



The Severity of Mental Challenge: Determinant of Quality of Sibling Relationship

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ABSTRACT The present study investigated the effect of severity of mental challenge on the sibling relationship of normal children with their mentally challenged siblings. For the present study, 150 families with mentally challenged children were selected from 3 different rehabilitation centres of Delhi by randomly drawing 50 children from each degree of mental challenge, viz. mild, moderate and severe. The respondents for the present study comprised of one (any) of the parents and one (any) normal sibling of mentally challenged children making a total of 300. Sibling Relationship Scale was administered on respondents to arrive at meaningful inferences about sibling relationship between mentally challenged children and their normal siblings. Findings of the present study revealed that higher the severity of mental challenge significantly higher was warmth/closeness and relative status/power and significantly less was conflict and rivalry between mentally challenged children and their normal siblings.

INTRODUCTION

Over a billion people globally live with some form of disability (WHO 2013). This corresponds to about fifteen percent of the world's population. According to WHO, disability is an "umbrella term" covering impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. Mental challenge is one such sort of disability. According to the American Association on Mental Retardation (2002), "Mental retardation is a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. In India, there are over 20 million mentally retarded people - of which two million are children. Mentally challenged child in the family, no doubt has a significant impact on the family as a system.

A family system comprises of multiple subsystems viz., parental subsystem, spousal subsystem, and sibling subsystem consisting of an interdependent, stable and harmonious group of people operating on the principles of harmony and love. Subsystems are interlinked and in-

fluence each other significantly. Hence, any deviation from the normal in the family shall almost equally but differentially influence each subsystem. Hastings and Taunt (2002) reported that majority of children with an intellectual disability (ID) are raised at home by their family and a child with an ID not only influences the wellbeing of the main caregiver(s) (parental subsystem) but also affects the other family subsystem such as sibling subsystem and the family as a whole. Most of the times, the presence of a mentally challenged child changes the family's self-identity, reduce its earning capacity, restricts its recreational and social activities, and affects career decisions, thereby influencing the family environment for normal siblings as well.

Siblings are viewed as an integral component of family systems (Howe et al. 2011). Al-Rehani (1985) believed that the existence of an intellectually disabled brother or sister in the family changes the role and increases the responsibilities of normal brothers and sisters towards ID children. Besides this, Greenberg et al. (1997) reported that normal siblings' perception of the severity of their siblings' mental illness may also critically influence their intentions to provide care and to prioritize their needs to meet out the needs of their ill siblings. Another study by Stoneman (2005) also suggests that the way siblings interact and play with each other also depends on the severity of the disability for a substantial part. Hence, it may be assumed that erratic mood swings, slow learning, repetitive

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behaviours, confusing cues and forgetfulness on the part of mentally challenged children drastically hinders normal siblings' social, cultural and sports involvement and puts them under intensive pressure, anxiety, and stress especially if the family depends on them to look after its challenged child. Thus, mentally normal siblings have to welcome early maturity and adjust to the changing roles of a peer, protector, guide, caregiver and so on. In short, most of the times mentally normal siblings miss out their time and experiences of being a kid. There is a probability that this all will have an effect on the quality of sibling relationship between mentally challenged and normal children. Orfus (2008) reported that most of the normal brothers and sisters felt embarrassed in front of friends of their mentally challenged siblings.

However, some researchers report having a sibling with a disability and having a sibling without a disability makes a little difference in sibling relationships (Benson et al. 1999). Inam et al. (2017) reported that presence of a child with autism was a significant predictor of poor self-concept, behavioral mal-adjustment and scholastic status, popularity, happiness and satisfaction related self-concept of siblings. Chourasiya et al. (2018) reported a high level of stress and burden associated with increased level of disability; it being the maximum in the caregivers of persons with severe to profound Mental Retardation. Further, Kowalski's (1980) work has indicated that the degree of disability is not significant in the attitudes of the non-disabled siblings, while the type of disability plays an important role in this regard. Blacher and Baker (2017) in their study reported that more youth with ASD or ID had clinical level behavior disorders than their TD peers, and their mothers reported significantly higher personal stress and psychological symptoms. It is very strange to note that research has also shown that siblings and parents have a different view on the influence of a child with ID on his/her sibling. In studies where siblings were the primary informants, children were seen to be more positive in their self-report about their relationship with their disabled sibling than their mothers in parent reports. Shivers and McGregor (2019) in their study found that there were no differences between siblings of individuals with ASD and siblings of

