

Children's experiences of sibling relationships after parental separation: A case study approach

by

Jacqueline Bush
B.A., University of Western Ontario, 1995
M.A., University of Victoria, 2002

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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Marion F. Ehrenberg, Department of Psychology
(Supervisor)

Dr. Marsha G. Runtz, Department of Psychology
(Departmental Member)

Dr. Robert C. Dalton, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
(Outside Member)

Abstract

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Outside Member

The current study examined children's experiences of sibling relationships following parental separation. Areas investigated included the nature of sibling relationships in separated families, how siblings provide care and support to each other, and how they view sibling relationships in general. To obtain a holistic, context-sensitive understanding of sibling relationships, the study involved a multimethod, multi-source, case study approach that included interviews, sentence completion items, drawings, and vignettes. Three families participated in approximately five to six sessions each. Children and parents participated in individual sessions, and the children participated in one session with their siblings. Through cross-case, qualitative analyses, several salient themes relevant to sibling relationships in separated families were identified. Such themes include the importance of context in understanding sibling relationships (e.g., developmental phase of sibling relationship, custody arrangements, co-parenting relationship); the role of negotiating time with each parent; the impact of physical context; how shared experiences might shape sibling relationships in separated families; and the indirect ways in which siblings support each other. Relevant research and clinical implications when working with children are discussed.

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Dedication

For my brother, Andy, who taught me the meaning of “siblingmance.” And for my mother, Roseanne, and my father, Jack, for giving me that rarest of gifts: unconditional love.

Children's experiences of sibling relationships after parental separation: A case study
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Marital separation affects all members of a family. To date, researchers have focused primarily on investigating the impact of divorce and related transitions on child adjustment. A family systems framework, however, suggests that a family disruption affects not only individual members of a family, but all of the relationships within a family. That is, a divorce or remarriage has an impact on the marital relationship, the parent-child relationships, and the sibling relationships. Although parent-child relationships in the context of family transitions have been examined extensively, how family transitions influence sibling relationships remains relatively unexplored. Given that the developmental literature indicates that sibling relationships play a role in an individual's development across the life course, studies need to focus more on understanding the role of family transitions on the quality of sibling relationships.

The scant research on sibling relationships and family transitions has focused on child sibling behaviour or on retrospective accounts of sibling dynamics from an adult perspective. Such studies fail to account for how children make sense of sibling relationships closer to the time of a family transition. To understand how children experience their sibling relationships in the context of a marital transition requires a child-perspective focus.

The current study examined how children make sense of any changes to their sibling relationships following parental separation or divorce. To facilitate children's

expressions of their thoughts and feelings, child interviews embedded within task-based activities comprised the primary methodology. The study examined how children experience changes in their relationships, how they may help each other, and how they perceive sibling roles. Given that sibling relationships need to be understood within the context of the whole family, multiple family perspectives were solicited.

To put the present study of sibling relationships and family transitions into context, the next chapter reviews three relevant areas of research: the effects of divorce and related transitions on children, how children tend to be represented in research, and how divorce/separation affects sibling relationships.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Brief Review of Divorce Literature

Approximately 40% of Canadian children experience the dissolution of their parents' marriage (Statistics Canada, 2011). Roughly 75% of men and 66% of women eventually will remarry, and about 60% of these remarriages will end in divorce (Hetherington, 2003; Wolfinger, 2005). Overall, one in ten children will experience two divorces of a custodial parent before the age of 16 (Kushner, 2009). In reality, these statistics underestimate the frequency of children experiencing their families breaking up, because these figures fail to include those children living in homes where parents cohabit. Cohabitation has been rising steadily in Canada. According to the 2011 Canadian census, 16% of children were living in common-law families compared to 2.8% in 1981 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Children living in common-law families are approximately four times as likely to experience the dissolution of their parents' relationships compared to children living in married homes and to experience that dissolution more negatively (Cheng, Dunn, O'Connor, & Golding, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2011).

The past fifty years has yielded a wealth of research examining associations between marital dissolution and children's short- and long-term well-being. Studies comparing children from divorced homes with children from married homes have demonstrated, in general, that children from divorced homes manifest lower school achievement, greater emotional and behavioural problems, and lower self-esteem, with approximately 8-10% of children from divorced backgrounds demonstrating clinical levels of distress on adjustment measures (Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2003;

Wallerstein, 1991). It is important to note that although, on average, children from divorced homes demonstrate more problems than those from married homes, effect sizes tend to be small, with most children functioning within the 'normal' range on measures of adjustment (Amato, 2001, 2010; Hetherington, 2006; Kelly, 2007; Lauman-Billings & Emery, 2000; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Although many children eventually adjust to their parents' divorces and demonstrate healthy functioning, longitudinal studies have linked the experience of childhood parental divorce with early sexual behaviour, adult depression, diminished occupational opportunities, early marriage, and increased risk of divorce (Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2006; Hurre, Junkkari, & Aro, 2007; Wallerstein, 2004; Wauterickz, Gouwy, & Bracke, 2006). A substantial minority, approximately 10-15%, of children from divorced homes reach young adulthood with long-term problems (Amato, 2003; Hetherington, 2006; Wallerstein, 2004). Although research demonstrates that problems often manifest before parental separation, sometimes many years before, the process of divorce has effects on children independent of pre-separation functioning, often emerging in young adulthood (Cheng et al., 2006; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McCrae, 1998; Stroschein, 2005). Cherlin et al. (1998) conducted a longitudinal study of British families and found that although pre-separation factors accounted for much of children's emotional, social, and behavioural problems within the first three years of the marital dissolution, post-separation problems became more prominent as the children entered young adulthood, increasing up to 33 years of age. In other words, the differences between children from divorced homes and continuously-married homes increased over time, suggesting that family transitions may be associated with difficulties that stand out more prominently at later phases of development. It is important to note

that parental divorce alone does not lead to difficulties some children may experience. Intrapersonal child factors, such as temperament and coping style, can influence how children adapt (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Moreover, divorce is not a discrete event. Divorce can lead to significant changes in a child's life, such as moving to a less affluent neighbourhood, changing schools, seeing less of a parent, and experiencing further transitions, such as parental remarriage (and sometimes the subsequent break-up of that marriage). All of these factors, combined with age and gender, lead to a complicated, cascading web of changes and adjustments, any combination of which might be associated with a child's adjustment throughout the life course.

Although research indicates that children from divorced homes are at greater risk for problems than children from continuously-married families, meta-analyses indicate that between-group variability tends to be smaller than within-group variability (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001; Jeynes, 2006), suggesting great diversity in children's experiences of family transitions. Recognizing such diversity, researchers have begun to explore potential processes involved in child outcomes. Researchers have identified several key factors that appear to be associated with child well-being, namely, pre-separation marital conflict, post-separation parenting conflict, number of transitions, decreased financial resources, and parental mental illness, such as depression or substance abuse (Barber & Demo, 2006; Booth & Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 2003; 2006; Jekielek, 1998; Noller, Feeney, Sheehan, Darlington, & Rogers, 2008; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008). Although these factors have a direct association with child well-being, much of their influence is mediated through parent-child relationships, particularly parenting (Hetherington, 2003; Kelly 2012; Velez,

Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2011). Divorce and its attendant stressors have been associated with less parental monitoring of children's activities and a more authoritarian parenting style (Hetherington, 1993; 2003; Kelly, 2012; Wallerstein, 2004). Although parenting often improves after the initial two-year crisis period, consequences of disrupted parenting can persist over time. For example, Hetherington (2006), in a 30-year longitudinal community study of divorced families, found that maternal low monitoring of daughters in childhood was associated with daughters' early sexual behaviour in adolescence. Although custodial mothers often became more controlling of their daughters in adolescence, this behaviour appeared to be a reaction to daughters' sexual activity and was largely ineffective (Hetherington, 2006).

That the effects of family transitions manifest themselves through disrupted parent-child relationships accords with a Family Systems perspective. Family Systems theory suggests that problems in one family subsystem will have an impact on other family subsystems (Minuchin, 1988). According to this perspective, a family is composed of three primary subsystems: the marital, the parent-child, and the sibling subsystems. A disruption in one subsystem, such as the parental subsystem, affects other subsystems, such as the parent-child subsystem. When a marriage ends, there is a reorganization of the family unit in which the various subsystems are altered. One parent, typically the father, moves out, creating a shift in the family composition. Parents and children need to renegotiate their relationships with each other, a process that continues to be influenced by the co-parenting relationship. As an example, studies indicate that the father-child relationship often deteriorates following marital dissolution (Amato, 2003; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Bokker, 2006; Finley & Schwartz, 2010), and

that this weakening of ties can be associated with poorer child and young adult well-being (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Finley & Schwartz, 2010). Amato's (2003) longitudinal study indicated that 35% of young adults from divorced homes reported weaker father-child ties than young adults from continuously-married homes, even when taking frequency of contact into account. Moreover, Schwartz and Finley (2009) found that young adults in divorced homes reported desiring greater father involvement in their lives growing up compared to young adults who grew up in married homes. Although various factors contribute to the attenuation of father-child relationships (e.g., custody arrangements, substance abuse, family violence, relocation, father role confusion; Bauserman, 2002; Bokker, 2006; Braver, Ellman, and Fabricius, 2003; Kelly, 2007), two relationship factors identified as playing a role in such deterioration include the early, subsequent remarriage of the father and the ongoing co-parental relationship (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003; Fabricius, 2003; Juby, Billette, LaPlante, & LeBourdais, 2007; Sobolewski & King, 2005). Fathers who re-marry within a year of the marital separation appear to have diminished relationships with children from their first marriage (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003). In this situation, new subsystems are being introduced to a setting in which the father-child relationship has yet to re-stabilize. Similarly, parents engaging in low-conflict and positive co-parenting have children with more positive relationships with their fathers (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003; Sobolewski & King, 2005). Ongoing conflict between parents can weaken father-child ties if the conflict leads to diminished access for fathers (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003; Braver & Griffin, 2000; Sobolewski & King, 2005). Thus, the co-parental subsystem affects the father-child subsystem. Moreover, young adults who perceive their mothers as interfering in their relationships with their fathers,

report feeling angry at their mothers even years later (Fabricius, 2003). In this way, the co-parental subsystem affects the father-child relationship and the mother-child relationship. It is important to recognize that within these subsystems, multi-directional influences operate, such that children also affect their own relationships with their parents.

Having examined the potential broad outcome variables of divorce on children (e.g., achievement, emotional, behavioural, and relationship problems), researchers have begun to take a more nuanced look at children's experiences living in a family where the marriage has dissolved. A focus on broad variables tells us little about the day-to-day experiences of living in a post-transition environment. Although research suggests that most children adapt well to their parents' divorce, day-to-day living with divorce likely involves multitudinous little adjustments that children must manage (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Amato, 2010; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Marquardt, 2005).

Understanding how children handle these everyday adjustments can shed light on how children may successfully manage and sometimes benefit from parental divorce and subsequent transitions, or how children may falter in the post-transition environment.

To further understand children's day-to-day divorce experiences, researchers have begun to call for more of an emphasis on children's perspectives (e.g., Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett, 2009; Maes, De Mol, & Buysse, 2011; Smart, 2006).

These researchers point out that much of the family transition research relies on parent reports or researcher observations, with a child perspective often sought only when the children are late adolescents or young adults (Hetherington, 2003; Maes et al., 2011).

Moreover, with the exception of some longitudinal studies (e.g., Ahrons, 2006; Amato &

Afifi, 2006; Cherlin et al., 1998; Hetherington, 2006; Wallerstein, 2004), most studies taking a young adult perspective involve retrospective accounts (e.g., Cartwright, 2006). Although retrospective studies are informative, particularly given that our current life narratives are constructed from our perceptions of life events (Maxwell, 1998), they fail to yield information regarding how children make sense of their parents' divorce at the time of the transition (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003). As Ahrons (2006) notes, children's well-being is a social construct; how children make sense of the marital dissolution and the subsequent changes in their lives plays a key role in their adaptation and functioning.

Due to the relative lack of a children's perspective, the divorce literature seems to imply that divorce "happens" to children, thereby suggesting that children are passive objects in the process of adjusting to post-transition family life. The notion that children can play a significant role in shaping their post-transition environments tends to be de-emphasized (Smart, 2002; Maes et al., 2011). It is important to note, however, that for many years, researchers have heeded the role of bi-directional influences in family functioning (Finley & Schwarz, 2009; Hetherington, 2006). For example, Hetherington's (2006) work demonstrates how child and adolescent behaviour influence custodial mother- child relationships and child-stepparent relationships. Despite such multidirectional models, however, most studies still rely primarily on adults' reports. Recently, researchers have begun to explore how children play an active role in constructing their post-transition environments and relationships.

Children's Agency, Participation, and Protection

Over the last decade, some social science disciplines, namely sociology, have been criticizing psychology for its views of children (Hogan, 2005). Such researchers claim

that early developmental models, particularly Piaget's theory, focused on children's abilities and limitations (i.e., cognitive, linguistic, social) at various stages in their development, viewing children as developing in a universal, stage-like, biologically-deterministic fashion without regard to cultural, historical, or social context (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). As a result, these critics argue, the idea of children as active constructors of the meaning of their environment has been overlooked (Christensen & Prout, 2005). Moreover, such critics suggest that developmental psychology's focus on change over time has contributed in part to the image of children being in the process of learning to become adults (James et al., 1998). In other words, children often are thought of in terms of the future, as "becoming" rather than "being" (Christensen & Prout, 2005). Parenting, teaching, and government policy seem to be geared towards ensuring that children become well-functioning adults. Consequently, the sense of children as complete individuals living their lives in the *present* often seems neglected (James, 2007). Moreover, critics argue, because of psychologists' focus on children's age-dependent competencies and limitations, children have been viewed as vulnerable and in need of protection (James, 2007). Critics posit that although children certainly require protection, guidance, nurturing, and basic needs such as health care, food, and housing, the impact of such a protectionist framework is that children, to a certain extent, become marginalized in society (James, 2007). Adults speak for children in many societal settings, decide what information they can have, and make decisions for them. Children's opinions regarding their lives are rarely or only nominally sought.

Such critics emphasize that adults do not deliberately or cruelly neglect children's perspectives (although some believe that adult interests may be better served by muting

children's voices; Alderson & Goodey, 1996). Adults, socialized to the view that children need protection, undoubtedly believe they are looking out for children's best interests. Unfortunately, however, adults' desires to shield children from potentially distressing events, issues, or information, result in a lack of permission or space for children to express their opinions and concerns freely, thereby inhibiting their ability to make sense of the events affecting their lives (Butler, Scanlon, Robinson, Douglas, & March, 2002).

Finally, such critics take issue with psychology's research methodology, asserting that because children are deemed competent based on age-based norms, children often are viewed as unable to participate in research (i.e., unreliable, easily influenced, confused by questions/ procedures); as a result, children's perspectives tend to be ignored. Furthermore, critics argue that such research often involves testing children in isolated laboratories, thereby stripping them of context.

Yet such an overly-simplistic presentation of developmental psychology and psychology in general fails to acknowledge the complexity involved in psychological theories and research methods. For example, Piaget's original theory clearly indicated that children's development stems from their interactions with the world, rather than as a result of simple biological unfolding (Tudge & Winterhoff, 1993). Moreover, Piaget's theory stemmed from his day-to-day observations of his own children, not from laboratory testing. In addition, neo-Piagetian psychologists, having revised early procedures to incorporate context, have found that children's cognitive abilities are greater than once thought (Newcombe, 2002; Newcombe & Huttenlocher, 1992). Finally, psychological theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (1979)

emphasized the importance of context and social interactions in children's development and many psychology studies incorporate context, such as family or cultural background, into their designs.

On the other hand, the argument that psychology tends to ignore children's perspectives on their everyday experiences may be somewhat legitimate (Hogan, 2005). Questions of what it is like to be a child or what is it like to be a child in this world, have been somewhat neglected in psychology, perhaps because such research may seem untenable from psychology's traditional epistemological framework (Hogan, 2005; James & James, 1999). To derive a rich, multifaceted understanding of children's subjective experiences of their lives requires more qualitative approaches, which incorporate methods such as drawings, vignettes, storytelling, and child-friendly interviews (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999; Driessnack, 2006; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Harden, Scott, Backett-Millburn, & Jackson, 2000; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Smith, Duncan, & Marshall, 2005).

Recently, researchers have attempted to reconcile traditional developmental perspectives with the more recent idea of children as social actors, who have perspectives of their own and who actively construct meaning of their lives (James, 2007). Such research acknowledges the importance of maintaining a developmental perspective, but emphasizes that children's subjective experiences should be included (Hogan, 2005). Within this framework, children are viewed as valuable contributors to research on their everyday lives (Engel, 2005; James et al., 1998). This is not to suggest that children's perspectives should dominate, but rather should be integrated into a multi-perspective view of their lives (Blueblond-Langner & Korbin, 2007). Moreover, children's agency

needs to be balanced with the reality that children are a vulnerable population needing care, and therefore necessarily live within protectionist frameworks (Blueblond-Langner & Korbin, 2007).

Outside of psychology, studies of the child as social actor can be found across social science disciplines, including anthropology, nursing, and geography (e.g., Barker & Weller, 2003; Blueblond-Langner, 1978; Smart, 2002; 2006). Blueblond-Langner's (1978) seminal work on children dying of leukemia demonstrated the degree to which children help shape their environments and construct their own understanding of events happening to them. In her eight-month participatory investigation of children in the leukemia ward of a children's hospital, Blueblond-Langner demonstrated how, in spite of almost no information provided to them, children began to understand that they were dying, and how that knowledge shaped their identities and subsequent behaviour. This study illuminated the pervasive assumption by doctors and parents that the children were unaware of what was happening to them, and that it was best to protect them by not giving them any information or acknowledging that they were seriously ill, as it might be too traumatic for them (Blueblond-Langner emphasizes that parents were also protecting themselves from having to face the reality of their children's illness). In spite of such lack of information, children, through careful scrutiny and exploration of their environments, through interactions with parents and hospital personnel, and through piecing together information they gleaned from each other over time, eventually became aware that they would die. Understanding that they were not supposed to know they were dying, children were unable to talk about their illnesses openly, and therefore resorted to communicating indirectly, such as by telling people that they would not be

returning to school, or nonverbally such as by placing dolls in a box and placing a tissue over them in order to “bury them” (Blueblond-Langner, 1978). Such research enabled Blueblond-Langner (1978) to construct a theory describing the stages through which children typically move in developing their identities as dying children. Moreover, this study demonstrated how children have important perspectives of their experiences, and that these perspectives can be obtained through respectful and appropriate research approaches. As a result, this research made a significant contribution to adults’ understanding of how children experience illness and how children’s experiences might be improved. In other words, knowledge of children’s perspectives can have substantive clinical and policy implications.

