

## **ОТНОШЕНИЯ МЕЖДУ СИБЛИНГИ КОГАТО ЕДИНИЯ ИМА ЗАТРУДНЕНИЯ В РАЗВИТИЕТО**

**Шарон Бар**

Докторант във ВСУ „Черноризец Храбър“

Катедра „Психология“

***Резюме:** Уврежданията на едно от децата в семейството може значително да повлияе на системата на отношения със сиблингите. Тази ситуация ще бъде по-значима, когато родителите очакват здраво дете да помага в грижата за детето с увреждания. Специфичното разстройство на развитието, от което страда детето, може да окаже влияние върху качеството на връзката между тях. Разбирането и приемането на увреждането на неговия / нейния сиблинг са важни, така че детето да не вижда увреждането на братчето / сестричето си като пречка за сигурна и топла семейна среда. Значителна роля в отношенията на децата играят семейните кохезия и емпатия.*

***Ключови думи:** сиблинги, сиблинги с увреждания, социални умения, семейство с дете с увреждания, семейна кохезия*

## **RELATIONS BETWEEN SIBLINGS WHEN ONE HAS A DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY**

**Sharon Bar,**

PHD student in Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar”

Department of Psychology

***Abstract:** The disability of one of the children in the family may significantly influence his system of relations with his sibling. This situation will be more*

*significant when the parents expect the healthy child to help in the care of his sibling. The specific developmental disorder from which the child's sibling suffers can have an impact on the quality of the relationship between them. The understanding and acceptance of his/her sibling's disability are important so that the child will not see his sibling's disability as an obstacle for a secure and warm family environment. Significant role in children's relations play family cohesion and empathy.*

**Key words:** *Siblings, disabled sibling, social skills, family with a disabled child, family cohesion*

Specifically, the disability of one of the children in the family may significantly influence his system of relations with his sibling. When the disability is expressed already in the child's early childhood, it may change the natural balance of powers that exists between him and his sibling and the dynamics between them. This change will frequently be expressed in that the healthy child will play a more dominant role in the relationship between them, regardless of whether he is the older of them (Schuntermann, 2007).

This process will be more significant when the parents expect the healthy child to help in the care of his sibling, both inside and outside of the home. According to some of the research studies in the field, a child who is involved actively in the assistance of his sibling, especially when this is a younger child than the sibling with special needs, may feel anxiety, conflict, and the weight of the parents' expectations, but they will not consequently perceive the presence of their disabled sibling in a negative manner. Instead, they will develop understanding, empathy, and sensitivity towards the sibling with the special needs and the unique difficulties with which the disabled child copes – thus leading to the reinforcement

of the relationship between the siblings. However, in some of the cases, the tasks are larger and the responsibility assigned to the child may create stress, frustration, and anger towards the sibling, thus creating between them more conflictual relations (see Boer, Goedhart, & Treffers, 1992; Bryant, & Crockenberg, 1980; Cuskelly & Gunn, 2003; Dunn, 1993). Furthermore, it was consistently found that siblings of children with special needs feel the lack of parental time and attention (Corter, Pepler, Stanhope, & Abramovitch, 1992; Lobato, Miller, Barbour, Hall, & Pezzullo, 1991).

In some of the cases, the reports of the children's parents indicated that the siblings of the children with developmental disabilities express a large degree of empathy, kindness, and involvement towards them (Cuskelly & Gunn, 2003; Derouin & Jesse, 1996), which are even higher than those that arose in the relationship between siblings who are both healthy (Cuskelly & Gunn, 2003). For instance, a research carried out with siblings of children with mental developmental disability found that in the comparison to siblings of children with normative development the former expressed higher levels of empathy and learning and lower levels of rivalry and aggression in the relationship with their sibling (Yechezkeli, 2014). However, other researchers did not find differences between the quality of the relations between siblings in families with a deaf or retarded child and that existing in families where the children are healthy (Hosseinkhanzadeh et al., 2014).

The specific developmental disorder from which the child's sibling suffers can have an impact on the quality of the relationship between them. One disability upon which many previous research studies were carried out is autism, because of the significant concomitant communication difficulties. In the comparison to the parents of healthy children or children with Down's syndrome, those who have an autistic child report less intimacy, support, and prosocial behavior in the relationship between the siblings in the family (Kaminsky & Dewey, 2001). As the

