

CHAPTER ONE

Sibling Relationships

Sibling relationships are a unique form of human relationships. They are often the most enduring and ongoing relationships of an individual's lifetime, although siblings may alternate between main characters and supporting cast in each others lives across time (Bank & Kahn, 1982). The sibling relationship is unique in its peerlike characteristics/relative egalitarianism and shared history/experiences (Cicerelli, 1995; Goetting, 1986), in addition to its duration, intimate childhood contact, and ascribed nature (Cicerelli, 1995). One's sibling may be an important source of support, comfort and companionship throughout the lifespan (Goetting, 1986). As widespread societal changes including increased divorce rates, greater geographic mobility and loosened extended family ties continue to affect the family, sibling relationships may become even more salient, providing an important anchor in a fast-paced and constantly changing world (Bank & Kahn, 1982).

Sibling Influence

The sibling relationship may have important consequences for development. According to Cicerelli (1995), siblings impact each other through shared socialization experiences, cooperative ventures, and experiences of conflict. Siblings may also be instrumental in personality formation (Bank & Kahn, 1982). Adolescents have identified siblings as sources of emotional support (Cicerelli, 1980) and sources of advice (Seginer, 1992; Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997). Older siblings also appear to serve as models for both health risk behaviors (D'Amico & Fromme, 1997) and for sexual attitudes and behavior (East, 1996; Rodgers & Rowe, 1988). Research suggests that siblings may also support and encourage cognitive development (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993). Siblings appear to wield influence in a variety of developmental arenas.

Observational Studies

Because the sibling relationship appears to be an important one, researchers have endeavored to understand the processes through which siblings influence each other. In pursuit of this goal, many sibling studies have used observational techniques which yielded valuable information regarding sibling interaction. For instance, total interaction and verbal exchanges/conversation between siblings both appear to increase through the preschool and elementary years (Abramovitch, Corter, Pepler, & Stanhope, 1986; Brown & Dunn, 1992), perhaps as a function of increasing social understanding and skill. Analysis of conversational data between child and mother versus child and sibling also suggests that mothers and siblings are qualitatively different conversational partners. Whereas mothers rarely refer to their own feelings, focusing instead on the child's, siblings rarely refer to the child's feelings, focusing instead on their own (Brown & Dunn, 1992). It appears that sibling interaction may place greater demands on children.

Observational research also suggests that siblings may assume different roles in their relationships with each other. Older siblings tend to assume teacher, manager, and helper roles, whereas younger siblings assume observer, helpee, learner, and managee roles (Brody, Stoneman, MacKinnon, & MacKinnon, 1985). Older siblings also tend to be both more agonistic and prosocial and more dominant (Abramovitch et al., 1986; Pepler, Abramovitch, & Corter, 1981). Younger siblings are more likely to imitate and submit to the demands of older siblings (Abramovitch et al., 1986; Pepler et al., 1981). As children enter middle childhood, however, it appears that the relationship becomes increasingly egalitarian, with the younger sibling gaining in power and status and decreasing in imitation and the older engaging in less teaching and instruction (Vandell, Minnet, & Santrock, 1987).

Findings from observational studies, however, offer little insight into the broader dimensions of the relationship or the relationship from the participant's perspectives. Nearly twenty years ago, Victor Cicerelli (1980), noting the failure of researchers to capture perceptions of siblings themselves, suggested that the perceptions and feelings of siblings may play a fundamental role in determining relationship quality and sibling influence on development. His observation coincides with Robert Hinde's (1979) declaration that, because relationships are composed of affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects, observations of overt behavior do not in themselves constitute a comprehensive account of a relationship. An exclusive focus on behavioral aspects, then, yields only a fractional account of relationships between siblings.

Studies of Sibling Perceptions

Since 1980, a handful of researchers have addressed the concerns raised by observational research by studying the perceptions of siblings themselves. Such research has yielded valuable insight into the relationship, particularly with regard to changes over time. According to adult siblings, perceived closeness fluctuates over time, primarily because during young and middle adulthood one's attention turns from the family of origin to the family of procreation (Ross & Milgram, 1982). Many adults report adolescence as a time when they grew closer (Ross & Milgram, 1982), although a study by Buhrmester and Furman (1990) found that adolescents report less companionship and intimacy with siblings than do younger children. College students, however, report generally positive relationships with siblings (Newman, 1991) and college women report siblings are a source of emotional support preferable to fathers and equal to mothers (Cicerelli, 1980). Perceived closeness appears to originate in shared childhood experiences while living in the same house; interviews with adults indicate that closeness rarely originates in adulthood (Gold, 1989; Ross & Milgram, 1982). Elderly siblings report a decrease in resentment and contact and an increase in acceptance over time (Gold, 1989).

Studies focusing on sibling perceptions have also yielded information regarding gender differences. Girls in late adolescence report receiving more advice, being more influenced by their siblings, and being more satisfied with sibling support than their male counterparts (Tucker et al., 1997). Girls with sisters reported receiving the most advice (Tucker et al., 1997), in addition to greater intimacy, warmth, and confiding (Dunn, Slomokowski, & Beardsall, 1994) than did brother pairs or mixed-pairs. College women reported writing and discussing problems with siblings more than college men (Newman, 1991). In her study of adult siblings, Sandmaier (1994) reported considerable gender differences. Sisters reported greater emotional sharing and more intense experiences of connections than did brothers. Sisters were also more likely to talk through their issues and invest more energy in “tending the bond” (Sandmaier, 1994, p. 91).

Although these studies have contributed valuable information regarding perceptions of the sibling relationship, they also share a common limitation: all considered only one member of the sibling dyad. Results of both observational and perception studies suggest that siblings may experience and perceive the relationship differently (e.g., Tucker et al., 1997). According to Hinde (1979), the “way in which each partner in a relationship sees the other is important in a very fundamental way” (p. 119). Interviewing only one member of the dyad fails to capture relational dynamics or to give a complete view of the relationship as experienced by both participants. Cicerelli (1995) points out that interviewing both members of a sibling dyad allows the researcher to check for congruence of perceptions.

Most of these studies have also utilized quantitative methodology (see Ross & Milgram, 1982; Sandmaier, 1994, and Seginer, 1992 for exceptions). Although use of such methodology has contributed to the growing body of research on siblings, it may not capture fully the relationship’s complexities and subtle nuances. When participants must choose from pre-worded surveys (e.g., Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; Newman, 1991; Tucker et al., 1997), a complex relationship may be flattened and over-simplified as the respondents make their experience “fit” a questionnaire rather than being free to frame their responses in personally meaningful ways. The full meaning of the relationship as experienced by siblings remains elusive.

However, a clear implication emerges from sibling research regardless of methodological approach: Siblings are important in children’s lives from the children’s perspective. The relationship is important not only from the researcher’s point of view (e.g., Bank & Kahn, 1982), in terms of influence and developmental consequences, but also from the siblings view, in terms of relationship qualities such as support (Cicerelli, 1980), advice (Seginer, 1994) and conflict (Rafaelli, 1992).

In recognition of the importance of sibling relationships, researchers in the past few decades have focused increased attention on siblings. Once a neglected area in family research (Bedford, 1989), siblings are now being approached from a variety of angles. According to Hetherington (1994), there are currently four primary areas of sibling research in psychology and family studies: The relationship’s developmental course over the lifespan, nonshared environment and individual differences between siblings, developmental consequences of sibling relationships, and the impact of sibling relationships on other relationships. Within the realm of the first area focusing on the

relationship itself, a number of constructs relevant to siblings have been identified, including equity, maturity, loyalty, and individuality (Handel, 1986), conflict (Rafaelli, 1985), closeness and rivalry (Ross & Milgram, 1982), support and protection (Cicerelli, 1980), responsibility (Tisak & Tisak, 1996), and self-disclosure (Howe, Aquan-Assee, & Bukowski, 1995). Although siblings consider self-disclosure a fundamental aspect of their relationship (Howe et al., 1995) it appears to have been overlooked in much of the research. This research will focus on the content and function of self-disclosure in sibling relationships.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure, or the revelation of personal information to another, has long been assumed to be critical in mental health (Jourard, 1971) and important in forming and maintaining relationships (Rotenburg, 1995). Self-disclosure appears to be related to greater marital satisfaction (Hendrick, 1981) and less loneliness (Rotenburg & Whitney, 1992). The family of origin may be an important forum for the learning of appropriate disclosure behaviors, including the rules of reciprocity and social rules regarding when, to whom, and how much to disclose (disclosure flexibility). The content of the disclosure may be descriptive (factual) or evaluative (related to feelings and judgments) (Snell, Miller, & Belk, 1988). Furthermore, disclosure is generally assumed to vary along a depth dimension, ranging from superficial to intimate (Dindia, 1997). Self-disclosure has been deemed a behavior (Berndt & Hanna, 1995; Hendrick, 1981), a personal trait (Rotenburg & Whitney, 1995), a relationship quality (Howe et al., 1995), and a dynamic and interactive process (Dindia, 1997). Each of these is a reasonable way to conceptualize self-disclosure; however, disclosure may most accurately be represented as a process.

