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Siblings in Residential Child Care

Online Edition

Sabine Walper
Carolin Thönnissen
Eva-Verena Wendt
Bettina Bergau

Sibling Relations in Family Constellations at Risk

SOS KINDERDORF
Sozialpädagogisches Institut

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Findings from Development-psychological and Family-psychological Studies

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SOS-Kinderdorf e.V.
Sozialpädagogisches Institut (SPI)
Renatastraße 77
80639 München
Tel. 0 89/1 26 06-432
Fax 0 89/1 26 06-417
info.spi@sos-kinderdorf.de
www.sos-kinderdorf.de/spi

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Sibling relations play a particular role in human relations. They are created by birth and last for a life-time, even in case of alienation between siblings. They belong to the longest social relationships in human life-span and allow for very lasting social experiences. Sibling relations are of ambivalent nature, they can support as well as strain siblings’ psychosocial development.

Closeness and dissociation, rivalry and solidarity, conflict and reconciliation are inherent characteristics of sibling relation development from the very beginning. Emotions, thought patterns and strategies for action, developed within the joint family context, determine their self-conception and identity.

The admission to residential care means insecurity for all children and adolescents, and the need to form new personal relations. Siblings often guide each other, provide proximity and intimacy. They can mutually support each other in coping with biographical disruptions, and provide some coherence in their life history.

A separation of siblings is often perceived as a trauma by the children affected, aggravating the separation from the parents and the loss of their familiar environment. However, experts report constellations where it is advisable for the children’s well-being to accommodate siblings in separate placements. A number of studies support these experiences. Relevant research results are sometimes contradictory and do not provide a homogeneous answer to the question, which form of accommodation is generally preferable. Instead, a complex set of cause-and-effect correlations becomes evident, as well as the necessity of assessing each individual case, whenever possible, on the basis of thorough diagnostics.

Statistical documentation in child and youth welfare provides only few data on sibling relations, on joint or separate sibling placement, on grounds for decision-making, and courses of care. Since in Germany, there are only few studies available on this topic, many questions remain open:

From which family context and sibling constellation do children and adolescents come from? What is the importance of sibling constellations for accommodation or care planning? What are the reasons for professional, administrative or financial arguments for decisions made in favour of, or against joint placement? Which procedures are applied for appropriate decision-making? How can sibling relations be a starting point for pedagogical action in out-of-home care? How do sibling relations develop in out-of-home care? What is the relation between positive and negative aspects on sibling relations? When, and in which cases do separate placements become indispensable? How can sibling relations be further promoted, despite separate placements? What are the possibilities provided by a family-based care setting, such as life in an SOS Children’s Village, in this context?

In order to enlarge the knowledge base on siblings and sibling relations, the SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. (Germany) has started to lay a research focus on this issue as of autumn 2007. The main research interest is to explore the question how children and adolescents can benefit from their sibling relations in out-of-home care. In the frame of this research focus, various partial studies and applied research projects will be carried out until 2011. The experts' experience from the SOS Children's Villages is an important source of knowledge in this context.

Together with other national SOS Children's Villages associations in Europe as well as the International Foster Care Organisation (IFCO), an international network for supporting foster families, the SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. has applied for funds in the frame of the European Union Research Programme Daphne III. In the centre of the submitted project parts stands the development of procedures for supporting decisions on placement and accommodation, and the pedagogical support of siblings.

The Sozialpädagogisches Institut (SPI) des SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. (Institute for Social Pedagogy of SOS Children's Villages Germany) is going to publish successively the results of the research project in the context of a proper expert series, "Geschwister in der stationären Erziehungshilfe" (Siblings in residential child care). The results will be released within the publications "SPI-Materialien", which will be partially translated into English. In the first volumes of the series, the expertises on current knowledge in different disciplines and professional areas will be presented. The topic will be covered from a psychological point of view (Sabine Walper, Carolin Thönnissen, Eva-Verena Wendt and Bettina Bergau, Volume 7; additionally, a commented literature overview of Anglo-Saxon Studies produced by the SPI will be released, Volume 9), as well as the position of residential child and youth care (Maja Heiner and Sibylle Walter, Volume 8) concerning legal bases and legal practice of out-of-home care (Johannes Münder as well as Johannes Münder and Gabriele Bindel-Kögel, Volumes 10 and 11), and concerning the importance of diagnostics and case management (Christian Schrapper, Volumes 12 and 13). In additional volumes, the results from the partial project on the development and testing of an assessment method for sibling relations will be subsequently presented (Christian Schrapper, Volume 14), as well as the results from an in-depth case study on the situation of siblings in SOS Children's Villages (Klaus Wolf, Volume 15).

For a short introduction into the German child and youth welfare system see page 98.

The aim of this expert series is to highlight a topic which is vitally important in our view. We are looking forward to any response, participation in the discussion, and support.

Considering the importance for children's personality development, which has been attributed to growing up in sibling constellations for a long time, strangely enough there is no consistent research tradition in Germany about this topic. Hence for the present expertise, mainly the results from North American studies were reviewed and revised. As late as in the 1970s, sibling relations were merely assessed on the basis of age, number and birth order. Only in the 1980s, additional factors were taken into consideration, such as family structures, socio-economic status, or parenting behaviour. In the course of this development, the question on the role of individual siblings in difficult family situations came to the fore of expert discussions.

Family relatedness defines from the very beginning a certain social constellation, where personal characteristics such as emotion, cognition, decision-making and responsibility, social behaviour, habit and identity, as well as social norms and behavioural roles are developed. These developments as well as the course of sibling relations will be revised from a family-systemic, attachment-theoretical and structural point of view and interpreted on the basis of different hypotheses, such as congruence hypothesis and compensation hypothesis.

Many studies show that sibling relations have highly positive effects on the emotional state of siblings, and can serve as a stabilising element in times of family reorganisation, particularly in case of losing primary attachment figure. The expertise discusses the role of sibling relations in different family forms with a particular view to family constellations at risk, and the consequences of sibling separation in the context of out-of-home care.

Particularly after experiencing extreme family instability, sibling relations can be an important social resource for identity formation. Many empirical findings promote the support of sibling relations in out-of-home care. As sibling research still is in need of action, important incentives for research studies will be given at the end.

1

STARTING POINT – FRAGMENTARY SIBLING RESEARCH AND CONCERN OF THE EXPERTISE

The change in forms of life and families during the past decades has caused a considerable decrease in the number of children. In West Germany, there was a decline in birth-rate from about one million children in 1964 to roughly 550,000 in 2006. In East Germany, the decline was even more drastic, particularly due to German reunification (from 1990 to 1994, the decline in natality rate was higher than 50 % – from 178,000 to 79,000) (Statistisches Bundesamt 2007). In both parts of Germany, there was an increase in childlessness on the one hand (even more in the West than in the East), accompanied by a decrease in the share of large families on the other hand (with three or more children), the latter more in the East than in the West (ibidem). Considering the number of children in those households where there are children at all, a notable decrease started as early as in the beginning of the 20th century. In 1900, the average number of children in a family was five to six, while in 1930 the rate had decreased to three, and in 1955 to two children per family (Kasten 2003). In 2006, the average was 1.61 minor children per family (Statistisches Bundesamt 2008). According to data from the Statistisches Bundesamt (Federal Statistical Office of Germany) from 2006, approximately 25 % of minor children grow up as only children. 48 % of the children live together with one sibling, 19 % live in households with two siblings, and 8 % with at least three siblings (Statistisches Bundesamt 2006). And there are also children with elder siblings who have already moved out and children whose siblings do not live in the same household, due to other reasons.

Sibling relations are not only widely spread; they are also particularly relevant in the network of human relations. A well as parent-child-relations, sibling relations are fateful and inextricable, because “one does not chose his or her siblings, they are assigned by the parents” (Rufo 2004, p. 22) (1). Even in case of alienation, one cannot become an only child again, the status of a sibling child remains valid, so that it becomes inevitable to redefine and fictitiously, symbolically or virtually develop the relationship (Frick 2004, p. 9). There is also the fact that sibling relations tend to be the longest lasting social relations in human lifespan, and therefore belong to the most permanent social experiences ever made (Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005, p. 436).

While this characterisation is most applicable to the prototype of biological siblings, siblings themselves are no uniform phenomenon. Essentially, siblings are defined by belonging to the same parents. More specifically, that is (full) siblings with the same biological parentage, in other words with the same natural parents. In case that children share only one natural parent, they are attached to each other as half siblings. In contrast, stepsiblings are not biologically related, but attached to each other on the basis of their parents’ relationship, so to speak by parents who brought their children resulting from previous partnerships into their new common relationship. While in the past, families with half- or stepsiblings occurred mainly after the death of one parent and the remarriage of the remaining parent, a stepfamily today is usually formed after the separation of the natural parents (Walper and Wild 2002). The number of stepfamilies and particularly households with stepsiblings is lower than could be expected in view of the increasing rate of divorces (Bien, Hartl and Teubner 2002). According to an estimate of the Deutsches Jugendinstitut (German Youth Institute) based on the Family Survey, in Germany only 7 % of all children live in a (primary) step-

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family, and only few of them live together with a stepsibling in one household. Unfortunately, there are no accurate numbers to this respect. It becomes particularly difficult to count when considering those frequently occurring cases, in which stepsiblings live in different households with their natural mother, and only spend the weekend or holidays together. Furthermore, children in foster families and adoptive siblings have to be assigned to the group of siblings whose (quasi-)family relations are determined by their inclusion into a common family (except of adoption of stepchildren). As a rule, children and their new parents in foster families or adoptive families are not biologically related, although there are exceptions.

On the development of sibling research

In view of changes in sibling constellations and particularly of the major importance of growing up together with siblings attributed for a long time to the personality development of children and adolescents, it should be obvious that sibling research was a rather active and productive branch of research. However, this is not the case, at least as far as Germany is concerned. Admittedly, sibling research started as early as in the beginning of the 20th century in psycho-analysis, but the question of development and importance of sibling relations did not meet any continuous interest. Initially, it was the founder of individual psychology, Alfred Adler, who attached – unlike his mentor Sigmund Freud – major importance to siblings and became a pioneer in this area from the mid 1920s onwards. He analysed sibling constellations and their impact on personality features, whereat he created the concept of the "trauma of being dethroned". Thus, the birth of a sibling means a shock or trauma for the first-born, subsequently creating a damped sibling relationship. Coping with this shock or trauma can last until adult age (Adler 1928, 1973).

From the end of the 1950s onwards, the question of correlation between sibling constellation and particularities of personality development was raised again, partly focussing on the importance of birth order and gender constellation (König 1974; Toman 1987), in other cases rather with a view to the number of siblings (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg 1970). A largely familiar model is the Confluence Model by Zajonc stating that the level of intelligence in a family temporarily drops after the birth of the second child, that hence the second child has a slower development in the beginning, but is going to pass the first-born in the course of time. However, this advance will be levelled up in adult age (Zajonc 2001 a, 2001 b; Zajonc and Markus 1975; Zajonc and Mullally 1997; Zajonc and Sulloway 2007).

As recently as in 1983, the meta-analytic evaluation of studies on birth order published under the title "Birth order" by Cécile Ernst and Jules Angst (1983) deflated the interpretation hype. Ernst and Angst revealed that sibling position has no major effect on personality. For this reason, a change of research direction was induced, and the focus of attention was not laid any more on simple structural variables such as sibling number and sibling position, now the question was analysed with a broader approach and a stronger theoretical background in order to find out which factors in family life determine the quality of sibling relations (Lamb and Sutton-Smith 1982). Likewise in the area of research methodology, more sophisticated research designs were considered; the changes in relations during the course of time or lifespan were to be represented, as well as interindividual variations as a function of personal and contextual conditions (Frick 2004; Kasten 1998).

Correspondingly, since the beginning of the 1980s, in US-American sibling research increasingly more factors are taken into consideration such as family structure, socio-economic status and parenting behaviour, apart from mere sibling number and age differences. The impacts on the quality of sibling relations and questions on the role of siblings in difficult family situations are the main focus of modern research (Kasten 1993 a). However, sibling research in Germany has not seen an upswing like in the USA. Although due to expert monographs, international research findings have gained currency also in Germany (Kasten 1993 a, 1993 b, 1995, 1998, 2003, 2007; Kasten, Kunze and Mühlfeld 2001), very few empirical studies have been carried out in Germany to date. There is a relatively high recurrence of psycho-analytical case studies on disturbed sibling relations (see for example Cierpka 2001; Fabian 2004; Petri 2006; Rufo 2004), which are quite revealing for clinical practice, but probably underestimate the positive potential of sibling relations. It remains an open question to which extent the results of such specific groups can be transferred to society as a whole. Moreover, far-reaching interpretive conclusions are often drawn on the basis of relatively small databases. But even comprehensive studies are usually limited as to their validity – in Germany as well as on international level, there is a lack of longitudinal studies on changes in the course of time or the development of sibling relations providing information on the predictability of different development courses of sibling relations. The Cambridge Longitudinal Study (Dunn and Plomin 1990) is one of the few studies over a longer time span carried out to date, and is therefore of major significance.

A relatively large branch of research deals with the effects of diseases or disabilities of siblings on their healthy brothers and sisters and their sibling relations. The results mainly demonstrate negative effects on the psychological development of healthy siblings (see for example Hastings 2007; Lobato, Kao and Plante 2005; Labay and Walco 2004; Orsmond and Seltzer 2007; Ross and Cuskelly 2006). They suffer particularly from the stress situation of families with disabled children (Asai and others 2004; Giallo and Gavidia-Payne 2006). Nevertheless, the effects of diseases and disabilities cannot be proven in all siblings affected (Cuskelly and Gunn 2006; Levy-Wasser and Katz 2004). As sibling constellations with disabled children or children suffering from severe chronical diseases are not of major importance for the context of the present project on residential care, this special case of sibling relations will not be considered in the following.

Summary of the study

The present literature survey is mainly focused on sibling relations in high-risk family constellations. As a starting point, there are some general observations of sibling relation particularities, important factors of influence on their development and the consequences of respective sibling experiences for child development in the further course of life. The survey itself is mainly focused on US-American sibling research, where the transferability to local conditions seems be most likely. In view of the project orientation for the practice and systematics of German child and youth welfare, research from other cultural spheres is not taken into consideration.

The study centrepiece is chapter 4, dealing with sibling relations in high-risk family constellations. At this point, the impact of biographically important aspects of family structures in families with parental separation or divorce, stepfamilies, foster families or adoptive families will be discussed. Family dynamics will be thematised by means of analysing the effects of

parental relationship problems, parental differential treatment of siblings, and strains on parent-child-relation. With a special focus on foster families, the question whether siblings should be placed jointly or separately in out-of-home care will be taken up. A legal survey on custody regularisation, the status of siblings in separation or divorce proceedings, decision criteria for sibling separation and the respective consequences are going to finalise this chapter.

In order to ensure suitable embedding of the present study's basic questions into the context of German child and youth welfare, sibling relations were first generally ranged in the family context, and their central features as well as their importance were highlighted. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical frame of reference and shows how sibling relations are considered from different theoretical perspectives. In this context, the interconnectedness between sibling relations and other family subsystems from a family systemic perspective is referred to. Questions of role-making as well as the different functions siblings can have for each other, will be commented on an empirical basis. The importance of siblings as attachment figures is discussed in detail. This aspect is not least important for the question, to which extent siblings can provide each other emotional back-up and stability. At a glance, once again characteristic features of sibling relations will be analysed based on relevant research findings. It becomes evident how multi-faceted sibling relations are, and that ambivalence is so to say a structural feature of sibling relations. Many factors have influence on the form and development of individual sibling relations, a fact subsequently discussed in more detail in chapter 3. A short outline of characteristic changes in sibling relations during the course of life finalises chapter 2.

In chapter 3, single factors of influence on sibling relations will be explored more closely. At first, we give an overview on structural features of sibling constellations, particularly ordinal position, age difference and gender distribution. This chapter also deals once again with correlations between different family subsystems within a family, and discusses the importance of parental relationship quality for sibling relations, apart from parenting behaviour. By means of congruence, compensation, buffer and favouritism hypothesis, different explanatory models will be presented and taken up in chapter 4 with a view to the impact of family risk factors in specific family constellations and dynamics.

In chapter 5, the findings will then be summarised, and an outlook on additional questions will be given, which have not yet been sufficiently considered in research. In this context, we refer to sibling relations in family-based out-of-home care and sketch possible research approaches which seem to make sense in view of the results presented and the remaining open questions.

In the following, sibling relations will be considered from the perspective of different theoretical concepts. This way, central features and the complexity of sibling relations become apparent.

2.1 Sibling relations from a systemic point of view

The family systemic perspective has proven to be particularly helpful in analysing sibling relations, considering them as embedded in a broader network of family relations, and with a view to interdependencies between family subsystems (Minuchin 1977; Schneewind 1999 b). Although sibling relations have a certain autonomy within the family system, their formation and development is anything but independent from the characteristics of surrounding relations within the family and their interconnectedness; the relation of each sibling to his parents which can differ not only on the level of comparison between the siblings, but also between mother and father, as well as the parental relationship in all the complexity that families undergoing separations or 'multi-parent' systems such as stepfamilies or foster families can present in each case.

Although the term of 'family' often meant the household community of parents and children in the past (in the beginning specifically limited to nuclear families, this focus has proven to be too short-sighted (Schneewind 1999 a; Walper 2004). This insight does not only suggest itself considering the generation-spanning affiliation of grandparents, parents and children beyond household borders, but is also imposed due to the complex connections between households after separation and divorce, as well as subsequent new partnerships. This way, also more complex sibling constellations can be explored. In this sense, sibling relations will not only be considered a subsystem of one household community, but as a part of families which can be described as 'intimate relational systems' through the (varying) degree of their dissociation from the environment, and be defined as a specific internal structure.

The basic assumption of family systems theory is that the behaviours of individual members have an impact on the overall family system, and that they have circular causal mutual impacts on each other, so that conclusions on simple, linear cause-effect-relations are hardly possible, or only to a very limited extent (Noller 2005; von Schlippe 1995). This reciprocal influence seems to be particularly obvious in case of sibling relations which are more egalitarian than parent-child-relations as a rule, and therefore a priori more characterised by the features and behaviours of both parties involved, rather than by one side with stronger structural power (von Salisch 1993). But also when examining the interdependences between parents and children, it holds that parents in their role as family 'conductors' are limited by their children's willingness to cooperate, and that they also react with their behaviour on child demands (Crouter and Booth 2003). The interdependencies between family subsystems, such as parent relationship or sibling relations have to be equally considered as reciprocal, although in this case it is assumed that parents have a stronger influence on children than vice versa (see chapter 3).

A vital question focuses on the type of these correlations between relation qualities in family subsystems. Many findings support the so-called congru-

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ence hypothesis stating that positive relationship qualities in one subsystem also have a positive impact on other family subsystems. There is major proof for the impact of a conflictive parental relationship on the parent-child-relation (Erel and Burman 1995; Krishnakumar and Buehler 2000), but also on sibling relations (see chapter 3.2). The fact that parents do not always play a modelling or orchestrating function in sibling relations, but that the self-organisation of sibling relations as a partially autonomous family subsystem can be identified, becomes particularly evident in cases where siblings form proper cohesion and solidarity, as a countermovement to the lack of parental support. Such compensatory processes, taken up repeatedly in sibling research as "compensation hypothesis", are probably only superficially contradictory to congruence hypothesis. Respective findings are mentioned for example in chapter 2.3 and 3.2, as well as in chapter 4. But first, the function of siblings in the family system shall be discussed.

2.2 Roles and functions of siblings

A basic question arising from the systemic as well as role-theoretical perspective is aimed at roles and functions siblings assume for each other. The attention is hence directed towards roles and functions as potential strains, but also as learning possibilities for the persons involved, as well as on their importance for individual well-being and competence, and personality development of siblings.

First of all, siblings are partners in interaction. According to Ulrich Schmidt-Denter and Gottfried Spangler (2005), infants have presumably more conflicts with their elder siblings than with their mothers. As they grow older, at pre-school and school age, the time they spend with their siblings clearly outweighs the time they spend with their mother (Bank and Kahn 1976; Lawson and Ingleby 1974). For the elder siblings, the younger ones become interesting playmates (Kasten 1998, 2003). Studies have shown that hereby, elder siblings adapt to the younger ones and their less developed linguistic and cognitive capacities (Dunn and Kendrick 1982; Pepler, Abramovitch and Corter 1981).

However, siblings are not only playmates to each other, but also rivals who are competed against, be it for material things, proving their competence or striving for parental care (Lüscher 1997). Accordingly, their mutual feelings for each other are very diverse and fluctuating between affection, love, anger or even hatred. From a psycho-analytical point of view, it is furthermore indicated that siblings can also function as objects for displacement of hostility and aggression (Parens 1988). It is assumed that aggressions against more powerful opponents, parents for example, can be displaced on siblings. The playing field for control and regularisation mechanisms is a relevant function in this context that sibling relations can even better fulfil than parent-child-relations and peer relations (Hartup 1980). While aggression is inadequate in the hierarchical parent-child-relation and can destroy peer relations, conflicts can be dealt with in sibling relations without having to fear a relationship break-up (Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005).

