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Typical Siblings' acceptance of siblings with special needs

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of the findings on the kind of acceptance shown by typical family members towards the presence of siblings with special needs in their families. A set of interview protocols was used to interview the samples (n=5). The data from the interviews was transcribed verbatim and categorized into three main themes: typical siblings' acceptance, the form of relationship with sibling who has special needs and the form of relationship with parents. The findings show positive acceptance through strong attachment between the samples and their siblings with special needs and positive relationships with parents and peers.

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1. Main text

The presence of siblings with special needs may create different forms of acceptance as well as different types of challenges to typical family members. King (2007) states that relationship between siblings is one of the important aspects in a family system where sibling could be the first friend one can have in terms of a relationship with another individual in a lifetime. However, King (2007) explains that the presence of siblings with special needs provides a different kind of experience in terms of relationship with each typical sibling. The difference in experience may be due to difference in age between siblings, and responses that typical siblings may have developed over time (Strohm, 2008).

As parents may focus more on the needs of siblings with special needs, the typical siblings may feel they are being ignored (Russell et al., 2003). Such feelings, however, will diminish once there exist “the attitude of tolerance”, increased awareness of the disabilities being experienced by another sibling and openness to accept siblings with special needs (Mulroy et al., 2008). In many ways, the change in typical siblings' acceptance and adjustment to having sibling with special needs in the family can be traced from mere feelings and behavior to an increase in empathy and care. Such changes and differences can form a good perspective for a better understanding of the relationship between typical siblings and the siblings with special needs. Thus, this study

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aims to explore typical siblings' acceptance towards the siblings of special needs as their family members, as also the nature of their relationship with their parents.

2. Methodology

For this case study, a qualitative approach was adopted and five samples, who had siblings with special needs, were interviewed. The objective was to examine how the participants in the interview constructed their definitions of acceptance towards their siblings with special needs. The present method was chosen as it offered greater flexibility in exploring the samples' responses and views, besides allowing them in expressing different types of feelings. Only those participants who were aged between 22 and 24 years were selected. The rationale for selecting this age group was that they would have achieved a good level of maturity and constructed their own description on acceptance of siblings of special needs as their family members. The composition of the participants was as follows:

- a. Participant A (23 years old) has a sibling with cerebral palsy;
- b. Participant B (22 years old) has a sibling with Down syndrome;
- c. Participant C (23 years old) has three siblings with hearing impairment;
- d. Participant D (22 years old) has a sibling with visual impairment;
- e. Participant E (22 years old) has a sibling with hearing impairment.

The data was collected via in-depth structured interviews, using an interview protocol with items that focused on the following:

- a. the form of acceptance towards siblings with special needs,
- b. the relationship of typical siblings with siblings with special needs, and
- c. the relationship of typical siblings with parents.

The interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' permission and were then transcribed. Each transcript was then analyzed carefully to identify the key points and emerging themes.

3. Results and discussion

From the findings of this study, three main themes emerged: The typical siblings' acceptance of siblings with special needs, the relationship of typical siblings with siblings who have special needs, and the relationship of siblings with parents and peers. In the following paragraphs, the key findings of these themes are presented and discussed.

3.1. The typical siblings' acceptance of siblings with special needs

The interviews with the five participants expressed different forms of emotions and responses towards their siblings of special needs. Their reactions came in the form of diverse feelings: sadness, anger, guilt, love, sympathy, pride, empathy and support. The feelings of sadness and empathy for siblings of special needs were expressed by Participants B

"... at first, I felt sad, a bit, and of course my parents were very sad..." (Participant B)

"... when I got to know my brother could not hear, I felt sad but my elder sister told me to be strong. She told me it's okay to be sad ... " (Participant E)

Despite the sadness, typical siblings (e.g. Participant C) expressed their sense of pride and joy of having siblings with special needs. Participant C felt good when her friends acknowledged her ability in communicating with her hearing-impaired siblings through sign language. Having three siblings, aged 28, 21 and 8 years, with hearing impairment, Participant C stressed on the need for communication skills in using sign language as that would be the only way to bond with her siblings.

