

## The Experiences of Younger Siblings After an Older Sibling Leaves Home for Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

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### ABSTRACT

Siblings are the first peer of an individual. People often talk about Empty Nest Syndrome in parents when their children move out of their home. But the experiences of the younger sibling when the older one moves out is yet unexplored. The study aims to understand the experiences of younger sibling when the older sibling moves out for higher education. The sample for the study is selected through purposive sampling. The sample consists of 10 female participants and 10 male participants residing in Kerala State. The study used thematic analysis. The study found six major themes, emotional wellbeing, sibling relationship quality, personal growth, family dynamics, feelings towards change and coping mechanisms. The study revealed the significant negative emotions that is facing by the younger sibling when the older sibling moves out. The study also emphasis on the involvement of the parents and other family members' in the psychological wellbeing of the sibling remaining at home. The study also revealed the coping strategies used by the younger sibling.

**Keywords:** *Younger sibling, Emotional Wellbeing, Sibling relationship quality, Personal growth, Family dynamics, Feelings towards change, Coping mechanisms*

People often talk about Empty Nest Syndrome in parents when their children move out of their home. But the experiences of the younger sibling when the older one moves out is yet unexplored. Siblings are the first peer of an individual. The transition that happens when the older sibling moves out could be big for the younger siblings. This transition can have an impact in the family dynamics, emotional wellbeing and the relationship quality among the siblings. This key life event can bring out a range of emotions and adjustments, influencing the emotional wellbeing, sibling relationship quality and coping mechanisms of the younger sibling. There are many more researches that explores the experience of the child who is leaving, but the experiences of the child remaining at home should be a topic of discussion. This study explores this gap by exploring the experiences of the younger siblings during this transition time.

The older sibling plays role of a caregiver, supporter, and even a third parent in many cases. When the older sibling, the source of support and role model for the younger ones, leaves home, the younger sibling would lose a shoulder that they use to rely on. However, this

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change can help to bring out the aptitude and capabilities in the younger ones. Without the older sibling's immediate presence, the younger sibling is compelled to develop greater self-reliance, problem-solving skills, and emotional resilience, qualities that may have been previously overshadowed by dependence (Whiteman, Bernard, & McHale, 2010). The absence of a readily available supporter forces the younger sibling to seek their own solutions, build independent social networks, and cultivate internal coping mechanisms, ultimately fostering maturity and self-confidence (Tucker, Finkelhor, Turner, & Shattuck, 2013). Additionally, this shift can redefine the sibling relationship from a hierarchical, caregiving dynamic to a more egalitarian bond in adulthood, where both siblings interact as equals rather than protector and dependent (Jensen & Whiteman, 2014). The older sibling leaving home, often removes a key reference point for social comparison, which can lead the younger sibling to reassess their own traits, abilities, and aspirations (Feinberg et al., 2013). Without the older sibling's presence, the younger sibling may experience a sense of liberation, allowing them to explore interests and identities that were previously suppressed or overshadowed (Whiteman et al., 2011).

The sibling relationship is always been a core content for the wellbeing of the individual. Supportive sibling relationships are linked to higher self-esteem, lower depression, and greater emotional resilience (Buist, Deković, & Prinzie, 2013). The communication between the siblings can be more emotionally validating and comforting for the younger ones. The compliance, the validation, the approval, and the acceptance of the older sibling can deeply affect the emotional wellbeing of the younger one. Sibling's fosters an environment for the discussion of feelings and emotions between siblings, consequently the need for emotional expression through externalizing problems decreases as conversations are used instead (Cox., J.K, 2023). Warm and affectionate sibling bonds in childhood predict better social competence and emotional regulation in adulthood (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012).

The dynamics of the family may change as one of the family member leaves home. The older sibling might play a role as the chain that keep the family together. Older siblings frequently serve as mediators, confidants, or even "family glue" (Voorpostel & Blieszner, 2008), their absence can disrupt established channels of communication, leading to reduced bond or increased tension among remaining members. This transition can also affect parent-child relationships. Parents may unconsciously redistribute household responsibilities to younger siblings, altering their roles from dependents to helpers or even surrogate caregivers for younger children (Whiteman et al., 2011). The younger sibling may have to live up to the expectations of the parents. They may feel the need to cover up the gap that came up. This sudden role shift can create stress, particularly if the younger sibling feels unprepared for these new expectations (East & Khoo, 2005).