Children’s Subjective Experiences of Family Transitions

Similar to Blueblond-Langner’s (1978) early work on children’s perspectives, family researchers have begun to investigate children’s perspectives on family transitions. Wallerstein (1980; 1985; 1991; 2004), one of the earliest researchers in the area, used child-friendly approaches (e.g., play, drawing) to explore children’s perspectives in her longitudinal study of families experiencing divorce in California. More recently, in a number of community research projects using various child-centred, multi-method approaches, researchers have examined how children perceive their day-to-day divorce experiences and how children play an active role in adapting to post-transition family life (Butler et al., 2002; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008; Ebling et al., 2009; Haugen, 2007; 2010; Maes et al., 2011; Mantle, Moules, & Johnson, 2007; Smart, 2006; Smart et al., 2001). Research findings tend to focus on how children re-negotiate their relationships with parents, how they actively care for parents, how they cope with

transitions, and how they believe families should conduct themselves following a transition.

Renegotiating parent-child relationships. Consistent with past research highlighting the importance of parent-child relationships, one of the prominent findings has been that children view their relationships with their parents as most important to them, that they appreciate their parents more than they did before their parents separated, and that they do not take such relationships for granted (Butler et al., 2002; Smart, 2002; Smart et al., 2001; Smith, Taylor, & Tapp, 2003; Walker, 2003). Researchers have identified several factors that seem to contribute to the shift in how children view their parents. For example, in their community study of 50 children between four and 18 years of age whose parents had been divorced/separated for at least three years, Smart et al. (2001) found that the physical separation from a parent and its accompanying sense of loss made children more aware of their relationships with parents. Moreover, because children were always separated from one of their parents, the feeling of loss became a staple of their post-transition lives, heightening the awareness of how much they valued their parents (Smart et al., 2001).

Similarly, travelling between two distinct parental homes furthered children's sense of their parents as individuals and contributed to the renegotiation of the parent-child relationship. Often, children spent time in two homes with diverse emotional climates, each of which required adjustment (Smart, 2002). Through living and adjusting to these different home environments, children became more aware of their parents as individuals with thoughts, emotions, and needs of their own (Smart et al., 2001).

Finally, the awareness of time and its limitations played a role in children's renegotiation of their relationships with parents (Smart et al., 2001). Time suddenly took on new meanings, in that children become more cognizant of time as a precious commodity, one that required them to make important decisions about how to spend it. For instance, children had to balance the time they spent with each parent and with their friends. Often children sacrificed, willingly, time with friends in order to be with a parent. Although many individuals might perceive this as "traumatic" that children had to make such decisions, the children, for the most part, did not report such decisions as painful; rather, because they valued their relationships with their parents more consciously than they did before the divorce, they valued time spent with their parents. Time requires ongoing negotiations, however (Smart, 2002). As children enter adolescence and begin to value their peer groups more, they have to make decisions about how to manage their time (Haugen, 2007; Smart, 2002). Many children find the act of trying to renegotiate time spent with parents painful. Many adolescents have reported sleep problems (including nightmares), guilt, anxiety, and sadness at the thought of hurting one or both of their parents and have worried about the long-term impact of decreasing time spent with parents on their parent-child relationships (Haugen, 2007; Smart, 2002). Such feelings can be compounded by parents' resistance to spending less time with their children (Smart, 2002). Although all children in adolescence have to renegotiate relationships with parents as part of the individuation process (Steinberg, 2001), Smart (2002) suggests that for children with separated parents, this process does not occur slowly, almost imperceptibly, as it may be allowed to do in a two-parent home, but must be confronted directly. For example, an adolescent may need to tell her father

that she no longer wants to spend Saturday nights with him because she wants to go out with her friends. Moreover, the responsibility to initiate such changes falls to the adolescent, who then can feel responsible for how making such decisions might affect their long-term parent-child relationships (Smart, 2002). In other words, children living in a post-transition environment need to actively and deliberately re-negotiate their relationships with their parents, which includes managing any potential accompanying feelings of guilt, pain, worry, and responsibility (Haugen, 2007; Smart, 2002).

For some children, renegotiating relationships with parents involves giving up on such relationships. Smart et al. (2001) found that some children who actively made repeated attempts to contact or spend time with a parent who seemed disengaged, uninterested, or inconsistently available eventually gave up and the relationship drifted apart (Smart et al., 2001). Similarly, some children who had experienced violence or verbal abuse at the hand of a parent often wanted to discontinue their relationship with that parent.

Overall, the research of Smart et al. (2001) and others (Smith et al., 2003; Butler et al., 2002; Pike et al., 2002) demonstrate the active role that children play in re-negotiating their relationships with parents in a post-transition environment. It is worth noting that divorce is not the only transition requiring parent-child renegotiation (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003). Divorce often leads to new relationships for one or both parents, some of which may result in step-parents, step-siblings, and half-siblings. Each transition requires the child to renegotiate and reconsider their family relationships (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003).

Children caring for parents. In addition to their role in re-negotiating parent-child relationships, children in post-transition families demonstrate their roles as social actors by how they care for their parents (Haugen, 2007; Smart, 2002). Given Western society's view of children as dependent on parents, care tends to be thought of as being directed from adult (parent) to child (Haugen, 2007). As a result, children's role in caring for parents remains relatively unexplored. Within Western society, how children care for family members tends to focus on physical acts of labour, such as taking care of siblings, helping disabled parents, or taking on the majority of household chores (Smart, 2002). Because parents are expected to care for children, such physical acts of care tend to be viewed as unusual or, perhaps, a temporary reaction to family difficulties. Although children certainly depend on parents economically and emotionally for a significant period of their lives, this polarized view of children and parents tends to ignore the extent to which children care for parents (Smart et al., 2001).

Early conceptualizations of care might help account for why children's role in caring for parents has been relatively unexplored (Haugen, 2007). Often, care is thought of as behaviour, such as tending to children's emotional needs (e.g., consoling a crying child), feeding, clothing, cleaning children, and teaching and guiding them (Mason, 1996). As Mason points out, however, viewing care only in behavioural terms neglects other aspects of care. Focusing on family relationships, Mason's (1996) theory of care incorporates thinking and feeling in the activity of care. Mason uses the term *sentient activity* to emphasize that thought and feeling are activities involved in care. Examples of sentient activity in relation to care include interpreting the moods of others, noticing the preferences of others, and studying the behaviours of others (Mason, 1996). For

example, children often are attuned to ways of making their parents laugh and will use such knowledge to cheer their parents up, often with some success (Haugen, 2007). Similarly, Blueblond-Langner's (1978) study of dying children illustrated how children care for parents by engaging in sentient activities, such as emotionally withdrawing from parents to protect them from the child's impending death and by engaging in the mutual pretence that they were not dying, despite their clear knowledge that they were. According to Mason, sentient activity derives from a sense of responsibility for, or commitment to, another person, rather than simply a feeling of love for another individual. Referring to such feelings of responsibility as *active sensibility*, Mason (1996) argues that such commitments arise from ongoing negotiation of relationships with others rather than simply one's family position (e.g., 'I am a mother, so I have these responsibilities'). In this way, it makes sense that a person engages in sentient activity with certain individuals but not others. Through ongoing relationships, commitments towards specific individuals become stronger. Although Mason discusses her theory of care in relation to adult women, the theory has implications for children's roles in caring for family members (Smart, 2002); namely, such a view allows for the conceptualization of interdependence in families. Moreover, such a theory enables researchers to examine the "invisible" ways in which children might actively care for their parents.

Within the divorce literature, focus on care directed from children to parents tends to explore unhealthy aspects of care, such as the negative aspects of parentification (Byng-Hall, 2008). Although research has documented associations between parentification and children's adjustment and well-being (Peris, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Emery, R. E., 2008), caring for parents in less pathogenic frameworks has

been relatively neglected (Haugen, 2007). Recently, using Mason (1996)'s notions of sentient activity and active sensibility, researchers have begun to examine how children living in post-transition environments care for parents in everyday ways.

For example, research indicates that children from divorced homes care for parents in numerous ways that reflect Mason's (1996) ideas of care (Butler et al., 2002; Haugen, 2007; Smart et al., 2001). Caring often takes the form of protecting parents from potentially painful information about the other parent's life. Many children are highly attuned to parents' moods and seem to "edit" the information that might make parents angry or upset (Haugen, 2007). Although such editing likely has a self-serving function in that children also protect themselves from the potential consequences of making a parent angry or upset, many children appear to genuinely want to protect parents from being hurt (Haugen, 2007).

In addition to protecting parents from painful information, many children actively manage family life 'behind the scenes.' In one of many examples, Smart (2002) described a child who deliberately arranged for her parents to come to a school play performance on two different nights, so that her mother would not have to see her ex-husband with his new wife. This example illustrates two levels of sentient care: first, the young girl carefully orchestrates family functioning to prevent her mother from being hurt; second, the young girl also demonstrates care for her parents by enacting these arrangements without telling them, in order to protect them from knowing that she worries about them. Haugen (2007) highlights how such behaviour might be viewed as children "suffering" as a result of their parents' divorce by having to take parents' feelings into consideration, and this view would be consistent with the idea that divorce is

inherently traumatic and that children are victims. Although it undoubtedly is true that some children can become so overburdened by their parents' needs that problems in their own well-being can arise (Hetherington, 1999), for many children the act of having parents that live apart and have demonstrated needs and feelings of their own makes such accommodations a natural part of their daily, post-transition family life, a reality that needs to be recognized in order to understand children's day-to-day post-transition experiences.

Similar to their sensitivity to parents' moods, children also are aware of the demands placed on their parents, such as increased work load and financial worries, and they sometimes express care towards parents by refraining from demanding luxury items or from complaining about the lack of money (Haugen, 2007). Exceptions to this tendency occur when children believe that one parent fails to participate in the financial situation, such as refusing to pay child support or complaining to the children about the financial burden (Moxnes, 2003). In these cases, children become angry at the offending parent and resent the situation in which that parent has placed them; moreover, they direct this anger to the parent they perceive as responsible for the situation. Such exceptions demonstrate how care develops out of family relationships and that if children feel a lack of a parent's commitment to them, then their own commitment to that parent lessens and care decreases (Mason, 1996).

Children's worry about their parents also demonstrates sentient activity (Haugen, 2007; Smart et al., 2001). Studies indicate that children often worry about their parents, particularly the one from whom they currently are separated. Children worry about whether the other parent is eating properly, feels lonely, or is upset about the other

parent's re-partnering (Haugen, 2007; Smart et al., 2001). Moreover, often children find ways to alleviate their worries, such as by calling the other parent to check in or by writing letters and drawing pictures to give to the parent in order for them to feel less lonely (Butler et al., 2002; Smart et al., 2001). Haugen (2007) points out that although children in two-parent families certainly worry about their parents, the presence of another adult in the home might alleviate the intensity of such worries and the sense of responsibility for helping the parent. The act of physical separation in post-transition family life appears to play a role in children's worrying about parents.

Active coping. The manner in which children cope with family transitions further demonstrates their role as social actors (Smart et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2003). For example, Smart et al. (2001) found that although over time some children adapted to changing homes on a regular basis, some children found the transition between one parent's home to the other upsetting, seeming to experience each transition as a new separation. Such children coped by crying briefly in their room alone, reading a book until their emotions subsided, calling the absent parent, or looking at a picture of the other parent to feel connected. Although some children sought comfort from the available parent, many children managed their emotions on their own, often stating that seeking such support seemed inappropriate (Smart et al., 2001). Although others might view such painful experiences as too burdensome, these children expressed that they would rather cope with the emotions than sacrifice spending time with parents (Smart et al., 2001). Exceptions included children exposed to parents who ignored, abused, or otherwise treated them poorly (Smart et al., 2001).

Children's ethical disposition regarding post-transition life. Although little research has solicited children's perspectives on living in a post-transition family, children have views of what they want and need in order to adapt to family transitions (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008; Mantle et al., 2007; Moxnes, 2003; Smart, 2002; Smart et al., 2001; Walker, 2003). Smart (2006) suggests that children construct an ethical disposition regarding post-transition life, believing that parents should divorce in the "proper manner" (p. 168). For example, consistent with research on children's adjustment (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 2003), children want parents to reduce conflict, to keep children out of arguments, to not introduce new romantic partners early, and to help children maintain relationships with both parents (Maes et al., 2011; Smart, 2006). A salient source of painful, ongoing distress for children appears to be the perception of a lost relationship with an absent parent (Smart, 2006). Such findings accord with research with young adults who mention the loss of relationships with parents as a source of ongoing pain (Fabricius & Hall, 2000; Finley & Schwartz, 2007; Kelly, 2003; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Schwartz & Finley, 2009).

Children believe they deserve to be told what is going on and want to feel that they "matter." (Maes et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2003). As Neale (2002) suggests, children want to be treated as "citizens" in their own families, accorded the right to express their needs and concerns and to have their input respected and considered. Sometimes this input involves not wanting to participate, which also needs to be respected (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008; Smith et al., 2003). Unfortunately, treating children as citizens sometimes results in generational conflict of interests (Smart, 2002). For instance,

parents sometimes resist telling their children what is going on and how it will affect them (e.g., where they will live, when they will see their other parent), particularly when children are younger (Butler et al., 2002). Reasons for parental reluctance to talk include a lack of information themselves about what might happen (Smart et al., 2001), a natural resistance to disclosing potentially disturbing information, such as an extramarital affair, parents' emotional states, and a desire to protect children (Smart, 2002; Walker, 2003). According to studies focused on children's perspectives, however, such protection can compound feelings of distress, anxiety, and frustration (Butler et al., 2002; Maes et al., 2011; Moxnes, 2003). Moreover, some children report feeling abandoned by a parent who resists talking to them and experience feelings of loneliness in the family (Smart, 2006; Walker, 2003). Some children report that although they may struggle to absorb information about a transition all at once, or may become upset, they still want the information, even if that means talking about it repeatedly, because, according to children, understanding the reasons for divorce helps them to cope (Butler et al., 2002; Maes et al., 2011; Smart, 2002). Such findings correspond to retrospective reports from adult children from divorced backgrounds. In a qualitative interview study, Westberg, Nelson, and Piercy (2002) asked twenty adults between the ages of 18 and 51 about their experiences of being told about their parents' separation. Findings suggested that having more information about the separation and being able to ask questions and provide their opinions emerged as central to these participants. Moreover, the participants underscored the importance of being allowed to ask more questions and talk more about their feelings and thoughts in the days following the original disclosure, opportunities rarely provided to them. It is important to note that the information children want pertains to details

about how the divorce will affect them. Obviously, disclosure of information regarding the intimate details of the parental relationship (e.g., extramarital affair) or circumstances surrounding the separation needs to be considered in terms of whether it will be useful or detrimental to the child's well-being. Above all, these studies indicate that children want to be able to obtain specific information about everyday changes in their lives and want to be afforded the opportunity to discuss their feelings.

In addition to securing information, children report a desire to participate in family decisions. Moxnes (2003) conducted an interview study with 52 children (8-18 years of age) who had experienced multiple changes as a result of their parents' divorce. Findings indicated that children often discussed such decisions as 'shared family problems,' believing that parents should consult them about matters that affect them, such as moving homes or visitation agreements. Other studies report similar findings (Butler et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2003; Smart et al., 2001).

Although children want to be included in family decisions that might affect their lives, children distinguish between *making* decisions and *participating* in discussions that lead to final, parental decisions (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008; Mantle et al., 2007; Neale, 2002; Smart et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2003). In their study of 47 children between the ages of six and 18 years who had experienced their parents' divorce approximately three years earlier, Cashmore and Parkinson (2008) found that 91% of children indicated that they should be involved in discussions of post-transition living arrangements, although not in making the decision. Of these, the most adamant children were those involved in custody disputes, particularly when violence, abuse, or high conflict occurred (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008). Reasons for children wanting to be involved included

wanting the acknowledgement that their lives are being affected by decisions, feeling more control over their lives because they know what is going on, and believing that their participation in decisions resulted in arrangements that best suited their needs and wishes (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008). Moreover, when asked what change they most desired, children reported more time with their non-resident parent, typically the father. Other studies have also found that children tend to want more time with non-resident parents and the emotional pain experienced in response to this lack of contact lingers years later (Fabricius, 2003; Finley & Schwartz, 2007; Pike, 2003; Schwartz & Finley, 2009; Smart et al., 2001). Recently, Maes et al. (2011) found that participating in family decisions depended on how children perceived their parents' ability to take their needs into consideration. Some children wanted to participate in family decisions if their parents were making decisions that appeared to neglect their needs. Some children, however, reported that they were happy to stay out of family discussions because their parents' decisions reflected their needs and desires. As such, Maes et al. (2011) noted that feeling that they "mattered" to parents appeared to be of primary importance for children. Consistent with children's tendency to care for others, some children report feeling concerned about the fairness of the arrangements for their parents and siblings (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008; Haugen, 2010). For example, Haugen (2010), in a study examining children's views of shared residence, found that for some children, although they had mixed feelings about living in two homes, they felt that they should continue to do so out of fairness towards their parents.

Although parents also reported beliefs that children should have a say, these beliefs were less definitive, with some parents fearing that children could be easily manipulated

by the other parent or were too young to understand or provide information (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008). Parents also reported that children were happier with arrangements when allowed some participatory role. Several studies report the desire by children to have flexibility in their arrangements, particularly as they get older and their developmental needs change (Butler et al., 2002; Smart et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2003). Several studies found that children express a desire to 'try out' various living arrangements, particularly at the time of the transitions when matters seem uncertain (Butler et al., 2002; Smart et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2003). Some children involved with distant or rejecting parents desire the ability to decrease time spent with such a parent. As Cashmore and Parkinson (2008) observe, older children who resent having to spend time with a parent (typically the non-resident parent) 'vote with their feet' by refusing to visit or running away from the parent's home. For some children, running away from an abusive parent was the only way to change decisions because the courts tended to become involved at that point (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008).

