

Sibling Conflict and Its Resolution: The Influence of Family Subsystems

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Abstract

Sibling conflict refers to the incompatibility expressed in behaviors, goals, or activities between two or more individuals sharing the same biological parents within an intact family, which typically manifests as arguments, hostile emotions, and mutual aggressive behaviors. Parental intervention strategies for sibling conflict are categorized into child-centered strategies, control strategies, and non-intervention strategies. Family Systems Theory posits that the family is a hierarchically structured, dynamic system, wherein subsystems (including the parental marital relationship, parent-child relationship, and sibling relationship) are interconnected and mutually influential. Based on this theory, it is necessary to explore the influence of family subsystems on sibling conflict, integrate and construct theoretical hypothetical models of sibling conflict, in order to analyze the generation mechanisms of sibling conflict from a multi-path perspective. Future research needs to differentiate or integrate sibling conflict and its related concepts, examine the influencing factors of parental intervention strategies for sibling conflict, and view sibling conflict from a developmental perspective.

Full Text

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Abstract

Sibling conflict refers to the incompatibility expressed by two or more individuals with the same biological parents in their behaviors, goals, or activities within an intact family, typically manifesting as quarrels, hostility, and mutual aggression.

Parental intervention styles in sibling conflict can be divided into child-centered strategies, control strategies, and nonintervention strategies. Family systems theory posits that the family is a hierarchically structured, dynamic system in which subsystems (including marital relationships, parent-child relationships, and sibling relationships) are interconnected and mutually influential. Based on this theory, this paper examines the influence of family subsystems on sibling conflict and constructs an integrated theoretical hypothesis model of sibling conflict to analyze the generation mechanism of sibling conflict from a multi-path perspective. Future research needs to distinguish or integrate sibling conflict and its related concepts, focus on the factors influencing parental intervention styles in sibling conflict, and view sibling conflict from a developmental perspective.

Keywords: sibling conflict; sibling relationship; intervention style; family subsystem; influence pathway

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Introduction

One of the most challenging tasks parents face is deciding how to respond to conflicts between their children (Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). Although China's "one-child policy" meant that single-child families were the norm for over 40 years, recent policy changes—from "two children for both parents being only children" to "two children for one parent being an only child" to the "universal two-child policy"—mean that two-child families will replace single-child families as the dominant family structure (Yin et al., 2019). In these families, shocking news about sibling conflict (such as firstborns killing or verbally abusing their younger siblings) has become increasingly common (Chen et al., 2017). Consequently, sibling conflict has emerged as a serious topic of concern, and how parents should respond to it has become an urgent issue. China has long emphasized harmony as a core value, a principle that is particularly evident in family relationships; thus, virtually all parents hope their children can live together peacefully.

Against this backdrop, research on sibling conflict holds significant historical and practical importance. Sibling relationships represent the longest-lasting interpersonal relationships for most people, with siblings connecting in diverse ways and playing various roles for one another. Siblings may spend more time together than they do with their parents (Noller, 2005). In fact, the more time siblings spend together, the more conflicts they experience (Raffaelli, 1997).

Many researchers believe that sibling conflict not only undermines intimacy between siblings and disrupts harmonious family atmosphere but also has substantial negative effects on individual development, leading to increased sleep problems, behavioral disorders after school entry, antisocial behavior, and poor

peer relationships (Breitenstein et al., 2018; Bekkhus et al., 2011; Bank et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2020).

However, other researchers hold different views: compared with more voluntary relationships (such as friendships), sibling relationships are involuntary, providing ample space for siblings to learn communication skills without fear of losing the relationship (Howe & Recchia, 2014; Recchia et al., 2015). In conflicts with siblings or friends, children have opportunities to express and defend their positions, consider others' feelings or perspectives, and resolve disputes through negotiation. During this process, children can learn social and moral rules that guide behavior, which is significant for their development and socialization (Abuhatoum et al., 2018).

Sibling conflict is crucial for child and adolescent development, yet domestic research on this topic remains scarce. Therefore, this paper addresses three questions: (1) How should sibling conflict be defined? (2) What are the resolution methods for sibling conflict, specifically how can parents intervene to promote positive sibling relationships? (3) What is the relationship between sibling conflict and family subsystems, or how do family subsystems influence sibling conflict? By exploring these three aspects, this paper aims to alleviate parental concerns about sibling conflict in families and provide a theoretical foundation for future research.