The conceptualization of self-disclosure as a process places it within the context of relationships. The causes and effects of self-disclosure are somewhat cyclical, for “self-disclosure transforms the nature of the relationship and the relationship transforms the meaning and consequences of self-disclosure” (Dindia, 1997, p. 415). Thus, self-disclosure is intimately intertwined with relationship. Given this, the study of self-disclosure between strangers provides little insight into the process and mutual influence of disclosure between two people in an ongoing and enduring relationship. Miller (1990) suggests that researchers devise studies that target self-disclosure in particular relationships.

Recent research offers support for the importance of relationship on disclosure behaviors. School children are more candid and more revealing (Dolgin & Minowa, 1997) and are more likely to disagree with friends than with classmates (Berndt & Hanna, 1995), suggesting that “relationship” and the accompanying trust and respect may be instrumental in the development of increasingly intimate disclosures. Miller and Kenny (1986) and Miller (1990) found that among college women disclosure varied according to partner rather than to individual tendency to disclose. Disclosure appears to be a mutual influence process best studied in the context of unique and ongoing relationships that have established elements of trust and respect. Within the context of such relationships, interpersonal and intrapersonal perceptions are more likely to be shared (Miller, 1990);

therefore disclosure and disclosure reciprocity may be unique to particular relationships rather than stable across contexts.

Gender and self disclosure

The popular image of women as more emotionally expressive than men has contributed to an extensive body of research on gender differences in self-disclosure behaviors. It appears that women do, indeed, tend to engage in more self-disclosure than men (Berndt & Hanna, 1995; Buhremester & Prager, 1995; Dolgin & Minnowa, 1997). Adolescent girls also spend more time in intimate disclosure and more time in total disclosure than their male counterparts (Cohn & Strasbourg, 1983). In a study of college undergraduates, Snell, Miller, and Belk (1988) found that women disclosed more overall and were more willing to discuss negatively toned emotions (e.g., fear, shame) than were men. In the same study, women reported an ability to disclose to both sexes, whereas men reported they are more likely to be more revealing to women. Women are also more overtly responsive and supportive when hearing the disclosures of others (Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995). Perhaps the tendency for women to be more active listeners creates a context which encourages others to disclose and may account for the greater willingness of both men and women to talk and discuss more “troubling” topics with them. Overall, these studies suggest that women may be more willing to disclose and may be able to discuss a wider range of topics with a variety of listeners than men.

Self-disclosure over time

A recent meta-analysis of 50 articles found a significant increase in self-disclosures to peers and to same-sex friends across early and middle adolescence, and an accompanying shift toward greater disclosure to friends than parents over time (Buhremester & Prager, 1995). These findings are in accord with Douvan and Adelson’s (1966) assertion that intimacy becomes increasingly important during adolescence as children restructure parent-child relationships and search for identity within the peer context. Buhremester and Prager (1995) suggest that as children age and become increasingly articulate and able to reflect on self, others, and relationships, self-disclosure may provide an opportunity for both connection and individuation. The expression of personal thoughts contributes to relational development by increasing relational intimacy; at the same time, articulation of personal beliefs helps delineate and define the “I” (Buhremester & Prager, 1995). As children enter adolescence, then, self-disclosure may increase in breadth and depth as they restructure old relationships and form new ones in the search for identity.

Self-Disclosure Theory: Social Penetration

Altman and Taylor’s (1973) social penetration framework identifies the gradual increase in breadth and depth of self-disclosure over time as a fundamental component of relationship development. Their framework outlines the gradual process whereby people form, maintain, and dissolve relationships over time. They propose that relationships develop slowly as individuals gradually progress from superficial to intimate disclosures in which they reveal information more central to the “core” of the personality. Social

penetration (relationship formation), then, is a gradual process in which two individuals “meld” as they gradually proceed from superficial to intimate topics and revelations. The process of social penetration includes both overt, observable behaviors and accompanying internal processes such as perceptions, emotions, and cognitions. Social penetration is largely dependent on a shared history which allows for assessment of past interactions and the promise of future interactions.

According to Altman and Taylor (1973), the social penetration process itself includes nonverbal language and use of the physical environment (e.g., personal space, environmental props) in addition to verbal disclosure. The process of social penetration proceeds in an orderly and sequential manner. In the orientation stage, disclosures tend to remain superficial and nonthreatening. There is an accompanying tendency to withhold criticism. Stage two, exploratory affective exchange, is marked by friendly, relaxed communication in outer areas of personality. In the affective exchange stage, the individuals have a history of association and interaction and are more revealing to each other but still exhibit caution in revealing information central to the personality (i.e. beliefs about self-identity, self-worth). This is the stage of close friendship. The final stage of social penetration is stable exchange, which is marked by few miscommunications, high spontaneity, and much communication on verbal, nonverbal, and environmental levels.

Siblings and Self-Disclosure

The sibling relationship may be an ideal context that encourages and supports self-disclosure. According to Howe, Aquin-Assee, and Bukowski (1995), several features of the sibling relationship may encourage self-disclosure between siblings. First, the relationship is marked by both complementary and reciprocal features. The complementary features provide opportunities for support and guidance, whereas reciprocal features promote familiarity and trust. Such trust may be necessary for disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Second, siblings, by virtue of growing up in the same family, also share a common developmental history which often results in shared meanings (a common way of looking at the world)). According to Hinde (1979), the extent to which people share a similar world view affects and is affected by their feelings for each other; these feelings may influence self-disclosure. Finally, siblings constitute a salient part of each other’s social environment; intense, ongoing interaction often results in strong emotional ties and greater comfort in revealing personal information.

Howe et al’s (1995) empirical research supports their assertion that self-disclosure is an important aspect of sibling relationships. In a study of 4th, 5th, and 6th graders, two-thirds of the respondents reported disclosing to their siblings. Their spontaneous (i.e., no prompting) identification of disclosure as an important behavior suggests that children themselves see it as an important feature of their relationships with siblings. Follow-up studies revealed that most siblings self-disclose, although the extent and depth of disclosure varies from dyad to dyad. The highest amounts of self-disclosure occurred when the child’s sibling was a sister rather than a brother. According to Howe et. al. (1995), several important questions regarding sibling self-disclosure remain, including its content, role and function in the relationship. Information regarding the content and role

of sibling self-disclosure and changes in disclosure behaviors over time (for example, during adolescence) may help illuminate differences in relationship quality, sibling influence, and perceived satisfaction with the relationship.

Purpose of the study

The focus of this research is the sibling relationship as a context for self-disclosure. The purpose was to examine, using qualitative methodology that is sensitive to meaning and perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), the content and function of self-disclosure between sister pairs. Interviews allowed respondents considerable latitude in framing their responses and provided information on breadth, depth, and content of self-disclosure in addition to perceptions regarding the importance, role, and consequences/outcomes of disclosure in the relationship. Both members of sister dyads were interviewed to allow a more complete picture of the relationships between siblings to emerge.

Research questions

1. What is the content of disclosures between adolescent sisters?
2. How has disclosure changed over time?
3. What is the process of disclosure between sisters and what factors affect it?
4. What is the role of disclosure in the relationship of sisters during adolescence?
To what extent are the perspectives of two sisters in a dyad congruent?

Scope and delimitations

This study was limited to adolescent sister pairs for several reasons. First, research suggests that women are more likely to disclose personal information and that support and advice is highest between women. The study of self-disclosure between sisters, then, may highlight self-disclosure content and processes between siblings in general. Second, adolescent participants were used because research suggests that during adolescence, siblings may be particularly likely to become confidants. In addition, adolescents were able to provide some perspective on self-disclosure in their relationship and how it, and the relationship itself, have changed over time.

CHAPTER II Methodology

Overview of Research Design

The purpose of this study was to examine self-disclosure in adolescent sister relationships. In-depth interviews were conducted with each member of seven sister dyads in order to obtain perceptions of disclosure and information regarding the disclosure process. Interviews were an appropriate methodological choice given the research goal of examining the nature and meaning of self-disclosure in the relationship from the participant's perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Sample

The sample consisted of 14 participants from 7 adolescent sister pairs. The participants were between the ages of 13 and 18 years, currently living at home in intact two-parent families. Sample recruitment began with the identification of potential participants by my sisters, ages 19 and 31, and by a colleague with two daughters within the target age. Additional participants were identified using the technique of snowball sampling, in which participants provided the names of other families fitting the study's criteria (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). A total of 36 potential participants, 18 pairs, were identified through snowball sampling. Three of these pairs were eliminated because they did not fall within the target age range.

