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SIBLING REACTION TO A HEARING IMPAIRED CHILD IN THE FAMILY

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Currently, there has been a growing interest in investigating the influence of handicapped children on the attitudes and behaviors of their nonhandicapped siblings. Siblings serve important functions within a family: they observe and evaluate each other's behavior, learn from each other, and share resources and experiences (Murphy, 1979). Seligman (1983) suggested that the presence of a handicapped child alters both the structure of a family and the way in which siblings interact. According to Murphy (1979), siblings of handicapped children share common concerns related to family relationships, social relationships and relationships with their handicapped brothers or sisters. However, little is known about the manner in which siblings are influenced by a handicapped brother or sister. In particular, there is little information available regarding sibling reaction to a severely to profoundly hearing impaired child.

A review of the research on siblings of children with handicapping conditions other than hearing impairment suggested that siblings are differentially affected by their experiences. Many siblings reported that the presence of a handicapped brother or sister in the family had a positive influence on their subsequent adjustment and coping behaviors (Cleveland & Miller, 1977; Graliker, Fishler & Koch, 1962; Grossman, 1972). Other siblings appeared to be negatively affected by the experience (Breslau, Weitzman & Messenger, 1981; Trevino, 1979). For some siblings, the presence of a handicapped child in the family appeared to have little or no impact on their growth and development (Breslau et al., 1981).

The extent to which siblings are held responsible for their handicapped brother or sister is often related to their feelings and perceptions about themselves, their handicapped siblings, and their parents (Seligman, 1983). A handicapped child absorbs a great amount of a family's time, energy, money, and emotional resources. As a result, nonhandicapped brothers and sisters

may be required to take on extra family responsibilities. In addition, they may be expected to compensate for their handicapped sibling's deficit by achieving at high levels in school, athletics, or work (Schild, 1971). Some researchers and clinicians suggest that excessive responsibility for a handicapped child may lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, anger, and possible psychological disturbance (Breslau et al., 1981; Pozanski, 1969; Trevino, 1979; San Martino & Newman, 1974).

Schwirian (1976) investigated the impact of preschool age severely hearing impaired children on the behavior patterns of older normally hearing siblings, using a protocol in which the mothers were the respondents. She concluded that the presence of a hearing impaired child does not significantly affect the amount of family responsibility older siblings are expected to assume or their degree of independence.

In a related study, Israelite (in review) investigated the influence of elementary age, severely to profoundly hearing impaired children on self-reported levels of family responsibility, depression, anxiety, and self-concept by normally hearing, female adolescent siblings. Results indicated significant differences on two dimensions of self-concept: identify and social self. The author suggested that the presence of a hearing impaired child in the family influences certain aspects of psychological functioning for siblings.

The purpose of the present study was to further investigate how the presence of a hearing impaired child in the family influences the feelings and perceptions of normally hearing, female adolescent siblings. This was accomplished by interviewing siblings with regard to some of the issues and concerns delineated by Murphy (1979).

METHOD

Subjects

The participants included 14 normally hearing

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female adolescents, who were siblings of younger, severely to profoundly hearing impaired children. The subjects were aged 14 - 18 years with a mean age of 16 years, 3 months and were reported by parents and teachers to have no serious handicapping conditions. They were located in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and New York. Their parents were normally hearing.

The hearing impaired brothers and sisters of the participants were aged 7 - 12 years, with a mean age of 10 years, 6 months, and were enrolled in full-day, nonresidential educational programs. They were prelingually impaired with a three frequency better ear pure tone average poorer than 85 dB HL (ANSI). According to school reports, the hearing impaired children were of normal intelligence and had no serious multihandicapping conditions. One-parent families and families in which more than one child was handicapped were excluded from the investigation.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in the present study was an interview protocol developed by the investigator. The protocol, which was adapted from Murphy (1979), consisted of 8 open-ended questions related to family relationships, social relationships, and career choices. (See Appendix for complete interview protocol.)

Prior to initiation of the investigation, the instrument was pilot tested with three college-age siblings of hearing impaired children. The investigator modified the instrument based on the results of the pilot study.