individuals with IDD on any sibling self-reported feelings toward their brother or sister, though parents of individuals with ASD reported significantly less optimism and more negative perception of the child's impact on the family than did parents of children with IDD or no disability. Also, Braconnier et al. (2017) in their study reported that siblings of ASD were more positive in their assessment of the sibling relationship than were their parents. Saban and Ankan (2013) in their study observed that self-esteem of children with mentally retarded sibling was not affected from the handicap of their siblings.

Guite et al. (2004) observed that parents reported more sibling adjustment problems than did siblings and they also noticed that parents who reported more problems than siblings also reported greater negative impact of Chronic illness/Developmental disability on family social functioning than other parents. Hastings (2007) mentioned that conflicting findings on the topic suggest that several factors affect sibling relationships such as the individual characteristics of the sibling and the child with a disability and the characteristics of the entire family. These conflicting findings on the topic of discussion paved way for the present study which was taken up with the following objectives.

Objectives

- 1 To analyze the level of quality of sibling relationship between mentally challenged and normal siblings across degree of mental challenge.
- 2 To assess statistical differences in the quality of sibling relationship between mentally challenged and normal siblings across degree of mental challenge.

METHODOLOGY

Locale

The present research study was carried out exclusively in Delhi. Delhi was purposively selected as it is the nearest region having an appreciable number of RCI (Rehabilitation Council of India) recognized special schools meant exclusively for mentally challenged children. Out of the 9, RCI recognized institutes for MR children in Delhi, only 3 institutes namely NIMH

(National Institute for Mentally Handicapped), Manovikas and C.B.S Memorial granted permission to use their institute as a research base for the present study.

Participants

The list of mentally challenged children enrolled in National Institute for Mentally Handicapped (NIMH), Manovikas and CBS Memorial was procured from their Directors to pick up families with mentally challenged children. Out of the total population of mentally challenged children, 50 were randomly drawn from each degree of mental challenge, viz. mild, moderate and severe and their families were included in the sample. This way a total of 150 families were selected for the present study wherein 150 (any one) normal sibling and 150 (any one) parent were taken up as respondents.

Research Tools

Sibling relationship was assessed using the Sibling Relationship Scale (SRQ) by Furman and Buhrmester (1985). SRQ is the 48-item standard version questionnaire to assess sibling relationship on domains like Warmth/Closeness (it consists of the average of the scale scores for intimacy, prosocial behaviour, companionship, similarity, admiration by sibling, admiration of sibling, and affection); Relative Status/Power (it consists of nurturance of sibling, dominance of sibling, minus the scale scores of nurturance by sibling and dominance by sibling); Conflict (it consists of the average of the quarrelling, antagonism, and competition); Rivalry (it consists of the average of maternal and paternal partiality). It was pretested for Indian culture and found to be reliable and valid for use without any modification.

Data Collection and Analysis

The respondents were extensively interviewed in their homes and participant observation was made to confirm collected data. The data thus, collected was classified and tabulated in accordance with the objectives to arrive at meaningful and relevant inferences. The data

were analyzed using statistical techniques like mean, standard deviation and t-test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A close view of Table 1 shows that with the increase in the severity of mental challenge there is an increase in warmth/closeness in sibling relationship between mentally challenged children and their normal siblings. Thirty percent of the families with mildly mentally challenged children reported high warmth/closeness in sibling relationship whereas thirty-four percent reported low warmth/closeness. At the same time, in families with moderately mentally challenged children and families with severely mentally challenged children fifty percent and sixty-four percent respectively had high warmth/closeness in sibling relationship and fourteen percent and twelve percent had low warmth/closeness. Similarly, overall view on relative status/power in sibling relationship reveals that higher the degree of disability of mentally challenged children, higher is the relative status/power in the sibling relationship. In families with mildly, moderately and severely mentally challenged children, thirty percent, fifty percent, sixty-six percent had high relative status/power.