Age differences between siblings are usually connected with different competences, resulting in specific role relationships. Elder siblings often assume the function of plotters and role models (ibidem), and the younger ones identify themselves with their elder siblings. Thus, it can be proven that younger siblings more likely tend to smoke or to develop anti-social problem behaviour, if siblings, particularly elder siblings, set the example (Asbridge, Tanner and Wortley 2005; Snyder, Bank and Burraston 2005). By means

of this identification, the child enlarges the scope of its possibilities through experiences of his counterpart, mirroring himself in the opponent. Stephen Bank and Michael Kahn (1997) differentiate between various forms of identification. A close identification can be similar to symbiosis, it can be perceived as merging with the other sibling or lead to strong adoration of a sibling. However, such a close identification bears the risk of limiting a child's development possibilities (Bank and Kahn 1997). Equally negative effects are produced by a very loose identification between siblings, very often related to denial. In this case, the sibling is denied a benefit for the relationship. Sibling relations in such cases prove to be very rigidly differentiated; Bank and Kahn (ibidem) speak of polarised rejection. Partial identification is considered as a positive identification pattern, corresponding with the ideal of an individualised relationship, which means positive attachment as well as sufficient room for autonomy. "It enables a flexible handling of similarities as well as differences, usually permitting changes" (Lüscher 1997, p. 23). By means of partial identification, possible access to other relational partners is left open (Lüscher 1997).

The pioneer function of elder siblings is closely related to age difference or sibling ordinal position (Bank and Kahn 1975), resulting from their exertion of influence on parental attitudes. Elder siblings with a pioneer function have negotiated certain issues with the parents, so that younger siblings are allowed to follow the elder ones. This includes the clarification of rules, and achievement of areas of freedom (Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005). While the pioneers initiate new developments in the family, younger siblings can profit from these developments, and simply exercise new freedoms. Frequently, younger and elder siblings form an alliance against the parents, in order to be strong negotiating partners. In this context, siblings seem to adapt their 'strategies' to the requirements, caused by the parents' resistance (and model function). "A strong sibling solidarity is more likely, if parents form a coalition, too" (ibidem, p. 438). When disputes arise, siblings can also function as mediators and serve as translators between child and parents (Cummings and Schermerhorn 2003).

Furthermore, elder siblings often assume the role of parenting, attendance and teaching, including assistance at homework (Bryant 1982) or baby-sitting, when parents are absent (Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005). Baby-sitting for younger siblings is a cross-cultural phenomenon. However, the frequency and intensity depend on culture and social class. In Germany and other industrialised countries, siblings only baby-sit from time to time. Admittedly, there is a lack of current data. At the beginning of the 1980s, 15% of children aged one to five were at least partially attended by siblings, in socially disadvantaged classes the percentage was clearly higher, namely 30% (Schmidt-Denter 1984). In general, it can be said that children tend to baby-sit for younger siblings more frequently in large families, and for children who are distinctly younger.

In case of mothers who are liable to substance abuse or psychological problems (risk sample), US-American studies show multiple factors of influence for involving their children in sibling attendance (McMahon and Luthar 2007). Hence, the degree of involving children in sibling attendance is as much higher as there are more children in the household; the younger the mother, the lower her schooling degree, the more she works outside the household, and the more anxiety symptoms she shows. Interestingly, girls and boys are equally involved in sibling attendance, whereas the eldest sibling is most affected. The study results show a strong involvement of children aged twelve on average. In comparison to the stress caused by having to attend and

care for the mother, sibling support is connected with relatively few problem behaviours of the children affected; thus only a slightly increased risk of externalised problem behaviour becomes evident, whereas child care for the mother has more far-reaching consequences.

It seems to occur much more frequently that siblings assist in doing homework. Likewise at the beginning of the 1980s, a study from the USA showed that back then, 78 % of the children were assisted by their siblings (Bryant 1982). The assistance was better accepted by younger siblings, if the supporting siblings were substantially older, and sisters were more accepted as tutors (Cicirelli 1975). A possible reason might be the similarity of sisters with the mother or female teacher. Additionally, boys generally seem to be less effective as tutors, as they tend to become competitive. All in all, it has to be added however that children, with the exception of children from immigrant families, are hardly involved in attending younger siblings nowadays (Kasten 1998). US-American findings show ethnical-cultural differences in involving siblings in child care – in case of Afro-American families, the share is higher than in Latin-American families or families of European origin (McMahon and Luthar 2007; see also Jurkovic 1997). In the course of an increasingly child-centred approach in parenting, the range of child tasks seems to have changed, and the direct parenting function towards siblings seems to be less prominent.

Ultimately, siblings can also assume a therapeutical function (Greenbaum 1965). As a positive sibling relationship promotes child empathy and social understanding (Dunn 1989), sibling interaction during play seems to balance corresponding development disorders (Hartup 1979). Furthermore, it is a fact that emotion regulation and the control of aggressive impulses can be practiced more easily in the context of sibling relations, as problem behaviour might be corrected or adjusted by siblings, which would lead to lasting, more negative sanctions in the context of peer relationships (Hartup 1980; Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005). However, resilience of sibling relations should not be overestimated, either.

2.3 Siblings as attachment figures from the attachment research point of view

John Bowlby was convinced as early as in 1973 that particularly in view of experiences of loss, siblings can function as important attachment figures in order to alleviate possible negative effects of traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, this issue has still not been treated thoroughly in empirical research (Whelan 2003). In the following, after a short introduction into the assumptions of attachment theory, the importance of sibling relations as attachment relations will be discussed. In chapter 4.3, this point will be once again referred to, when dealing with the perspective of attachment theory in the frame of custody and foster care decisions.

2.3.1 Basic assumptions of attachment theory

The child-parent-attachment is at the centre of attachment theory, founded by the British psychoanalyst and child psychiatrist John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980).

Bowlby postulated that each human being has an innate attachment behaviour system (“behavioral system”), ensuring that the infant is cared for and protected against perils, enabling him or her to safely explore the surrounding environment. This behavioural system serves the greater goal,

together with other behavioural systems, to secure human survival and safe reproduction (Cassidy and Shaver 1999).

From the age of around seven months onwards, the attachment behaviour is targeted towards specific attachment figures providing primary care for the child, in most cases the parents. In dangerous situations such as fear, grief, fatigue, pain or illness of the child, the child's attachment behaviour is activated, in order to secure sufficient proximity to the primary care person. To this end, the child has available a number of behaviours such as crying, shouting, clinging, later calling for or running after someone. The attachment person reacts on the child's attachment behaviour in turn with care-giving behaviour. If the desired state of proximity to the attachment figure has been reached, the attachment system is stabilised, and other behavioural systems such as exploration can be activated. The resulting attachment relation between child and care-giving person is characterised by the fact that it is outlasting and person-specific.

According to Bowlby (1969), a behavioural system represents a universal, neutral programme organising human behaviour. In this system, specific primary behavioural strategies will be activated due to certain triggers. However, behavioural systems are capable of adapting to environmental challenges based on individual learning experiences, whereby a change of primary behavioural strategies through feedback loops is assumed. This way, different attachment behaviour strategies can be developed based on different experiences with primary attachment figures. These differences in the quality of attachment behaviour could be identified by means of observational studies on children (see below).

Mary Ainsworth and her fellow researchers were able to prove with their substantial observational studies, particularly using the standardised Strange Situation Test, that children differ in the quality of their attachment strategies, and that these differences can be mainly explained by the attachment figure's capacity of reacting delicately to the needs of his or her child (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall 1978). The observations resulted in the formation of three, later four categories, describing the qualitative differences in children's attachment strategies; secure attachment, insecure-avoidant attachment, insecure-ambivalent, and disorganised attachment (ibidem; Main 1990; Main and Solomon 1986). In the following, the basic qualitative differences in children's attachment strategies will be discussed in short. These strategies develop through outlasting experiences children make in interaction with their most important attachment figures (for a more detailed presentation of the topic, see Grossmann and Grossmann 2004).

Children with secure attachment experience that their mother reacts promptly and appropriately, that means sensitively, to their attachment signals, so that the current activation of the attachment systems is not necessary any more. Thus, the child quickly regains capacities for activating other behavioural systems. Particularly important in this context is the child exploration system for investigating the environment, which can only be activated if the attachment system has been de-activated (see concept of attachment-exploration balance, Grossmann and Grossmann 2004). Thereby, securely attached children have an optimal primary strategy for calming the attachment system at hand, allowing for a full exhaustion of the whole range between attachment and exploration (Main 1990).

On the other hand, children with insecure attachment experience that their mother reacts either with aversion or in an unpredictable way to a child's

attachment signals. In both cases, the child's attachment needs remain largely unsatisfied. While the first form of interaction leads to an insecure-avoidant attachment organisation, where children try to show as little attachment signals as possible, children with insecure-ambivalent attachment organisation learn to express their feelings in the most dramatic way, in order to secure their mother's attention. Both forms are lacking sensitive behaviour and lead to secondary strategies children develop to satisfy their needs. Children with insecure-avoidant attachment show a permanent de-activation of the attachment system, combined with a restricted access to supporting counterparts, while children with insecure-ambivalent attachment show a permanent hyper-activation of the attachment system, to the cost of cutback in their environmental exploration.

The recurring experiences with primary attachment persons are saved as mental attachment representations, so-called internal working models, or "working models of self and others" (for a more detailed overview on the concept of internal working models and related concepts, see Bretherton 2001; Bretherton and Munholland 1999; Fremmer-Bombik 1995).

Internal working models comprise emotions, knowledge and notions of oneself and the attachment figure, as well as expectations on how the attachment figure is going to react on proper attachment and exploration attempts. They control the attachment and exploration system, concretely the behaviour, cognitions and emotions in emotionally stressful situations (Grossmann and Grossmann 2004, p. 72). The most important function of internal working models is to predict the behaviour of an interaction partner, and thus to be able to plan one's own behaviour in an anticipatory manner (Bowlby 1969, 1976). This way, internal working models organise memories as related to the functionality of the behavioural system, and direct future attempts of creating individually valid, optimal proximity to the most important attachment figures (Mikulincer 2006). It is true that the better a working model reflects the external reality, the better an individual can adapt to given circumstances (Fremmer-Bombik 1995). The internal working models have life-long effect, as they control the way of thinking on relations as well as behaviour and emotions in relationships, far beyond childhood.

In the best case, a positive or secure, generalised representation of oneself and the others is formed. "A child or person has a concept, an internal working model of its attachment persons, whereupon they are constantly available and ready to react and assist when needed, and a respective complementary notion of oneself as a basically lovable and valuable person who deserves to be assisted when in need" (Grossmann and Grossmann 2004, p. 79). Attachment theory assumes a stability of the internal working model, although Bowlby explicitly mentions the possibility of change – particularly for the development of expectations concerning the availability of attachment figures, it is the phase between six months and five years of age, in his view. According to Bowlby, this sensitivity also remains during the next ten years of one's life, although to a lesser extent (Bowlby 1973, quoted according to Zimmermann 1999).

2.3.2 Sibling relations as attachment relations

In spite of a rather weak empirical basis, attachment researchers agree that siblings do have an important function in the family system (Bowlby 1973; Doherty and Feeney 2004), and can for their part constitute an attachment relation (Ainsworth 1969; Ainsworth and Eichberg 1991). From an attach-

ment-theoretical point of view, it is assumed that attachment behaviour is usually directed towards a person who is older and wiser, and therefore assistance may be expected: “Briefly put, attachment behaviour is conceived as any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual, who is usually conceived as stronger and/or wiser” (Bowlby 1977, p. 203).

If parents drop out in the short or long run as care-giving attachment figures, siblings can assume that role. However, not all siblings develop attachment relations to each other. So, under which conditions does sibling attachment develop?

Children as well as adults show typical attachment behaviours in case of stress or imminent separation, such as proximity seeking and separation protest. The attachment partner functions as safe haven in case of threat and provides a secure base for exploration (Ainsworth 1985/2003; von Sydow 2002). The listed behaviours represent four distinct, but interacting behaviour types in human attachment system which can be observed in all age groups (Hazan and Zeifman 1994). Although these typical behavioural attitudes in particular are not only shown towards attachment figures, there is a specific orientation of certain behaviour in all four types towards only one ‘real’ attachment person (Hazan, Campa and Gur-Yaish 2006; Hazan and Zeifman 1994). Also where attachment relations towards one sibling are concerned, these four attachment behaviours can be proven (Doherty and Feeney 2004; Noller 2005; Trinke and Bartholomew 1997), particularly obvious in case of identical twins who grow up with a particular proximity to each other (Tancredy and Fraley 2006).

A comparative study shows that in case of respondents with siblings aged 16 to 90 years, 22 % declared that one sibling fulfilled all functions of a genuine attachment figure (Doherty and Feeney 2004). However, only 6 % identified a sibling as a primary attachment figure, while roughly 74 % called the partner, at least about 21 % the mother, and 16 % the father as such. Persons without partner called siblings 10 % more often a primary attachment figure than persons with a partner (3 %). Very similar results were presented in a study by Shanna Trinke and Kim Bartholomew (1997), who furthermore differentiated that siblings were of major importance as secure basis, rather than safe haven. Siblings therefore play a stronger part as a basis for exploration, while they are less important as providers of emotional security, compared to other attachment figures such as partner or mother. Sibling attachment proves to be particularly important for singles and persons without children. For them, sibling attachment seems to be a substitute for lacking attachment relations to a partner or (elder) children. All in all, the importance of sibling relations increases in older age (Doherty and Feeney 2004), whereby a particular increase in sibling relations in old age can be proven for twins (Tancredy and Fraley 2006).

These findings give important evidence of the fact that one person can have attachment relations with various persons, and that attachment relations are embedded in a hierarchical organisation, where the most important attachment figure is at the top (Grossmann and Grossmann 2004, p. 68). While during childhood, normally the mother is at the top of this hierarchy, in adult age it is usually the partner (Doherty and Feeney 2004; Hazan and Zeifman 1994; Trinke and Bartholomew 1997). Sibling relations seem to play a particular role where parents or a partner are not available as attachment figure. Empirical findings show that a secure attachment to at least

one attachment figure is linked to a better social behaviour in childhood (Howes, Roding, Galluzzo and Myers 1988). So it can be assumed that a secure attachment to one sibling can serve as a buffer to insecure parent relations. Particularly elder siblings can become important care-giving attachment figures.

Empirical studies impressively demonstrate that children aged merely three to seven years old show care-giving attitudes towards their younger siblings in case of stress induced by separation from the mother (Stewart 1983; Stewart and Marvin 1984; Teti and Ablard 1989). Especially those children who are asked by their mother to care for their younger sibling for a short time adopt this function (Stewart and Marvin 1984). Hereby, it is more likely that those children assume the care-giving function for their younger siblings who have a good capacity of perspective-taking (ibidem) on the one hand, and dispose of a secure attachment to the mother on the other hand (Teti and Ablard 1989). All in all, roughly half of the elder siblings show care-giving behaviour towards the younger ones. Children whose mother facilitates open communication on negative feelings are more likely to assume care-giving attitudes for their siblings (Howe and Rinaldi 2004). In this context, the results rather plead for the so-called congruence hypothesis, where it is assumed that in case of positive competences and experiences in the family, positive sibling relations are promoted, too (for congruence hypothesis, see chapter 3.2). In this context, it can also be shown that children with a secure attachment to their parents also have more positive relations with their siblings (Grossmann and Grossmann 2004, p. 401; Teti and Ablard 1989; Volling and Belsky 1992). In general, the authors interpret their results as follows – even small children can function as additional attachment figures for younger siblings (Stewart and Marvin 1984, p. 1330).

However, based on these results it cannot be assumed that siblings can completely replace parents as attachment figures during childhood, or compensate possible deficits in this context. Behavioural observations of elder siblings, who have been chosen by their younger siblings as sole attachment figures in case of stress or sadness (which happens quite rarely), show that child care-giving behaviour in its complexity clearly differs from adult behaviour (Bryant 1992). Younger siblings seeking for care show less positive behaviour towards elder siblings if they have been chosen as primary attachment persons, so that a particular stress for these elder siblings can be assumed (ibidem). In the long term, it has to be taken into consideration that children who assume the care-giving role for younger siblings due to negative family relations or the lack of parental care will suffer from deficits in their personal development (Herrick and Piccus 2005). John Bowlby (1977) already described the danger of “compulsive care-giving”: “Thus, from early childhood, the person who develops in this way has found that the only affectional bond available is one in which he must always be the caregiver and that the only care he can ever receive is the care he gives himself” (ibidem, p. 207).

Nevertheless, these phenomena are particularly important according to the so-called compensation hypothesis (see chapter 3.2) from an attachment-theoretical point of view, assuming that sibling relations have a compensatory function in view of stressful family relations. Thus at best, it can be assumed that siblings can provide each other support, protection, love and the experience of a long-term stable relationship (see for example Whelan 2003). Bowlby (1973) discussed this assumption particularly in the context of parental loss. Also in case of pronounced conflicts and disharmony

between parents, a positive sibling relation in childhood can buffer emotional and behavioural problems, although a positive sibling relation is generally less likely due to the negative family climate (Jenkins 1992) (see chapter 4.2.1). Empirical findings show that as early as in childhood, a sibling relation characterised by protection and warmth can buffer the negative effects of critical events, and the resulting development of problem behaviour (Gass, Jenkins and Dunn 2007). This protective influence can be proven irrespective of the quality of parent-child-relation, although it can only be confirmed for external problem behaviour, and not for problems dealt with on an internal basis. For adolescent age, a correlation between more support in sibling relations and less externalised problem behaviour can be proven (Branje, van Lieshout, van Aken and Haselager 2004). If support is provided by an elder brother, a correlation with fewer problems at school and a higher degree of self-confidence can be proven (Milevsky and Levitt 2005).

With the growing development of social and emotional competences in adolescent and adult age, this protective function becomes more important. Thus, sibling relations in early adult age can compensate a negative quality and negative affects of relations with the parents, for example the development of depression, a lack of self-esteem or the sense of loneliness or discontent (Milevsky 2005). The support by elder brothers can soften the lack of maternal care during adolescence (Milevsky and Levitt 2005). For young adolescent mothers, particularly elder sisters have an important supportive function (Gee, Nicholson, Osborne and Rhodes 2003). About half of all interviewed young mothers named one elder sibling as an important source of support, while elder sisters were mentioned twice as often as elder brothers. Despite this subjectively high importance of sibling relations, it did not result in a better emotional status of young mothers.

Finally, from an attachment-theoretical point of view, it can be concluded that the development of attachment relations between siblings is particularly promoted by shared experiences at the parental home (Whelan 2003). In this context, sibling attachment does not have to be automatically or generally positive. Bank and Kahn (1997) impressively show in their clinical research that in view of negative family experiences, sibling attachment is more often characterised by proximity, but also marked by negative aspects of abusive dynamics (see chapter 3.2 and chapter 4). It can be shown for example for adolescent age that children from families with parental separation bond particularly often with their siblings, that their attachment is characterised by a very high degree of warmth and mutual support, and at that same time by hostility towards each other (Sheehan, Darlington, Noller and Feeney 2004). Therefore, sibling attachment can have positive as well as negative effects on children's sense of security, whereby the long-term experiences with the parents are of fundamental importance. "Siblings can promote a secure caretaking environment and/or they can perpetuate an insecure caretaking environment" (Whelan 2003, p. 28).

2.4 Dimensions of sibling relations

The quality of sibling relations can hardly be represented by global distinctions between positive or negative, due to the complexity of their nature. Wyndol Furman and Duane Buhrmester (1985) have identified and closely analysed four quality dimensions of sibling relations. These are "warmth or proximity, rivalry, conflict, relative power or status". These aspects describe relationship qualities indeed, but relate to the participants' behaviour which does not necessarily turn out equal on both sides, and therefore

can be perceived differently by the siblings. In the following, based on empirical findings, an insight is to be provided into the formation and development of these relational aspects and their importance for the psychosocial development of siblings. At the same time, relevant influential factors on individual characteristics of sibling relations will be approached, which will be treated more in detail and systematically in chapter 3.

2.4.1 Warmth, proximity and loyalty

According to Patricia Noller (2005), the dimension of "warmth or proximity" describes the most important aspect of sibling relation which is most suitable to predict the individual behavioural and social development and the well-being of siblings. Although in all clinical and qualitative studies it is warned against a too closely involved relationship, in standardised enquiries a high degree of warmth and proximity have continuously proven to be resources associated with a better sense of well-being and a more favourable development of the persons involved (Dunn, Brown and Beardsall 1991; Dunn and Munn 1985; Herrera and Dunn 1997; Howe, Aquan-Assee, Bukowski, Lehoux and Rinaldi 2001; Pike, Coldwell and Dunn 2005). According to Furman and Buhrmester (1985; Buhrmester and Furman 1990), the dimension of "warmth or proximity" is characterised by aspects of perceived similarity, affection, esteem and admiration of and by siblings, intimacy or the readiness to open oneself in trustful communication, supportive-prosocial behaviour, and friendship.