Furthermore, the coping mechanisms employed by younger siblings to navigate this transition could be different for different individuals. These coping mechanisms shape their resilience and adaptation to change. Some may adopt problem-focused coping strategies, such as actively seeking new responsibilities or strengthening peer relationships to fill the void left by their sibling (Compas et al., 2001). Others might rely on emotion-focused coping, like journaling or turning to parents for reassurance, particularly if they struggle with feelings of abandonment (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). Gender differences also play a role, research suggests girls are more likely to seek social support, while boys may withdraw or engage in distracting activities (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). In families where the

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older sibling was a primary confidant, younger siblings may initially experience emotional dysregulation but gradually develop greater self-sufficiency, a process linked to long-term resilience (Luthar et al., 2000). Conversely, those lacking alternative support systems may exhibit maladaptive coping, such as academic disengagement or risk-taking behaviors (Tucker et al., 2013). The interplay of these coping strategies not only determines how well younger siblings adapt but also influences their future relationship with the sibling, ranging from renewed closeness to sustained detachment (Jensen & Whiteman, 2014).

By exploring into the lived experiences of the younger sibling, the study aims to provide an understanding of how they perceive and respond to the transition that happens after their older sibling moves out. Through qualitative inquiry, the research will uncover the emotional, relational, and adaptive dimensions of this experience, which can significantly affect the younger sibling's personal development. Understanding of these changes and perceptions are important in fostering the psychological wellbeing of the younger siblings. The study offers valuable insights for families navigating this transition, helping them support younger siblings more effectively. Educators and mental health professionals can also benefit from this research by gaining a deeper awareness of the psychological and social implications of such transitions, allowing them to offer targeted guidance. This study helps us better understand the experiences of younger siblings and how they cope when their older sibling moves out. While much attention is given to the person leaving home, we often forget how this change affects the siblings left behind. This research brings their experiences to light, showing how this important family transition shapes their growth and relationships.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Aim***

The study aims to explore the experiences of younger siblings when the older sibling moves out for higher education.

#### ***Research Design***

The qualitative analysis is conducted to understand the experiences of the younger sibling who is remaining at home when the older sibling leaves home for higher education. The study explores the areas of emotional wellbeing, sibling relationship quality and coping mechanisms the younger sibling adopted when they go through this significant transition.

Qualitative methods like interview, allow participants to express their perspectives, feelings, fears, and coping strategies in their own words, providing a rich and deeper understanding of their experiences. Qualitative methods provide in-depth exploration in this given area.

#### ***Participants***

The study consists of 20 participants. The gender uniformity in the number of participants are maintained. The 10 participants are female and 10 participants are male. The sample of the study includes individuals from the Kerala population, who has at least one older sibling who has moved out for higher education. The participants are between the age group of 15 to 24.

#### **Inclusive Criteria**

- Younger sibling between the age group of 15 to 24.
- Participants must have at least one older sibling who has moved away for higher education within the past year.

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- Participants should cohabit with their older sibling before them moving out.
- Participants must have had regular interaction with the older sibling prior to them moving out.
- Both male and female younger siblings are eligible.

### Exclusive Criteria

- Younger siblings who have not had significant contact with their older sibling after them moving out.
- Younger sibling below the age of 15 and above the age of 24.
- Non-residents of Kerala State

The participants are selected only from the state of Kerala. As there would be significant differences in the cultural values followed in different states of India, the study has excluded the participants from other states to keep the uniformity in the values followed by the participants. By limiting the study to Kerala, the study ensures the uniformity in cultural norms of the participants.

### ***Sample Selection Technique***

- Purposive sampling method is used to select the participants for the study. The samples are selected by the interviewer according to the inclusion criteria of the research.
- This method of purposive sampling ensures that the participants completely follow the criteria of inclusion. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose the individuals who can provide a rich, detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Tools Used**

- A semi-structured interview method is used to collect data from the participants. Questions were prepared prior to the interview. While delivering the interview, the required changes in the use of language, and the order of questions are made.
- Semi structured interview method is used as it helps in keeping the interview purposive to the research study. The semi-structured method allows the interviewer to modulate and change the structure of the interview according to the needful. It provides the interviewer the flexibility to adapt different patterns for questioning.

### ***Procedure***

A thorough search through literature reviews about the sibling relationship, familial structure and psychological wellbeing of the siblings are done pre-hand. Then the interview questions are made and a pilot study is conducted to ensure that the questions focuses directly on the research objectives. The interview questions are reviewed after making required changes. The interviewer selected the participants through purposive sampling and collected the data. The interview took around 15 to 30 minutes. The collected data is transcribed and then thematic analysis is used to analyze the data. Themes and subthemes are derived from the data and further analysis is done.