1.1 Definition of Sibling Conflict

Currently, research on sibling conflict in China is extremely limited. In two articles examining sibling relationships, sibling conflict is treated as a dimension of sibling relationships, manifested as quarrels, jealousy, hostility, and mutual aggression (Chen et al., 2017; Zhao & Yu, 2017), but no explicit definition is provided. The international academic community also lacks a unified definition of sibling conflict. Some researchers consider sibling conflict to include negative aspects such as quarrels, fights, aggression, hostility, and coercion (Buist et al., 2013), while others define conflict more broadly as the incompatibility expressed in behaviors, goals, or activities when one person explicitly opposes another's actions or statements (Porta & Howe, 2017; Abuhatoum & Howe, 2013; Persram et al., 2017). Therefore, to address this gap, this paper defines sibling conflict as "the incompatibility expressed by two or more individuals with the same biological parents in their behaviors, goals, or activities within an intact family, typically manifesting as quarrels, hostility, and mutual aggression."

1.2 Types of Sibling Conflict

From the perspective of manifestation, sibling conflict can be categorized into verbal conflicts, physical conflicts, and psychological abuse. Verbal conflicts include quarreling, bickering, and insulting; physical conflicts include teasing, fighting, and aggression; and psychological abuse includes intimidation, threats, exclusion, and cold wars (Tippett & Wolke, 2015; Tompsett et al.,

2016; Bouchard et al., 2018). From the perspective of outcomes' effects on individuals, sibling conflict can be divided into constructive conflicts and destructive conflicts (Pickering & Sanders, 2017; Abuhatum et al., 2018). Constructive conflicts involve emotional control, sustained social interaction, and fair problem-solving through negotiation and reasoning, which effectively develop children' s communication skills. In contrast, destructive conflicts involve relationship deterioration, interaction disruption, and unfair problem resolution, causing serious negative effects on children (Pickering & Sanders, 2017; Abuhatum et al., 2018).

2 Parental Intervention Styles in Sibling Conflict

For many parents, managing conflict and aggressive behavior between siblings is a challenging task, and parental responses to sibling conflict affect the quality of sibling interactions (Bouchard et al., 2018). After reviewing existing literature, this paper identifies three parental intervention styles in sibling conflict: child-centered strategies, control strategies, and nonintervention strategies (Perozynski & Kramer, 1999; Kramer et al., 1999; Bouchard et al., 2018).

2.1 Child-Centered Strategies

Child-centered strategies refer to parents helping children communicate with each other, express their respective positions, and resolve conflicts through negotiation, reasoning, and reconciliation (Perozynski & Kramer, 1999; Ross & Lazinski, 2014). Within child-centered strategies, mediation is one of the most effective methods for intervening in sibling conflict. Mediation consists of four steps, as detailed in Table 1 .

Table 1. Four-Step Mediation Process 1. The mediator establishes ground rules and behavioral guidelines to reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation and hostility. 2. The mediator identifies the problem underlying the conflict. Only by clarifying the issue and focusing discussion can conflicting parties make progress toward resolution. 3. The mediator seeks to promote mutual understanding and build empathy between the conflicting parties. 4. The mediator encourages both parties to propose possible solutions and select ones that are acceptable and achievable for both.

Adapted from Smith & Ross, 2007; Ross & Lazinski, 2014.

Previous research on parental mediation of sibling conflict has found that mediation helps young children better understand their siblings' positions and encourages them to use more constructive conflict resolution strategies, including speaking calmly, sharing viewpoints, listening to siblings, explaining behaviors, apologizing, and proposing solutions (Siddiqui & Ross, 2004; Smith & Ross, 2007; Recchia & Howe, 2009). In Smith and Ross' s (2007) study, children in mediation-group families (where parents used mediation to intervene in sibling conflict) employed more constructive conflict resolution strategies and frequently communicated with siblings to resolve conflicts through reconciliation,

compared to control-group families. Ross and Lazinski (2014) obtained similar results. Additionally, Tucker and Kazura (2013) found that child-centered strategies were associated with positive sibling relationships. Thus, parents' use of child-centered strategies to intervene in sibling conflict can help children learn communication skills and more frequently resolve conflicts constructively, thereby reducing the recurrence of sibling conflict. In fact, intervention need not wait until conflict occurs; it also includes a preventive component. Kramer's (2010) review enumerates nine competencies for promoting sibling relationships and managing sibling conflict (as shown in Table 2). Parents should cultivate these competencies throughout their children's development to reduce sibling conflict and promote positive sibling relationships.