The sense of proximity and similarity as well as prosocial behaviour is more distinctive among same-gender siblings, particularly among girls (Hetherington, Henderson and Reiss 1999). Concerning intimacy and friendship, the age difference plays an additional role. Same-gender siblings in dyads with minor age difference report more intimacy and friendship between them. Helgola Ross and Joel Milgram (1982) analysed the development and preservation of proximity in a study with 75 participants with 3.5 siblings each, on average. In this study, it became clear that proximity is promoted by common experiences, be it in the family, the sibling subsystem or experiences with specific siblings. At the same time, the same familiar and personal values, common family traditions, similar goals and interests as well as common shared space proved to be favourable for the creation and preservation of proximity. Not least, communication between the family members is a major pacemaker for proximity.

Empirical findings show consistently positive effects of sibling relations characterised by warmth and proximity. Thus it could be proven, that a growing intimacy between siblings results in less depression symptoms (in case of girls), as well as more social competence in dealing with peers at adolescent age (Kim, McHale, Crouter and Osgood 2007). All in all, positive emotions and warmth in sibling relation prove to be important factors of influence for a positive development of emotions and behaviours in childhood and adolescence (Modry-Mandell, Gamble and Taylor 2007; Oliva and Arranz 2005). Conflicts in sibling relations are less decisive (Pike, Coldwell and Dunn 2005). Proximity in sibling relations can buffer effects of critical events in life and a resulting development of externalised problem behaviour as early as in childhood (Gass, Jenkins and Dunn 2007). This finding refers to the important supportive function of siblings (see detailed in chapter 2.3).

Closely linked to the aspect of proximity is sibling loyalty, which however rather describes the individual behaviour or attitude of the persons involved

in this relation. The basis of loyalty, apart from a trustful and close relation, is particularly mutual responsibility (Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005). Characteristics of sibling loyalty are mutual sympathy and actively striving for being together, sometimes the development of a specific, exclusive language as an expression of particular closeness, but most of all cooperation and helpfulness, mutual defence against outsiders and a way of conflict resolution where there is usually no loser, and rituals of forgiveness are shown (Bank and Kahn 1997). Despite the reciprocity mentioned, there is the distinction between reciprocal and one-way loyalty (ibidem). One-way loyalty is characterised by unequal disposition and investment of siblings in their relation. One person is primarily the giver and protector, the other one is rather on the receiving side. In a study by Judy Dunn and Shirley McGuire (1994), at least 20 % of all children described their own and their siblings' behaviour in very different ways.

In case of reciprocal loyalty, cooperation and mutual helpfulness are quite distinctive. Mutual loyalty is the ideal case, due to a high degree of readiness to invest in the relation. The siblings are good friends, and harmony in the community is considered particularly important, nevertheless each sibling remains autonomous. Stephen Bank and Michael Kahn (1982) however point out that mutual sibling loyalty tends to occur frequently, too, if siblings are heavily stressed. This is the case for example if parental social support is weak or absent (Adam-Lauterbach 2007; Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005). In that case, siblings try to compensate parental deficits concerning emotional or material attendance, to ensure family cohesion and to provide attendance and support for their siblings. This might be beneficial for children's development, but can also encumber individual development (Lüscher 1997).

2.4.2 Rivalry

Frequently, terms such as 'rivalry', 'envy' and 'jealousy' are used largely exchangeable and without differentiation in sibling research. Indeed, they all describe sibling competition, but possibly referring to different objects and with different features. Katharina Ley (2007, p. 5) describes rivalry as "operative envy". Envy takes place in a triangle situation between two persons and an issue, while jealousy always arises in a situation between three persons. Jealousy and destructive envy are always linked with a negative self-esteem according to Ley (ibidem), while rivalry definitely has a positive potential, too (Frick 2004). However, envy and jealousy are often used as indicators to detect rivalry.

According to Hartmut Kasten (1993 a), there is no uniform agreement on the roots of sibling rivalry until today. Sigmund Freud considered sibling rivalry as a matter of course, while other psycho-analysts, for example Alfred Adler (1928) underline the role of the "trauma of being dethroned" for the first-born when a sibling is born, and point out that with the birth of a second child in a family, a child competition for parental affection and resources is initiated. Yet other authors affiliate rivalry motives to comparisons made by the siblings themselves, often initiated or continued by parents or social environment (school, peers). Comparative processes between siblings are common and particularly occur when siblings perceive themselves as very similar, for example if there is little age difference, or if they are same-gender. Furthermore, the striving of the individual to reach a certain status or approval by others contributes to the emergence of rivalry. And finally, parental differential treatment of their children is emphasised as a major trigger for envy, jealousy, competition and aggression (see for

example Brody, Stoneman and Burke 1987). Such a parental differential treatment, probably also due to age-related different child needs, is quite frequent. Thus, a study shows that second-born receive more maternal attention (Bryant and Crockenberg 1980), also in case of a triad situation between a mother and two siblings. However, other findings argue that the first-born get more attendance in interaction with the mother (Stocker, Dunn and Plomin 1989). Summing up, it can be said that birth order and the position in the sibling row have only a limited impact.

Even more than the – possibly unavoidable from their own point of view, and therefore justified – differential treatment of siblings, the parental preferential treatment (favouritism) of one child compared to another gives rise to competitive feelings and rivalries (Adams 1982). Although passages between parental differential treatment and favouritism are probably fluent, they still have different affective implications for children. An experienced preferential treatment of another sibling implies much more obvious injustice and devaluation of their own necessities, as well as parental demands. Dieter Ferring, Thomas Boll and Sigrun-Heide Filipp (2003) also point out the problem of differentiating between parental differential treatment and favouritism, concerning their effects. “Parental differential treatment has particularly negative effects, if children perceive it as unfounded and unjustified, and therefore see discrimination or preferential treatment” (Ferring, Boll and Filipp 2001, p. 9).

For the perception of parental differential treatment, there are a number of structural risk factors. Children with younger siblings experience more parental injustices than those with elder siblings (Furman and Buhrmester 1985). Age difference and family size are equally important. The sense of rivalry with distinctly younger siblings is very pronounced in families with more than four children (ibidem). The competition for parental care, concentrated on more needy younger children, seems to increase in case there are many siblings. Observational studies on the development of early childhood rivalry underpin the major importance of parents, particularly the mother, in the first years after the birth of a younger sibling (Abramovitch, Corter, Pepler and Stanhope 1986). Thus, the reactions of the first-born towards the sibling are highly dependent on his or her relationship with the mother. In the context of a positive relation with the mother, prosocial orientations and positive emotions of the elder sibling towards the younger one are clearly more promoted, probably not least because feelings of discrimination in comparison to the younger siblings occur much less frequently. On the other hand, first-born who have a negative relationship with the mother show typical ‘loser behaviour’ towards their younger siblings, namely withdrawal and hostility (Dunn 1988).

Apart from development and preservation of proximity, Helgola Ross and Joel Milgram (1982) also explored the issue of rivalry in their study. In this context, it could be shown that the first reason for rivalry is parental behaviour, and sibling behaviour only comes second. Rivalry is mainly nurtured by parental favouritism towards one child, by competitive behaviour between the siblings, and partially also by the feeling of being excluded, by holding on to role attributions and by the fact that rivalry between siblings is not a subject of discussion in a family. Boys initiate sibling rivalry more often than girls, a fact that might lead to the assumption that boys are more competitive, but could also be caused by a more demanding and confrontative behaviour of parents towards their boys. Concerning the question of rivalry issues between siblings, the most frequent cause stated was perform-

ance, followed by physical attractiveness, intelligence, social competence and maturity.

Similar to findings about sibling proximity, also where rivalry is concerned, there are characteristic variations in the course of lifespan (ibidem). In childhood and adolescence, rivalry is more prevailing; when leaving the parental home and starting a proper life, the degree of rivalry decreases measurably. In the course of adult life, there is a comeback of rivalry impulses as a function of external circumstances (such as differences in professional successes of siblings). Due to increasing proximity at advanced age, rivalry also flares up again. The suggested parallelism between proximity and rivalry shows once again that the simultaneous existence of positive and negative, therefore ambivalent emotions is a characteristic feature of sibling relations.

Rivalry, as well described above when speaking about loyalty, is not only a relationship criterion, but furthermore characterises the respective perception and behaviour of individual siblings. Respectively, there is a distinction between one-sided, reciprocal and gender-related rivalry. In case of one-sided rivalry, in most cases the sibling feeling inferior acts as initiator. This form of rivalry is most common (ibidem), and a major cause for conflict (see below).

As already mentioned, parents are often the reason for sibling rivalry. Apart from differential treatment (see chapter 4.2.3), the style of parenting and education also have effects on rivalry. A parenting style aimed at conformity blocks open rivalry (Kasten 2003) and primarily reacts with negative sanctions on rivalling behaviour, without teaching children constructive strategies for dealing with competition and competitors. Although there is a lack of relevant data on the transition of sibling relations, the change of parenting attitudes and practices suggests that sibling rivalry today is sanctioned less frequently than before, as an early orientation towards conformity has been broadly replaced by an orientation towards values standing for autonomy and self-fulfilment (Schneewind and Ruppert 1995; Walper 2004). Apparently, culture also has a bearing on the occurrence of rivalry – in collectivist tribal societies for example, rivalry is disliked and therefore occurs less frequently (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1989).

However, a certain degree of rivalry can absolutely have productive effects on sibling relations and individual identity development (Frick 2004). “Feelings of envy, jealousy and rivalry are important for constructing one’s own identity, for dissociation, for self-assertion, the capability of self-defence, for one’s uniqueness” (Ley 2007, p. 2). In a healthy relationship, competition and rivalry can also be a driving force for the development of assertiveness and personality (Frick 2004; Ley 2007). However, there is the risk that rivalry, envy and jealousy become prevalent. In case of excessive, raging jealousy, emotional wounds can be caused and strain future relations for years (Frick 2004). Frequently, there is a clear connection between sibling rivalry and emotional disorders (Nissen 2002). Accordingly, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), a manual published by the World Health Organization on all recognised diseases and diagnoses, included the disorder of sibling rivalry:

“F93.3 Sibling rivalry disorder: Some degree of emotional disturbance usually following the birth of an immediately younger sibling is shown by a majority of young children. A sibling rivalry disorder should be diagnosed only if the degree or persistence of the disturbance is both statistically unusual

and associated with abnormalities of social interaction. Sibling jealousy" (World Health Organization 2007).

Also according to Casey Moser and co-authors (2005), rivalry that has not been successfully coped with indicates therapeutical tasks for clinical practice. "One of the most common maladaptive outcomes […] is the development of an intensely competitive nature" (ibidem, p. 272). If there is no possibility of compensating feelings of inferiority, rivalry can also be destructive (Lüscher 1997). "However, 'healthy' rivalry is open and not rigid, but changes in times of alliance and solidarity" (Fabian 2004, p. 80).

2.4.3 Conflict

Due to the necessity of finding agreements in every-day life, and due to family relations in general, sibling relations generally bear a considerable potential of conflict, which however can vary. The conflictive nature of sibling relations can be described by the extent of arguments, contradiction and competition (Furman and Buhrmester 1985). The attention of empirical research is directed towards open conflicts or disputes in this context. Generally, conflicts occur more frequently between siblings with minor age difference (ibidem). Furthermore, there are more arguments with elder siblings, as long as they are not substantially older. Particularly elder siblings of the same gender are perceived as dominant, and thus invite disputes. In comparison, there are fewer conflicts with substantially younger siblings.

Apart from these structural properties of sibling constellations, also behavioural dispositions of individual siblings have a bearing on the conflictive nature of sibling relations. Thus, there is a higher rate of conflict among highly active siblings, and a lower conflict rate between two calmer siblings (Volling and Blandon 2003). Particularly elder siblings with increased, externalised problem behaviour seem to offer a training field where younger siblings assume and train the aggressive behaviour of their elder siblings (Teti and Candelaria 2002). Particularly family dynamics and here again the parent-child-relationship quality are important. Thus, children who had developed an insecure attachment to their mother in early childhood show more conflictive behaviour against their siblings at kindergarten age (Volling and Belsky 1992). Presumably, the lack of emotional support in maternal relationship enhances a more insisting and confrontative behaviour, instead of constructive problem-solving when asserting proper interests. Furthermore, frequent parental interventions in conflicts between siblings add to a higher level of conflict in sibling relations, instead of limiting their occurrence in the longer term (Furman and Giberson 1995). It is obvious that children are barred from finding proper solutions this way, and therefore cannot learn effective strategies in order to constructively settle their differences (Teti and Candelaria 2002). Parental interventions might also be perceived as downright intrusive, and enhance aggressive strategies. On the other hand, controversial and adversary behaviour between siblings is reduced, and prosocial action is increased, if parents are far-seeing and try to prevent possible conflicts between siblings beforehand, for example by establishing rules on acceptable behaviour among siblings, planning and structuring child activities, taking time to anticipate possible problems and discussing them with the children in advance (Furman and Giberson 1995; Teti and Candelaria 2002).

Although open rivalry is closely linked to conflict, not all forms of rivalry lead to conflictive disputes, and reversely, there are many more reasons for

disputes than for rivalry such as disagreements, diverging interests, or criticism of the other's behaviour. Insofar, conflictiveness is a separate feature of sibling relations. Neither should it be misunderstood as an antithesis to the extent of emotional proximity between siblings. Admittedly, conflicts in the given situation are often linked with negative feelings such as anger or fury, but it shows that warmth or rather proximity between siblings as an outlasting relation quality is hardly or slightly connected to conflicts in sibling relations (Furman and Buhrmester 1985). This fact does also show that contradictory feelings of children towards their siblings are not rare, and that also ambivalent relationship patterns can evolve, as long as they are parallely stabilising each other (Buehler 1939; Ley 2007).

Shirley McGuire, Susan McHale and Kimberley Updegraff (1996) describe four types of sibling relations based on the dimensions of warmth and hostility. The harmonious sibling relation (a), characterised by high warmth and low hostility, the hostile relation (b) with low warmth and high hostility, the highly affect intense relation (c) with high warmth and high hostility, and finally the uninvolved sibling relation (d) with low warmth and low hostility. Two other studies could only confirm the first three types of relationships (Teti and Candelaria 2002). Interestingly enough, these two studies, both focussed on sibpairs with one aggressive child at primary school age, show that only half of the sibling relations is to be rated as conflictive (low warmth). Even in case of increased problem behaviour of one sibling, in half of the cases relationships develop which are also characterised by warmth.

Furthermore, one of these studies showed that conflictiveness of siblings has an influence on the problem behaviour of the child at risk. In sibling relations rated as supportive (high warmth, low conflict), the problem behaviour of the aggressive sibling decreased in the course of time, as opposed to the other two groups, where conflicts prevailed (with or without warmth). However, the parenting behaviour was not parallely taken into consideration, so that it remains open to which extent the effects of sibling relations are not possibly underlying stronger parental influences. After all, there are findings which show that siblings have an autonomous influence on the socioemotional development of children, at least where socialisation or parenting functions of elder siblings are concerned (Bryant 1989).

All in all, a whole series of empirical findings refer to negative impacts of sibling conflicts on child and adolescent development. Thus, during adolescence, more conflicts among siblings come along with more symptoms of depression (Kim, McHale, Crouter and Osgood 2007). These negative effects on the development of depression could be proven in a longitudinal study with a sample of fifty-year-old men. In this study, a negative sibling relation characterised by conflict and low warmth was associated with more depressive symptoms and more substance abuse (Waldinger, Vaillant and Orav 2007).

In a study on boys, sibling conflicts in late childhood could be identified as indicators for more antisocial behaviour, as well as more problems with peers during early and middle adolescence (Bank, Burraston and Snyder 2004). However, the individual development seems to depend also on the conflict-solving capacities of siblings. In general, siblings seem to have worse styles of conflict-solving amongst each other than with their parents (Tucker, McHale and Crouter 2003). Furthermore, data collections also point towards the fact that conflicts among siblings are less significant for the development of problem behaviour than a lack of positiveness and warmth in sibling relations (Modry-Mandell, Gamble and Taylor 2007; Pike, Cold-

well and Dunn 2005). Up to a certain degree, conflicts among siblings are supposed to be a normal phenomenon, where negative impacts on the development do not necessarily have to occur. But if an increased rate of conflicts is combined with a lack of support, warmth and affection amongst siblings, there is the danger of lasting developmental problems as well as a persistent strain on the sibling relation.

2.4.4 Relative power

Sibling relations are often compared with peer relations, which are considered to be comparatively equitable, at least compared to the parent-child-relation, due to the minor age difference (von Salisch 1993). Asymmetries however do not only exist between siblings, they also become apparent in the respective role-making concerning power or status. In their study, Wyndol Furman and Duane Buhrmester (1985) include the aspects of exerted or conceded dominance, admiration or being admired, but also nurturance of, and being cared by a sibling to the area of "relative power" of siblings. Expectedly, it appears that age differences have a strong influence on relative power. Thus, elder siblings report more care for and dominance over younger siblings; while contrariwise, the younger sibling experiences more care and dominance from the elder sibling. Furthermore, elder siblings are more admired than younger ones. The greatest power differential occurs when there are more than four years in age difference. Admiration also increases with higher age difference between siblings. Furthermore, family size is significant in combination with age. In families with more than four children, elder siblings are perceived as particularly caring. In such large families, younger siblings have less influence on elder siblings than in families with fewer children.

Concerning the effects of relative power on child development, there are comparatively few findings available. For the different facets of power relations, quite different effects are to be expected. As already mentioned, the care experienced by an elder sibling has positive effects on the socioemotional development of younger children (Bryant 1992). To the contrary, distinctive dominance of one sibling expectedly causes negative consequences, as it limits the individual scope of action of the other child and is therefore contrary to his or her individuation development. Thus, it is not clear how the combination of high care and strong dominance affects siblings. As such an 'authoritarian' pattern is probably only slightly oriented towards the needs of a younger sibling, similar unfavourable effects as in case of an authoritarian parenting are likely. However, also in this respect the quality of the parent-child-relationship and the intrinsic pattern of power relations, where the sibling relation is embedded, should be taken into consideration.

2.5 Sibling relations in the course of life

In family development theory (Schneewind 1999 b) as well as in life course research or life-span development psychology, the fact is stressed that the formation and development of roles and relationships in general varies according to age-related demands and possibilities that are typical for different phases. This way, typical developmental courses can be described. However, the development is anything but standardised, it rather shows clear deviations from typical courses in a given case. Nevertheless, theoretical concepts and findings referring to development provide helpful hypotheses of age-related or phase-specific particularities, also in case of sibling relations.

For parents, the birth of a second child is linked to less change than the process of becoming parents, when the first child is born. Concerning the first-born child however, the birth of a sibling signifies a considerable change of his/her position in the family. Alfred Adler (1928) proceeded on the assumption of a "trauma of being dethroned". Today, this concept is not valid anymore, because empirical findings have shown that elder siblings very often have a loving and positive relation to a baby (Unverzagt 1995). Nevertheless, the birth of a sibling can be a time of critical experiences for the elder children. The mother's absence in hospital for several days can often be stressful. Children who frequently visit their mother during that period are more open and sympathetic to the baby (Kasten 1993 a, 2003). The first-born or elder earlier-born have to take on the role of an elder sibling now. At this point in time, parental behaviour is very decisive, as it is their role to establish contact between the siblings.

Kurt Kreppner and co-authors (1981) have developed a model of three phases based on their findings, describing sibling approximation and showing which role the parents play in this context. The model is oriented towards the developmental progress of the youngest sibling. In the first phase, comprising the period from birth up to the eighth month of the youngest sibling, the main focus is laid on sustaining both children and coping with domestic tasks. In this respect, parents can practice different approaches. While the mother mainly cares for the baby, the father can look after the elder sibling, or the mother mainly cares for all children and the father looks after household tasks and external relations. Of course, parents can alternate their roles. Particularly in this phase, it is helpful for the adaption of the elder sibling to the new situation, if parents try to meet his or her needs of undivided parental care and pay a lot of attention to him or her. It is also helpful if parents promote contact between the siblings and include the elder sibling in activities concerning the baby (feeding, carrying, changing nappies).

The second phase lasts up to the sixteenth month of the younger sibling. During this period, the baby's radius of action increases, and conflicts between the siblings arise more frequently. They show signs of rivalry and jealousy and have to learn to patch up after a dispute. There are different ways of parental conflict regulation (Schütze 1986). Very often it happens that parents urge the elder sibling to put his or her own wishes aside. Some parents completely stay out of the conflict, and others try to prevent possible conflictive situations beforehand. During this phase, parents often continue to divide child care as before, so that each parent looks after one child; usually the mother after the baby, and the father after the elder child. As a consequence, responsibilities are specialised.

In the third phase (sixteenth to twenty-fourth month), rivalries subside and the parents have to intervene or mediate less frequently. Once this phase is over, the family has become consolidated again as a whole and subsystems have been differentiated, where parents and siblings each form a familiar subsystem (Kreppner and Lerner 1989).

Thus for a first-born, it can be difficult if a new sibling comes into the family, or it can be perceived by the elder sibling as a gift and an enrichment of the family (Lüscher 1997). The parents have a say in this context and might support a positive development. Once the sibling subsystem has developed after 24 months, as siblings grow older, interactions become more frequent

and intense (ibidem). There is also more social behaviour, characterised by positive as well as negative actions. The younger siblings are now capable of challenging the elder counterparts who react accordingly. But particularly this negative social behaviour demonstrates the degree of intimacy and familiarity (Dunn 1983). A larger age-difference between the siblings promotes the prosocial behaviour of the elder towards the younger sibling, but possibly makes identification harder (Lüscher 1997) (see chapter 3.1.2).