Procedure

In order to obtain participants, the investigator contacted administrators of 13 day programs for the hearing impaired throughout the State of Pennsylvania. Following local approval of the research project, the administrators of 11 programs contacted those families of hearing impaired children from their schools that were considered suitable for the investigation. Names and addresses of families who consented to participate were forwarded to the investigator. From the list of 38 volunteer families, the investigator selected participants from those meeting the selection criteria. The low incidence of severe to profound hearing impairment coupled with stringent selection criteria severely limited the subject pool. All families

who met the criteria were included in the present study. Although the original intent was to investigate the effects of a hearing impaired child on both male and female siblings, the characteristics of the subject pool necessitated study of female siblings only.

A standard description of the project and request for participation were mailed to all volunteer families. Subsequently, home meetings were scheduled. During the home meetings, the investigator explained details of the study and secured the consent of the parents and subjects.

The subjects were interviewed in a private, comfortable environment in their own homes. The investigator conversed with the subjects before administering the interview protocol in order to establish rapport. All responses to the protocol were audiotape recorded.

RESULTS

Responses to the interview were transcribed and analyzed to discern common trends. The following review discusses the results and sibling comments with regard to each question.

Family Relationships

Relationship with parents. The purpose of Question 1 was to ascertain whether subjects felt that relationships with their parents were influenced by a hearing impaired brother or sister. The subjects were equally divided in their opinions, with 7 responding affirmatively, 4 subjects additionally commented that the hearing impaired child had strengthened relationships by bringing family members closer together. Those subjects who felt that the relationships with parents were not influenced commented that the relationships shared with their parents were similar to those shared by friends with normally hearing siblings.

Four subjects commented that they were expected to assume more family responsibilities in comparison to friends with normally hearing siblings. Three of these subjects were resentful of perceived inequities in family responsibility and parental attention. They felt strongly that the presence of their hearing impaired brother or sister had created an unfavorable family climate.

Question 2 investigated the issue of parent aspirations for nonhandicapped siblings of hearing impaired children. When asked if parental expectations were influenced by the presence

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of a hearing impaired child in the family, only 3 subjects responded affirmatively, indicating that their parents expected better grades and more mature behavior. Of the 11 subjects who felt that parental expectations were not influenced, most indicated that their parents had high expectations for all children in the family.

Question 3 explored whether siblings were ever jealous of the familial attention frequently focused on hearing impaired children. Six subjects stated that they had experienced feelings of jealousy, particularly when they were younger and had less understanding of hearing impairment. Eight subjects indicated that they were never jealous of their hearing impaired sibling, and attributed this to consistent, considerate parental behavior.

Relationships with hearing impaired siblings. Question 4 asked siblings to describe how they expressed both positive and negative feelings toward their hearing impaired brother or sister. Subjects stated that they expressed positive feelings by paying more attention to the hearing impaired child, participating in joint activities, and making special efforts to communicate. Subjects also reported that negative feelings were more difficult to manage. A common strategy was to ignore hearing impaired siblings until negative feelings had dissipated. Most subjects commented on the difficulty in maintaining mutually satisfying verbal interactions with their hearing impaired brother or sister. For some, this led to physical expressions of frustration and anger.

Social Relationships

The purpose of Question 5 was to ascertain how hearing impaired children influenced the social lives of normally hearing siblings. In general, subjects reported that they were not expected to include hearing impaired brothers and sisters in their social activities. Four subjects, however, reported that they and their friends enjoyed interacting with the hearing impaired child. Three subjects stated that they did not feel comfortable in social activities when hearing impaired brothers or sisters were included. In a number of instances, subjects commented that parents made special efforts to ensure that social lives were neither influenced nor limited by hearing impaired brothers or sisters.

In Question 6, siblings were asked to describe how they explained hearing impairment to

friends. Although one subject commented that she was embarrassed by questions and comments, most subjects stated that they discussed hearing impairment as openly and honestly as possible. Frequently, they reported that friends took a continuing interest in the academic and communicative progress of their hearing impaired brother or sister.

