

# FIRSTBORN CHILD READINESS FOR A NEW SIBLING: A CASE STUDY OF BIRTH-ORDER CHALLENGES AND COPING FOR PARENTS

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## Abstract

Transition to siblinghood can be very stressful for many families due to a newly born sibling's arrival. The study's primary purpose is to explore the mother's preparation experiences with regard to the firstborn child's behavior before and after in response to the birth of a second-born sibling. The current study is a phenomenological examination of the firstborn child's readiness for a new sibling using a sample of two mothers who are currently having two children. Eighteen categories that emerged from the raw data were further categorized into four general themes: support systems, talk to your child, positive post-birth behavior, and malicious post-birth behavior. The themes developed in this study illustrate mothers' perceptions of their firstborn child's behavior in response to a second-born sibling's birth. It is hoped that this study would enlighten on the critical period and changes in the firstborn child's adjustment and family relationships following the sibling's birth.

**Keywords:** Transition to siblinghood (TST), new sibling, firstborn child's readiness, mother's preparation experiences, attachment

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## **Introduction**

The birth of a baby sibling is a normative ecological transition for most children, especially to the firstborn child, and this transition is said to be stressful, constituting a developmental crisis for most children (Howe, 2017; Marlin, 2016; Volling, 2005, 2012, 2017; Volling, Yu, Gonzalez, Kennedy, Rosenberg & Oh, 2014). It can be a stressful life event for young children and their parents, and such transitions can reveal important patterns of risk and resilience within families. Concerning that, the occurrence of sibling rivalries leading to fights and death have increased over the past decades, thus received scarce attention (Feinberg, Sakuma, Hostetler, & McHale, 2013; Hashim, & Ahmad, 2016). The negative aspects of the two children families have been frequently reported that firstborn children have difficulties adapting to the newborn's birth and parents have difficulties coping with the firstborn children's adaptation (Chen, Wang, Liang, & Tong, 2016). During this period, it may lead to feelings of dispersion on the part of the older child and parental concerns about sibling jealousy that might turn to sibling rivalry (Kramer & Ramsburg, 2002; Volling et al., 2014; Hashim, & Ahmad, 2016).

However, there was no overwhelming evidence of consistent changes in firstborn adjustment, and a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on older adjustments and family relationships over the transition to siblinghood (TTS), has not been done for several decades (Volling, 2012). Therefore, this paper is designed to gain insight into a firstborn child's behavior before and after a newborn sibling's birth from the mothers' perspective. It is hoped that this study will help to address how these changes are connected over time, what influences the firstborn's acceptance of their newborn siblings, and promote firstborn's adjustment and risk factors that may lead to difficulties in adjustment during the transition to siblinghood (TTS) period.

Therefore, there is a need to understand how to prepare your older child, introduce the new baby, help the children feel positive about the new baby, and encourage a healthy sibling bond. Thus, in realizing this worrying issue, it is crucial for parents who plan to have a second child in the family to be enlightened on the

crucial period and changes in the first-born child's adjustment and family relationships following the sibling's birth. Hence, this paper aims to investigate mothers' perceptions of their first-born child's behavior in response to the birth of a second-born sibling. This paper reports these two research questions: (1) how does the participant prepare the first-born child for a new born sibling? and, (2) what are the participant's experiences with regard to the first-born child's behavior in response to the birth of a second-born sibling?

## **Literature Review**

### **Transition to siblinghood**

The arrival of a second child into the family can bring many changes to a family, and this transition from a family of 3 to a family of 4 is almost stressful for all parents, at least for the short-term. The transition to siblinghood (TTS) is a period that allows the examining of children's reactions to the impartial loss with their mother, and consequently, their sensitivity to different treatment (Marlin, 2016). According to Voilling (2012), based on scientific literature, there are large individual differences in children's adjustment. The transition to siblinghood can be a period of disruption, and occasion for development advances to occur, or a period of latent with no noticeable change. The author further stated that TTS might be a developmental turning point that indicates future psychopathology between children and the changes in the ecological context or time. It is said in the literature that most firstborn children will experience the transition to siblinghood between the ages of 2 and 3 (Baydar, Greek, & Brooks-Gunn, 1997), which Thompson and Goodman (2010) considered as the significant period for the development of young children's abilities to control their behavior and emotions. Other than that, this period is where the emergence of an understanding of others' emotions and minds in young children (Wellman & Goswami, 2002 as cited in Voilling, 2012).

