

The Impact of Family Structure on Sibling Relationships

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Introduction

- Healthy sibling relationships may be an important source of support and encourage personal growth and well-being, whereas an unhealthy sibling relationship may cause emotional distress into adulthood. (Riggio, 2001)
- Research suggests that there is not an immediate difference in the positive aspects of sibling relationships among children who have had a parent leave their household.
- However, the literature disagrees on factors such as time after the divorce (Riggio, 2001) and the affects divorce has on the negative parts of sibling relationships (Poortman & Voorpostel, 2009).
- One factor that may cause a change in sibling relationships is whether the mother or the father leaves the household.

Research Questions

- Does family structure affect sibling relationships?
- Does the affect on sibling relationships differ when a mother leaves as opposed to the father?

Methods

Sample

- ADDHEALTH
 - Over 20,000 respondents were asked questions in various waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.
 - This study was conducted with the Wave 1 survey, which included children in the US who were in grades 7-12 during the 1994-95 school year (n=1138).

Measures

- Family Structure
 - Both Parents – respondents did not have a biological parent who was not a household member
 - No Biological Mother – respondents had a biological mother who was not a household member
 - No Biological Father – respondents had a biological father who was not a household member
 - Neither Parent – Both biological parents are non-household members
- Sibling relationships
 - measured by frequency of fighting between siblings and the frequency of feelings of love for siblings. Both variables follow the same scale:
 - 1 – Never
 - 2 – Seldom
 - 3 – Sometimes
 - 4 – Often
 - 5 – Very Often

Results

Univariate

- 68.98% of respondents have both parents present in the household
- 28.82% of respondents have either a mother or a father who is not considered a part of their household
- 22.847% of respondents had a father who was a non-household member, while 5.975% had a mother who was a non-household member.
- **Hypothesis Testing**
 - A Pearson Chi-Squared test revealed that **the frequency of feelings of sibling love** was not significantly associated with **family structure**. ($\chi^2=19.53$, $p=0.08$)
 - Another Pearson Chi-squared test showed that **the frequency of fighting between siblings** is significantly associated with **family structure**. ($\chi^2=25.38$, $p=0.01$).
 - A Pearson Residual test revealed that those with no biological parents in their household who never feel love for their siblings are observed significantly more than expected.

