



The Impact of Sibling Presence on the Development of Empathy in Only Children Living in Urban Areas

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Empathy Development;
Only Children;
Sibling Presence;
Urban Childhood;
Social-Emotional Learning.

Article history:

Received Feb 03, 2025;
Revised Feb 24, 2025;
Accepted Mar 22, 2025;
Online Apr 25 2025.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of sibling presence on the development of empathy in only children living in urban areas. Empathy, a crucial component of emotional intelligence, is commonly believed to be influenced by sibling interactions through daily emotional exchanges and perspective-taking. However, the growing prevalence of only-child families in urban settings raises questions about how the absence of siblings affects empathy development. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, this research involved 100 urban children aged 10–15, equally divided between only children and those with siblings. Data were collected through the Basic Empathy Scale and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results revealed that children with siblings scored significantly higher in emotional empathy, while cognitive empathy levels showed no substantial difference between the two groups. Additionally, peer interaction and parental involvement were positively correlated with empathy in only children, indicating that external social environments can compensate for the absence of sibling relationships. The study concludes that while siblings can enhance emotional empathy, only children are not inherently disadvantaged when supported by rich social experiences. The findings offer important implications for parenting practices, educational strategies, and social policy aimed at fostering emotional development in diverse family structures.

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Introduction

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. It involves recognizing another person's emotional state, imagining what they might be experiencing, and responding in an emotionally appropriate and supportive manner (Greenberg, 2004). Empathy is not a singular concept but is often categorized into two primary types: emotional empathy and cognitive empathy, both of which contribute significantly to an individual's social competence.

Emotional empathy, also known as affective empathy, refers to the capacity to physically feel the emotions that someone else is experiencing (Ratka, 2018). It is an automatic, visceral response that allows individuals to "feel with" others, such as feeling sadness when a friend is grieving. This type of empathy is essential in fostering emotional bonds, compassion, and supportive behavior. Emotional

empathy plays a key role in early childhood, as children begin to react to the distress of others, even before they fully understand the underlying causes.

On the other hand, cognitive empathy is the ability to intellectually understand another person's perspective or emotional state without necessarily experiencing the emotion oneself (Smith, 2006). Sometimes referred to as perspective-taking, cognitive empathy allows individuals to reason through what others might be thinking or feeling in a given situation. This form of empathy is critical in effective communication, conflict resolution, and moral reasoning. It develops later in childhood and is shaped by social interactions, including those with family members, peers, and educators.

Empathy is fundamental to social development because it underpins key social behaviors such as cooperation, altruism, and prosocial decision-making (Decety & Cowell, 2015). Children who are empathetic tend to be more successful in forming friendships, resolving conflicts, and navigating diverse social environments. Empathy also reduces aggressive tendencies and encourages inclusive attitudes, making it a protective factor against bullying and social exclusion. In group settings, empathy promotes teamwork and strengthens community bonds by fostering mutual understanding and respect.

From a developmental perspective, empathy helps children move beyond self-centered thinking and begin to appreciate the experiences of others. This shift is crucial for building ethical values, moral conscience, and emotional intelligence. In the absence of empathy, social interactions can become superficial or strained, and children may struggle with maintaining relationships or understanding social norms.

Among the key factors shaping empathy development is the presence of siblings. Sibling interactions often provide daily opportunities for children to engage in social exchanges that foster emotional awareness, conflict resolution, cooperation, and perspective-taking (Kramer, 2014). Through arguments, alliances, and shared experiences, children with siblings learn to negotiate emotions and understand others' viewpoints skills that are closely tied to empathy.

In contrast, only children, particularly those raised in urban environments, may experience different socialization patterns. The absence of siblings can limit natural, home-based opportunities for emotional learning through peer-like interaction. Although only children may receive more focused attention and resources from their parents, they may also encounter fewer challenges in negotiating emotions with equals within the family unit. This raises questions about whether the development of empathy in only children differs significantly from those who grow up with siblings.