Research by Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000) and Kelly and Emery (2003) highlight the potential long-term negative consequences of failing to allow children to participate in family decisions. Although research suggests that most children adapt well to their parents' divorce, some researchers highlight the difference between distress and pathology, suggesting that although children may fail to manifest clinical or sub-clinical adjustment difficulties, they may experience pain and distress in their everyday lives (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). In their study of college students, Laumann-Billings & Emery found that the majority of young adults from divorced families demonstrated healthy levels of adjustment, according to standardized

measures of depression and anxiety. Moreover, their adjustment scores did not differ from young adults who grew up in continuously-married homes. In contrast to measures of adjustment, however, young adults from divorced backgrounds reported significantly higher levels of distress (e.g., feelings of parental loss) than did young adults from continuously-married homes, as measured by a distress scale devised by the researchers. Moreover, higher levels of distress tended to be strongly related to lack of contact with fathers, with most individuals longing for more contact and wondering if their father loved them. Although these young adults experienced their parents' divorce many years ago, painful feelings lingered, with most wishing that they could have spent more time with their fathers. These findings were replicated in a second community study of young adults from low-income families none of whom were attending college (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). Fabricius and Hall (2000) found similar desires in their study of 820 college students, with many young adults feeling angry and resentful with how their lives were arranged after their parents' divorces. Similarly, Marquardt (2005), in a mixed qualitative and quantitative retrospective study with young adults, found that although participants appeared to be functioning well according to broad measures of adjustment (e.g., employment, mental health, academic achievement), many reported feeling lonely during childhood, experienced family events and holidays as stressful, struggled with transitions between their parents' homes, missed their fathers, and struggled to feel a sense of security. Of note, participants in Marquardt's reported that their parents, overall, had amicable divorces. Overall, such research indicates that although most children grow up to be well- functioning young adults, painful feelings of loss sometimes remain. Allowing children to participate in family decisions and express

their feelings and thoughts might help prevent such long-term pain (Kelly, 2003). More important, perhaps, these studies highlight how more nuanced examinations of children's post-transition experiences can reveal important information about how to improve, or at least understand more fully, their everyday lives.

In order for children to feel free to participate in family decisions, the environment needs to support the expression of their thoughts and feelings (Moxnes, 2003; Smith et al., 2003). Smith et al. (2003) suggest that perceptions of children's incompetence to express opinions relate more to the way in which information is elicited and acknowledged than to children's actual ability. Wishes and desires expressed within an accepting environment where such expressions are encouraged and where children feel they are actually being listened to, not just being nominally consulted about their views after a decision has been made, seem to facilitate the ease with which children can talk to parents and other adults (Moxnes, 2003). Moxnes (2003) found that children who had to change homes because of a divorce or remarriage reported feeling happier about the change if the parents were involved in helping the child adjust to the move (e.g., helping find new friends, making efforts to maintain contact with old friends). Children saw such involvement as an acknowledgement that they were affected by such moves and that they had a right to be helped. In other words, they felt respected as citizens in their family (Moxnes, 2003). Such involvement becomes critical when children move far away from a parent (Braver et al., 2003; Warshak, 2003). Braver et al. (2003), in a study of 602 college students from divorced homes, found that compared to young adults who grew up in the vicinity of both their parents, young adults who, as children, had moved more than an hour's drive away from the other parent (typically the father) demonstrated greater

health and emotional problems (i.e., divorce-related distress, inner turmoil), poorer father-child relationships, and lower perceptions of parents as strong sources of emotional support. Although many factors contribute to the impact of relocation (e.g., conflict between parents, parenting skills of both parents), research supporting the importance of both parents remaining involved in children's lives (Hetherington, 2003) suggests that consideration of children's perspectives regarding issues such as relocation are of paramount importance.

It should be noted that although children's views need to be incorporated in family decisions, the emotional and relationship settings in which these views are solicited need to be considered carefully (Warshak, 2003). Preliminary research suggests that children prefer to talk to their parents or trusted adults rather than to case workers, lawyers, or child advocates (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008, Smart et al., 2001). Because most children want to refrain from hurting their parents, they need to feel that they are free to talk without hurting a parent. Such considerations may become heightened when children are caught in loyalty conflicts between parents (Warshak, 2003). Positive parent-child relationships before the transition appear to set the stage for children's participation in family decisions (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008; Smart et al., 2001). Unfortunately, parents involved in ongoing conflict or custody disputes often have difficulty creating an environment that enables children to speak freely (Warshak, 2003). In such cases, children have to rely on child advocates or case workers to represent their interests. Recent research, however, indicates that many children in such circumstances feel that their advocates either fail to listen to their needs or misrepresent their needs in court proceedings (Neale, 2002; Warshak, 2003).

As mentioned above, although children want to participate in family decisions, children recognize and support the distinction between involvement and decision-making power (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008; Smart et al., 2001), thereby acknowledging that adults have and should have more power in their relationships with children. Framing children's relationships with adults in terms of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' might help delineate their respective roles (Smart, 2002). An 'asymmetrical reciprocity' framework recognizes that adults dominate in their relationships with children, but reminds adults to refrain from assuming that they can easily understand the impact of family transitions from a child's standpoint (Smart et al., 2001). Given that all adults were once children, adults might be at risk of believing that they can easily imagine what a child might be thinking and feeling (Smart, 2002).

To summarize, research seeking children's perspectives suggests that children want to be regarded from an "ethic of respect," where they are viewed as valued family members (Butler et al., 2002; Maes et al., 2011; Neale, 2002; Smart et al., 2001). Children appear to have strong views about the proper way parents should divorce and conduct themselves in the post-transition years, views which include fairness, respect, and inclusion (Smart, 2006). Children are heavily invested in their parent-child relationships, care for parents actively, renegotiate their parent-child relationships, and wish to have a say in decisions that affect those relationships. Of note, some children also express opinions about how children should behave when parents separate. For example, in their focus group study conducted with children between ages eleven and fourteen, Maes et al. (2011) found that some children noted that children should treat both parents with respect and should never take sides.

Although researchers have examined children's subjective experiences of relationships with parents, little research has focused on how children perceive their sibling relationships in families experiencing transitions. From a family systems perspective, changes in the marital relationship affect all subsystems in the family, including sibling subsystems. To date, however, such relationships have been relatively neglected in family transition research.

Sibling Relationships

Although sibling relationships have been overlooked in the divorce literature, research in the developmental sphere has demonstrated the importance of sibling relationships to individual development. During childhood, positive sibling relationships are associated with heightened opportunities for cognitive development (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993; Howe & Recchia, 2004; Smith, 1990), academic engagement (Bouchey, Shoulberg, Jodl, & Eccles, 2010; Milevsky & Levitt, 2005), social functioning (Downey & Condrón, 2004; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007), self-esteem (Yeh & Lempers, 2004), and overall positive psychosocial functioning (Buist, Decovic, & Prinzie, 2013; Pike, Coldwell, & Dunn, 2005; Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005; Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2008). Moderate levels of conflict between young siblings have been associated with emotional control, social competence and prosocial behaviours such as sharing, helping, cooperation, and teaching (Dunn, 1993; McGuire, Manke, Eftekhari, & Dunn, 2000; Stormshak, Bellanti, & Bierman, 1996; Volling, McElwain, & Miller, 2002), whereas high-conflict sibling relationships have been linked to internalizing and externalizing problems (Bank, Patterson, & Reid, 1996; Garcia, Shaw, Winslow, & Yaggi, 2000; Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007; Snyder, Bank, & Burraston, 2005;

Stocker, Burwell, & Briggs, 2002). Positive and supportive relationships in adolescence have been associated with more positive psychosocial functioning (Branje, van Lieshout, van Aken, & Haselager, 2004; Kim et al., 2007; Milevsky, Smoot, Leh, & Ruppe, 2005; Oliva & Arranz, 2004). Although rooted in shared childhood experiences, positive sibling relations are the most enduring of family relationships and can be sources of support, companionship, and life review throughout the human life span (Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999; Milevsky et al., 2005; Ponzetti & James, 1997).

Given the importance of sibling relationships across the life span, researchers have tried to identify factors involved in the formation of sibling relationships. Overall, research has determined that the quality of a sibling relationship is established primarily in childhood when children are living together; rarely do siblings begin to develop a relationship in adulthood (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; Conger & Little, 2010; Dunn, 2000; Ross & Milgram, 1982). Aside from general interpersonal skills, such as emotion regulation, social and emotional understanding, and behaviour control (Kramer, 2010), researchers have identified individual temperament as contributing to sibling relationship quality (McHale, Kim, & Whiteman, 2006). Early research demonstrated that siblings who have difficult temperaments (e.g., high emotionality) tend to have more conflict with each other than siblings with 'easy' temperaments (e.g., high adaptability) (Munn & Dunn, 1989; Stocker, Dunn, & Plomin, 1989; Stoneman & Brody, 1993). Recent research, however, suggests that the role of child temperament in sibling relationships may be more complicated than once thought and can depend on situations and the relative ages of siblings. For example, Volling, Herrera, and Poris (2004) found that preschoolers rated as socially fearful by their parents tended to be more nurturing towards their 16-

month-old younger siblings in stressful situations (i.e., parent leaving the room). Older children showing more temperamental anger tended to leave the room when their younger siblings became distressed. Moreover, younger siblings rated as high in temperamental anger tended to elicit care from older siblings who were not high in temperamental anger. Researchers hypothesized that different situations can affect the role of individual temperaments on sibling relationships. For instance, whereas a mismatch between sibling temperaments may lead to conflict in play situations, which require mutual compatibility (Munn & Dunn, 1986), the match between sibling temperaments may be more complicated in stressful situations. Similarly, Rivers and Stoneman (2008) refer to “temperament buffering,” in which one sibling’s more positive temperament minimizes the negative impact of a sibling’s more difficult temperament on the sibling relationship.

In addition to child characteristics, family dynamics play a central role in sibling relationships (Volling, 2005). One of the most frequently studied aspects of siblings and their family environment is the link between parent-child relationships, particularly mother-child, and sibling relationships (Dunn, 1992). In some of the most systematic work completed on sibling relationships in early childhood, Dunn (1988; Dunn & Kendrick, 1982) found that children who had enjoyed a close, positive relationship with their mothers prior to the birth of a sibling subsequently engaged in more conflicts with their mothers following the birth of the sibling. Of note, however, children who were close to their mothers and whose mothers prepared them for the arrival of a new sibling demonstrated more prosocial behaviour towards their sibling than did children who were less well prepared. Similarly, after the birth of the sibling, mothers who talked to their

first-born children about how the baby was feeling and what the baby needed had children who were more positive towards their siblings than children whose mothers did not provide such information. Perhaps children who are included in sibling care-taking and are taught that newborn babies have special needs requiring additional attention feel less displaced or neglected by their parents (Volling, 2003).

In a related set of findings, Dunn (1988) also found that children who had disengaged relationships with their mother before the birth of a sibling exhibited more positive behaviour towards their sibling following the birth. Dunn (1988) hypothesized that perhaps the newborn sibling fulfills an emotional need that was not being met through the child's relationship with the mother. On the other hand, researchers have consistently demonstrated that children who have conflict-ridden relationships with their mothers engage in negative interactions with their siblings (Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1994; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, & Golding, 1999). Although mothers have been the focus in early sibling research, recent research suggests that father-child relationships also play a role. Volling (2005; 2012) and Volling & Belsky (1992) found that close relationships between the fathers and their older children were associated with prosocial sibling behaviour after the birth of a younger child. Similarly, diminished father-older child relationship quality during the first year after a younger sibling's birth was associated with increases in older sibling problem behaviours.

Although the exact mechanisms through which parent-child relationships and sibling relationships are related are unknown, researchers use attachment theory, social interaction concepts, and parental differential treatment to help account for such links (Brody & Stoneman, 1996; Dunn, 2002; Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2008).

Children with a secure attachment to parents have been found, overall, to have positive sibling relationships (Boer, Goedhart, & Treffers, 1992; Seginer, 1998; Volling & Belsky, 1992). The influence of social learning processes in family interactions is found in the work of Patterson and colleagues (Patterson, 1986; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989; Bank et al., 1996). Patterson (1986) posited that in families where parents inadvertently reinforce noncompliant behaviours, patterns of coercive exchanges develop leading to increasingly aggressive interactions. Patterson's (1986) work suggests that families characterized by conflict-ridden interactions may create an environment in which siblings develop conflict-ridden relationships with each other (Bank et al., 1996; Bedford & Volling, 2004; Criss & Shaw, 2005; Kim, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2006; Snyder et al., 2005). Noller (2005) labelled this process 'interaction-based transmission,' highlighting the theory that children learn how to interact with each other through their interactions with parents. Finally, parental differential treatment, in which parents behave unequally towards their children, often has been cited as playing a prominent role in linking parent-child relationships with conflicted sibling relationships (Brody, Stoneman, McCoy, & Forehand, 1992; Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980; Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008; Noller, 2005; Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005; Shanahan et al., 2008; Solmeyer, Killornen, McHale, & Updegraff, 2011; Volling & Belsky, 1992). Research also indicates that in times of family stress (e.g., divorce, economic trouble), parental differential treatment may be exacerbated (Crouter, McHale, & Tucker, 1999; Hetherington, 1988; Jenkins, Dunn, O'Connor, Rasbash, & Behnke, 2005; Mekos, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1996; Simons, 1996). It should be noted, however, that, overall, the amount of variance in sibling relationship quality that is accounted for by the

presence of parental differential treatment appears to be relatively low (Kowal & Kramer, 1997). Moreover, children's attributions of differential treatment appear to be important (Kowal, Kramer, Krull, & Crick, 2002; McHale, Updegraff, Jackson-Newsom, Tucker, & Crouter, 2000; McHale, Updegraff, Shanahan, Crouter, & Killoren, 2005). Children who perceive the differential treatment as being necessary because of developmental or physical differences between them and their siblings do not manifest aggressive behaviour to their siblings, but when treatment is perceived as favouritism, sibling conflict is evident (Kowal et al., 2002). Thus, children differentiate between justified differential parental treatment and blatant favouritism. It is important to emphasize that the relationships between parent-child relationships and sibling relationships are correlational in nature, which allows for the possibility that bidirectional influences may be at play (Brody & Stoneman, 1996; Dunn, 2005; Volling & Belsky, 1992).

To date, conflict between siblings tends to be more fully understood than closeness between siblings (Dunn, 2002; McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012). For example, conflict-ridden sibling relationships are better predicted by parent-child relationships than are positive sibling relationships (Brody et al., 1994; Erel, Margolin, & John, 1998; Volling & Belsky, 1992). Perhaps because conflict between siblings is more overt and more easily measured, it also is more easily examined and quantified. Closeness, on the other hand, may take more subtle, less discernible forms. Moreover, because much of the day-to-day life of sibling relationships may take place outside of adults' presence (Dunn, 2002), other aspects of sibling dynamics are missed.

Finally, the marital/partner relationship has been associated with sibling relationships. Just as marital conflict and family transitions, such as divorce and

remarriage, can affect individual adjustment and parent-child relationships, such disruptions, according to a family systems perspective, may also affect sibling relationships. Given the importance of sibling relationships to individual development and well-being, associations between marital functioning and sibling relationships need to be examined.

Sibling Relationships in Families Experiencing Transition

Research on siblings in divorcing families has demonstrated that siblings can play a role in how a child adjusts to a parental transition. For example, in a direct examination of the potential buffering effect of sibling relationships during family transitions, Kempton and colleagues (1991) compared adolescents with one sibling with adolescents who had no siblings and found evidence for a moderating effect for the sibling relationship. Compared to their peers from continuously-married homes, adolescents from divorced homes who had a sibling were functioning at the same level, whereas adolescents from divorced homes who did not have a sibling manifested more externalizing problems than the other two groups.

Although the findings of Kempton et al. (1991) suggest that the mere presence of a sibling has a buffering effect on the negative impact of family transitions, other studies indicate that it is the presence of a supportive sibling relationship that is key. For example, Jenkins and Smith (1990) investigated the role of sibling relationships in the context of marital conflict in a group of 9-to-12 year-old children. Consistent with other studies, results indicated that children living in conflict-ridden families did not develop positive sibling relationships, and, in fact, were more likely to exhibit hostile behaviour towards one of their siblings than children living in harmonious homes. Children living

in conflict-ridden homes who had close or moderately close sibling relationships, as measured by high behaviour ratings (e.g., sibling spent a lot of time with the child or was a source of comfort when the child was upset), however, exhibited levels of emotional and behavioural problems similar to children living in harmonious homes. In contrast, children living in conflict-ridden homes without a supportive sibling relationship demonstrated a significantly greater number of psychological and behaviour problems than children in conflict-ridden homes who had a close sibling relationship. Jenkins (1992) points out that the effect of a close sibling relationship is a true protective factor since the effect was only present in the conflict-ridden homes and not the harmonious homes. Furthermore, in a longitudinal study of mothers and children, Gass, Jenkins, and Dunn (2007) found that close sibling relationships moderated the impact of stressful life events even when mother-child closeness had been considered.

Moreover, such buffering effects appear to have a lasting impact. For instance, Caya and Liem (1998) conducted a survey study of undergraduate college students to assess the long-term buffering effects of sibling relationships in conflict-ridden homes. Similar to the findings of Jenkins et al. (1990), participants from high conflict families who had experienced high sibling support during childhood reported similar levels of current functioning as participants from low conflict families. Moreover, for individuals raised in conflict-ridden families, those with high levels of sibling support reported greater levels of self-esteem than both those participants without any siblings and those participants who experienced less support from their siblings. These findings further support the notion that it is not the mere presence of a sibling that is related to the buffering effect, but that it is the quality of the sibling relationship that is important.

Although close sibling relationships appear to protect children from the negative effects of divorce, some research suggests that close sibling relationships might interfere with a child's adjustment to subsequent transitions. Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, and Pauk (2001) conducted a qualitative interview study of 58 members of 17 stepfamilies and found that some siblings interfered with their (often younger) siblings' burgeoning relationships with stepparents, often reminding them to remain loyal to their biological parent.

To summarize, the small number of studies examining siblings in families of transition suggest that sibling relationships might play a role in how children adjust to family transitions. To date, however, researchers understand little about the nature of sibling relationships in families experiencing family transitions.