### ***Data Analysis***

Thematic Analysis is used to analyze the data. The codes are found from the transcribed materials and then grouped as themes and subthemes.

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Thematic analysis is used as it provides flexibility and systematic analysis. It helps in the in-depth exploration of the data. It provides valuable insights into the data, offering adaptable interpretations to the participants' narratives. This approach balances between structured analysis and interpretive depth. This method is basically grounded in participants' voices and the researcher's understanding.

**Table for example of analysis process.**

| Quote   | Second Person   | Meaning   | Theme                        | Subtheme            |
|---|---|---|------------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>If she is with us, I wouldn't feel alone.</i>                        | The participant has experienced the feeling of loneliness after their older sibling left home for college                   | As a person left home suddenly, their absence had triggered feelings of loneliness.   | Emotional Wellbeing          | Loneliness          |
| <i>I was angry that my sister is going. I felt so empty.</i>            | The participant has experienced anger towards her older sibling when she moved out. She also had feelings of emptiness.     | As an important person has left home suddenly, it brought grief in the participant.   | Emotional Wellbeing          | Grief               |
| <i>We talk a lot more when we were together.</i>                        | The participant used to talk to their older sibling before they have moved out.   | The physical distance has brought less opportunities to talk.   | Sibling Relationship Quality | Communication       |
| <i>I became more independent and had developed a sense of solitude.</i> | The participant has felt more independent after their older sibling moved out and started enjoying the lone time gradually. | As the participant got used to doing all things for themselves, they developed self-reliance and appreciated being able to do so. | Personal Growth              | Self-reliance       |
| <i>Everyone's focus turned around to me when she left.</i>              | The participant has experienced increased attention from everyone.  | As the older sibling moved out, all the attention has been transferred to the one who is staying back at home.                    | Family dynamics              | Increased Attention |

### **Ethical Consideration**

The participants are informed about the confidentiality prior to the data collection. The interviewer ensures that the participant is participating willingly and without any pressure from the external factors. The participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. A consent form was given to all the participants prior to the interview, ensuring their free will to participate. Since some of the participants are not legally adults, a consent form was taken from the parents also to avoid any future complications.

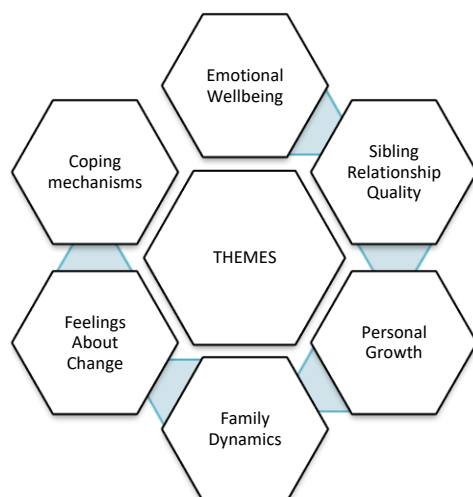
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### RESULT

The participants are between the age group of fifteen to twenty-four.

The total number of participants are 20. Out of that, ten participants are female and 10 participants are male.

The study gives an overall of six themes, (1) Emotional wellbeing, (2) Sibling relationship quality, (3) Personal growth, (4) Family dynamics, (5) feelings about change, and (6) Coping mechanisms.



#### ***Emotional Wellbeing***

The initial days of separation had a lot intense emotion. The emotions varied as loneliness, anger, sadness, emptiness etc. This theme and contributed to two subthemes, loneliness and grief. The loneliness is prone in siblings who doesn't have another sibling at home, while anger is seen in participants who has family issues at home. The sadness and emptiness is accompanied in all the participants soon after their older sibling moved out.

#### **Loneliness**

As the older sibling moved out, the younger sibling has felt loneliness. Since they spend much more time with their older sibling before they moved out, it evoked sense of isolation and loneliness. For the individuals who doesn't have other siblings have felt loneliness. The participant responded, "*Nobody else in my age is there at home, so I feel a little lonely after she left*". In a house of two children, where the older one left home for college, the younger one feels lonely and isolated. Another participant responded that "*I'm alone at home now. I don't have much people to talk to, so when I'm home I feel lonely*".

