

# A Study of the Relationships and Acknowledgement of Non-Disabled Children with Disabled Siblings

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated the relationships of healthy children with their handicap siblings and analyzed their acceptance of the siblings. The study was conducted in 16 different special education and rehabilitation centers in Ankara. Two hundred twenty eight healthy children between the ages of 10 to 17 years voluntarily participated in the investigation. All participating children had siblings diagnosed with one of the six disabilities: Learning disability (LD), mental retardation (MR), cerebral palsy (CP), mental- motor retardation (MMR), Down syndrome (DS), or autism (A). The attitudes of the healthy children towards their handicap siblings (EKYTO) and towards other handicap people (EBYTO) were studied. Results show that healthy children display positive attitudes towards their own handicap siblings whereas less positive attitudes towards other handicapped people. The investigation takes into consideration diagnosis and degree of the handicap. In general, it is observed that the healthy children's attitudes towards their handicap sibling are clearly changing according to diagnosis and level of handicap whereas the same factors do not make any difference in terms of attitudes towards other handicapped people.

## **Key Words**

Sibling Relations, Relations with Handicap Sibling, Attitudes Tended to Handicap Child.

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Human beings seek out social support from birth. In order to be able to feel physically and psychologically healthy, people need friends on whom they can trust and siblings are the best way of meeting this need (Gotting, 1986:704).

The family is a basic social entity comprised of individuals who are related to each other through blood relation, marriage, and other legal means, and who generally live in the same household, where all social, psychological, and economic needs of these individuals are met, and their adaptation to and participation in society is ensured through mutual interaction. The family structure has established behavioral patterns resulting from repeated behavioral patterns within the family, which ensures interaction of the family members as well as establishing rules for this type of interaction. The family system functions through sub-systems established by the individuals. One of the major sub-systems is the sibling sub-system (Atasoy, 2002:29). Compared to other social relations, the relationship between siblings is a clear way to hold on to one of the most important periods of life through physical and emotional links. Although siblings have a lifelong relationship, they use the power resulting from the link they have created in others' social relations as well (Powell & Ogle, 1985; Buhrmester & Furman, 1990:1388; Girli, 1995:11).

Studies on the nature of sibling relations are generally in three categories: (i) the developmental changes of younger siblings, (ii) sibling relations during late childhood, and (iii) sibling relations during adolescence (Dunn & McGuire, 1992:69). Dunn and McGuire (1992) defined sibling relations as an emotion-based special relationship, which starts developing since birth, and having a separate and stronger structure than the other relationships.

It might be more supportive for older children to play advanced imaginary games with their siblings in terms of emotional and cognitive development. It is a very common view that the siblings will instinctively treat each other in a more protective and caring way (Dunn, 1983:797; Yavuzer, 1998:166-167; Primoğlu, 1996:21).

Having a disabled child in a family will definitely have an impact, whether positive or negative, on the structure and functionality of the family system, as well as the relationship of the family members with each other and the roles they play within the family. Problems among siblings

may be caused by perceived qualifications of the “superiority” or “inferiority” of one of them. A non-disabled child having superior qualifications compared to his/her disabled sibling may exhibit “excluding” or “protective” behaviors towards the disabled sibling (İçöz, 2001:2; Dunn, 1988:124).

Children with a disabled sibling, while trying to figure out the difference their sibling has, may feel that they hold more responsibility than their peers having non-disabled siblings; additionally, they may feel that they are neglected by their parents (Şenel, 1995:33). According to Seligman (1983), the attitude of the family towards a disabled child affects the adaptation problems of the non-disabled child, responsibilities s/he carries for her/his disabled sibling’s care, as well as the difficulty in understanding what it is like to be disabled.

Non-disabled children are affected by their disabled siblings in the same way their parents are, and they exhibit similar emotional stages. Having a disabled sibling might harm the social and emotional processes of a child, and let them experience various negative feelings in their emotional reactions such as anger, hostility, jealousy, guilt, anxiety and fear, shame, distress and rejection (İçöz, 2001:21).