The nature of sibling relationships in separated families. The small body of research concerning the impact of family transitions on sibling relationships has focused largely on the behavioural interactions of siblings. Compared to siblings from continuously-married families, siblings undergoing a family transition have consistently been shown to express more conflict toward one another, including more arguing, name-calling and physical fighting (Anderson & Rice, 1992; Conger & Conger, 1996; Hetherington, Henderson, & Reiss, 1999; MacKinnon, 1989). These behaviourally focused findings suggest that, on average, negative interactions between siblings tend to increase in the face of family transitions, at least in the short term. Possible, but as yet unexplored, sources of such conflict between siblings include disrupted parenting, marital conflict, increased parental differential treatment, siblings having divergent perspectives on the reasons for the separation, and children's feelings of confusion, powerlessness,

and insecurity (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Brody, 1998; Conger & Conger, 1996; Hetherington, 1988; Mackinnon, 1989; Noller et al., 2008; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004). It is worth noting that such conflict tends to be temporary; in most families the conflict eventually decreases, such that by two years post-separation levels of conflict between siblings in these divorced families are similar to conflict levels between siblings in continuously-married families (Hetherington, 1988). Sometimes, however, sibling conflict is more serious in terms of severity, nature, and duration. For instance, some siblings experience aggressive and coercive forms of conflict that last a long time after the immediate separation. Severe sibling conflict often is apparent in the pre-separation sibling relationship and might be more common in older brother-younger sister dyads (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Hetherington, 1988; MacKinnon, 1989). Often, such conflict-ridden relationships are related to severe, ongoing parental conflict.

In addition to temporary increases in observable conflict in the face of marital separation, preliminary research suggests that siblings may experience enhanced feelings of closeness to each other (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Kunz, 2001). In a meta-analysis, Kunz (2001) found that siblings in divorced homes enjoyed slightly closer sibling relationships than children from continuously-married homes. Feelings of increased closeness have been attributed to feeling that a sibling was the only person who truly understood the family break-up experience, and to feeling that the sibling relationship provided a stable unit of continuity amid the chaos of the family disruption (Abbey & Dallos, 2004). Such stability might be relevant to maintaining what Smart et al. (2001) refer to as 'ontological security,' the sense of a continuous self in different family

environments. In other words, the sibling may act as a transition object as children move between homes.

Although presented separately here, the relationship between conflict and closeness is complex. Early family transition researchers conceptualized sibling relationships as being conflict-ridden or close, often considering the two classifications as opposite ends of a continuum (Anderson & Rice, 1992; Conger & Conger, 1996; Hetherington, 1988). A growing body of research in the developmental field suggests, however, that most sibling relationships are characterized by both conflict and closeness (Brody, 1998; McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012). Brody (1998) highlights the importance of looking at the balance between positive and negative aspects of sibling relationships rather than the absolute amounts of each separate sibling relationship quality. For example, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, and Lussier (2002) found that although sibling negativity varied according to family type (single-mother, continuously-married, stepfather, stepmother, complex), sibling positivity remained constant across family type. In their study of child sibling relationships, McGuire, Mchale, and Updegraff (1996) found four sibling typologies based on independent dimensions of warmth and hostility: *Hostile* (high hostility, low warmth), *affect-intense* (high warmth, high hostility), *harmonious* (high warmth, low hostility), and *uninvolved* (low warmth, low hostility). Of note, “hostility” refers to interactions such as quarreling and competing. Sheehan, Darlington, and Noller (2004) replicated this typology in a sample of adolescents from divorced homes. These researchers found that in contrast to children in continuously-married families whose sibling relationships tended to be evenly distributed among the four types, sibling relationships in divorced families tended to be over-represented in the

affect-intense category. Participants reported that older siblings attempted to provide more nurturance to younger siblings, which sometimes created conflict between the siblings. Younger adolescents reported that although they sometimes resented their older siblings' interference in their lives, they also recognized and appreciated their siblings' attempts to take care of them and believed it created increased closeness.

Retrospective reports from young adults support the complicated nature of older siblings' protection of younger siblings (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003). In their qualitative retrospective study of thirty young adults (18-24 years) from divorced families, Bush and Ehrenberg (2003) found that some participants reported that following their parents' divorce, they assumed some responsibility for their younger siblings. In this study, 40% of participants stated that their siblings were parent figures for them, or that they were parent figures for their younger siblings. Brothers and sisters were equally likely to serve as care-takers. Care-taking responsibilities tended to involve behaviours of practical assistance to the custodial parent, such as helping siblings with homework, making lunches, playing with younger siblings, and generally being more available for guidance and advice if younger siblings needed it. Consistent with results of earlier studies demonstrating that disrupted parenting often occurs as a function of emotional or economic circumstances (Conger & Conger, 1996; Simons & Johnson, 1996), participants typically cited parent unavailability as the reason for assuming care-taking responsibilities. Moreover, for many siblings, this care-taking role began before their parents' divorces, but was enhanced by the parental separation. Care-taking was also motivated by a desire to help younger siblings cope with the divorce. Although participants stated that this care-taking had a positive impact on their sibling

relationships, there were several ways in which care-taking appeared to have a negative effect. First, such responsibilities placed older siblings in a dual role. They had to perform traditional parental duties, such as assigning chores or telling a younger sibling to do homework, while still being a sibling. As a result, younger siblings sometimes resented their older siblings, feeling that the older sibling was acting outside of the boundaries of the sibling relationship. Second, although care-taking behaviour of older siblings drew siblings together during the divorce, if a parental role was not relinquished as the younger siblings grew up, it began to interfere in the sibling relationship.

Consistent with other studies, over time, parents were able to adjust to the divorce and resumed their roles as primary caretakers (Hetherington, 1993), which enabled older siblings to let go of some of their care-taking responsibilities and become siblings again. If this role was not relinquished, however, then the sibling relationship seemed to suffer, because the siblings were limited in how close they could become. Given that research suggests that siblings reach an important milestone in their relationship during adolescence, in that older siblings have less responsibility over their siblings, enabling the balance of power to shift such that sibling relationships become more egalitarian and begin to develop a more meaningful relationship (Buhrmester, 1992), if older siblings in divorced families cannot give up their care-taking role, the growth of their sibling relationships might be stunted.

In addition to conflict and closeness, siblings in divorcing families sometimes experience a phase of detachment from each other, as one or both members of the sibling dyad withdraws from the relationship (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Hetherington, 1988). Often, the withdrawing sibling is the older member of the dyad, typically an adolescent.

Older siblings may withdraw because they need to figure out their feelings about the divorce on their own, apart from other members of their family. Often such siblings have a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding their parents' divorce and want to protect their younger sibling from knowing such details. As such, they turn to friends or other means for support during the divorce. In some instances the older adolescent attempts to escape painful feelings about the family break-up altogether by "rejecting" the family, including the younger sibling, and immersing him- or herself fully in the peer culture. In either case, the younger sibling may feel abandoned and alone.

In addition to research on conflict and closeness in post-transition sibling relationships, some research suggests that sibling relationships in homes where children have experienced a family transition might be qualitatively different than sibling relationships in continuously-married homes (Kier & Fouts, 1989; MacKinnon, 1989; Sheehan et al., 2004). For instance, Kier and Fouts (1989) found that whereas boys in married homes preferred to play with older brothers, boys in divorced homes were equally likely to play with older sisters as with older brothers. The authors speculated that because fathers were absent from the home, children might have engaged in less sex-role stereotyping in the divorced group. Thus, sibling relationships in divorced families may follow a different developmental path than sibling relationships in other family types. Research by Sheehan et al. (2004) on sibling typologies provide further evidence that siblings in families experiencing a family transition might be qualitatively different in their developmental trajectories than siblings from other families.

Limitations of research on sibling relationships in separated families. In spite of the informative findings from the small number of studies on sibling relationships in

families in transition, such studies have limitations. For example, such studies typically use questionnaires that focus on frequency of behaviour (Anderson & Rice, 1992; Conger & Conger, 1996; Hetherington et al, 1999; Sheehan et al., 2004). Such questionnaires ask about how often siblings fight or how many times a week a child goes to a sibling for comfort or advice (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Deater-Deckard et al., 2002; Rinaldi & Howe, 1998; Sharf, Schulman, Avigald-Spitz, 2005; Stocker & McHale, 1992; Yeh & Lempers, 2004). Similarly, observation studies, which are a common measure of sibling relationships in childhood, tend to focus on behaviour by counting the number of incidents of positive or negative actions (Hetherington et al., 1999; Kramer & Kowal, 2005). Although understanding the frequency of behaviour provides critical information, such information fails to inform about the meaning of behaviour to siblings in families experiencing a transition. As Newman (1994) points out, there can be a discrepancy between the overt behaviour and the underlying feelings of siblings. In terms of closeness, for example, a child who is helping a sibling may be seen as acting positively, but the behaviour may be motivated by a negative feeling, such as the desire to control the sibling (Newman, 1994). Similarly, negative interactions may be caused unintentionally by children who are too young to understand how to achieve a goal or communicate their needs in a socially appropriate manner (Newman, 1994). Researchers often measure conflict using behavioural indices without exploring the meaning of the conflict to participants. Conflict can appear intense or serious when, in fact, it means nothing to siblings; seemingly meaningless conflict can mask deep-rooted negative feelings between siblings; and behaviour that appears to an outsider as a sign of hostility might be a sign of closeness between siblings, such as wrestling between brothers (Bush

& Ehrenberg, 2003; McGuire et al., 2000). Moreover, conflict that takes place in a context of overall sibling warmth likely takes on a different meaning to siblings than conflict that occurs in a detached relationship or a relationship characterized by a lack of warmth (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Sheehan et al., 2004). Bush and Ehrenberg (2003) found that many participants reported high levels of conflict (e.g., squabbling) after a family transition, but the participants emphasized that such conflict was trivial and carried no significant import. On the other hand, a few participants attributed great weight to sibling conflict, emphasizing the hostile intent behind more aggressive behaviour. These participants explained that although there had been tension and conflict before the separation (often due to parental conflict), after the separation, the siblings became less close. Consequently, without the closeness to mitigate the conflict, the conflict escalated. Given such complexity, understanding participants' perceptions of sibling conflict would provide depth to studies of sibling relationships in families in transition (Littleton & Miell, 2005).

In addition to solely focusing on behaviour, research on siblings in divorcing families has failed to focus on other dimensions of sibling relationships. Although some studies have noted sibling care-taking and support in families of divorce, such dimensions tend to be explored less fully than dimensions of closeness and conflict. Research from the adolescent and young adulthood sibling field suggests that siblings might play a unique role in assisting each other. For example, Seginer (1998) found that 11th-grade adolescents view their siblings as unique forms of emotional support above and beyond parental and peer support. Perhaps the individuation process occurring during adolescence impels adolescents to turn to their siblings for support rather than to

their parents, as they might have done when younger (Yeh & Lempers, 2004). Moreover, research indicates that adolescents prefer to seek support from siblings rather than parents regarding particular issues such as dating and sex (Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997; Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2001). Early research examining sibling support found that, perhaps unsurprisingly, younger siblings sought more support than older siblings (Buhrmester, 1992). Recently, however, Tucker et al. (2001) examined sibling support in different domains (parent-child, schoolwork, social life, and risky behaviour) and found that siblings assumed more complementary roles (i.e., older siblings supporting younger siblings) in relation to non-familial experiences, but reciprocity was the more common experience with respect to family situation issues. In other words, age differences were less important when siblings sought support around family-related matters, with older siblings as likely to seek support from younger siblings as vice versa. Such findings suggest that younger and older siblings might provide help to each other, particularly during family difficulties.

Regarding support in the familial realm, siblings are uniquely positioned to provide validating forms of support to each other (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Teti, 2002). Because siblings share salient aspects of their family environment, but also experience the family in different ways, they can provide different perspectives on family dynamics (Daniels & Plomin, 1985). As such, siblings can help inform each other of family happenings and explain family dynamics from different perspectives (e.g., “Mom is upset because Dad forgot to bring us home on time”). In addition, sibling relationship scholars suggest that siblings may act as interpreters or translators within the family (Goetting, 1986). Siblings may help each other understand how a parent is feeling or warn each other about a

parent's mood or if there is impending "danger" from a parent. Similarly, siblings may interpret sibling behaviour to parents in an attempt to assist parents in understanding or helping a sibling. For example, Bush and Ehrenberg (2003) found that some older siblings helped parents understand the feelings of younger siblings, who found it difficult to talk to their parents.

Although the bulk of research examining sibling support asks participants directly about the degree to which they find their siblings supportive, sibling support might take more subtle forms (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). Preliminary divorce research suggests that the mere presence of a sibling can be supportive (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). For example, in Bush and Ehrenberg's (2003) retrospective study, one young adult reported that when he was young and heard his parents arguing, he sought his older brother's presence, often spending time in his older brother's room colouring while his brother does his homework. Similarly, one young adult reported that although she and her sister rarely spoke about their parents' divorce, she felt comforted by her sister's presence when they watched television together. Particularly for young children, who may lack the language to discuss troubled feelings, the presence of a sibling might provide needed support. Given the amount of time spent in each others' company, siblings may be viewed as stable, supportive figures simply by being present. More recently, in their retrospective study examining sibling support from the perspective of young adults who had experienced parental divorce in childhood, Jacobs and Sillars (2012) found that sibling support tended to be less overt, in that it rarely involved direct supportive communications or behaviour. Support tended to be perceived as more subtle, such as spending time together and

knowing that someone could understand their experience. Regarding sibling relationships in the context of family transitions, subtle elements of care might be salient yet invisible when studies focus on overt behaviour. For example, in Bush and Ehrenberg's study, young adults reported that they and their siblings often cared for each other in ways that were consistent with Mason's (1996) theory of sentient activity, such as by sensing when a sibling needed to choose a program to watch, or allowing a sibling to blow off steam during difficult transitions between homes. Such sensitivity to each other's needs has been relatively unexplored in studies examining siblings in post-transition families.

In addition to how family transition researchers conceptualize and measure the quality of sibling relationships, such research contains additional limitations. For example, most studies fail to incorporate multiple perspectives in their studies. Given that emotions and stress can influence an individual's perceptions (Winkielman, Knutson, Paulus, & Trujillo, 2007), obtaining multiple perspectives becomes critical when examining family relationships during stressful periods (Simons, 1996). Three types of perspectives are possible in studies of sibling relationships (Cicirelli, 1995; Harden, Beckett-Millburn, Hill, & McLean, 2010). An "insider" perspective is that of a sibling reporting on his or her own sibling relationship. An "outsider" perspective is that of a person, such as a researcher, who is uninvolved in the sibling relationship. Finally, a "participant observer" is a person, such as a parent, who is indirectly involved in the sibling relationship. Many researchers argue that investigators should incorporate multiple perspectives when examining sibling relationships, because each perspective can provide different information. For example, whereas a researcher is in a position to

comment objectively on behaviour demonstrated between siblings, siblings themselves are better able to provide insight and interpret each other's behaviour. Multiple perspectives can be incongruent. For example, recent research indicates discrepancies between mothers' and children's reports of differential treatment (Noller, 2005). That is not to say, however, that one perspective is necessarily more valid than the other. On the contrary, each perspective contributes unique information. The observer can speak to how the sibling behaviour might appear to others who are unfamiliar with the sibling relationship, and the siblings can explain how they experience their own relationship.

Within the three categories of perspectives, numerous comparisons can be made. For example, the researcher might be interested in comparing parental reports with children's reports (participant observer vs. insider). Researchers who have compared mothers' and children's perspectives of sibling relationships have demonstrated that mothers tend to exaggerate positive and negative qualities of their children's relationships relative to their children's own reports (Newman, 1994; Ross, Woody, Smith, & Lollis, 2000). Researchers might also want to compare perspectives within one category. Similarities and inconsistencies between sibling reports can provide insight into the shared experiences of siblings. Although siblings share a relationship, they each experience the relationship individually (Butler et al., 2002; Daniels & Plomin, 1985; Moxnes, 2003; Smart et al., 2001). Moreover, research indicates that siblings have different reactions to a family divorce, which may influence sibling dynamics in a post-transition environment (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Jennings & Howe, 2001; Kurdek, 1989). Almost every sibling relationship divorce study solicits the perspective of only one child in the family, thereby neglecting other members in the relationship. To fully understand

the dynamics between siblings requires information from both members of the dyad. In addition, no studies to date have solicited one child's perspective on other sibling relationships in the same family. In this case, a child has a unique perspective in that he is both an insider and an outsider in these configurations. For instance, a child is a sibling to the other children, but also experiences their relationships with each other from an outsider's point of view. Examining such perspectives could potentially result in deeper understandings of sibling relationships in families in transition.

When children's perspectives have been incorporated in studies, the studies focus on measures that operationalize sibling relationship quality in terms of the closeness and conflict constructs noted above, focusing on behavioural manifestations of relationship quality (Anderson, 1999; Hetherington, 2006; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Sheehan et al., 2004). Although broad measures of closeness and conflict benefit studies of sibling relationships, such a focus tends to neglect more subtle aspects of sibling relationships, such as care. The few studies soliciting children's perspectives from a non-behavioural standpoint have examined such relationships retrospectively from a young adult's point of view (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). Although such studies have helped provide rich, in-depth accounts of sibling relationships, such retrospective studies fail to capture the immediacy of how family transitions might affect children's sibling relationships, limiting our knowledge of the day-to-day experiences of sibling relationships in the aftermath of a family transition and how children might actively renegotiate their sibling relationships.

Another limitation of the existent research on sibling relationships in divorcing families is that some studies tend to examine sibling relationships outside the context of

other family relationships. With the exception of some studies examining how sibling behaviour relates to marital conflict (Hetherington, 2006; Jenkins, Smith, & Graham, 1990), the role of other family dynamics has been neglected. For example, studies of parental differential treatment indicate that sibling relationships tend to be more conflict-ridden in families where children perceive unfair discrepancies in how their parents interact with them (Dunn, 1988; Kowal & Kramer, 1997; Noller, 2005). Clinical reports of families in transition suggest that when the family reconfigures itself after a parent leaves the home, various relationships shift, potentially leading to imbalances in family relationships (Eno, 1985; Shapiro & Wallace, 1987). Bush and Ehrenberg (2003) found that such instances sometimes occur with negative effects on the sibling relationship. For example, one participant described how she was closer to her father and her brother was closer to her mother before the parental separation. After the separation, however, she was left in the home with her brother and mother, whose closeness made her feel excluded. She attributed such changes to an increase in conflict between her and her brother, stating that her brother became more involved with her mother, leading to an imbalance in relationships. In another case, a participant described how a once close sibling relationship with her sister decreased after the separation, because she needed to spend a great deal of time with their mother who needed a lot of emotional support. Moreover, attempts by the mother and sister to shield the younger sister from details about the divorce seemed to exacerbate problems in the once-close sibling relationship, as the younger sister felt even more excluded (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003).