The remaining 15 pairs of potential participants were contacted initially by phone. In most cases, the families had been previously contacted by the referring family. I requested to speak with either of the sisters. I identified myself, named the referring party, and explained the study. I then asked if they would be interested in participating. Of the 15 pairs of potential participants, 7 agreed to participate. Of the remaining 8, four could not be reached via telephone and four declined to participate, citing lack of interest or time.

Four of the seven pairs that comprised the sample lived in central Maryland and the remaining three lived in Blacksburg, Virginia. All were Caucasian and were from middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds with professional parents.

Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining verbal consent to participate in the study, interviews were scheduled at the participants homes. Upon my arrival at each house, I spoke briefly with each mother, explaining the study. I gave each mother the informed consent form (see Appendix A), which I asked them to read and sign, and I answered any questions they had. After obtaining parental consent, I explained that I needed to talk with each girl individually, preferably in an isolated room so that we could not be overheard. All of the families accommodated this request.

My interviews with participants began with my briefly reiterating the purpose of this study. I then asked each to read and sign the informed consent for participants form (see Appendix B) and entertained questions before beginning the interview. Questions

followed the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C). They were open-ended questions which allowed the participants considerable latitude in framing their responses in personally meaningful ways. Prompts and follow-up questions were used as necessary to expand on and clarify participant's remarks. The interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and were audiotaped, with permission of participants.

Analysis

Tapes were transcribed following the interviews of each sister pair. Although formal analysis occurred after data collection, preliminary analysis occurred concurrently with data collection as transcripts were read and reread at least three times upon completion. Analysis began with open coding, which involves the conceptualization (naming each idea or event) and categorization (grouping concepts referring to similar phenomenon) of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The coding approach for the first few interviews was line-by-line analysis, which involves the careful examination of phrases or words in each line. Such minute treatment of the data assisted in generating initial codes, as key words and phrases were underlined and reviewed for emerging patterns, ideas, and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). I then grouped preliminary codes into coding families. Codes themselves constituted subcategories within the coding families. I re-read transcripts, assigning sentences and/or paragraphs to one or more coding categories.

As data collection continued, transcripts were analyzed according to the preliminary coding scheme. Sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph analysis, in which major ideas are identified and named (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), assisted in revising, refining, combining and/or eliminating codes. Categories were revised and refined until they 'fit' the data and all transcripts were recoded according to the final coding scheme, which consisted of 31 codes. Finally, I examined entire interviews as a whole to obtain an overall idea of the basic theme of each and to determine the congruence of perspectives within sister pairs.

After all data were coded according to the final coding scheme, full quotations were pulled and sorted into coding categories. Categories were examined for themes and relationships among coding families (see Appendix D).

CHAPTER III

Results

In this chapter, I present the major findings from participant interviews. I discuss the following topics: Disclosure content; developmental change; the act of disclosing; factors influencing disclosure; barriers to disclosure; sisters as comparative disclosure partners; relative age differences; other aspects of the relationship; the role of disclosure; and relationship evaluations.

Content

Relationships with boys. Although the content of sisters' self-disclosure spanned a broad range of topics, a common topic of disclosure concerned boyfriends. In these revealing moments, they discussed their emotions and the problems associated with dating and boys. Many of the personal problems they described disclosing to their sisters revolved around boy-girl relationships.

“Well, lately she’s been talking to me a lot because her boyfriend is moving and she’s been crying a lot, she’s been really upset a lot. And she’s been talking to me about like, what their relationship is gonna be like. And I’ve had problems with boyfriends before and she usually helps me to see it from their perspective and think about the most caring way to go through it and everything.” (K, age 13)

“I guess a lot of times she wants to know about my relationships with guys and stuff. I think she’s constantly trying to compare. Just recently she told me about this guy who liked her and she’s got a boyfriend already, so it was kind of a bad time for him to say that.” (D, age 16)

“There’s a guy on her bus who made fun of her all the time and she would come to me and say, ‘What should I do about this guy?’ I think that’s a major time she’s come to me.” (A, age 15)

Family Relationships. In addition to boys, sisters described talking about family members and family issues with each other. They explained that family issues constitute an area that they reserve for discussion with their sister because they believe that sisters can best understand. Talking about family issues with a sister served to help them feel "normal," with the knowledge that they are not alone in their familial experiences.

“Like, if there’s anything wrong in the family, I’ll go talk to her. Like if everyone is in a fight or something, I’ll find out what that person did to, like get somebody mad at them. If it’s a friends thing, I’ll keep it with my friends, but if it’s family, I’ll go to my sister.” (F, age 16)

“It’s like part of my family, I feel a little more normal after I talk to her. You know every family is different and everything you go through in a family is different, so if I would go to my friend and she doesn’t go through the same kinds of things, I’d feel kinda weird, but when I talk to (my sister) and know she feels the same way or she’s going through the same thing, I feel normal.” (A, 15)

“I like talking to her about things like family stuff because, we can both make fun of them, like...this is really bad. My grandmother’s brother just died. And we were talking about it. And you know, how sad it was, and you know, we make jokes about my grandmother feeling old now... I can make jokes like that and she understands that I’m not like, really bashing anybody.” (T, 16)

Relationships with Peers. A third area sisters identified as talking about with each other is friends. The emotions and problems that friendships bring are discussed with each other.

“One time her and one of her friends were fighting and I knew something was wrong so I just asked her about it and she told me why they were fighting...I just said give it time, if she’s a real friend she’ll come back and everything will be better.” (F, age 16)

“We’ll say, oh you know, kind of complain about people. I can say, “Oh gosh so-and-so is making me so mad,” and she doesn’t know who I’m talking about. But after a while she knows enough about that one person or those people just from what I’ve told her.” (T, age 16)

Other topics. Besides relationships with boys, family and peers, sisters identified a variety of other disclosure topics, including their futures, school, sports, theological questions, and health.

“We talk about our relationships with God and stuff.” (E, age 13)

“We talk about life in general, like what we’re gonna be when we grow up.”

“She has a heart condition. She was born with a heart problem and her doctor tells her all the time she can’t play basketball, she shouldn’t be playing---and I always tell her, no man, you’re playing basketball, I don’t care. That’s really important to me, that she keep playing basketball and doesn’t worry about what anyone else tells her, if she feels she can do it.” (A, 15)

“We talk about school. Sports. What we’ve been doing.” (H, age 13)

Developmental Change: From Childhood to Adolescence

Childhood relationships. In addition to talking about the content areas of disclosure, sisters talked about how disclosure has changed over time. They described their childhood relationships as oriented toward play, with their sisters their constant companions and playmates. Most participants fondly recalled engaging in dramatic play together, in which they jointly created a make-believe world. Participants believed play to be the most salient characteristic of their childhood relationships and downplayed the role of disclosure during childhood.

“We didn’t talk as much as we do now. I remember we played house a lot.” (E, age 13)

“We would pretend play all the time. I don’t remember a day going by where we didn’t play something. I don’t think we really talk-talked when we were little. We just played.” (A, age 15)

“We were always playing together. I was obsessed with horses, so I would make her ride me around all the time. I would make her get on my back and we would ride all over the place...We really didn’t need to talk about anything.” (D, age 16)

“I don’t think talking was a big part of our relationship. It was just playing. We played dress-up and She-Ra a lot.” (K, age 14)

Adolescent relationships

In contrast to their childhood relationships, sisters described their adolescent relationships as focusing more on talk than play. They spoke not only of talking more, but of talking about more personal issues and topics. Participants considered their current relationships closer and better than their childhood relationships.

“We talk about a lot more personal stuff now.” (K, age14)

“I’m closer to her now than I was. Conversations have gotten more personal.” (F, age 13)

“I talk to her more now. Just about stuff.” (N, age 14)

“I think we’ve gotten closer as we’ve gotten older...we talk a lot more now...we would never really talk [when we were younger].” (P, age 18)

Sisters also believed that, although they talked more as adolescents, they spent

less time together and described a decrease in overall interaction.

“We don’t do as much together as we used to [when we were little].” (N, age 14)

“We might have spent more time together then, but we didn’t get along as well.”
(T, age 16)

“We probably spend less time together.” (K, age 14)

Separate lives: Reflections on relationship changes. Without prompting, participants offered explanations for the changes in their relationships. They attributed the decrease in overall interaction to their expanding social worlds. They spoke of their sisters being their constant companions in childhood. As they got older, however, they described making friends and interacting with other people. They believed that the decrease in time spent together is a result of their shift in focus from family to friends.

“We spent a lot more time when we were younger, I guess because we weren’t really into going out with your friends and stuff like that. It’s like, we did family things when we were younger. And now it’s more like going out with your friends and stuff. ...We probably spent a lot more time when we were younger.” (F,13)

“[We spent more time when we were younger because] When we were little we would always play with each other but when we got older we would play with, like, separate friends.” (M, age 15)

They also believed that the reduction in time spent together stemmed partly from the increase not only in time spent with friends, but in time spent in individual pursuits. Eight participants specifically cited schedule conflicts as the primary impediment to spending time together as adolescents. School, extracurricular activities, and afterschool jobs were all mentioned as occupying their time and interest and keeping them from spending time together.