#### **Grief**

As some of the participant feels lonely and isolated, some other felt intense grief. This grief is channeled as emptiness, anger and even sadness. One of the participants responds "*During the first month after my sister moved out, I felt so lonely and I felt like depressed*". The participant used the term 'depressed' to explain her feeling of emptiness and sadness. The participant had a good relationship with the older sibling prior to their moving out, it evoked intense negative emotions in the participant.

Another response is "*I was angry that my sister is going. I felt so empty*". The participant is angry as the sibling is leaving her at home and moving out. The participant said that they were very emotionally dependent on their older sibling. As the older sibling moved out, it evoked anger in the younger sibling for abandoning her.

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### *Sibling Relationship Quality*

There is change in the relationship quality of the siblings as the older sibling moved out. This theme contributed to three subthemes, increased appreciation, improved communication, shifts in closeness. The participants who had a deeper bond with their older sibling prior to their physical distance, had a negative shift in relationship quality and those who didn't had a deeper connection had a positive shift in relationship quality.

#### Increased Appreciation

The participants reported to have appreciated their older sibling more after they left home for higher education. As they miss their older sibling, they started appreciating their presence. Many participated responded a feeling of longingness for their older sibling which made them reflect on the comfort and support which they had previously taken for granted. The participant responded that *"I appreciated my brother more when he moved out"*. The participants felt their older sibling's value and presence to be more comforting. Another participant responded *"I miss her, I feel good in her presence"*, *"I found it more easier to solve the problems when she is around"*.

Another participant responded *"I appreciated her more when she was around"*. The participant implies that their relationship were much more deeper when they were together, both of them appreciated each other's presence in their life even before this transition. For this participant, the presence made them appreciate not the distance.

#### Communication

For the participants who didn't had daily deep conversations and interactions with their older sibling, the distance has made them appreciate the presence of the sibling. The participant responded *"When we were together at home, we don't talk much, but when she moved out, we started talking a lot"*.

Another participant responded, *"I share things with my sister through phone now, it feels difficult at times"*. For the participants who had a very good connection and daily meaningful conversations with their older sibling reported to have difficulties in maintaining the communication that they had before. Another responded *"I frequently talk to sister, but its different. We talk a lot more when we were together"*.

#### Shifts in closeness

There were positive as well as negative shifts in the closeness as per their daily interactions and connections before the older sibling moves out. For the participants who had daily conversations, and meaningful connections the physical distances had made the interactions lesser which affected their closeness. The participant responded, *"I feel like my bond with my sister has become a little weaker when she moved out"*. These participants had a good bond with each other prior to this transition.

There is a positive shift in the closeness. As the siblings consciously try harder to keep in touch with other, their communication improved. The distance had made them realize the value of sibling. The participant responded, *"We got a lot closer when he moved out"*. These participants didn't had a much deeper bond with each other prior to their physical distance. The presence of physical distance made them consciously put in efforts to stay connected with their older sibling which brings out a growth in their relationship.

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### Personal Growth

The physical distance between the siblings made the younger sibling difficult to depend on to their older siblings, which forced them to grow themselves as a person. This theme contributed to three subthemes, responsibility, self-reliance and self-discovery. Most younger sibling were influenced by the older sibling in many ways (*“80 percent of my personality is composed by my sister. She influenced me in many way”*).

#### Responsibility

The void that created by the older sibling in the house are forced to be filled by the younger ones who is remaining at home (*“Since my sister moved out, I’m forced to care about family stuff”*). The participant responded, *“I had to take up the responsibilities my brother had done before he moved out”*.

#### Self-Reliance

The transition of the older sibling has a huge impact in making the younger sibling much more independent. Before the transition, the younger ones were much dependent on their older siblings for everything including their personal needs (*“My sister used to iron my clothes. Now I start doing it on my own”*). Before, the participants received help from their older siblings for academic purposes also. But the transition had made them to rely on themselves as they didn’t had anyone else to rely on. The participant responded, *“After she moved out, I became more independent and had developed a sense of solitude, which is good”*. The transition had lifted them as persons. The became much more independent now.

#### Self-Discovery

The younger sibling had got the opportunity to explore themselves as individuals. As the physical presence of older sibling had brought a sense of dependency, the younger ones are limited with the opportunities of identifying their capacities and aptitudes. The younger ones had the tendency to follow the path of their older sibling rather than finding themselves. They are composed for following the older sibling in most scenarios. As the transition happens, they got an opportunity to explore their abilities. The participants responded, *“I started making new friends when she moved out”, “I’m much more confident right now... now that I’m forced to, I’m doing it well”*. The younger ones started reflecting on themselves as they started exploring their skills and capacities. The new found independence helps them in identifying and exploring themselves.

