend to guide their children through their relationship experiences. Research also suggests that the quality of a parent's relationship with his or her child can influence that child's future relationships with siblings and peers. For example:

- Children with secure attachments to their parents are more likely to create secure attachments with their friends and peers, leading to healthier social relationships.

- Children who have lower quality relationships with their parents are more likely to have lower quality sibling relationships.

How parents respond to each of their children, or parental differential treatment (treating people differently) can play a role in children's relationships. While a certain amount of differential treatment is normal and expected in children's different ages and needs, extreme differential treatment is linked to poorer quality sibling relationships. Research indicates that:

- High rates of parental differential treatment is associated with lower sibling quality relationships.

- Younger siblings appear to be more affected by differential treatment. They respond more positively than older siblings when they view themselves as "favored" and more negatively when they feel viewed in a lesser light.

Can the relationship with between parents influence children's sibling relationships?

Yes, the quality of the relationship between parents is associated with children's relationships with siblings and peers. Studies have found that:
• Parents with a strong, positive relationship are more likely to have children with higher quality sibling relationships. Similarly, parents with a low quality marital relationship are more likely to have children with lower quality sibling relationships. 24

• If parents are experiencing high marital conflict, this could lead to more negative parent-child interactions, which can then lead to more conflict between siblings, diminishing the quality of their relationship as well. 24

• Children view their parents’ relationships as the learning base of other social relationships. Therefore, if children are constantly exposed to their parents’ marital conflict, they may react negatively or avoid future relationships with siblings and peers. 24
Sibling Conflict

Why is it important to understand Sibling Conflict?

Sibling conflict is defined as the opposition, arguing, or competition between brothers and sisters. Sibling conflict is a common, sometimes daily occurrence in most family homes, and a primary concern for parents nationwide. Sibling conflict is important to understand because siblings can offer opportunities to develop conflict negotiation skills, which is considered to be an essential skill for children to have in the future social relationships.

Some research indicates that children who are exposed to sibling conflict are more likely to develop positive strategies to resolve conflict, benefiting children’s future relationships with others, including peers. Other research has indicated that exposure to sibling conflict may actually create a learning environment for aggression, creating a more detrimental effect on a child’s peer relationships.

This may seem contradictory, except that not all conflict is the same. Some researchers have conceptualized conflict as being either constructive or destructive.

Constructive conflict occurs when children use strategies such as collaboration and compromise to resolve conflict.

Constructive Conflict provide siblings with an understanding of another’s perspective. This may motivate children to resolve conflict in more socially acceptable ways. Constructive Conflict also provides opportunities for children to practice a range of resolution strategies and develop valuable conflict management skills useful to other relationships.
In contrast, destructive conflict occurs when children use physical or negative strategies, such as coercion or name calling, or aggression to resolve conflict. Destructive sibling conflict is associated with negative psychological adjustment, such as high anxiety, depressed mood, and delinquent behavior. Destructive sibling conflict may teach children inappropriate, aggressive behavior that is generalized to other relationships. They also suggest that sibling conflict may provide children with more negative relationship experiences, which may transfer on to future social relationships with peers. In other words, when children are exposed to constructive conflict, they can receive many of the benefits sibling relationships have to offer, such as increased cognitive and social skills. However, children exposed to destructive conflict may have more experiences related to low quality sibling relationships, such as an increase in depressed moods.
Conflict Resolution Strategies

How do children resolve conflict with each other?

There have been a number of studies examining how children resolve conflict with each other. The Dual Concern Model, a model of conflict resolution, proposes three types of conflict resolution strategies:

1. **Controlling Resolution Strategies**: A child’s primary goal is self-satisfaction with little consideration for others. For example, this could be a sibling refusing to back down from his position in an argument until he gets what he desires from the argument.

2. **Non-confrontational strategies**: Involve low consideration for one’s self as well as others. Non-confrontational strategies include avoiding or withdrawing from the conflict. For instance, if a sibling takes a child’s toy, a child with non-confrontational strategies would not protest or say anything to create conflict; he or she would rather pick another toy to play with than fight with a sibling.