2.5.2 Toddler and kindergarten years

Elder siblings take more interest in their smaller siblings when they are about four years old, because now they have become rather worthy partners in play (Kasten 1998; Noller 2005). Through the time spent together, trust and the knowledge about affinities and features of the other one have developed. This experience will also determine later contacts and social relations (Lüscher 1997). Care and prosocial behaviour are usually shown by elder siblings (Pepler, Abramovitch and Corter 1981), however they occur less frequently between brothers (Abramovitch, Corter, Pepler and Stanhope 1986). Gender-specific differences can be found in several aspects. While girls are characterised by a stronger prosocial behaviour (Lüscher 1997) and elder sisters tend to assume the caring part for their younger siblings (Schmid and Keller 1998), brothers show more aggressive behaviour (Berndt and Bulleit 1985). In the course of time however, there is also more aggressive behaviour and more negative social behaviour between pairs of brothers and sisters, presumably due to the fact that they have different interests. Nevertheless, during this age phase the elder siblings remain model and example (Cicirelli 1976; Weinmann 1994). Processes of identification and deidentification with siblings have an impact on the creation of a self-image (Lüscher 1997).

2.5.3 Middle and late childhood

Many studies on sibling relations aim their research interest at the life-span between the sixth and twelfth year of age as well as adolescence (Dunn 1992). This is probably not least the case because children are now linguistically capable of providing information about their relationship. While this phase has already been intensely researched since the 1960s in the USA, in Germany there are hardly any studies available on this topic. US-American longitudinal studies prove a rather low degree of stability of sibling relations for the period of pre-school age up to middle childhood (ibidem). As a general rule, sibling relations become increasingly more balanced and less asymmetrical in middle childhood (Buhrmester and Furman 1990; Kasten 1993 a; Noller 2005). At the same time, cooperation increases. Children are now better capable of solving their conflicts themselves, and parents take a back seat. When emotional problems occur, siblings might be consulted now instead of the parents. The relationship to the siblings is now perceived in a more differentiated way, and the siblings see themselves increasingly as individuals, irrespective of the context of their relationship. However, this way also ambivalences can become more visible than before. An asymmetry of feelings between siblings can be part of a separation and individuation process, in the course of which elder siblings try to dissociate from the family, while younger siblings identify with their elder ones and their increasing autonomy.

During this phase, there is more contact with the extra-familiar area such as peers or personal friends than within the family, although siblings nevertheless spend a lot of time together. Parents report a less frequent occur-

rence of conflicts, whereby the relation in itself is assessed more positively. The teacher-learner role pattern takes up increasingly more room in middle childhood, due to school attendance. Siblings help each other doing their homework, whereby elder siblings are quite competent in assuming the teaching role, adapting flexibly to the state of development of the younger ones, for example where speech level is concerned.

2.5.4 Siblings during adolescence

Although the importance of siblings for identity development has been repeatedly pointed out, and particularly identity development is a major development task for adolescence (Erikson 1968), sibling relations during this phase of life have hardly been researched until now. Some exceptions are for example the studies of Frances Schachter (1982) on deidentification, and the study of Joan Pulakos (1989) on the comparison of sibling and peer relations. According to these studies, relations to siblings as well as parents (Walper 2003) develop into individuated relations in the ideal case, and are characterised by increasing autonomy with a simultaneous preservation of attachment and proximity. There is also a less frequent occurrence of conflicts between siblings during this phase.

Alienation between siblings at the beginning of adolescence can only be seen to a minor degree and should not be overestimated (Buhrmester and Furman 1990). Some sibling relations probably develop towards support and equality during adolescence. Care and attention do not play an important role any more due to the growing competences of younger siblings (Masche 2003), so that the hierarchy between siblings continues to diminish (Cicirelli 1995; von Salisch 1993).

Apart from identity development, not least sexuality development plays an important part during adolescent age. Elder siblings definitely prove to be pace-setters in this respect. A study with representative samples on the extent of sexual activity shows that younger siblings are more advanced concerning the development of their sexual behaviour than their elder siblings had been at that age (Rodgers and Rowe 1988). In this context, elder siblings have a direct as well as indirect influence. Particularly in case of minor age difference, they give recommendations and advice, and indirectly function as models. Mostly in case of major age difference, elder siblings serve as examples for younger siblings in the context of sexual behaviour.

The results of a study on the transition from middle childhood to adult age (Richmond, Stocker and Rienks 2005) suggest that changes in the sibling context are also important for changes in psychological adaption and well-being. According to this study, a supportive attitude amongst siblings facilitates transition into adolescence. On the other hand, deterioration in the quality of sibling relations makes it harder to cope with this demanding phase. In general, these results suggest that relationship experiences and support by siblings are significant predictors for the course of development and well-being during adolescence.

2.5.5 Young and middle adult age

Also this age period has been mainly disregarded in research until now. According to findings by Helgola Ross and Joel Milgram (1982), the subjective proximity between siblings decreases during this phase and reaches a low level compared to previous and following development phases. In return, there is a stronger alliance with the (marriage) partner. Viktor Cicirelli

(1995) also proved a phase of dissociation between siblings during young adult age. The marriage of a sibling proves to be an important event in life which also effects sibling relations. Brothers seem to suffer more strongly than sisters from the resulting changes of their relation, tend to feel backed out, and thus react with stress (Ross and Milgram 1982). Sisters seem to be more able to profit from a sibling's marriage, at least if the sibling relation before marriage had been positive. For this case, it could be proven that marriage has a positive result on the well-being of sisters. In general, a marriage of course tends to be perceived rather negatively, if the siblings dislike the partner. In some cases, a marriage can lead to a lasting deterioration of the sibling relationship.

In many cases, for example due to job-related requirements or the start of a family, a change of residence of one of the siblings takes place during middle adult age. This can lead to more attachment or alienation, depending on the spatial distance between the siblings. In most cases, there is a spatial distance, but the contact is rarely completely disrupted. Regular family meetings serve as promoters for proximity.

In middle adult age, the individual focus is usually laid on development issues such as profession, career, partner relationship and child-raising, so that siblings and in most cases the parents of the family of origin, too, fade into the background. In case no proper start of a family has (yet) occurred, siblings remain more important. Single and childless siblings often live more closely to each other, and often have closer contact resulting in a more amicable relationship than between married siblings. In case of parental divorce, the situation can become difficult, if siblings side with different parental units (Ross and Milgram 1982).

2.5.6 Late and old adult age

In later adult age and old age, siblings tend to close ranks again (Cicirelli 1995). During this old age phase, the importance of sibling attachment increases considerably (Doherty and Feeney 2004; Tancredy and Fraley 2006), whereas due to familial experiences of loss, the attachment to members of the family of origin naturally gains in importance during old age (Cicirelli 1989). The loss of a marriage partner through divorce or death, as well as move-out of proper children supports this process. According to Elaine Brody and co-authors (1989), the relationship between ageing siblings particularly becomes closer again if questions of attending parents in need of care have to be answered jointly and satisfactorily. In many cases, the sibling relation is intensified in case of parental disease or parents falling in need of care, due to cooperation in caring for the parents. However, such a necessity can also be detrimental for the sibling relation, if no agreement is found (Ross and Milgram 1982). Conflicts often arise if male siblings emotionally and physically shuffle out of responsibility (Brody, Hoffman, Kleban and Schoonover 1989).

A further potential for conflict arises from parental household dissolution and testations after the parents' death, which can lead to temporary or lasting alienation. The death of the parents as a critical experience in life has partly positive, partly negative effects on sibling relations (Ross and Milgram 1982). Common mourning ties siblings together, while it can have negative effects if one sibling tries to push himself or herself to the fore and to replace the deceased parental unit.

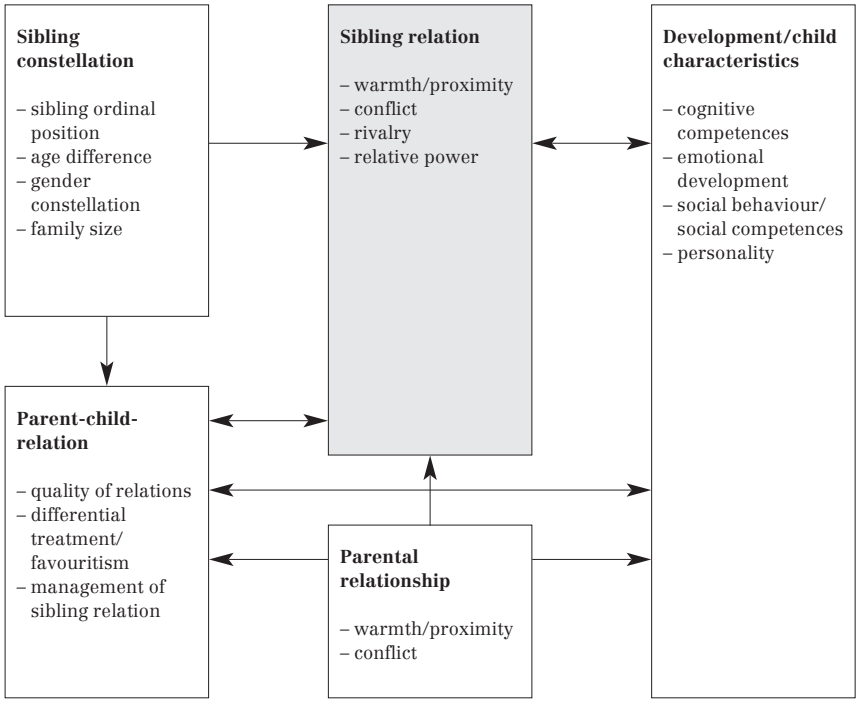
The quality of sibling relations during old age has clearly positive effects on the subjective well-being. A positive relationship with a female sibling, particularly an elder sister, seems to be beneficial for men as well as women. Cicirelli found out, that persons with a good relation to an elder sister show less depressive symptoms in old age (Cicirelli 1989). In the context of attachment theory, this can be explained by the fact that elder sisters often function as maternal replacement, also in old age. Nevertheless, equal rights and mutual support are also in old age a precondition for the creation and maintenance of proximity between siblings.

In their study on the effects of verbal aggressions on sibling relations, Jacqueline Martin and Hildy Ross (2005) point out that as siblings grow older, their relations becomes ever less binding and more voluntary, whereas past common experiences play an important role. In this context, possible problems and strains seem to fade largely into the background. In a study by Deborah Gold (1989), more than 90 % of the respondents stated that rivalries and negative aspects did hardly play a role any more. On the other hand, mutual support decreased, which might possibly be ascribed to increasing physical frailty.

As the explanations above have shown, the formation and development of sibling relations is determined by numerous factors (Sohni 2004).

On the one hand, structural features of sibling constellations are influential, as they suggest certain forms of role allocation, characteristic interactions and relations (see chapters 2.2 and 2.3). Other significant factors in this context are age (also in relation to the other sibling) and gender of siblings, but also the number of children. Furthermore, sibling relations are affected by properties of familiar relational dynamics in other family subsystems. This is particularly the case for the relation between the parents themselves, and between parents and children (see also chapters 2.1 and 4.2). And finally, the development of sibling interactions also depends on behavioural tendencies and characteristics of individual siblings. The following illustration sketches the correlations between the different factors of influence.

Illustration
Influences on sibling relation



Taken from: Sabine Walper, Carolin Thönnissen, Eva-Verena Wendt & Bettina Bergau (2010). Sibling Relations in Family Constellations at Risk. Published by the Sozialpädagogisches Institut (SPI) des SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. Materialien 7. Munich: self-publishing company.

In the following, first of all structural features of a sibling system (birth order, age difference, gender constellation) will be commented, concerning their importance for the quality of sibling relations. Particularly in the beginnings of sibling research, sibling constellation was attached major importance for the personality development of individual children and their relationship to each other (see chapter 1). Respective doctrines, such as the one by Alfred Adler, proceed on the assumption that a certain position in sibling constellation is linked to typical educational and socialisation-related influences, determining child personality to a significant extent (Adler 1973; Sulloway 1997). Traditional sibling constellation research considers also age difference and gender combinations of siblings, apart from ordinal position (Kasten 2003; Toman 1987). Although these factors have been broadly researched by means of numerous studies, the findings are nevertheless limited, as the experiences of socialisation were only studied retrospectively and therefore hardly based on theories. These experiences in the context of family dynamics will be mentioned in the last section of this overview chapter on influences of family relations. It is going to be the transition to chapter 4, where familiar risk factors for strained sibling relations will be discussed.

3.1 Structural features of sibling constellation

First reflections on the effect of sibling relations were mainly undertaken on the basis of the components of ordinal position, age difference and sibling constellation.

3.1.1 Sibling ordinal position

Particularly induced by Adler's assumption of the "trauma of being dethroned" (Adler 1928), research intensely dealt with allegedly typical characteristics of first-born who were attributed jealousy, envy, rejection and aggression, but also a stronger dependency of parents, a lack of independence, strong fearfulness, an increased need of loving care, and minor sociability. It was assumed that in this context, not only the relation to the younger sibling, but also the parent-child-relation was overshadowed by an internal conflict between affection and mistrust. However, the assumption of the "trauma of being dethroned" could not be confirmed by Yvonne Schütze (1986) as well as Kurt Kreppner, Sybille Paulsen and Yvonne Schütze (1981). According to their findings, parental behaviour plays a decisive role. They found out that a protective parental attitude has a beneficial impact on the relation between elder and younger sibling.

Although the assumption of inevitable strains for the first-born was clearly relativised therewith, nevertheless the first place in ordinal position seems to invite a rather typical role-making, manifested in the sibling relation. As already described in chapter 2.4.4, the ordinal position has an impact on status and power differences in sibling relation (Schmid 1997). The fact that elder siblings more frequently show caring and dominant behaviour towards the younger ones, confirmed by the younger ones according to their own statements (Furman and Buhrmester 1985), does not seem to be surprising. But also rivalry is more predominant in elder siblings towards the younger ones than vice versa (ibidem). However, ordinal position has no impact on proximity and warmth, or conflictiveness of the relationship.

Also the last-born were attributed typical personality characteristics. Thus, last-born tend to be rather spoiled, to be quite demanding and to show a high degree of immaturity (Klagsbrun 1997). According to Jeannie Kidwell

(1982), middle children in the 'sandwich position' are predisposed for problematic developments, as they lack the special status of a unique family member. This "lack of uniqueness" phenomenon arises from the interim sibling position and contributes to the fact that these children get less parental attention and care than their siblings, and therefore often feel underprivileged compared to their elder as well as younger siblings (see for example Klagsbrun 1997; Kasten 2003). They are particularly sensitive to parental injustice and experience a break in their development just as the first-born, when a third child is born (Levy 1937).

Numerous studies deal with the correlation between ordinal position and extrafamiliar social behaviour; however they do not draw a consistent picture. Thus, Norman Miller and Geoffrey Maruyama (1976) found out that first-born are chosen less frequently as playmate and desk neighbour than second-born, which is ascribed to different communicative styles of behaviour, resulting from the greater experience of second-born in dealing with elder children, but also from the different behaviour of parents towards first-born and later-born (Hofer, Wild and Noack 2002). First-born tend to be judged as rather conservative, power-oriented and more responsible, while later-born seem to be more assertive, cooperative, popular and rather oriented towards extra-familiar relations (Sulloway 1997). Based on family dynamics, it can be reasoned that first-born spend a lot of time with the parents in the beginning, and due to their developmental advance, they are granted responsibility more frequently, while younger siblings have to assert themselves against elder siblings from the very beginning and therefore develop respective strategies for self-assertion.

However, such differences in social behaviour of first-born and second-born do by no means appear in general (Ernst and Angst 1983; Teubner 2005). The differences appear most clearly in parents' descriptions, whereupon first-born are said to be more sensitive, more introverted, more serious, more responsible, less satisfied, less impulsive, show less social activity and seem to be more 'adult'. However, it is questionable whether these descriptions really characterise children objectively or whether they rather reflect the parents' insecurity at that time. From a research methodical point of view, longitudinal studies would generally be much more conclusive than the usually available cross-sectional studies, where the age of children and their birth order position is always mixed-up, so that the first-born and later-born in a family are not investigated in the context of comparable age phases. In view of the manifold methodical limitations of available data, interpretations should be cautiously made (Kasten 2003).

In general, it can be said that correlations between ordinal position (birth order) and personality features can only be vaguely proven. In isolated cases, effects can definitely be seen, but a reasonable assessment of such findings implies that further context-related factors have to be taken into consideration (Ernst and Angst 1983). This is not only related to the (statistical) control of confounded, thus mixed-up 'third variables', but also to the question to which extent sibling position per se or especially in interaction with other variables has an impact on personality development. There is every indication to say that also other factors such as age difference and gender constellation, but particularly parental behaviour in the development of sibling relations might enhance or weaken the importance of ordinal position.

3.1.2 Age difference between siblings

Siblings born shortly after each other, with an age difference of less than two years, often develop a particularly intense relationship, characterised by contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, they have similar interests and competences due to their course of development, so that they spend a lot of time together and can play with each other (Kasten 2003; Koch 1960); on the other hand they quarrel much more and show more aggression, jealousy and envy than siblings with a greater age difference (Kasten 2003). The relationship between siblings with a minor age difference is characterised accordingly by a high emotional intensity (Bank and Kahn 1997), and by an attachment not exactly free from conflict and contradiction. The elder ones in these sibpairs with minor age difference are rather affected in their development of autonomy and individuation, which takes place at the age between two and three years. During exactly this period, the younger sibling is born, and retains parental attention to a large extent (Kasten 2003).

A middle age difference roughly comprises the time span between three and six years. With this age difference, elder siblings often take over caregiving tasks and might become inspiring models. But siblings also have a mutual impact on each other. They give each other advice, recommendations, information and instructions, and invite each other to join the circle of friends. The larger the age difference, the less common interests arise between siblings, and the greater the differences in degrees of autonomy (Frick 2004).

In case siblings have a major age difference of more than six years, the relationship tends to be less conflictive, but also less intense on an emotional level and more impersonal (Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005). In case of major age difference, there is hardly any competition between siblings, but neither are there common interests (Bank and Kahn 1997; Frick 2004). In case the elder sibling is involved in caring for the younger sibling, the development of social competences can be promoted, and parents can be supported and unburdened at the same time.

3.1.3 The importance of gender constellation

Sibling gender constellation can become important for the development of sibling relations in different ways. On the one hand, parents even today tend to treat their daughters differently from their sons and to involve them in different roles and activities accordingly (Kaiser 2005; Maccoby 1998). Also peers and the media inseminate gender-typical norms of behaviour, which might find expression in the development of sibling relations. On the other hand, boys and girls contribute different behavioural dispositions to their interactions, and therefore determine the course of events.

Some findings suggest that mothers communicate more with their girls, particularly the eldest daughter, than with their boys (Kasten 2003). When mothers deal with their sons, they show more steering-controlling interaction behaviour than towards their daughters. They deliberately steer their attention to certain objects or things, and bar them from doing undesired activities (ibidem). Particularly in case of same-gender sibpairs, this difference appears very clearly. Certain findings imply that mothers and fathers educate two brothers more strictly than two sisters. In general, the style of parenting seems to be more consistent and consequent in case of a same-gender sibpair (ibidem). Same-gender sibpairs are obviously more often left

alone by themselves. On average, parents spend less time with them compared to mixed-gender sibpairs, probably not least because the greater similarity of playing preferences between same-gender sibpairs requires less parental instruction and attention.

Siblings' role-making is often directly influenced by the parents. In case the eldest child is a girl, parents demand the child's assistance in caring for younger siblings more frequently. But also the siblings themselves act out in the sense of traditional gender-role stereotypes. Younger siblings tend to ask for attention, consolation and assistance from an elder sibling more frequently if it is a girl (Whiting, Whiting and Longabaugh 1975). This is particularly obvious in case of same-gender female sibpairs (Schmid 1997). Also in the development of verbal and sociomoral capacities, children profit to a higher extent from a clearly older sister and her suggestions than from a brother (Schmid 1997; Schmid and Keller 1998). To the contrary, elder brothers seem to inspire their younger siblings rather with regard to sportive-creative activities and to promote their professional success (Kasten 2003).

Typical gender-role differences in sibling behaviour, as well as in parenting style, can also be seen in the context of sibling-related aggression (Martin and Ross 2005). Accordingly, boys react with more physical aggression, while girls tend to react with verbal aggression, as they grow older. Such gender-related differences are particularly distinct at kindergarten age, presumably due to the fact that gender-typical socialisation of problem-solving by the parents seems to start recently from the age of two years onwards. From that moment on, parents assign to their children more responsibility for their behaviour, and have a greater say in the expression of fury and aggression. In this context, according to their proper statements, parents tend to accept physical aggression rather between boys than between girls who are often not allowed to show respective behaviour (Lytton and Romney 1991). At least in the past, parents applied corporal punishment more often to boys than to girls. On the other hand, a prosocial behaviour is more strongly promoted in girls than in boys, and girls feel less comfortable in aggressive situations than boys. However, in the course of development it can be said that the grade and expression of aggression of boys and girls tend to level up as they grow older. In a sibling relationship, aggression decreases, as long as the dyadic hierarchy does not have to be newly fought out due to the birth of a younger sibling, particularly between brothers.