### Family Dynamics

This theme contributed to three subthemes, Parental attention, Role changes, Family communication. The younger sibling perceive these changes in family dynamics differently in different environment.

#### Parental Attention

As the older one moves out, the parental attention is shifted more to the one remaining at home. The participants has different perceptions about this shift in attention. Some find the shift as positive and some find it overwhelming and unnecessary. The participant responded, *“Everyone’s focus turned around to me when she left. I started getting all the attention”*. Some participants found the new attention and focus overwhelming.

Another participant responded, *“I’m an attention seeker, so I like this new found attention that I’m getting”*. Some other participants likes all the attention that they’re getting. They

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found it comforting to be seen and appreciated (“*My parents talk nice about me after my sister moved out*”). They enjoyed the spotlight and focus.

### Role Changes

The roles within the family changes. The participants expressed a sense of dislike towards the role changing. The participant responded, “*Since my sister moved out, I’m forced to care about family stuff*”. The participants were overwhelmed as they were told and forced to follow and take the lead of their older sibling. Another participant responded, “*My parents tried to get me in the path that she went. I fought to get away from that*”. As they were forced to take up that expected role which is previously done by the older sibling, it brought overwhelming feeling in the participants. A participant reacted to the change in role as “*I felt that my parents could’ve understood that me and my sister are two different person and we cannot perform the same*”.

### Family communication

In a house, where they had daily ritual dinner and conversations, the older sibling being physically distant from the family brought the shift. The younger sibling reported, “*The time we spend as a family become lesser when my sister moved out*”. This shift caused gap between the younger sibling and the other family members.

The positive impact on the family communication also witnessed. The participant reported, “*After my sister left for college, my mother and brother started spending more time with me*”. The family members invested more time with the younger one as the older sibling moved out. As they spend more time together, it helped in fostering the relationship between them.

### ***Feelings About Change***

The participants perceived these changes as positive and negative. The theme contributed to two subthemes, resentment and anger, and positive reflections. Some participants reflected negatively to the change and the others reflected positively to the change.

### Resentment and Anger

The participants had feelings of resentment and anger towards the older sibling. The responds included, “*We have some family issues, so when she moved out, I was angry at her for leaving me here*”. The participant explained her feelings of resentment and anger towards her older sibling as she left for college. The participant perceived the older sibling’s moving out as an abandonment. The other participant openly responded, “*I felt like she abandoned me*”. These participants who felt abandoned by their older siblings are the ones who were emotionally very dependent on their older sibling.

### Positive Reflections

After a certain period of time, the participants perceived change in a positive dimension. The moving out of the older sibling opened a new channel for the younger sibling to grow as themselves. The new roles and responsibilities helped them discovering their potential and foster their development as a person. The participant responses included, “*I think this change has been positive to me, I started getting more responsible and independent*”. When they identified that they were capable, the change turned towards a positive note. Another participant responded, “*After she moved out, I became more independent and had developed a sense of solitude, which is good*”. The transition evoked a sense of independence and

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autonomy in the younger sibling and they also perceived it as a positive outcome to the change.

### **Coping Mechanisms**

Different individuals adapt to the changes in different ways. This theme contributed to three subthemes, social support, distraction, emotional suppression. The individual has different sensitivities and responds to the change differently, thus having a different coping strategy for different individual.

#### Social Support

The participants reach out to the reliable sources for support and comfort. The participant responded, *“I shared my worries about missing my sister to my parents and friends. And they were very supportive”*. The participants have developed social skills to adapt to the negative outcomes of the transition. The responses of the participant included, *“I started making new friends when she moved out”*. The participants have improved the social skills to adapt quickly and to find a space other than their older sibling for emotional support and contentment. The another response is, *“I use to spent most of my time talking to my sister, but when she moved out, I started spending more time with my friends”*. The participants spend their time with their peer group to adopt to the change.

#### Distraction

The individuals distract themselves from the overwhelming thoughts and emotions. The transition can evoke negative outcomes in the individuals. They make themselves occupied with works to distract themselves. The participant responded, *“I started spending more time in online games when my sister moved out”*. Some participants used social media to distract themselves. The participant spends more time in mobile phones and other entertainment activities. The responses include, *“I started spending more time in social media”*. The other participants also worked improving their skills and talents. The responses include, *“I started doing art works when my brother moved out”*, *“I started painting after she moved out.”*, *“I started reading books now”*, *“When my sister was around, I don’t usually read, my sister does”*. The participants also involved in activities that their older siblings used to do, which will help them receive the comfort of being in the presence of their older sibling.

