



Siblings of Kids With Intellectual Disabilities Score High in Empathy

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A new study suggests that the sibling relationship between a typically-developing child and a brother or sister with an intellectual disability tends to be more supportive and empathetic than the relationship between two typically-developing siblings.

Using artwork and questionnaires, researchers from Tel Aviv University (TAU) and the University of Haifa examined the relationships of typically developing children and their siblings either with or without intellectual disabilities.

“Having a child with a disability in a family places unique demands on all family members, including typically developing siblings,” said Professor Zaidman-Zait from the Department of School Counseling and Special Education at TAU’s Constantiner School of Education.

“Although challenges exist, they are often accompanied by both short- and long-term positive contributions.”

“Through our research, we found that relationships among children with siblings with intellectual disabilities were even more supportive than those among typically developed siblings. Specifically, we found that children with siblings with intellectual disabilities scored higher on empathy, teaching and closeness and scored lower on conflict and rivalry than those with typically developing siblings.”

Previous studies on how having a sibling with a developmental disability affects children’s social-emotional and behavioral outcomes have shown mixed results. At times, the findings suggested that having a sibling with developmental disabilities led to greater variability in typically developing children’s behavior and adjustment.

“But these studies did little to tap into the inner worlds of children, which really can only be accessed through self-expression in the form of art or self-reporting, independent of parental intervention, which is the route we took in our study,” said Zaidman-Zait.

The study involved around 60 children, ages 8-11, half of whom had typically developing siblings, and half with intellectually disabled siblings.

Both groups of children — those with and without siblings with intellectual disabilities — were asked to draw themselves and their siblings. Licensed art therapists then used several set criteria to “score” the illustrations: the physical distance between the figures; the presence or absence of a parent in the illustration; the amount of detail invested in either the self-portrait or the sibling representation; and the amount of support given to a sibling in the picture.

“We drew on the basic assumption that artistic creation allows internal content to be expressed visually and that children’s self-reports have special added value in studies measuring sibling relationship qualities, especially in areas where parents might have less insight,” said Zaidman-Zait

The children were then asked to complete the Sibling Relationship Questionnaire, which assessed the feelings of closeness, dominance, conflict and rivalry they felt for their siblings. Mothers of both sets of siblings were also asked to answer a questionnaire about their children’s sibling relationship quality.

Overall, the children with siblings with intellectual disabilities scored significantly higher on empathy, teaching and closeness in their sibling relationship and scored lower on conflict and rivalry in the relationships than those with typically developing siblings.

“Our study makes a valuable contribution to the literature by using an art-based data gathering task to shed new light on the unique aspects of the relationships of children with siblings with intellectual disabilities that are not revealed in verbal reports,” said Zaidman-Zait.

“We can argue that having a family member with a disability makes the rest of the family, including typically developing children, more attentive to the needs of others.”

Zaidman-Zait conducted the study with Dr. Dafna Regev and Miri Yechezkiely of the University of Haifa’s Graduate School of Creative Art Therapies.

The researchers hope their study, published in the journal *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, will serve as a basis for further research into art-based tools that elicit and document the subjective experience of children.

Source: [American Friends of Tel Aviv University](#)



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