



Research Brief

Family Context: Understanding the Importance of Siblings

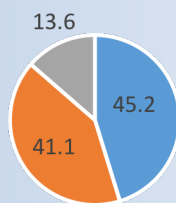
Developmental perspectives

Families play an important role in influencing the educational and occupational outcomes of children who are deaf and hard of hearing (DHH).¹ Although we know that parents are important in shaping DHH individuals' future, less is known about the role of siblings within families with DHH children.^{2,3} Sibling relationships are important because they are believed to influence individuals' relationships with peers.³ Therefore, early relationships with siblings may have important implications for DHH individuals' later functioning in school and the workforce.

Prevalence of siblings for children who are DHH

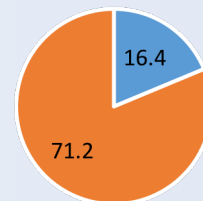
The graphs below provide a national snapshot of the percentage of students who are DHH who have siblings and the hearing status of those siblings. These graphs are based on data collected from more than 37,000 students who were surveyed by the Gallaudet Research Institute.⁴ The second graph shows that individuals who are DHH are more likely to have a hearing sibling than a DHH sibling, but the proportion of DHH children with DHH siblings is higher than in the overall population.

Proportion of DHH children with a sibling



■ No siblings ■ Yes, has siblings ■ Unknown, Adopted

Proportion of Siblings who are DHH



■ DHH ■ Hearing

Influence of siblings and sibling relationships

- ❁ Many of the studies in this area focus on the hearing sibling and his or her psychological adjustment.^{5, 6, 7, 8, 9} Much remains to be explored in terms of sibling relationships and their effects on deaf individuals.²
- ❁ There is little difference in the psychological adjustment between children who have a deaf sibling and those with a hearing sibling.^{8,9}
- ❁ For families with children with disabilities, whole family functioning and access to financial resources are likely to influence sibling adjustment.¹⁰
- ❁ Deaf students in high school with deaf siblings performed better than their peers on non-verbal tests and language tests.¹¹
- ❁ Preliminary research suggests that hearing parents with more than one deaf child may feel more empowered to advocate for their youngest deaf child due to experiences with their oldest deaf child.¹²

“It is primarily through observing, playing, and working with others both younger and older than himself that a child discovers what he can do and who he can become.”¹³

How may family structure influence sibling relationships?

- ❁ Birth order may play an important role in sibling relationships. Relationships between deaf and hearing siblings tend to be more positive when the deaf child is the oldest in the family.²
- ❁ Feelings of closeness between siblings may be affected by their hearing status, as deaf siblings tend to feel closer to each other than deaf and hearing siblings.³ These feelings of closeness may be influenced by whether or not siblings share the same communication modality.¹²
- ❁ Although deaf children of deaf parents tend to have higher self-esteem than deaf children of hearing parents, the hearing status of siblings does not seem to influence deaf children’s self-esteem.³
- ❁ Parents’ attitudes may influence sibling’s relationships, in that sibling relationships are slightly more positive if parents have no anxiety about deafness.²

References

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