

Aging Families—Series Bulletin #1

Sibling Relations in Later Life

Aging Family Relationships

When we think about family life, often there is an assumption we are talking only about families with young children. There is also an assumed emphasis on immediate rather than extended relationships that consist of one generation. As a result of a dramatic increase in life expectancy and the subsequent growth in the population of older adults, more attention is now being given to the many relationships among family members in later life. Researchers and educators interested in the dynamics of later life family relationships have developed new terms, for example, “aging families,” “later life marriage,” “skip-generation grandparents,” and the “sandwich generation.”

In fact, an emerging sub-field within the field of Family Science, known as “Family Gerontology” (Blieszner & Bedford, 1997) is becoming increasingly recognized. This specialization area is specifically related to exploring and analyzing family relationships among older adults. Some of the roles and relationships that pertain to aging families include grandparents and their grandchildren, aging parents and their adult children, later life marriages, divorce and remarriage among seniors, and siblings in later life. This is the first in a series of bulletins that will include information about the unique characteristics of later life family relationships. The focus of this particular publication is sibling relationships among older adults.



Libby and Rose

Libby and Rose had been sisters for 76 years. They had grown up together on an Iowa farm, sharing secrets, fighting over clothes, and dreaming of the future. At 18 Rose went away to college and things between them changed. Libby grew up, got married, and started her own family. Rose became the managing editor of a large newspaper and chose her career over marriage and children. Although they always stayed in touch and tried to visit one another every year, they did not describe their relationship as emotionally close. When their widowed mother died, both Libby and Rose

planned her funeral together and spent one week cleaning out the old house and dividing up family heirlooms. During this time, they discovered how much they enjoyed each other! They spent hours sharing old family stories and laughing over embarrassing teenage moments. The two sisters realized how unique and fulfilling their relationship was and since that time have become much closer. Although Rose does not see Libby every day, she finds comfort in knowing that if she were to need anything at all, there would be someone to be there for her. When asked about their renewed rela-

tionship, Libby says, "At a time in my life when I am looking backwards a little more but also enjoying more free time, I have received the gift of a new friendship. A friendship with someone who remembers when I had braces, who accepts me as I am, and who enjoys my company as much as I enjoy hers. She also happens to share my family name. What a wonderful gift!"

Sibling Relationships in Later Life

As with any family relationship, sibling relations can vary by person, by family, and by culture. Siblings mean different things to different people. As a result of this variation, it is important to avoid applying generalizations to all sibling relationships without considering the reality of potential differences. Research on siblings provides us with a greater appreciation for the joys and the complications of this family relationship. Research also enlightens us with varying descriptions of how individuals experience the sibling relationship differently.

Although some people might not believe that relationships with siblings are relevant once a person gets older, research shows that many older adults do have contact with their siblings and report these relationships to be meaningful (Bedford, 1997; Connidis & Campbell, 2001). Researchers have also found that relationships with siblings can contribute to life satisfaction, higher morale, fewer depressive symptoms, psychological well-being, and a greater sense of emotional security in old age (Cicirelli, 1995).

As a result of the changing structure of our families, there are five types of sibling relationships that require recognition. For example, there are:

- 1) *Full siblings* (who share biological parents)
- 2) *Half-siblings* (who share one common parent)
- 3) *Step-siblings* (who have no biological relationship but a parent of one is married to a parent of the other)
- 4) *Adoptive siblings* (a sibling who is legally adopted into a family but has no biological relationship)
- 5) *Fictive siblings* (no biological or legal relationships but regarded as siblings). (Cicirelli, 1995)

Most of the research available on siblings pertains to biological or "full" siblings. As a result, information about "half," "adopted," or "step" siblings in later life is not available.

Sibling Typology

In 1989, Deborah Gold developed five typologies of adult sibling relations based on "... patterns of psychological involvement, closeness, acceptance/approval, emotional support, instrumental support, contact, envy and resentment" (Cicirelli, 1995, 49). This typology has been replicated in various studies with supportive results. Most often, the first three sibling types, *Intimate*, *Congenial*, and *Loyal* represent the majority of adult sibling relationships.

