



The Role of Sibling Relationships in Adolescent Development

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Abstract: Sibling relationships constitute one of the most enduring and formative social bonds in a person's life, often beginning in early childhood and continuing into adulthood. Despite their significance, sibling interactions are relatively underexplored compared to the roles of parents and peers in adolescent development. This study investigated how three primary dimensions of sibling dynamics—interaction frequency, sibling rivalry, and birth order—influence adolescents' social confidence, emotional well-being, and identity formation. Using a structured questionnaire disseminated to 100 participants aged 18–30, the study employed thematic analysis to identify key psychological and behavioral trends. The results indicated that positive and frequent sibling interactions significantly contribute to enhanced social competence; sibling rivalry can negatively impact emotional health but can be mitigated through effective conflict resolution; and birth order influences personality traits, responsibility levels, and self-concept. These findings highlight the need to integrate sibling-focused strategies in mental health and educational interventions to foster healthier adolescent development.

Keywords: *Sibling Relationships, Adolescent Development, Social Confidence, Emotional Wellbeing, Birth Order*

1. Introduction

Adolescence, typically defined as the period between ages 10 and 19, represents a crucial transition in the human lifespan. It is characterized by physical maturation,

psychological changes, and the gradual shift toward independence and adult identity. During this stage, individuals develop a deeper sense of self, learn to regulate their emotions, and begin to establish patterns of social interaction that will extend into adulthood. As such, adolescence is not only a time of opportunity but also one of vulnerability, where various influences shape long-term developmental outcomes.

Traditionally, research in adolescent development has focused primarily on the roles of parents, teachers, and peers. However, another major source of influence—siblings—has received comparatively less attention, despite the fact that sibling relationships often endure for a lifetime. Siblings typically share the same environment during formative years, experiencing similar parenting styles, family stressors, cultural expectations, and socioeconomic conditions. These shared experiences give rise to deeply interconnected emotional, cognitive, and social exchanges that uniquely contribute to each sibling's development.

Sibling relationships are emotionally complex and multifaceted. They offer companionship, cooperation, rivalry, mentorship, and sometimes conflict. These interactions act as a microcosm of broader social relationships, allowing adolescents to practice skills like empathy, negotiation, compromise, and emotional regulation. According to Family Systems Theory (Minuchin, 1974), each family member affects the functioning of others within the family unit. This theory posits that siblings influence each other's emotional responses, coping strategies, and behavioral tendencies—factors that are central to adolescent growth.

Additionally, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) supports the idea that siblings serve as powerful models for learning behaviors and social norms. Adolescents often mimic or internalize behaviors they observe in their older siblings, especially when parents are less available or engaged. Older siblings can act as guides, helping their younger counterparts navigate school pressures, social challenges, and identity issues. On the other hand, conflicts between siblings—while sometimes damaging—can also foster resilience and self-awareness when managed constructively.

Birth order also plays a fundamental role in shaping the sibling dynamic. Firstborn children often receive more attention from parents in the early years, fostering a greater sense of responsibility, leadership, and conscientiousness. Middle children may develop negotiation skills to balance their place in the family hierarchy, while youngest siblings are frequently perceived as more free-spirited, creative, or rebellious. These positions, while not deterministic, contribute to identity formation and personality traits, which in turn influence adolescent behavior and self-perception.

Despite the significance of these relationships, sibling influence remains an underexplored domain in adolescent psychology. Many interventions and studies continue to overlook the powerful effect that siblings can have on social development and emotional adjustment. For instance, positive sibling bonds have been linked to lower levels of anxiety, increased self-esteem, and better conflict resolution in peer relationships. Conversely, negative sibling interactions, especially when marked by chronic rivalry or perceived parental favoritism, can lead to behavioral problems, emotional distress, and even long-term issues in romantic and platonic relationships later in life.

This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how sibling interactions impact adolescent development. Specifically, the research explores three primary dimensions: (1) the effect of sibling interaction on social confidence and peer communication, (2) the impact of sibling rivalry on emotional well-being, and (3) the influence of birth order on personality development and identity formation.