The transition of siblinghood (TTS) is a normative transition that occurs for most families at a specific point in the family life cycles, and it occurs with the birth (Volling, 2012). Volling (2012) mentioned that even though there was no overwhelming evidence of consistent changes in firstborn adjustment, thirty studies

addressing the transition to siblinghood were found to have decreased in children's affection and responsiveness toward mothers and other potentially disruptive behaviors such as regression, aggression. TTS is disruptive for most children as a failure to adjust to siblinghood due to the arrival of the second-born child.

### **The arrival of a sibling**

One significant variable that a mother has to take into account when preparing for the arrival of a second-born baby is the firstborn child, who up to this point has experienced that world pretty much revolves around him. The arrival of a sibling has been associated with marked changes in the behavior of firstborn children (Volling, 2012), and this includes changes in the patterns of interaction between firstborn children and their mother (Stewart, Mobley, Van Tuyl & Salvador, 1987). Firstborn children are commonly found to reveal distress (Volling et al., 2014) and benefit from the changes in the family system surrounding the birth of a second child.

The addition of a new sibling can be a huge transition for young children to go through, as parental attention, once the only territory of the firstborn, must now be shared with a sibling rival (Volling, 2012). All the changes can be too difficult and a significant developmental transition for the firstborn child to handle (Volling, 2005), and it is common for them to feel jealousy toward the newborn and start acting out as part of their innate reaction. Therefore, to ease this change, the mothers need to prepare children well in advance for the upcoming birth to explain to the children in the age-appropriate language what to expect and how their situation will likely change. Not only that, parents or caregivers should make the firstborn child feel important and feeling of involvement during this exciting life event in the family system.

### **Sibling adjustment and rivalry**

A parent's influence on a child's development is undeniably significant, and the same goes for the influence of a sibling should not be under-estimated as they are growing up has a significant influence on their emotional and social development as adults. Sometimes parents are overly excited that they underestimate the emotional

turmoil caused by a new addition to the family. The developmental transition to siblinghood (TTS) in children's lives undoubtedly necessary knowledge, as mentioned by Volling (2012) to:

- determine if there are changes in firstborn children's adjustment after the birth of the second-born sibling,
- determine what developmental processes might explain these changes patterns,
- predict individual differences in children's adjustment across the transition.

Volling (2012) explicitly highlighted the period following the birth of a second child because this period marks the transition of siblinghood (TTS), whereby the firstborn's role as an only child is transformed into an older brother or sister. The author aimed to investigate whether the TTS is a developmental crisis or a disruptive force of firstborn children's lives. Furthermore, parents have to be aware of the complex and demanding task ahead in managing the emotional needs of having more than one child in the years come. Such emotional upset and disruptive behavior of firstborn children to a new sibling's arrival is often viewed as sibling jealousy (Volling, 2012). Many see this transition as naturally happens considered significant stress for young children and their parents (Howe, 2017; Marlin, 2016; Volling, 2005, 2012, 2017; Volling et al., 2014). Parents are listing their concerns on firstborn children's jealousy as one of their most immense childrearing distress (Kramer & Ramsburg, 2002).

Sibling rivalry can be described by the jealousy, competition, and fighting between brothers and sisters when an older sibling holds a grudge toward a younger sibling for stealing parental affection (Hashim, & Ahmad, 2016). This problem often started along the way of transition to siblinghood or right after the second child's birth that usually continues throughout childhood. This fact is supported by Barrow, Heyman, Scott, and Krebs (2014) as that sibling rivalry onset is during the months following the birth of the younger and thus leads to the development of persistent emotional disturbance. Gender, number of siblings, and the age gap between siblings are the primary factors that influence sibling rivalry among siblings, as mentioned in the study conducted by Wallace (2012). Sibling rivalry in Malaysia showed 97 cases

of abuse among children caused by siblings (Welfare Department Malaysia, 2007) and increased cases reported in Indonesia, too (Marazyan, 2011).

## **Theoretical Framework: The Developmental of Ecological System and Attachment Theory**

Understanding the transition to siblinghood (TTS) period from a developmental ecological systems perspective is essential to guide in the discussion of how child, parents, and contextual factors may contribute to the prediction of firstborn children's successful adaptation to the birth of a sibling.