Table 2. Essential Competencies for Intimate Sibling Relationships in Early Childhood

Competency	Description
Play, talk, shared interests, enjoyment, and fun	Identify activities suitable for siblings at different developmental levels.
Recognize and value mutual help, support, protection, cooperation, loyalty, trust, and pride	Build supportive shared experiences. Appreciate siblings' unique understanding of each other and the family to strengthen bonds, while avoiding using this knowledge to harm siblings. Value both shared and independent interests.
Social and emotional understanding (perspective-taking)	Decenter; learn to evaluate and respect siblings' unique viewpoints, needs, goals, and interests. Identify and manage emotions when facing challenges and frustrations.
Avoid behaviors that siblings dislike	Such as being bossy, teasing, causing embarrassment in front of friends, disrespecting personal boundaries and space, being hyperactive, or acting silly.
Form neutral or positive attributions	In ambiguous situations, children may form hostile attributions about siblings' behavioral intentions; children must learn to examine or correct erroneous attributions. Family members should help clarify intentions and communicate about the impact of others' behaviors.

Competency	Description
Conflict management and problem-solving	Conflicts are solvable social problems, but children need explicit instruction in these methods. Parents' effective use and modeling of conflict management strategies (e.g., collaborative problem-solving, mediation) are crucial for children's learning.
Evaluate parental differential treatment	Discuss the impact of parental differential treatment and adjust parental behaviors to meet children's unique needs.

Adapted from Kramer (2010).

2.2 Control Strategies

Control strategies refer to parents resolving sibling conflict not from a perspective of understanding children but by eliminating conflict through punishment, threats, privilege revocation, or other controlling behaviors (Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). Recently, Relva, Alarcão, Fernandes, Carvalho, et al. (2019) conducted a study of 320 Portuguese adolescents and found that punitive intervention in sibling conflict by either fathers or mothers only led to more severe aggression and conflict between siblings. Similarly, Chen (2019), in a study of 542 Chinese adolescents, and Bouchard et al. (2018), in a study of 302 French-Canadian undergraduates, obtained comparable results. These empirical studies consistently demonstrate that control strategies are not an appropriate intervention method for sibling conflict among adolescents or adults, representing merely a “temporary fix” that fails to address root causes.

This may be related to adolescent characteristics, as teenagers' need for autonomy increases and they desire more equal interaction and communication with parents. Adults also have independent thoughts and perspectives and possess the capacity to resolve sibling conflicts themselves, suggesting that parental nonintervention strategies might be more appropriate. But what about younger children? Are control strategies an appropriate intervention method? Research indicates that among young children, parental authoritarian control cannot resolve sibling conflict or promote positive sibling relationships; instead, it leads to more severe sibling hostility and conflict later on (Kendrick & Dunn, 1983; Kramer et al., 1999; Perlman et al., 2007). This may be because young children cannot learn effective conflict resolution strategies from parental control strategies and thus remain unsure how to resolve conflicts with siblings subsequently. Therefore, parents need to “teach children to fish” rather than “give children fish.”

2.3 Nonintervention Strategies

Nonintervention strategies refer to parents not intervening in sibling conflicts or allowing children to resolve conflicts themselves (Bouchard et al., 2018). According to Adler's individual psychology theory, sibling conflict stems from jealousy and competition for parental attention and affection (Tucker & Kazura, 2013; Recchia & Witwit, 2017). Therefore, researchers and practitioners grounded in this perspective advocate for parental nonintervention, so that parental behavior is not perceived by siblings as favoring one child (Tucker & Kazura, 2013), thereby avoiding conflicts arising from competition for parental love and attention. Some researchers also argue that nonintervention strategies may be most suitable for adult siblings, as they are more capable of managing and resolving their own conflicts (Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). Similar perspectives suggest that as adolescents acquire necessary social skills and can effectively resolve sibling conflicts, increased parental intervention may actually reduce sibling relationship quality (Tucker & Finkelhor, 2015).