But also gender composition between siblings has an impact on the role orientation of children. Hence, feminine girls who answer the female role cliché often come from a purely female sibling group, or are only children. Likewise, a clearly masculine boy is often an only child, or has only brothers. These role stereotypes are even enhanced if the age difference between same-gender sibpairs is very minor (Kasten 2003). As a single different-gender child in a group of elder siblings, there are two possible developments, according to sibling identification or deidentification – either the child orients himself by his siblings, assimilates interests of the other gender and thus almost seems androgynous, or dissociates himself from his siblings, increases his gender-typical behaviour, and therefore appears downright feminine or masculine (ibidem). Girls are thus described as soft, adaptable, permissive, emotional and sensitive, boys are said to be tough, assertive, dominant, reasonable, and interested in technology and hard sciences.

For the quality of sibling relations, gender composition is particularly important concerning aspects of warmth and proximity. Female sibpairs

are characterised by more intimacy and prosocial behaviour. However, in same-gender sibling dyads, there is also more potential of conflict and stress than in mixed-gender sibpairs. Similar to the effects of age difference, also in case of gender constellation, less similarity seems to cause greater distance within a relationship. Again, it applies that other factors have to be taken into consideration.

3.2 Correlations in the family network – congruence, compensation and favouritism

Sibling relations are characterised by a multitude of intensive relationship experiences that siblings make in a transforming family system. There are different hypotheses on the question how experiences in the family affect sibling relations – congruence, compensation, buffer and favouritism hypothesis (Boer, Goedhart and Treffers 1992; Geser 2001; Noller 2005; Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005). Congruence and compensation hypotheses have already been mentioned in chapters 2.1 and 2.3.2. In the following, they are to be presented more in detail together with the other two, as they are important points of reference for understanding sibling relations. Also later on in this expertise, these hypotheses will be repeatedly referred to.

The basic assumption of the so-called *congruence hypothesis* ("parent sibling continuity approach") (Noller 2005; Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005) is that the quality of relations in different familiar subsystems is similar, due to learning and bonding experiences within the family (Brody, Stoneman and McCoy 1994 a). According to this assumption, positive relationship experiences with the parents are linked to closer and more positive sibling relations, while negative experiences with the parents come along with rather negative and aggressive sibling relations.

The so-called *compensation hypothesis* ("compensating siblings hypothesis") (Bank and Kahn 1997; Boer, Goedhart and Treffers 1992) parts from the assumption that siblings develop closer relationships in view of family strains in order to compensate problematic experiences in other parts of the family, such as a lack of parental attention and care. Familiar strains can include different phenomena, such as familiar instability, mainly due to parental separation or divorce, a lack of emotional or physical availability of the parents, or emotional or physical parental abuse. Thus, compensation hypothesis is contrary to congruence hypothesis, as the latter assumes a distinct similarity of relationship qualities in different familiar subsystems, while compensation hypothesis proceeds from opposing developments of relationship qualities in different subsystems. In the context of another interpretation of compensation hypothesis, also the effects of sibling relations on the well-being and behavioural development of individual children are assumed (compensating function). They will be separately discussed in the following as 'buffer hypothesis'.

As indicated, compensation hypothesis is often linked to the assumption that a good quality in sibling relations can balance familiar strains children experience in other areas. In stress research, such deliberations are specified as *buffer hypothesis*. The buffer hypothesis thus parts from the assumption that sibling relations function as a helpful resource in view of familiar strains and buffer negative effects of unfavourable familiar relationship experiences with or between the parents, and might also alleviate or prevent these strains. Assumptions on how the quality of sibling relations is

affected by the relationship quality in other familial subsystems are not necessarily formulated in the frame of the buffer hypothesis.

While the above-mentioned hypotheses consider the quality of individual relationship experiences of siblings, the favouritism hypothesis also considers, in a more systemic sense, the comparison between siblings and particularly the fairness norm in social relations. The *favouritism hypothesis* ("favoritism breeds hostility hypothesis") (Boer, Goedhart and Treffers 1992) proceeded on the assumption that differential treatment or favouritism towards siblings leads to hostility and negativity in sibling relations and therefore has negative effects on the development of sibling bonds.

Although compensation and congruence hypothesis seem to be contradictory at first sight, they do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive (Geser 2001; Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005). So on the one hand, it is assumed that in view of negative experiences with the parents, sibling relations intensify (compensation), but on the other hand, in extreme cases, they can develop abusive features (congruence): "In this vacuum of parental guidance and disturbed nurturance, the children come to need one another for contact. This contact can become sexual, physically abusive, verbally or emotionally humiliating, or primitively comforting to the point of providing both solace and enmeshing dependency" (Bank and Kahn 1982, p. 141). Particularly clinical studies suggest that despite a partially compensatory function of sibling relations in certain aspects of role-making, negative relational dynamics continue to exist (Bank and Kahn 1997). Furthermore, the chronological changeability of sibling relations has to be taken into consideration. In view of acute stress, such as for example parental divorce, they can first become more intensive, however develop negative features in the course of time. Thus, a study on children of divorced parents between six and eleven years shows that in the first period after separation, at first positive bonds and supporting functions were enhanced, but then after about three years, a clear increase of aggressive disputes could be proven (Geser 2001; Schmidt-Denter and Beelmann 1995).

Empirical findings show buffer effects of a positive sibling relation, characterised by affection and warmth as early as in childhood, but particularly during adolescence and adult age. Thus, positive sibling relations can absorb negative effects of critical events in life and negative familiar developments and contribute to a more positive development of siblings (Branje, van Lieshout, van Aken and Haselager 2004; Gass, Jenkins and Dunn 2007; Gee, Nicholson, Osborne and Rhodes 2003; Milevsky 2005; Milevsky and Levitt 2005) (see also chapter 2.3.1). As the compensatory or buffering function of sibling relations can often be found in families under a lot of stress and negativity, the question is under discussion whether it might be a phenomenon appearing more in case of persons with social disadvantage than in case of a 'normal family'. Frits Boer and co-authors (1992) hence state that in any case the underlying processes in the respective groups have to be identified, before such findings are to be transferred to the total population (Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde 1988).

Favouritism hypothesis shows a stronger link to congruence hypothesis, as it assumes that the discrimination of one child compared to another sibling comes along with a strained sibling relation (Boer, Goedhart and Treffers 1992). Thus, apparently in the sense of congruence hypothesis, a strained parent-child-relation is linked to an equally strained sibling relation for the

disadvantaged child, which can be empirically proven up to adult age (Ferring, Boll and Filipp 2003) (see also chapter 4.2.3).

As for each hypothesis, a whole range of empirical evidence can be found (Boer, Goedhart and Treffers 1992; Brody, Stoneman and McCoy 1994 b; Geser 2001; Noller 2005; Schmidt-Denter and Spangler 2005), individual familiar experiences and their handling have to be considered when assessing individual cases. A detailed presentation of the hypotheses, together with empirical findings is made in chapter 4, dealing with the effects of negative family constellations and dynamics.

4
THE ROLE OF SIBLING RELATIONS IN FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS AT RISK

With the focus on specific effects of familial risk factors on sibling relations, fragile family structure and conflictive family dynamics, joint and separate out-of-home care as well as custody-related issues will be reviewed in the following.

4.1 Family structures at risk

Research findings identify families with parental separation or divorce, stepfamilies, foster and adoptive families as well as sibling groups of semi-orphaned or orphaned children as 'special' family forms with an increased stress potential. Their effect on sibling relations will be discussed in the following sections.

4.1.1 Sibling relations in families with parental separation and divorce

When parents split up, it means particular stress and challenges for all children in the family (Walper 2002; Walper and Krey 2009). For the children concerned, sibling relations can be an important resource, but in turn, they can also be affected by acute and long-term familiar strains in the course of divorce.

Accordingly, the two hypotheses mentioned in chapter 3.2 on possible effects of parental separation on sibling relations can be applied (Geser 2001; Noller 2005).

Compensation hypothesis proceeds on the assumption that after divorce, a positive intensification of sibling relations takes place, as siblings try to compensate the loss of divorce-related social resources. *Congruence hypothesis* on the other hand predicts a deterioration of sibling relations in families with parental divorce based on attachment theory and learning-theoretical assumptions, as more relationship problems have to be coped with in general, and difficulties in parent-child-relations have negative effects on sibling relations.

Comparing how siblings and only children cope with divorce, with a view to their well-being and behavioural development, the findings of the Kölner Längsschnittstudie (Cologne Longitudinal Study) imply that siblings cope better and more easily with the consequences of a divorce than only children (Beelmann and Schmidt-Denter 1991). There are also further studies which point out positive effects of the existence of siblings in view of the stressful situation of parental separation. Thus, siblings show for example less externalised problem behaviour than only children (Kempton, Armistead, Wierson and Forehand 1991). Also in retrospect, for adults the relation to their siblings after divorce seems to be as good as in sibling groups without parental divorce (Hallie 2007). Accordingly, siblings tend to be a resource in the sense of compensation hypothesis, facilitating children to deal with insecurities and stress in the family context in a more constructive way (Schneewind 1999 a).

Concerning the quality of sibling relations in nuclear families and families with parental separation, findings are however less consistent. Due to coping jointly with stressful situations of separation, sibling relations seem to gain more proximity and intensity, and mutual support increases par-

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ticularly in case of conflictive parental relations, or in case the parents are unavailable on an emotional level (Abbey and Dallos 2004; Bush and Ehrenberg 2003; Noller 2005; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller and Feeney 2004). However, some authors (Noller 2005; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller and Feeney 2004) point out that such strong sibling bonds are characterised by warmth and support on the one hand, but also by a high degree of hostility on the other hand. Particularly at the beginning of a separation, there can be more disputes and strained relationships amongst siblings, although they become positively consolidated in the longer term (Bush and Ehrenberg 2003).

But sibling relations not always take a turn for the better. Thus, a German longitudinal study shows that sibling attachment and support increase in the first time after separation, but that after about three years, a clear intensification of aversive disputes could be proven (Geser 2001; Schmidt-Denter and Beelmann 1995). Some studies furthermore show clearly negative effects of parental divorce on sibling relations. Thus, Avidan Milevsky (2004) for example shows that sibling relations of children with divorced parents are characterised by less proximity and support, compared to children without parental divorce. Ultimately, the development of sibling relations also in this context seems to be strongly dependent on the parent-child-relation, which comes along with more positive sibling relations if it is positive and cooperative in itself (Ahrons 2007).

In this respect, it has to be taken into consideration that children particularly in the context of conflictive parental disputes are also exposed to unfavourable examples, and particularly to strong emotional strains (Davies and others 2002). According to social learning theory, it seems that parental conflict solution tactics are imitated by siblings – a fact suggesting that parents function as models for conflict solving behaviour of siblings (Reese-Weber and Kahn 2005). However, such a correlation between parental relationship and sibling relation features is not to be found in general, as already hinted above (Noller 2005). Also in this context, there is probably a frequent occurrence of contradictory tendencies. While particularly elder siblings in highly conflictive families try to support their younger siblings, these efforts are not always accepted in a positive way by the younger siblings themselves (ibidem), possibly because they might be perceived as paternalism and control.

The correlation between parent-child-relation and sibling relation is more obvious. In terms of congruence hypothesis, a study by Willi Geser (2001) shows for example that children with a positive relation to the main caregiving parent also have a good relationship with each other, while in case of strains on the parent-child-relation, sibling relations are affected, too. In this study, the correlation between parent-child-relation and sibling relations was even stronger in families with parental divorce than in nuclear families.

Judith Wallerstein and Julia Lewis (2007) show in their studies that the way siblings individually experience parental divorce can differ considerably and also depends to a large extent on the question whether parents give equal treatment to their children, or whether one child is disadvantaged compared to his or her siblings (see also chapter 4.2.3). Even if other findings point out that on a longitudinal basis, parental separation comes along likewise for all siblings with negative effects such as deteriorated school achievements and a higher divorce rate (Wolfinger, Kowaleski-Jones and Smith 2003), nevertheless the individual dynamics of different family sys-

tems should be taken into consideration, which can be very different for children in function of their age and role in the family. For example, siblings in families with parental separation can be involved in different ways in loyalty conflicts between the parents, and therefore be exposed to the pressure of having to side with one or the other parent (Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch 1991; Buchanan and Waizenhofer 2001; Maccoby and Mnookin 1992). Due to such negative dynamics, the sibling relation in families of parental separation or divorce might be additionally strained. Some siblings experience parental conflicts in very different ways, while those children who feel more threatened by parental conflicts or ascribe parental conflicts to their own (wrong) behaviour also have to deal with feelings of guilt and develop more internalised, introversive problem behaviour (Skopp, McDonald, Manke and Jouriles 2005).

With the findings presented, neither compensation nor congruence hypotheses can be doubtlessly proven, or confuted. It rather seems that both developments tend to occur in situations of parental separation. Siblings can become more important, if parents are psychologically or emotionally unavailable, or alternatively become rivals in fighting for scarce resources. The question what kind of development is going to be prevailing in the end, or which combination of both tendencies is going to emerge, seems to depend inter alia on the quality of family relations, particularly the parent-child-relation.

4.1.2 Sibling relations in stepfamilies

If divorced or widowed parents start a new partnership, they form a stepfamily. Today about 6 % of all children under eighteen grow up in a (married or unmarried) stepfamily, whereas the share of stepchildren in the newly-formed German states (former East Germany) is almost twice as high (10 %) as in the old West German states (Bien, Hartl and Teubner 2002). Considering that children mainly stay with their mother after parental separation or divorce, it is no surprise that about 90 % of primary stepfamilies have a stepfather (ibidem).

The newly emerging families differ to a great extent, as a function of their composition. Does only one partner bring (biological) children into the new relationship? Do both partners have (biological) children? Do the stepparents have joint children in their new relationship? Furthermore, there is a distinction between primary stepfamilies (where children live together with the new partner), and secondary or ‘weekend-stepfamilies’ (where the parent who moved out lives together with a new partner) (Walper and Wild 2002). German micro-census data from 1999 show that in case of 7 % of (primary) stepfamilies, the partners had remarried in two thirds of the cases, while the remaining third lived in unmarried partnerships. In most cases, the formation of a stepfamily is a result of separation or divorce, the death of one marriage partner is quite the exception.

The formation of a stepfamily is a particular challenge for the life partnership. Familiar routines between the formerly usually single parent and the children are changed, due to the admission of a new adult into the household. Parenting authorities have to be newly negotiated. According to different theoretical perspectives, there are diverging prognoses on child development. Parting from the socialisation theory point of view, it can be assumed that children from stepfamilies benefit from the presence of another adult, as a two-parent family as socialisation context can offer better financial, social and emotional resources. According to stress theory on the other hand, it

can be assumed that renewed changes in family life, necessarily caused by the integration of a stepparent, are connected with further strains for the children (Walper 2002).

According to a development-related, systemic perspective as a synthesis of family development theory and family systems theory, primarily the re-arrangement of roles and relations, necessary due to the formation of a new family, is underlined. The newly created family has to cope with a number of developmental tasks with a view to establishing stable, but permissive system limits, and to reorganise roles in the family (Walper and Wild 2002). These tasks are,

– the emotional coping with loss, limitations and other negative experiences from the previous developmental phase, caused by separation from, or death of the former marriage partner or parental unit;

– the development of a trustful relationship between stepparent and step-child(ren);

– parallel to this, the consolidation of the new partnership;

– if the stepfamily foundation takes place after parental separation, and if there is still contact with the separated parent, the consolidation of relations to the separated parent and if any, to his or her relatives;

– in case there are stepsiblings, the development of positive relations between siblings who are not biologically related;

– if children are born in the new partnership, coping with changes and problems associated with the birth of new, joint child.

The growing together of a stepfamily is a process in the longer term that from experience takes five years longer than the reorganisation of the family system after parental separation on average (Hetherington and Jodl 1994). Thus, the siblings interviewed conceive parental remarriage in retrospect as a stronger stressor than the previous divorce, particularly in case of the father's remarriage (Ahrons 2007).

In general, current data indicate that the development possibilities and risks of children in stepfamilies largely compensate each another (Amato 1994). Compared to children from single-parent families, children from stepfamilies perform similarly (ibidem; Ganong and Coleman 1993) or even better (see for example Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin and Kiernan 1995), while they are clearly disadvantaged compared to peers from nuclear families (see for example Butz and Boehnke 1999; Hetherington and Clingempeel 1992; Walper 1995). For the adaption process, the age of children at the formation of a stepfamily seems to be decisive, while transition is usually easier for younger children than for elder children in early adolescence (Walper and Wild 2002).

In stepfamilies, siblings with different biological kinship come together. Apart from biological siblings, there might be stepchildren who are not biologically related to each other (see chapter 1). Furthermore, there can be half siblings in a stepfamily if the new parental couple has joint children, apart from the children already brought into the stepfamily. Particularly in case of various family transitions, this diversity of sibling relations in a family becomes more likely. Additionally, there might be major age differences

between the siblings. These differences in kinship, age and gender might cause more difficulties and conflicts between the siblings. Indeed, there is empirical proof that siblings in stepfamilies report strained relationships and a lack of support as well as a higher degree of rivalry and greater emotional distance more frequently (see for example Anderson, Lindner and Bennion 1992; Kurdek and Fine 1995).

Also as a result of systematic observations, the relationship between stepchildren is described as more aggressive, more callous, more competitive and avoiding (Hetherington 1987). Particularly during adolescence, the conflict rate in stepfamilies seems to increase even more than in nuclear families. In the course of further development, a more distant relationship between siblings in stepfamilies can be proven during young adult age than compared to biological siblings (Hetherington 1999), while in middle adult age, there are indications of more frequent contacts (White and Reidmann 1999) as well as grade of distance above average (Hetherington 1999). However, gender and biological kinship also prove to be important influential factors for sibling relation. Thus, girls who are biologically related to one parent show a particularly close and caring relationship to each other, a fact that could not be proven for boys in this way (ibidem). In general, the relationship between stepbrothers and mixed-gender sibpairs in stepfamilies appears to be more problematic (Kasten 2003).

Hartmut Kasten (2003) also points out the importance of age differences as well as the lifetime of the new family constellation. Thus, minor age differences between stepsiblings or half siblings are particularly problematic in young, newly formed stepfamilies, and lead to tensions and strains between the siblings. In the long term, the minor age difference however presents the opportunity of forming particularly close sibling relations. This process is easier for younger children in general, compared to elder sibling groups. Particularly the birth of a sibling into a newly formed stepfamily can be perceived as stressful by elder children, as their role in the family is changed with the arrival of a new-born. However, such problems can also occur in nuclear families. “Typical sibling problems [for stepfamilies] particularly arise, if the ‘new’ family has not yet been consolidated when a half sibling is born, and does not yet offer protection to the children brought along” (ibidem, p. 161). In this context, joint children often do not serve as the desired ‘adhesive’ in the new family (Stewart 2005). On the children’s part, the adaption to the birth of a half sibling succeeds particularly well in stepfamilies that have been existent for a longer time, and if elder siblings are aged two to five or more than ten years old (Kasten 2003).

In general, biological siblings as well as half siblings often have a better mutual relation than stepchildren without biological bonds (Walper and Wild 2002). In the subjective representation of the family at child level, particularly stepchildren are at risk of being excluded (Roe, Bridges, Dunn and O’Connor 2006). An important reason for the greater proximity between biologically related siblings might well be parental differential treatment of biologically akin and unrelated children, a fact which has been consistently empirically proven (Walper and Wild 2002). Findings show that a stepchild receives less proximity and support than a biological child (Henderson and Taylor 1999). In stepfamilies, parents turn more intensely towards biologically related children (see for example Bray 1999; Hetherington 1999).

The closer proximity between biologically related persons can also be proven experimentally. Thus very often, mothers cannot recognise their stepchildren by scent, as well as adolescents recognise their stepsiblings less

frequently (Weisfeld, Czilli, Phillips, Gall and Lichtman 2003). Concerning the treatment of 'own' children and the partner's children, clear differences between parenting practices could be verified (Hetherington 1999), which can partly be traced back to different common histories, but also to the fact that the degree of similarity between stepsiblings is lower than between biological siblings or half siblings (Anderson 1999). This differential treatment however might increase the probability of sibling rivalry, as a perceived differential treatment also causes more conflict between biologically related children (see for example Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2001), and half- and stepsiblings might possibly react to an actual or supposed discrimination in a more sensitive way. Negative effects of favouritism towards joint children in newly formed stepfamilies can also be proven by longitudinal studies up to adult age (Wallerstein and Lewis 2007) (see also chapter 4.2.3).

In addition to differential treatment of siblings, a parenting behaviour strained by chronic stress in the course of family transitions can be detected in step families. Both factors might explain a major part of differences due to family structures between children from nuclear families and children from stepfamilies (Walper and Wild 2002). A particularly negative development of the relationship between stepparents and stepchildren occurs most frequently in those families where the stepfather demonstrates an authoritarian parenting behaviour, and the new partnership is only somewhat harmonious (Graf and Walper 2002). In this context, children from stepfamilies seem to be more frequently in danger of being exposed to parental conflicts and tensions, whereas the children are also quite often in the centre of parental dispute (Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash and O'Connor 2005). But also the relation to the separated parent has an impact on sibling relations in a stepfamily. Thus it can be proven that children with eroded or disrupted relation to their biological father have a worse relationship quality with their stepsiblings (Ahrons 2007; Ahrons and Tanner 2003).