Volling (2005) proposed a developmental ecological systems (DES) model to examine the changes in family and child functioning that occur across the transition to siblinghood period. The DES model is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system perspective and similar ecological frameworks used to explain other developmental transitions, such as the transition to parenthood and, in this case, the transition to siblinghood. From this DES model, it can locate the child within an ecological context and acknowledge the significance of several interfamilial and extrafamilial systems that affect children's development. Volling (2005) suggested that the immediate family environment (*microsystem*) in which the child lives which include daily home (presence of grandparents, aunts, uncles, parents-in-law), school or day care and the direct effect of parenting, parent characteristics, and the quality of both mother-father child relationships on the developing child.

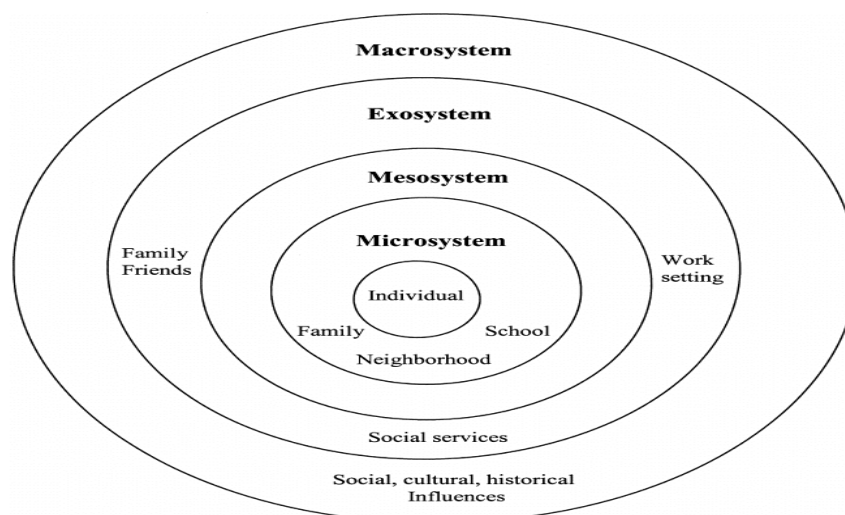


Figure 1: A Developmental of Ecological Systems

Other than that, changes can also occur in the *mesosystem*, the interaction between two or more settings, and for this case, the older siblings' participation in both the family and a child care setting, for instance. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems and as proposed by Volling (2005) on a developmental ecological systems (DES) model, other environmental influences are found in the community context (*exosystem*) such as mother's social network or the father's work setting might affect the older sibling's adjustment indirectly. Volling (2017) stated that the developmental ecological systems framework addresses the risk and protective factors that predict children's adjustment outcomes.

As cited in Flaherty and Sadler (2011), Bowlby's evolutionary theory of attachment (1969, 1982) described attachment as "a unique relationship between an infant and caregivers that is the foundation for further healthy development." Positive maternal-infant attachment imparts the infant with a secure base for exploring the world. The attachment relationship between the child and attachment figure such as mother develops in early childhood acts as a guideline for all future social relationships, so disrupting it can have severe consequences. Siblings are said to be a general path for attachment stages from the birth of the second sibling. It is a normative life event for the firstborn child to elicit situations involving a rival such as clinging, touching, proximity seeking to their mother, which are also attachment behaviors. During the transition to siblinghood period experienced by most children following the birth of a sibling, it was found that these three different behavioral profiles emerged namely, clingy, anxious-withdrawn, or oppositional, are characterized as children's reaction to parent-sibling interactions (Volling et al., 2014).

## Methods

A phenomenological study is used as a research design in this paper to explore the mothers' preparation and experiences with regard to the first-born child's behavior in

response to the birth of a second-born sibling. A purposive sampling procedure was used in the recruitment process of the participants. The subjects of the study were two mothers who are currently postgraduate students specialized in Educational Psychology in one of the public universities. The participants' age ranged from 27 to 29 years old. They were selected based on the criteria: a mother with two children and the selection was based on their willingness to be interviewed.

The data was obtained through a semi-structured interview consisting of general questions to build rapport and explore the importance of parental pregnancy planning and the existing child's readiness for the new sibling's arrival. Interview protocol of ten questions was used in the interview sessions. The researcher also asked a follow-up question that was relevant to the participants' responses. The interview sessions were recorded using an audio recorder for transcription purposes. Verbal consent and consent form were prepared and given before the interview started.

Face to face in-depth interview session was conducted after agreeing on the scheduled venue, time, and date as preferred by the participants. Field-notes were taken to record the behaviors of the participants, events, and features of the setting. Each participant was interviewed individually for about an hour. Then, the recorded responses of the participants were transcribed and analyzed thematically for this research. The data were analyzed in four steps. First, the recorded audio was transcribed into word text by using Express Scribe Transcription software. Each line was assigned a number chronologically for organization purposes. Second, each line of word texts was categorized by using a coding system. Third, codes were analyzed to create subcategories. Then, the subcategories were revisited and reduced to lesser categories. Finally, themes were generated through emergent categories.