Conversely, other researchers argue that parental nonintervention hinders children's opportunities to learn communication skills during conflict and forfeits chances to teach conflict management strategies (Tucker & Kazura, 2013). Consequently, when sibling conflict recurs, children's lack of appropriate resolution methods may exacerbate the conflict. This aligns with Tucker and Kazura's (2013) findings that parental nonintervention is associated with more frequent sibling conflict. Therefore, regarding children's conflicts, parents need to comprehensively consider factors such as conflict motivations, children's ages, and children's cognitive developmental capacities when deciding whether to intervene.

Based on the above analysis of the three intervention styles, this paper can address three common parental concerns. First, should parents intervene in sibling conflict? The answer is clear: parents should intervene in sibling conflict, though caution is needed when intervening in conflicts among adult siblings. Second, how should parents intervene? Parents should primarily use child-centered strategies, avoid control strategies, and use nonintervention strategies cautiously. Third, what should parents pay attention to when intervening? First, parents need to flexibly apply these three strategies based on actual circumstances rather than rigidly applying them. For example, when severe physical conflict erupts between siblings, parents may first use control strategies to calm both parties before seizing an opportunity to mediate the conflict. Second, research shows that in both childhood and early adulthood, siblings with closer age gaps or the same gender tend to experience more conflict and aggression than those with wider age gaps or different genders (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2010; Stocker et al., 1997; Tucker et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2019). Therefore, parents should pay special attention to and provide guidance for siblings with close age gaps or the same gender. By addressing these three questions, parents should better understand how to manage children's conflict behaviors and thereby promote positive sibling relationships.

3 The Relationship Between Sibling Conflict and Family Subsystems

According to family systems theory, the family is a complex, unified system within which three important family relationships or subsystems can be identified: marital relationships, parent-child relationships, and sibling relationships (Cox & Paley, 1997; Cox & Paley, 2003; Cox, 2010; Whiteman et al., 2011). Sibling conflict also exists within this system and inevitably connects with other subsystems in various ways. Therefore, this paper analyzes the influence on sibling conflict from these three subsystems: marital relationships, parent-child relationships, and sibling relationships.

3.1 Marital Relationships and Sibling Conflict

To a large extent, many family problems are closely related to parents' marital relationships, and harmonious marital relationships lay the foundation for overall family harmony. Disharmonious marital relationships with frequent interpersonal conflicts inevitably affect other subsystems (Eriksen & Jensen, 2009). Interparental conflict includes a range of behaviors, from verbal disagreement to more severe psychological or physical aggression (Iturralde et al., 2013). According to the spillover perspective in family systems theory, emotions and behaviors in one family subsystem can spill over into another subsystem. Therefore, interparental conflict spills over into sibling relationships, deteriorating them and triggering sibling conflict (Yu & Gamble, 2008; Hakvoort et al., 2010; Ruff et al., 2017). This aligns with findings from numerous empirical studies. For example, Poortman and Voorpostel's (2009) empirical study on parental divorce found that interparental conflict directly leads to sibling conflict. Similarly, Stocker and Youngblade (1999) found that marital conflict was significantly associated with decreased warmth and increased conflict and competitive behavior among siblings. However, some studies have reached different conclusions: under poor marital relationships, siblings may provide mutual support and assistance, making sibling relationships closer and reducing sibling conflict (Hakvoort et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2019). This can be understood through the compensatory perspective in family systems theory. According to this perspective, emotions and behaviors in one family subsystem can compensate for those in another subsystem (Yu & Gamble, 2008; Hakvoort et al., 2010; Ruff et al., 2017). Therefore, when marital relationships are disharmonious, sibling relationships become closer, and vice versa, indicating a complementary relationship between the marital relationship and sibling relationship subsystems.

Parents' marital relationships are also reflected in child-rearing. For many parents, raising two children is challenging and requires intimate cooperation and coordinated parenting. Research shows that supportive coparenting (where both parents interact with each other warmly and cooperatively) is negatively correlated with sibling conflict, whereas destructive coparenting (where both parents interact with each other dismissively and critically) is positively correlated with sibling conflict (Chen, 2019). Therefore, during child-rearing, parents should

understand and support each other to promote positive sibling relationships and reduce sibling conflict.