A glance of conflict and rivalry in sibling relationship in families with mentally challenged children reveals that it decreases with the increase in the degree of mental challenge of the child. Forty percent, eighteen percent and ten percent of the families with mildly, moderately and severely mentally challenged children, respectively reported high conflict whereas, thirty, forty-six and fifty-six percent, respectively reported low conflict. Similarly, eighty, sixty-six and thirty-four percent of the families with mildly, moderately and severely mentally challenged children, respectively reported high rivalry in sibling relationship and zero, twelve and thirty-eight percent of the families reported low rivalry in sibling relationship.

Table 2 explicitly shows significant difference in the quality of sibling relationship between mentally challenged children and their normal siblings across the degree of mental challenge. Families with severely mentally challenged children reported significantly more warmth/closeness in sibling relationship followed by those

Table 1: Distribution pattern of mentally challenged children on type and level of sibling relationship with their mentally normal siblings across their degree of mental challenge

Domains of sibling relationship	Subscales	Levels of sibling relationship	Mildly mentally challenged children (n ₁ = 50)		Moderately mentally challenged children (n ₂ = 50)		Severely mentally challenged children (n ₃ = 50)		Total sample (n=150)		
			n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Warmth/ Closeness	Intimacy	Low	11	22.00	8	16.00	2	4.00	21	14.00	
		Moderate	25	50.00	19	38.00	16	32.00	60	40.00	
		High	14	28.00	23	46.00	32	64.00	69	46.00	
	Prosocial Behaviour	Low	19	38.00	5	10.00	0	0.00	24	16.00	
		Moderate	17	34.00	17	34.00	14	28.00	48	32.00	
		High	14	28.00	28	56.00	36	72.00	78	52.00	
	Companionship	Low	23	46.00	8	16.00	6	12.00	37	24.67	
		Moderate	14	28.00	17	34.00	10	20.00	41	27.33	
		High	13	26.00	25	50.00	34	68.00	72	48.00	
	Similarity	Low	22	44.00	10	20.00	11	22.00	43	28.67	
		Moderate	18	36.00	28	56.00	22	44.00	68	45.33	
		High	10	20.00	12	24.00	17	34.00	39	26.00	
	Admiration by Sibling	Low	24	48.00	7	14.00	6	12.00	37	24.67	
		Moderate	16	32.00	14	28.00	12	24.00	42	28.00	
		High	10	20.00	29	58.00	32	64.00	71	47.33	