3. **Solution Orientation strategies**: Consist of compromise and negotiation and are associated with higher levels of consideration toward self and others. The primary goal in solution orientation is to resolve the conflict mutually in order to preserve the relationship. For example, this can be two children negotiating who should play with what toy and for how long (i.e., "I can play with Barbie for 2 minutes and then you can play with Barbie for 2 minutes").

What influences how these strategies are used?

There are several factors that are linked to conflict resolution:

AGE
Research suggests that children's conflict resolution strategies change over time, and that they become more sophisticated as they get older. Some examples are listed below.

For example:

- Age is linked to more constructive strategies in conflict resolution, such as solution orientation strategies. 11
- Younger children tend to have more variations in their responses to conflict, whereas older siblings become more constant in their strategies, often referring to different perspectives and possible solutions, or solution orientation strategies. 14

**BIRTH ORDER**

Birth order also has a role in how children use conflict resolution strategies. Children with older siblings are more likely to consider one another's positions than children with younger sibling. 10

- For example, an 8 year old with an older sibling is more likely to exhibit higher levels of negotiation and consideration in sibling conflict. In contrast, an 8 year old with a younger sibling is more likely to direct and guide the younger sibling in conflict resolution.

**PARENTS**

Parents may also have a significant influence in how children resolve conflict with their siblings. In fact, how a parent views sibling conflict may be related to how children respond to sibling conflict. Past research suggests that:

- Mothers who view sibling conflict as positive, constructive, and developmentally appropriate are more likely to have children who experience more positive emotions after sibling conflict constructive, and developmentally productive. 17

- Mothers who view sibling conflict as negative towards development are more likely to have children who report more distress after conflict with their siblings. 14

Parents' views on how beneficial and/or detrimental sibling conflict is on their children's development may also influence their choices on different response strategies, as described on the next page.
Types of responses to Sibling Conflict

Should parents become involved in their children’s quarrels?

Parents may need to intervene or respond to their children’s conflict in order to help children learn and develop successfully learning strategies. However, whether or not a parent needs to respond to conflict may depend on the age of their children.

- Younger children are more likely to increase negative behavior when parents choose not to intervene.

- In contrast, older siblings are more likely to report lower-quality sibling relationships when parents do intervene in conflict.

Given that research indicates that younger children may benefit more from parental intervention than older children, parents may want to become more involved in their younger siblings’ conflicts and gradually decrease their involvement as children get older.

Regardless of the age of the child, parents should intervene in conflict that has become highly aggressive. More information and links to related articles are listed below.

How should I intervene?

Past research has revealed three different ways parents respond to sibling conflict:

1. Intervention methods include the strategies of stepping in between the conflict or asking for one’s spouse to intervene. For example, if two children are fighting over a particular toy, a parent with an intervention strategy would resolve the conflict for them, such as “Johnny, let your sister have the car” or “I’m going to take that toy away if you don’t stop fighting over it.”
2. Coaching methods are linked to strategies such as giving children advice on how to solve the problem or helping children explain their feelings to one another. A parent is more likely to guide their children through the conflict resolution process. For instance: "Betty, how do you think that makes Johnny feel when you take his toy?" or "Jake, can you think of a way to share the car? Maybe you have it for two minutes and then Bobby has it for two minutes?"

3. Non-intervention methods include ignoring the conflict all together or telling the siblings to work it out amongst themselves. For example, if one child comes to a parent with a sibling conflict problem, a parent with non-intervention strategies might say "I don't know honey, go work it out with your brother" or "I'm staying out of your argument, you two need to figure it out."

What type of strategy should I use?

What type of strategy to use also depends on the age of the child and the type and severity of the conflict. In a sense, these strategies may also be looked as developmental. With very young toddler or preschool aged children who have not developed the majority of their verbal skills, intervention strategies may be necessary.

As children grow into preschool and middle childhood, research suggests that parents who incorporate more of a coaching strategy with young children are more likely to have children who have less intense conflicts. By coaching their children through the resolution process, parents can contribute to their child's future social skills with other siblings and peers.

As children then move over into the teenage years, non-intervention may be the most beneficial. Research points out that parents who incorporate intervention or coaching strategies with their adolescent teens are more likely to have teens with negative sibling relationship qualities.

Under what circumstances should I intervene?