*Table 1: Sibling Typology**

<i>Title</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<i>Intimate</i>	High devotion and psychological closeness; the relationship is based on mutual love, concern, empathy, protection, understanding, and durability.
<i>Congenial</i>	Strong friendship and caring; less depth and reliability than intimate siblings; regular contact (weekly, monthly).
<i>Loyal</i>	Based more on cultural norms than personal involvement; support each other during crises; regular contact but not frequent.
<i>Apathetic</i>	Mutual lack of interest in sibling relationship (no emotional or instrumental support); lives have gone in different directions and do not care much; minimal contact.
<i>Hostile</i>	Strong negative feelings (resentment, anger) toward siblings; considerable negative psychological preoccupation with the relationship; no contact.

*Based on variables: Closeness, Instrumental support, Emotional support, Acceptance/Approval, Psychological involvement, Contact, Envy, Resentment. (Cicirelli, 1995; Gold, 1989)

What Makes the Sibling Relationship Unique?

Sibling relationships have many characteristics that contribute to their uniqueness:

- 1) A sibling relationship is one of the few adult relationships we have that has lasted since our childhood. In fact, we are likely to have known our siblings three times as long as we may know our spouse or our friends.
- 2) Siblings often share a common cultural background that contributes to having share values and beliefs.
- 3) In addition to sharing a culture, siblings also share their family history. If they don't share both parents they frequently do share childhood memories and family stories.
- 4) Biological siblings are produced from the same gene pool; as a result they may share similar physical characteristics (e.g., the "Simpson nose") or health conditions (e.g., high blood pressure).
- 5) Unlike the parent-child relationship, siblings do not have a relationship hierarchy that influences the nature of their interactions. Unless there is a significant age difference, most siblings interact in an egalitarian manner recognizing that they share a peer relationship.
- 6) Finally, the ambiguous nature of the sibling relationship can result in a variety of relationship approaches. There are few societal expectations about how siblings "behave" in adulthood or the extent of contact they must have. This lack of clearly defined rules often results in the sibling relationship being a voluntary one.

These unique characteristics of the sibling relationship contribute to:

- A sense of continuity across the life span (both socially and personally). The sibling relationship is one that can connect our childhood with our adulthood.
- Sibling relationships also can provide us with a sense of security in later life. Our siblings, even if we haven't been very close in young adulthood, provide an anchor in later life based on our shared biography and shared memories.

(Cicirelli, 1995)

Relationships Between Siblings Over the Life Span

Researchers have shown that sibling relationships change over time. During infancy and childhood, siblings usually interact on a regular basis thus establishing the foundation of their relationship. Those siblings who reside in the same household, are close in age, and share similar interests are more likely to establish close emotional bonds. Fortunately for some families, and unfortunately for others, it is the nature of the childhood relationship that often predicts the nature of the relationship in adulthood. For example, if in childhood siblings have considerable conflict with little emotional closeness or commonality, it is likely their adult relationship will be a continuation of these interaction patterns. However, some researchers have found that as individuals age, their tendency to hold onto past jealousies or feelings of anger and resentment decreases. Often referred to as “mellowing out,” siblings report making a conscious decision in later life to put old hurts behind them and instead, focus on building and maintaining a new relationship with their sibling(s).

As adults, siblings tend to distance themselves as they become more involved in finding themselves, investing in other relationships, such as a marriage or partnership, bearing and raising children, and pursuing employment. It is during middle-age and old age that siblings reach out to each other and reestablish close ties (Bedford, 1997). In fact, research shows that after age 45, people rate their sibling ties as being more positive and more important than previous adult years (Connidis & Campbell, 2001). Often described as “critical incidents,” it is significant life events (i.e., death, divorce, birth of grandchildren, relocation, retirement, illness) that initiate renewed contact between siblings in middle-age. Earlier rivalries or conflicts may be put aside in the desire to improve relationships. Also, in later life, the family of origin may have decreased due to the death of aged parents and/or older siblings. Consequently, adult siblings provide a valuable tie to past memories, values, and experiences.

The Likelihood of Having a Sibling in Old Age

What is the likelihood of having a surviving adult sibling in later life? To what extent do surviving siblings maintain contact and provide support to each other? A number of survey studies attempting to answer these questions have found that for a majority of older adults, siblings do live into old age and do choose to remain in touch with each other until death (Cicirelli, 1995).