	Admiration of Sibling	Low	22	44.00	13	26.00	0	0.00	35	23.33	
		Moderate	19	38.00	20	40.00	11	22.00	50	33.33	
		High	9	18.00	17	34.00	39	78.00	65	43.33	
	Affection	Low	4	8.00	3	6.00	0	0.00	7	4.67	
		Moderate	23	46.00	16	32.00	12	24.00	51	34.00	
		High	23	46.00	31	62.00	38	76.00	92	61.33	
Overall Warmth/ Closeness	Low	17	34.00	7	14.00	6	12.00	30	20.00		
	Moderate	18	36.00	18	36.00	12	24.00	48	32.00		
	High	15	30.00	25	50.00	32	64.00	72	48.00		
Relative Status/Power	Nurturance of Sibling	Low	11	22.00	6	12.00	0	0.00	17	11.33	
		Moderate	16	32.00	8	16.00	9	18.00	33	22.00	
		High	23	46.00	36	72.00	41	82.00	100	66.67	
	Dominance of Sibling	Low	21	42.00	12	24.00	6	12.00	39	26.00	
		Moderate	12	24.00	13	26.00	8	16.00	33	22.00	
		High	17	34.00	25	50.00	36	72.00	78	52.00	
Nurturance by Sibling	Low	17	34.00	11	22.00	3	6.00	31	20.67		
	Moderate	25	50.00	18	36.00	19	38.00	62	41.33		
	High	8	16.00	21	42.00	28	56.00	57	38.00		
Dominance by Sibling	Low	23	46.00	14	28.00	6	12.00	43	28.67		
	Moderate	16	32.00	18	36.00	17	34.00	51	34.00		
	High	11	22.00	18	36.00	27	54.00	56	37.33		
Overall Relative Status/Power Conflict	Quarreling	Low	18	36.00	10	20.00	4	8.00	32	21.33	
		Moderate	17	34.00	15	30.00	13	26.00	45	30.00	
		High	15	30.00	25	50.00	33	66.00	73	48.67	
	Antagonism	Low	11	22.00	24	48.00	29	58.00	64	42.67	
		Moderate	16	32.00	16	32.00	13	26.00	45	30.00	
		High	23	46.00	10	20.00	8	16.00	41	27.33	
	Competition	Low	15	30.00	19	38.00	24	48.00	58	38.67	
		Moderate	11	22.00	18	36.00	19	38.00	48	32.00	
		High	24	48.00	13	26.00	7	14.00	44	29.33	
	Overall Conflict	Low	19	38.00	26	52.00	31	62.00	76	50.67	
		Moderate	18	36.00	20	40.00	19	38.00	57	38.00	
		High	13	26.00	4	8.00	0	0.00	17	11.33	
	Rivalry	Maternal Partiality	Low	15	30.00	23	46.00	28	56.00	66	44.00
			Moderate	15	30.00	18	36.00	17	34.00	50	33.33
			High	20	40.00	9	18.00	5	10.00	34	22.67
Overall Rivalry	Paternal Partiality	Low	19	38.00	8	16.00	0	0.00	27	18.00	
		Moderate	18	36.00	9	18.00	8	16.00	35	23.33	
		High	13	26.00	33	66.00	42	84.00	88	58.67	
Overall Rivalry	Low	19	38.00	4	8.00	0	0.00	23	15.33		
	Moderate	21	42.00	13	26.00	11	22.00	45	30.00		
	High	10	20.00	33	66.00	39	78.00	82	54.67		
Overall Rivalry	Low	0	0.00	6	12.00	19	38.00	25	16.67		
	Moderate	10	20.00	11	22.00	14	28.00	35	23.33		
	High	40	80.00	33	66.00	17	34.00	90	60.00		