In general, research on stepfamilies shows a complex picture, whereas the quality of sibling relations seems to depend to a large extent on the degree of biological kinship, but also on the often clearly visible parenting differences of stepparents' behaviour towards biologically related and unrelated children. The key to improving sibling relations seems to lie in the development of a good parent-child-relation to all children in the new family, supported by authoritative parenting equally shown towards all children. Authoritative parenting is characterised by a lot of attention paid towards the child, and simultaneously by consequent behaviour and knowledge about the child's activities. Authoritative parenting is almost consistently beneficial for competence and behaviour development of children, while it is ideally practiced by the biological parent as well as the stepparent.

4.1.3 Sibling relations in foster and adoptive families

In many cases, children in foster families are not biologically related to their foster parents. The foster parents take on "social parenting" for their foster children in care (Kasten 2003). Just as during other family transitions, the new situation is a potentially stressful event for the foster family, requiring a rearrangement of the family system. Foster children for their part have to overcome the often traumatic experiences from their families of origin and past living contexts as well as the separation from their primary reference persons, possibly including siblings. Chapter 4.3 explicitly deals with the question of joint or separate sibling placement in foster families, therefore this question is only marginally dealt with at this point. The previous chapter on siblings in stepfamilies (4.1.2) furthermore gives an overview on empir-

ical studies on relations between biologically unrelated siblings. In foster families (with the exception of kinship care), exactly this social sibling relation between foster children has to be dealt with. Unlike children in conventional stepfamilies, foster children have an implicit or explicit special status due to their strained original family background.

What exactly is the special feature of sibling relations in foster families? Monika Nienstedt and Arnim Westermann (1989) assume that in view of the major challenges for foster children of getting adapted to a new family situation, sibling relations tend to play a subordinate role. According to their findings, a central factor for a successful foster relationship is the parents' capacity to optimally answer each foster child's demands, which can be rather differing and also change in the course of time (Kasten 2003).

However, results from joint sibling placement indicate that sibling relations absolutely do have importance for the development of children in foster families. Thus, empirical studies predominantly show that siblings in joint placement grow up more frequently in a more stable foster care environment, and have a better emotional and behavioural development (Hegar 2005). In the long term, foster children in adult age seem to maintain closer relations to their biological siblings than to foster siblings (Gardner 2004). Within the foster family, the long-term relationship to the foster parents is more important to foster children than the relation to their foster siblings, while in the family of origin, the strongest bonds exist with the siblings.

Biologically unrelated foster siblings, who come together in the foster family, first have to cope with the task of establishing solid relations with each other, characterised by friendship and intimacy rather than rivalry and aggression. The older children are at admission age into the foster family, the more difficult becomes this task (Kasten 2003). The similar applies to adoptive families, whose consolidation tends to be more successful, if children are adopted at baby or infant age (Wild 1998). Concerning sibling groups, at least in the USA it has become apparent that foster care settings with various siblings lead less frequently to adoption by the foster parents (Leathers 2005).

A frequent problem in foster families is rivalry about affection and care of foster parents, which for the often traumatised and emotionally deprived foster children are of great importance (see for example Pflegekinder-Aktion Schweiz 2003). As findings on the formation of stepfamilies show, the development of relations between the new foster siblings represents a challenge that cannot always be successfully coped with in the long term (Walper and Wild 2002) (see chapter 4.1.2). A particularly dark picture is drawn by Nienstedt and Westermann (1989), who assume that the integration of foster children into a foster family is particularly and permanently endangered by the existence of siblings – most of all same-aged or younger biological children of the foster parents – and that therefore the admission or birth of further children absolutely has to be postponed until the foster child has completed all phases of integration. However, this opinion is not unconditionally shared by experts, as shown in the chapter on sibling placement in foster families (see chapter 4.3).

4.1.4 Sibling relations of half and full orphans

There is hardly any relevant scientific literature on sibling relations after the death of one or both parents. The probably best known study on this topic has been made by Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham (1944). The

study on Theresienstadt orphans focused on six children, who were brought to the concentration camp Theresienstadt immediately after being born. The care attendants changed all the time, the children were merely provided with basic supplies, and there was hardly any contact to adult reference persons. The children were liberated aged 36 to 46 months and accommodated in a British children's home. Among themselves, they showed a very positive attitude, did not interrupt each other and were mutually affectionate, sensitive and considerate of each other. Towards adults however, they were hostile and aggressive. These children seem to have been tied to each other by a sibling-like attachment; they showed loyalty, solidarity and emotiveness towards each other (Kasten 1993 a). Thus it is possible that such positive social abilities between siblings also develop if they have to grow up without parents in an unkind environment.

In a longitudinal study by Harriet Mosatche and co-authors (1983), retrospect data showed that in critical living circumstances such as the death or loss of one parent, sibling bonds were experienced as mainly positive and supporting. Certainly, the circumstances of loss, age of siblings at the moment of parental death and sibling relations before parental loss play an important role in answering the question, which impact the death of one or both parents has on sibling relations. Presumably, there are developmental phases in the life of siblings where loss has particularly negative effects, and where a close and positive sibling relation alleviates grief. Jürg Frick (2004) sketches the favourable case that siblings comfort and support each other in coping with parental death, but also the unfavourable constellation where the daughter assumes the mother's duties and tasks after maternal death.

4.2 Precarious family dynamics

In the following, the impact of strained internal family dynamics on sibling relations will be discussed – particularly conflicts between parents, strained parent-child-relations and parental differential treatment.

4.2.1 Parental conflicts and partnership problems

Conflicts are an important instrument to assert changing needs of individual family members in the course of family development, and to newly negotiate rights and duties. Although conflicts can be rather functional in this sense, however lasting and particularly open hostile conflicts between the parents stand for dysfunctional, destructive family dynamics. Correspondingly, such conflicts have also proven to be important risk factors for child development (Buehler, Krishnakumar, Anthony, Tittsworth and Stone 1994; Krishnakumar and Buehler 2000). Frequent and intensive conflicts between the parents can provoke internalised problem behaviour of children (such as depression and fear) as well as externalised problem behaviour (such as aggression) (Buehler, Krishnakumar, Anthony, Tittsworth and Stone 1994; Davies and others 2002; Fincham 1998; Grych and Fincham 1990). Not least, the risk of problems in siblings' relations increases. Thus, marital problems and parental conflicts are linked to a rather negative relationship quality amongst the siblings concerned (Brody 1998). For their part, siblings frequently react on parental conflicts with conflicts among themselves (Cummings and Smith 1989; Hetherington 1988; MacKinnon 1989 a), whereas it seems that parental conflict solving tactics are imitated by siblings.

This fact suggests that parents function as examples or models for sibling conflict solving behaviour (Reese-Weber and Kahn 2005). In the context of

social cognitive learning theory (Bandura 1979), it is pointed out that children (also) appropriate behaviour by means of observational learning, and not least consider in this context which type of behaviour has proven to be 'successful'. This explains why children particularly develop externalised problem behaviour, if they are exposed to disputes mainly characterised by open hostility and aggression. If children imitate hostile-aggressive parental conflict strategies in the course of observational learning, this will also strain the sibling relation.

However, further processes are probably relevant, too. Various theoretical approaches deal with the question how parental conflicts affect the well-being of children affected (Davies and others 2002). Partly different outlooks than within the hypothesis of observational learning just described are presented by the "emotional security hypothesis" (Cummings and Davies 1994). The latter assumes that parental conflicts affect the feeling of emotional security of a child, whereas not only externalised, but even more internally digested reactions are promoted. Empirical findings prove that children confronted with parental conflicts show intense emotional stress reactions, withdrawal, attempts to intervene and fear about the stability of relations, potentially causing external and internal problem behaviour (Davies and others 2002). Thereby, conflicts do not always have to occur on a parent-child-level in order to affect the emotional stability of the child. A negative parent-child-relation in case of a conflictive partner relationship however is considered to be an additional risk factor for the development of problem behaviour, while a positive parent-child-relation can be a protective factor.

Rather additional than contradictory to this stipulation, "cognitive contextual framework" (Grych and Fincham 1990) assumes that parental conflicts do not per se, but rather in the way they are perceived and interpreted by the children, have an effect on their well-being. They affect children for example by means of the experienced intensity, frequency and unforgiveness of conflicts, or by means of the feeling of threat which in turn is responsible for the development of internalised problem behaviour. Particular attention of the model is laid on child attributions concerning the causes of conflict. Mostly self-accusation of children is connected to negative effects of parental conflicts.

A more systemic orientation is presented by the triangulation hypothesis and the so-called indirect effects model. Due to child attachment to both parents, children easily get into loyalty conflicts in case of parental partnership problems, associated with considerable strains which in many cases can only be solved by an alienation from one or both parents (Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch 1991; Buchanan and Waizenhofer 2001; Maccoby and Mnookin 1992). In this context, analogous to tendencies in families with parental separation, siblings might show a certain distribution of loyalties, where one sibling shows solidarity with one parent, another sibling with the other parent. Such formations of coalitions always put further strains on sibling relations.

Finally, the "indirect effects model" assumes that primarily parenting behaviour and the quality of parent-child-attachment is undermined by parental conflicts, which in turn affect the child's well-being and behaviour and thus function as linking factors between parental conflicts and child problem behaviour (Stone, Buehler and Barber 2002). Indeed, many findings show that in case of frequent conflicts in parental relations, there is a 'spill-over' of negativity on parenting behaviour (Erel and Burman 1995; Krishnakumar and Buehler 2000). The negative impact on parenting behaviour is mani-

fested in form of low warmth, acceptance and emotional availability of parents right up to hurtful criticism and rejection of children, in low behaviour control from parental side – such as sparse observation and accompaniment, inconsistent disciplining behaviour – and also in form of psychological control mechanisms such as triangulation, withdrawal of affection, causing feelings of guilt and intrusive or rather obtrusive parenting behaviour. These strains on parent-child-interaction often cause problem behaviour of children in turn (Davies and others 2002).

Although in case of open conflicts and disharmony between parents, a positive sibling relation seems to be less probable in general, according to compensation hypothesis at least to some extent an increased care-giving behaviour of elder siblings can be proven when facing parental conflicts (Brody 1998). Also buffer theory finds certain confirmation. Even a higher number of siblings seem to contribute to the fact that negative effects of parental conflicts can be alleviated. Thus, it becomes apparent that with a higher number of siblings, the probability of child parentification in the course of parental dispute or separation decreases (Walper u. a. 2001).

The quality of sibling relation is considered even more important. According to a study by Jennifer Jenkins (1992), a positive sibling relation in case of conflictive parental relations can indeed mitigate emotional and behavioural problems of children. Interestingly, a generally positive sibling relation in this study showed clearer mitigating effects than sibling support in a concrete situation of conflict. The fact that the general relation quality proved to be so important, refers to the fact – consistent with attachment theory deliberations – that emotional safety and protection amongst siblings are particularly important. At the same time, the minor importance of a concrete, situation-related support might show that the capacity of siblings to support and help each other in case of parental problems is still limited in childhood. In this context, support by adult attachment persons is considered to be more effective.

In general, many processes and mechanisms seem to contribute to the fact that parental conflicts have negative effects on sibling relations. Presumably, the erosion of parental competences has a certain key function. On the one hand, it can be assumed that children suffer from impaired parenting behaviour and develop unfavourable behaviour patterns, which affect sibling relations in turn (Brody 1998). On the other hand, those parents who are affected in their parenting behaviour in general probably react in a less adequate manner to sibling conflicts and are therefore less capable of limiting these conflicts or contributing to their solution. Provided that parenting behaviour is not affected, it seems that no considerable strains on sibling relations occur in case of parental conflicts (Brody 1998; Brody, Stoneman and McCoy 1994 a, 1994 b; Hetherington 1988; MacKinnon 1989 b). In the following, hence the importance of parent-child-relation for sibling relations will be discussed.

4.2.2 Strains on parent-child-relations

Numerous empirical studies suggest that the parent-child-relation particularly affects the quality of sibling relation. The following table summarises the findings and shows, which aspects of parent-child-relation are relevant for sibling relations, and how these effects can be demonstrated by specific child behaviour. The summary documents at the same time the current knowledge base on familiar impacts on sibling relations (Brody 1998).

This model addresses particularly three areas of parent-child-relation, discussed in the following.

(A) Empirical findings demonstrate convincingly – that according to congruence hypothesis (see chapter 3.2) – positive experiences in parent-child-relation come along with a prosocial orientation among siblings, while negative experiences, such as negativism, obtrusive parenting or exaggerated control are linked with rather aggressive sibling relations (see for example Noller 2005; Tseung and Schott 2004; Updegraff, Thayer, Whiteman, Denning and McHale 2005; for an overview, see Brody 1998). Positive experiences in this context promote reciprocity, support and intimacy between the siblings, while negative experiences increase the probability of more rivalry and aggression. In case of adolescents, particularly correlations between conflict communication and styles of conflict solution in the parent-child-relation and in sibling relation could be proven (Noller 2005; Reese-Weber and Kahn 2005).

(B) A good 'management' of sibling conflicts by the parents proves to be particularly beneficial for sibling relations in childhood, linked to the development of prosocial attitudes. Particularly important is the guidance of elder siblings in dealing with their younger siblings, in order to contain dominance and rivalry (Dunn and Munn 1986). However, parents have the task in this context not to intervene too frequently and to appear obtrusive, but to leave appropriate margins of action to children for finding proper conflict solutions. A positive adaption of the elder sibling in this context also improves sibling relations (Pike, Coldwell and Dunn 2005).

(C) Parental differential treatment or discrimination compared to other siblings is a particularly negative experience in parent-child-relation, as discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Table
Influences on sibling relationship quality
(according to the heuristic model of Gene Brody 1998, p. 11)

Family Experience	**Mediators**
Positive experiences	*Positive mediators*
A Parent-child-relationship: Affective positivity and responsiveness	Emotion regulation featuring problem-focused coping
B Management of sibling conflict: Parental intervention to escalating sibling conflict	Prosocial behaviour patterns
	Rendering of benign attributions for relational events
	Internalisation of norms governing aggression and fairness
	Sense of security and safety
Negative experiences	*Negative mediators*
A Parent-child-relationship: Affective negativity and hostility	Aggressive/coercive behaviour patterns
B Management of sibling conflict: Parental non-intervention to escalating sibling conflict	Emotion dysregulation featuring anger-focused coping
	Rendering of non-benign attributions for relational events
C Differential parental treatment: Receipt of less preferential parental treatment	Rejection of norms governing aggression and fairness

4.2.3 Parental differential treatment

Although differential treatment or favouritism by parents is probably perceived as problematic experience by most people, this topic has been only recently discussed in empirical research in Germany (Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2001). In the Anglo-American region, a conceptual distinction between two phenomena is made. The term of 'parental differential treatment' can best be translated into German as 'elterliche Ungleichbehandlung' and implies that children experience a different degree of affection, control or punishment, which however does not have to be necessarily unjust, but can be adequate parental behaviour in certain cases (ibidem). To the contrary, the phenomenon of 'parental favouritism' ('elterliche Bevorzugung') clearly implies different parental appreciation of children, and therefore implies injustice in parental action (ibidem).

The negative effects of parental favouritism on sibling relations have already been mentioned in chapter 3.2, where favouritism hypothesis was presented (Boer, Goedhart and Treffers 1992). However, also in the context of parental differential treatment, negative effects on sibling relations can be proven. In the following, the consequences of parental differential treatment and favouritism for children, parent-child-relation and sibling relation will be briefly summarised, as well as the question which factors promote parental differential treatment and favouritism.

Empirical findings on the consequences of parental differential treatment and favouritism consistently show, that such parental behaviour causes negative effects on the siblings concerned, be it in the short or long term (for a more detailed overview, see Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2001; Ferring, Boll and Filipp 2003). Thereby, negative effects on the psychological state, self-esteem as well as externalised problem behaviour, for example delinquency can be proven, which are partly more distinct in case of disadvantaged children (see for example Brody, Stoneman and McCoy 1994 a; Conger and Conger 1994; McHale, Updegraff, Shanahan, Crouter and Killoren 2005; Richmond, Stocker and Rienks 2005; Stocker, Dunn and Plomin 1989; Tamrouti-Makkink, Dubas, Gerris and van Aken 2004; see also Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2001). Also in the long term, negative effects of parental differential treatment and favouritism can be proven in adult age. Thus, parental discrimination in retrospect comes along with a more difficult social adaption in adult age (Young and Ehrenberg 2007). The experienced parental differential treatment is linked to a rather negative self-assessment in adult age, insecure attachment and more stress in partner relations, irrespective of the fact whether experiences were made as a preferred or disadvantaged child (Rauer and Volling 2007).

Effects of parental favouritism on parent-child-relation significantly depend on the fact whether the children affected were preferred or disadvantaged by the parents. Children who were preferred compared to their siblings report more positive relations to their parents than children who were disadvantaged (Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2001). Other findings point out that the impact on parent-child-relation depends on how just or unjust the differential treatment was perceived. Thus, a differential treatment perceived as fair has no negative effects on parent-child-relation (Kowal, Krull and Kramer 2004). Furthermore, the effects depend on the degree of preferential or discriminating treatment, whereas particularly a minor preference comes along with a positive parent-child-relation (Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2005). Also familiar cohesion plays an important role concerning the effects of parental favouritism on parent-child-relation (McHale, Updegraff,

Shanahan, Crouter and Killoren 2005). Furthermore, attachment to the parents as well as closeness and support of the parents in middle adult age is also in the long term undermined by differential treatment experienced in childhood (Ferring, Boll and Filipp 2003).

Most studies dealing with the consequences of parental differential treatment and favouritism put the sibling relation in the focus of attention. Summarising, it can be stated (Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2001) that the stronger parental differential treatment, the worse the relationship between the siblings. Thereby it seems to be relatively negligible for the assessment of sibling relation whether it is made by the preferred or disadvantaged sibling (Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2003). Differential treatment undermines positive aspects of sibling relation and enhances negative aspects. The way differential treatment is experienced seems to play a particularly important role for sibling relations. The relation quality between siblings is particularly worsened, if differential treatment cannot be explained by differences due to age or needs (Kowal and Kramer 1997). The perception of the same degree of experienced parental affection and control is linked to more positive sibling relations (Kowal, Krull and Kramer 2006; Rauer and Volling 2007). Also from a longitudinal point of view, it can be proven that differential treatment in childhood is linked to less positive sibling relations in adolescence (see for example Brody, Stoneman and McCoy 1994 a) as well as in middle adult age (Ferring, Boll and Filipp 2003).

In general, it can be assumed that parental differential treatment fosters mostly conflicts and rivalry between sibling, while proximity and support are affected. If differential treatment is perceived by siblings as fair, less or no negative effects on sibling relations are to be expected.

The factors promoting parental differential treatment and favouritism have hardly been researched into. On the one hand, parental differential treatment seems to depend on individual parenting knowledge and experiences of the parents themselves. Thus, findings have shown that parents have better parenting competences with their second-born children (Shanahan, McHale, Crouter and Osgood 2007), as well as they assist the transition to adolescence with fewer conflicts (Shanahan, McHale, Osgood and Crouter 2007). Also child characteristics are responsible for parental differential treatment and favouritism. Differences in age, gender or personality of siblings play a role in this context (see for example Martin and Ross 2005; Tucker, McHale and Crouter 2003). Furthermore, parents seem to tend to prefer that sibling who presents the fewest problems after difficult experiences with their children during adolescence, such as the pregnancy of a daughter (East and Jacobson 2003).

Likewise, psychological strains of parents can provoke differential treatment and favouritism. Thus, the results of the famous longitudinal study over a period of 25 years on the consequences of parental divorce show that parents have parenting problems due to major challenges in the course of divorce and post-divorce phase, which can also be expressed in differential treatment of their children (Wallerstein and Lewis 2007). Particularly in large families with three and more children, the preference of one child compared to the others can be proven. During childhood, related negative effects do not yet appear in the post-divorce phase, sustainable effects can recently be proven for later development in adult age. Mothers as well as fathers tend to treat their children differentially after divorce, in case of fathers this tendency is more pronounced (see also chapter 4.1.1). Parental

separation also implies an increased danger of forming coalitions which might be linked to a differential treatment of siblings in turn (Brody 1998).

Biological relationship to children seems to be another cause for parental differential treatment and favouritism, proven impressively by findings on parenting behaviour in stepfamilies (Walper and Wild 2002) (see also chapter 4.1.2). Thus, parents in stepfamilies care more intensely for those children who are biologically related (see for example Bray 1999; Hetherington 1999), and offer less proximity and support to their stepchildren (Henderson and Taylor 1999). The differential treatment of biological children and stepchildren might be explained by the fact that these stepchildren are less similar to each other than biological siblings or half-siblings (Anderson 1999).

As described above, parental differential treatment of children can be absolutely appropriate and does not have to cause negative effects, given that parental behaviour meets children's individual needs, and that the siblings consider the differential treatment to be fair (Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2001). In an ideal situation, this individual treatment of siblings is not characterised by favouritism towards individual siblings. In order to strengthen the sense of justice in the family, open conversations on the appropriateness of differential treatment of siblings should be conducted in the family (Kowal, Krull and Kramer 2004). However, such conversations do not necessarily result in the fact that all children coincide in their assessment of parental behaviour (Kowal, Krull and Kramer 2006).

