Same-Sex and Cross-Sex Siblings: Activity Choices, Roles, Behavior, and Gender Stereotypes

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Forty same-sex and cross-sex school-aged sibling pairs were observed in their homes during self-selected activities. The sex role learning index (SERLI) and a sex-typing room analysis were administered for the younger siblings, and maternal questionnaire information was obtained. Sibling gender constellation was associated with reliable differences in activity choices during the unstructured observations. Male dyads interacted less than other sibling groups, while older sisters in female dyads engaged in the most teaching. Older female siblings, regardless of the gender of the younger sibling, assumed the manager role frequently. Dyads containing an older girl also exhibited the greatest role asymmetrics. Affective differences related to gender constellation were also noted. Younger girls with older brothers and younger boys with older sisters evidenced the least gender stereotyping.

In recent years, researchers have demonstrated renewed interest in the role of siblings in child development. It has become increasingly evident that brothers and sisters exert influences on each other that are different from the influences exerted by other powerful social agents, such as parents and peers (Hartup, 1980; Lamb, 1982). Most of the observational research on
siblings has focused on infants and preschool-aged children (Abramovitch, Corter, & Lando, 1979; Abramovitch, Corter, & Pepler, 1980; Dunn & Kendrick, 1981; Lamb, 1978a, b; Samuels, 1980). Several studies, however, have begun to investigate the interactions of school-age siblings (Brody, Stoneman, & MacKinnon, 1982, in press; Brody, Stoneman, MacKinnon, & MacKinnon, 1985; Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980; Minnett, Vandell, & Santrock, 1983; Stoneman, Brody, & MacKinnon, 1984).

One important area of inquiry for sibling researchers concerns the contexts in which siblings choose to interact. A contextual approach to sibling relationships (Brody & Stoneman, 1986) posits that sibling interaction patterns cannot be understood apart from the contexts in which they occur. Siblings conform their behavior to existing contexts and contribute to the creation of new contexts through their own actions and choices. Activities in which siblings engage when they play together at home constitute one important contextual parameter. For same-sex siblings, differences between the activities selected by male and female sibling pairs have been documented (Stoneman et al., 1984). Little is known, however, about the activities selected by sibling dyads containing both a boy and a girl. Therefore, the first purpose of the current study was to examine the activities in which same-sex and cross-sex siblings engaged while playing together at home.

A second important research question concerns the role relationships that occur during sibling interactions. In essence, a role is a patterned sequence of actions performed in an interactive or social context (Stoneman & Brody, 1982). These roles, it can be argued, have important developmental outcomes (Bargh & Schul, 1980; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Zajonc & Markus, 1975). Learning and enacting a role not only teaches the child about that specific role, but also about the complementary roles. Effective social exchange requires the child to know the expectations of complementary roles in order to engage in smooth, predictable social interactions. Complementary roles such as teacher/learner, manager/managee, and helper/helpee, as well as roles such as playmate and interactor, have been described in the sibling literature as important to sibling socialization (Weisner & Gallimore, 1977). Distinct role asymmetries between older and younger siblings have been detected while same-sex siblings played a broad game together (Brody et al., 1982), as well as during a variety of self-selected activities (Brody et al., 1985; Stoneman et al., 1984). Older siblings tend to assume teacher and manager roles, while their younger brothers and sisters assume less dominant learner and managee roles.

Gender differences in the role relationships of school-aged siblings have been found in several studies. In general, female sibling pairs play together more than males (Brody et al., 1985; Stoneman et al., 1984). Among same-sex siblings, older girls assume a teacher role more than boys, even after dif-