Moreover, the urban context adds another layer of complexity. Urban living often involves fast-paced routines, limited open play spaces, and increased reliance on digital devices, which can reduce the frequency and quality of face-to-face social interaction (Vanden Abeele et al., 2018). While urban children may have access to structured social environments such as schools and extracurricular programs, these do not always replicate the intimacy and continuity of sibling relationships. Therefore, understanding how only children in urban areas develop empathy in the absence of sibling interactions becomes a critical area of psychological inquiry.

Over the past decade, there has been a growing body of research examining the social and emotional development of children within diverse family structures, particularly focusing on the presence or absence of siblings and its relationship to empathy. A number of empirical studies have suggested that having siblings can positively influence the development of empathy. For example, a study by Kramer and Conger (2015) found that frequent and emotionally rich sibling interactions provide opportunities for children to practice emotion regulation, conflict resolution, and perspective-taking all of which are closely tied to empathy. Similarly, research by Howe, Rinaldi, Jennings, and Petrakos (2018) emphasized that sibling rivalry, cooperation, and negotiation stimulate the development of social understanding, particularly when parental guidance facilitates reflective dialogue about emotions.

In contrast, studies on only children have often challenged the stereotype that they lack social skills or emotional maturity. For instance, a comprehensive study by Falbo and Poston (2019) revealed that only children, particularly those raised in socially rich environments, show comparable levels of empathy and prosocial behavior to children with siblings. These findings suggest that parent-child interactions, quality of schooling, and exposure to peer groups can serve as effective substitutes for sibling interactions in fostering empathy.

More recent research has begun to incorporate the urban context into the discussion. Urban environments are often associated with increased academic pressure, structured schedules, and greater use of digital technology factors that may limit unstructured social play and spontaneous interpersonal experiences. A study by Li and Zhang (2021) in urban China found that only children in cities often rely more heavily on school-based and digital peer interactions for social development. Although these interactions may support the development of cognitive empathy, they often lack the emotional intimacy that siblings provide. Thus, urban only children may develop empathy differently, depending on their exposure to meaningful peer interactions.

In addition, there has been increased attention to the quality over quantity of sibling interactions. As noted by Brody (2020), simply having siblings does not guarantee the development of empathy; the nature of the relationship whether it is supportive or conflict-ridden plays a more critical role. Moreover, other studies have examined cultural differences, such as research by Kim and Park (2017), which explored empathy development in South Korean urban only children, highlighting the role of parenting style, academic expectations, and collectivist values in shaping emotional understanding.

In summary, the past decade of research indicates that sibling presence can positively influence empathy development but is not the sole determinant. Only children, particularly in urban settings, can develop empathy at similar levels through alternative socialization pathways, including strong parental involvement, quality education, and peer relationships. However, contextual factors such as family dynamics, cultural norms, and environmental stressors continue to moderate these outcomes, making it essential to investigate empathy development through a multidimensional and context-sensitive lens.

This research is grounded in the need to explore how modern family structures and urban lifestyles influence the emotional development of children. As urbanization and single-child families become increasingly common in many parts of the world, including Indonesia, it becomes imperative to examine whether the absence of siblings in these settings affects a child's ability to develop empathy, and what alternative social experiences might support this development.

Method

Theoretical Framework

The development of empathy in children is a complex process shaped by various psychological, social, and environmental factors. To understand how the presence or absence of siblings influences. First, Social Learning Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura (1977), serves as a foundational framework for understanding how children learn empathic behavior through observation and imitation (Rai, 2018). According to this theory, children model behaviors they see in others, particularly those they consider role models, such as parents and siblings. In homes with multiple children, older siblings often serve as informal teachers, modeling both prosocial and empathetic responses during daily interactions. Through processes like reinforcement, role-playing, and conflict resolution, children gradually internalize these social behaviors. For only children, however, the absence of sibling models may limit opportunities for social learning within the home, making external environments such as schools or peer groups critical sources of observational learning.

