

# Forgotten Figures: A Scoping Review of Research on Sibling and Peer Attachment

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### **RATIONALE**

Most attachment research has focused on dyadic, parent-child or adult romantic relationships, in spite of other important close relationships fulfilling important emotional and social functions (Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Morelli et al., 2018).

When widening the focus to include multiple attachment figures, there is also debate as to how multiple attachment relationships are organized and whether attachments should be understood hierarchically, as a network, or otherwise (Zeifman, 2018; Fraley, 2019; Gillath et al., 2017: Scharfe, 2020: Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997).

These appear to be some of the reasons that attention to sibling and best friend bonds as attachment figures has been limited.

Sibling relationships and best friendship tend to be framed as possible alternative attachment figures to compensate for unmet attachment needs elsewhere in people's lives, but not as first choice attachment figures in and of themselves (Pinel-Jaquemin & Zaouche-Godron, 2009).

Research on friendships has proposed that friends may be transitional attachment figures as youth launch from their families of origin (Welch & Houser, 2010; Fraley & Davis, 1997). Friends appear to continue to provide safe haven functions throughout adulthood, even when a person develops a romantic attachment (Markiewisz et al., 2006; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). This research suggests that friends might play an attachment role for a time, or in a partial way, but not to rise to the level of other more complete attachment figures, such as parents/caregivers and romantic partners.

Similarly, the sibling relationship can constitute an attachment bond, with research documenting children showing signs of distress when a sibling leaves, joy at the sibling's return and a general preference for siblings as playmates in early childhood (Noel et al., 2018; Stewart, 1983). Across the lifespan siblings play important roles in navigating major life events and modeling successful transitions (Bank & Khan, 1982) and may act as key sources of support in times of crisis.

### **OBJECTIVE**

To understand the state of knowledge on research that examines both siblings and peers as attachment relationships within the same study.

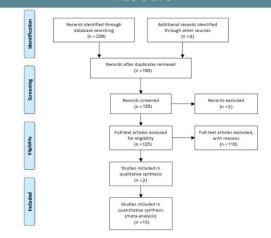
### **METHODOLOGY**

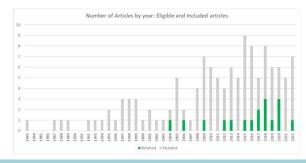
Systematic scoping review methodology used because reveals breadth of existing research activity on this topic and to identify research gaps (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Grant & Booth, 2009; Moher et al, 2015).

Five stage approach outlined by Arskey & O'Malley's (2005):

- (1) Identify the research question: What is the state of empirical and theoretical literature that examines siblings and peers as attachment figures?
- (2) Identify inclusion/exclusion criteria: Inclusion criteria: (1) empirical and theoretical studies that examine attachment in sibling and peer relationships; (2) examine both sibling and peer relationships within the same article; (3) published in a peer reviewed journal: (4) available in English: (5) published between 1 January 1998 and 6 February 2023; (5) clearly describe method that generated findings. Exclusion criteria: (1) book reviews, dissertations, conference papers, historical works, grey literature, editorials; (2) studies on parent-child attachment and its impact on sibling and peer relationships.
- (3) Identify relevant studies: See PRISMA chart. Electronic databases: PsycInfo, Web of Science, Scopus. Search terms: [attachment AND sibling AND (friend OR peer)]. Date searched: 6 February 2023. Steps to be completed at a later date include searching through reference lists, hand-searching key journals, and existing networks and conferences
- (4) Chart the data: Copies of table available for review on-site.
- (5) Assemble and summarize the results: See Findings section.

### **RESULTS**





### **FINDINGS**

Empirical vs Theoretical: All studies identified for inclusion were empirical in nature.

#### Developmental stage and age:

- 7 articles studied sibling and peer attachment during middle childhood (age 5 to puberty) (Atkas & Yildirim, 2022; Brumariu et al., 2020; Noel et al., 2018; Pace et al., 2020; Seibert & Kerns, 2009; Stacy, 2006; Thomas et al., 2013)
- 1 studied older adolescents (age 15-18) (Laghi et al., 2020)
- 7 studied adult (age 18+) peer and sibling attachment relationships (Ames-Sikora et al., 2017; Brumbaugh, 2017; Carr & Wilder, 2016; Clauson, 2012; Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Tamam et al., 2019; Wolfe et al., 2018)

#### Definitions of "sibling" and "peers" or "friend":

- 9 had no clear definition of either (Ames-Sikora et al., 2017; Atkas & Yildirim, 2022; Brumariu et al., 2020; Clauson, 2012; Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Noel et al., 2018; Pace et al., 2020; Seibert & Kerns, 2009; Tamam et al, 2019)
- "Sibling" was defined as "involuntary" relationships in contrast to peers (Carr & Wilder, 2016), as people with the same biological parents and a close age gap (Stacy, 2006), or participant's emotionally closest sibling (Brumbaugh, 2017)
- "Peer" was defined as "voluntary" relationships (Brumbaugh, 2017; Carr & Wilder, 2016), a person's closest friend (Stacy, 2006; Laghi et al., 2020), or "compensatory or complementary" to biological family (Wolfe et al., 2018)

## FINDINGS (continued

Attachment concepts measured: Multiple constructs were studied as evidence of attachment including internal working models, safe haven (comfort/reassurance seeking), secure base (exploration), proximity seeking, separation protest, communication or selfdisclosure, trust, alienation, companionship, anxiety vs avoidance, familiarity (time spent), and social, material or emotional support.

#### Selected key findings:

- · Doherty & Feeney (2004) found that friends, mothers and partners were most commonly identified as primary attachment figures, while siblings were less often identified. Both friends and siblings were more commonly a primary attachment figure for adults who did not have romantic partners.
- · Brumbaugh (2017) found that more siblings was correlated to greater attachment security while more friends was correlated to less attachment insecurity.

### DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed captures some of the key attachment and support functions friends and siblings may play from middle childhood through adulthood as one of many, or as primary attachment figures. Nevertheless, few articles consider how siblings and friends may serve as alternative attachment figures in the face of adversity, nor how these relationships might help mediate the impact of an absent parent. In other words, this scoping review provides insight into the research on sibling and peer attachment, while containing limited information on implications for children who could most benefit from alternative of complementary attachment figures.

MAIN FINDINGS: Findings suggest that friends and siblings can constitute primary attachment figures, appearing to compensate for the lack of parental or romantic attachments (ex. Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Thomas et al. 2009). Research also finds these relationships are selectively and contextually elected for specific attachment behaviours (safe haven, secure base, proximity seeking), but not often for all these functions. For example, young people may routinely turn to friends for reassurance where parents are typically absent (i.e. at school) (Brumariu et al., 2020; Seibert & Kerns, 2009).

RECURRENT STUDY LIMITATIONS: A number of reviewed articles examine concepts such as "companionship", "closeness", "time spent", "familiarity", without clearly articulating how these relate to attachment. Relatedly, most studies contained numerous hidden assumptions about core concepts under study, including attachment, but also with regards to who are what constitutes a "sibling" and "friend" or "peer." Many studies assume peer and sibling relationships resemble one another, leaving participants to selfdefine these relationships, but also resulting lack of definitional clarity.

### CONCLUSIONS

More research is needed to flesh out the differences and similarities between sibling and peer/friend attachment relationships and to clarify how these relationships are organized in relation to other attachment relationships in people's lives, and over the life course (McWilliams & Fried, 2018).

The common assumption that sibling and peer relationships function similarly in people's lives marks an opportunity for theoretical and empirical expansion.

### LIST OF REFERENCES