Participants believed that despite the reduced time with their sister, the inclusion of more people in their lives ultimately provided more for them to talk about.

“I guess, now that we’re older, we have other friends, too. And before it was just the two of us. So because of that we have more to talk about.” (D, age 16)

“Everywhere we were, we were together, you know? Cuz we never like really played with anybody else when we were little... we were just always together. I guess, now that we’re older, we have other friends too, and before it was just the two of us. So because of that we have more to talk about.” (M, age 15)

The Act of Disclosing

In addition to what they disclosed to each other and reflections on changes in disclosure within their relationships, sisters described the manner in which they disclosed to each other. Sometimes disclosure involved making a premeditated decision to confide in a sister. They described approaching their sisters for the purpose of talking about a specific problem or issue.

“If she’s in her room and I wanna talk to her, then I’ll go to her room, or she’ll come to my room to talk. Whatever is on whoever’s mind brings it up.” (F, age 16)

“I guess both of us will just go into the other’s room and sit on the bed or lie there. Someone may be crying.” (D, age 16)

“I guess I’m usually in her room, like I might wander by and be like, “I need to talk,” or something. And um, I just say whatever it is.” (N, age 14)

However, sisters also spoke of disclosures occurring as a natural and spontaneous sharing and gradual opening up. They described disclosures as leapfrogging from one to another and being somewhat embedded within the conversation. They spoke of revealing thoughts, feelings, and experiences that fit the flow of the conversation and described disclosure as often unplanned and casual.

“It normally starts out with a joke or something, just joking around, talking about something like ‘How’s your day?’ or ‘Did that boy tease you again?’ and she’ll be like, yeah well, or whatever, and then we’ll get into a deep conversation.” (A, age 15)

“Well, mostly it’s not one of those things that we plan. Like, it’s often something like, I go into her room to ask her if she wants to borrow my shirt, and I end up sitting there on her bed with her for an hour or so just talking.” (T, age 16)

“Our bedrooms connect, so like she’d be in her room and I’d be in my room and I’d be like, brushing my teeth or brushing my hair or something, and she’d come in and she’d be like, hey did you hear about this, and then we’d talk about that, and that would lead into more personal stuff.” (M, age 15)

“I’ll go into her room or she’ll come into my room and we’ll just talk and a lot of times, it kind of leads to things, like experiences the other person has had and then leads into another conversation.” (R, age 14)

Factors Influencing Disclosure

When talking about disclosing to each other, sisters spoke of why they did or did not disclose. They mentioned several considerations or conditions that led them either to disclose or to refrain from disclosure.

Understanding. When talking about disclosing to each other, one most consistently mentioned factor was understanding. Participants spoke of their sister's ability to understand the disclosed material and understand the associated emotions.

“[My sister] is like going through the same kinds of things, so she can kinda like understand.” (A, age 15)

“[My sister is a good person to confide in because] she always understands or sees where I'm coming from, most of the time.” (M, age 15)

The feeling that understanding is lacking may be equally important in the decision to disclose or not.

“[I don't like to confide in my sister because] I don't think she'd understand yet. Like stuff I'd probably want to talk about she probably couldn't help me with, or she probably wouldn't understand.” (J, 16)

Freedom from judgment. In addition to understanding, the absence of judgment emerged as a second influence on disclosure. Sisters spoke of feeling secure in the knowledge that their sisters would not judge them. The certainty that a sister will listen and be nonjudgmental sometimes promotes disclosure.

“She's not gonna be like ‘Oh my gosh, you're such a dork’ or something like that...I don't have to worry about her being like ‘you're weird’ or anything like that.” (A, age 15)

“I feel like she's just listening and she's not going to judge what I say to her...like, she's not gonna say, ‘Oh, she said something about so-and-so, that probably means she doesn't like them. That means she's a mean person.” (T, age 16)

Trust. A sense of trust also emerged as influential. Sisters spoke of trust as necessary for disclosure and described feelings of trusting their sisters in general.

“A sister is somebody who you can pretty much trust all the time.” (F, age 16)

“It’s one of those things where I know she’ll never be in a situation where she’s really talking about it. It’s one of those things where I don’t really have to trust her. I mean I do, but even if I didn’t she would never have a chance to tell any of the people I’m talking about.” (T, age 16)

“With my sister I think I feel relaxed talking to her. And like, I trust her that she wouldn’t tell anything I wouldn’t want her to.” (F, age 13)

Barriers to Disclosure

In addition to factors that promoted disclosure, sisters talked about the barriers to and disclosure. One barrier they consistently mentioned was the possibility of the breach of confidentiality. They spoke of the violation of confidentiality as a serious risk associated with disclosure and expressed reservations regarding disclosing to sisters. They described two ways in which a sister could breach confidentiality: tattling and gossip

She might tell on me: Tattling. A sister may violate confidentiality by tattling, in which she reveals information regarding misbehavior to their parents.

“Sometimes... she’ll tell my parents something I don’t want them to know.”

“She knows things, and parents, you know.” (N, age 14)

Sisters explained that tattling is not the only means by which they can breach confidentiality with regard to parents. Through blackmail, she can manipulate her sister by threatening to expose a secret to their parents. Participants spoke of the disclosure of information to a sister as possibly arming her with a weapon that may in future be used against them.

“Like, sometimes I come to her and I’ve told her, like, well, I don’t anymore because I’ve learned my lesson, but I’ve told her really important things I don’t want anybody to know and she’ll be like, “If you don’t do this for me, I’m gonna tell mom, or something like that, and I’m like, oh my God.” (A, age 15)

[If I tell her something, then] she knows something that I might not want her to know later, or she can tell everyone what I did, that I wouldn’t necessarily want my mom to know. She can, like, bribe me. I don’t know if she’d do that or not, but she always has that option.” (F, age 13)

Hearing it through the grapevine: Gossip. Sisters identified gossip as a second means by which confidentiality may be breached. They expressed fear of the embarrassment or ridicule that may result if an intimate disclosure becomes available to peers.

“The only thing I’d be worried about is if she gossiped about it. I don’t know, a lot of her friends are really gossipy... I don’t want my sister to go and tell all her friends something about me because I know that they all talk.” (P, age 18)

“I don’t know if I could tell her things, because she has like, friends who are sisters of my friends. She would tell her friends if it was something funny or something that was embarrassing to me, and I don’t want it to, like, get around. (J, 16)

“I know I told my sister something, and it was like a humongous secret and I found out she told somebody who told somebody else who told somebody else who came back and told me about it. If I were to tell her something big again I wouldn’t know if she’d be able to keep the secret.” (F, age 16)

Disappointment. In addition to telling others, participants also worried about their sister's personal response to disclosed information. For instance, younger sisters spoke of the possible disappointment of older sisters as a concern associated with disclosure. If the revelation of personal information resulted in a sister's disappointment, they may hesitate to confide or decide that a particular disclosure may be better left unsaid.

“If I had a problem, I’d probably go to my best friend. I’m kinda like afraid to talk about it with them (mom or sister) because they might be disappointed in me.” (F, age 13)

[A drawback of confiding in her] is her feeling disappointed in me if I did something wrong.” (K, age 14)

Sisters, Mothers and Best friends: Sisters as Comparative Disclosure Partners

In order to better highlight the contexts and considerations of disclosure between sisters, I asked participants to describe and compare disclosing to their mothers and best friends. The concept of understanding, or the feeling that they would be understood, once again surfaced as an important factor in disclosure. Ten participants reported that they told their sisters more than their mothers and described their reluctance to confide in her

as stemming from mother's lack of understanding.

Mom doesn't have a clue. Sisters perceived their mothers as having experiences and perspectives foreign to their own. Their accounts revealed that they often considered their mothers to be sources of useless and/or outdated information. They spoke of sisters, on the other hand, as sharing a lingo and being bonded by similar world views and experiences. Because they are closer in terms of age and understanding, they are perceived to have a greater appreciation and insight into each other's experiences.