disorder is more severe and the disabled child has greater difficulty understanding his sibling's viewpoint, the creation of a meaningful reciprocal relationship between the siblings is not possible (Cuskelly & Gunn, 2003). In addition, siblings of children on the autistic spectrum also report greater feelings of shame towards their sibling in comparison to other siblings (Mascha & Boucher, 2006). In contrast, parents of children with Down's syndrome report more positive sibling relations in comparison to families of children with normal development (Roper, Allred, Mandelco, Freeborn, & Dyches, 2014) – more closeness, warmth, and empathy (Cuskelly & Gunn, 2003). The involvement and empathy of the healthy children in the family towards their sibling who is suffering from Down's syndrome was found to be related to their contribution in his care (Cuskelly & Gunn, 2003). In addition, siblings of children on the autistic spectrum or who have Down's syndrome also report fewer arguments and less competition between them, in comparison to siblings who develop normally (Kaminsky & Dewey, 2001). As the sibling's disorder is more overt (visible) and understood (its meaning), the relationship between the siblings was found to be stronger, and the child will perceive his sibling's disability less as a threat to his relationship with his parents. In contrast, when the healthy child will find it difficult to understand what his sibling's problem is and why his sibling behaves differently, this will harm the relationship between them, since it will be harder for him to accept the greater attention and time that his parents invest in the sibling (Nielsen et al., 2012). In addition, as the sibling's disability is more serious and more significantly impairs his functioning, the relationship between the siblings will be less positive. The reason is that then the healthy child will find it more difficult to accept his disabled sibling and adapt his behavior to the characteristics of the disability and his sibling's abilities, which may detrimentally influence the quality of the relationship between them. The understanding and acceptance of his sibling's disability are important so that the

child will not see his sibling's disability as an obstacle for a secure and warm family environment (Aksoy & Yildirim, 2008; Nielsen et al., 2012). When the child's disability will be expressed in violent behaviors towards his siblings, he will feel towards him anger and hostility and will find it difficult to create with him a positive relationship that influences reciprocal help and joint play (Cuskelly & Gunn, 2003). Conversely, it was found that in the comparison to the siblings of children who suffer from a physical illness or chronic orthopedic problems, siblings of children who suffer from autism or Down's syndrome will express towards them kindness and empathy since they will feel a need to help them communicate with the environment and get along in it (Nielsen et al., 2012). A similar feeling of desire to help their sibling get along in the environment was found also in the research on siblings of children with Down's syndrome who report more intimacy and less brutality towards their sibling as opposed to siblings of healthy children (Cuskelly & Gunn, 2003).

As described previously, the system of relations between healthy siblings serves as a framework in which they can learn and attempt social skills that will serve them in the future with those their age. In light of the unique characteristics of this system of relations when one of the children suffers from a developmental disorder, the following question arises. What is the influence of this on the healthy child's social skills? The findings of research studies that examined the social adjustment of siblings of children who suffer from developmental disorder in comparison to siblings of children without the disorder are not consistent. Some of them found only small differences between the social skills, acceptance, and social networks of siblings of children with or without disabilities (see Mandleco et al., 2003). In contrast, other research studies found that siblings of children with special needs experience many more difficulties in systems of relations with those their age, their social skills are less good, they tend to avoid interactions with them (for

instance, because of depression or anxiety), and they express more problematic behaviors (such as violence) than do the siblings of regular children. According to these findings, these siblings frequently prefer to remain alone – as an expression of depression and anxiety (Cuzzocrea et al., 2014; see also Guite et al., 2004). However, in some of these research studies it was found that the social skills of the siblings of children with a developmental disorder are even better than those of other children. This finding was explained in that the care and concern for their siblings and the coping with their difference helped them develop abilities of cooperation, self-control, empathy, affection, and compassion and made them more sensitive to and tolerant of other people in comparison to other children (Jefferson, 2006; Mandleco et al, 2003). In addition, these children develop greater tolerance of social problems, are more responsible and mature, and have the altruistic motivation to help others (see Cuzzocrea et al., 2014). It is necessary to conduct a research study that will directly examine the relationship between the quality of system of relations between the siblings and the healthy child's social skills. Hence, such research study will enable the identification of how the degree of intimacy, involvement, or conflicts in the system of relations between siblings when one of them suffers from a disability is translated into the healthy child's social skills in his interaction with those his age. This is in contrast to previous research studies that examined separately the quality of the system of relations between siblings when one has special needs and the social skills of the healthy child in these families, which did not enable the direct examination of the relationship between them. An additional unique contribution of such research study is that the correlation between the quality of the system of relations between the siblings and the healthy child's social skills can be examined through the examination of two possible mediating factors – communication skills, which reflect a significant dimension in the disability of the child with special needs, and family cohesion,

which reflects the family's ability to balance between the needs of the children in the family. This examination will contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the unique processes of the system of relations between siblings, when one of the siblings has special needs, and their influences on the social development of the healthy child.

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A positive correlation between family cohesion and empathy in the relations between siblings and a negative correlation between family cohesion and avoidance in the relations between siblings as reported by their mother were found. The healthy child in these families will feel more empathy towards his sibling who suffers from a developmental disorder, will want more to help him, and will less



attempt to avoid him – in other words, the relationship between them will be better (Jefferson, 2006). Moreover, when there is a high degree of family cohesion, namely when the social competence of the siblings of children with a disability was higher, they expressed more cooperation and assertiveness (Mandleco et al., 2003). In light of these findings, the proposed research study will examine whether the family cohesion will mediate in the correlation between the quality of the system of relations that exists between a healthy child and his sibling who suffers from a developmental disorder – and his social skills.

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