4.3 Joint or separate placement? Siblings in out-of-home care

When siblings cannot grow up in their family of origin, responsible decision-makers have to answer the question whether siblings should be accommodated in joint placement, or whether a separation of siblings is possible or perhaps even necessary. For a growing number of professional experts, joint sibling placement has become the ultimate ambition (Pflegekinder-Aktion Schweiz 2003). Reservations are serious concerns such as violence, abuse or traumatisation amongst siblings (Herrick and Piccus 2005, p. 847; Karle 2004). Also placement-organisational obstacles play a role (see below).

Jurisdiction concerning decision on custody and foster care follows the principle of continuity, whereas existing relations are to be continued, as far as possible. The sibling relation is considered to be an important resource for stability that helps children to cope better with separation from the family of origin. In the long term, the preservation of sibling relations, particularly for children from difficult family backgrounds is considered an important factor for developing stable, life-long relationships (Kosonen 1994; Herrick and Piccus 2005). There are hints that in adult age, the relation to siblings from the family of origin is more important than the relation to foster siblings (Gardner 2004).

However, joint placement is not always possible, due to structural or psychodynamic factors. In the following, an overview is to be presented on empirical research concerning the conditions and consequences of joint or separate sibling placement. Subsequently, the conditions and consequences of separate sibling placement will be discussed in detail.

For the Anglo-American region (a detailed overview is presented by Hegar 2005), various studies consistently show that large sibling groups or sibling

groups with major age differences between the siblings, as well as mixed-gender sibling groups are accommodated in separate placements more frequently (see for example Wulczyn and Zimmermann 2005). If decisions on custody and foster care are not made for all siblings at the same time, separate sibling placement also occurs more frequently. To the contrary, in so-called kinship care, siblings are placed jointly more frequently. These findings can be traced back to structural problems of sibling placement on the one hand, for example the lack of foster families or residential care placements for large sibling groups. On the other hand, in case of large sibling groups it often seems hardly possible to meet the different needs of children in one foster family, so that a separate placement is considered to be the better solution.

In recent times, particularly in the USA, detailed overview studies on the consequences of different placement decisions for the development of the siblings concerned were published (Shlonsky 2005). Rebecca Hegar (2005) draws the careful conclusion that joint sibling placement in foster families can contribute to a somewhat greater stability in these families, and that siblings in joint placement have better courses of emotional and behavioural development in general.

Empirical findings show that children who live in a foster family together with their siblings present less behavioural (Boer and Spiering 1991; Smith 1998) or emotional (Smith 1998; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005) problems and show more positive behaviour towards peers (Smith 1995), as well as they develop stronger bonds with foster parents (Leathers 2005). The latter is particularly true if siblings are accommodated jointly without other children (Rushton, Dance, Quinton and Mayes 2001). Jointly placed siblings furthermore experience a greater familiar stability, as they change foster family less frequently (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry and Charbonneau 2000; Staff and Fein 1992) and have to experience the break-up of a foster family less frequently (Rosenthal, Schmidt and Conner 1988).

However, a number of studies do not find any differences concerning the problem behaviour of siblings in joint or separate placement (Brodzinsky and Brodzinsky 1992), or the stability of the foster family (Holloway 1997; Rushton, Dance, Quinton and Mayes 2001; Wedge and Mantle 1991). Very few studies also show negative effects of joint sibling placement such as for example a slower development of linguistic skills (Smith 1998), a deterioration in school achievements and a more pronounced problem behaviour (Thorpe and Swart 1992). The question remains, under which conditions a separation of siblings becomes necessary.

In the context of custody and foster care decisions for sibling placement, the decision-makers have to answer a whole series of questions, particularly concerning earlier experiences of relationships among the siblings affected: “To which extent have they been neglected? What have they been deprived of? How many relationship disruptions did they already have to cope with? How does the relation quality among the children themselves look like? What about their developmental status, how old are the children when being put in placement? The perspective is also decisive: shall the children return to their family of origin, or is the objective a long-term stay in a foster family or residential care unit?” (Zabernigg 2003, p. 15). Thereby, it has to be newly decided in each individual case, how important sibling relation is: “However, what a sibling relationship means or can potentially mean to any child in foster care is as diverse as the children who have experienced life care” (Herrick and Piccus 2005, p. 847).

A separate sibling placement is intended, if abuse and traumatisation in sibling relations become apparent, if children develop a very strong rivalry for getting the foster parents' affection due to hardship and deprivations, and positive relational experiences with the foster parents therefore seem to be doubtful, or if elder siblings are so intensely bound to their role of care-giver for the younger siblings that their own development is endangered (Pflegekinder-Aktion Schweiz 2003; Whelan 2003). But also structural conditions already mentioned such as for example the lack of foster families for large sibling groups, or too great differences between the needs of individual siblings can lead to a separate placement (see hereto the findings by Hegar 2005). From the foster mothers' point of view, dealing with separately placed siblings is actually easier than the integration of whole sibling groups (Smith 1996).

The children affected in turn very often express the wish from their subjective point of view that they want to be placed together. If a joint placement is not possible, they expect frequent visits, and to receive information about their siblings (Herrick and Piccus 2005). If the contact between siblings is maintained through mutual visits and thus a re-organisation of sibling relations is made possible, particularly positive results are to be expected (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry and Charbonneau 2000).

Also the findings of attachment theory can be taken into consideration for custody and foster care decisions, in order to answer the question of joint or separate sibling placement. Hence, the decision should be made in view of the best possible development of attachment bonds. David Whelan (2003) names three central questions which should be answered by decision-makers from an attachment theory point of view. First, to which extent does the placement contribute to maximum security and care for the siblings concerned? Second, to which extent does the placement have neutral effects on security and care? And third, to which effect does the placement have negative effects on security and care?

Positive answers in the first two cases usually present acceptable solutions for sibling children, so that a joint placement can be attempted. "Siblings can provide familiarity, love and comfort to one other. In cases where the sibling relationship is not loving, but nevertheless not abusive, the foster parents and other caregivers can counteract the insecure attachment style within the sibling-set through discipline, re-direction, role modelling and coaching. The siblings in these sibling-sets can then improve their relatedness to one another while in placements that promote secure attachment styles" (Herrick and Piccus 2005, p. 847). If the third question on negative effects of placement on security and child care is answered in the affirmative, it will become necessary as a rule for the children's best interest to place them in separate foster families.

Due to the separation from parents and siblings, intensive feelings such as sadness or guilt will be triggered. The loss of identity can also be an effect of separation (Herrick and Piccus 2005; Zabernigg 2003). Feelings of guilt can arise if siblings have to be left behind in an unfavourable family situation, whereas the separation from the sibling is conceived as a punishment. Particularly elder siblings might feel sorrow for losing their care-taking role, which might have previously given self-esteem to these children. All these mechanisms have to be cautiously reflected in out-of-home care decisions.

4.4 The role of sibling relations in questions of custody during separation or divorce proceedings

With the aim of getting transferable findings on the situation of siblings in care, this chapter is going to deal with the role of sibling relations for decisions on custody, or the right to determine the place of residence in separation and divorce proceedings. Let us start with a short introduction into German divorce law.

4.4.1 Custody law in Germany

Changes in divorce law reflect modified views on how to assess parental separations from a social and political point of view, and at the same time set basic preconditions for the development of relationships in families with parental divorce. With the introduction of the principle of irretrievable breakdown at the divorce law revision in 1977, the allocation of blame to one party was abandoned. Thereby, new aspects came into effect in the context of alimony and custody decisions (Schwab 1995, p. 268 et seq.). The then new, today already obsolete divorce law from 1977 generally allowed for the sole custody of one parent. Joint parental custody was rather an exception, only chosen by tribunals in 'appropriate cases'. On the one hand, the Family Court decision on custody was oriented towards the wish of the persons affected; to be exact, it depended on the fact whether parents presented a consistent and content-wise acceptable proposal. In case of children having completed fourteen years of age, their wishes were also taken into consideration. On the other hand, and first and foremost the decision was oriented towards the child's well-being (Schwab 1995).

It was to find fault with the fact that the exclusive decision in favour of only one parent often presented a certain arbitrariness, particularly as judicial prognoses on future parental and child behaviour "even in case of expert psychological support stand on a sticky wicket" (ibidem, p. 271). Additionally, the suspicion was raised that parental conflicts were fuelled by the court decision on custody, and that children were often exploited in divorce proceedings.

In 1998, many amendments were made in family law such as the introduction of joint custody as a rule, amongst others (Lederle von Eckardstein, Niesel, Salzgeber and Schönfeld, 1999). The precondition is a compliant parental declaration stating that no applications on custody or visitation rights of the child will be filed. Joint custody according to the new stipulations does not mean that all affairs concerning the child have to be regulated consensually by both parents. Merely decisions of particular importance, for example concerning professional training or a medical operation, have to be taken by mutual agreement. However, if one parent applies for sole custody, the consent of the other parent and in case of children aged fifteen or above also their consent is necessary in order to grant the application for sole custody without a further examination. In case of disputes the decision is taken in favour of the child's well-being, whereas children are also personally heard, and children above fourteen years have a special say. In order to promote joint custody, in case of dispute also partial custody, for example the right of decision on residence can be adjudicated to one parent alone.

4.4.2 Siblings in separation and divorce proceedings

In 2005, about 45,000 marriages with at least two joint children were divorced in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt 2008). Even after the German

Children's Law Reform Act, 85 % of the children in Germany live with their mother and only about 11 % with their father after separation (Proksch 2002). In some cases though, the children are divided among the parents, which means that one part of the children lives with the mother, another part with the father. There is only a limited extent of data on the exact number of these cases of sibling separation.

Friedrich Arntzen (1994) mentions a study from 1983 suggesting that custody evaluators gave explicit recommendation for sibling separation in 34 % of all sibling-related cases. According to another study from 1992, in 23 % of the cases it was recommended to separate the siblings. Michael Karle and his colleagues analysed further legal opinions in 2000 and found 19 % of sibling separations (Karle, Müller, Kleefeld and Klosinski 2000). These figures are based on selective random sample cases, as since the German Children's Law Reform Act, only about 15 % to 20 % of all divorces are taken to court (Statistisches Bundesamt 2008), whereby in only about 10 % of these cases in turn an expert opinion is delivered (Balloff 2004). Therefore, it can be assumed that on a percentage basis, fewer children are separated from each other as a result of divorce than the stated figures suggest.

Bruce Hawthorne (2000) reports for Australia, that in 5 % to 7 % of all divorces of families with children, siblings are separated from each other. If a sibling separation indeed occurs, in Australia as well as in the USA, it happens mostly in case of elder children, whereas the elder ones mainly stay with the father, the younger ones with the mother (Hawthorne 2000; Kaplan, Hennon and Ade-Ridder 1993). In Australia, tendentially more children of different gender are separated than same-gender siblings, about 60 % of the girls stay with their mothers in case of sibling separation (Hawthorne 2000).

German jurisdiction is primarily oriented towards preventing sibling separation (Salzgeber 2005). Sibling separation will only be decreed, if there are particularly good reasons to do so (Oberlandesgericht Brandenburg 2003). In principle, family courts consider particularly important that siblings are raised and educated together.

The avoidance of sibling separation as a matter of principle is based on the assumption that siblings can support each other in case of divorce-related parental conflicts, and that particularly with a view to the experiences of loss, staying together is an important resource for a healthy future development (Balloff 2004; Spangenberg and Spangenberg 2002). In the critical situation of parental separation, according to jurisdiction, an ongoing sibling relation offers strength and support (Oberlandesgericht Dresden 2003). Hence, a separation of siblings is generally avoided.

Ideally, the court only decides sibling separation after thorough examination of the case. In general, the principle applies that parent-child-attachment takes precedence over sibling attachment. Hence, a particularly intensive attachment of a child to the mother or father is an important fact to be considered. In case of different inclination of the children towards one or the other parent, sibling separation might be suggested. Nonetheless, sibling relations play an important role for the court decision on custody or permanent main place of residence of children (Salzgeber 2005). The mutual affection of siblings is particularly decisive, if parental relationship is severely broken (Palandt, Bassenge and Brudermüller 2007).

The quality of sibling relations therefore has to be explored as thoroughly as the parent-child-relation. In this context, not only the separation period itself should be taken into consideration, but also sibling bonds prior to this phase. In case of major age differences between the children, the importance of sibling relations decreases in the context of deciding sibling placement in German jurisdiction (Oberlandesgericht Zweibrücken 2001).

Harry Dettenborn and Eginhard Walter (2002) have detected the following difficulties in assessing sibling relations.

– *Wrong precedence of parent's well-being over child's well-being:* The separation of siblings should not be undertaken in order to alleviate the parents' sorrow, for example by letting them keep at least one child. Such a decision would functionalise children within the separation context and would be contradictory to the child's well-being.

– *Overassessment of sibling conflicts:* The parental separation conflict often leads to aggressions at sibling level among the children. Here, they can express their feelings more easily, because dependencies and respect are less distinctive than in their relation to the parents. Hence there is the danger that the quality of sibling relations is not assessed correctly.

According to German jurisdiction, a separation of siblings is not consistent with child well-being, if both siblings have an equally strong attachment to both parents (Oberlandesgericht Brandenburg 2003), or if one child has a strong attachment to the parent he or she has not been adjudicated to (Oberlandesgericht Hamm 1999). Neither can siblings be separated, if the parent in charge is less adequate, but some siblings refuse to go and live with the other parent, and the siblings refuse to be separated (Oberlandesgericht Bamberg 1998).

Dettenborn and Walter (2002) furthermore argue in support of the fact that excessive demands on siblings shall not be a reason for sibling separation. Frequently, a parentification of elder children who care for their younger siblings takes place during severe parental conflicts, so that they put their own needs aside to an inadequate extent. In this case, supporting measures of child and youth welfare services shall be in demand.

A separation of siblings is only consistent with or necessary for child well-being on rare occasions (Gerhardt, von Heintschel-Heinegg and Klein 2008). A separation might be indicated in case of massive aggressions between siblings, erupting repeatedly in physical attacks (Oberlandesgericht Frankfurt 1994). Another reason is given if siblings mutually obstruct each other in their development, or strongly reject each other on an emotional level (Salzgeber 2005). Also in case that both parents are unable to cope with the care of all children on their own, a separation of siblings is applicable (Balloff 2004).

4.4.3 Consequences of sibling separation

Sighting expert literature, it became evident that the consequences of sibling separation after parental separation have hardly been researched until now. In one of the few existing publications, Lori Kaplan and co-authors proceed on the assumption that a separation of siblings has negative effects on sibling relation, possibly affecting the children's psychological well-being for years. Kaplan refers to family systems theory and points out that in case of sibling separation, the family subsystem of siblings is

endangered. Kaplan and co-authors see the reason for sibling separation rarely based on child well-being, but on parents' interests – neither mother nor father want to part with their children (Kaplan, Ade-Ridder and Hennon 1991; Kaplan, Hennon and Ade-Ridder 1993).

As mentioned above (see chapter 4.1.1), no universal results on the function of siblings in the course of parental separation can be stated. Furthermore, it is unclear how sibling separation affects psychological well-being in the long term. In an Australian survey on families with separated siblings, Bruce Hawthorne (2000) draws completely different conclusions than Kaplan and co-authors. His findings are contradictory to the assumption of parents' selfish motives being decisive for sibling separation. According to Hawthorne, in 69 % of all cases it is the children's will that is decisive; the parents are mainly unhappy about sibling separation. Parents explain their discontent with sibling separation by saying that siblings belong together even more than children and parents, in their point of view. Admittedly, they missed those children who did not live with them very much. However, sibling relations had not changed through sibling separation, according to parents as well as children.

In assessing sibling separation, according to Hawthorne, children were more satisfied than their parents. For a successful sibling separation, some important factors have been worked out – geographical proximity to the parents, regular contact of children with the separated parent and with their siblings, as well as efficient communication and cooperation between the parents. In his summary, the author states among the advantages of sibling separation that in an ideal situation, both parents maintain parenting functions and responsibility for the children, and can exchange opinions on parenting and education. Furthermore, both parents have similar positions with regard to the children, meaning that none of the parents has the power to command all children and, should the occasion arise, deny visitation rights to the other parent.

These different representations of possible consequences of sibling separation clearly show a major research deficit in this context. According to the current state of knowledge, there does not seem to be one necessarily 'best' solution for the children. Therefore, it has to be always carefully considered and decided for the individual case, and according to the aspects mentioned above, whether siblings shall grow up jointly with one parent, or separated from each other divided between both parents. This result may carefully be applied for decisions on child accommodation of child and youth welfare services. However, it has to be taken into consideration that children who were taken out of their families and accommodated in a new living place generally suffer from much more severe problems and far-reaching strains than children whose parents are undergoing separation or divorce.

5
CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The findings presented suggest a series of conclusions concerning sibling relations in strained family situations, which shall be once again summarised and discussed in this chapter. In doing so, we address the question how strained sibling relations fraught with risk can be detected, and which family-related factors tend to cause respective negative developments in sibling relations. We raise the question how such a development can be prevented, which is important in view of the development of suitable preventive and intervention services, and thus have implications for the common practice of child and youth welfare services.

Furthermore, once again the question is raised how opportunities and risks of sibling relations are to be assessed in those family constellations where caring and educating tasks are assigned to foster parents, and experts in child and youth welfare services. We discuss the special challenges foster families and family-based forms of care are confronted with, if they accommodate sibling groups jointly, and which opportunities, but also risks such an arrangement may carry for child development. In the following, in chapter 5.3 we will address the issue of emerging research needs.

5.1 Opportunities and risks for and in sibling relations

The fact that sibling relations bear a considerable potential as resilience factor and resource should have become sufficiently clear due to the studies and findings presented. Social work practitioners in residential care units are obliged to promote the development of children and adolescent in their care. In view of the generally ambivalent character of sibling relations, they are thus confronted with the task of supporting the aspect of resources also in case of severe, on-going strained situations, and to professionally alleviate negative aspects. How can risks for and in sibling relations be recognised, and be productively dealt with for individual children and the sibling group?

It remains to be stated that sibling relations are multi-faceted and are often based on ambivalent basic structures, equally containing supportive as well as stressful aspects. Such ambivalences are so to say ‘normal’ and also characteristic for other family subsystems such as partnerships and intergenerational relations. Also for the latter, ambivalences have been pointed out as characteristic, apart from the often demonstrated function of solidarity (Lüscher and Liegle 2003). The closer sibling relations are, and the more functions they comprise, the more contradictory tendencies seem to take effect, as great emotional proximity and high density of interactions contain the mutual commitment growing out of certain role constellations, as well as an increased conflict potential and the risk of competition for scarce resources in the family context.

In case it is intended to detect relevant risks for development arising from sibling relations, conflictiveness per se seems to be a less conclusive indicator than the basic lack of warmth, positive-supporting interaction and cohesion. Insofar, different aspects always have to be considered in sibling relations assessment. A special attention should be paid to the ratio of positive-supporting and negative-contradictory aspects of the relation. Presumably, a cooperative, emotionally sound basic structure of sibling relation provides major resources to be able to cope with conflicts and problems in a productive way. So if siblings show only little affection to each other, but

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cooperation and attention can be identified in the relation, this can absolutely be interpreted as a positive sign.

However, it has also become clear that sibling relations are not always conceived the same way by the siblings concerned, but that individual perceptions can show clear divergences in view of different needs and clearly asymmetrical roles. This fact can become quite obvious, if one sibling assumes the role of the caring, giving part, and another sibling is the attended, receiving part. In cases of such unequal commitment, it is obvious that the relation is experienced differently, even if the rather active role of the caring part must not be less rewarding due to a higher grade of influence, and probably also due to a higher degree of competence experienced.

Also in case of rivalling relations, the individual assessment of siblings can diverge. Sibling rivalry has often been discussed as a typical feature of sibling relations. Obviously, it can take different shapes, not only between sibpairs, but also within a sibling system. Usually, rivalry emerges if proper needs cannot be satisfied because of the counterpart. In case of mutual rivalry, this fact is true for both siblings more or less in equal measure, however rivalry often occurs only on one side, for example if one sibling is disadvantaged due to parental differential treatment. Clinical evidence shows that rivalry of one sibling against another might cause the development of quite pathological traits and have negative effects on personality development in the longer term. In this context, the opponent seems to suffer less than the active rivalling sibling, whose needs are not satisfied within the relationship context. However, it has to be said that experiences of the rather passive 'opponents' have been comparatively less considered, so that their disadvantages are possibly underestimated.

In general, it seems to be indispensable to choose an individualised approach when assessing opportunities and risks of a sibling relation (amongst others), taking into account the different points of view and experiences of individual siblings. In this context, the positive potential of the experienced support might be prevailing for one sibling, while for another sibling rivalry and overload caused by caring and attending tasks are stronger to the fore.