A disproportionate number of older adults have at least one living sibling. In research conducted by Cicirelli (1995):

- 85% of individuals in middle-age had a living sibling compared to 78% of those over the age of 60.
- Unfortunately, however, as we get older the likelihood of having more

than one living sibling decreases. When data is analyzed by age, researchers have found those between the ages of

- 60 and 69 have an average of 2.9 living siblings
- 70 and 79 on average have 2.2 living siblings
- 80 and over have an average of 1.1 living sibling

Contact Between Siblings in Later Life

For those older adults who are fortunate to have one or more living siblings, regular contact between siblings is often reported. In a study of 300 older adults, Cicirelli (cited in 1995) found that 26% of elders had a sibling living in the same city and 56% had a sibling living within 100 miles. Older adult siblings are much more likely to report feelings of emotional closeness than they are to report being estranged or experiencing conflict. Factors that are thought to contribute to the close bond between siblings include family rituals, shared memories, regular visits, and family reunions. Despite the tendency for family members to be geographically separated, seniors report a high level of contact with their siblings. If they are fortunate enough to live in close proximity to each other, they report having contact with their sibling(s) at least once per week. If they happen to live in another state, older adults still report a high degree of contact via telephone and more recently, e-mail. In fact, geographic distance between siblings has not been found to influence emotional closeness. In other words, those who live far away from their siblings are just as emotionally close as those siblings who live in the same town.

In a large, nationally representative study of siblings in adulthood (White & Riedmann, 1992), close to 50% of sib-

lings reported seeing or talking with their sibling at least once per month (as compared to once per week for those who lived nearby). Reports on contact with step and half-siblings in addition to full biological siblings were included. The authors found sister-to-sister sibling relationships to have the greatest amount of contact in adulthood. Relations between sisters and brothers followed in frequency of contact and brother-to-brother relationships had the least contact. Although this study included data from adults in middle age as well as old age, the findings provide information about the importance of the sibling relationship beyond childhood and the likelihood that siblings will remain in contact as they get older.

In an examination of sibling relationships over time, White (2001) found that sibling networks were generally viewed second in priority to marital and parent-child relationships. A dramatic increase in sibling exchange, however, was demonstrated in later life. Additionally, factors influencing the extent of sibling contact and the importance of the relationship were geographic proximity, being without a partner, and a decrease in contemporaries who can share life review activities.

Finally, the actual exchange of social support between siblings in old age is likely to consist more of psychological support (companionship, advice, or encouragement) than instrumental support (household assistance, shopping, or financial assistance). Interestingly, relatively few individuals report depending on a sibling in old age although they list them as a support resource. In a study conducted by Cicirelli (1995), 60% of respondents said they would help a sibling if their sibling needed their assistance, yet only 7% had actually turned to a sibling as a primary source of assistance during their own time of crisis.

It is possible that sibling relations in later life provide us with assurance that support is available should our immediate support resources be limited.

Siblings as Friends

Not surprisingly, sibling relationships in late adulthood are frequently described as being similar to “friendships.” The fact that siblings are likely to have shared beliefs, values, and attitudes is thought to contribute to the likelihood of rating a sibling in the same category as a friend. In fact, sibling relationships are more similar to friendships than any other family relationship. A significant difference between sibling and friendship relations, however, is that friendships have a degree of uncertainty as to their future, whereas the sibling relationship is assumed to be permanent because it is a “family” relationship.

Those siblings who consider themselves “compatible” and report being emotionally close are still less likely to share intimate personal life details or consult their siblings when making important decisions. There are significantly lower levels of sibling rivalry in later life as compared to rivalry in childhood and adolescence. However, this is not to say that sibling rivalry does not occur between aging siblings. In fact, past rivalry patterns, for example, the belief that a parent favors one child over another, can still surface during times of conflict or stress (Cicirelli, 1988). These feelings of resentment or pain may surprise the adults who encounter them and may require some time and effort to achieve resolution. Overall, adult siblings value their relationships and find ways of interacting that avoid past conflicts or rivalries.

Does Gender Make a Difference?