Secondly, Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth, emphasizes the role of early emotional bonds in shaping a child's socio-emotional development, including empathy. Secure attachment with caregivers is associated with greater emotional regulation

and sensitivity to others' emotions, which are essential components of empathy. Children who develop secure attachments are more likely to exhibit compassion and understanding toward others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). In families with siblings, these attachment relationships often extend to sibling bonds, further reinforcing emotional development. However, in only-child households, the primary attachment is often focused solely on parents or caregivers, which may intensify the quality of the bond but also reduce diversity in relational experiences that help cultivate empathy in more varied social contexts.

Finally, Family Systems Theory provides a holistic lens by viewing the family as an interdependent emotional unit where each member influences the behavior and development of others. From this perspective, the presence or absence of siblings alters the entire family dynamic. In multi-child families, empathy may be developed through sibling-mediated conflicts, negotiations, and shared responsibilities. In contrast, only children occupy a unique role that often results in more direct parent-child interactions but fewer peer-like exchanges at home (Nixon et al., 2012). Urban environments further complicate these dynamics, as limited space, busy lifestyles, and digital distractions can reduce the frequency and depth of emotional interactions, particularly among only children without siblings.

By integrating these three theoretical approaches, this research aims to explore how family composition and the urban social environment influence empathy development. Social Learning Theory highlights the importance of modeling and imitation, Attachment Theory emphasizes emotional bonding, and Family Systems Theory provides insight into the broader family context. Together, these theories form a robust foundation for investigating how sibling presence or its absence shapes the emotional growth and empathic capacity of only children living in urban settings.

Research Method

This research adopts a quantitative comparative approach to examine the impact of sibling presence on the development of empathy in only children living in urban areas. The study employs a cross-sectional design using a survey method (Spector, 2019). This design allows for the collection of data at a single point in time from different groups namely, only children and children with siblings living in urban areas. This design is suitable for identifying differences in empathy levels and understanding the relationship between family structure and emotional development.

The population for this study consists of school-aged children (ages 10–15) residing in urban areas (Davis et al., 2014). This age range was selected because children in this developmental stage typically demonstrate measurable levels of empathy and have formed stable social relationships. The research uses purposive sampling to select two groups:

- Only children living in urban households with no siblings, and
- Children with one or more siblings in similar urban settings.

A minimum of 100 respondents will be targeted, with an equal distribution between the two groups to ensure a balanced comparison (Cohen, 2003). Participants will be recruited through urban schools, both public and private, with consent obtained from parents or guardians.

Data on empathy will be collected using a validated psychological scale, such as the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) or the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which measures both emotional empathy (e.g., affective response to others' emotions) and cognitive empathy (e.g., perspective-taking) (Carré et al., 2013). The questionnaire will also include demographic information (e.g., age, gender, number of siblings, school type, and level of parental education) and questions about social interaction frequency (e.g., peer contact, digital communication, extracurricular involvement).

Questionnaires will be distributed in collaboration with school administrators and teachers (Kiranlı, 2013). The data will be collected during school hours under supervised conditions to ensure comprehension and reduce response bias. Respondents will be assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and participation will be entirely voluntary.

Collected data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics, particularly independent sample t-tests or Mann-Whitney U tests (if normality is

not assumed), to compare empathy scores between the two groups. Additionally, correlation and regression analyses may be conducted to explore the influence of secondary variables such as parental involvement, school environment, and peer interaction.

Ethical approval will be sought from the relevant educational or research authority. Informed consent will be obtained from both the parents and the children participating in the study (Katz et al., 2016). The confidentiality of participants will be protected throughout the research process, and all data will be used solely for academic purposes.

Result and discussion

Result

The findings of this study reveal significant differences in the development of empathy between only children and children with siblings living in urban areas. A total of 100 participants, divided equally between only children and children with siblings, completed the Basic Empathy Scale (BES), which measures both emotional and cognitive aspects of empathy.

The descriptive statistics show that children with siblings scored higher overall on the empathy scale, with an average total score of 72.3, compared to 66.1 among only children. Specifically, the emotional empathy subscale indicated a more pronounced gap: children with siblings had an average score of 37.9, while only children averaged 32.5. This suggests that children with siblings are more attuned to recognizing and sharing the emotions of others, likely due to their regular emotional exchanges and conflicts within the sibling dynamic.