#### Emotional Suppression

The participants also try to cope up with the transition by avoiding the distressing emotions. They tend to avoid emotions that can possibly bring out distress and discomfort. The participants’ responses include, *“I tend to suppress my feelings now. Before I used to share my feelings with my sister”*. The participants who were emotionally dependent on their older sibling who couldn’t find a place to vent out their emotions, suppresses their emotions now. The responses also included, *“I don’t usually share my worries with people”*. The participant who was not dependent on the older sibling for emotional support also cope with the change by suppressing their emotions. The participant usually doesn’t share emotions with other people.

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Table for themes and subthemes.

| <b>Emotional Wellbeing</b>          |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Loneliness                          | <i>I'm alone at home now. I don't have much people to talk to, so when I'm home I feel lonely.</i>          |
| Grief                               | <i>During the first month after my sister moved out, I felt so lonely and I felt like depressed.</i>        |
| <b>Sibling Relationship Quality</b> |   |
| Increased Appreciation              | <i>I appreciated my brother more when he moved out.</i>   |
| Improved Communication              | <i>When we were together at home, we don't talk much, but when she moved out, we started talking a lot.</i> |
| Shifts in closeness                 | <i>I feel like my bond with my sister has become a little weaker when she moved out.</i>                    |
|                                     | <i>We got a lot closer when he moved out.</i>   |
| <b>Personal Growth</b>              |   |
| Responsibility                      | <i>I had to take up the responsibilities my brother had done before he moved out.</i>                       |
| Self-Reliance                       | <i>After she moved out, I became more independent and had developed a sense of solitude, which is good.</i> |
| Self-Discovery                      | <i>I started making new friends when she moved out.</i>   |
| <b>Family Dynamics</b>              |   |
| Parental Attention                  | <i>Everyone's focus turned around to me when she left. I started getting all the attention.</i>             |
| Role Changes                        | <i>Since my sister moved out, I'm forced to care about family stuff.</i>                                    |
| Family communication                | <i>The time we spend as a family become lesser when my sister moved out</i>                                 |
| <b>Feelings About Change</b>        |   |
| Resentment and Anger                | <i>We have some family issues, so when she moved out, I was angry at her for leaving me here.</i>           |
| Positive Reflections                | <i>I think this change has been positive to me, I started getting more responsible and independent</i>      |
| <b>Coping Mechanisms</b>            |   |
| Social Support                      | <i>I shared my worries about missing my sister to my parents and friends. And they were very supportive</i> |
| Distraction                         | <i>I started spending more time in online games when my sister moved out.</i>                               |
| Emotional Suppression               | <i>I tend to suppress my feelings now. Before I used to share my feelings with my sister.</i>               |

### **DISCUSSION**

The older sibling has played a significant role in shaping and influencing the younger sibling. The sudden transition that happens when the older sibling moves out of their home had brought a variety of emotional experience for the younger sibling who is remaining at home.

When an older sibling moves out of their parental home to pursue higher education, it marks a complex and significant emotional transition for the younger sibling who is remaining at home. This period can cause a whirlwind of feelings ranging from deep loneliness and sadness to anger and even grief. For many younger siblings, especially those who shared a close emotional bond with their older sibling, the initial days and weeks following the separation can feel like a sudden emotional vacuum. The house feels quieter, routines shift, and the absence is felt in even the smallest of moments from meals once shared to late-night conversations.

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This experience is deeply personal and varies greatly depending on the nature of the sibling relationship, the stability of the home environment, and the younger sibling's own emotional resilience. Many describe an overwhelming sense of emptiness or even abandonment, as though a part of their emotional support system has suddenly been taken away. In some cases, these younger siblings struggle to articulate what they're feeling, caught between missing their sibling and trying to adjust to a new normal.

Conversely, younger siblings from more strained or unstable family environments may react quite differently. For them, the older sibling leaving home can spark anger or resentment emotions rooted not just in the loss itself but in the perception of being left behind in a difficult home. In such cases, the older sibling might have represented a source of safety or escape. Some younger siblings report feeling as if the sibling has escaped a burdensome situation while leaving them behind in the difficult place. As they themselves remain stuck in that place, it caused them to feel resentment towards the older sibling who is able to get away from that home. The difficulty they once share together had to be faced by the younger one alone now.