Research has shown that the gender of siblings significantly impacts the emotional closeness of sibling pairs and the extent of contact between siblings. Sister-to-sister relationships and sister-to-brother relationships show greater emotional closeness and more frequency of contact, especially by telephone, than brother-to-brother relationships (Connidis & Campbell, 2001). At the same time, however, more conflict is reported between sister-to-sister relationships than other sibling combinations.

One of the primary explanations for the increased intimacy among sister sibling relationships is women’s emotional investment in family ties and the kinkeeping responsibilities of women within the family. Kinkeepers, who are most frequently women, encourage siblings, especially brothers, to maintain contact largely through family rituals and celebrations.

Racial /ethnic Differences

Sibling relationships do vary by race and ethnicity. The exchange of instrumental types of assistance is more frequent among African-American siblings as compared to Caucasian (Bedford, 1997). Additionally, African-American siblings are more likely to report close emotional ties and more frequently live within two miles of siblings in comparison to Caucasian siblings. White and Riedmann (1992) also report important ethnic differences in sibling relationships based on a nationally representative sample. African-American participants rated higher emotional ties and interacted with their siblings much more often than Caucasian, Mexican-American, and Asian-American adults. These differences are frequently explained by cultural emphasis on horizontal versus vertical family ties.

Vertical ties (i.e., parent-child; grandparent-grandchild) are stronger among Asian-American, Hispanic, and Caucasian cultures, thus contributing to less emphasis on sibling relationships over the life span (Connidis & Campbell, 2001).

Implications for Future Generations

Demographic changes (i.e., decreased fertility rates; divorce and remarriage; and increased longevity) are likely to influence the nature of sibling relations for future generations. For example, decreased fertility may result in smaller sibling networks having greater caregiving responsibilities for aging parents. At the same time, however, divorce and remarriage patterns will likely result in higher numbers of step-siblings, half-siblings, and non-biological fictive kin relations. Although longer life expectancy will contribute to an increased risk of widowhood, especially among women, it will also result in more years spent in the role of sibling and more opportunity for interaction and emotional bonding between siblings in later life.

The importance of sibling relationships to our emotional and psychological well-being in later life is clearly illustrated in existing research. As a result, it is important to emphasize the value of sibling relationships across the life-span but particularly among older adult populations.

What are some ways to facilitate sibling relations among younger and older generations?

- Encourage parents to foster and respect the sibling relationships among their children. Discourage intentional or unintentional favoritism (the most common cause of bitter sibling rivalry that can last into later life).

- Parents, by establishing and maintaining strong sibling ties themselves, can serve as models for their children.
- Adult siblings must work to establish and maintain healthy communication and helping relationships with their siblings as adults. These ties will continue into later life and serve as a source of emotional, psychological, and possibly instrumental support.
- Brothers (especially brother-to-brother) as well as sisters need to take on the responsibility of maintaining contact.
- Important life events are opportunities for siblings to interact. These events serve as opportunities for siblings to strengthen or even repair sibling ties. Giving special attention to these events and providing time to share with siblings is important.
- Establishing and maintaining good sibling relations in adulthood often depends on the development of positive relations with sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law. Siblings may need to make an extra effort to establish a mutually respectful and congenial relationship with the spouse of their sibling.

How can Extension professionals encourage and enhance the appreciation of sibling relationships among older adults?

- In senior centers, retirement communities, or homemaker groups, give a brief presentation on the importance of sibling relationships in later life.
 - Conduct a group activity that enables participants to explore their own thoughts and feelings about their siblings.

- Facilitate a sharing session about childhood sibling memories.
- Discuss why sibling relations can increase in importance as we age.
- Encourage participants to do one of the following:
 - 1) Call a surviving sibling they have not had contact with recently.
 - 2) Write down five positive characteristics or five positive memories of a sibling and share these thoughts with others.
- Print in county newsletter or local paper a press release on the importance of siblings. By targeting siblings who live in the same community, you can encourage interaction, social activities, and exchange of support.
- Advertise and facilitate a “sibling celebration day” in your county where siblings of all ages spend time together. For those who have siblings that live far away, participation can involve making contact via telephone, e-mail, or written letter. The goal of this recognition event is to encourage community members to recognize the value and importance of sibling relationships across the life span.

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