Sibling conflict can also affect parents' marital relationships in turn. For example, when children develop highly antagonistic and conflictual sibling interactions, parents may experience shame, self-blame, or emotions and feelings that undermine their parenting self-efficacy (Yu & Gamble, 2008; Feinberg et al., 2012), which may reduce the quality of parents' marital relationships.

3.2 Parent-Child Relationships and Sibling Conflict

In addition to marital relationships, the relationship between parents and children—the parent-child relationship—also significantly influences sibling conflict. This paper categorizes parent-child relationships into two types: first, equal treatment, where parents maintain either good or poor relationships with each child; second, differential treatment, where parents' relationships with each child differ.

Currently, the relationship between parent-child relationships and sibling relationships has been well-researched internationally. Many studies support that positive parent-child relationships are associated with good sibling relationships (Pike et al., 2005; Hoffman et al., 2005), while negative parent-child relationships are associated with sibling conflict and aggression (Hoffman et al., 2005; Eriksen & Jensen, 2006; Hakvoort et al., 2010; Tompsett et al., 2016). However, some studies have reached opposite conclusions: when parents have poor relationships with both children, the sibling relationship between the two children may become closer and warmer (Yu & Gamble, 2008; Noller, 2005). This can also be understood through the compensatory perspective in family systems theory, which suggests a complementary relationship between the parent-child relationship and sibling relationship subsystems: when the parent-child relationship is disharmonious, the sibling relationship becomes closer, and vice versa (Yu & Gamble, 2008; Hakvoort et al., 2010; Ruff et al., 2017).

Although exact numbers vary considerably across studies, reports indicate that in one-third to two-thirds of families, parents favor one or more children in at least one domain (Shebloski et al., 2005; Volling & Elins, 1998). However, when children perceive that parents show favoritism toward any sibling in the family, sibling relationships become distressed, leading to decreased intimacy and increased conflict (Suitor et al., 2008; Suitor et al., 2009; Shanahan et al., 2008; Dawson et al., 2015; Phillips & Schrodt, 2015). Nevertheless, children's perceptions of parental favoritism or differential treatment can moderate the adverse effects of parental favoritism. In some cases, this moderation is positive; for example, when children believe another child needs more help, their hostility toward that sibling decreases (McGuire & Shanahan, 2010). Conversely, the moderation can be negative; for instance, when these perceptions lead less-favored children to feel inadequate and believe parental treatment is justified (McHale, Updegraff, Jackson-Newsom, et al., 2000).

Sibling conflict can also influence parent-child relationships in turn. For example, Kim et al. (2006) found that sibling intimacy was associated with maternal acceptance, while sibling conflict was associated with both father-child and mother-child conflict. Other researchers have found that sibling quarrels and discord cause parental stress and worry, which may determine the overall emotional climate or affective tone of parent-child relationships and parents' attitudes toward their children (Yu & Gamble, 2008). This may also undermine parents' positive involvement in parenting, leading them to adopt harsh, authoritarian parenting styles or become detached (Feinberg et al., 2012).

3.3 Sibling Relationships and Sibling Conflict

Although some researchers consider sibling conflict a negative aspect of sibling relationships (Zhao & Yu, 2017), sibling conflict also has positive dimensions. For example, sibling conflict can be viewed as a special form of interaction characterized by antagonism or opposition between siblings, requiring proper guidance. With appropriate guidance, sibling conflict can help children learn perspective-taking, respect siblings' viewpoints or positions, and develop mutual understanding, all of which can promote positive sibling relationships.

Furthermore, sibling relationships and sibling conflict share a deeper connection: mutual influence. Research shows that higher-quality sibling relationships are associated with more adequate conflict resolution methods, with siblings being more willing to use negotiation to resolve conflicts. Conversely, lower-quality sibling relationships lead siblings to use more extreme methods, such as harming each other or physical aggression (Relva, Alarcão, Fernandes, & Graham-Bermann, 2019). Similarly, Rinaldi and Howe (1998), in a study of 34 fifth- and sixth-grade students, found that warm sibling relationships were associated with prosocial behavior and more constructive strategy use. Therefore, good sibling relationships can better facilitate constructive resolution of sibling conflict, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflict recurrence. Correspondingly, during the process of constructively resolving sibling conflict, both parties deepen their understanding of each other, learn to view issues from each other's perspectives, and develop respect for differences between themselves and others, which can predict positive development in sibling relationships.