“... I’m proud to have a sister who is hearing-impaired..., my friends thought that I’m really good in signing (using sign language) ...” (Participant C)

Similarly, Participant D expressed a positive relationship between her and her visually-impaired sister. They would share problems and stories about themselves.

“... I like the way it is ... because I have a gang (friend) in the family, I always share my problem with her...” (Participant D)

The acceptance and receptiveness of typical siblings towards their siblings with special needs provide for effective communication between the siblings (Pit-Ten Cate & Loots, 2000). Such acceptance would support the development of better ties and relationship between them. Participant B had mixed feelings about her sister with Down syndrome. This was especially so when she saw her sister for the first time after she was born. She explained,

“... I knew it right from the beginning something is not right, her eyes especially told me she’s not like any of us...” (Participant B)

3.2 The relationship of typical siblings with siblings who have special needs

The presence of siblings with special needs impacts family relationships in different forms. Sharpe and Rossiter (2002) explain how siblings’ relationship is influenced by family functioning, the characteristics of each siblings and the nature and demands of these siblings. The participants’ relationship with their siblings with special needs is positive mainly because they spent a significant amount of time together. However, the findings of this study show that such relationship developed more through care-giving activities. Examples of such development are described by Participants B and D:

“... actually I’m closer to her because I took care of her ...” (Participant B)

“... we went to the same school, we did everything together like going to school canteen and waiting for our father to take us home from school. We even fell in the drain together when she tried to lead me to her classroom...” (Participant D)

The form of relationship between the siblings is often determined by several factors. McHale and Gamble (1987) consider that factors like age, gender, birth order and family dynamics are instrumental in determining the kind of one’s relationship with his or her sibling with special needs. The participants reported:

“...so far we can work and play together...” (Participant A)

“... ooo...we’re very close...” (Participant B)

Participant E described of her childhood relationship with her hearing-impaired sister who was living away from home. However, the relationship changed as they grew older and became closer and were spending more quality time together.

“...we were not close because my sister was already working and she stayed on her own, but now it has changed; we are closer now. I’m now very good with signing... this helps (with our relationship) I think...” (Participant E)

3.3 The relationship of typical siblings with parents

On the relationship of typical siblings with their parents, the understanding of the importance of building knowledge on one’s disability and meeting the needs and requirements of each child in a family have proved to be helpful. Parents have a role in sharing information, and the participants find that this sharing is important to enable them to understand and support their siblings with special needs. Participants, B, D and E explained their feelings as follows:

“...since my sister was born, my father joined the association for children with Down syndrome and my parents would tell us what we can and cannot do and that we have got to help our sister (with special needs)...” (Participant B)

“... I think parents play an important role in giving and sharing information about the family member with special needs...(my father explained to us about my sister’s condition and how we must not be jealous of his attention to her ...” (Participant D)

“... I always ask my mother why my sister is deaf and she answered ‘deaf is not a genetic factor’ ...” (Participant E)

While some parents may have seen the development of positive relationships within the family, Participant C had the following experience to describe:

“...when I was small, I felt I was ignored and there was a lack of attention (by my parents)... but that was a long time ago ...” (Participant C)

She added that she was not getting due attention because of her hearing-impaired younger brother. The responses and feelings of Participant C were not static as siblings are likely to adapt and change over time. In their younger age, typical siblings may feel confused, anxious or even angry. According to Renuka (2007), siblings react and respond differently depending on their age. The older siblings are more flexible and more readily accept their siblings with special needs. Such flexibility and acceptance would help promote positive psychological development and better adaption to the disability that one may have (Manisah & Norshidah, 2008). This in turn would allow for a stronger family relationship to develop.

4. Conclusion

The presence of siblings with special needs in family brings forth different responses among typical family members. Although literature has reported many negative relationships because of the presence of siblings (King, 2007; McHale & Gamble 1987), the experiences of the participants of this study were not so. Positive acceptance by typical family members, demonstrated through support and help, strengthened the family’s relationship. Parents were instrumental in allowing such relationship to develop; their equal and undivided attention to all family members, including those with special needs, provided a strong ground for development of positive relationship between siblings. Understanding the interaction pattern between siblings, family’s lifestyle and child-rearing practices have implications on such development.

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