The most universal emotional experiences during this transition is loneliness. Especially for the younger ones who are the only child remaining at home now. The loss of a daily companion and partner-in-crime leaves a noticeable void in their day to day life. Siblings often share a unique emotional intimacy that is hard to replicate in other relationships, including those with parents. When that bond is suddenly disrupted, younger siblings may find themselves searching for new sources of connections, turning to friends, mentors, or digital spaces to fill the gap. For some, grief seeps in quietly, manifesting as withdrawal, sadness, or even depressive symptoms. For others, especially those who feel emotionally abandoned, it can come out as anger and frustration, creating tension within the family or among peers.

Interestingly, this physical separation often transforms the quality of the sibling relationship itself. In some cases, absence truly does make the heart grow fonder. Many younger siblings begin to appreciate their older sibling in ways they hadn't before, recognizing the depth of their influence only once they're gone. As the physical distance is persisting, it encourages the siblings to keep in touch with each other. The intentional text messages, phone call make their bond more deeper than before. The physical distance builds a stronger relationship also. Siblings who once had only casual, surface-level conversations might begin to open up more meaningfully, as the distance invites vulnerability. On the flip side, siblings who were already close and had a deeper connection, may experience a gradual weakening of their bond, simply because the shared day-to-day moments are no longer there to maintain it. The communication would be harder for them through phone call and text messages. Their deeper connection is formed from being available to each other and daily communication. This is interrupted as the older sibling moves out.

Even though the transition causes an emotional turbulence in the younger siblings, another powerful shift begins to take place, personal growth. With the older sibling no longer around them to help them, they are obligated to take in all the things in their own hands. The younger sibling often finds themselves stepping into new roles, discovering untapped strengths, and developing a greater sense of self. Tasks that once fell to the older sibling, like helping with homework, managing chores, or guiding family decisions, now become the younger sibling's responsibility. This can be empowering. Many reports feeling more

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capable, more independent, and more self-aware. They begin to form an identity that's no longer in the shadow of their older sibling. It provides the opportunity to explore who they are outside that dynamic.

There is no easy way to learn something. This growth isn't always heartily welcome. For some, the transition brings with it a heavy burden of expectations. Parents, consciously or not, may begin to project their hopes or expectations onto the younger sibling. Parents expect them to "step up" or "fill in" for their older counterpart. This pressure can be overwhelming, particularly when it disregards the younger sibling's individuality. Some internalize it and rise to the occasion, while others feel a sense of resentment or even rebellion, frustrated by being asked to grow up too fast. This pressure to grow up as their older sibling is real or is imagined by themselves. The younger ones would feel the need to be seen and appreciated as their older sibling. This would create an internal pressure or at the bright side a sense of responsibility.

Family dynamics as a whole often shift dramatically during this period. With one child out of the house, the younger sibling may find themselves under a more focused parental lens. For some, this newfound attention is welcomed, they feel seen, perhaps for the first time. For others, it's suffocating. The family rhythm changes. Responsibilities are redistributed, and communication patterns evolve. In some households, where the older sibling acted as the glue that stick the family together, dinner table conversations weaken without the older sibling's voice. In others, bonds strengthen, as the remaining family members work to adjust together.

Over time, most younger siblings do find their footing. The sting of separation fades, replaced by a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the family. Many come to view the experience as a pivotal moment in their personal development. Even with the pain, the transition ultimately helped them grow. The journey is shaped largely by how they cope with the initial emotional upheaval. Those who are able to express their feelings whether through conversations, journaling, or creative outlets tend to adjust more smoothly. Others, who turn to emotional suppression or distraction without processing their pain, often struggle for longer periods, carrying a quiet weight they can't quite name.

In the end, the older sibling leaving home for higher education is much more than a simple goodbye, it's a moment of transformation. It brings out all their capacities and vulnerabilities which were hidden. The transition brings out the unknown and undiscovered capacities in them. It challenges the younger sibling to deal with loss, identify their strength, reshape their relationships, redefine their role in the family, and, perhaps most importantly, discover who they are becoming in the process.

### ***Limitations***

This study was carried out exclusively among participants from Kerala, which naturally shapes the findings through a regional lens. Kerala's unique cultural values such as tightly-knit family systems and high rates of educational migration, may not reflect experiences in other parts of India or the world. As a result, while the insights are meaningful, they may not fully apply to families in different cultural or geographical contexts.