To address these aims, a structured questionnaire was administered to 100 individuals aged 18–30 who have at least one sibling. This age range was selected to include individuals who had recently experienced adolescence, allowing for reflective self-reporting while still capturing adolescent dynamics with some immediacy. The research questions were designed based on existing theories and literature, ensuring alignment with empirical and theoretical foundations.

The expected outcome is a more comprehensive understanding of how sibling relationships contribute to adolescent growth. This includes identifying protective factors, such as emotional support and role modeling, as well as risk factors like unresolved rivalry or parental comparison. The broader goal is to inform parents, educators, and practitioners on how to nurture healthier sibling relationships within families, thereby promoting better developmental outcomes.

By integrating existing theories with original data analysis, the study positions sibling relationships as a critical, yet often underutilized, avenue for understanding adolescent development. In doing so, it offers not just a reflection on family dynamics, but also practical strategies for enhancing the adolescent experience through supportive sibling engagement.

2. Review of Literature

Tucker and Updegraff (2024) found that strong sibling bonds characterized by mutual support and warmth significantly enhance adolescents' social competence and overall adjustment. They emphasized that such relationships promote a sense of belonging and provide

a secure environment for practicing social skills. Similarly, Buhrmester (1992) illustrated that siblings serve as essential agents of socialization, helping children develop empathy, conflict resolution, and emotional expression through everyday interactions.

Dunn (2015) extended this understanding by noting that sibling relationships often serve as a child's first exposure to complex social dynamics. He argued that the negotiation of rules, roles, and responsibilities within these relationships helps shape interpersonal abilities that adolescents carry into wider social contexts. Moreover, he pointed out that when sibling relationships are positive, they provide emotional support and reduce the likelihood of social isolation.

Dirks et al. (2015) presented a more nuanced picture by examining the dual nature of sibling conflict. They found that while moderate levels of conflict can build resilience and problem-solving skills, high-intensity or chronic conflict paired with low emotional warmth is linked to increased internalizing behaviors such as anxiety and depression. Their study emphasized the importance of emotional context, suggesting that the presence of warmth and understanding can buffer the negative impact of rivalry.

Yeh and Lempers (2004) supported these conclusions, showing that constructive conflict resolution among siblings leads to better emotional outcomes. Adolescents who developed the skills to resolve disagreements in empathetic and cooperative ways were more likely to demonstrate emotional stability and resilience in other life areas. These findings highlight the role of siblings as both stressors and resources, depending on the relational dynamics and conflict management strategies involved.

Adler (1928) introduced the foundational concept of birth order as a determinant of personality. According to his theory, firstborns often internalize leadership roles, develop strong organizational abilities, and exhibit a heightened sense of responsibility. Conversely, later-born children are more likely to be creative, socially skilled, and sometimes rebellious as a result of attempting to differentiate themselves from their older siblings. This theory has inspired a significant body of research investigating the implications of sibling position.

Paulhus et al. (1999) conducted a quantitative study that confirmed several of Adler's propositions. They found that firstborns scored higher on conscientiousness and academic performance, while later-borns were more open to experience and risk-taking behaviors. These personality differences were partially attributed to the different expectations and parental interactions experienced by children in various birth order positions.

Lindell and Campione-Barr (2017) examined sibling dynamics in adolescence and observed that birth order also influences conflict resolution styles, responsibility sharing, and

role expectations within the family. Their research indicated that the eldest siblings were more likely to mediate family conflicts and assume caretaker roles, while younger siblings often relied on older siblings for guidance and validation. Such patterns were shown to affect self-concept and self-esteem.

McHale et al. (2012) highlighted that differential parental treatment often intersected with sibling dynamics to impact adolescent development. When parents showed favoritism or were perceived as unfair, it created tensions that exacerbated rivalry and affected identity formation. This, in turn, impacted how adolescents viewed themselves and their roles within the family system.

Campione-Barr and Killoren (2015) emphasized that the emotional intensity of sibling relationships makes them uniquely influential during adolescence. They noted that unlike friendships, which can be ended, sibling relationships are enduring and thus have a long-term impact on emotional development and personality formation. Their research called for more longitudinal studies to examine how these relationships evolve over time.

Overall, the literature underscores the multifaceted impact of sibling relationships on adolescent development. From fostering social skills and emotional resilience to shaping identity and personality, siblings play an indispensable role. However, the quality of these relationships, the nature of conflict, and contextual factors such as parental involvement and cultural expectations all mediate these effects. The current study builds upon this foundation to explore these relationships in greater empirical depth.