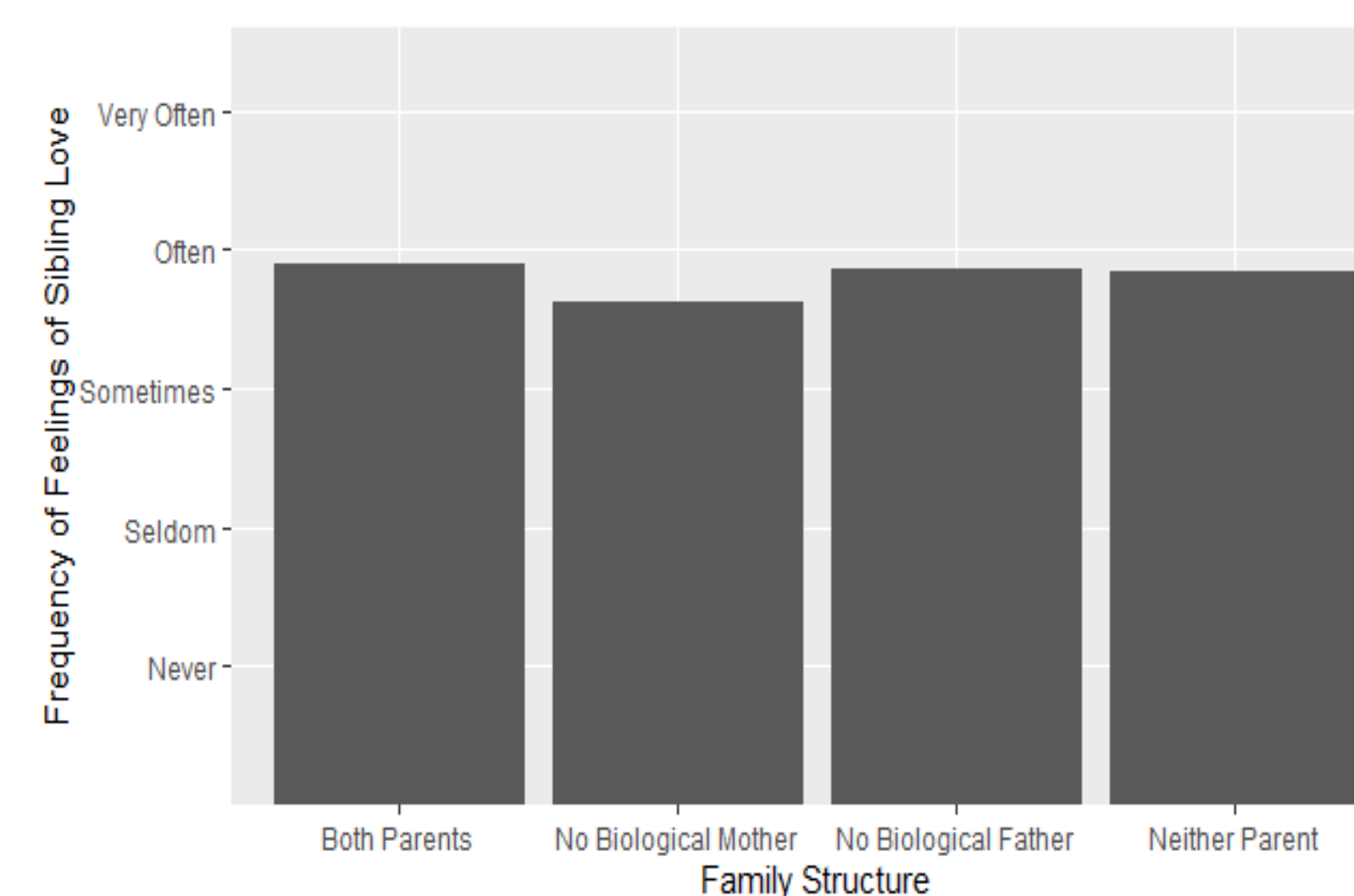


Figure 1. Frequency of Feelings of Sibling Love Based on Family Structure

Sibling Fighting

- Like the sibling love variable, respondents were asked to report the frequency of which they fight or quarrel with their siblings.
- In the graph between the mean frequency of fighting between siblings and family structure (Figure 2), there seems to be no significant difference between siblings who have one or more biological parents in their household. However, there seems to be less frequent fighting among siblings who have no biological parents in their household. This difference is confirmed to be significant by the results of the Chi-Squared test.