Studies also examine sibling relationships outside the context of other family relationships by focusing solely on one sibling dyad in the family. From a family

systems perspective, dyad-level sibling subsystems likely affect other sibling dyad-level sibling subsystems. For example, in a family with three children, one child has two separate dyad-level relationships and one triad-level relationship. In other words, the sibling subsystem can be broken down into three separate subsystems, all of which affect one another. To remove one sibling dyad from the context of other children in the family results in a limited understanding of the relationships.

In addition to methodological considerations, current family transition sibling research lacks an understanding of sibling relationship ideology (Stoneman, 2005). Whereas strong expectations and information regarding optimal parent-child relationships exist, we know little about what constitutes a 'good' sibling relationship from children's perspectives. If they have a sense of what an appropriate sibling relationship should be, from where do those impressions stem, beyond being told 'don't fight with your brother,' or 'be nice to your sister'? Such a gap in the literature limits our understanding of the intricacies of sibling dynamics. Developing a sense of children's views of sibling relationships can provide valuable information regarding what they see as important in their relationships. Because siblings spend so much time together as children (e.g., siblings in middle childhood spend more time with each other than with mothers, fathers, and friends; Volling, 2003), adults may know little about the inner workings of sibling relationships. Moreover, findings suggest that siblings' interactions when alone differ significantly from those that occur when in the presence of a parent (Newman, 1994); as such, understanding children's views of sibling norms can provide insight into such dynamics that might be unavailable to parents and other adults. The general sibling literature also lacks information regarding sibling ideology (i.e., beliefs about the roles of

siblings or the importance of sibling relationships) (Beals & Easton, 1993; Stoneman, 2005). Given that children experiencing divorce tend to cognitively reconstruct the meaning of family and see various family members as individuals, siblings in post-transition families may be ideally-positioned to elucidate such an ideology.

Finally, in keeping with general divorce literature, in separated families, little is known about children's perspectives on their sibling relationships beyond self-reports of behaviour. Most studies examine sibling relationships using quantitative methodology and measures, which, although important in examining correlates of sibling relationship variables (e.g., age, sex) and identifying patterns across broad, representative samples, can be limiting in understanding the rich complexity of children's experiences from their point of view at the time of the transition. For example, nothing is known about how children may re-negotiate their relationships with siblings, what their everyday experiences with a sibling might be like during or after a divorce, how siblings might experience care, and whether siblings have an ethical stance on how siblings should behave during a divorce.

Current Study

The current study involved an in-depth examination of sibling relationships in post-transition families from the children's and parents' perspectives. The overall purpose was to derive a rich understanding of how siblings experience their sibling relationships in the context of a parental separation. The study involved a mixed method, multiple perspective, qualitative approach to focus on how children make sense of their sibling relationships. Qualitative methodology is particularly suited to this type of research, because it allows for the exploration of how relationships are interpreted, understood, and

experienced (Mason, 2002). Whereas quantitative data can describe the parameters and content of experience (e.g., through standardized questionnaires), such methods may limit understanding of how children construe and negotiate their post-divorce worlds (Greene & Hill, 2005). Moreover, using multiple methods such as vignettes, observations, and interviews allow for subtle aspects of sibling relationships to emerge, aspects that, to date, have been missing from current studies of sibling relationships and marital divorce.

Given the emphasis on understanding sibling relationships in the context of their families, the researcher took a case study approach. Case studies can be ideal for understanding the meaning of relationships within context (Gilgun, 2005; Yin, 2008). Case studies involve developing an in-depth, holistic understanding of a relationship or system within its broader context (Merriam, 1998). A case study is defined by the “bounded” unit of study, in this case the sibling relationship (Yin, 2008). According to Stake (1995), a case is a “specific, complex, functioning thing” (p. 2), and as Yin (2008) notes, the focus involves understanding the interaction of “contextual conditions” that might contribute to the unit of study. From a family systems perspective, such a case study approach facilitates a rich understanding of sibling relationships within the context of the overall family system.

To incorporate family context in the examination of sibling relationships, the current study attempted to solicit the participation of each family member. Given that research studies examining sibling relationships in families that have experienced a parental separation tend to focus on only one sibling dyad in the family, all sibling relationship combinations in the family were examined (i.e., dyadic and triadic levels) from individual, dyadic, and, in one case, triadic perspectives. For example, individual

and group interviews with the children were conducted to assess their perspectives of their various sibling relationships. Interviewing siblings together can provide information regarding their mutual perspectives, but also can provide non-verbal indications of the quality of their sibling relationships.

To date, in-depth studies of sibling relationships in separated families have been retrospective (e.g., Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012), thereby providing a look back at sibling relationships from an adult perspective. Although such studies help inform current perceptions of sibling relationships, developmental changes over time can affect participants' perceptions of what they were thinking and feeling closer to the time of the transition. As such, important information might be lost. Consequently, the current study attempted to capture the immediacy of the family transition experience by conducting the study closer to the separation. In addition, such a time frame becomes central when attempting to understand how children's sibling relationships might change during a family transition and how children understand their relationships at that time, because such changes likely play a role in the developmental trajectory of their sibling relationships across the life course.

The current study focused on *three* general research areas. *First*, possible changes in sibling relationships since the parental break-up were examined from children's and parents' perspectives. Given that studies suggest that children actively re-construct their relationships with parents after a family transition and, likely, their sense of family as well, perhaps the same process occurs within the sibling relationship. On the other hand, perhaps children's relationships with siblings remain fundamentally unchanged.

Second, the role of care/support in sibling relationships was examined. Research suggests that children care for parents in various, perhaps less obvious, ways than overt care-taking. Although evidence suggests that within some separated families, some older siblings take care of younger siblings in the traditional sense of care-taking (i.e., feeding, helping with homework), there might be myriad other ways in which children might care for siblings. Moreover, preliminary evidence suggests that reciprocal sibling care might be more common when family matters are involved; as such, older and younger siblings might provide care to each other.

Third, children's perceptions of the meaning of sibling relationships were explored. Areas to explore included how a sibling should behave, why a sibling might be important, and what messages they have internalized regarding how siblings should be regarded. Parental views on the importance of sibling relationships and their own childhood history of sibling relationships were included to help elucidate how individuals might develop a sense of sibling ideology.

CHAPTER 3

Method

Participants and Procedures

The current study sought three families that had at least two siblings (biological or adoptive) living in the home, one of whom was between nine and 14 years of age (to anchor the study within a developmental period). Originally, the study sought families in which the parents had separated within the past year, but due to recruitment difficulties, the one-year time frame had to be relaxed to include families that had been separated longer. Table 1 provides details regarding the three families that participated. Each family has been assigned a surname pseudonym, and each participant has been assigned a first name pseudonym. All children were full biological siblings and had been living together all their lives. Recruitment posed more of a challenge than anticipated and took approximately three years. Recruitment strategies included an article about the study in the local Victoria newspaper, a radio interview, advertising on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook), postings on internet forums (e.g., Craigslist), posters in the community (e.g., daycare centers, libraries; see Appendix A), and contact with various sources, such as the BC Families in Transition Centre, the Military Family Resource Centre, The UVic Family Resource Centre, and other contacts within the community (e.g., clinics, private practitioners, lawyers). The researcher, under supervision, also offered a short-term, supportive intervention to families experiencing parental separation, with the hope that families might agree to have their information included in the study. In this clinical setting, the researcher ended up working with families that had one child only, so those families have not been included in this study.

Table 1
Family Information

	Family		
	Bridges	Klein	Draper
Location	Calgary, AB	Victoria, BC	Vancouver, BC
Parent interviewed	Father	Father	Mother and Father
Length of marriage	17 years	11 years	9 years
Time since separation	10 months	7 years	6 years
New partner status	Yes, both parents	Yes, both parents	No
Children sex and age	F – 12, M-10	F-11, M-16, M-17	F-12, F-10
Children age at time of separation	F-11.5, M-9	F-4, M-9, M-10	F-6, F-4
Custody arrangement	Shared; both children together, week on, week off	Primarily mother – father sees each child separately approximately once per week	Shared – both children together – father sees each weekend and two nights a week

The study included parents and children in order to derive a multi-layered context within which to understand the sibling relationships. Although, ideally, both parents in each family would have participated, only one family included the perspectives of both parents. In the other two families, the researcher discussed the possibility of contacting the other parent, but in both cases, the parent that originally volunteered for the study stated that the non-participating parent did not want to be contacted.

Each family participated in approximately five to six research sessions: two individual parent sessions, two individual child sessions, and one sibling session in which the children were seen together (see Appendix B). Each session took place on a separate day. Each session lasted between one to one and a half hours. Given the taxing nature of this study and to accommodate parents' schedules and needs, parents decided where to conduct the research sessions. Due to variable time constraints, the timing of methods used in each family differed slightly.

Parent interview. In each family, the first session involved the initial parent interview. Three goals made up the first session. The study was introduced to parents in detail and any questions were answered. Second, consent to participate was sought from parents.¹ (see Appendix C). This consent involved agreeing to having all sessions audio-taped and for the sibling session to be video-taped. Finally, each parent participated in a family background interview, the purpose of which was to generate a broad understanding of each child's developmental history, particularly each child's general temperament and any developmental/medical needs (see Appendix D). Parents also were asked to provide some information regarding their separation history, how each child

¹ In the two families where only one parent participated, written consent from the other parent was obtained by the participating parent. The researcher ensured that that she had the other parent's written consent before seeing any child.

reacted to the parental separation and any concerns they had about their child regarding the separation. Such information was sought to obtain an overall context for the rest of the study and to alert the researcher about how she might best proceed with each individual child. To this end, parents were also asked how their child interacts with strangers and if they have any suggestions about how to make each child feel most comfortable within the research setting. These questions were developed by the researcher for the purposes of this study.

Child interview. Following the initial parent session, the individual child interviews took place. These individual sessions were designed to understand children's reactions to parental separation, children's perspectives on their siblings' reactions to divorce, and children's views of sibling relationships. These sessions involved interviews, drawing, and other activities.

At the start of the first individual session with each child, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and asked the child if he or she had any questions. Following the introduction, the researcher obtained child assent (see Appendix E). Obtaining a child's assent indicates that the researcher respects the child, that the child has the right to decide whether to participate, and that the nature of the research will be collaborative. After assent had been obtained, the interview began (see Appendix F). All interview questions were developed by the researcher to serve as guidelines for the session, with relevant follow-up questions asked as the session progressed.

Sibling session. Following the individual child interviews, the sibling session took place (see Appendix G). Although the researcher had hoped to have two sibling sessions, each family's busy schedule only allowed for one sibling session. This session focused

on interviewing siblings together about their relationship. In two families, the sibling session was videotaped, as the sibling sessions took place in a setting that enabled unobtrusive videotaping (e.g., UVic lab, Alberta Children's Hospital interview room). In the third family, where all sessions took place in the family home, the space was so small that the researcher decided that camera equipment would be too intrusive and might inhibit the children. As in all sessions, the researcher audiotaped the session and took detailed observation notes following this sibling interview. Questions focused on the children's general sibling relationship, their relationships before and after their parents' separation, and how they may or may not provide care to each other. As part of the interview, the researcher introduced vignettes. The siblings were asked to respond to the vignettes (see vignette section below) and to any relevant follow-up questions the researcher asked.

Second parent session. Following all of the individual and sibling sessions, the second interview with the parent took place (see Appendix H). The purpose of this final session was to ask parents about their perspectives of their children's relationships with each other. Parents were asked about their children's relationships in general, whether they have noticed any changes in the siblings' relationships following the separation, and what messages, if any, they (parents) communicate to their children regarding the importance of sibling relationships.

Drawing

During the interview, each child was offered the chance to draw. Although some children chose to draw, some children declined. The drawing was offered to help children feel comfortable in the interview setting and to facilitate the expression and

organization of their thoughts and feelings (Veale, 2005). Research suggests that drawing can help facilitate children's discussions of emotions (Driessnack, 2006; Gross & Hayne, 1998; Weinle, 2003; Wesson & Salmon, 2001). Researchers speculate that the physical act of drawing may help children organize their thoughts in a more coherent manner than if simply asked to answer questions (Driessnack, 2006). Specifically, the act of drawing might provide cues that facilitate children's accounts of their experiences (Driessnack, 2006; Wesson & Salmon, 2001). In addition, drawing might allow children to focus their attention on something besides the interviewer, thereby decreasing anxiety or the social demands of the research situation (Gross & Hayne, 1998; Harden et al., 2000). The children who drew tended to draw doodles rather than actual pictures, but the act of drawing seemed to make them comfortable, and they were able to stay focused on the interview. Children who chose not to draw also seemed focused on the interview, but stated that they did not like drawing. Two children who particularly liked drawing were willing to draw a picture of them and their siblings when asked.

Sentence completion

A Sentence Completion task was devised to further facilitate discussion of family, divorce, and sibling relationships (see Appendix I). Sentence completion tasks involve providing the person with a sentence fragment and then asking them to fill in the rest of the sentence (e.g., "I feel good when_____"). Although originally designed and typically used for clinical purposes, sentence completion tasks have also been used in research studies to explore child and adult perspectives on aspects of their lives (Dykens, Schwenk, Maxwell, & Myatt, 2007). Similar to the drawing activities, sentence completion stems might help provide cues and structure to facilitate children's expression

of feelings and thoughts (Dykens et al., 2007). Although various sentence completion tasks already exist (e.g., Rotter's Incomplete Sentences; Rotter & Willerman, 1947; Rotter, Lah, & Rafferty, 1992), the sentence completion stems for this study were developed by the researcher to maintain the focus on divorce and sibling relationships.

Vignettes

Four written vignettes depicting situations involving siblings were designed to facilitate children's discussion of their relationships (see Appendix J). For example, one vignette involved a child seeing his younger brother getting teased at school. Although, initially, two vignettes were to be used for individual interviews and two vignettes were to be used in sibling interviews, this timing was possible in one family only. In the other two families, all four vignettes were presented in the sibling session. The purpose of the vignettes was to probe sibling ideology and open avenues for discussion of participants' personal sibling relationships. Previous research suggests that vignettes can be a fun and productive way for children to talk about their own experiences and their beliefs about family relationships (Smart et al., 2001). A chief advantage of vignettes involves flexibility (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). For example, numerous follow-up questions can be asked about what the child says. Moreover, the vignettes can be altered slightly to add nuance to the situation and further explore children's perspectives. Other advantages of vignettes include allowing children more control over when to introduce personal or sensitive information, helping shy or reticent children talk to the researcher, and engaging children in the research process (Barter & Renold, 2000). Critics of vignettes state that there is a gap between what people say they will do in a hypothetical situation and what they will do in reality (Finch, 1987). Although this concern remains important, in this

study, rather than assessing what a child might actually do in the situation portrayed in the vignette, the vignettes were designed to encourage discussion of sibling relationships. In other words, the accuracy of what a participant says he or she would do was irrelevant; how participants interpreted the vignettes and the reasoning behind their responses were the focus of interest.

Another criticism of vignettes pertains to the risk that participants will provide socially desirable responses (Barter & Renold, 2000). To address this potential problem, participants were asked how they think the person in the vignette will act and why, and then how they would respond and why, a strategy that enables children to introduce potentially unacceptable material (Barter & Renold, 2000). For example, in their study of violence in child care homes, Barter and Renold (2000) found that vignettes helped some participants express their own experience as perpetrators more readily than direct questioning. Moreover, the vignettes in this study were part of a multimethod approach, rather than constituting the only research method.

The vignettes were designed to be as ambiguous and authentic as possible, in order to encourage participants to make their own meaning of the situation (Barter & Renold, 2000). Given that a vignette with four or more stages in it seems to confuse adult and child participants, each vignette had three or fewer separate sections (Barter & Renold, 2000; Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Although the researcher read the vignettes aloud, each child was provided with a copy. After each vignette was read, the researcher asked follow-up questions to stimulate discussion (see Appendix J). For example, the researcher asked questions, such as “What do you think he will do?”

Analysis

Although the analysis is presented as following the data collection phase, analysis tended to be an ongoing process throughout the project (Patton, 2002). For example, the researcher wrote reflections after each interview and while transcribing the interviews (see Appendix K for a brief sample of transcription reflections). Following a case study approach, the analysis focused on providing rich descriptions of the sibling relationships in each family, on identifying themes within each family, and on making across-case comparisons to examine differences and similarities between families (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2008). Within each family, multiple perspectives and methods were compared to examine the complexity of each potential theme. Consistent with case study approaches, the primary goal involved providing the reader with an in-depth, holistic understanding of the sibling relationships in each family at a particular point in time (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). The focus was on providing “thick description” to enable readers to develop their own interpretations or conclusions (Patton, 2002).

The first step in the analysis involved transcribing each interview and videotaped observation session fully. Verbal and non-verbal behaviour in each videotaped observation was transcribed verbatim. Recognizing that the act of transcription is in itself an interpretive act (Lapadat & Lindsey, 1999), the researcher developed specific guidelines for the transcription of each interview. For example, each interview was transcribed verbatim, including every “um,” “like,” or repeated word. The researcher also tried to capture notable changes in tone of voice. In addition, on occasion, for the sake of clarification for the reader, the transcriber inserted comments into the transcription, but delineated those comments by putting them in brackets. For instance, if

a participant referred to someone with a personal pronoun (e.g., “he”), the transcriber sometimes added the name of the person to help facilitate reader understanding. The transcriber also attempted to capture the speaker by inserting punctuation to provide a sense of the rhythm of speech. Given that the researcher believes that silence can be informative, ellipses were added to indicate long pauses in the conversation. All transcribed interviews were checked three times by the researcher. Although the researcher transcribed most of the interviews (and all of the sibling sessions) herself, time constraints necessitated obtaining transcription assistance from a professional service and from a research assistant. The researcher checked each transcript prepared by someone else three times.

The researcher developed a case record for each family, one that included completed transcripts, notes, the sentence completion forms, and drawings (Yin, 2008). To obtain a beginning sense of the data, the researcher read through each family’s case record before beginning the coding process (Merriam, 1998). The researcher then examined one family at a time to develop themes. Of note, the data in this study were examined collectively rather than separately. That is, rather than conducting and presenting separate analyses for each method, the researcher analyzed the sentence completion items, the vignette discussions, and the interview questions together in order to present an integrated and holistic understanding of each family.