Charles Neuhoef, M.A., wrote on an article on tips for prevention and intervention in sibling conflict on aboutourkids.org, a website developed for the New York University Child Study Center (for full article, please click here). Although we recommend reading the full article, we have summarized some of his points below.
Sibling conflict is universal and unavoidable in sibling relationships.

Don't become too involved in the minor bickering and arguments that can occur.

A parent should intervene when:

- When the fighting becomes excessive, or consistently reoccurs with no foreseen solution.
- When the argument becomes physical where one or both children could become hurt.

If you have any other questions on when to intervene or need to talk to someone about your children's conflicts, please call the National Parent Helpline at 1-855-4A-PARENT (1-855-427-2736).
Inside the World of Sibling Relationships
Understanding Sibling Conflict and the Importance of Parent Involvement

Parent Resources

Although we could not find other websites focusing specifically on sibling relationships, the websites below have published several articles regarding sibling relationships on their website. We encourage you to take a look!

First 5 California
First 5 California focuses on services and programs that directly benefit teachers, children and families. This includes advocating for a variety of programs that support sustainable early childhood education programs.

Parenting.com
Provides tips, ideas, and advice for the parenting stage that fits you best, whether you’re pregnant, potty training a toddler, or sending your child off to kindergarten.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)
The AAP provides resources online on the health, safety and well-being of everyone, from infants to young adults. Members include pediatricians and surgical specialists.

National Education Association (NEA)
The NEA provides a list of two-page guides that parents can use as tools to encourage their children to succeed in school. Was created by the NEA and the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

Family Corner
In the Family Corner you will find everything from crafts, fitness ideas, family activities, education advice, and home decorating tips. A fun place to find ideas to add some fun into family time!

Healthy Kids and Teens
This website was developed to provide more health oriented programs and events for young children and adolescents. On the site, you can find delicious, healthy recipes kids will eat up, as well as fun and active games to play.

Literature on Sibling Conflict

Literature has a significant amount of books on sibling conflict, geared towards both parents and kids - definitely some cute ones in there! All of these books are available and can be found on Amazon.com (Links with general information about the books are provided below)
Parents:

1. The Baffled Parent's Guide to Sibling Rivalry
2. The Sibling Effect: what the Bonds Among Brothers and Sisters Reveal About Us
3. Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live, too
4. Sibling Relationships in Childhood and Adolescence: Predictors and Outcomes
5. Beyond Sibling Rivalry: How to Help Your children Become Cooperative, Caring, and Compassionate

Kids:

1. Big Sister, Little Sister
2. Oh, Brother...Oh, Sister
3. Betsy Bick and Selfish Sisters: All about Sibling Rivalry
4. Siblings: You're Stuck with Each Other, So Stick Together
5. The Resolving Sibling Rivalry Book
Inside the World of Sibling Relationships
Understanding Sibling Conflict and the Importance of Parent Involvement

Contact Us

Comments? Suggestions?
If you have any comments or suggestions on how to improve our site, please let us know! Everything we have written or researched on this site has been with parents in mind.

Parent Evaluation Survey

Please help us by answering the questions below so that we may continue to improve our site to better fit the needs of parents like you. Space is provided below for additional comments.

1. How helpful was this website to you regarding Sibling Relationships?
   - Very helpful
   - Somewhat helpful
   - Not helpful

2. Was the website easy to navigate?
   - Yes, very easy
   - I had some trouble, but managed to find my way
   - I had a very hard time navigating around the website

3. How helpful was this website to you regarding Parent Involvement?
   - Very helpful
   - Somewhat helpful
   - Not helpful

4. What was the most useful information on the site?

5. What would you like to see added to the site to make it more useful?

6. Name (Optional): 

7. Email (Optional):

Submit  Reset
APPENDIX B

Parent Evaluation Survey (Available on Website)

1. How helpful was this website to you regarding Sibling Relationships?
   a. Very helpful
   b. Somewhat helpful
   c. Not helpful

2. How helpful was this website to you regarding Parent Involvement?
   a. Very helpful
   b. Somewhat helpful
   c. Not helpful

3. Was this website easy to navigate?
   a. Yes, very easy!
   b. I had some trouble but managed to find my way
   c. I had a very hard time navigating around this website

4. What was the most useful information on the site? (Open ended with comment box)

5. What would you like to see added to the site to make it more useful?
   (Open ended with comment box)
REFERENCES