For a non-disabled child to accept and learn how to live with a disabled sibling, there are many different factors having different impact levels other than this natural process of acceptance and learning. Parents’ acknowledging attitude, the family structure, seniority of age, the gender of the siblings and the personality of the children are among the primary factors in determining the harmony, interaction and relations of the siblings, in connection with the type and degree of disability that the disabled sibling has. The higher the level of these factors, the more positive the non-disabled child’s acknowledgement of having a disabled sibling and the relationship with them will be. The purpose of this study is to explore and determine the relationship between the acknowledgement of a disabled child by a non-disabled sibling and their sibling relations, within the concept of disabled sibling relations, the importance of which has been increasingly accepted recently.

## **Purpose**

A normal non-disabled child with a disabled sibling will surely be a part of this situation; thus, it is clear that they will experience problems both

in and out of the family, and will need assistance. Both the school and the family, playing an important role in the child's development, should take necessary steps to enable the child to adapt him to this situation in the most appropriate way, to acknowledge the status of his sibling, and to establish a positive network of relationships. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore and determine the relationship between the acknowledgement of a disabled child by a non-disabled sibling and the sibling relations, within the concept of disabled sibling relations.

## Method

### Research Model

This research is a descriptive study conducted using the survey model in order to explore the relations of 10-17 year old-age-group children within the with their disabled sibling and the acknowledgement of their siblings' disability.

### Population and Sample

The population of this study is normally developing siblings of disabled children attending special education centers affiliated with the Social Services and Child Protection Organization in the provincial centre of Ankara in the 2004–2005 academic year. Therefore, the sample of the study is normally developing siblings of those children living in the provincial centre of Ankara and having Learning Disability (LD), Mental Retardation (MR), Mental Motor Retardation (MMR), Autism (A), Down Syndrome (DS) or Cerebral Palsy (CP). The random sampling method is used for the selection of the sample for the study. In the sample selection, the acceptable error level is 0.065% and the reliability level is 95%. In terms of having the measured characteristics, it is accepted that the ratio of the sample within the population is approximately 50%; because of this acceptance, enlarging the variance, ensures the establishment of the largest sample. Using these parameters, the sample size is calculated for the number of disabled children to be selected from the special education and rehabilitation centers ( $n_0=227$ ). Consequently, it is determined that the representativeness of the randomly selected group of disabled children will have a reliability of 95%. Siblings of the disabled children are contacted through those children receiving special education in the special education and rehabilitation centers of the Social Services and Child Protection Organization (SHCEK) of the Tur-

kish Prime Ministry. The siblings of 228 disabled children are included in this study on a voluntary basis. Of these siblings in the 10-17 years-old group, 134 are girls and 94 are boys. All of them are non-disabled children exhibiting normal developmental characteristics. Data for this study were collected from the siblings of disabled children attending to 16 special education and rehabilitation centers.

## **Measures**

Three forms are used to collect the data for this study. The Attitudes towards Disabled Sibling (ATDS) Questionnaire was completed by the non-disabled siblings in order to explore their relationship with the disabled sibling. The Attitudes towards Disabled Person (ATDP) Questionnaire was also completed by the non-disabled sibling to explore their acknowledgement of the disability situation. The Personal Data Form was developed to obtain more detailed information about the disabled and non-disabled siblings. Data about the disabled children were received from their files in the education centers, as well as from their mothers where necessary.

### **The Attitudes towards Disabled Sibling (ATDS) Questionnaire**

This questionnaire is developed by Küçükler (1997) and includes 28 items pointing to positive or negative attitudes through four options, namely “completely agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “completely disagree”.

### **The Attitudes towards Disabled Person (ATDP) Questionnaire**

This questionnaire is developed by Özyürek (2000) and is a measurement scale consisting of 20 items with up to six reaction categories ranging from “completely agree” to “completely disagree”.

## **Procedure**

All responses received for the attitude questionnaires and the data form were coded and computerized. SPSS statistical software was used for making statistical calculations.

## Results and Discussion

This section shows the demographic information about the disabled children and their non-disabled siblings within the scope of the study, as well as the findings obtained, in line with this information, as a result of the examination of the relationship between sibling relations of these children and acceptance of the disabled children by their siblings.

Of the participants of this study, 41.2 % are males and 58.8 % are females. Of the participant children, 44.7 % are in the 10-13 year old group and 52.3 % are in the 14-17 year old group. A review of the age difference between non-disabled children and their disabled siblings shows that in 35.5 % of cases, there is a three years or less age difference, whereas in 64.5 % of the cases the age difference is four years or more. Of the participant children, 81.6 % are older and 18.4 % are younger than their disabled sibling. 55.7% of the participant children were attending primary education whereas 44.3 % were attending high schools at the time of this study.