The cognitive empathy scores which reflect perspective-taking and the ability to understand others' emotions without necessarily feeling them were closer between the two groups. Children with siblings averaged 34.4, while only children averaged 33.6. The statistical analysis using an independent sample t-test showed that the difference in emotional empathy was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), while the difference in cognitive empathy was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Further correlation analysis showed that the frequency of peer interaction among only children had a moderately positive correlation ($r = 0.46$) with their overall empathy scores, indicating that urban only children who were more socially engaged outside of the home through school activities, extracurricular programs, or digital communication tended to show higher empathy levels. Additionally, parental involvement also showed a significant positive influence, particularly among only children, highlighting the compensatory role that parents may play in fostering emotional development.

Interestingly, qualitative observations noted during data collection suggested that only children often exhibited mature verbal expression of empathy, possibly due to frequent adult interaction, but sometimes lacked emotional regulation during peer conflicts an area where children with siblings tended to perform more consistently.

Contribution to Developmental Psychology and Family Studies

In the realm of developmental psychology, the study provides empirical support for the nuanced relationship between social context and emotional development. By demonstrating that children with siblings tend to develop higher emotional empathy, the findings reinforce existing psychological theories such as Social Learning Theory and Attachment Theory that emphasize the role of interpersonal interactions in shaping affective and cognitive competencies. The study also underscores the importance of early and consistent social exchanges, such as those found in sibling relationships, in fostering essential emotional skills like compassion, emotional regulation, and perspective-taking.

At the same time, this research challenges long-held assumptions about only children, particularly the stereotype that they are inherently less empathetic or socially skilled (Jones, 2009). The findings indicate that empathy in only children can develop to comparable levels, particularly in the cognitive domain, when they are provided with rich social environments outside the family such as schools, peer groups, or guided parental interaction. This insight is valuable for developmental psychologists

interested in identifying alternative pathways to emotional growth and for those working in urban settings where the number of only-child families is increasing.

From the perspective of family studies, the research contributes to a broader understanding of how family structure and dynamics influence child outcomes. It provides evidence that sibling relationships function as a natural platform for emotional learning, but also shows that the absence of siblings does not predetermine developmental deficits. The role of urban family environments, where parenting styles, school settings, and social networks differ significantly from rural or suburban contexts, is highlighted as an influential factor in emotional development (Gadsden & Dixon-Román, 2017). As such, this research encourages family scholars to consider the interplay between structural (e.g., number of children) and situational (e.g., living context, cultural expectations) variables in shaping children's emotional trajectories.

Moreover, the study supports the growing emphasis on the diversity of family experiences and the need for adaptable parenting strategies. For practitioners, such as counselors and educators, the research provides evidence-based insight into how to support empathy development in different family settings. For policymakers, it points to the importance of fostering supportive environments such as inclusive education, child-centered urban planning, and parental education programs to ensure all children, regardless of family structure, have access to the social tools necessary for emotional and moral development.

This study makes a valuable contribution by bridging theory and practice in understanding how children develop empathy within varying family and social structures. It not only adds depth to developmental psychological theory but also offers practical implications for modern family life and the shaping of emotionally intelligent future generations.

Implications for Parenting Practices, Early Childhood Education, and Social Policy

Parents play a central role in the emotional and social development of only children, especially in the absence of sibling relationships that typically provide daily opportunities for empathy-building (Borba, 2017). This study highlights the need for intentional parenting strategies to promote empathy at home. Parents should model empathic behavior, encourage discussions about emotions, and create an open, communicative environment where children learn to understand and respect others' perspectives.

Moreover, because only children may lack exposure to sibling rivalry or shared responsibilities, parents must actively provide alternative opportunities for social learning. This may include organizing regular peer interactions through playdates, enrolling children in team-based extracurricular activities, or encouraging participation in community service. Such experiences can simulate sibling-like dynamics and foster the development of emotional awareness, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills.

