Sibling Issues in Therapy
Also by Avidan Milevsky

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENTS FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

WILL I EVER BE HAPPY AGAIN: A Jewish Approach to Helping Children Deal with the Loss of a Loved One

THE TRANSITORY NATURE OF PARENT, SIBLING, AND ROMANTIC PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE: Predictors and Outcomes
Sibling Issues in Therapy
Research and Practice with Children, Adolescents and Adults

Avidan Milevsky
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, USA
Wellspring Counseling, Towson, MD, USA
To my wife Ilana...
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We were sitting in the living room illuminated by a flickering memorial candle struggling to stay alive. The funeral-home director insisted that the candle would last for seven days. On a short wooden bench to my right were my two older brothers, Moshe and Yirmiya. My younger brother, Yonatan, was on a bench to my left. My kid sister, Devorah, aged seven, was in the other room with our mother. Her long-term plan was world travel, not widowhood at 46. Twenty-four hours prior we had spent a dreary afternoon burying our father. After a negotiation that lasted close to five years, he valiantly acquiesced to the wishes of the Angel of Death. He finally lost an argument.

We were in the midst of day two of the week-long mourning period known in our faith as the “week of Shiva.” Being a well-regarded Talmudic scholar, our father gained many followers over the years, all of whom wanted to pay their last respects to the family of their revered rabbi.

Our house was inundated with people from around the globe offering their condolences to a family whose foundation had just been upended. On that day, as the visitors came and went, my brothers and I inconspicuously found our way to the backyard and began to kick around a soccer ball. Being from Uruguay, our father instilled in all of us a love for the game. His favorite childhood memory was when the Uruguayan national team beat Brazil in the 1950 World Cup final. Playing our father’s game on that day seemed right. We found the outing uplifting and decided to take many such soccer breaks over the upcoming, dreadful few days.

Although many visitors coming to the house of mourning found it peculiar to see the sons of the great sage playing soccer outside instead of sitting in the living room lamenting, we continued with our newfound tradition throughout the week. In the backyard that week was the finest soccer ever played.

While many would attribute the healing power of those outings to the “beautiful game,” I suggest that what was truly reassuring as we chased down the ball was something far greater than a game. What offered a sense of well-being during those games was the
sibling bond. Although our world was turned upside down, those soccer games reminded us that our relationship with each other had not changed. Regardless of the turmoil in our midst, we were still there together offering each other a profound sense of stability and continuity.

Siblings are one of the most important influences in our life. In childhood, they are the context in which we learn about social interactions, conflict resolution, sharing, negotiations, and emotion management, all essential life lessons. In adulthood, siblings can be a profound source of support as we deal with life’s challenges. On the other hand, destructive sibling relationships can make for a miserable childhood and a chaotic adulthood. Knowing how to harness the power of this fascinating relationship can offer a lifelong gift of support, warmth, and affection.

Considering the potency of the sibling bond, sibling issues often, overtly or covertly, permeate the content of psychotherapy. Clinicians working with clients of all types and ages will be well served by having an understanding of the role played by siblings throughout life, what impacts the sibling bond early in life, and how sibling issues impact adulthood well-being. This book offers researchers and clinicians a comprehensive understanding of sibling issues, including how to apply the knowledge in therapeutic interventions.
Acknowledgments

My interest in siblings developed many years ago working under the direction of Dr. Mary Levitt in the doctoral program in developmental psychology at Florida International University. I am grateful for her continued inspiration and support.

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About the Author

Avidan Milevsky is Associate Professor of Developmental Psychology at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania and a psychotherapist at Wellspring Counseling in Towson, MD, where he specializes in sibling issues. He holds a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Florida International University and a B.L.S. in behavioral sciences from Barry University. He is a prior visiting professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

He serves as Director of the Center for Parenting Research at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in lifespan development and assessment. His clinical research has produced over 100 conference presentations and more than 20 papers including publications in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, Social Development, Educational Psychology, the European Journal of Developmental Psychology, Child and Family Studies, and the Journal of Adult Development. He is also a contributor to the Encyclopedia of Adolescence. His four books include Sibling Relationships in Childhood and Adolescence: Predictors and Outcomes and Understanding Adolescents for the Helping Professional.

He has lectured to audiences in the United States, Canada, South America, Europe, and the Middle East on various topics including family issues in therapy, parenting, and sibling relationships. He has been a guest expert on TV, radio, and the media about his work, including stories in the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, the Associated Press, Real Simple, and Allure magazine. Additionally, he is a columnist for Psychology Today and the Huffington Post on family issues.