Coding involved an iterative process in which transcripts were read repeatedly in order to develop and refine codes and broader themes. The coding process began with the researcher making notes in the margin of each transcription. Specifically, codes that were thought to capture meaning were written in the margin of each paragraph. Coding

involved a combination of “in vivo” codes and researcher codes. “In vivo” codes are derived directly from a participant’s words (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, when attempting to describe his relationship with his sister, one participant used the term “sibling-mance.” Given the novelty of the term, the researcher used that label in the transcript. Such a term became emblematic of a broader theme related to the challenge of finding ways to capture the uniqueness of sibling relationships. Researcher codes involved terms used by the researcher, and they could be based on actual statements made by participants or the researcher’s observations about the statements. For example, at times, the siblings seemed to be open about criticizing each other or about making negative statements about each other. As such, “honesty” was written next to such segments. Such a code became part of a broader theme differentiating sibling relationships from parent-child relationships post-separation, which further helped suggest possible hypotheses for understanding sibling relationships in divorcing families (e.g., are sibling relationships more secure than parent-child relationships?).

Following the initial coding process, the researcher used the codes to develop broader, tentative categories that represented various dimensions. For example, the category ‘sibling closeness’ comprised various codes, such as shared laughter, shared experiences, physical affection, and knowledge about each other’s lives. Following multiple reviews of all of the transcripts, a category was considered “saturated” when no other dimensions could be identified (Merriam, 2009).

In moving from the more concrete codes to the more abstract levels of categories, the researcher developed memos (written records) of how she came to develop the categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Sometimes such memos involved listing various

dimensions of a category, such as sibling closeness, but sometimes the memos were comprised primarily of questions the researcher asked about the data as she attempted to develop a tentative category. For example, one abstract theme labelled ‘negotiation of time with parent’ included questions the researcher asked when making sense of the data. An excerpt from this memo can be found in Appendix J. Memos also helped the researcher work through complicated constructs such as sibling teasing. In such a memo, the researcher noted that sometimes teasing can reflect closeness but sometimes such teasing seems more ambiguous.

Following a case study approach, as the codes and themes were being identified, the researcher also looked for similarities and differences in family members’ perspectives (Merriam, 1998). Given the multiple perspectives within each family, the researcher took an interpretationist or “bird’s eye” stance, in which no perspective represented “truth” more than another (Gabb, 2010; Harden et al., 2010). Of note, given that adults tend to provide more voluminous answers to questions than children do, a natural impulse can be to accord adults’ perspectives more weight. As such, the researcher took pains to ensure that adult perspectives were not privileged over children’s perspectives (Harden et al., 2010). Such a review of perspectives became important for understanding themes. For example, parents and children tended to have different perspectives on how the separation might have impacted the sibling relationship. Gabb (2009), in discussing how to handle different family members’ perspectives, emphasizes the importance of maintaining the ‘messiness’ of perspectives rather than attempting to ‘tidy them up’ by providing a simple explanation. As such, although the researcher

provided some tentative explanations for differences in perspectives, such explanations remained speculative.

Of note, in developing codes, the researcher used all aspects of available data, including observations. For example, non-verbal aspects of closeness, such as physical affection, stemmed from observations made during the sibling session. Such an approach differs from examining results from the different methods separately. The researcher attempted to integrate the sources of information in developing themes rather than examining each method independently. In other words, data from the vignettes, observations, drawings, and interviews were examined collectively.

Validity

Merriam (1998) summarizes several approaches to validity (credibility) in case study research. Methods used in this study include triangulation, maintaining a reflexivity journal, and thick description. *Triangulation* involved using multiple methods and multiple perspectives to help develop a holistic understanding of sibling relationships, rather than relying on one method or one person's perspective. Patton (2002) also discusses a form of triangulation in which multiple analysts examine the data. Although such triangulation remained difficult given the researcher's time constraints and limited resources, the researcher attempted to validate her findings by showing the transcripts for two families to two research assistants who are somewhat familiar with the area but not involved with the project. These assistants, who were unfamiliar with qualitative research methods, reviewed the transcripts for one of two families and provided the researcher with some initial thoughts/themes. Similarly, the researcher's doctoral supervisor, who is well-acquainted with the area, and one of the researcher's

clinical psychology colleagues, who remains unfamiliar with the area, reviewed the three family write-ups and provided feedback regarding the researcher's interpretations.

The researcher maintained a *reflexivity journal* in which she detailed her thoughts, experiences, and emotional reactions to the research process (Barker & Weller, 2003; Greene & Hill, 2005). Such reflexivity processes were useful in understanding how the researcher's own biases or thoughts might impact her analytic interpretations (Aldred & Burnam, 2005). In other words the journal served as a source of transparency, which can help ensure the validity of the research study (Barker & Weller, 2003). Several issues emphasize the need for ongoing reflexivity on the part of the researcher. First, the reflexivity process helped the researcher maintain awareness of her own perspective and potential biases pertaining to children and their ability to participate meaningfully in research. Second, given the involvement of the researcher with the families, she naturally developed relationships with each family member. Documenting her own responses to each family member helped the researcher maintain awareness of her emotional or personal reaction to the family, which served as a useful check during the research analysis (Gilgun, 1994). Similarly, given the researcher's training in clinical psychology, an ongoing concern involved maintaining a "researcher" role rather than a "clinician" role. Although separating such roles tended to be relatively straightforward, the researcher felt that she slipped into the "clinician" role briefly on one occasion when she deliberately attempted to normalize a child's divorce-related experience. Although the researcher made the deliberate, conscious decision in the moment to switch into "clinician mode," the act of reflecting on the experience in her journal later that evening helped her explore her reasoning and motivations more fully. For instance, the researcher

reflected on whether her own experience of feeling pain during her parents' divorce in childhood made her overly empathic, and, subsequently, whether that heightened empathy led to her decision to "switch roles," whereas another researcher might have made a different choice. Finally, ongoing reflexive thought enabled the researcher to maintain awareness of how her own childhood experiences with parental separation might affect her interpretation of the data.

Thick, rich description functions as a check on validity to the extent that it enables readers to sense the experience of the participants, to see interactions between people "come alive," and to be able to determine the credibility of the researcher's findings (Cresswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 1998). To that end, the researcher tried to provide enough details to help the reader develop an impression of each family. Similarly, the researcher chose to include longer excerpts of dialogue rather than brief excerpts of participants' responses, so that readers could see how the researcher responded to statements made by participants, how she asked questions, and how siblings interacted with each other.

As Patton (2002) notes, the credibility of a qualitative study ultimately depends on the integrity of the researcher (e.g., how the researcher conducts herself at all times: in sessions, transcribing, analysis, reporting). Although strategies such as triangulation, keeping a reflexivity journal, and providing thick description can add to a reader's sense of credibility, the researcher remains the primary "instrument" in a study such as this. As such, understanding the background of the researcher can help readers position the researcher in the context of the study. The researcher in this study is a clinical psychology student who specializes in lifespan development, has had experience

interviewing parents and children, and has been involved in clinical and research work with families experiencing parental separation. The researcher's parents separated when she was very young, and the separation had an impact on her. Taken together, the researcher's professional and personal experiences with parental separation can be viewed as beneficial and problematic. For instance, the researcher's experience working with children and families likely helps in establishing a safe and comfortable environment, in maintaining a fluid interview, and in understanding children's needs to deviate from the interview structure from time to time. On the other hand, such familiarity with such families, the divorce literature, and her own personal experience of parental divorce in childhood might have led the researcher to make assumptions during the sessions about the intended meaning of participants' statements. Previous interview research with young adults helped the researcher understand the danger of how easily an interviewer can slide into making such assumptions. To fight such potential bias, the researcher strove to maintain an active awareness throughout the sessions of how she interpreted participants' responses and regularly asked follow-up questions to clarify participants' meanings.

CHAPTER 4

Family 1 – The Bridges

The Bridges family case has been removed due to privacy concerns.

CHAPTER 5

Family 2—The Kleins

The Klein family case has been removed due to privacy concerns.



Figure 1

Connor Klein's drawing of him and his siblings "doing something."

"Luke and I are having a philosophical discussion while Sadie rolls around."

CHAPTER 6

Family 3 – The Drapers

The Draper family case has been removed due to privacy concerns.



Figure 2
Sophie's drawing of her and Rachel "doing something."
"Rachel and I are having fun walking to the park."

CHAPTER 7

Cross-Case Summary and Discussion

The current study examined sibling relationships in three families where a marital separation had taken place. Considering all three families, several themes relevant to understanding sibling relationships in divorcing families were identified from rich, qualitative findings. The most fundamental theme points to the importance of considering *context*. Context includes the dynamic interplay of factors such as the pre-divorce sibling relationship, parenting, parent-child relationships, temperament, custody arrangements, physical environment, pre-divorce family functioning, reactions to the separation, ongoing consequences of the separation, the developmental phase of the sibling relationship, and other real-life events occurring at the time of the parents' separation, such as siblings transferring to different schools. All of these contextual elements were relevant to understanding the sibling relationships in the three families who participated in this study. As such, although the themes have been presented separately, it remains necessary to be mindful of the interconnectedness. With this caveat of interconnected contextual factors as an interpretive landscape, several themes stood out as particularly pertinent to sibling relationships in separated families.

Consistent with research involving young adults, *separation did not seem to change the sibling relationships* in a dramatic way (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003). In other words, close relationships tended to remain close and disconnected relationships did not suddenly become close. As such, it becomes important to consider the pre-separation sibling relationship when trying to make sense of post-separation sibling relationships. Consistent with research on sibling relationships in general, some

factors that appeared to set the stage for positive sibling relationships in this study included opportunities to play, the ability of siblings to understand each other, parents' attempts to help children develop empathy and resolve conflicts, and family messages regarding respect, communication, and the importance of sibling relationships (Brody, 1998; Kramer, 2010; Milevsky et al., 2011) . Of interest, the use of photos, home videos, and stories seemed important in helping children construct the narrative of their sibling relationships. For example, Sadie Klein used photos to make sense of her relationship with her brothers when they were younger; Rachel and Sophie discussed home videos in understanding their relationship; and Nate and Emma Bridges repeatedly told stories of their early childhood. Although such materials help foster the sibling narrative by presenting evidence of early, positive sibling relationships, the manner in which they have been presented to the children might also be relevant. For example, Rachel and Sophie explained that their mother took countless videos of them together, suggesting to them, perhaps, that Ms. Draper took an interest in and valued their relationship. Similarly, the stories that Emma and Nate know about their relationship came from their parents, and even when the stories involved fighting or less positive interactions, they seem to have been told in a way that suggests a positive slant on the stories, in that they seem to have been related to the children or interpreted by the children in a positive way; in other words, they seem to be viewed as good stories about their relationship. As such, the stories and home videos might convey an implicit message that parents value their children's relationships with each other regardless of how the family may have changed through a marital separation and divorce. Perhaps this positive message is internalized by siblings and is enacted as the affective overtone of their relationships with each other.

Reactions to the separation seem to play a role in how parental separation might create tension between siblings or foster greater closeness. Reactions seemed to depend, in part, on the degree to which children anticipated the separation, how they understood the separation, and whether the separation helped decrease exposure to parent conflict (a possible benefit) or created a loss without benefit (e.g., separation occurring in the context of a calm, conflict-free environment). For example, Emma and Nate Bridges had different reactions to the separation, reactions that seemed related to how they made sense of the separation, whether the separation came as a surprise, and other factors, such as knowing friends whose parents had also separated, having different vulnerabilities, and the degree to which they might have derived gains or suffered losses as a result of the separation. Although the children had an overall close relationship, their different reactions to their parents' separation seem to be associated with subtle tension in the relationship. For example, at the time of the study, Nate seemed to have had a harder time adjusting to the separation than Emma, as evidenced by reports of his emotional reactions, his ongoing sadness, and his increased need for attention. At present, Nate also appears to value family time together more than he did before the separation, perhaps related to a cognitive shift that many children experience after a separation in which they place more value on time with parents than they did before the separation (Smart et al., 2001). For Nate, this increased attachment to time spent with parents might have extended to appreciating time with his sister as well. Similarly, Nate's struggle to re-configure the meaning of family might also increase his attachment to family time. An example of tension between the two stems from Nate's becoming upset when Emma prefers to spend time with friends than attend "family night." In contrast, Rachel and

Sophie Draper seem to have similar confusion and ongoing questions regarding their parents' separation that seem to be associated with increased closeness between the two as they attempt to understand the story of their parents' separation.

The negotiation of time is another salient theme. Perhaps the one, fundamental, unalterable consequence of separation involves the state of being constantly separated from a parent and needing to negotiate limited time with each parent. Sadie Klein illustrated the painful feelings some children experience at always being apart from a parent when she described her search for a "solution," such as having everyone, including step-parents, living in one house. Previous research suggests that children have to re-negotiate relationships with each parent following separation (Haugen, 2007; Smart et al., 2001); the attempt to do so with other siblings present seems to create tension in sibling relationships. For example, Mr. Klein noted an increase in conflict between Sadie and Connor following the separation, stemming from competition for his attention. Mr. Bridges also noted an increase in attention-seeking behaviour from Nate that created tension between Nate and Emma. Custody arrangements and parent responsiveness to children's needs appear to exacerbate or alleviate tension. For example, in the Klein family, the family with the greatest sibling conflict in this study, the three children saw Mr. Klein approximately seven hours a week, part of which involved travelling by car one hour each way. The children were unable to spend overnight time with Mr. Klein and, for several years, had to share that limited time with him. Although conflict among these children seemed to stem, in part, from personality clashes, the separation arrangements seem to have exacerbated stress in their relationships, particularly between Sadie and Connor. Mr. Klein noted that Connor became upset at the loss of time spent

with his father, and Sadie remarked that she wishes she could see her father more.

Altering the arrangements, such that each child rotated visits with Mr. Klein, appeared to alleviate some of the tension among the siblings. In contrast, Nate and Emma Bridges, who had less conflict in their relationship, saw their parents regularly and were able to address concerns regarding the custody arrangements. Parents in this family appear to have a positive co-parenting relationship, remain responsive to their children's needs, and seem willing to adjust the arrangements as needed. That Nate seemed comfortable asking to make a change to the schedule, a change that inconvenienced his parents, speaks to the ability of his parents to create a safe environment for their children to express their needs (Moxnes, 2003; Smart et al., 2003). This family differs from the Klein family, where the parents struggle to communicate regarding their children's needs and have had contentious interactions regarding custody and child support.

Physical context also appears to have played a role in sibling relationships. A consequence of parental separation in these families involves the time the children spend together. For all three families, shared space seems to be associated with close relationships (except Sadie and Connor Klein) and, in some cases, high conflict. For example, Sophie and Rachel Draper spend almost all of their time together and have been described by all members of their family as close siblings who often have intense arguments. In this family, the girls share small, physical spaces in both homes, travel together to see their parents, and spend free time together, because their close friends live in the old neighbourhood that remains too far away for them to travel to on their own. Such separation-related consequences, combined with other factors, seem to account for the intense relationship the girls have. Such a finding might help explain, in part,

previous research that noted that siblings from divorced backgrounds tend to have more affect-intense relationships than children from continuously-married homes (Sheehan et al., 2004). For the Kleins, in which there appears to be a disconnect between Sadie and her brothers, the children spent intense periods of time in small spaces (e.g., in the car, in the father's hotel, in his one-bedroom apartment), which might have exacerbated conflict between Sadie and Connor, who lacked the opportunity or the ability to develop a close relationship before the separation. Nate and Emma Bridges have their own space at each parent's home, which, although they spend time together, might help minimize tension that might arise between them if they had to share space (i.e., one child can go to his or her own room to get away). Overall, then, some consequences of parental separation (e.g., moving to a different neighbourhood, diminished resources requiring smaller homes, and distance between homes) can help create physical circumstances that, perhaps in combination with other factors, contribute to increased closeness and/or conflict among siblings.

Shared experiences seem to be an additional consequence of separation that might have an impact on children's sibling relationships. Making transitions between homes, moving, coping with parenting differences, adjusting to new people in their parents' lives, seeing their homes change (e.g., different furniture), and separation-related anxieties (e.g., "will we always get to see Dad?") seem to serve as a source of connection between siblings. For example, Nate and Emma Bridges' reported dislike of their mother's partner seems to serve as a point of connection for them (e.g., shared jokes). Similarly, coping with divergent parenting styles or values might help foster closeness between Luke and Connor Klein and between Sophie and Rachel Draper. Marquardt

(2005), in her national study of adult children of divorce, noted that participants often reported that attempting to manage living in typically quite divergent households created stress for them and made them feel alone in having to develop their own set of values. As Marquardt (2005) notes, in married families, parents typically have to resolve their parenting differences themselves and present a decision to the child, but in separated families, that responsibility to resolve parent differences sometimes falls on the child. Moreover, as Marquardt (2005) and Amato et al. (2011) observe, such parenting differences can have an impact not only on children's level of stress, but on their own developing sense of identity, as they sometimes become "chameleons" in adapting to each parent's home, carefully censoring information they provide each parent. As such, for the siblings in the Klein and Draper families, managing their parents' differing parenting beliefs might have fostered closeness.

Of note, the emotionally charged nature of the shared experiences might help differentiate these shared experiences from other shared experiences that all siblings encounter, thereby helping to partially explain how the shared experiences might foster closeness. Experiences such as making transitions between homes, dealing with their parents' new partners, moving, and coping with different parental expectations can involve feelings of stress, sadness, and worry, feelings that might only be shared by a sibling. As such, the emotional component might lead some siblings in divorced families to be qualitatively different than siblings in continuously-married homes. Rachel and Sophie observed that they seem to be closer than other siblings, as did Nate and Emma. Whether that closeness reflects a difference in degree of closeness or a different type of closeness stemming from their divorce-specific experiences remains uncertain.