4 An Integrated Theoretical Hypothesis Model of Sibling Conflict

Family systems theory posits that the family is a hierarchically structured, dynamic system in which subsystems are interconnected and mutually influential (Cox & Paley, 1997; Cox & Paley, 2003; Cox, 2010; Whiteman et al., 2011; Zhao & Yu, 2017). Therefore, considering the influence of each subsystem on sibling conflict in isolation is inadequate; instead, these influences should be viewed from a unified, holistic perspective. Accordingly, by integrating existing literature on sibling conflict, this paper attempts to construct an integrated theoretical hypothesis model among sibling conflict, parental intervention styles

in sibling conflict, and family subsystems (as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]) to further explore the connections among these three elements.

Figure 1. Influence Pathways of Family Subsystems on Sibling Conflict

Note: Solid lines indicate bidirectional effects; dashed lines indicate unidirectional effects.

This hypothetical model depicts the relationships among sibling conflict, parental intervention styles in sibling conflict, and family subsystems. As shown in Figure 1, marital relationships, parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, and sibling conflict all influence each other pairwise. Therefore, multiple pathways exist through which family subsystems influence sibling conflict. This paper analyzes the pathway from marital relationships to sibling conflict as an example. First, marital relationships can directly influence sibling conflict (Kim et al., 2006; Poortman & Voorpostel, 2009; McGuire & Shanahan, 2010). Second, marital relationships can indirectly influence sibling conflict by affecting parent-child relationships. According to the spillover perspective, good marital relationships lead to intimate parent-child relationships, which can both directly reduce sibling conflict and indirectly promote positive sibling relationships to reduce sibling conflict occurrence (Brody et al., 1996; Cox & Paley, 1997; Hakvoort et al., 2010; Ruff et al., 2017). Finally, marital relationships can indirectly influence sibling conflict by affecting sibling relationships. According to the spillover perspective, good marital relationships can foster positive sibling relationships (Kim et al., 2006; Ruff et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2016), thereby reducing sibling hostility and conflict—a notion also supported by social learning theory. Additionally, positive sibling relationships can lead to good parent-child relationships, which in turn reduce sibling conflict.

Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1, marital relationships, parent-child relationships, and sibling relationships can also indirectly influence sibling conflict by affecting parental intervention styles. For example, in marital relationships, when marital relationships are good and problems can be resolved through negotiation and communication, parents learn communication skills in the process and can therefore better implement child-centered strategies, enabling children to learn these skills and reducing sibling conflict. In sibling relationships, when sibling relationships remain positive and children are willing to communicate with each other when disagreements and conflicts arise (Relva, Alarcão, Fernandes, & Graham-Bermann, 2019; Recchia & Howe, 2009), parents can better use child-centered strategies without encountering resistance from children, allowing conflicts to be resolved constructively and reducing the likelihood of recurrence. In parent-child relationships, when parents maintain good relationships with each child, both parents and children may be willing to resolve conflicts through negotiation when sibling conflict occurs.

This hypothetical model emphasizes the complex relationship between sibling conflict and the entire family system, which can be summarized in three aspects: multi-factor, multi-path, and multi-level. “Multi-factor” means that

sibling conflict is simultaneously influenced by multiple factors rather than a single factor alone. For example, in a family, marital relationships, parent-child relationships, and sibling relationships coexist, so sibling conflict must be simultaneously influenced by these three subsystems. “Multi-path” means that a particular factor’s influence on sibling conflict occurs through multiple pathways, and these pathways intersect with those of other factors. For example, both marital relationships and parent-child relationships can indirectly influence sibling conflict by affecting sibling relationships. “Multi-level” means that factors influencing sibling conflict exist at different levels. This hypothetical model’s analysis remains at the family subsystem level; beyond this, many factors at social and individual levels also influence sibling conflict and require further development in the future. Finally, although most influence pathways in the model have received empirical support, these studies are primarily from foreign contexts, so the applicability of these pathways in China requires further verification. Additionally, some pathways in the model remain controversial or unconfirmed, awaiting examination and verification in future research.

