The Relations between Marital Conflict and Sibling Interactions

Introduction

Marital interactions shape the home environment. How couples handle disagreements has an impact on children; when children see parents successfully resolve conflicts, their levels of distress decrease (Ehrensaft, 2003). In situations of prolonged negative marital interaction and unresolved conflict, children run the risk of developing troubling personality traits and unhealthy ways of dealing with emotion (Thompson, 2001).

The harmful effects of negative marital interactions on children are first modeled by children in relationships with their siblings. By middle school, children spend more time with siblings than with friends (McHale and Crouter, 1996), spelling out the importance of fostering healthy sibling relationships. Relationships between siblings are powerful, serving as models from which children learn to relate to others throughout their lives. Supportive sibling relationships are associated with peer acceptance in middle school (Stormshak, Bellanti, and Bierman; 1996) and translated into healthy relational styles throughout life.

Jealousy between siblings is a common way emotional maladjustment manifests itself. Past research on sibling jealousy examines the effects of parental inattentiveness on a child’s future ability to manage emotions (Miller, Volling, and McElwain; 2000). In a recent study on sibling jealousy, positive marital interaction emerged as the most significant predictor of children’s behavioral dysregulation, (Volling, McElwain and Miller; 2002). The present study attempts to uncover more specific and complex family predictors of sibling jealousy.

The present study improves upon past design by examining marital interaction and sibling interaction directly. The current study will further examine the relations between marital conflict style and sibling interaction. It is hypothesized that children’s will exhibit the same type of interaction styles in their relations with their siblings as their marital interaction styles.

Methods

Family members completed a subset of tasks as part of a larger study focusing on familial interactions. The participants included 20 married or cohabitating couples that had been together at least two years with two children between the ages of five and thirteen, inclusive.

Martial Conflict

The parents completed a marital dyad problem-solving task to assess marital interaction. Each partner chose a difficult topic in their relationship, and they discussed them in ten-minute intervals. These videotaped interactions were coded using the System for Coding Interactions in Dyads (SCID, Malik & Lindahl, 2000), which assessed
couple’s functioning in areas such as verbal aggression, withdrawal, dysphoric affect, support, positive affect, and cohesiveness.

Questionnaires used also assessed interactions and communication employed by couples during conflicts, as well as frequency of disagreements over child rearing practices. These included the Conflicts and Problem Solving Scale (CPS, Kerig, 1996), the Love and Affection, Validation, and Editing scale of the Managing Affect and Differences Scale (MADS-E, Arellano & Markman, 1995), and the Child Rearing Disagreement Scale (CRD, Jouriles et al., 1991). Additionally, the O'Leary-Porter Scale, (OPS, Porter & O'Leary, 1980) was used to measure the extent to which children observe their parents interacting negatively and the couple’s hostility during these interactions. Finally, marital satisfaction was assessed using the Locke-Wallace Short Marital Adjustment Test (SMAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959).

**Children’s Sibling Relations**

To assess sibling interaction, siblings played with toys for twenty minutes. The videotaped interactions were coded for factors such as anger, support, and cohesiveness between siblings—which ranged from playing alone to playing together cooperatively (Dunn, Cutting, and Fisher, 2002). The sibling relations were also assessed using the Sibling Relationships Questionnaire (SRQ, Furman & Burhmster, 1985).

Sibling jealousy was measured using the triadic interaction paradigm developed by Volling, McElwain & Miller (2002). First, the parent played with one child while encouraging the other sibling to play with another toy. Later, the parent played with the second child while encouraging the first to play something else. Last, the parent chose how to play with both children. Videotaped interactions were coded for sibling behaviors (e.g., withdrawal) and emotions (e.g., sadness).

**Results**

Marital relationship and sibling relationship results from correlational analysis suggested that negative marital interactions, including withdrawal and anger, between couples were associated with less cohesiveness among siblings. Results from the marital questionnaires also supported these findings. Increased parental verbal anger was related to a decrease in sibling cohesiveness. Similarly, higher levels of reported hostility between parents were associated with a decrease in cohesiveness between siblings. Moreover, high reports of parent disagreements about child rearing were significantly related to a decrease in sibling cohesiveness and warmth.

Positive marital interactions, demonstrated through support and positive affect, as well as reports of marital satisfaction, in contrast, were significantly related to sibling’s warmth towards each other. Additionally, more collaboration between parents was associated with less negative sibling interactions.
Significant results were also found between quality of marital relationships and sibling jealousy. Increased parental communication was associated with less withdrawal and less distracting behaviors of the siblings during the jealousy task. Also, greater collaboration between spouses was significantly related to the older child providing support during the jealousy task.

Analyses were performed for siblings and jealousy and revealed a highly significant positive relationship between negative sibling interactions, such as anger or sadness, and negative emotions and behaviors in the jealousy task. Conversely, greater sibling cohesiveness was related to more support in the jealousy task. Emotions between siblings during the jealousy task were also related. For example, the younger child’s anger during the jealous task was related to the older child’s sadness or anger.

Finally, negative sibling emotions were interrelated. Warmth in sibling relationships was associated with less externalizing of emotions; whereas, sibling rivalry was related to sibling conflict. Additionally, sadness during the jealousy task was highly associated with anger and distractions during the jealousy task, and anger was associated with distractions and withdrawal. Increased positive affect, on the other hand, was related to increased support during the jealousy task.

**Conclusions and Implications**

The present study showed that positive and negative marital interactions are related to positive and negative sibling interactions, respectively. In addition, positive and negative siblings’ emotions and behaviors were interrelated. Thus, parents need to be aware of the effects that their interactions styles have on their children’s adjustment in general and children’s relations with their siblings’. Thus, this study adds to the body of literature regarding the relations between family systems and the direct and indirect effects of parents’ behaviors and emotions on children’s behaviors and emotions.