

Latino Immigrant Children's Sibling Relationships: A Context for Positive Development

Ana M. Nuñez, Maria A. Salamanca, Lindsay Gips, David Murray, Sarka Turecka, Christine Donovan, Michelle Espinal & Ganie B. DeHart

Abstract

Despite limited research, there is reason to believe that siblings can serve positive and protective functions in the lives of immigrant Latino children in the United States, due to high levels of familism and parental expectations that older siblings will help and care for younger siblings. We explored this phenomenon by analyzing Latino immigrant children's aggressive and prosocial behaviors with siblings in semi-structured play situations. Latino siblings demonstrated lower rates of aggression than a comparison group of Anglo sibling pairs, and both ethnicity and gender made a difference in levels of prosocial behavior. Sibling relationships may serve a protective function and foster positive development for Latino immigrant children, especially for older sisters.

Introduction

Despite limited research, there is reason to believe that siblings can serve positive and protective functions in the lives of immigrant Latino children in the United States. Existing research and anecdotal evidence indicate high levels of familism in immigrant Latino families, along with parental expectations that older siblings will help younger siblings negotiate life in a new setting in which the parents may not feel fully comfortable. This set of values and expectations is likely to foster sibling roles and behavior that differ from those found in Anglo-American families. For example, older siblings in immigrant Latino families, especially girls, often take on the role of secondary parental figures to their younger siblings, expected to fulfill much more extensive caregiving, teaching, and disciplinary functions than older siblings in most Anglo communities. These sibling relationships may offer benefits to both older and younger siblings: opportunities for older siblings to practice nurturance and role modeling and for younger siblings to receive guidance and support from older siblings.

Although the Latino population is the fastest growing minority group in the United States, behavioral research on sibling relationships in Latino families is surprisingly limited. The present study examined Latino children's interactions with siblings in semi-structured free-play situations, focusing on various types of aggressive and prosocial behavior. Based on past research and anecdotal evidence, we hypothesized that Latino sibling pairs would have lower rates of aggression and higher rates of prosocial behavior than comparable pairs of Anglo siblings, and that these differences might be particularly marked for older sisters.

Method

Participants:

A total of 25 Latino middle- and lower-class families from Rochester, NY, and the New York City area, as well as 25 Anglo families from the Rochester area participated in this study. The researchers recruited Latino participants through social networks such as Latino community groups and church groups. The Anglo sibling pairs are part of a larger longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships in childhood and adolescence. The Latino sibling pairs were about evenly distributed in terms of gender pairing (same sex = 13, mixed sex = 12), with wide variation in age (younger siblings $M = 58.46$ months, range 44-66.67 months; older siblings $M = 121.92$ months, range 119.6-130 months), ethnicity (Dominican and Puerto Rican), and acculturation status (from recent immigrants to third generation in the United States). The Anglo sibling pairs were chosen from a larger sample to resemble the Latino pairs in regards to age (younger siblings $M = 65.5$ months, range 46.67-76 months; older siblings $M = 110.93$, range 101-113.8 months) and gender composition (same sex = 15, mixed sex = 10). All families were offered a 10-dollar gift card and a small prize for each child as a token of gratitude for their participation.

Method (cont.)

Materials and Procedures:

Researchers taped the sibling pairs playing in a familiar setting, usually at home, in a location with sufficient play space. Each pair participated in a 30-minute session that included a ten-minute construction task, a ten-minute board game session, and a ten-minute free-play session. Only the free-play sessions is analyzed in the current study.

The researchers then transcribed the footage and coded each sibling pair for aggression and prosocial behaviors, using coding schemes from the longitudinal study. Aggression was defined as any behavior intended to harm or bother the partner; prosocial behavior was defined as any action intended to benefit the partner. Aggression was subdivided into relational aggression (RA) (behaviors intended to damage or threaten to damage a relationship, such as intentional ignoring, relationship insults, negative comments to third parties, malicious tattling), physical aggression (PA) (hitting, kicking, biting, grabbing toys, destroying something partner was building, etc.), and verbal aggression (VA) (non-relational aggressive utterances).

