The Importance of Social Support in the Adjustment of Siblings of Children with Cancer

Melissa A. Alderfer, PhD,1 Kristin A. Long, MS2 & Melanie Goldish, MA3

1The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia & University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, 2University of Pittsburgh, 3SuperSibs!

Background

- Within families of children with cancer, high levels of distress and the need to attend to their sick child may make parents physically and emotionally unable to tend to the needs of healthy children.
- Unfortunately, siblings of children with cancer are at risk for emotional, behavioral, and academic problems (Alderfer et al., in press).
- Social support from sources outside the family may help bolster sibling adjustment (Stewart & Sun, 2004).
- The aims of this study were to:
  1) examine siblings' ratings of the amount and importance of support provided by parents, friends, teachers, classmates, and others; and
  2) determine associations between social support and sibling adjustment.

Method

PARTICIPANTS:
- A healthy sibling and parent from each of 161 families of children with cancer participated (79% enrollment rate)
- Participating siblings: ranged in age from 8 to 18 (M = 12.6; SD = 2.9)
- nearly half (48%) were female
- 88% were white/non-Hispanic; 5% African American; 5% Hispanic.
- Families were 3.7 to 38.0 months post-diagnosis (M = 16.7 months; SD = 6.9); Diagnoses included: leukemias/lymphomas (49%); solid tumors (36%); brain tumors (13%) and other (2%).

MEASURES:
- Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS; Malecki & Demaray, 2002).
- Completed by the siblings, this 60-item measure assesses siblings' perceptions of the amount and importance of social support from parents, friends, teachers, classmates, and others in the school.
- Emotional (i.e., caring), instrumental (i.e., helping), informational (i.e., providing advice), and appraisal support (i.e., evaluative feedback) are assessed.
- Children’s Depression Inventory-Short Form (CDI-S; Kovacs, 1992). This 10-item self-report inventory completed by the siblings assesses behavioral and cognitive symptoms of depression.
- Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS; Reynolds & Richmond, 1985). This 37-item standardized self-report completed by the siblings assesses anxiety across psychological, cognitive, and social domains.
- Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). This 120-item checklist completed by parents provides ratings of child competencies and behavioral/ emotional problems. The Social Competence scales focus on the child’s participation in activities, involvement with friends, and school performance. The Problems subscales include eight syndrome scales spanning Internalizing (anxious/depressed; withdrawn/depressed; somatic complaints), Externalizing (rule breaking; aggression) and Other problems (e.g., attention problems).

Results

AMOUNT AND IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT:

- Patterns in amount and importance of social support were examined across support sources using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).
- Significant variation was found across support sources for both perceived amount (F(4, 636) = 42.49, p < .001) and importance of support (F(4, 636) = 32.41, p < .001).
- Friends reportedly provided more support and were considered more important sources of support than parents, teachers, classmates and others in the school (p < .001).
- Parents and teachers were rated equally in terms of amount and importance of support (p > .74).
- Parents were rated as more important than classmates (p = .005), but provided roughly the same amount of support (p = .18).

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT AND ADJUSTMENT:

- Pearson correlations were used to examine associations between amount of support from each source and sibling adjustment.

Results (continued)

- Siblings’ perceived parental support was associated with more indices of their adjustment than perceived support from friends, teachers, or classmates.
- Perceived support from parents was related to less sibling depression, rule-breaking and aggression, fewer attention problems, and greater competence in social activities and school.
- Sibling’s ratings of friend support were related to less depression and rule-breaking.
- Perceived support from teachers was related to better school performance, less rule-breaking, and fewer attention problems for siblings.
- Ratings of support from classmates and others in the school were related to less depression, less rule-breaking, and fewer attention problems.

Conclusions

- Support from school-based sources (teachers, classmates) was available and valued by siblings at a rate roughly equivalent to that from parents.
- Friends were rated as the most important and greatest source of social support by siblings of children with cancer – even more so than parents.
- However, parental support was related to many more indices of sibling adjustment than friend support, demonstrating its true importance for competent adjustment in siblings of children with cancer.
- We recommend that parents be encouraged to find small ways to provide their healthy children with ongoing support during cancer treatment:
  - Inform siblings of what is going on with treatment using age-appropriate terms and details.
  - Call siblings at home when staying at the hospital; at home plan one-on-one time together.
  - Acknowledge siblings’ own achievements, successes and milestones;
  - Ask siblings how they feel and then listen;
  - Remind siblings that it is ok to feel how they feel, and that it is ok to laugh and have fun, too;
  - Encourage siblings to reach out for support from you, teachers, friends, and psychosocial professionals;
  - Reinforce and demonstrate to the siblings, “I care about YOU!”

REFERENCES:


This work was supported by grants from the National Cancer Institute (CA11092 to MA) and the American Cancer Society (MRS55213 to MA).

We thank these sponsors and Lynne Kaplan, PhD, K. Julia Kaat, MA, Caroline Stanley, PhD, Rowena Conroy, PhD, Jilda Hodges, MA, the entire "SuperSibs-C" and "ACE" research teams and the families who so generously participated.

Portions of these data are published as: Alderfer, MA & Hodges, JA. (2010). Siblings of children with cancer: A need for family-school partnerships. School Mental Health, 2, 72-81.