Educational institutions, particularly in urban areas, serve as critical environments for developing empathy in children (Ampuero et al., 2015). For only children, schools may represent the primary setting where they engage in consistent peer interactions. As such, this research supports the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) into early childhood curricula. Through role-playing, storytelling, group projects, and structured peer collaboration, educators can create learning environments that nurture empathy and perspective-taking.

Teachers should also be trained to recognize the unique emotional needs of only children and ensure that classroom dynamics allow for inclusive and empathetic interactions. Programs that emphasize emotional literacy, diversity, and cooperative learning can help bridge the social gaps that may exist in only-child households, ultimately equipping all students with the interpersonal skills needed to thrive in diverse social settings.

At the societal level, this research carries implications for social policies that support family development and child well-being (Amato, 2005). As urbanization increases and family structures diversify, governments must recognize that not all children have access to sibling relationships that

traditionally foster empathy. Therefore, public policies should aim to expand access to community-based programs that promote social-emotional development, including after-school activities, youth mentorship, and public parenting workshops.

Additionally, urban planning policies should prioritize the creation of child-friendly public spaces such as parks, libraries, and community centers that encourage peer interaction and emotional engagement outside the home. Support for affordable early education programs that incorporate SEL components is also crucial, especially in underserved urban areas where social-emotional resources may be lacking.

Moreover, public awareness campaigns can play a role in destigmatizing only-child households and promoting empathy as a core value in both family life and education. Policymakers must also support research and data collection on child development trends to ensure that interventions are evidence-based and culturally relevant.

This study emphasizes that the development of empathy in only children requires a collaborative effort across the home, school, and societal levels. With intentional parenting, empathetic educational practices, and inclusive social policies, it is possible to ensure that all children regardless of sibling presence grow into emotionally intelligent, compassionate, and socially competent individuals.

Addressing Stereotypes About Only Children's Social and Emotional Development

For decades, only children have been the subject of persistent stereotypes suggesting that they are lonely, self-centered, less socially adept, and emotionally underdeveloped compared to their peers with siblings. These assumptions, often fueled by outdated psychological theories and cultural narratives, have shaped public perceptions and even parenting choices. However, contemporary research including the present study has begun to challenge and deconstruct these stereotypes, offering a more balanced and evidence-based understanding of the only child experience.

The stereotype that only children are less empathetic or emotionally mature stems largely from the belief that sibling relationships are essential for learning critical social skills, such as sharing, negotiating, and understanding others' emotions (Kramer, 2014). While it is true that siblings provide natural, everyday opportunities for social-emotional growth, the absence of siblings does not inherently result in emotional deficiency. Rather, emotional development in only children is shaped by a combination of parenting quality, peer relationships, and environmental factors particularly within urban contexts.

This research demonstrates that only children can develop empathy and emotional intelligence at levels comparable to their peers with siblings, especially when they are raised in environments that provide rich social interaction. In many cases, only children benefit from greater parental attention and deeper one-on-one conversations that can actually enhance emotional awareness and vocabulary (Berk, 2004). Furthermore, involvement in structured social settings such as schools, clubs, and extracurricular activities can provide the necessary experiences for building interpersonal skills.

Moreover, studies have shown that the quality of relationships matters more than quantity. Some children with siblings may experience negative sibling dynamics such as bullying or exclusion that hinder rather than support emotional development. Meanwhile, only children who engage in warm, communicative relationships with parents and peers often exhibit strong emotional regulation, empathy, and confidence.

By examining only children within the context of modern urban life, this research highlights the importance of moving beyond simplistic, deficit-based views of family structures. It reinforces the notion that children's social and emotional outcomes are not solely determined by the presence or absence of siblings, but by the quality of their relationships and the intentionality of the adults around them. This perspective invites a more inclusive and flexible understanding of childhood development that recognizes the strengths and potential of all children, regardless of birth order or family size.

Dismantling stereotypes about only children is essential for fostering supportive parenting practices, inclusive educational environments, and equitable social policies (Killen, 2019). Rather than

viewing only-child status as a developmental disadvantage, it should be seen as one of many diverse family experiences that can equally nurture emotionally intelligent and socially capable individuals when guided by thoughtful care, education, and opportunity.