Table 2: Mean difference in sibling relationship between mentally challenged children and their mentally normal siblings across mentally challenged children's degree of mental challenge

Domains of sibling relationship	Subscales	Mildly mentally challenged children ($n_1 = 50$)	Moderately mentally challenged children ($n_2 = 50$)	Severely mentally challenged children ($n_3 = 50$)	F calculated
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Warmth/Closeness	Intimacy	2.00 ^a (0.58)	3.11 ^b (0.72)	4.34 ^c (0.78)	5.35**
	Prosocial behaviour	2.16 ^a (0.34)	3.21 ^b (0.49)	4.54 ^c (0.56)	4.14*
	Companionship	2.37 ^a (0.63)	3.92 ^b (0.66)	4.85 ^c (0.68)	4.12*
	Similarity	2.50 ^a (0.81)	3.57 ^b (0.70)	4.81 ^c (0.72)	3.97*
	Admiration by sibling	0.76 (0.73)	0.81 (0.79)	0.72 (0.99)	0.73
	Admiration of sibling	2.63 ^a (0.80)	3.49 ^b (0.47)	4.92 ^c (0.36)	3.81*
	Affection	2.26 ^a (0.35)	3.36 ^b (0.42)	4.29 ^c (0.32)	3.41*
Overall Warmth/Closeness		2.10 ^a (0.40)	3.07 ^b (0.24)	4.07 ^c (0.34)	3.42*
Relative Status/Power	Nurturance of sibling	0.29 (0.45)	0.33 (0.43)	0.35 (0.40)	0.66
	Dominance of sibling	0.75 (0.54)	0.81 (0.53)	0.79 (0.49)	0.87
	Nurturance by sibling	2.15 ^a (0.71)	3.31 ^b (0.68)	4.22 ^c (0.57)	4.35*
	Dominance by sibling	2.04 ^a (0.76)	3.30 ^b (0.70)	4.35 ^c (0.62)	3.47*
Overall Relative Status/Power		1.31 ^a (0.94)	1.94 ^b (1.10)	2.43 ^c (0.88)	3.19*
Conflict	Quarreling	3.72 ^a (0.59)	2.31 ^b (0.49)	0.17 ^c (0.58)	3.23*
	Antagonism	3.58 ^a (0.42)	2.25 ^b (0.53)	0.42 ^c (0.59)	3.79*
	Competition	3.94 ^a (0.77)	2.53 ^b (1.06)	0.30 ^c (0.85)	3.93*
Overall Conflict		3.75 ^a (0.55)	2.36 ^b (0.53)	0.30 ^c (0.51)	3.66*
Rivalry	Maternal partiality	1.99 ^a (0.56)	1.29 ^b (0.69)	0.52 ^c (0.73)	3.82*
	Paternal partiality	1.82 ^a (0.73)	0.95 ^b (0.75)	0.25 ^c (0.66)	3.26*
Overall Rivalry		1.90 ^a (0.68)	1.12 ^b (0.55)	0.38 ^c (0.58)	3.73*

*Significant at $P < 0.05$;**Significant at $P < 0.01$; Means with different superscripts are significant at $P < 0.05/P < 0.01$

having moderately challenged and then mildly challenged children. Higher warmth/closeness in sibling relationship was reflective of higher intimacy, affection, companionship, pro social behavior, similarity and admiration between the two siblings. This finding is in accordance with that of Wilson et al. (1989) who reported that siblings of children with severe disabilities have fun playing with their siblings, feel strong loyalty, interact with their siblings on a daily basis and are aware of the children's activities and developmental gains. According to a study by Upreti and Singh (2015) siblings of mentally challenged children play an important role in the development of adaptive skills of mentally challenged children as well as lowering of their disturbed behavior. A study by Hakeem and Subathra (2013) stated that siblings of mentally challenged children had positive attitude towards their MR siblings and they responded positively towards the future of their relationship. Berk (2012) reported that age and stage of siblings' develop-

ment is important, as each stage fosters new capacities, goals, and social expectations. Another study, by Manor-Binyamin and Abu-Ajaj (2012) has shown that brothers and sisters of disabled children are at compatibility problems and have low self-esteem than non-disabled children. Begun (1989) too reported that relationship patterns vary according to the degree of disability in superiority, care, admiration, or such areas. According to a study by Shivers et al. (2018) sibling of individuals with autism reported significantly more overall stress than did siblings of individuals with Down syndrome, as well as more stress specifically attributed to the brother/sister with autism.

Kaminsky and Dewey (2001) also found that siblings of the child having disability have more positive attitudes such as affection, closeness and intimacy in sibling relationship. Shivers and Dykens (2017) in their study observed that siblings of individuals with IDD reported higher levels of anxiety toward the target child than did

siblings of normal developing individuals. Moges (2017) showed that children with mental retardation are facing different psychosocial challenges like stigma, discrimination, isolation, blame, shame, frustration, feeling of upset, self-insult, loneliness, losing respect, despairing (feeling of no hope), insult, anger and sadness. Results of a study by Andersson (1998) showed that the siblings of mentally challenged children are more socially isolated in school and in their leisure time.