The obvious question at this point, which extent of attending functions for younger or needier siblings becomes an overload for the caring part is difficult to answer. Presumably, in each individual case, the degrees of subjective strain or apparent stress symptoms have to be decisive. Furthermore, the question should be addressed to which extent the way of coping with age-typical developmental tasks, such as the development of sound peer relations or coping with school requirements is impaired by assuming tendentially overstressing tasks and functions in the sibling system. However, it has to be noted that even a strong involvement in caring for siblings is not necessarily linked to disadvantages of child personality development. Hence, for example E. Mavis Hetherington (1989) has found in her study on children of families with parental divorce a group of particularly competent children who assumed a high degree of responsibility for their siblings after parental divorce, but however rather profited from that situation in their social and performance development. In view of the repeatedly shown gender-related differences in sibling relations it is no surprise that in this case, the children mentioned were almost exclusively girls. The decisive factor for the girls' positive development seems to have been the supporting-esteeming behaviour of the mothers towards the girls, which gave the necessary backing for a successful coping with the highly demanding tasks.

Parenting behaviour plays a key role among the factors decisive for the development of sibling relations in individual cases. Competent parental behaviour can prevent conflicts and rivalries between siblings, and when necessary contribute to constructive solutions. A lack of parental sensitiveness in view of individual needs of siblings, and also their sense of justice, can strain a sibling relation in the long term. The positive effects of authoritative, or tender-consequent parenting imply a major opportunity for promoting a positive development of sibling relations, also in case of demanding or problematic family situations.

However, parenting behaviour often suffers from critical life experiences and chronic stress situations, such as unemployment, poverty, partnership conflicts, health-related and personality problems of parents, as well as from deprived living situations in general with multiple problem constellations (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat für Familienfragen 2005). Concerning the decisive question how sibling relations develop in view of such experiences such as the lack of parental care, different, partly contradictory hypotheses have been presented. Although the findings are not consistent, there seems to be more evidence for congruence hypothesis, stating that after strains on parent-child-relation, an increased occurrence of problems in sibling relations is to be expected. Particularly conflict behaviour shows clear continuity throughout different family subsystems.

On the other hand, concerning the caring and attending behaviour of siblings, also compensatory processes seem to be quite clearly visible in order to balance the lack of parental care. Presumably, the fact that (mostly elder) siblings are steered into this role by different factors contributes to the rise of such compensatory effects – apart from their own prosocial motives, in individual cases parental expectations or instructions and a support-seeking behaviour of (mostly younger) siblings can even be ultimately decisive. However in general, there remain clear research needs, as a systematic assessment of congruence and compensation hypothesis concerning their validity for certain areas of sibling research is still pending.

Three aspects of parenting behaviour have proven to be relevant for sibling relation:

– first, the individual, child-related quality of parental behaviour and communication, at best characterised by a lot of attention and support, but also by clear alignment with age-appropriate behavioural standards, and by expectations of competent, socially compatible child behaviour (authoritative education; see Wissenschaftlicher Beirat für Familienfragen 2005);

– second, the consideration of norms of justice when dealing with children's rights and duties, as shown in the context of (un)equal or differential treatment of individual children, particularly favouritism and the risks involved;

– third, how parents deal with sibling conflicts.

While the first-mentioned aspect of parental competence is generally important for emotional, social and behavioural child development, the last two points are more closely linked to the development of sibling relations. The above-mentioned compensation hypothesis only refers to the first-mentioned aspect of parental competences, and not to the aspects of favouritism or parental behaviour in case of sibling conflicts.

Parental favouritism of one sibling was pointed out as particularly stressful, as it is a lasting strain on solidarity among siblings and therefore promotes rivalry and conflict. At the same time, siblings suffer less from differential treatment, if they consider it to be justified. In families with a disabled or chronically ill child for example, an equal treatment of siblings is hardly possible. But also age differences usually contribute to differences in the granting of privileges and liberties. Differential treatment experienced in such manner is usually attenuated by the fact that younger siblings follow more quickly in the steps of their elder siblings, and get privileges earlier than their elder vanguards. If parents explain their differential treatment, children are more readily willing to accept these differences. Thus, negative consequences for sibling relations can be prevented. In families with children who are in need of increased parental attention due to special strains, parents are well advised to ask for the understanding of siblings time and again.

The question how parents deal with conflicts between the children is a sensitive topic not yet sufficiently explored. Some findings suggest that exaggerated interference has rather negative effects, and conflicts can even become chronical or intensified. However, parents should not generally stay out of conflicts, as this attitude carries the risk that the stronger child takes advantage and the weaker child becomes disadvantaged in the long run. Insofar, parents play an important role in mediating conflicts between children. On the one hand, this comprises parental instruction on appropriate negotiation strategies, on the other hand limiting possible conflict situations by means of preventive parental action in foreseeable delicate situations. Familial strains such as partnership conflicts, financial worries or psychological problems of parents might not least become risk factors for the development of hostile sibling relations, so that parents subsequently do not, cannot, or cannot adequately deal with every-day arguments between siblings. However, in order to make concrete assertions on related effects and impacts, further research findings are missing.

Compared to this aspect of family dynamics, other factors often have a rather indirect impact on sibling relations. Admittedly, also sibling constellation has proven important, but the risks merely linked to factors of family structures are by far less important. However, shortages in parenting behaviour can also act as catalysts for structure-based tensions, if for example various children with minor age difference compete for attention or children with different degrees of relatedness clash in step or foster families. Particularly in patchwork families, differential treatments seem to be promoted by the closer proximity between parents and their biological children, which can cast a damp on sibling relations. This takes us to the importance of sibling relations in foster families and similar family-based care settings in child rearing support.

5.2 Residential child and youth care – sibling relations in family-based care

The organisational and professional frame of SOS Children's Village families as a residential offer of family-based care in the context of child and youth welfare services generally allows for the possibility to accommodate also groups of various siblings in one family, or to build a proper Children's Village family out of larger sibling groups under the attention of a proper Children's Village mother (see for example SOS-Kinderdorf Ammersee 2005). In most cases, the children admitted together with their biological siblings live together with other unrelated siblings in an SOS Children's Village family.

In the SOS-Kinderdorf e.V., it is furthermore possible to spread a group of siblings on different families or houses in the same Children's Village.

As far as the preconditions at the request of the Child and Youth Welfare Office admit a corresponding solution, first of all the professional question is raised at the admission into an SOS Children's Village, under which circumstances siblings from one family of origin should be accommodated jointly or separately in a Children's Village or Children's Village family. The decision is closely linked to the question of assessing, under which conditions the development of individual children and their relation to each other and to the other SOS Children's Village siblings could be positively supported.

The present expertise on the importance of siblings in the life of children has shown that sibling relations represent an important social resource, and last for a lifetime under certain conditions. Sibling relations evidentially have a great impact on the social and cognitive development of children (Brody 1998).

Particularly in case of foster children, sibling relations present the opportunity of making positive learning experiences and to establish life-long bonds. In research, it is pointed out that relations between siblings of one family of origin have greater stability in the course of life than relations between foster siblings (Gardner 2004). It is possible that foster and SOS Children's Village siblings gain in importance, if biological siblings do not exist. As research on stepfamilies has shown, the establishment of relations between biologically unrelated stepsiblings often represents a major challenge, and success depends on various factors such as age difference between the siblings, the amount of time spent in the new family situation, but also on the quality of parent-child-relation (Kasten 2003; Walper and Wild 2002). However, the findings of research into stepfamilies might not be completely transferable on the situation of SOS Children's Village families. Due to their structure, SOS Children's Village families do indeed have similarities with foster families or stepfamilies. However in a stepfamily, children continue to grow up with at least one biological parent, while out-of-home care in the frame of child and youth welfare, be it in an SOS Children's Village family or a similar family-based care setting, is usually linked to a definitive change of the main reference person for the children affected. Kinship care is a possible exception.

Nevertheless, in case of relations between biologically unrelated foster and SOS Children's Village siblings it can be assumed that they represent likewise an important potential for resources in view of strained relations in the family of origin, according to compensation hypothesis. However, congruence hypothesis points out that negative parent-child-relation patterns might also be continued in relations between biologically unrelated siblings. In order to give children the possibility to break lasting patterns of negativity, SOS Children's Village mothers and fathers, foster parents and professional experts need to take action in reflecting and supporting relation dynamics between biological as well as 'social' siblings.

The relationship with the foster parents is particularly important for foster children, according to Monika Nienstedt and Arnim Westermann (2007). Positive experiences in the relationship between foster parents and foster child can equally improve the relationship quality between siblings (Brody 1998). Empirically, there were more indications for effects according to congruence hypothesis in relational dynamics between foster parents, foster children and (foster) siblings in the past, but the effects according to com-

pensational processes, particularly in view of traumatic experiences in the family of origin, seem to become increasingly plausible (Bank and Kahn 1997). However, close compensational sibling relations frequently show also negative or even abusive traits (Noller 2005; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller and Feeney 2004). Also seen from this angle, it becomes apparent how important it is to address the sibling issue in family-based out-of-home care, be it in a foster family or an SOS Children's Village family.

A major factor of influence for successfully building relations between foster siblings and biological siblings in foster families is the way justice is experienced in parental treatment within foster care. Studies clearly prove that in view of differential treatment or parental favouritism of individual siblings, the quality of sibling relations is affected (Boll, Ferring and Filipp 2001). Children in a foster family have different needs, for example as a function of their age, character or period of stay in the new family. Open discussions on the needs of each individual child can help foster parents to offer maximum possible justice in relations and to promote the social understanding of children (Kowal, Krull and Kramer 2004).

The question of placement of sibling groups is discussed in chapter 4.3 in the present expertise. Empirical findings plead for rather positive effects of joint sibling placement, although under certain circumstances, a separate placement seems to be rather beneficial for the development of individual children. The most important reason for separate placement is negative relational dynamics among siblings, for example due to a high degree of aggression or rivalry. Also in case of separate placement, the contact between siblings should be maintained, in order to be able to work on improving the relation (Herrick and Piccus 2005).

The fact of being biological siblings is often experienced as the basis for life-long, lasting relations (Gardner 2004). Particularly in view of having made experiences of extreme familiar instability, sibling relations are an important social, identity-forming resource for children and adolescents in residential care. The objective of the SOS-Kinderdorf e.V., to accommodate biological sibling together whenever possible and to thus give them the possibility to grow up together, is supported by the findings of empirical research.

5.3 Classification of findings, and future research

As already mentioned, sibling research in Germany is clearly lagging behind in general. The vast majority of findings quoted come from the Anglo-Saxon region, particularly the USA. Many studies have already been carried out considerable time ago. Accordingly, the question of transferability of results on local and present circumstances remains open. Furthermore, there are hardly any international longitudinal studies on the changes of sibling relations and their importance for individual sibling in the longer term, at best up into at least middle adult age. However, particularly longitudinal studies are suitable for demonstrating different courses of development in sibling relations, and to consider important factors of influence. Thus, cross-sectional studies merely give first indications, at best.

Differential courses of development also form the background for the present question on clarifying possible risks for and in sibling relations. Hence, it is unclear which factors function as milestones in a negative sibling relation and might induce positive developments. For the practice of residential care however, such information could be helpful, both for decision on

joint or separate placement as well as for accompanying and supporting sibling children.

Diagnostics merely focussed on the current status of sibling relation possibly underestimates the development potential of this relation under favourable conditions. With a view to the practice of child and youth welfare services, we therefore recommend the reflection and development of suitable possibilities of accommodation for children with problematic sibling relations. This applies both for the work with parents, foster parents, SOS Children's Village mothers and fathers, professional experts as well as for the work with children and adolescents.

From the point of view of quantitative empirical psychology, a targeted intervention research would provide information on the effect of individual factors of influence on sibling relations. Clinical psychology traditionally works in settings of randomised control group comparisons in researching factors of influence.

Key questions on the situation of siblings in out-of-home care or in SOS Children's Village families could be perfectly tackled in longitudinal studies, including also the period after having left the family. Thereby, on the one hand the relations of siblings from one family of origin placed in one Children's Village family could be observed for example and on the other hand their relations to biologically unrelated siblings. As the differences between relations between biological and social siblings have hardly been researched into, studies on the life in SOS Children's Village families could make important contributions. According to preliminary findings, adults who have grown up in a foster family tend to rather maintain contact with their biological siblings than with their foster siblings (Gardner 2004). In this context, it would be interesting, amongst others, to see whether a later close relation to biological siblings already had been visible during their joint stay in the SOS Children's Village family, or whether values and relational structures changed after having left the family.

A comparison between siblings in joint and separate placement within facilities of the SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. and in other care provisions would also be of interest. In such a study design, also the particular conditions of growing up in one SOS Children's Village, but in different families could be reflected. The research into developmental possibilities of the relation to siblings living 'separate' outside the Children's Village in the context of different contact possibilities would be another rewarding endeavour.

Children in SOS Children's Village families have to cope with the separation of their family of origin as well as with usually very stressful, even traumatic experiences. These biographic stress factors for children have to be considered in the respective studies. Interviews with the children themselves will not be sufficient, other perspectives and sources of information probably might be necessary in order to particularly consider the situation and the relationship structure of children in their family of origin. Deliberate data collection and consideration of earlier experiences is not least necessary due to the fact that according to continuity hypothesis, it can be assumed that negative relationship experiences also increase the probability of major problems in sibling relations.

In researching the quality of sibling relations, appropriate methods have to be chosen; in this context only a method triangulation will be rewarding. Thereby, qualitative as well as quantitative elements are conceivable, in

principle. For the assessment of attachment quality for example, the tools of attachment research might be useful (see for example Doherty and Feeney 2004). Furthermore, apart from interviews, the work with sociograms would be suitable, where each family member can explain relationship structures from his or her point of view. But most of all, it would be desirable to implement observational studies, hardly carried out in the anyway scarce field of sibling research until now. On the one hand, the observation of siblings in SOS Children's Villages could contribute to the development of objective indicators for cooperation and conflict behaviour in child relations, for example. On the other hand, observational studies would provide valuable information, complementing the subjective assessments of the persons involved. Also more complex observation situations, including the interaction with the SOS Children's Village mother, other professional experts or the foster parents would be revealing. Studies of this kind would not only be highly useful for assessing the quality of sibling relations on the basis of amplified indicators, but they could also make an important contribution to application-oriented basic research on siblings in child rearing support.

Note

1
In this text, German quotations have been translated into English.

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The authors

Prof. DPhil. Sabine Walper

Born in 1956, graduate psychologist, professor for youth research at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich, Institute for Pedagogics, Educational and Socialisation Research. Fields of work: family and youth research, particularly research on the development of family relations, on effects of divorce and new parental partnerships on children, on impacts of poverty on family life, and development opportunities of children. Member of the German Scientific Council for Family Affairs of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, as well as co-publisher of the review "Psychologie in Erziehung und Unterricht".

Carolin Thönnissen

Born in 1981, M.A., education researcher, research assistant in the research project "Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics" (PAIRFAM), promoted by the German Research Foundation (DFG) at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich. Research focus areas: adolescence and young adult age, relations to the family of origin, parenting and education.

DPhil. Eva-Verena Wendt

Born in 1977, graduate psychologist, research assistant in the research project "Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics" (PAIRFAM), promoted by the German Research Foundation (DFG) at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich. Research focus areas: family relations in nuclear families, families with parental divorce and conflictive families, development characteristics in adolescence, partnership development and sexuality in young romantic relations.

Bettina Bergau

Born in 1981, graduate psychologist, authorised psychological expert for family law issues, doctoral candidate at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich. Fields of work: psychological expertise and research in family court-related issues on solution-oriented assessment in family court-related proceedings.

Legal basis

The "Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz, KJHG" (that is Child and Youth Services Act or Child and Youth Welfare Act), also referred to as "Achtes Buch Sozialgesetzbuch, SGB VIII" (that is Social Code, Volume VIII) came into force in 1991. The Child and Youth Services Act is written and interpreted in the spirit of ensuring the best interest and welfare of young people and their families and of guaranteeing the legal claim to receive welfare services. Its main goals are described as: achieving prevention by supporting the young people's development, removing obstacles and protecting children and young people from harm. The code primarily grants the parents support in educating their children ("Hilfe zur Erziehung"). It emphasises the aspect of participation, meaning that the help provided has to be welcome and co-organised by the people in need. Criminal acts of youth are regulated in the Criminal Code (Strafgesetzbuch, StGB) and the Youth Court Act (Jugendgerichtsgesetz, JGG).

Institutions and agencies

The Child and Youth Services Act serves as a federal legislative framework for different forms of assistance implemented locally in the communities and federal states in a variety of institutions, projects and initiatives. The local Child and Youth Welfare Offices ("Jugendämter") are in charge of implementing the Child and Youth Services Act. These are the key institutions to organise and finance aid. However, youth welfare services are not only provided by statutory institutions ("öffentliche Träger"), but also by many voluntary youth welfare agencies as well as private agencies ("freie Träger"). Traditionally, about two-thirds of the services are provided by diverse voluntary agencies. Most of these are operating as registered non-profit associations, some of them as profit-oriented business companies. The statutory agencies are expected to cooperate with the voluntary and private associations. Collaboration follows the idea of a "Youth Services Triangle" meaning that parents and children seek and get help, the Child and Youth Welfare Offices grant help and the agencies render the services. All three parties involved are meant to work together.

Care-plan process on the granting of care: gate-keeping and evaluation

The parents themselves need to apply formally for help at the Child and Youth Welfare Office. The decision on the care provision is taken within the scope of the so-called care plan. The care plan, one of the Child and Youth Services Act's central instruments, is legally stipulated in Section 36. It defines the provisions in the Child and Youth Welfare Office's responsibility in a precise and binding way. It guarantees the parents' participation and the cooperation of different professionals. It clears the form of care and the institution providing the care. It also assures a written documentation of

the help and a goal-oriented approach through a regular process check which equates to an evaluation.

Children, adolescents and families are entitled to receive help after verification that the help measure is necessary and suited to the problem. In this verification process, a detailed socio-educational diagnosis and, in some cases, also a psychological or medical diagnosis should be made. However, there are no binding rules on diagnosis. Therefore, practice in this field varies considerably from intensive, multi-methodical diagnosis by external providers to assessments by teams or in family group conferences to appraisal by a single social worker. There has to be a joint decision on the care provision taken by the parents and, if possible, the children and youth, which has to be voluntarily accepted by the recipients.

In case of threat to the rights of children: custody and family courts

In case the parents refuse help and the well-being of the child(ren) is considered to be threatened, the family court and, in exceptional cases, also the police are involved. The family court is authorised to deprive parents of child custody (Section 1666 Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch, BGB, that is Civil Code). The latter might inevitably occur when the best interest and the welfare of a child is considered to be in danger and the parents do not want to or are not able to alleviate the situation. In this case, the family court can decide that support is necessary, even if the parents disagree. The Child and Youth Welfare Office is obliged to participate in this process. It supports the family court in all measures concerning parental care. If the family court deprives the parents of child custody, a guardian is appointed. The guardian then, instead of the parents, applies for help at the Child and Youth Welfare Office and in most of these cases, out-of-home care provisions are implemented. Depriving parents of custody is regarded as a last resort, meaning this measure is only taken if the child's or young person's welfare cannot be guaranteed in another way (for example parents do not accept help voluntarily). Some 10 % of all residential care placements are due to removal of child custody.

If the child's physical and emotional integrity is seriously put under threat in a way of imminent danger, Child and Youth Welfare Offices can take short-term custody ("Inobhutnahme") without a court decision.

Alternative childcare in residential homes ("Heime") and in foster families ("Pflegefamilien")

The Child and Youth Services Act states: where necessary, out-of-home care is provided as a form of day-and-night assistance in educating a child or young person outside the parental home in a suitable alternative foster family (full-time care, Section 33), an institution/residential home or in any other type of supervised living arrangement (residential care, Section 34). General goals of out-of-home care are to prepare children and youths for the return into their families of origin or to prepare young adults for living on his or her own or to find a permanent alternative care, for example foster care or special forms of residential care like Children's Villages. In most of the cases, out-of-home care is arranged after various forms of non-residential support (counseling services, housing assistance) have failed.

Alternative out-of-home childcare is regulated in the following Sections of the Child and Youth Services Act (Social Code, Volume VIII):

Section 27	Parenting and educational support
Section 33	Full-time care in foster families
Section 34	Residential care
Section 36	Care plan
Section 42	Taking the child into custody

Non-residential support

A broad variety of non-residential support options is mentioned in the Child and Youth Services Act. These range from counseling services on parenting and education to socio-educational family assistance at home, intensive educational support for individual youth to day groups for therapeutic pedagogy and groups for social learning (Double Sections 28–32: Outpatient care and day-care treatment). Other innovative and individual forms of intensive support are included in a general section on educational support (Section 27). These forms of support are regulated by care plans.

Other forms of support without an individual care plan, for example social work in schools, youth work or preventive family support, are also mentioned in the Child and Youth Services Act. These measures are supported by the Child and Youth Welfare Offices as well.

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Since the middle of the 1950s, the SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. has established a broad variety of residential, non-residential and flexible forms of assistance in the Federal Republic of Germany. Today the organisation maintains 46 facilities with differentiated services: SOS Children's Villages, SOS Youth Facilities, SOS Mother Centers and SOS Multigenerational Community Centers with services for all ages, SOS Counseling Centers, SOS Vocational Training Centers, SOS Village Communities for people with special needs (last update: 1/2010).

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