5 Future Research Directions

Currently, research in China on sibling relationships and sibling conflict remains limited, likely due to the long-standing “one-child policy.” Given this, this paper has primarily drawn on foreign literature to preliminarily explore the definition of sibling conflict, provide an in-depth introduction to parental intervention styles and their effectiveness, analyze the relationship between family subsystems and sibling conflict, and construct an integrated theoretical hypothesis model of sibling conflict. These efforts aim to stimulate researchers’ interest in sibling conflict and support China’s two-child policy. Here, we offer several suggestions for future research directions.

First, distinguish or integrate sibling conflict and its related concepts. Literature review reveals that concepts such as sibling conflict, sibling antagonism, and sibling violence lack clear definitions, resulting in blurred boundaries, overlap, inclusion, and even interchangeable use. Many foreign documents mention this issue, but few have deeply investigated it, mostly describing and analyzing the current situation (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006; Eriksen & Jensen, 2009; Krienert & Walsh, 2011; Tucker et al., 2013; Tippett & Wolke, 2015; Tompsett et al., 2016). Therefore, future research needs to distinguish or integrate sibling conflict and related concepts. For example, based on this paper’s definition of sibling conflict and descriptions of these concepts in relevant literature—where sibling antagonism refers to aggressive or hostile behavior toward siblings (Song et al., 2016) and sibling violence refers to intentional physical violence by one child toward another in the family (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006; Eriksen & Jensen, 2009)—we believe that sibling antagonism and sibling violence can be integrated into sibling conflict. However, from the perspective of behavioral severity, sibling antagonism can be integrated into sibling conflict, while sibling violence can be distinguished from sibling conflict. Future research can distinguish or integrate

sibling conflict and related concepts from different perspectives.

Second, focus on factors influencing parental intervention styles in sibling conflict. Beyond family subsystems, parents' selection of intervention styles is affected by other factors. For example, Perozynski and Kramer (1999) found that parents' choice of conflict management strategies is based, to some extent, on their perceptions of various strategies' effectiveness and their assessments of their own ability to implement them. Similarly, parental intervention styles change as children grow and develop (Dix et al., 1989). Parents may consider certain strategies (such as child-centered strategies) more effective for relatively older siblings because younger children cannot engage in complex discussion, reasoning, perspective-taking, and negotiation (Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). Research also suggests that parental intervention styles are related to parents' own gender (Vuchinich et al., 1988; McHale, Updegraff, Tucker, & Crouter, 2000; Carvalho et al., 2017). Therefore, future research should more comprehensively consider what other factors influence parents' selection of intervention styles. Due to the lack of domestic research, this paper' s discussion of interventions and their effects is based on research from Western countries, and the applicability of these conclusions in China requires further verification. Thus, future research needs to consider cross-cultural and cross-ethnic differences and conduct localized studies based on existing theories.

Third, view sibling conflict from a developmental perspective. For most people, sibling relationships are the longest-lasting family relationships they experience, beginning at birth and lasting until one sibling dies (Noller, 2005). Over such a long timespan, the influences of sibling conflict and family subsystems continuously change. In early childhood, parents may show special care toward the later-born child, affecting the relationship with the firstborn (Chen & Shi, 2017), which becomes an important factor influencing sibling conflict. In early childhood, siblings spend more time together than with parents, and sibling interactions exceed those with parents (Faith et al., 2015; Wolke et al., 2015), making sibling relationships highly influential on sibling conflict during this period. Additionally, early childhood experiences profoundly impact individuals, and parents' marital relationships during this stage (such as divorce) significantly affect sibling conflict. In adolescence, children' s attention gradually shifts to peers, and sibling interactions decrease (Noller, 2005; Tucker et al., 2010), reducing the influence of sibling relationships on sibling conflict. Adolescents generally experience a rebellious stage, and distant parent-child relationships become an important factor influencing sibling conflict. As children mature and develop stronger independent thinking, the influence of parents' marital relationships on sibling conflict diminishes. Therefore, future research should examine the characteristics of sibling conflict at different developmental stages.

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