"I can tell [my sister] a lot more stuff that I'm kinda uncomfortable with talking about with my mom because she's like, closer to me, I guess." (E, age 13)

"It's so much easier to talk to D. than it is to my mom, you know, like especially with just language or whatever, that teenagers have. My mom's like 'What are you talking about?'" (A, age 15)

"[My sister's] are more like, just newer, I guess, like my mom doesn't know what's going on now. I think [my sister] can understand more." (N, age 14)

"I'm not as afraid of what my sister will say back to me as I am with my mother, because she hasn't been in the situation in a long time. So I guess [my sister] is like, fresher, at it. I tell her more secrets and I talk to my mom about more general things." (K, age 14)

Mom just doesn't understand Part II. In addition to describing the general lack of understanding resulting from the generation gap, participants spoke of being misunderstood if and when they confide in their mothers. Conversation with their sisters, they said, comes easily and naturally, whereas it is much harder to connect with their mothers in a more personal or intimate discussion. Sisters spoke of mothers as less likely to understand both the subject matter and the discloser; sisters are more adept at "reading" each other than a mother and can better interpret what is left unsaid in addition to what is said. They spoke of mothers misunderstanding their motivation for disclosing and therefore responding inappropriately. "Talking" with one's mother can even turn into listening to her.

"With my mom I always feel like I'm being patient. It seems like when you talk with your mom, she just has this amazing quality of everything she says, she says it the wrong way. And you know, [my sister] and I can make jokes and she won't give me any looks and she knows when I'm being serious and when I'm not and my mother definitely doesn't pick up on that. I think I feel more comfortable with my sister because I don't feel like she'll misunderstand me as easily, and if she does, I feel like she would say something and not, kinda, judge me on that. With

[my sister]... I feel less like I'm listening and more like I'm participating." (T, age 16)

"Like with C., I guess, she knows I don't like hearing that [I have a bad attitude], so she doesn't say it. She'll listen and talk about whatever it is. But with my mom I'll end up not telling her about anything, just because I'm mad about hearing about my attitude." (F, age 16)

"My sister always know when to give me feedback and when I'm just trying to unload on her. A lot of times my mom gives me advice I don't want to take, but L always knows when I want her advice and when I just want to tell her something." (R, age 14)

Mom as Judge and Jury: Mothers and Punishment. Participants further distinguished between mothers and sisters with regard to the possibility of mother's punishment for information in the disclosure. Mothers and sisters can have similar emotional reactions (disappointment, judging) but mothers can also punish.

"Well, like, when I talk to my mom...I have an attitude a lot of times and no matter what I say about anything... like if I'm trying to tell her a story about work and something went wrong, she'll be like, 'Oh that's your attitude. That's cuz your attitude always comes out. You have a bad attitude.'" (F, age 16)

"My mom is always worrying about what's best for me and if I did the right thing, and my sister is, I don't know, she's more of what my feel of it was, you know? Like why I would do something, without worrying whether it was right or wrong." (F, age 13)

"Like my mom is kinda different from my sister because with my mom, I can't always tell her everything that I do, like, I'd get in trouble... I can't really tell her everything." (F, age 16)

"If I did something wrong, my sister isn't going to get mad at me, well, she might, but she's not gonna punish me or anything." (F, age 13)

Friends, Sisters, and Understanding. Although sisters described disclosing more to their sisters than their mothers, 11 participants said that they reveal more information to their best friend than their sister and that they prefer disclosing to their best friend. One 13-year-old revealed that although she confided often in her sister, she rarely shared the "most intimate secrets" that she confided to her best friend. Sisters described being more forthcoming with their best friends.

“[Conversations with my sister] aren’t as long or in depth. With my friend I would go for like everything I do everyday or any problem that I have. (A, age 15).”

“I can tell my best friend anything. At all. And [my sister], I don’t think I could tell her everything.” JL, age 16)

“I usually tell my best friend everything.” (N, age 14)

Sisters, again, described understanding as the root of the preference for best friends over sisters. Compared to a sister, participants described a friend as more likely experiencing similar situations, and therefore more likely to understand. Friends are more familiar with specific situations in a participant's life because they spend more time together than sisters.

“If I had a problem, I’d probably go to my best friend... my friend, she’s kinda, she might be in a similar situation.” (F, age 13)

“I’d talk to my friend first. My friends are, like, more understanding because they might be going through it too.” (E, age 13)

“I always thought a friend is there to tell secrets to, more than a sister. I guess if we were closer in age it’d be easier to tell secrets to her because the same things would be going on in both of our lives.” (F, age 16)

“My sister is usually gone... And I guess she [friend] would know more about what is happening because she would be around more. She sees it more than my sister.” (K, age 13)

Relative Age Differences

When speaking of their relationships with their sisters, older sisters described looking out for their younger sisters, whereas younger sisters described looking up to their older sisters. Older sisters assumed the role of protector or guide; younger sisters assumed the role of the guided.

Older sister role. Emerging from the testimonies of older sisters was a theme of taking care of their younger sisters. Older sisters spoke of feeling responsible for their sisters, of watching out for them and keeping them safe. Sometimes this protection included worrying about them and shielding them from some of life’s realities. Older sisters expressed a continuing concern for the welfare and well-being of their younger sisters.

“You know, if you’re ever asked that question, if your house were on fire, who would you save?, I think I’d save D. first because I think I’m the closest to her. She’s really important to me.” (A, age 15)

“I really try to look out for her. Like if one of her friends hasn’t been calling in a while, I’ll ask why she isn’t calling, did you guys get in a fight? Or if she’s over at a friend’s house and she’s supposed to be home by 8 and she’s not home yet I wonder, where is she? Like if we go to the beach, if she goes into the ocean, I’m always looking out for her because I’m always afraid something will happen to her.” (F, age 16)

“Sometimes if I tell her something, like, I’ll tell her about if I drank, sometimes I think it’s good because then she knows what sort of stuff I think about that, but then other times I wonder if it’s a bad thing for her to know that I have done that...I’m worried about the whole high school thing. I feel like she could get in trouble somehow. I think she’s wild and when she starts getting more freedom, I’ll be worried.” (D, age 17)

Tied in with the theme of protecting younger sisters was that of caregiving. Older sisters described guiding, advising and helping their sisters. They expressed a willingness, in some cases even an eagerness, to share their knowledge and expertise with their sisters.

“With [my sister] I remember going through stuff she’s going through right now so I’m just like ‘Ooh, I remember that and I can give you advice on that.’” (A, age 15)

“Lots of times I feel like I can tell her a whole lot of stuff because I remember things that I’ve done and can tell her ‘don’t do that’ or ‘do that.’” (D, age 16)

“It’s weird how, like, I went through that and she’s going through like, the same thing. And she’s asking the same questions as I did. And I feel kind of honored that I can help her and that she’s asking me...I’ve been through it and I know how it feels. And telling her about my experience can help her.” (J, age 16)

Younger sister role. Whereas older sisters spoke of giving advice, younger sisters spoke of seeking and receiving it. Younger sisters said they depended on and valued the advice and help offered by older sisters.

“I depend on her mostly for guidance, I depend on her for that. I ask her questions about what kind of stuff I should and shouldn’t be doing.” (K, age 14)

“I depend on her for help, like, growing up and stuff. I know I can ask her questions.” (H, age 13)

“She gives me good advice and she’ll help me through things. When I ask her for help, she always helps me and always comes through for me....She’s always helping me with things like homework or just situations that I’m in.” (F, age 13)

Younger sisters described admiring and respecting their advice-giving older sisters. They spoke of them as models and valued their opinions and respected their judgment.

“It’s important that like she tells me I did good and stuff like that. That’s important to me, you know, because I guess I look up to her.” (E, age 13)

“I really like being the younger sister. I like her being...I really like looking up to her (K, age 14)

Because they so value their older sisters, they can be hurt, even crushed, by an offhand remark from an older sister.

“Her opinion is really important to me, I don’t know why, and she can really hurt me with her opinions.” (N, age 14)

“If I tell her something and she’ll say something like, ‘You’re so stupid,’ or something like that, it almost seems like she’s punishing me... Sometimes it seems like she doesn’t even want a sister.” (F, age 13)

Other Aspects of Sister Relationships

The previous section identified and elaborated on the content, process, and contexts of disclosure between adolescent sisters. However, in talking about their relationships, sisters spoke of disclosure as being an important but not necessarily the only dimension of talk or their relationship.

Just being together. In the course of their interviews, sisters spoke of the time they spent together, not necessarily talking about anything of consequence or even talking at all, as being a critical part of their relationship. They described valuing the time they spent engaging in common activities, or even just hanging out doing nothing at all, as being a valued element of their relationship. Their personal accounts suggest that, although they spent considerable time apart, they valued the time they spent together.

“When we’re around the house together, we listen to the same kinds of music mostly, slightly different, but we’ll eat lunch together and make jokes.” (T, age 16)

“Just doing things together, like the interests that we share and the places that we go, is important.” (A, age 15)

“I think most of the time we’ll just snuggle together and that’s what we’ll do. And I love going down to her room and she has on her awful music and I’m hearing it and seeing all the stuff on her walls, you know, just completely who she is. I like going to her room and just sitting there and watching her doing stuff.” (D, age 17)

“A lot of times we’ll just go out and do stuff. I go with her to, like, things she needs to do, like, she had to go to the library to do something.” (R, age 14)

“I think often we just share opinions and have conversations, but we’re not so much confiding personal things....” (T, age 16)

Sisterly Fun and Play. Sisters spoke of fun and playfulness as a second fundamental component of their relationship. They spoke of valuing their relationship because it allowed them to indulge their sense of humor and love of fun.

