The Role of Siblings in Adoptive Family Dynamics: Adoption Communication, Adoptive Identity, and Developmental Outcomes

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Introduction

• As role models and social partners, siblings affect one another’s development throughout life (McHale et al., 2012).
• Sibling relationships are often the longest lasting family relationship (Noller, 2005).
• Positive sibling dynamics can act as buffers; negative ones can accentuate difficult family dynamics (Brody, 1998, 2004).
• Within adoptive families, negative sibling relationships could be exacerbated by discrepancies in biological relatedness or in birth family contact (Berge et al., 2006).
• Few studies have addressed adopted sibling dynamics.
Sibling Relationships & Outcomes

• Growing interest in studying sibling relationships (e.g., Brody, 1998, 2004; Cicirelli, 2005; Matthews, 2005; McHale et al., 2012; Noller, 2005; White, 2001)

• Studying the influence of sibling relationships in the absence of biological connections is a compelling area for further study.

• Studies of individual adjustment: externalizing and internalizing behaviors; substance use (adolescence and emerging adulthood)
  – Importance of sibling similarity and closeness (e.g., Hicks, Foster, Iacono, & McGue, 2013; Samek, McGue, Keyes, & Iacono, 2014).
Openness in Adoption

• Open adoption arrangements vary greatly in type, frequency, directness of contact, and family members involved.

• How openness in adoption influences has been studied (e.g., Grotevant, 2012; Siegel, 2012). In families with multiple adopted children, the adoptive kinship network is expanded.

• Of interest is how siblings may uniquely contribute to adoptees’ experiences of birth family contact over time, via processes of emotional distance regulation (Grotevant, 2009).
Adopted Siblings and Openness

• Berge et al. (2006) explored birth family contact during adolescence among 29 adopted sibling pairs ($N = 58$).

• Adolescents in “dual contact” sibling sets (vs. “mixed contact”) reported fewer conversations about their adoption with their family or close friends.

• Dual contact siblings: “fewer secrets or unanswered questions”, while adolescents in mixed contact pairs expressed a greater need to talk about adoption with family and friends. They also reported a strong desire to connect with their own birth families, particularly birth siblings.
Research Questions

(1) Have there been changes in the level of birth family contact for the target adoptee and their sibling?

(2) How are adopted siblings’ perceptions of and experiences with their own adoption related to target adoptees’ behavioral adjustment?

(3) How does sibling involvement in conversations, information sharing, and connections with birth family influence target adoptees’ behavioral adjustment as well as perceptions of their adoption experience?
Method: Participants

• 190 adoptive families
  – Recruited through 35 adoption agencies in 23 states
  – Domestic, infant adoptions (all same-race placements)
  – Participants: predominantly White, Protestant, and middle to upper-middle class
  – Adoptions varied from completely confidential (closed) to fully disclosed (open)

(Grotevant & McRoy, 1998)
Method: Participants, Waves 2 and 3

**Wave 2** \((N = 156\) adolescent adoptees):
- \(M_{age} = 16\) years, range = 11-20 years
- Data from 88 siblings (68 adopted)
- 29 adopted sibling pairs (Berge et al., 2006)

**Wave 3** \((N = 167\) emerging adult adoptees)
- \(M_{age} = 16\) years, range = 11-20 years
- Sibling data not included
- Reports from 134 adult adoptees included responses about their siblings
- 26 adopted sibling pairs
Method: Materials & Procedure

• Semi-structured interviews at Waves 2 and 3
  – Frequency of contact: 1 = never/stopped; 5 = often (more than twice a year)
  – Satisfaction rated: 0 = very dissatisfied; 4 = very satisfied
  – Affect toward birth parents/adoption: 1 = none or low; 5 = very strong
  – Sibling involvement in birth family connections (yes/no); Wave 2

• Behavioral Adjustment at Waves 2 and 3
  – YSR and ASR; internalizing, externalizing, total

• Adoption Dynamics Questionnaires at Waves 2 and 3
  – Positive affect, negative experiences, preoccupation
Results: (1) Have there been changes in birth family contact?
Results: (2) How are siblings’ experiences with own adoption related to adjustment?

• When siblings felt positively about own adoption (W2), target adolescent adoptees (W2):
  – fewer negative experiences with their adoption, $r(51) = -.33, p = .026$
  – fewer externalizing behaviors, $r(51) = -.36, p = .015$

• Adult adoptees reported fewer externalizing problems (W3) when their siblings (W2):
  – less preoccupied with their own adoption history, $r(51) = .29, p = .043$
  – more positive affect about their own adoption, $r(51) = -.31, p = .047$. 
Results: (3) How does sibling involvement influence adjustment and adoption experiences?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Adolescent Adoptees (W2)</th>
<th>Emerging Adult Adoptees (W3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Siblings involved at Wave 2 (n = 37)</td>
<td>No siblings involved at Wave 2 (n = 97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Externalizing problems</td>
<td>49.33</td>
<td>55.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive affect toward birth mothers/adoption</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>2.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact with birth mothers</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>2.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with contact</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.60</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

• Highlight how siblings are associated with adoptees’ outcomes and experiences from adolescence into emerging adulthood.
• General decreases in contact
• Siblings’ involvement, and own adoption experiences, were linked with adoptees’ more positive feelings about their own birth family and adoption and better behavioral adjustment.
• Importance of open family communication about adoption and birth family contact
• Siblings in adoptive families are vital sources of social support and role models
Strengths & Limitations

• Among first to emphasize sibling contributions in adoptive families
• Longitudinal; mixed-methods
• Represents only one pathway to adoptive family formation
• Need to know more about underlying mechanisms to sibling influence
Implications

• Involving siblings in openness arrangements of adopted children
• Understanding “contagion effects” of perceptions and experiences
• Advantages of openness in adoption (contact and communication)
Conclusion

• Important and dynamic role of sibling relationships to adoptees’ development and experiences across the lifespan
• Advocacy for greater openness in adoption
• Siblings can play important supportive role to adoptees!
Thank you!

• Participating families
• Research collaborators and assistants

• Our funding partners:
Questions and Discussion

• For more information, please contact:
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