

**0714**

## **The Interactions and Relationships between Young Twins**

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### **Background**

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfES, 2007) identifies how, from birth, children are 'competent learners' who seek to communicate with those around them. Social competence with peers is a key skill that helps infants integrate into the group to which they may belong and assists them in making friends (Howes, 1987; Kramer & Gottman, 1992; Dunn, 2004).

The ten-year strategy, *Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children* (HMT, 2004), building on the *Green Paper Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), set the vision to ensure every child gets the best start in life and provided parents with more choice about how they balance work and family life. The result is that more young children are in group care outside the home. Whilst it is unlikely that there is a simple correlation between the way children get on with their siblings and their friends, as each relationship is unique, research in this area can be used to gain a better understanding of the way children develop social understanding and competence (Dunn, 2004; Cutting & Dunn, 2006) generally.

The study of siblings is a largely untapped resource yet provides valuable information about how young children develop and their understanding of other children. Knowing how to tease, for example, implies knowledge of what will annoy them. If poor sibling relationships early in life predict adverse outcomes, this may also mean that harmonious relationships early in life serve as protective factors, setting the stage for positive development and relationship outcomes in adulthood (Dunn, 2004; Kramer and Bank, 2005).

When in such care, children are often with same-age peers so using the relationship between same-age siblings (i.e. twins) will provide opportunity to learn about social development of same-age children. Vandell, et al. (1988) observed interactions between twins aged 6-24 months and the interactions these twins had with unfamiliar twin-peers. By 12 months they noted some generalisations between the interactions with a co-twin and with an unfamiliar peer. Twins that displayed more social behaviours in one situation (with co-twin or twin-peer) also did so in the other, suggesting that being a twin does not mean greater social competence, though a twin spends most of his/her childhood with a same-age child.

### **Research Questions**

The aims of the study were to:

- identify within the literature work that has been carried out in the area of the social experiences of very young same-age siblings and peers;
- describe and analyse the nature of relationships between same-age siblings under two years;
- consider the implications of such research for those caring for young children.

The research question was:

What is the nature of the relationship (social interactions) between same-age siblings (twins) and what are the implications for the care and development of same-age peers in group settings?

### **Methods**

The social interactions of two sets of twins during free play sessions in their home were studied. Data were collected from four and ten months until five-years old.

The twins were visited regularly so that they became comfortable in the presence of the researcher. Sessions were video-recorded. Bi-monthly sessions until the twins were two-years-old were used during this analysis. Sessions lasted about thirty minutes.

Before mobile the twins were placed next to each other on a blanket or in their chair. Once mobile they were allocated a part of the house, usually a room they normally played in.

## **Frame**

Several types of analysis took place. Firstly, ten-minute samples (created by leaving the first five 'acclimatisation' minutes and documenting the next ten) of each session were analysed thematically in order to identify normal, frequent interactions and social behaviours of the children. Secondly, episodes of sustained and intensive interactions were documented over the whole data collection period in order to highlight the range of positive and negative interactions that occurred. Thirdly, the amount of time the infants spent in close proximity to each other was measured.

## **Research findings**

Preliminary analysis revealed that as the children got older the interactions and social behaviours became more complex and varied. From four months there were distinct signs of interest in each other. Once at least one twin (ten months) was mobile, both dyads spent a significant amount of time in close proximity (up to 50%). Interactions also became more complex with a mix of positive and negative interactions. At 16-18 months there were signs of both purposeful antagonism and joint activity increased. At 20-22 months there was an increase in the level of antagonism, humour as well as fantasy play were also evident. Finally, there was evidence of empathy.

These findings echo those of a broader and unrelated sample of children. Thus, they suggest that the same-age relationship development for twins in the home context and, hence, same-age peers in infant educare are significant. Dunn (2004; 14) agrees that we can learn about friendships by studying siblings as we see "capacities very young children have for sharing affection and support, and for their understanding of other people."

Detailed exploration of this sibling relationship and the use and development of social behaviours will allow further development supporting environments for the youngest children. Day care quality is a consistent predictor of children's social competence with both caregivers and their peers with settings considered 'high quality' proving more conducive for positive interactions (Volling & Feagans, 1995; Sylva et al. 2004, Gevers Deynoot-Schaub & Riksen-Walraven, 2006).

This study has highlighted several implications for practice, including the need to develop awareness and understanding of infant-infant relationships, the importance of interaction opportunities and developing familiarity with the wide repertoire of non-verbal communication young children establish with one another in the pre-verbal period.

The activities that children engage in with each other hold a wealth of information about how young children develop social understanding. Documenting, describing and analysing such behaviours further can help to improve the care and education provided for the youngest children, in and out of the home environment.

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