“We still like to have fun together... you know, just have fun.” (F, Age 13)

“Normally when we’re together, we’re always, like, making jokes.” (M, age 15)

“Sometimes it’s nice just having someone to play with. Cuz you know you get older and no one will go out to the beach and play with you anymore, so we have fun just being little kids again, kinda. Running around the house and screaming and driving our parents mad...I think mostly we just have a very good time, so many jokes and kind of uninhibited.” (T, age 16)

An especially articulate 16-year-old captured the blend of playfulness, silliness, and inside jokes she believed characterized her relationship with her sister:

“We have so much fun. Like, we make jokes and have little, like...my mom has a little wrinkle right here (*points to upper lip*) and you’d never notice it if you look at her, but when she smiles it looks like she has a little mustache and we have this joke, because she’s always using her hands to talk. We go (*using exaggerated hand motions*) MOM says to CLEAN out the DISHWASHER.... It’s one of those things where we have so many jokes. We just have an incredible silliness thing going, a special kind of sisterly silliness that drives our parents crazy. Kind of like stupid jokes that nobody else in the world would think were funny.”

Role of Disclosure

According to the participants, disclosure plays an important, but not necessarily central, role in their relationships. Sisters spoke about what they perceived disclosure to do for their relationships. They described disclosing as bringing them closer and helping them understand each other.

Sisters said that talking with each other brings them closer and contributes to feelings of trust and comfort.

“We’ve definitely gotten closer...we’ve found that we have a lot more things in common than we thought. [Talking] has definitely brought us together because if we didn’t talk or share stuff, then we’d probably be the same as before.” (R, age 14)

“I think we feel closer when we talk cuz if we didn’t talk we’d be like, way far apart from each other and we wouldn’t be able to share.” (E, age 13)

“It makes us become closer, we can depend on each other. It makes us feel more comfortable with each other because we talk” (F, age 16)

“I think it’s good for us when we do talk...It makes me feel closer to her. (P, age 18)

Sharing confidences with a sister can reveal information that helps them better understand and know each other. Sisters described talking as helping them to see each other realistically.

“Sometimes it seems as if she doesn’t have any problems at all because it seems like ... everything is going perfect for her, so it’s like when she says she’s got a problem or something, it just makes me feel different about her, like she’s not perfect.” (F, age 13)

“I think it helps us to understand each other more. Yeah, I think it deeps us from getting into some stupid arguments cuz we know each other better. (K, age 13)

“It makes me like her more. Or understand her more. When we talk it makes it seem like a better relationship.” (N, age 14)

“It’s easier to respect the other person. We see each other less as competition and more as somebody else you live with.” (T, age 16)

Paradoxically, they also spoke of disclosure as potentially highlighting differences. should they express ideas and opinions that do not coincide.

“The drawbacks are the moments that we realize how different we are. Like, you know, we disagree about something, or once in a while there’s something that we take wrong about the other person...there are certain aspects about her life and my life that the other person just can’t quite understand. You know, ‘Why would you do that?’” (T, age 16)

“Well, sometimes we kind of get in disagreement about something and we have strong views that are totally different.” (R, age 14)

Relationship Evaluations and Congruence of Perceptions

As indicated earlier, sisters spoke of disclosure as contributing to feelings of closeness between them. Closeness and disclosure, then, appear to be related. To assist in clarifying the relationship between disclosure and closeness, I divided the respondents into two groups, using closeness as the critical element. Sisters clearly stated whether they believed themselves to be close, and the closeness evaluations of each sister in a pair agreed. The perceptions of each member of a pair were generally congruent, with the perspective of one echoed by the other. All identified the younger as confiding slightly more in the older than vice-versa. Participants also tended to evaluate their relationship in terms of general compatibility and disclosure.

Close Relationships: Predominantly positive. Sisters who felt close to each other believed they had a good overall relationship characterized by positive feelings. They said they had only occasional arguments over minor annoyances and for the most part took pleasure in each others company. They also identified talk as an important part of their relationship and believed that they talked about important issues at least occasionally. The amount of satisfaction participants expressed was similar within the pair.

Pair 1

“We’re pretty close. We talk. We have the same interests. We do a lot of stuff together. I know things about her. She comes to me with her problems. She’s a really close friend and I tell her stuff so she’s really important to me.” (A, age 15)

“We have a pretty good relationship. It’s really close. .. I feel pretty good that I’m a sister because I have someone to, like share my feelings with. We spend a lot of time talking. It’s kind of important.” (E, age 13)

Pair 2

“Our relationship is a really good one. She’s one of my best friends. I love her....

Lots of times when I come home at night I'll go in there and we'll talk about stuff. We never have really argued that much." (D, 16)

"It's very close. It's pretty close. I tell her almost everything. We spend a lot of time in the car, driving back and forth. We spend a lot of that time talking. ...I think we get in fights about every other month or once a month about like, I don't know, she has an appointment and I'm too late getting ready. [If I didn't have a sister] It would be worse because I wouldn't have someone to be very close to." (K, age 14)

Pair 3

"I like her more the older we get and the less we feel we have to compete with each other. We're getting closer. I'm very satisfied." (T, age 16)

"Now we barely ever fight and we get along pretty well. We're close. We've kind of learned to get along with each other's faults." (R, age 14)

Not close relationships. Three pairs did not perceive themselves to be especially close and remarked that they wished their relationships with their sisters would improve. Arguments occurred frequently. These sisters spoke of feeling frustrated and somewhat distant from each other and described more high's and lows in their relationship. They believed that although they talked, they did not do so frequently and did not discuss issues they perceived as important. They spoke, however, of knowing that their sisters were there for them if necessary.

Pair 4

"We don't get along very well. Um, I can talk to her about stuff, though. But she's busy a lot...I think we're not really close, I think we both know we don't have a really good relationship...It would be nice to have a better relationship..It'd be better if we could just get along, be nicer to each other. (N, age 14)

"I like her. I mean, she's my sister. I love her, but we just don't spend time together.. We'll tell each other things, but I wouldn't say that we're close. We're not real nice to each other sometimes. We put each other down and we're mean to each other and make fun of each other. I'd rather not fight as much...We don't really talk very much...We're just really not close enough to really confide in each other." (P, age 18)

Pair 5

"Well, I love her and everything, she's my sister. But, um, sometimes I just get, like, really mad at her. But sometimes I feel like she's my best friend, and sometimes it seems like we can't be in a room 5 minutes without fighting...I don't

really have those kinds of conversations [where we confide] with my sister.” (F, age 13)

“We don’t really talk that much. I love her, I wouldn’t want anything to happen to her. But when she’s around certain friends she gets an attitude, so I like her when she’s not with her friends. I think we could be closer. I mean, on the personal level it could be a little closer...It’s hard to be her older sister.” (M, age 15)

Pair 6

“She’s funny...She’s mean to me sometimes. I probably tell her more things. I always , like, start conversations. She doesn’t usually come up to talk to me. [If I could change anything, it would be to] probably not fight as much.” (H, age 13)

“I’m not as satisfied as I would like to be. I wish we were closer, but, like, she needs to like, lose her attitude....She’s annoying and she likes to annoy. She annoys me a lot. I can talk to her, if I wanted to, about anything, but I usually don’t.” (J, age 16)

Summary

Participants spoke of talking about boys, family and friends with their sisters. They described their childhood relationships as play-based, as opposed to their adolescent relationships, which they described as based on talk. The ability of their sisters to be understanding, nonjudgmental, and trustworthy can facilitate disclosure, whereas the possibility that a sister may breach confidentiality can limit it. Participants described disclosure as bringing them closer, helping them understand each other, and highlighting differences between them. Although they described disclosure as an important aspect of their relationship, they also spoke of valuing companionship and playfulness. There was an association between disclosure and closeness. Finally, the perspectives of each sister within a dyad were generally congruent.

CHAPTER IV

Discussion

In this section I review the results of this study in light of existing theory and research and discuss directions for future research.

Implications for Social Penetration

The findings of this study were consistent with social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), which proposes that relationships develop over time as the breadth and depth of disclosures gradually increase. In this study, participants confirmed that disclosures with their sisters had progressed gradually over time from superficial to increasingly intimate disclosures. However, the results of this study suggest that developmental or cognitive shifts may also contribute to relationship change. Participants in this study said they talked more than they did when they were younger in spite of spending less time together. This reported increase in disclosure is consistent with Buhrmester and Prager's (1995) conjecture that as adolescents become increasingly articulate and reflective, they are increasingly able and likely to disclose. The emergence of adolescent issues such as dating, awareness of family issues, and more intimate peer relations may also contribute to the increases in disclosure by providing more to talk about. The transition from childhood to adolescence shifts the focus of sister relationships from play, in which children reveal their thoughts and wishes indirectly, to talk. Talk assumes a more personal nature due to expanded content and to the fact that it is more direct and no longer conducted through the medium of play. The findings from this study imply that social penetration theory could be extended to include developmental considerations and the influence of emerging social contexts.