## **Findings**

The findings of the research were based on two research questions mentioned above. From the interview sessions, sixteen categories emerged from mothers' raw data with two children in exploring their preparation and experiences concerning



their firstborn child based on thematic analysis. These were further categorized into four general themes: support systems, talk to your child, positive post-birth behavior and negative post-birth behavior. The themes developed in this study illustrate mothers' perceptions of their firstborn child's behavior in response to a second-born sibling's birth. They are presented in the following table below.

Table 1: Mothers' Perceptions with regard to their Firstborn Child's Readiness for a New Sibling

| No | Themes                           | Categories  |
|----|----------------------------------|---|
| 1  | Support System                   | Husband (H), parents-in-law (PIL), family members (F)   |
| 2  | Talk to Your Child               | Have a conversation (C), know what to expect (E), involvement of the child (IC), spend time (ST), |
| 3  | Positive Pre-Post Birth Behavior | Interactions with the infant (II), curiosity (CU), caring (CR), independent (I)                   |
| 4  | Negative Pre-Post Birth Behavior | Denial (D), attention-seeking (AS), comfort-seeking (CS), clinging behavior (CB), acting out (AC) |

### Support system

A support system is a network that provides an individual with practical or emotional support. It involves having a network of family and friends that a person can turn to in times of need and builds people up during stress. It serves as a form of support for many people in everyone's life. All participants in this study highlighted the importance of having od support system:

Participant 1: My husband plays an important role to help me out in preparing and taking care of the first child. Towards the due date, my son was with my parents-in-law and his aunt. He stayed there when I need to stay in the ward for a few days, so he was behaving well with others.

Participant 2:I frequently brought him back to my mother's house. He was closed with my youngest sister; they play together and listen to her well. They were the one who helped me out to take care of him.

Through pregnancy, labor, and new-born baby, support systems play a crucial role in ensuring mothers get the support they need during this life-changing time, especially when experiencing an emotional roller coaster. The supportive system

helps to meet the new mum's physical and mental health needs, which is essential for the woman's health, the new-born baby, and relationship.

### **Talk to your child**

Telling our children that they have another sibling is essential, especially to the firstborn child, because parents' priorities change in terms of preparations before and after the baby arrives, and much of the family's attention involves taking care of the new-born. This might develop the feeling of left out and abandoned for the child. Both participants agreed that letting their children know about getting siblings is essential:

Participant 1: Yes, it is very important to prepare the child for the upcoming sibling since firstborn child especially at the age of 3 needs more parental attention where this is their developmental stage.

Before the second child was born I spent most of my time talking to him, bring him around, buy toys every week and be around him.

Participant 2: It is good that we give heads up to the firstborn child about having a sibling so that they know what to expect and all. It is of a helpful way that a mother can prepare our firstborn.

Talk to him and have conversation regardless of age, like ask how they are feelings and make him feel as part of the journey. Get him involved things related to the new baby.

Other than that, let the child be involved in preparing anything and even daily routines that involved the new baby, such as bathing or changing diapers. Praise the child when he or she acts lovingly towards the new baby. This is so that the firstborn child will not feel that he/she lose attention from their parents because of another sibling's arrival. If the child is older enough to understand a sibling's concept, tell and make them understand that this is our responsibility that is about to arrive.

## **Positive pre-post birth behavior**

Some of the positive behavior of the firstborn child that parents might observe along the way is that they demonstrated more positive post-birth behavior, interact more positively with infant siblings at 6 to 14 months after birth, listen and behave well when with other people, especially in a feeding context. Both participants observed the positive pre-post behavior of their child:

Participant 1: He was excited when he saw neighbor's baby, and after a while he understands that he has sibling. He played with his little brother when he woke up"

Participant 2: He starts to play with her after he realized that this baby is going to stay forever at home and that's when he understands that this is sister.

Throughout the later years, my first child is more independent. He does not dependent on his parents. If he wants something than he goes and take it unlike his sister. He gets things done on his own.