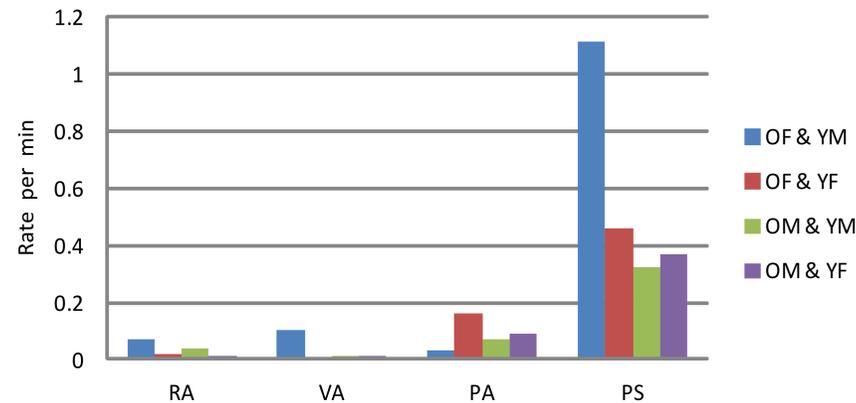


Figure 1. Aggression and prosocial behaviors among Latino siblings.

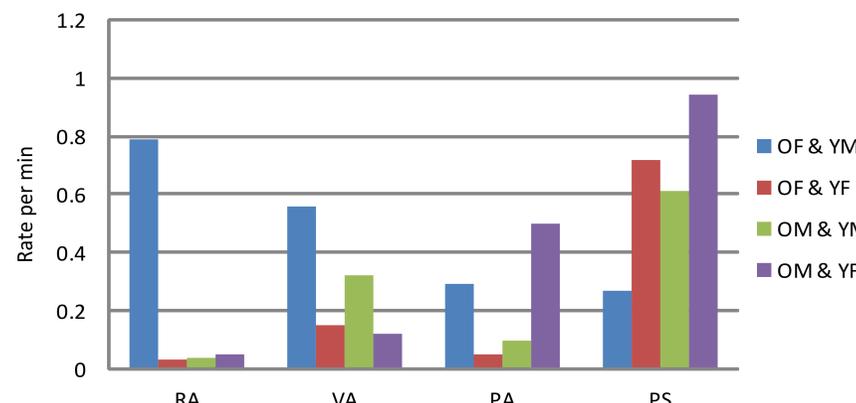


Figure 2. Aggression and prosocial behaviors among Anglo siblings.

Results(cont.)

Because we were particularly interested in possible cultural differences in the roles of older siblings, we focused in this study on older siblings' behavior. To examine the roles of ethnicity and gender in older siblings' aggressive and prosocial behaviors, we conducted a series of 2 (ethnicity: Latino/Anglo) X 2 (older sibling gender) X 2 (younger sibling gender) ANOVAs. Because the length of the play sessions varied, the dependent variables were rates of the various forms of aggression and prosocial behavior per minute. Figures 1 and 2 show effects of both ethnicity and gender for all three forms of aggression and for prosocial behavior:

Total Aggression:

- Anglo older siblings produced marginally more total aggressive behavior than Latino older siblings did ($p = .072$).

Relational Aggression (RA):

- Overall, Anglo older siblings produced more RA than Latino older siblings ($p < .05$).
- In both Latino and Anglo families, older sisters produced more RA than older brothers ($p < .05$).
- There was a significant interaction between ethnicity, older sibling (OS) gender, and younger sibling (YS) gender. Specifically, Anglo older brothers directed more RA toward younger sisters, but everyone else directed more RA toward younger sisters ($p < .05$).

Verbal Aggression (VA):

- Overall, Anglo older siblings showed more verbal aggression than Latino older siblings ($p < .01$).
- Anglo older siblings directed more VA toward younger brothers than toward younger sisters ($p < .05$), but this was not true for Latino older siblings (in part because their rate of VA was so very low).

Physical Aggression (PA):

- Anglo older siblings tended to produce more PA than Latino older siblings, but the difference did not reach statistical significance, due to high variability among Anglo sibling pairs in levels of physical aggression.

Prosocial Behavior (PS):

- There was a marginally significant ethnicity X OS gender effect ($p = .90$). In Latino sibling pairs, older sisters showed more prosocial behavior than older brothers, especially toward younger brothers, but the reverse was true for Anglo sibling pairs.

Discussion

As predicted, Latino older siblings produced lower rates of aggression than a comparison group of Anglo sibling pairs, but there was no ethnic difference in overall rates of prosocial behavior. There were also ethnicity by gender interaction effects for most forms of aggression; the patterns of behavior for older siblings differed considerably between the two ethnic groups. In particular, Latina older sisters showed elevated rates of certain types of aggression and prosocial behavior, all of which were related to either care giving or control of younger siblings; this finding was particularly strong for girls with younger brothers.

Our results suggest that sibling relationships can provide Latino immigrant children with a context in which potentially useful social behaviors related to giving and receiving nurturance and exercising and experiencing control can be modeled and practiced. Many of these experiences may serve a protective function and foster positive development for both older and younger siblings; the effects might be expected to be particularly strong for older sisters.