He is currently consulting for the Pennsylvania State House’s Children and Youth Committee in an effort to introduce legislation that would strengthen sibling visitation rights in family court and recognize the importance of sibling relationships on the emotional and psychological development of children and adolescents.
My brothers I seek…

Genesis, 37:16
Part I

The Foundation: The Role of Siblings in Developmental and Clinical Literature
The Significance of Siblings throughout Life

As the field of mental health matures, a consistent stream of cross-sectional and longitudinal research emanating from developmental and clinical psychology has highlighted distinct correlates between early life experiences and adult functioning. From as early as prenatal development and onward, numerous aspects of an individual’s surroundings provide ingredients that coalesce with biological determinants to produce epigenesis. A long list of significant lifelong human features including physical health, food choices, intelligence, occupational status, political ideology, spirituality, sociability, and psychological well-being has been suggested to be influenced by early childhood environment.

One particularly fertile line of research on environmental influences and development has emphasized the importance of family interactions and atmosphere. Driven by the early theoretical models of Freud, Bowlby, Harlow, and Ainsworth, with their initial limited emphasis on the importance of early maternal interactions, subsequent theoretical and empirical work has offered an array of data highlighting the crucial role played by the entire family system in producing adaptive development in multiple domains (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Levitt, Guacci, & Coffman, 1993; Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1993).

Introduction to siblings

Within this complex web of family connections, one particular relational category with enormous potential for both positive and
negative consequences is the sibling relationship. Based on demographic statistics of Western countries, it is apparent that the large majority of individuals, over 90% in some regions, have a sibling (Cicirelli, 1982). Additionally, in comparison to all other family and extra-familial relationships, the sibling bond is the most long-lasting. Parent and child relationships are cut short by the passing of the preceding generation, spousal relationships only begin later in life and are often short-lived, and friendships are similarly transitory. On the other hand, the sibling bond is often formed early in life and can last a lifetime.

Beyond the prevalence and endurance of the sibling bond, a recent scientific focus in both developmental and clinical literature has begun to unravel the many ways in which brothers and sisters influence our life in magnificent ways. Childhood cognitive and social development, adolescent identity and delinquency, and adulthood well-being, adjustment, and successful aging are but a few examples of significant lifelong outcomes driven by overt or covert sibling forces (Cicirelli, 1980; Downey & Condron, 2004; Kramer & Kowal, 2005; Lewin & Sharp, 2009; Milevsky, 2011; Schulman, 1999). Although still in its infancy, a robust and emerging literature has emphasized the central role played by siblings throughout life.

Unfortunately, the power of this inimitable and complicated family connection has been untapped in clinical settings. Understanding the complexities of this bond and possessing the knowledge of how to unleash its potential in therapy can offer clinicians a powerful tool in their healing arsenal.

The neglected relationship

Regrettably, even with the growing developmental and clinical appreciation of the integral role played by siblings throughout life, multiple sectors of practice have failed to account for the significance of siblings. Among other fields, this neglect can be seen in education, disability and social services, and family law.

Education

Schools disregard the role of siblings in neglecting to devise ways for siblings to assist students with schoolwork. Schools have back-to-school nights for parents but little effort is made to include siblings in
these evenings. These oversights are particularly startling considering the growing research on the impact siblings have on cognitive and educational domains (Downey & Condron, 2004; Smith, 1993).

Furthermore, when schools assess peer violence they often neglect the context of the sibling relationship as an antecedent of the aggression. Numerous studies have shown that childhood aggression is linked with sibling relational dynamics (Bank, Burraston, & Snyder, 2004; Downey & Condron, 2004). Schools can be served by integrating siblings into their broader efforts at minimizing peer victimization (Dusenbury & Falco, 1997).

Lastly, a lack of sibling sensitivity and a misunderstanding of sibling de-identification processes may lead schools to judge younger siblings based on expectations born from school experiences with older siblings (Seaver, 1973). Understanding sibling issues can help schools offer a non-constricting environment for all children.