## **Negative pre-post birth behavior**

It is expected that if firstborn children act out due to the arrival of the new baby in the family as they might feel that their parents are no longer for them, and their attention, affection is now shared between the two. The younger firstborn child acted clingier and showed a tremendous increase in clinging behavior, not only that, the time spent near mothers increases, distress increased over time for the mothers, seek for more proximity from their mother and in terms of feeding context, it is hard to give them food and want only their mother to do so. The firstborn children are having emotional security and also attachment. Both participants described the behavior of their firstborn before and after the arrival of the second-born child.

Participant 1: His first reaction when I told him about having another sibling, he said: That's not mummy's child, it is daddy's child. I assume he was at the stage of denial and didn't understand yet the concept of having sibling.

It was hard for me after the arrival of second child since he was extra clingy, wanting attention by

crying, running and jump around the house, make a mess with his toys.

It was hard to ask him to have his meal. He wants only his mother to give him food and bath him. It was hard to talk to him after the baby was around and was acting out he first few months.

Participant 2: When I told him about having another baby he didn't respond, and couldn't understand that the baby is part of the family. He showed tantrums and all.

We had to buy him a big chunk of Lego so that he won't acting out when I gave birth to his little sister.

When a child is acting out or throwing tantrums, try not to punish or scold him/her, which may lead them to feel more resentful toward the baby. Parents should explain and ask clearly what is wrong and how do he/she feel about certain things. This encourages the child to open up to his/her parents more and feel comforted because parents want to know how to help them feel better.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the mothers' preparation and experiences about their firstborn child's behavior, and the results lead to the emergent of four general themes: (i) support systems, (ii) talk to your child, (iii) positive post-birth behavior and (iv) negative post-birth behavior. Understandably, welcoming a second child into the family can be an emotionally intense time for the parents, the firstborn child, and the new born. All the changes can be too difficult and a significant developmental transition for the firstborn child to handle (Volling, 2005; Chen et al., 2016), and it is typical for them to feel jealousy toward the new born and start acting out as part of their innate reaction (Barrow et al., 2014; Hashim & Ahmad, 2016).

The findings reported that a sibling's arrival for the two participants had been associated with marked changes in firstborn children's behavior, as supported by Volling (2012). Prior research and literature have noted that children's reaction to the arrival of a newborn sibling may vary significantly and include both negative

behaviors such as attention-seeking, comfort-seeking, clinging behavior, acting out, and positive behaviors (i.e., affection toward the infant, independent) (Volling et al., 2014). Firstborn children are commonly found to reveal distress and benefit from the family system changes surrounding the birth of a second child. It is true in such a way that one of the participants said that her firstborn child is more independent in which for her was a positive post behavior that benefits from the changes in the family due to the arrival of the sibling.

Both participants agreed that there is a need to tell the firstborn child about having a new sibling because, as parents, they are aware that their priorities might shift and more attention is given to the newborn. They strongly suggested getting the child to involve in the daily routine related to the newborn baby. When children know what to expect when parents talk to them, they lead to less disruptive behavior or throwing tantrums. This is related to the transition to siblinghood in which it is a period that allows the examining of children's reactions to the impartial loss with their mother, and consequently, their sensitivity to different treatment (Marlin, 2016). Other than that, this period is where the emergence of an understanding of others' emotions and minds in young children (Wellman & Goswami 2002 in Voilling, 2012).

Both of the participants mentioned that the first five years are the stage where their developmental milestones are developing and growing. They need more parental attention, and having another sibling added significant responsibilities and complexity for parents. They see preparation for the firstborn child for the sibling's arrival to come with enough utilities, food, shelter, and preparation in terms of mental, emotional aspects of the parents and the firstborn child. The findings reported the changes in family and child functioning that occur across the transition to siblinghood, as proposed by Volling (2005). From this Developmental Ecological Systems model, it can locate the child within an ecological context whereby the immediate family environment (*microsystem*) plays a significant role in helping both the parents, firstborn child, and the new infant. Not only that, but changes can also occur in the *mesosystem*, the interaction between two or more settings, and for this case is the firstborn siblings' participation in both the family and a child care setting. During this transition of siblinghood, the parenting styles, parent characteristics, and

quality of both mother-father child relationships have a meaningful direct effect on the developing child.

## Conclusion

In summary, the present study investigated the firstborn child's readiness for a new sibling from the mothers' perspective in response to a second-born sibling's birth. The findings intensified our understanding of how important parents' preparation may have a role in firstborns' positive adjustment before a sibling's birth. Taken together with evidence from the vast literature related to siblinghood and birth-order, these findings contribute to knowledge about the importance of how to prepare your older child, how to introduce the new baby, how to help the children feel optimistic about the new baby, and encourage a healthy sibling bond.

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