One important factor not explored in this study is the gender of the older sibling who moved out. Sibling dynamics often shift depending on whether it's a brother or sister leaving. Some

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research suggests, for example, that sisters might offer more emotional support, or that younger siblings may react differently depending on who they were closer to. By not considering this, the study may have missed out on some important factor.

Most participants came from similar backgrounds in terms of age and family setup. The study didn't explore how younger siblings of different ages, or from families with more or fewer children, might experience the transition differently. These details could have added more depth to understanding how individual circumstances shape emotional responses and coping strategies.

### ***Implications***

Parents, guardians, and educators should recognize that a sibling leaving home can be a major emotional event for those left behind. It's important to check in regularly, offer reassurance, and create safe spaces for younger siblings to express themselves. Schools and colleges can play a big role too by offering peer support groups or access to counselors who can help students navigate these changes.

Future studies should include participants from a variety of regions, cultural backgrounds, and family structures to capture a broader spectrum of experiences. Exploring how the gender of the sibling who leaves home affects emotional reactions, it could shed light on deeper relational patterns. Longitudinal research would allow us to see how sibling relationships and personal growth unfold over the months and years after separation, offering a more holistic understanding.

Counselors and therapists working with adolescents should be mindful of sibling separation as a potential source of stress, especially in cultures where sibling bonds are emotionally significant. Therapy can help younger siblings work through their feelings in a healthy way, encouraging emotional expression and connection rather than internalizing pain or pretending to be unaffected.

Colleges, universities, and migration-focused support services could consider offering family-oriented programs to ease this transition. Workshops for parents, sibling mentorship programs, or resources designed to keep siblings connected could go a long way in helping both the student who leaves and the one who stays behind adjust more smoothly.

### ***Recommendations***

The study found significant difficulties facing by the younger siblings when their older sibling moves out. The initial stage is difficult as they are introduced to new roles and responsibilities along with their emotional disturbances. Journaling or talking to someone helps in expression of their true emotions. Seeking for a safe space to talk freely about their emotions can help them navigate through those feelings. During this time, focusing on skill building activities would help the individuals to build themselves as a person. Spending time in activities such as drawing, painting, reading etc would help them to keep themselves occupied and productive. The feelings of loneliness and abandonment can be improved by forming new connections with other people at home. Building social network outside the family also helps. Building new friendships and new relationships would help them to get rid of feelings of loneliness. Apart from engaging in new connections, engaging in new hobbies and passion can also help them to eliminate the feelings of emptiness. Frequent communication with the older sibling who has moved out can improve their sibling

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relationship quality. Social media can also be used to stay connected to their sibling who has moved out. Sending out virtual cards, letters, and care packages would help to remind each other of their connection and also strengthens their bond. The parents can help them in this transition by understanding their potential as a separate individual without comparing with the older sibling. Positive reinforcement from the family is crucial for the younger siblings. Appreciating their efforts and acknowledging their feelings can boost their self-esteem and worth. As they are given new responsibilities, it would help them to be self-reliant. The feelings of independence help them to build self-confidence.

### CONCLUSION

In the end, when an older sibling leaves home for college or university, it marks far more than just an empty bedroom, it's a major turning point that shakes up family routines and sibling bonds. For the younger sibling left behind, it can be an emotional rollercoaster filled with loneliness, confusion, and a deep sense of change. The home would feel empty without their elder sibling's presence. Yet, despite the initial heartache and disruption, this period often becomes a time of growth. Before they might have lived under the shadow of their elder sibling, but now they are given an opportunity to come into the light. Many younger siblings gradually find strength they didn't know they had, becoming more independent, self-aware, and resilient in the process.

The use of technologies helps maintain the sibling bond. For the siblings who had a surface-level interaction would improve their communication as the intentional phone calls and text messages are helping them. The technologies play as a bridge between those siblings. As for the siblings with deeper and more meaningful connection, this transition would affect their relationship negatively. Maintaining the daily conversations and deeper interactions would be difficult with the physical distance.

How smoothly they adjust depends on a mix of factors, the closeness of the sibling relationship before the move, the emotional atmosphere at home, and the ways they choose or are supported in coping with the changes. That's why thoughtful support really matters. Whether through open conversations with family, peer support groups, or even counseling, having spaces where younger siblings can express and make sense of their emotions can make all the difference. By validating their experience and giving them healthy ways to process this transition, we can help them not just get through it but grow from it.

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