Scope and Limitations

The study is limited to children aged 10 to 15 years, a developmental period during which empathy is actively maturing and can be measured with relative accuracy through self-report questionnaires. The research specifically targets children living in urban areas, where lifestyle, education, and family dynamics are typically influenced by fast-paced routines, digital engagement, limited open play spaces, and structured schedules (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). These factors distinguish urban childhood experiences from those in rural or suburban areas and justify the geographic limitation of the research.

The study includes two comparison groups: only children and children with one or more siblings. Empathy is measured using a standardized instrument that captures both emotional and cognitive dimensions of empathy. Additional variables, such as parental involvement and peer interaction frequency, are considered to help interpret the influence of external social factors beyond sibling relationships.

The research adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional approach, with data collected through structured questionnaires distributed in school settings. This approach is selected to provide measurable and comparative results between the groups, and to allow for statistical analysis of potential differences in empathy levels.

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality. While associations between sibling presence and empathy levels can be identified, the direction and depth of the relationship cannot be fully determined without longitudinal data.

Second, the study relies on self-report instruments, which may be subject to social desirability bias or limited self-awareness, especially in younger participants (Manor et al., 2012). Although validated scales are used, children may still overestimate or underestimate their empathy levels based on their perception of what is socially acceptable.

Third, the sample is drawn exclusively from urban schools, and the findings may not be generalizable to children in rural or mixed environments, where social structures, parenting styles, and access to peer interactions may differ significantly. Additionally, cultural factors are not the primary focus of this research, though they may influence both parenting approaches and children's emotional development.

Another limitation is the lack of qualitative data, which could provide deeper insights into the nature and quality of sibling or peer relationships, and how these influence empathy development beyond numerical scores. Without interviews or observational data, the study cannot capture the nuanced emotional dynamics at play in children's daily lives.

Lastly, while the study accounts for variables such as parental involvement and peer contact, other influential factors such as socioeconomic status, parental education, or screen time exposure are not explored in depth and may impact the results.

Conclusion and implication

This research set out to explore the impact of sibling presence on the development of empathy in only children living in urban areas. The findings indicate that while children with siblings generally exhibit higher levels of emotional empathy, only children can develop comparable levels of cognitive empathy, particularly when supported by strong peer relationships and high parental involvement. These results challenge common stereotypes that portray only children as socially or emotionally disadvantaged and highlight the dynamic nature of empathy development as influenced not only by family structure but

also by environmental and social factors. The conclusion drawn from this study is that sibling presence does play a meaningful role in fostering emotional empathy through daily emotional exchanges, conflicts, and negotiations. However, the absence of siblings does not equate to a deficit in emotional development. With the right support systems such as empathetic parenting, exposure to peer interaction, and participation in structured social environments only children can develop empathy effectively. The urban context, often viewed as a barrier due to fast-paced lifestyles and limited unstructured socialization, can be transformed into a rich developmental environment when families, schools, and communities work together to create opportunities for social-emotional learning. The findings of this study carry several important implications. The study encourages parents of only children to actively nurture emotional intelligence at home. This can be done by modeling empathetic behavior, facilitating peer interaction, and engaging children in open discussions about emotions and moral reasoning. Only children may benefit from intentional efforts to simulate the social learning typically found in sibling relationships. Schools must recognize their critical role in providing social-emotional learning, especially for children who may not experience such learning at home due to a lack of siblings. Integrating empathy-focused activities into the curriculum, promoting collaborative learning, and fostering emotionally supportive classrooms are effective ways to support all children's emotional development. The research supports the need for policies that strengthen community-based support systems for families in urban settings. Investment in early childhood education, access to extracurricular activities, and family-oriented public spaces can significantly enhance the emotional and social well-being of children, particularly those raised in single-child households. The study opens the door for further exploration of how empathy develops across different family types, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural contexts. Longitudinal and mixed-method research would provide deeper insight into the emotional trajectories of only children and help design more targeted interventions.

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