An examination of the correlation between the ATDS and ATDP scores of the children with disabled siblings indicates a significant negative correlation between the general attitude scores, which means a decrease in the ATDP scores while there is an increase in the ATDS. This shows that while the relationship of the non-disabled children with their disabled siblings is positive, this positivity decreases when their acceptance and acknowledgement of their disabled siblings is concerned. This negative correlation between the sibling relations and acceptance is mainly caused by the fact that the child does not see his sibling's disability as a barrier in the secure, safe, and warm family environment. Here, the blood relation is at the foreground. As a result, acceptance is under the influence of behaviors and viewpoints of the social environment, whereas sibling relations develop in a positive manner under the family roof. Girli's study (1995) also indicates that acceptance attitude of normal (non-disabled) children having a disabled sibling is more positive than those not having a disabled sibling.

The average score of those children having a sibling with Learning Disability is the highest, while one of those with Autistic siblings is the lowest. The reason for this is considered to be the differences between the two disabilities which lead to the level of influence that this disability diagnosis puts on the siblings.

A sibling diagnosed with Learning Disability has similar characteristics to a non-disabled child, which makes their acceptance easier. However, having a sibling diagnosed with Autism is difficult for a child, as well as for the family, to understand and accept since with Autism, one has to deal with the unexpected at all times.

Bagenholm and Gillberg's (1991) comparison of siblings of children with Mental Disability, Autism and normal development indicates that children with Autistic siblings express more negative views about sibling relations, more of loneliness, and more concerns about their sibling's future (cted in Küçüker, 1997:45).

Erden and Akçakın (2001) have revealed that the siblings of Autistic children points out more problems than those of siblings of healthy children. Kowalski's (1980) study has shown that the degree of disability is not significant in the concept of self and attitudes of normal siblings, yet the type of disability is.

Disability diagnosis of the sibling plays an important role in the relationship to be formed with their non-disabled sibling. The more visible and easily understandable the disability is, the more intense will be the relationship between two siblings. This intense relationship and interaction will grow more and more contributing to the lives of both children.

Girli (1995) has mentioned that non-visibility of the disability (especially Autism) makes it difficult for the siblings of disabled children to cope with the challenge. Girli (1995) has also emphasized that the disabilities that are "difficult to see" create more stress compared to those that are easier to see and understand.

Although the degree of disability is an important element in the relationship of the child with a disabled sibling, the higher the degree of disability, the less positive the relationship is. The reason for this correlation can be explained as follows: The child will start to witness his disabled sibling's inabilities both within the family and in society, as well as society's perspective and approach to them. Thus, it will be more difficult and challenging for the non-disabled child to accept his sibling as a disabled person and adapt himself accordingly in parallel to the degree of the disability, which will change the quality of the relations that the siblings have.

Girli's (1995) study has revealed that there is no difference for those children having "trainable" disabled siblings in accepting and acknow-

ledging their sibling's disability. 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.

Begun (1989) has examined the quality aspect of the relationship between children with medium and/or advanced level development disorder and their siblings. As a result of this study, Begun (1989) has found that relationship patterns vary according to the degree of disability in superiority, care, admiration, or such areas. The findings of the study have also revealed the existence of less competitive and less sincere relations between the siblings.

A review of the relationship between the ATDS and ATDP scores of those children having a disabled sibling shows that there is a significant negative relationship between general attitude scores. Correlation between the ATDS and ATDP scores is  $r = -0.16$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). The reason for the negative relationship between sibling relations and children's acceptance of their sibling's disability is that the child does not see his sibling's disability as a barrier in his secure, safe, and warm family environment where the blood relation is at the foreground. As a result, acceptance is under the influence of behaviors and viewpoints of the social environment, whereas sibling relations develop in a positive manner under the family roof. Girli's study (1995) also indicates that acceptance attitude of non-disabled children having a disabled sibling is more positive than those not having a disabled sibling. A review of the correlation between the ATDS and ATDP scores based on disability diagnoses indicates that all observed correlation coefficients are negative and this correlation is not statistically significant.