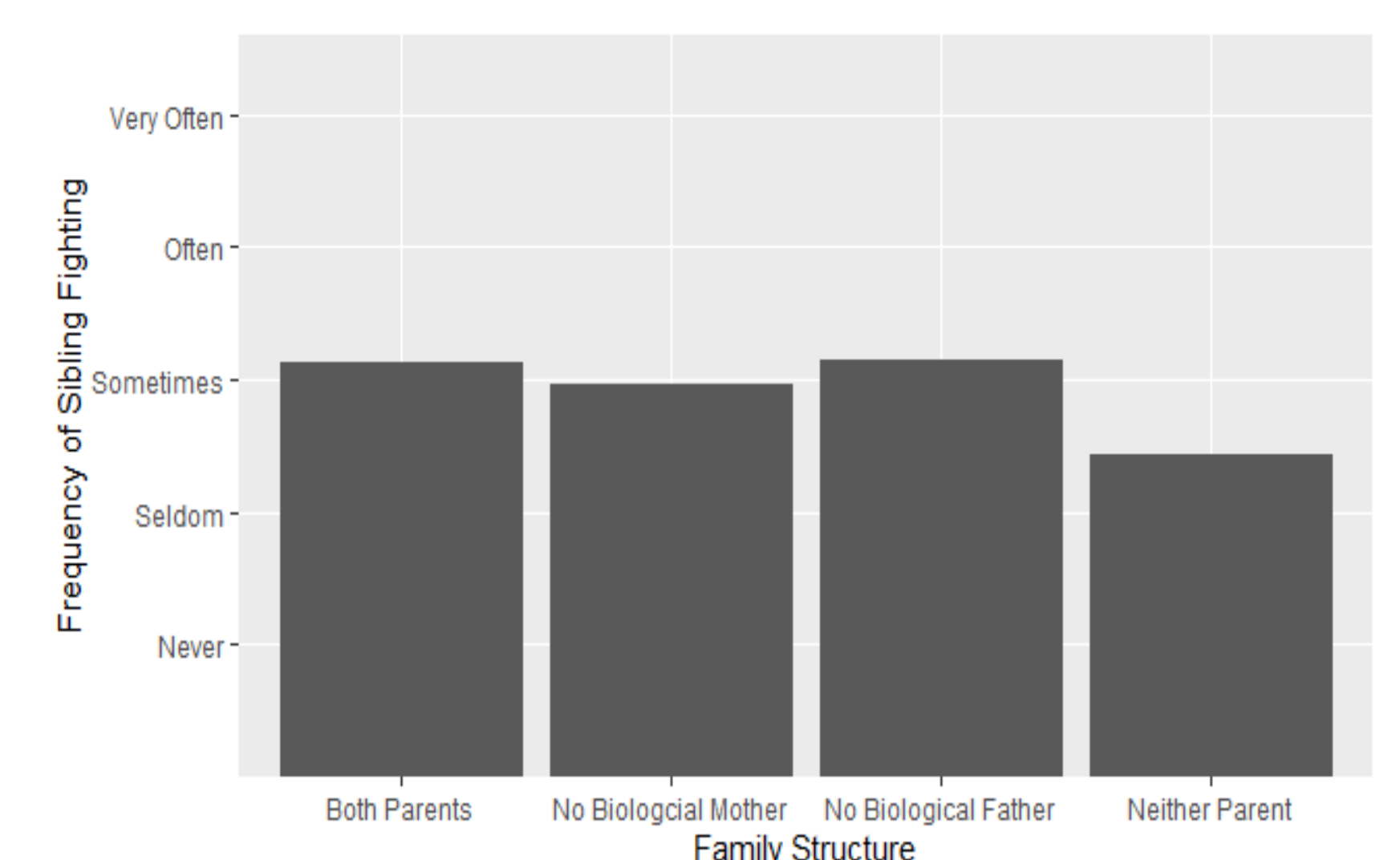


Figure 2. Frequency of Sibling Fighting Based on Family Structure

Sibling Love

- Respondents were asked how often they feel love for their siblings. After separating them into four categories based on family structure, the mean amount of love respondents felt was graphed. (Figure 1)
- The graph visually confirms the results of the Pearson Chi-Squared test: the frequency of feelings of sibling love and family structure have no significant association.

Discussion

- There is not enough evidence in this sample to find a significant association between family structure and the frequency of love felt for siblings.
- There is also no significant association between siblings whose mother is no longer a part of the household and siblings whose father is no longer a part of the household.
- These findings suggest that parental separation has no bearing on their relationship with each other. It also suggests that which parent they live with will not have a significant impact on their relationship. In cases of custody, sibling relationships may not need to be a significant consideration.
- However, there is a significant association between siblings who have no biological parents in the household and less frequent sibling fighting.
- This suggests that, in the case of sibling relationships, putting children with their biological parents might not always be in their best interests.
- However, there are many reasons a correlation like this might exist. More research needs to be done to identify why there is less fighting in children with neither biological parent in their household.