

Sibling rivalry: an under-rated entity of the little minds? A descriptive study

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To identify the etiological profile and risk factors of children with sibling rivalry and to identify presentation and manifestation of sibling rivalry in a child. **Methods:** In this descriptive study, 84 children who presented to the paediatric outpatient department (OPD) and child psychiatry OPD over a period of one year with behavioural changes after birth of their siblings were enrolled in the study. Parents were asked to fill the questionnaire during history elicitation. Percentages and median interquartile range were calculated and SPSS 23.0 software was used for analysis. **Results:** Median age of presentation was 5 years. Male children, children from above poverty line families, children from nuclear families, first born children, nursery and pre-school children were the most affected. Bullying was the commonest symptom of presentation followed by fear of losing parental love. Depression was the least common presentation. Majority of parents were unaware of the entity- sibling rivalry. **Conclusions:** Sibling rivalry is an under-rated entity in child psychology. It can lead to a wide range of psychological manifestations ranging from anger outbursts to physical insults over the sibling. Hence, the older child should be given better care and attention after the birth of the next order child to prevent mental trauma to the child. Prospective parents should be given better awareness and counselling about this condition for better mental health outcome in the children.

Keywords: Sibling rivalry in children, Psychological issues in children, Child psychiatry

Sibling rivalry is said to occur when the birth of a next child for the child's parents leads to emotional concerns in the child.¹ A varying degree of sibling rivalry occurs in most families. Manifestations of sibling rivalry are physical attacks or verbal attacks, anxiety, fear, frustration, attention demands and hyperactivity, regression etc.² If handled properly by the parents, healthy competition between siblings can lead to better acquisition of child's interpersonal, social, and cognitive skills.³ If the condition is mismanaged, it can lead to psychological problems which get manifested later in life. If there is proper spacing between children and if existing children are mentally prepared for a new sibling, it helps to reduce the magnitude of sibling rivalry.⁴ Situations in family which may potentially lead to comparison and jealousy between siblings should be avoided.⁵ Parents should not promote

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Received: July 08, 2020; Revision Received: August 20, 2020; Accepted: August 23, 2020

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favouritism between children. If episodes of sibling rivalry happen, the underlying cause should be given importance in treatment over the manifestation of the sibling rivalry. Parents should develop skills like love, affection, care, understanding, patience, and good humor sense to minimize symptoms of sibling rivalry.⁶

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many studies are there which have assessed causes of sibling rivalry and competition among siblings.⁷⁻¹⁴ Most of the studies focus on sibling rivalry at an early age of life but the fact is that competition can also manifest in later years or even in adulthood affecting the person's mental and physical performance.

A study in nineteenth century Belgium population showed that the competition between same aged siblings who compete against each other were more than children who were properly spaced by a proper birth interval.⁹

Sibling smallRNAs(s RNA) have similar nucleotide bases and can be a genetic basis of sibling rivalry. Sibling rivalry is defined as a competition between siblings for the love, approval and attention from one or both parents, which is usually present among siblings to some extent.¹ Worldwide, the incidence of sibling rivalry is 30-60 %. Millions of children in the age group 0-5 years are affected by sibling rivalry.² The insults can range from verbal abuse to physical abuse like hitting, biting, pulling the hair, stamping etc.³ Each child wants to be their parents' favorite and hence they show a tendency to compete with each other. Most of the manifestations of sibling rivalry start early in life but in few instances it can extend to adulthood period.⁴ Chances of sibling rivalry are more when the children are of same age and same gender.⁴ There are few risk factors for the development of sibling rivalry in children like undue competition between siblings in curricular and extracurricular activities, when they do not feel emotional sibling bonding with each other, when the parents tend to give more attention to one among the siblings, when the child feel insecure about the new baby coming into his happy life with his parents, all of which results in jealousy in the older child.⁶

Short birth intervals (less than 18 months) have a detrimental effect in the development of sibling rivalry. Literature shows an increased risk of mortality in both children with maximum mortality in the early post-neonatal period. Parental education, same gender of the siblings have also showed a role in the development of sibling rivalry.⁸ A higher maternal education decreased the chances of development of sibling rivalry.⁸

Many adolescent problems and adjustment disorders have their root cause as sibling rivalry.¹¹

A peaceful and harmonious interpersonal sibling relationship can lead to a good personality and educational outcome while a staggered and disturbed sibling relationship can lead to detrimental outcomes.¹³

Objectives

1. To identify the etiological profile and risk factors of children with sibling rivalry.
2. To identify presentation and manifestation of sibling rivalry in a child.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this descriptive study, 84 children who presented to the paediatric outpatient department (OPD) and child psychiatry OPD over a period of one year, from June 2019 to June, 2020 with behavioural changes after birth of their siblings were enrolled in the study. Parents were asked to fill the questionnaire during history elicitation and the data was analysed. Percentages and median interquartile range (IQR) were calculated and SPSS 23.0 software was used for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We screened a study population of 84 children from various backgrounds, who presented to the paediatric outpatient department (OPD) and child psychiatry OPD over a period of one year, from June, 2019 to June,2020 with behavioural changes after birth of their siblings were enrolled in the study.