Question 7 investigated strategies used by siblings when confronted with unkind or otherwise public responses to their hearing impaired brother or sister. Some subjects handled public encounters by briefly explaining the hearing impairment; others removed themselves and the hearing impaired child from the situation. Subjects commonly reported that they advised their hearing impaired brother or sister to ignore negative public reaction. They also expressed the feeling that unwise or unkind remarks were made out of ignorance or concern rather than malice.

Career Choices

The final question pertained to the effect of a hearing impaired child on the career choices of normally hearing adolescent siblings. Nine of the subjects reported that their hearing impaired brother or sister had influenced career goals. Of this group, only one wanted to become a teacher of the hearing impaired and two indicated interest in careers in helping professions. The remaining seven stated that frustrating experiences with their hearing impaired siblings had caused them to consider careers in nonrelated, and frequently high technical, areas. Those who stated that they were not influenced by the presence of a hearing impaired child in the family also indicated preferences for highly technical career areas.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present investigation showed a mixed pattern of sibling reaction to a hearing impaired child. With regard to the family, siblings were divided in their opinions as to the effect of the hearing impaired child on relationships with parents. They were equally divided as to expressed feelings of jealousy directed toward their hearing impaired brother or sister. In social settings, siblings varied both in their willingness to include hearing impaired children in social activities and in their strategies for managing negative public interactions.

Trends in response patterns suggested that

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sibling's feelings and perceptions were influenced by the presence of a hearing impaired child in the family. Subjects who expressed positive feelings about their hearing impaired brother or sister tended to express positive opinions with regard to family relationships and social relationships. They maintained close ties with parents and their hearing impaired brothers or sisters. In addition, they tended to effectively manage social interactions.

Subjects who expressed negative feelings about their hearing impaired brother or sister expressed similarly negative feelings and opinions throughout the interview. Most striking was their perspective regarding the negative influence of a hearing impaired child on relationships with parents. Although the issue of family responsibility was not addressed in the interview protocol, more than 50% of this group commented on perceived inequities in family responsibility and parental attention. These subjects also maintained surface relationships with their hearing impaired brothers or sisters and did not feel comfortable including them in social activities.

These findings are consistent with the diverse

results reported by previous researchers. The findings also support the contention that siblings are differentially influenced by the presence of a hearing impaired child in the family. While some siblings may be adversely affected, others may benefit from their experiences. Thus, siblings of hearing impaired children should be viewed as a heterogeneous group.

Informal observation of families during the home meetings and inspection of the research data led to the impression that the variability in sibling reaction to a hearing impaired child may be related to variability in parental attitudes and behavior. The presence of a hearing impaired child seemed to strengthen relationships in some families, while exacerbating already tenuous situations in others. Future research should attempt to identify those variables within family systems that promote both positive and negative patterns of sibling adjustment. Direct observation of sibling interaction and family interaction would provide additional useful information for professionals working with hearing impaired children and their families.

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APPENDIX **Interview Protocol**

Family Relationships

1. Think about how you get along with your parents. Now think about your best friend and how he/she gets along with his/her parents. How are these relationships the same? How are they different? Do you think that having a hearing impaired child in your family has affected the way you get along with your parents?
2. Do you ever think that your parents have higher expectations for you, because your brother/sister is hearing impaired? If yes: in what areas do they expect you to perform at a higher level than your hearing impaired brother/sister – in school work, in sports, in the kind of a career they would like you to have?
3. I once saw a video-taped interview of a young woman who has a hearing impaired sister. In the interview, the woman said when she was younger, she was very jealous of all the attention that her hearing impaired sister got from their parents. When she was very young, she sometimes wished that she were hearing impaired, too. Have you ever been jealous of the amount of attention that your hearing impaired brother/sister gets from your parents and other family members?
4. How do you show good and bad feelings toward your hearing impaired brother/sister?

Social Relationships

5. Does your hearing impaired brother/sister affect your social life? If yes: how does this occur?
6. How do you explain your hearing impaired sibling's handicap to your friends?
7. Have you ever heard other people say unkind or unwise things about your hearing impaired brother/sister? If yes: how do you respond to these people?

Career Choices

8. What are your career goals? Has the presence of a hearing impaired child in your family influenced your choice of a future career? If yes: how has this circumstance influenced your career decisions?