Parallels to Attachment Theory

In addition to implications for social penetration theory, the observations in this study suggested the importance of attachment processes in considering disclosure between adolescents. In the attachment framework, proximity-seeking behaviors establish and maintain the behavioral system and ultimately lead to a bond between mother and child (Ainsworth, 1979). Disclosure in sister relationships appears to parallel proximity-seeking behaviors in the attachment process. Specifically, the vulnerability exhibited during disclosure parallels attachment vulnerability behaviors, such as crying, exhibited during proximity-seeking. In addition, participants in this study repeatedly identified understanding, or the ability to understand, as an important characteristic of the listener; this understanding is reminiscent of the responsiveness and sensitivity of the caregiver that Ainsworth (1979) identifies as important in the attachment process. These parallels between disclosure and attachment support Ciccerelli's (1995) proposal that attachment styles that siblings develop toward each other may help explain sibling relationship quality and characteristics. In addition, disclosure appears to play an

important role in these attachment bonds. The sister pairs interviewed in this study were securely attached, avoidant, or ambivalent.

The Content of Disclosures

The findings of this study indicate that the content of disclosures between adolescent sisters is oriented toward relationships, specifically those with boys, family, and friends. Social penetration theory identifies these topics as relatively intimate, or close to the core of personality. As Howe et. al (1995) predicted, family matters and relationships constitute an important content area of disclosure between sisters due to shared familial experience. However, of the content areas identified by participants in this study, relationships with boys was the most salient during adolescence, as sisters experience and attempt to understand emerging opposite-sex relationships.

The Manner of Disclosure and Disclosure Amnesia

Some sisters in this study described disclosure of the relationship-related content discussed above as occurring in a somewhat formal, premeditated manner. However, others described disclosing in a more spontaneous, casual way. This informal manner of disclosing may be related to the inability of some participants to recall and describe instances in which they had disclosed to their sisters. Although they believed they had at some point disclosed to their sisters, they nevertheless remarked, "I can't really think of anything specific." Disclosures that occur in an informal and casual manner may focus on the discloser's current difficulties that, once resolved, fade into the background and are forgotten. The disclosure 'amnesia' participants exhibited implies that issues that had invoked deep or personal feelings become more matter-of-fact once the discloser is no longer affected by or vulnerable to them.

The Risks of Disclosure

Some observations in this study contradict the popular notion that disclosure is a uniformly positive aspect of relationships. Participants described potential negative consequences of disclosure, such as gossip or tattling. In addition, disclosing can highlight differences between sisters, which may lead to disappointment or feeling disconnected or separate from a sister. The strong emotional ties between siblings that Howe et. al (1995) predicted would foster disclosure by increasing comfort in sharing may instead impede disclosure if it is perceived that disclosing will result in disappointing a loved sister. Mothers hold the additional risk of punishment for disclosure involving misbehavior. Self-disclosure, then, is a situation that can contribute to positive relationship features of feeling understood or feeling closer, but it also holds potential for risk. These observations are consistent with Altman and Taylor's (1973) assertion that "openness to others in intimate areas is especially affected by reward/cost factors" (p. 102). In this study, sisters described weighing the rewards of feeling closer against the costs of gossip or disappointment when making disclosure decisions.

The findings of this study suggest that the risks associated with disclosing can be minimized when there are similarities between the discloser and the person to whom she discloses. Participants in this study perceived their friends to be more similar to them

than their sisters. Friends, they believed, experienced similar problems, issues, and activities. These similarities reduce the risk potential of disappointment or judgment and increase the likelihood of being understood. The preference for confiding to friends over sisters is consistent with previous findings that disclosures to peers and same sex friends increase across early and middle adolescence (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). The findings of the current study also support those of Miller and Kenny (1986) and Miller (1990), who found that disclosure varied according to partner rather than individual tendency to disclose.

Relative Age Roles.

In addition to the risks of disclosure, participants in this study addressed their roles in their relationships. An observational study of preschool siblings found that older siblings assume the teacher/helper/guider roles, whereas younger siblings assume the learner/helpee/ guided roles (Brody, Stoneman, MacKinnon & MacKinnon, 1987). Participants in this study described similar roles, in which younger sisters looked to their older sisters for help and older sisters willingly provided it. However, Vandell, Minnet and Santrock (1987) found that as children enter middle childhood, their sibling relationships become increasingly egalitarian, with the younger sibling gaining power and the older engaging in less teaching and instruction. The findings of the current study, though, suggest that sisters maintain their earlier patterns of interaction, in which the older sister is admired and the younger sister is helped. In adolescence, older sisters maintain their helper role by providing advice rather than overt instruction. An element of hierarchy associated with relative age seems to persist into adolescence.

The continuation of the older sister/younger sister roles may account for younger sisters disclosing more than older sisters, a finding that is consistent with observational studies of younger children in which younger siblings more often approached older siblings than vice-versa (Pepler, Abramovitch, & Corter, 1981). The identification of older sisters as sources of advice is consistent with Seginer's (1992) finding among Israeli-Arab sisters. Seginer's research, however, used only younger sisters and therefore provided no insight into the older sister's perspective on advice. The findings of this study suggest that advice in adolescent sister relationships is a one-way phenomenon; none of the older sisters in this study identified their younger sisters as sources of advice.

The existence of roles associated with relative age suggests that siblings experience the relationship differently, as Cicerelli (1995) predicted. Cicerelli also predicted that their differential experiences may result in different perceptions of the relationship. The sisters in this study, however, nevertheless expressed similar perspectives regarding relationship characteristics and quality. The findings of this study suggest that although siblings have different experiences within the relationship, their overall evaluations and perspectives on the relationship nevertheless coincide.

Disclosure as One Aspect of the Relationship

This study highlights the role of disclosure in adolescent sister relationships and points to its importance in fostering closeness between sisters. As did the schoolage

siblings in a study by Howe et. al (1995), sisters in this study identified disclosure as important. However, they also identified it as only one dimension of their relationship. They also valued companionship and playfulness in their relationships. Disclosure, then, is an important piece of the relationship, but it does not completely capture or explain the relationship between sisters.

Disclosure and Closeness

The main finding of this study suggests that closeness and disclosure are associated. In the process of describing their relationships, participants mentioned closeness and conflict in conjunction with disclosure. Closeness was associated with both talking and the lack of conflict. It is unclear, however, exactly how closeness, conflict, and disclosure fit together, suggesting a need for future researchers to address the relationships between and among these constructs.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study illuminated the content and process of disclosure between adolescent sisters. However, in this study, closeness and disclosure were consistently related. There were no negative case examples in which participants said they were close but did not talk or talked but were not close. This finding may stem from the restricted sample size used in this study. A different sample may reveal negative cases that may be important for clarifying the relationship between disclosure and closeness.

Future research might also address developmental shifts and the changes in disclosure that occur as adolescents become young adults. Does the effect of the age gap that participants in this study described become less important as they get older and perhaps have more similar experiences? If so, does disclosure increase as sisters perceive greater similarity of their experiences? Do they continue to maintain the relative age roles of childhood and adolescence? What is the impact of divergent life experiences, for instance if one sister marries and the other focuses on career?

Finally, this study also used a sample of middle to upper-middle class sisters from intact families. Their financial resources may have obscured the potential effects of external stress or limited resources on the relationship and disclosure. Future studies might use samples encompassing a broader demographic sample to address questions concerning the effects of financial stress or family disruption on the sibling relationship. Divorce, in particular, may affect sibling relationships and disclosure. Previous research has suggested that divorce may increase (Bank & Kahn, 1981) or strain (Arnstein, 1979) the bond between siblings.

This study, however, is important in spite of its limitations. The findings of this study suggest that disclosure plays an important role in the relationship between adolescent siblings and may be associated with relationship quality. This finding raises questions regarding the role of disclosure in terms of identity development. Specifically, how does sibling disclosure function as a formative identity process during adolescence? Future studies might address this. Future studies might also explore the parallels of disclosure to attachment styles and the effects on sibling relationship quality.

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Appendix A
VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent for Parents of Participants

Title of Project Girl Talk: Self-Disclosure Between Sisters
Investigators Krista C. Hadermann
Mark J. Benson, Ph.D.

I. THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to find out more about relationships between teenage sisters. I am interested in learning about sibling experiences during the teenage years. I am especially interested in finding out more about what kinds of things teenage sisters talk about, how often they talk, and how they feel about each other. If your family chooses to participate, you will join about nine other families in this study about sisters.