Table 1: Etiological profile and risk factors of children with sibling rivalry (N = 84)

Age at presentation (years)*	5 (2,17)
Gender, n (%)	
Male	72 (85.7)
Female	12 (14.3)
Type of family, n (%),	
Joint family	9 (10.7)
Nuclear family	75 (89.3)
Order of birth, n (%)	
1 st born	78 (92.85)
2 nd born	5 (5.95)
Others	1 (1.2)
Education, n (%)	
Nursery and pre school	52(61.9)
Class 1-4	21 (25.0)
Class 5-10	8 (9.53)
Class 11-12	3 (3.57)
Socio economic status, n (%)	
Below poverty line	8 (9.53)
Above poverty line	76 (90.47)
Parental awareness about sibling rivalry, n (%)	
Yes	21 (25)
No	63 (75)

*median(IQR), N= Total number of children

Median age of presentation of sibling rivalry in children was 5 years. Male children were more affected by sibling rivalry which amounted to a whopping 85.7 %. 90.47 % children were from above poverty line families while only 9.53 % children were from below poverty line families. 89.3 % of children with sibling rivalry were from nuclear families. 92.85 % of the affected were first born children. Nursery and pre-school children were the age group which was the most affected. Bullying was the commonest symptom followed by fear of losing parental love. Depression was least common presentation. Majority of parents amounting to 75 % were unaware of the entity- sibling rivalry. (Table 1)

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The commonest method of presentation of sibling rivalry was bullying their sibling which came to 22.62% followed by fear of losing parental love and affection (14.29 %) and physical insults.

(13.1%). Depression was the least common presentation with only one child being affected. Children with sibling rivalry also presented with poor scholastic performance, anxiety disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and food fads. (Table 2)

Table 2: Method of presentation of sibling rivalry (N = 84)

Anger outbursts	8 (9.52)
Poor scholastic performance	9 (10.71)
Anxiety disorder	10 (11.90)
Depression	1 (1.20)
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder	6 (7.14)
Fear of losing parental love and affection	12 (14.29)
Food fads (aversion/ over eating)	8 (9.52)
Bullying	19 (22.62)
Physical insults to the sibling	11 (13.10)

N = Total number of children

Sibling rivalry is found in most families where there is more than one child and this creates a frequent challenging situation for parents which can often be quite stressful. The older child may not happily welcome the new child unless he is given proper briefing about the situation. He might see the new baby as a potential threat for his relationship with his parents. Age of the child, gender of the siblings, gap between two children, parental behavior and personality of the child are all factors which can influence the degree of sibling rivalry. The older child may love and help to take part in the raising and care of the new baby if he develops proper sibling emotional bonding to the new baby. Prospective parents should take anticipatory expert guidance about tackling the situation positively and proper strategies should be formulated so that the elder sibling is unaffected by the arrival of new baby. Open parent-child communication, no partiality between siblings, not intervening in sibling conflicts and not punishing one sibling alone, positive reinforcement, and separation are key tactics in preventing sibling rivalry. Parents can provide a supportive, positive environment which allows the child to feel loved, cared and secured.

Sibling relationships and emotional sibling-bonding are unique and can lead to a powerful and positive support for children's mental development, leading to inculcation of strong positive characteristics, like inter personal warmth and intimacy while negative qualities can lead to as much detrimental situations in future. Thus, sibling interaction can be a double-edged sword and hence parents should play their positive roles to inculcate good aspects of sibling relationships. Children should be taught to forgive, adjust, love each other, and thereby remain happy and positive rather than be in sulky sibling rivalry which can adversely affect their future.

CONCLUSION

Sibling rivalry is an under-rated entity in child psychology. It can lead to a wide range of psychological manifestations ranging from anger outbursts to physical insults over the sibling. Hence, the older child should be given better care and attention after the birth of the next order child to prevent mental trauma to the child. Prospective parents should be given

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better awareness and counselling about this condition for better mental health outcome in children.

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Acknowledgements

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: J Suresh & Nidheesh C R (2020). Sibling rivalry: an under-rated entity of the little minds? A descriptive study. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(3), 592-596. DIP:18.01.069/20200803, DOI:10.25215/0803.069