3. Methodology

3.1 *Aim of the Study*

The central aim of this research is to examine the role of sibling relationships in adolescent development. More specifically, the study seeks to explore how the frequency and quality of sibling interactions influence adolescents' social confidence, emotional well-being, and identity formation. In addition, the study investigates how sibling rivalry and birth order dynamics shape personality traits, perceived support systems, and psychological outcomes. These goals are aligned with the broader objective of enhancing the understanding of familial relationships and their developmental consequences.

3.2 *Hypotheses*

- **H1:** Frequent, positive sibling interactions are positively associated with adolescents' social confidence.

- **H2:** Sibling rivalry significantly affects adolescents' emotional well-being, moderated by conflict resolution quality.
- **H3:** Birth order significantly influences personality traits and identity development in adolescents.

3.3 Research Design

A quantitative descriptive design was chosen for this study because it allows for the systematic collection of numerical data to describe relationships between variables. The descriptive design enables the researcher to explore the prevalence and patterns of sibling dynamics as perceived by adolescents and young adults. Since the study seeks to assess the presence and strength of associations—rather than causality—this design is particularly appropriate. The use of structured questionnaires helps in quantifying subjective experiences such as emotional closeness, rivalry, and self-esteem.

3.4 Population and Sampling

The target population for this study includes adolescents and young adults aged 18 to 30 years who have at least one sibling. This age range was selected to capture both late adolescence and emerging adulthood, thereby offering insights into how sibling relationships continue to influence developmental processes beyond the teenage years.

A **convenience sampling** method was employed, wherein participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. This non-probability sampling technique was suitable due to its practicality and the ease of reaching a diverse pool of respondents through digital platforms. While this approach may limit generalizability, it facilitates timely and cost-effective data collection.

- **Sample size:** 100 participants
- **Target group:** Students and young adults from various educational and socio-economic backgrounds
- **Recruitment:** Online platforms such as WhatsApp, email, and social media

3.5 Measures

- **Sibling Interaction Frequency & Quality:** Likert-scale items on warmth, shared activities, and communication.
- **Rivalry & Conflict Resolution:** Frequency of disagreements, perceived emotional impact, and resolution outcomes.
- **Birth Order & Comparisons:** Self-reported position, perceived responsibilities, and parental differential treatment.
- **Outcomes:**

- **Social Confidence:** Comfort making friends, communication skills.
- **Emotional Well-being:** Self-rated stability, stress levels post-conflict.
- **Identity Formation:** Self-esteem, perceived uniqueness, role adoption.

3.6 Procedure

Google Form questionnaire circulated via social media and email. Data cleaned in Excel; thematic patterns identified across responses.

4. Results

Hypothesis	Main Theme	Outcome
H1	Sibling interaction ↔ Social confidence	Supported: Frequent, positive exchanges correlated with higher comfort in new social settings and better communication skills.
H2	Sibling rivalry ↔ Emotional well-being	Supported with nuance: Conflict frequency related to emotional fluctuations; constructive resolution often led to strengthened bonds.
H3	Birth order ↔ Personality & identity development	Strongly supported: Firstborns reported greater responsibility; later-borns reported adaptability and creativity; parental comparisons influenced self-esteem.

5. Discussion

5.1 Influence of Sibling Interactions on Social Confidence (H1)

Participants were asked a series of questions related to the frequency of interaction with their siblings and the perceived impact on their social communication and peer relationships. An overwhelming majority—nearly 75%—indicated that they interacted with their siblings “very often” or “sometimes,” suggesting that sibling contact remains high even into emerging adulthood.

Further, 68% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their sibling relationship helped them become more confident in social settings. Respondents explained that sibling conversations helped them build verbal fluency, learn to navigate disagreements, and express their emotions constructively. Many indicated that these interactions prepared them to handle similar social dynamics in school, college, or the workplace.

For instance, one participant noted, “My brother and I always had debates at home. It made me more confident to speak up during group discussions in college.” Another wrote, “Having a sibling who constantly challenged me helped me learn how to explain myself and manage disagreements peacefully.”