Disability and social services

A combination of societal and legislative changes has made the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families more comfortable relative to the experiences of similar families throughout history. From education to industry, the accommodations and sensitivity offered to individuals with disabilities have created a less restrictive and more accessible environment. Families of individuals with disabilities have also gained attention and now have an array of services provided for their education and support. However, disability services often lag when it comes to attending to the unique issues faced by siblings of those with disabilities. Siblings often feel neglected by parents and service providers and report being in the dark about what is happening with their siblings (Abrams, 2009; Safer, 2002).

Social services offered for other problems, such as antisocial behavior and criminality, similarly fail to approach conceptualization and intervention using a broader sibling-based orientation. Long-term change resulting from intervention is less likely to succeed when the intervention targets only one sibling within a family. Intervention programs would be served by considering the role siblings play within the maladjusted system. Studies have shown that siblings influence each other’s behavioral patterns in profound ways. For example, Klein, Alexander, and Parsons (1977) found that an intervention targeting children’s antisocial behavior had an indirect effect on the
criminality of their siblings even when the siblings did not participate in the intervention program. Similar findings were reported on interventions for antisocial behaviors in pre-school children (Brotman, Dawson-McClure, Gouley, McGuire, Burraston, & Bank, 2005). Siblings have a unique potential for influencing each other and ignoring this powerful force of change risks minimizing the likelihood that interventions will result in meaningful change.

**Family law**

Family law is an additional sector that unfortunately neglects the vital role played by siblings over the lifespan. Although varied by country, similar patterns can be found in international jurisprudence when it comes to this issue. For example, United States family law mainly focuses on two relationships: the bond between spouses and the bond between parent and child. The limited focus on marriage and parenthood in United States family law comes at the expense of considering how the law should regulate and protect other family relationships including the sibling bond.

This neglect can be seen in multiple areas. First, undocumented immigrants living in the United States and raising citizen children may be able to avoid deportation. This is not the case if the connection is through any other relationship, including siblinghood. Furthermore, employees may have the right to unpaid leave to care for an ill spouse, child, or parent. This is not the case when caring for any other family member, including siblings.

More significantly, and impacting families in more direct ways, United States family law governing sibling visitation in cases of family dissolution seldom considers the importance of the sibling bond. Siblings are often separated at adoption or placed separately after the divorce or death of their parents with no right to communicate. For example, only “reasonable effort” needs to be made to place siblings together when the children are up for adoption together. When separately placed siblings seek post-adoption contact and the adoptive parent objects, it may be unconstitutional to force contact under the Supreme Court’s opinion in *Troxel v. Granville* (Hasday, 2012). In this case, the court held that a Washington State statute authorizing courts to “order visitation rights for any person when visitation may serve the best interest of the child” was “an unconstitutional infringement on [the mother’s] fundamental right
to make decisions concerning the care, custody, and control of her two daughters.”

Similarly, in cases when split custody is decided post-divorce or when siblings are placed in different homes after parental death, the legal system frequently provides no help for siblings seeking visitation rights. This situation stands in stark contrast to United States family law relating to grandparents. In the United States, every state has some form of grandparent visitation law. Post-divorce, grandparents can petition the court for visitation rights with their grandchildren even when the custodial parent objects. This imbalanced representation is probably driven more by lobbying efforts and political sway of older Americans and less by what is in the best interests of children (Hasday, 2012). In fact, the United States Congress designated 1995 as the “Year of the Grandparent.” Siblings, unfortunately, have limited advocacy and enjoy no such status.

In sum, numerous areas of practice with direct and indirect impacts on individuals and families have neglected the essential role played by siblings in the socialization of children and adolescents and in the offering of vital support functions throughout life. Hopefully, the emerging focus in developmental and clinical literature on siblings and the consistent stream of findings supporting the indispensable role played by siblings during all ages will influence educators, service providers, and policymakers to begin accounting for the unrepeable position occupied by siblings during the course of life.

**Siblings in clinical practice**

As noted, the most long-lasting and enduring relationship an individual can develop is with a sibling. Considering the closeness in age between siblings and the fact that often siblings are born into a family early in the life of children, siblings can bond for a lifetime (Cicirelli, 1980, 1982). Researchers are beginning to appreciate the sibling link and its important role in psychological well-being throughout life. Studies are now showing that individuals with close sibling relationships are more emotionally mature, are happier, have enhanced psychological well-being, and have closer friendships than those without warm sibling relationships (Downey & Condron, 2004; Dunn, Brown, & Maguire, 1995; Dunn, Brown, Slomkowski, Telsa, & Youngblade, 1991; Kramer & Kowal, 2005; Milevsky, 2011;