Usually mental deficit of the mildly mentally challenged is acknowledged as learning disability which makes the family members (including siblings) refuse to think of them as “disabled”. This denial impairs mildly mentally challenged children’s interpersonal relationships with their siblings and compels them to challenge themselves and over perform to compensate for their disguised disability and to act and behave with respect to the “norm” as well. This extensively affects the sibling relationship making it more competitive and full of conflict and rivalry between mildly mentally challenged children and their normal siblings. On the contrary, normal siblings share affectionate, caring and supervising relationship with their moderately and severely mentally challenged siblings. One of the probable reasons for this might be that the normal siblings understand the difference in capabilities of two and empathize significantly with their severely followed by moderately mentally challenged siblings. Thus, understand that their severely followed by moderately mentally challenged siblings need more attention and care and are in no way threat to their status in the family or parents’ love and attention. It ultimately leads to more affection, intimacy, companionship in their sibling relationship. The normal siblings of the mentally challenged also exhibit prosocial behaviors. Dyson (1989) also noted that brothers of disabled children exhibited fewer aggressive behaviors than other boys. Warmth/closeness is also inclusive of admiration of one sibling for another. Normal siblings were found to have greater admiration for the strength, and perseverance of their moderately and severely mentally challenged siblings. Mentally challenged siblings served as a source of motivation to their normal siblings for facing life challenges and hardships with zeal and vigor;

appreciating one’s innate capacities and having respect for differences.

Families with severely mentally challenged children also reported significantly more relative status/power in sibling relationship followed by those having moderately challenged and then mildly challenged children. Relative status and power in sibling relationship is measured in terms of nurturance and dominance of and by the sibling. Nurturance in a relationship is seen as love, care, attention, encouragement and assistance in advancement of another. Normal children from a very early age are witness to the special needs of their mentally challenged sibling and in many situations play the parental role of nurturing their mentally challenged sibling. Dominance is seen as power dynamics in the sibling relationship. The normal sibling takes charge by trying to keep a check on the maladaptive behaviors of the mentally challenged child. The normal siblings more often dominated their moderately and severely mentally challenged sibling and the challenged sibling too warmly accepts the dominance as it is meant only to assist them in their daily chores or basic decisions of life.

However, conflict and rivalry component of sibling relationship presented entirely reverse picture. Families with severely mentally challenged children reported significantly less conflict and rivalry in sibling relationship followed by those having moderately challenged and then mildly challenged children. Conflict in sibling relationship arises due to any ground for quarrel, antagonism and competition. Quarreling occurs when there is a reason for disagreement over perception, principles, and so on. The mentally challenged child is not intellectually competent enough so the idea of differing approaches or standpoints over any issue is completely subdued. So quarreling will reduce as the severity of the mental challenge increases. Kaminsky and Dewey (2001) also depicted that siblings of children with disabilities generally report less conflicts in their relationship than do comparison siblings. Rivalry in sibling relationship is often demonstrated vide feelings of animosity, hostility and antagonism between siblings. A number of factors contribute to siblings’ rivalries like parental attention, personal possessions, and so on. To be parent’s “best child” is the major issue which often leads to bickering among siblings. Stoneman et al. (1987) reported

that parents of children with disabilities spent as much time interacting with the non-disabled siblings as did parents in comparison families. Also, with growing age normal children start understanding their parents' exceptional roles and responsibilities in rearing mentally challenged siblings balancing the needs of their normal as well as special child without either of them feeling neglected. Additionally, non-disabled siblings often do not reciprocate their siblings' antagonistic actions (Stoneman et al. 1989). Eisenberg et al. (1998) found adolescents with a sibling with an ID to report less rivalry in the relationship than comparison siblings on the SRQ.

CONCLUSION

Higher the severity of mental challenge significantly higher was warmth/closeness and relative status/power and significantly less was conflict and rivalry between mentally challenged children and their normal siblings. Severely mentally challenged children witnessed high overall warmth/closeness and relative status/power (from their normal siblings) whereas, low conflict and rivalry in their sibling relationship with normal siblings followed by moderately mentally challenged children and lastly mildly mentally challenged children. Admiration by sibling; nurturance and dominance of sibling did not vary with their degree of mental challenge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a need for counseling of siblings of the mentally challenged children for developing in them empathy, appreciation for differences and understanding of the needs of their challenged sibling.
2. The parents need to attend support programs run to enhance family integration in such stress situations.

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