

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Adolescent Siblings of Individuals With and Without Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: Self-Reported Empathy and Feelings About Their Brothers and Sisters

Shivers, C. M., & Dykens, E. M. (2017). Adolescent siblings of individuals with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities: Self-reported empathy and feelings about their brothers and sisters *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 122(1), 62-77. doi:10.1352/1944-7558-122.1.62

SUMMARY: Siblings of adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities may have different levels of empathy and feelings toward their sibling than adolescents with typically developing siblings. Siblings of adolescents with and without disabilities were compared on levels of empathy and feelings towards their sibling. Siblings of adolescents with a disability did not report different levels of empathy, but did report increased levels of anxiety toward the sibling with a disability.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Empathy levels were not significantly different between sibling groups.
- Siblings of adolescents with a disability reported higher levels of anxiety toward their sibling than siblings of adolescents without disabilities.
- Parents of adolescents with disabilities reported greater stress related to the child, higher cost of raising the child, and more perceived impact of the child on the sibling.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Examine ways of creating more positive relationships between military children with special needs and their siblings
- Facilitate support groups for military families of children with special needs to increase kinship among those families

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide information to military parents regarding potential anxiety or negative feelings a child may have toward the sibling with special needs, and strategies for improving the sibling relationship
- Offer programs to help military parents cope with the potential increased stress associated with raising a child with special needs

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education for professionals on the possible effects of having a child with special needs on military families
- Encourage the development of programs that address the challenges faced by military families that have a child with special needs

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Families with two children were recruited from organizations that provide services to families and children with disabilities. The child with a disability was the target child in the disability group and the parent selected the target child in the control group.
- Parents completed measures of parental optimism and measures related to the target child's behavior, functional abilities, and impact on the family. Siblings completed measures of empathy and feelings toward the target child.
- Parent measures of optimism and the target child's behavior, functioning, and perceived impact were used to examine differences in sibling empathy levels and feelings toward the target child.

PARTICIPANTS

- Of the 97 families recruited, 49 included a child with a disability (M age =13.9 years; SD=3.42) and 48 did not have a child with a disability (M age=14 years; SD=3).
- Sibling average ages were 14.43 years in the child with a disability group and an average of 14.27 years (SD=2.01) in the control group. There were significantly more male children in the disability group (67%), but otherwise gender between child and sibling groups was not significantly different.
- The majority of responding parents were White (85%) and female (96%); the mean parent age was 44.48 years (SD=6.06).

LIMITATIONS

- Over 6,500 organizations were contacted for potential participants, but only 97 families were recruited. Therefore, the results may not generalize to other families.
- The diagnosis of a disability was not independently verified by the researchers. It is possible some target children in the disability group did not have a formal disability.
- Parents in the control group picked the target child; thus, the choice of target child may be unintentionally biased for this group.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the impact of having a sibling with a disability in families with more than two children
- Determine the effect of having a sibling with a disability on families with younger children
- Assess children's feelings toward a sibling with special needs using more representative samples

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>