Consistent with research with young adults, another subtle way in which sibling relationships in divorced families might be qualitatively different from sibling relationships in continuously-married families pertains to the sense of being a *team* (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003). Parents in the Draper and Bridges families reported a sense that the children seemed to change into more of a unit following the separation. Mr. Klein noted that the children seemed to work together more and seemed more considerate of each other. Similarly, Ms. Draper reported that the children banded together in confronting her regarding disparaging comments she might make about Mr. Draper. Such a sense of team might stem from shared experiences or an overall cognitive shift in recognizing the importance of family members following a parental separation. Of interest, as mentioned earlier, part of the recruitment strategy for this study involved offering a short-term, supportive intervention to families experiencing parental separation. Through this service, the researcher worked with two families, each of which had one child only. The bulk of the researcher's work with these children involved developing strategies to cope with divorce-related experiences, such as how to tell a parent to stop making disparaging comments about the other parent, or how to cope with traveling between two different households. The strategies that the researcher and the children developed in clinical sessions seem to be strategies that some of the siblings in this study derive naturally through their relationships with each other. For example, the relationship between Sophie and Rachel Draper seems to provide them with the strength or support that enables them, as a team, to tell their mother to stop making negative comments about their father. In contrast, a young girl without a sibling with whom the researcher worked struggled to determine a way to tell her parent to refrain

from making such comments about the other parent in a way that felt safe to her. In other words, compared to children without a sibling, the sense of team that some siblings share might serve as an advantage in that it enables them to support each other naturally in coping with divorce-related stresses. Although divorce research comparing the adjustment of children who have siblings to children who lack siblings remains scant, the current study suggests some possible explanations for the findings of Kempton et al. (1991), who found that adolescents with a sibling demonstrated greater adjustment following parental separation than adolescents without a sibling.

Similar to sibling relationships in general, *parenting* after a separation seems to have an impact on children's adjustment, and, by extension, sibling relationships. Perhaps unsurprisingly, authoritative parenting (i.e., responsive, consistent, warm) appears to help children in their adjustment to divorce, which, in turn, may foster more positive sibling relationships (Brody et al., 1992; Hetherington, 2006; Milevsky et al., 2011; Seginer, 1998; Velez et al., 2011). For example, Sophie Draper reported that the routine at her father's home helped her make the difficult transition each weekend, which likely helped foster positive interactions with her sister, because the emotional impact of being separated from her mother and in a different environment decreased. Similarly, Mr. Klein and Luke indicated that the structure implemented by Talia helped the children relate to each other better (i.e. conflict decreased)

Another prominent theme pertains to the importance of considering the *meaning of conflict* to siblings living in separated families. An oft-cited finding in the literature pertains to the higher levels of conflict exhibited by children in separated families compared to continuously-married families (Anderson & Rice, 1992; Conger & Conger,

1996; Hetherington et al., 1999; MacKinnon, 1989), which might stem, in part, from some of the factors noted above (i.e., shared space, negotiation of time). The siblings in this study, however, suggest that consideration of the meaning of conflict remains relevant. For the most part, the siblings in this study characterized their arguments as unimportant, regardless of the level of intensity. For example, Sophie and Rachel reported that they have frequent, intense arguments, but dismissed the significance of them, explaining that they revolved around inconsequential, day-to-day issues, such as taking turns on the computer and who gets dropped off at school first. Similarly, Connor and Luke Klein reported high levels of physical fighting and arguments, but also tended to remember them as having little impact on their relationship. Such a finding accords with previous research with young adults who grew up in separated families (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Sheehan et al., 2004). In the relationship between Connor and Sadie, however, the one sibling relationship in the study that seems to be marked by a long-standing history of fighting and disconnection, the meaning of conflict remains somewhat unclear. Neither Connor nor Sadie seemed to attribute any underlying hostility to their conflict, and Sadie emphasized feelings of love, but their long-standing disconnection and the relative absence of mutual sibling warmth, suggests that conflict between them might take on more significance than in other sibling relationships. Similarly, Connor's report that he views his sister in a negative light suggests that conflict between them might reflect deeper problems in their relationship. Consequently, investigating the meaning of conflict between siblings remains important when trying to understand sibling relationships in divorced families.

In contrast to some parents who noticed changes in their children's sibling relationship as a function of the separation, none of the children themselves in the three families reported a significant change in their relationships. Several explanations might account for this finding. First, perhaps despite parents' reports, the sibling relationships have stayed the same fundamentally. Second, perhaps a sibling relationship remains the one family relationship that requires no conscious renegotiation. Children have to renegotiate relationships with parents and parents' partners, but sibling relationships, at least in families where the children live together, might not seem different. Siblings still live together, they still interact on a regular basis, and there is no separation to cause the children to see their siblings differently, as they do their parents (Smart et al., 2001). In other words, the sibling relationship might seem to be the only relationship that remains unchanged. Third, children might be so focused on their parents during a separation that they fail to notice any subtle changes that they might experience. Fourth, individuals outside of a relationship might be better able to identify subtle changes to children's relationships with each other. Finally, perhaps children have a more realistic view of their relationship compared to their parents who are experiencing separation. Overall, however, the different perspectives highlight the importance of exploring each family member's point of view on sibling relationships.

Support in these families seemed to *differ from traditional forms of support*. Consistent with retrospective reports from young adults, support tended to be indirect (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Jacobs & Sillars, 2011). For instance, rather than talking about the separation, siblings supported each other by being physically present, distracting each other, making each other laugh, and nurturing each other (e.g., providing

hot chocolate). Siblings also supported each other by speaking for each other, as in the case of Sophie and Rachel Draper, defending each other (Luke and Connor Klein), and joining together to express feelings to parents (e.g., Sophie and Rachel Draper telling mother to stop saying negative things about their father). Consistent with research focused on young adults, for some siblings, indirect forms of support included providing a sense of continuity/stability as they navigated separation-related circumstances, such as moving back and forth between parents' homes, living in different homes, and meeting parents' new partners (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003). For example, despite needing space from each other, Sophie and Rachel Draper continue to want to be together when living at their parents' homes.

Provision of support seemed to depend on understanding how to relate to a sibling and on the ability to identify a sibling's need for support. In other words, the degree of connection with a sibling had an impact on support. Luke and Connor Klein, and the siblings in the Draper and Bridges families seemed to know when a sibling felt upset and knew how to support them. In contrast, Sadie Klein and her brothers, who have less connected relationships, who differ considerably in their personalities, and who have communication difficulties, seem to struggle to support each other, particularly Connor and Sadie. Although instrumental support seemed easy to provide (e.g., opening a jar for Sadie), emotional support seemed more difficult.

Overall, there appears to be an *imbalance* in some families regarding support. For instance Luke and Connor Klein noted that Sadie rarely provides support to them, and Emma Draper struggled to identify how Nate might support her. Although part of this imbalance might stem from natural older sibling/younger sibling roles (e.g., older siblings

see themselves as protectors or instructors), it is possible that younger siblings also provide support in less identifiable ways. For example, Nate Klein noted that through focusing on distracting him from their parents' arguing or separation, Emma might be distracting herself as well. Similarly, Sophie and Rachel Draper noted how Sophie sometimes becomes angry with their parents when they argue. Although Rachel denied that her parents' arguing affects her, Sophie noted that she knows it makes her sister angry. As such, perhaps, in part, Sophie's expression of anger towards their parents provides support to Rachel, in that Sophie expresses that anger for both of them; in other words, Rachel has her feelings expressed indirectly through Sophie.

In addition to support, siblings expressed *care* for each other in various ways, such as through worrying, by refraining from making potentially hurtful comments, and in attempting to mitigate potentially negative teasing. Such forms of care coincide with the idea of sentient activity (Mason, 1996), the notion that care involves thoughts and feelings, not just behaviour. For example, some children expressed meaningful worries and insights about their siblings, such as Connor worrying that "something will shock Luke back into his introverted shell." Similarly, Emma worried about Nate's self-esteem, and Sophie worried that Rachel might feel jealous of her artistic abilities. Such worries indicate that the children observe their siblings, are attuned to their feelings, and have thought carefully about them.

Closeness or connectedness between siblings took many forms in these families. Although some expressions of closeness, such as spending time together, playing, talking to each other about life events (e.g., school, friends) tend to reflect how closeness between brothers and sisters has been conceptualized in widely-used questionnaires

(Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), other, perhaps less overt, manifestations occurred in all three families. Closeness could be seen in shared story-telling, shared laughter, playful teasing, physicality (e.g., wrestling, putting head on shoulder, playful touching, such as high-fives), inside jokes, tangential conversations, and day-to-day knowledge about each other's lives. Such diversity of expression of closeness has implications for how researchers measure sibling relationships.

Research implications

Despite the limitations of this study, which will be discussed in a later section, the approach of examining sibling relationships across several sessions, using multiple methods, and obtaining multiple perspectives seemed to provide rich sources of information about sibling relationships in these families. First, the opportunity to conduct individual and sibling sessions enabled the researcher to obtain information that might have been lost if only individual sessions had taken place. For example, without the sibling session, many aspects of closeness that require observation, such as shared story-telling, shared laughter, physical expressions, knowledge of each other, teasing, and tangential conversations would have been missed. Similarly, at various points during the sibling session, children sometimes discussed their perspectives (e.g., whether their sibling relationship has become less close), which provided the researcher the opportunity to see them negotiating their relationship in session. In other words, despite the structured nature of the sibling session and, depending on the family, the foreign environment in which the session took place, the sibling sessions provided rich opportunities to see the sibling relationship "in action," so to speak. Observations in sibling research, with the exception of seminal family observations conducted by Dunn's

team (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Dunn, 1993), tend to involve counting instances of aggression or affection between children, which can limit the ability to understand the subtle aspects of sibling dynamics (Hetherington et al., 1999; Kramer & Kowal, 2005). The sibling session also enabled the researcher to ask about sibling behaviour (e.g., why a sibling smiled when listening to a sibling, what a punch reflected) that helped the researcher to uncover the meaning behind interactions (e.g., did a punch reflect hostility or affection), which can be important in understanding sibling behaviour (Newman, 1994).

At the same time, however, individual sessions seemed beneficial in that they allowed children to express themselves openly, particularly when discussing less positive aspects of their sibling relationships. For example, Emma Bridges expressed some of her frustrations regarding, from her perspective, her brother's tendency to be treated differently by her parents. Moreover, the individual sessions prevented one sibling, typically the older sibling, from dominating the conversation, which occurred on occasion during the sibling sessions. Harden et al. (2010) discuss the challenge of balancing different family voices when interviewing family members together, particularly when relationships can have power imbalances (e.g., older sibling-younger sibling). As an aside, the individual sessions have the potential to be therapeutic. Mr. Klein related to the researcher that Sadie had told him that she appreciated the opportunity to participate, because it "felt good" to talk about her parents' separation. Mr. Klein expressed surprise that, after seven years, Sadie seemed to still have feelings about the separation that she feels uncomfortable sharing with her parents.

The opportunity to obtain *multiple perspectives* on sibling relationships also proved fruitful. For example, whereas parents provided rich information regarding their observations and insights about their children's relationships from young childhood to the present, children often demonstrated insights into their relationships, or even just into each other, that their parents missed. For example, Emma Bridges reported concerns that Nate lacks self-esteem, sensed that Nate had mixed feelings about their father's fiancée, and provided insight into Nate's reaction to their parents' divorce. Similarly, children told stories about their relationships with each other that parents rarely told; such stories helped provide an understanding of the day-to-day nature of their relationships. Of note, the honesty between the siblings helped provide information regarding their relationships that parent reports missed. For example, the children seemed more willing to discuss negative aspects of their relationships with each other than some parents (with the exception of Mr. Klein). For example, Rachel saying "sometimes, I hate my sister, sure..." in relation to her sister, Sophie, one of the closest relationships in the study, helped anchor their sibling relationship in the concrete, every day context of their lives and provided multifaceted layers to the relationship. Although perspectives sometimes contradicted each other, rather than seeing one perspective as "truth," the different perspectives seemed to reflect different positions on the relationship. For example, Mr. Draper tended to emphasize the conflict between his daughters and seemed surprised by instances of closeness between the girls (e.g., one sister telling the other that she loves her). The girls, on the other hand, noted that they have a lot of conflict, but also reported on the closeness they share. Moreover, the researcher also had a perspective based on the observations made of the sisters. Rather than one perspective being "right," all the

perspectives seemed to provide additional layers to the conceptualization of the relationship. For example, Mr. Draper sees the girls for circumscribed periods of time (two weekday evenings and the weekend), times where the girls might interact slightly differently than they do at the mother's house during the school week. For instance, in contrast to the weekends when they spend all their time together, thereby increasing the chance of irritating each other, the girls get a break from each other during the day at school and might be less prone to fighting at the end of the week day. In addition, conflict often seems more salient to parents than closeness, likely due to its intensity and disruptive nature (Newman, 1994). The researcher, on the other hand, who was a relatively new person in the girls' life and who asked questions and provided new activities, might have inhibited the girls' tendency to fight, as they might have tried to present themselves in a certain way (Harden et al., 2010). Rachel's concern that the family "not have a scene in front of Jackie" perhaps suggests her concern with their family image. As a result, the researcher might have been exposed to some of the girls' more positive interactions than a typical night at home might reveal.

The *use of vignettes and the sentence completion* forms also seemed to add to the richness. The vignettes served as a useful method of fostering discussion among the siblings about their own relationships and sometimes led to the introduction of new information. For example, discussing the vignette where the father introduces his children to a new friend provided an opportunity for the Draper girls to talk about the partner their mother had at the time of the separation. The vignettes helped to jump-start new conversations that provided additional information about topics that had been covered previously. For example, discussing the bullying vignette led Luke to relate an

instance where Connor failed to support him when children ganged up on him during a school game. Of interest, using the vignettes in the sibling session seemed more fruitful than introducing two of the vignettes in the individual session, as was intended initially. Time constraints often led to most or all of the vignettes being introduced in the sibling session, which turned out to be the best use of them.

Whereas the vignettes helped foster sibling discussions of issues, the sentence completion items provided participants with another method for expressing themselves, which seemed especially useful for some participants. Connor and Luke Klein, in particular, seemed to reveal themselves more through sentence completion than through conversation. For example, Luke seemed to be more open about expressing less positive feelings about his siblings in his sentence completion form than in conversation. Sentence completion items pointed to possible directions the researcher might follow, such as understanding Luke's distrust of Sadie.

Setting of sessions needs to be considered when thinking about this study. Some sessions in this study took place in the family home and others occurred in a lab setting (hospital interview room, research lab interview room). An ongoing debate among researchers conducting research with children pertains to the ideal setting to talk to children, with some researchers encouraging researchers to meet with children in their homes, as this provides a comfortable setting for children to discuss sensitive matters (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Moreover, some research suggests that parents feel more comfortable having their children interviewed at home (Barker & Weller, 2003). On the other hand, some researchers suggest that talking to a stranger at home may be somewhat foreign to children, thereby risking increased reticence (Harter et al., 2010). Conducting

interviews in the family homes provided the advantage of seeing the children in their home environment, which helped provide additional context for understanding the sibling relationship. For example, entering Ms. Draper's home, the researcher immediately experienced the warmth, the child-focus, and the intimacy of the home environment. The children in the Draper and Bridges families also seemed comfortable in their home, which helped in establishing rapport, as the children could show the researcher things in their home (e.g., pets, toys). Being in the home also seemed to help prompt some children when discussing certain topics. For example, when Nate discussed the changes to his family, he looked around his living room area and pointed out the new furniture that his father's fiancée had brought when she moved in. One possible drawback, however, to conducting interviews in the home, pertains to the intrusion of a researcher into "home," which tends to be considered a safe place where a child can retreat from the world. Having a researcher come into a child's safe place and discuss potentially painful topics might have felt like a violation of the safe space. On the other hand, given that the topics focused on divorce and family changes, which occur in the home environment, conducting interviews in the home might have seemed fitting.

Privacy can also be an issue, as children were accorded varying levels of privacy during this study. Individual interviews in the Bridges home took place in an open area where family members sometimes intruded and the whereabouts of Mr. Bridges remained unclear. Such openness might have hindered the children's ability to be forthcoming in their interviews. Ms. Draper, on the other hand, left the home during the sessions in her house, which led to feelings of privacy (although the timing of her return always remained uncertain). The Kleins attended all of their interviews in the Families in

Motion research lab interview room, which provided the most privacy. Although the Kleins benefitted from complete privacy, the new environment and an adult stranger might have led to increased reticence. On the other hand, the privacy might have facilitated discussion. Although the impact of setting remains difficult to know, consideration of the context of the research sessions seems important when understanding how information was obtained. Given the difficulty recruiting families for this study, the researcher was concerned about possibly alienating parents and tended to defer to parents' wishes (e.g., agreed to hold an interview in a dining room area rather than request more privacy). Although, in retrospect, the researcher probably should have expressed a preference and been less concerned about parents dropping out of the study, such decisions take place in the moment and point to the reality of conducting such research with families. Perhaps the best a researcher can do involves carefully explicating the process of working with families, so readers can place a study in context.

An additional research issue involves *working with members of the same family*. Harden et al. (2010) discuss the delicate nature of research in which participants know that other family members are talking about them to a researcher. The researcher in this study held a unique position of being privy to everything that each family member said in confidence. To minimize potential discomfort, the researcher remained constantly aware of the need to protect each family member's confidentiality. At times, this could be challenging, particularly when the researcher wanted to follow up on something one of the participants had mentioned. Sometimes indirect opportunities arose that allowed the researcher to introduce a topic that might lead to discussion of a particular issue. For example, Ms. Draper had mentioned that she had been in a relationship at the time of her

separation, but the girls did not mention this in their individual interviews. During the sibling session, however, after the vignette pertaining to the father having a new “friend” had been discussed, the opportunity arose for the researcher to naturally ask if they had ever had a step-parent, which then prompted discussion of their mother’s friend. Sometimes “playing dumb” or responding vaguely helped in maintaining confidentiality. For example, Emma Bridges once said, “Did you know my brother has ADD”, to which the researcher, who knew from the parent interview about Nate’s diagnosis, replied, “Does he?” Although family members likely know that other family members have provided information, maintaining confidentiality in this way hopefully helps communicate to each participant that the researcher will not reveal what they say to other family members. Overall, however, it remains important to keep in mind that family members might have been uncomfortable knowing that other family members were talking about them. Of interest, no such discomfort seemed overtly evident during the sessions, but the possible impact of including members of the same family in a study bears consideration.

Two additional reflections regarding the research process bear mentioning. First, when discussing sibling relationships with children, for some children, the salience of conflict seemed to overshadow other aspects of their sibling relationship. For example, Rachel Draper and Emma Bridges mentioned conflict when first asked about their sibling relationships and had little difficulty providing examples, despite dismissing the importance of the conflict. Closeness, on the other hand, seemed to require more exploration. Consequently, researchers examining sibling relationships need to exercise caution in making interpretations based on how readily children discuss conflict. Second,

the developmental phase of the children's relationship needs to be considered when conducting sibling research. In all three families, the sibling relationships appeared to be undergoing a developmental transition, which can have an impact on sibling dynamics aside from divorce-related factors.