II. PROCEDURES

I will talk to each of your daughters separately about the relationship they have with each other. I will schedule a time that is convenient for your family for me to come to your house and talk with each of your daughters separately. I will ask each of them questions about how they get along, what kinds of things they do together, and what kinds of things they talk about. I will ask them to describe each other and their relationship.

Each interview will last approximately 30 minutes. I would like to tape record my conversations with your daughters so that I will not miss something they say.

III. RISKS

The questions I will ask your daughters are not intended to cause risk. However, they may experience feelings of discomfort or embarrassment when talking about themselves and/or their relationship. They are free not to answer any questions with which they are not comfortable.

IV. BENEFITS

By participating in this study, you and your daughters will provide information regarding sibling experiences and relationships which may be helpful to families and professionals who work with families. In addition, talking about their experiences may help your daughters better understand their relationship.

V. EXTENT OF ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

All information provided by your daughters will be kept confidential. Only my advisor, Dr. Mark Benson, a transcriptionist, and I will have access to the information

they provide. Your daughters will be assigned a number or a pseudonym which will be used on the transcripts and in my written report. The audio tapes will be stored in a locked box at my home and will be erased after they are typed.

VI. COMPENSATION

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

VII. FREEDOM TO WITHDRAW

Your daughters are free to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, they may choose not to answer any question I ask.

VIII. APPROVAL OF RESEARCH

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and by the Department of Family and Child Development.

IX. PARTICIPANT'S RESPONSIBILITIES

I agree to let my daughters answer questions about their relationship with each other.

X. PARTICIPANT'S PERMISSION

I have read and I understand the Informed Consent information and the conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge receipt of a copy of this consent form. I agree to let my daughters participate in this project. I understand that I may choose to withdraw from the project at any time without penalty.

Signature

Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact the following people at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University:

Krista C. Hadermann, Investigator
Mark J. Benson, Ph.D., Investigator
H. Thomas Hurd, Ph.D.

Phone: 301-831-9739
Phone: 540-231-5720
Phone: 540-231-9359

Appendix B
VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent for Participants of Investigative Projects

Title of Project: Girl Talk: Self-disclosure Between Sisters

Investigators: Krista C. Hadermann

Mark J. Benson, Ph.D.

I. Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this study is to find out more about how teenage sisters feel about each other and their relationship. I want to know how you and your sister get along, how you feel about each other, and what kinds of things you talk about with each other. If you and your sister choose to participate, you will join about nine other sister pairs who are participating in this project.

II. Procedures

I will talk to you and your sister separately at your home. I will talk to each of you for about 30 minutes. First I will ask you some background questions, like your age and grade in school. Next I will ask you questions about you, your sister, and what you talk about with each other. You will be free not to answer any question that you do not want to answer. I will be tape-recording our conversation, in addition to taking notes, so that I do not miss anything you have to say.

III. Risks

While the questions I will ask are not intended to make you feel bad, you may nevertheless feel uncomfortable or embarrassed when talking about yourself and your sister. However, remember that you are free to not answer any question that makes you uncomfortable.

IV. Benefits

By talking to me and answering questions about what you and your sister talk about, you may come to better understand your relationship with your sister. In addition, you will be helping to provide information which will help researchers better understand what siblings mean to each other.

V. Extent of Anonymity/Confidentiality

After I interview you and your sister, I and a helper will listen to the tape of our conversation and write down my questions and your answers. No one else will hear the tape. Only my helper, my advisor, Dr. Mark Benson, and I will see the written transcript

of our conversation. I will not use your real names on my written report. You and your sister will be assigned a number or a fake name which will be used on the written transcripts and on my written report. The tapes will be stored in a locked box at my house until they are transcribed, at which time they will be erased.

VI. Compensation

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

VII. Freedom To Withdraw

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, you may choose not to answer any question you do not wish to answer.

VIII. Approval of Research

This research has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and by the Department of Family and Child Development.

IX. Participants' Responsibility

By signing this form, I am agreeing to answer questions about myself and my relationship with my sister.

X. Participants' Permission

I have read and I understand the information and what I must do to take part in this project. I have had all my questions answered. I know that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I agree to take part in this project. I understand that I may choose to withdraw from the project at any time without penalty.

Signature

Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact the following people at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University:

Krista C. Hadermann, Investigator
Mark J. Benson, Ph.D., Investigator
H. Thomas Hurd, Ph.D.,

Phone: 301-831-9739
Phone: 540-231-5720
Phone: 540-231-9359

Appendix C
Interview Guide

Relationship: General questions

1. Tell me about your sister
 - Describe the type of person she is.
 - How is she like/ different from you?
2. Tell me about the relationship you have with her.
 - Who do you feel about her?
 - What kinds of things do you do together?
 - How much time do you spend with her?
 - How has your relationship changed over time, or stayed the same?
3. In what ways is your sister important to you?
 - In what ways has she influenced you?
 - What do you depend on her for?
 - What is it like to be her older/younger sister?
4. How would your life be different if you didn't have a sister?
5. What mental images does the word sister conjure up for you? When you think of the word "sister" what qualities do you think of? like, a sister is someone who.... what?

CONTENT OF DISCLOSURE

1. What kinds of things do you talk about w/ your sister? Do you ever talk about things, like secrets, feelings, religion, with your sister? How often?
2. Tell me about a time when your sister confided in you (shared personal info, feelings, experience).
3. Tell me about a time when you confided in your sister.
4. In what ways do conversations with you sister differ from those you have with your mom? With your best friend? Who do you usually talk to about your problems?
5. Why is your sister a good person/not a good person to confide in?

SELF-DISCLOSURE OVER TIME

1. Tell me about the relationship you had when you were younger, before you became teenagers. What kinds of things did you talk about? How important was talking to your relationship?
2. How has your relationship changed? How have conversations changed? How important is sharing and talking to your relationship now? Is talking the bulk of your relationship or just a little part? If little part, what makes up the rest of your relationship?
3. Tell me about arguments then and now.
4. How much of the talk that you do is just everyday conversations, pretty superficial, and how much is deeper and more personal (secrets, opinions, etc)? Ratio

PROCESS

1. Does your sister confide in you as much as you confide in her?
-Equal or unequal sharing? Why?
2. Tell me what usually happens when you talk about important things. Describe the scene for me...Where do you usually have serious talks, how does the listener respond, does it usually result in the other person confiding? How long are these talks? How do you feel after? What are the outcomes of intimate conversations?

ROLE OF DISCLOSURE

1. In what ways does talking on an intimate personal level affect your relationship?
conflict, time spent together, emotional support.
2. What are the rewards of talking with your sister and sharing personal things with her?
3. What are the drawbacks (why is sometimes bad)?
4. How does talking intimately with your sister affect your feelings for her, about relationship?
5. How satisfied are you with your current relationship? How much does having your sister as a confidant affect satisfaction?

6. Do you think your sister shares your feelings and perceptions of the relationship
(good, close) How similar are her answers?

Appendix D
CODING CATEGORIES

100 MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY SISTER

- 101 Feelings for my sister
- 102 Closeness
- 103 Getting along
- 104 What I value in my relationship
- 105 Being an older sister
- 106 Being a younger sister
- 107 Talking-amount and importance
- 108 Amount of time spent together and reasons for

200 CONTENT

- 201 Boys
- 202 Family
- 203 Friends
- 204 Other topics

300 DISCLOSING TO MY SISTER

- 301 How I disclose
- 302 How talking to my sister makes me feel

400 BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

- 401 Telling other people
- 402 Emotional reactions

500 WHY I LIKE TO TALK TO MY SISTER

501 She understands

502 Trust

503 Listening

504 Not judging

600 CHILDHOOD VS ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS

601 What we did as children

602 Role of talking then vs now

603 Time spent then vs now

604 Reasons for changes

600 WHAT TALKING DOES FOR US

601 Closeness

602 Understanding

603 Realistically seeing

604 Disagreements

700 MOMS, SISTERS AND BEST FRIENDS

701 Differences in understanding

702 Differences in consequences of disclosing

703 Differences in amount of time spent together

VITA
Krista Cecil Hadermann

EDUCATION

M.S., Child Development, May 1999. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia.

B.A., Social Work/Psychology, May 1994. Western Maryland College, Westminster, Maryland.

EXPERIENCE

Head Teacher, August 1996-May 1998. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Lab School. Responsible for care, supervision and curriculum development for 3 and 4 year olds. Supervised undergraduates.

Nanny, January 1995-July 1996. New Market, Maryland. Responsible for care and supervision of an infant and preschooler.

Intern, September 1993-May 1994. Carroll County Family Center, Westminster, Maryland. Provided counseling and parent education to adolescent mothers.

PRESENTATIONS

The Writing Center: Building Relationships. 1998 Virginia Association for Early Childhood Education conference, Crystal City, Virginia.