



# Characteristics of Sibling Relationships During the Transition to Emerging Adulthood

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## INTRODUCTION

- Sibling relationships are among the longest lasting relationships that a person may have; therefore, characteristics of sibling relationships are important to understand across the lifespan.
- While the role of siblings has received some attention in the adolescent literature, less is known about the characteristics of these relationships as adolescents enter early adulthood (Lindell, Campione-Barr, & Greer, 2014).
- The aim of the current study was to describe typical sibling relationships among a sample of emerging adults. Unlike many other studies on siblings, the participants were not selected based on having a single sibling within a certain age range, which enabled us to examine a variety of sibling constellations. Moreover, our longitudinal data allowed for the exploration of changes in sibling relationships over time.

## SAMPLE

- 471 youth (65% female, 64% Caucasian)
- Surveys were administered across 3 time points, starting when the participants were adolescents (15-19 years-old at Time 1) through emerging adulthood (17-21 years-old at Time 3).

## PROCEDURE

Assenting adolescents who attended one of seven public high schools in the mid-Atlantic region were administered surveys annually (Time 1 in the spring of 2007, Time 2 in the spring of 2008, and Time 3 in the spring of 2009). All participants had parental consent to participate. The survey took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Throughout the study, participants were assured that all of their responses would be kept confidential, and were made aware of their option to withdraw from the study at any time. Each year, participants were compensated for their time with a movie pass, and were invited to participate again the following spring.

## MEASURES

### Sibling Relationship Questionnaire

- Characteristics of the adolescent-sibling relationship within the last month were assessed using the The Sibling Relationship Questionnaire (Slomkowski et al., 2001). The 12-item measure included scales for both Hostility (e.g., "In the past month, how often did your brother/sister criticize you or your ideas?") and Warmth (e.g., "In the past month, how often did your brother/sister act supportive and understanding toward you?"). Participants rated their responses on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (7). Cronbach alphas ranged from .87 to .92.
- Both participant and sibling gender and age also were reported.

## RESULTS

Repeated measures ANOVAs were used to examine how the sibling relationship changed during the transition from adolescence (Times 1 and 2) to emerging adulthood (Time 3).

- As shown in Table 1, the pattern across the three waves of data was the same for participants with sisters and brothers, such that reported hostility was significantly lower in emerging adulthood than in adolescence.
- Warmth scores, however, remained relatively stable in relationships with brothers, and increased across the transition to emerging adulthood in relationships with sisters.

	Hostility Score			Warmth Score		
	M	SD	F	M	SD	F
<b>Relationship with Brother</b>						
Time 1	21.97 <sup>A</sup>	9.57	18.94 <sup>***</sup>	23.73	9.13	2.35
Time 2	18.67 <sup>B</sup>	8.99		23.79	10.53	
Time 3	16.83 <sup>B</sup>	7.67		25.42	10.36	
<b>Relationship with Sister</b>						
Time 1	22.94 <sup>A</sup>	7.86	25.76 <sup>***</sup>	25.69 <sup>A</sup>	8.54	3.74 <sup>*</sup>
Time 2	18.33 <sup>B</sup>	6.80		26.41	8.88	
Time 3	17.34 <sup>B</sup>	7.74		27.95 <sup>B</sup>	8.88	

Table 1. Changes in Sibling Relationships Over Time

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Subscripts of A and B mark which of the groups differed significantly from each other in post-hoc tests.

## RESULTS

ANOVAs also were conducted to examine additional patterns of sibling relationships in emerging adulthood (See Table 2).

- Participants reported significantly greater warmth than hostility in all sibling relationships.
- Both males and females rated their relationships with sisters as marginally warmer than their relationships with brothers. Differences in hostility were not observed.
- Participants reported significantly more hostility with younger siblings compared to older siblings. Participants reported significantly more warmth in their relationship with older sisters than younger sisters.

Sibling	Hostility Score			Warmth Score		
	M	SD	F	M	SD	F
Brother	15.58	7.86	0.07	26.35	10.27	6.67 <sup>†</sup>
Sister	15.43	8.14		27.87	10.15	
<b>Age- brother</b>						
Older brother	13.56	7.72	18.58 <sup>***</sup>	26.83	10.74	1.04
Younger brother	17.33	7.24		25.61	9.66	
<b>Age- sister</b>						
Older sister	14.06	7.56	16.51 <sup>***</sup>	29.98	9.82	7.18 <sup>**</sup>
Younger sister	17.62	7.90		27.07	9.23	

Table 2. Characteristics of Sibling Relationships at Time 3

Note. <sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$  \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

- The transition into emerging adulthood is characterized by less hostility within sibling relationships, and greater warmth in relationships with sisters.
- During emerging adulthood, perceptions of the sibling relationship systematically differ by gender and age.
- An important next step will be to examine how these differences map onto developmental tasks occurring during emerging adulthood.

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