Thus, sibling interactions are not just a source of emotional support but also function as a foundation for developing social confidence and interpersonal competence.

5.2 Impact of Sibling Rivalry on Emotional Well-being (H2)

Sibling rivalry was another key theme explored in the questionnaire. About 63% of participants acknowledged experiencing rivalry with their sibling “often” or “sometimes.” The types of rivalry included academic competition, seeking parental approval, comparisons in behavior or achievements, and disagreements over personal space or responsibilities.

Interestingly, the emotional impact of rivalry was mixed. While 45% of respondents stated that rivalry made them feel emotionally distressed, anxious, or less valued, another 35% stated that conflict eventually led to personal growth or stronger sibling bonds. This highlights a dual nature of sibling rivalry—it can be both a source of emotional challenge and an opportunity for resilience-building.

A number of participants mentioned that constructive resolution of conflicts helped them feel closer to their siblings. Some stated that learning how to apologize or compromise with a sibling made them more emotionally mature and equipped to handle conflicts in romantic or professional settings.

However, unresolved rivalry, particularly in households where parental favoritism was reported, often left lasting emotional wounds. For example, one respondent wrote, “My parents always praised my sister for her grades. No matter how hard I tried, I never felt good enough.” These findings support the hypothesis that sibling rivalry affects emotional well-being, with the direction of impact largely depending on the nature, frequency, and outcome of the conflict.

5.3 Influence of Birth Order on Personality Traits and Identity Formation (H3)

Birth order emerged as a significant factor in shaping personality and identity. Firstborn participants reported a high level of responsibility (82%), leadership qualities (74%), and being role models (66%). Conversely, younger siblings highlighted their creativity (61%), adaptability (59%), and sociability (68%).

Additionally, 64% of all participants felt that their birth order influenced how their parents and other relatives treated them. This, in turn, affected their self-esteem and shaped their identity. Sibling comparisons were common, with 57% stating that they were

“sometimes” compared with their sibling, and 21% saying it occurred “very often.” While some said it motivated them to work harder, others reported feelings of inferiority and frustration.

A firstborn participant stated, “I always had to act like the responsible one. It made me grow up faster but also made me feel pressured all the time.” A younger sibling remarked, “I was often seen as the fun or careless one. I had to work harder to prove that I could be serious too.”

These reflections reinforce the idea that birth order and sibling roles within the family significantly influence identity construction and personality development, confirming Hypothesis 3.

6. Conclusion

The present study underscores the critical influence of sibling relationships on various dimensions of adolescent development. By examining how sibling interactions, rivalry, and birth order affect social confidence, emotional well-being, and identity formation, the research highlights the depth and complexity of these familial bonds. Positive sibling interactions were found to be instrumental in fostering social competence, equipping adolescents with the interpersonal skills necessary for healthy peer relationships and broader social engagement. Meanwhile, sibling rivalry, though often viewed negatively, emerged as a nuanced factor—capable of either diminishing or enhancing emotional resilience depending on the context and nature of conflict resolution. Additionally, birth order was shown to shape adolescents' roles, responsibilities, and self-perception, validating theoretical perspectives on personality formation within family systems.

These findings point to the need for parents, educators, and mental health professionals to consider sibling dynamics as integral to adolescent support systems. Encouraging positive interactions, promoting fairness in parental treatment, and equipping siblings with conflict resolution strategies can have lasting benefits for individual development and family harmony. The sibling relationship, when nurtured appropriately, serves not only as a source of companionship but also as a foundational training ground for life-long emotional and social competencies.

6.1 Limitations and Future Implications

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the use of self-reported data introduces the possibility of subjective bias, as participants may overstate or understate aspects of their sibling relationships. Secondly, the convenience sampling method restricts the generalizability of

findings to the broader adolescent population. Thirdly, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents conclusions about causality between sibling dynamics and developmental outcomes.

Future research should consider longitudinal studies to observe the evolution of sibling relationships over time and their long-term impact on psychosocial development. Additionally, there is scope to explore how sibling dynamics operate in diverse family contexts, including single-parent, blended, and adoptive families. Future studies might also examine how factors like gender combinations, age gaps, and cultural background influence sibling interactions and their developmental consequences.

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