The average ATDS score of the children based on the disability diagnosis of their disabled sibling is  $\bar{x} = 90.34$ , whereas their average ATDP score is  $\bar{x} = 64.85$ . An examination of the average ATDS and ATDP scores of the children with disabled siblings according to the diagnostic groups shows that the average score for the children having a sibling diagnosed with Learning Disability is the highest with  $\bar{x} = 99.85$ , whereas the average score for the children having a sibling diagnosed with Autism is the lowest with  $\bar{x} = 75.46$ .

Bagenholm and Gillberg's (1991) comparison of siblings of children with Mental Disability, Autism, and normal development indicates that



children with Autistic siblings expressed more negative views about sibling relations, more of loneliness, and more concerns about their sibling's future (cted in Küçükler, 1997:45). Erden and Akçakın's (2001) study on the patterns of behavioral problems and personal characteristics of the siblings of Autistic children revealed that siblings of Autistic children points out more problems than those of siblings of healthy children.

Kowalski's (1980) work has examined the attitudes of non-disabled siblings and their relation with the type and degree of disability. In this study, Kowalski (1980) compared 12-16 years old non-disabled siblings of those children with Mental Disability, Hearing Disability, Learning Disability and Behavioral Problems. The study has concluded that the degree of disability is not significant in attitudes and the concept of self in the non-disabled siblings, while the type of disability plays an important role in this regard.

No significant difference was observed among the average ATDP scores according to disability diagnosis variable ( $p > .05$ ). In line with these results, it has been observed that the disability diagnosis of the sibling makes a difference in the establishment of a relationship between two siblings; however, the diagnosis does not affect the acceptance and acknowledgement of the disabled sibling by the non-disabled child. An overall review of the difference among the diagnoses shows that the biggest difference is between Learning Disability and Autism diagnoses, whereas the smallest difference is between Learning Disability and Mental Retardation. Disability diagnosis of the sibling plays a crucial role in non-disabled child's establishment of a relationship with their disabled sibling. Girli (1995) has mentioned that non-visibility of the disability (especially Autism) makes it difficult for the siblings the disabled children to cope with the challenge. Girli (1995) has also emphasized that the disabilities that are "difficult to see" create more stress compared to those that are easier to see and understand.

According to the results of one-way analysis of variance, it has been observed that the degree of the disability makes a significant difference in the arithmetic mean of the ATDS scores of those children having disabled sibling ( $F(2, 225; 0.1) = 9.273, p < .01$ ). In line with the research findings, although the degree of disability is a key element in the relationship between the non-disabled child and his disabled sibling, the higher the degree of disability, the less positive the relationship is of the non-disabled child with his disabled sibling.

Kowalski's (1980) work has examined the attitudes of non-disabled siblings and their relation with the type and degree of disability. In this study, Kowalski (1980) compared 12-16 years old non-disabled siblings of those children with Mental Disability, Hearing Disability, Learning Disability and Behavioral Problems. The study has concluded that the degree of disability is not significant in attitudes of the non-disabled siblings, while the type of disability plays an important role in this regard. The researcher has explained that this is mainly caused by the negative proportion of the degree of disability with the independent behaving skills.

A significant difference was observed among the rank-weight mean of the ADTS scores of those children having siblings with slight and/or medium disability as far as the Learning Disabilities diagnosis group is concerned ( $\bar{x} = 7.091, p < .01$ ). In Turkey, there are few studies conducted towards non-disabled siblings of children with various types and degrees of disabilities. Emphasis should be given to training programs to determine how non-disabled siblings of those children with various types and degrees of disabilities are influenced by this situation, as well as the level and extent of this impact.

In addition, other studies may be conducted to explore sibling relations between non-disabled and disabled siblings with no special education, as well as non-disabled siblings' acceptance of their siblings' situation, which will subsequently be compared to the outcomes of the aforementioned programs.

Another way to strengthen the sibling relations of those disabled children with no opportunity to receive training in a special education and rehabilitation center may be to establish mobile education centers to provide training to those children, their siblings and their families. Sibling relations and non-disabled children's acceptance of their disabled siblings may be examined in more detail through studies with larger samples or using longitudinal methods. Focusing on the development areas of the children may also lead to measure the influence level (positive or negative) at cognitive, language, social and emotional areas of development. Another relevant study will be to explore the potential impact of the existence of a disabled sibling on the relationship between the non-disabled siblings in the family.

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