SIBLINGS OF DISABLED CHILDREN MORE SELF-CONTROLLED, COOPERATIVE THAN PEERS, SAYS BYU STUDY

Brothers and sisters of children with disabilities demonstrate greater social skills than siblings of children without disabilities, according to a new study by Brigham Young University researchers.

The news that siblings of children with disabilities are more cooperative and exhibit more self-control than their peers is helping change the perception that families with a child with a disability are seriously disadvantaged, said Barbara Mandelco, associate professor of nursing and lead researcher on the study.

"It's not all negative. Yes, these families have challenges, but in many respects they are doing really well," said Mandelco. "That's the positive message of our work."

Published in the current issue of the "Journal of Family Nursing," the study reports the perceptions of 78 sets of parents, half of whom had a child with a cognitive, developmental or compound disability, and the elementary school teachers of their non-disabled siblings. Parents completed questionnaires on family functioning, which asked about marital and family conflict, cohesion and whether or not the family viewed itself as capable and responsible for solving its own problems.

Teachers were asked questions about how these siblings interacted with other children -- did they control their temper in conflict situations; did they invite others to join in activities unprompted; did they get along with people who are different than themselves?

"The teachers provided an objective viewpoint of the child's everyday behavior," said Susanne Frost Olsen, a BYU associate professor of marriage, family and human development. "We took the parent data, along with the teacher data and ran statistical analyses to see if there were differences between families who were raising a child with a disability and those who were not."

The researchers found no significant differences in problem behaviors between the two groups, but discovered an advantage in the social skills of siblings of children with disabilities.

"For families to know that there are positive aspects to having a member with a disability gives them a different perspective," said researcher Elaine Marshall, who is also dean of BYU's nursing college. "In that respect, the study's findings almost become therapeutic."

Janet A. Deatrick, an associate professor of nursing at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Nursing, said she is excited about the study.

"This is very important work that sheds light on families who have children with a disability," said Deatrick, who serves as co-director of Penn's International Center of Research for Women, Children and Families. "The study's theoretical framework, data analysis and interpretation are sound and enable clinicians and researchers to understand the child as well as the family unit."

The BYU researchers acknowledge that the study is partially limited because of the sample on which the findings are based -- mostly white, two-parent, middle-class families in Utah. Future research will try to determine why the siblings of children with disabilities may demonstrate greater social skills.

In the meantime, BYU researchers are pleased their findings may offer hope to people in less-than-perfect situations. Tina Taylor Dyches, a BYU professor of counseling psychology and special education, who has worked with the families of children with disabilities, is optimistic.

"It's a different world today -- these families don't ignore the negative aspects of raising a child with disabilities, but more and more they are looking for the positives," said Dyches. "Before, they would ask one another, 'How bad is it for you?' Now, it's, 'What works for you?'"

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