Clinical Implications

Some of the findings of this study suggest possible avenues for clinicians to pursue when working with families experiencing parental separation. First, given that, on average, siblings tend to have increased conflict during the first few years following a parental separation, working with siblings to help their relationship might be beneficial. For example, a clinician could help children understand each other better (e.g., temperament) or help children understand each other's reactions to divorce. Moreover a clinician might show children how to increase their support of each other, such as helping them band together to help deal with divorce-related issues, such as a parent criticizing the other parent. Helping siblings become more aware of how they might naturally support each other could be a way of encouraging siblings to lean on each other. In working with siblings, careful and comprehensive assessment of the sibling relationship remains critical, not just to understanding sibling relationships but to how sibling relationships might impact child adjustment. Clinicians need to understand the broad, day-to-day context of sibling relationships. Such an assessment should include exploration of temperament, parenting, parent-child relationships, the pre-separation sibling relationship, and divorce-related factors that might impact siblings' day-to-day relationships, such as transitions, physical space, and the need to adjust custody arrangements to minimize children's competition for parent time. Such examination

should include individual time with each child, each parent, and time with children together, and should look at other changes going in the children's lives at time of separation (e.g., change in school for Nate and Emma might have been an additional change that had an impact on their relationship).

Soliciting multiple perspectives might also form an important component of a thorough assessment of sibling relationships. Although time constraints imposed in clinical settings can preclude including multiple members of a family in an assessment, findings from this study suggest that obtaining viewpoints from different family members can be fruitful, as they provide various takes on the sibling relationship that, together, help foster a deeper, multifaceted understanding of children's relationships. Particularly in divorced families, where children tend to live in two different environments, obtaining both parents' perspectives remains invaluable. As the Draper family showed, information from both parents helps elucidate some of the more subtle dynamics involved in children's experiences of separation and sibling relationships. Moreover, the absence of the other parent's perspective in the Klein and Bridges families loomed large when trying to understand sibling relationships in those families.

Beyond parents, however, one of the prominent findings of this study pertains to the importance of soliciting the perspectives of other children in the family. The children in this study provided unique insights into their relationships, insights not provided by their parents. Moreover, extending beyond sibling relationships, siblings provided insights into each other that helped the researcher develop a deeper understanding of the individual children. As such, using siblings in clinical settings as an additional source of information regarding a referred child, regardless of the referral question (e.g., anxiety,

depression), could help clinicians develop more comprehensive assessments and treatment plans when working with individual children. Although researchers and clinicians typically cite the importance of soliciting both parents' perspectives when working with children, rarely, if ever, have all children in the family been included (except in family therapy). Although clinicians who work with children experiencing family transitions sometimes include siblings in therapy, (Gnoulati, 2002; Nichols, 1986; Rosenberg, 1980; Schibuk, 1989), the children in this study demonstrated how siblings might be a valuable, yet underused, resource when working with a child referred for any clinical problem.

When working with siblings, using multiple methods, such as interviews, vignettes, and sentence completion forms could help improve a clinician's understanding of the relationship. Moreover, helping to solicit stories about their relationship, perhaps using tangible items, such as photos or home videos, could also help to understand and foster a sibling relationship. For example, a clinician could ask children to bring in pictures of them together, which could then be used to understand the history of the relationship and to encourage children to construct a narrative of their sibling relationship.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that need to be considered when examining the findings. First, in two of the families, only one of the parents' perspectives could be obtained. Given that in those families the children spent a significant portion of their time with the missing parent, such an absence is not negligible. As clinical experience and this study suggest, parents can offer different but also consistent perspectives on their children and their separation, perspectives that remain relevant to developing a

meaningful, multifaceted, and rich understanding of sibling relationships. Song (1998) discusses the challenge of gaining access to other family members. In this study, the researcher relied upon the contact parent to provide the researcher with access to the other parent, and when the contact parent stated that the other parent had no interest, the researcher had no choice but to accept. Perhaps the researcher should have pushed the matter more, but again, due to the difficulty recruiting families, the researcher hesitated to do anything that might alienate the participating parent.

Second, the parents in two of the families in the study had separated 6-7 years ago, thereby making it impossible to capture the sibling relationship during the immediacy of the separation. Although both families provided rich information regarding the children's relationships, the 6-7 year time gap made it challenging to understand the subtle, day-to-day changes that might have occurred at the time of the separation.

Third, the families in this study seemed to be relatively high-functioning. The parents exhibited low conflict in front of the children; the children appeared to be well-adjusted, overall; and the sibling relationships, despite some being more disconnected than others, lacked intense conflict or hostility. In general, the parents in the families appeared to be sensitive to their children's needs, seemed interested in children's adjustment to divorce, and appeared to be psychologically minded and insightful. In other words, the study appears to be composed of a select sample of families that chose to participate in a time-consuming and intense study. Perhaps it is unsurprising, however, given the difficulty recruiting families, that families who tend to be interested in psychology and their children's relationships would self-select into the study.

Consequently, the findings of the study likely reflect sibling relationships in families that tend to be higher functioning than some other families experiencing parental separation.

Fourth, due to the limited number of sessions available, some areas tended to be less well-explored than others. For example, originally, the researcher had hoped to follow up on any salient sentence completion items completed by each child. Due to time constraints, however, sometimes she was unable to do so. Similarly, ideally, the researcher hoped to have two sessions with the siblings together, one to videotape their interactions and another to ask them questions about the interactions. That plan had to be eliminated, however, because only one sibling session per family was feasible.

Fifth, the children in this study tended to be, with the exception of the teenagers in the Klein family, roughly the same age (10-12). Although such similar ages provides an interesting point of comparison among the families, the study seems restricted to a particular developmental period. Studies aimed at understanding younger children's sibling relationships in the context of parental separation need to be undertaken in order to deepen knowledge in this area.

Sixth, each session had to allow for the flexibility to follow the children's directions at times. For example, listening to a child talk about her friends at school or about the drink a boy at school bought her remained essential to showing interest in the child and fostering rapport. As such, each session involved a rhythm of alternating between following the child's conversation and focusing on the research topic. Overall, despite the loss of time devoted to the research topics, allowing children to direct the conversation to areas that interested them or made them feel comfortable seemed necessary to obtaining fruitful information and observations. Asserting power in the

interactions likely would have alienated the children and made them less forthcoming (Irwin & Johnson, 2005).

Finally, the current study relied on an interview approach (albeit supplemented by vignettes and other activities), which can have inherent limitations. For example, researchers note that interviews involve the co-construction of knowledge and warn against the assumption that what people say reflects “a simple picture of what is in their heads.” (Silverman, 2007, p.56). Such researchers call for family research that extends beyond interviews to more natural settings, where family interactions can be studied in their natural state. Researchers caution against the assumption that family interactions occur the privacy of the family home and note that families interact in many public settings (Silverman, 2007). Although designing such studies in the context of parental divorce seems challenging, perhaps sibling researchers need to consider broadening the scope of sibling research. After all, many settings provide rich opportunities to observe typical sibling interactions (e.g., airports, restaurants, and playgrounds), and, as the sibling sessions in this study suggested, such interactions can be one way to “climb inside” perhaps the most secret of family relationships.

Conclusion

The present study sought to understand the complexity of the day-to-day life of siblings in separated families. Findings from this study suggest that sibling relationships need to be understood in the broader context of family life, development, individual characteristics, divorce-related factors, and the sibling relationship’s history. Moreover, this project shows how children themselves can provide valuable perspectives on their

sibling relationships, perspectives that can be as insightful as those of their parents, if not more so.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Poster

**Families in Motion Information and Research Group
University of Victoria**

**FAMILIES NEEDED FOR STUDY OF SIBLING
RELATIONSHIPS IN SEPARATED FAMILIES**



Please help us better understand marital separation through the eyes of children and their siblings. An understanding of families experiencing marital separation and divorce translates into more effective supports for children and their parents.

We are looking for families to take part in a study of children's sibling relationships in families where there has been a marital separation within the past year.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to complete two individual interviews regarding your separation and your children's relationships with each other.

As a participant in this study, your child would be asked to complete one to two individual interviews which would include drawing, stories, and questions, and participate in a session with his/her siblings in which they will draw and answer questions together.

Your participation would involve two sessions, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes.

Your child's participation would involve three to four sessions, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes.

Research sessions can be conducted at the University of Victoria or at your home, depending on your preference. All interviews will be audio- and video-taped.

In appreciation for their time, your children will each receive a \$50.00 Chapters gift certificate. You will be compensated for any travel expenses incurred.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,
please contact:

Jackie Bush, M.A.

Department of Psychology

at 250-853-3790 or jbush@uvic.ca

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, Research Ethics Board, University of Victoria.

If you wish to talk to my supervisor, Dr. Marion Ehrenberg, she can be contacted by phone or e-mail at:
250-721-8771, ehrm@uvic.ca

Appendix B

Protocol for Each Family

Family 1

1. Parent Interview 1 (Father-April, 2011)
Setting: Late afternoon in a research lab at Alberta Children's hospital
2. Child Interview 1 (Nate – May, 2011)
Setting: after school, family residence, dining room table
 - Sibling vignettes (1 & 2)
 - Sentence completion
3. Child Interview 2 (Emma – May, 2011)
Setting: morning, family home, dining room table (two days after Nate's session)
 - Sibling vignettes (1 & 2)
 - Sentence Completion
4. Sibling Session (September, 2011)
Setting: afternoon, research lab at Alberta Children's Hospital
 - Sibling vignettes (3 & 4)
5. Parent Interview 2 (September, 2011)

Family 2

1. Parent Interview 1 (Father-October, 2012)
Setting: Late afternoon, research lab at the University of Victoria
2. Child Interview 1 (Luke – October, 2012)
Setting: Saturday afternoon, research lab at the University of Victoria
 - Sentence completion
3. Child Interview 2 (Connor – October, 2012—same day as Luke)
Setting: Saturday evening, research lab at the University of Victoria
 - Sentence Completion
4. Child Interview 3 (Sadie –Hallowe'en, 2012)
Setting: After school, research lab at the University of Victoria
 - Sentence Completion
5. Sibling Session (November, 2012)
Setting: Saturday afternoon, research lab at the University of Victoria
 - Sibling vignettes (1-4)

6. Parent Interview 2 (November, 2012)
Setting: Sunday afternoon, research lab at the University of Victoria

Family 3

1. Parent Interview 1 (Mother – January, 2013)
Setting: Mother's home, Saturday afternoon, dining table
2. Parent Interview 1 (Father – January, 2013)
Setting: Starbucks, late afternoon on a weekday
3. Child Interview 1 (Rachel – January, 2013)
Setting: P.D. day, family residence, dining room table
 - Sentence completion
4. Child Interview 2 (Sophie – February, 2013)
Setting: weekday evening, family home, dining room table (one week after Rachel's session)
 - Sentence Completion
5. Sibling Session (February, 2013)
Setting: weekday evening, family home, dining room table
 - Sibling vignettes (1-4)
6. Parent Interview 2 (February, 2013)
Setting: weekday morning, family home, dining room table

Appendix C

Parent Consent Form

Sibling Relationships

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled **Sibling Relationships** that is being conducted by Jackie Bush, M.A. Jackie Bush is a graduate student in the department of Psychology at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by e-mail: jbush@uvic.ca or by phone: 250-853-3790.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. degree in Psychology. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Marion Ehrenberg. You may contact my supervisor at 250- 721-8771.

The purpose of this research project is to understand how children's sibling relationships change after a parental separation and how siblings might help each other adjust to parental separation.

Research of this type is important because sibling relationships play a central role in how children develop over their lives. Family transitions, such as a separation, often change family relationships. Understanding how sibling relationships might change can help further our understanding of child development in diverse families. Also, recent studies suggest that children sometimes provide support to one another during a family separation. Learning how children may help each other could provide individuals who work with children more information about how to best help children adjust to such transitions. Finally, unlike most research in this area, which focuses on adults' views of children, this study is important because it attempts to understand family relationships from the child's perspective.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you and your children have experienced a parental separation.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include participating in two interviews lasting between one and two hours. Your children will be asked to participate in two individual sessions and a sibling session, each of which will last between one and two hours. Your children will be asked to answer questions about their family relationships, particularly their sibling relationships, to draw pictures, and to provide their perspective on four vignettes that describe a situation between two siblings. The purpose of the drawings is to facilitate discussion. The drawings will be stored for the required time in a secure filing cabinet until they can be destroyed. The drawings will not be presented in any manuscripts or presentations arising from this research. During the individual child and sibling sessions, your children will be audio-taped and videotaped. If permitted, I would like to visit your home to observe your children's sibling interactions in a natural context.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including time commitment, discussion of potentially emotional topics, and travel time.

Because this research explores family relationships in the context of separation, there is a potential emotional risk to you and your children by participating in this research. To anticipate and prevent emotional distress, I will have interviewed you first and will have information regarding your child's temperament, any topics that may upset your child, and how your child can best be comforted. Such information will enable me to conduct the study in as careful, sensitive, and respectful manner as possible. As a Ph.D. student in clinical psychology with extensive experience working with children, I am trained to identify signs of burgeoning distress and will be able to redirect the conversation or suggest that your child take a break. Because this study allows for great flexibility in how each session is conducted, each child's individual needs can be accommodated.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include the opportunity to talk openly about your family experiences, the chance to help others understand children's sibling relationships in families experiencing separation, and the opportunity to provide anyone who works with families to information about how to best help children adjust.

As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be reimbursed for any travel expenses (including parking). As a token of appreciation, each of your children will receive a \$50.00 Chapters Bookstore gift certificate to thank them for their time and contributions. It is important for you to know that it is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants and, if you agree to be a participant in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. If you would not otherwise choose to participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you and your children do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you or your children do withdraw from the study your data will be used only with your permission. Your withdrawal from the study will not affect your child's compensation. To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will ask you or your children to sign a consent form at each session.

To protect your anonymity, you and each of your children will be assigned a code number for identification purposes. Although your names will be on a list for contact purposes, this list will be kept in a locked filing cabinet within a secure research office. Following the study, the list will be destroyed. If you have been referred to the study from a community organization, friend, or other participant, your anonymity about your participation remains limited. All materials regarding your participation, however, will remain anonymous. In terms of publication, any identifying information will be disguised or omitted in order to protect your anonymity.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by keeping all videotapes and printed transcripts locked in a secure cabinet in a secure research office. Only members of the research office have access to the cabinet. Any transcripts in progress will be kept in a password-protected computer file to which only the researcher has access. This computer file will be kept on a computer that never links to the internet. Once a transcript has been completed, it will be printed and stored in the locked filing cabinet. The computer file and tape will then be erased. Because multiple members of your family will be participating in this study, anything said by a particular individual will remain confidential.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others through a published article, a dissertation report, and presentations at scholarly meetings.

After seven years, all transcripts will be shredded.

In addition to being able to contact me and my supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by me.

Videos may be taken of my children for analysis.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix D

Parent Interview I

Circumstances of the separation

In order to understand your children's relationships with each other in the context of your separation, I just want to ask you a few questions about the separation. Please don't feel pressured to talk about anything you don't want to talk about—I just want to gather an overall sense of the family climate.

Can you tell me a little bit about your separation?

Potential follow-up questions

- a. Conflict? High, low, none.
- b. Child exposure to conflict?
- c. Long-standing problems?

General questions about child

Now I just want to spend some time talking about (child's name) to get an overall sense of (him/her).

1. Tell me a little bit about (child's name).

Potential follow-up questions

- a. What was (child's name) like as a baby?
- b. How would you describe (child's name)'s personality?
- c. What kinds of things does (child's name) like to do?

Parent-child relationships

Because this is a study of family relationships, I want to ask you a few questions about your relationship with your (son/daughter)

1. How does (child's name) get along with you?
2. Has your relationship changed since the separation? If so, how?
3. How does (child's name) get along with (other parent)?

4. As far as you know, has that relationship changed since the separation? If so, how?

Child's reactions to divorce

I just want to switch gears here and ask a few questions about your perspective on how (child's name) reacted to your separation

1. How did (child's name) react to the separation?
2. What kinds of things did (he/she) do or say that led you to make that conclusion?
3. What do you think (child's name) understands about the separation?
4. What were the best ways to help (child's name)? Did anything make it worse?
5. How does (child's name)

Child's comfort with strangers

In order to make (child's name)'s experience as positive as possible, I just want to ask a few questions about how (he/she) tends to interact with other adults.

1. How does (child's name) react to strange people? (e.g., shy, slow-to-warm-up, friendly)
2. What makes (child's name) feel more comfortable?
3. How does (child's name) like to communicate her feelings and thoughts to others (e.g., talking while drawing, writing)
4. Anything else I should know about (child's name)?

Appendix E

Child Assent Form

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT—CHILD AND ADOLESCENT FORM

Note: The University of Victoria and the researcher running this project have to follow rules. These rules have to do with how to help people who take part in the research projects to feel as safe and comfortable as possible while they are taking part. The information in this form, and in another form given and signed by your parents, are given to you to help you to understand what is involved in taking part in this study **before** you decide whether or not you would like to take part in it. If you decide to sign this form, this means that you have had time to read this form and, if you would like to go over it with the researcher and your parents. If you decide to sign this form, it means that you are volunteering to take part in this study.

This is a research project about how brothers and sisters get along with each other before and after their parents decide to stop living together. I am interested in how children and teens think and feel about the changes in their families. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be speaking to me about your family. I know a lot about talking to children and teens. I am very interested in making things as comfortable as possible for you, for your parents, and in general for the many families where the parents have decided to stop living together.

Taking part in this project means that you would be answering my questions, that you would do some drawing or writing, and that I will ask you to tell me what you think about some pretend stories. I will meet with you by yourself once or twice, and with you and your brothers/sisters two times. I would like to tape record our conversations and videotape the sessions you spend with your brothers/sisters. Taking part in this project could take up to eight hours of your time. I realize that this is a lot of time, and we will work together over approximately four months to spread the time out in small chunks. After we have finished working together, I would like to give you a gift certificate to thank you for spending some of your time with me.

If you decide to take part in this research project by signing your name, please remember that you may change your mind at any time. This means that you can tell me that you do not want to take part in the study anymore. Of course, you can also decide not to answer any one question at any time without having to explain why not. All videotapes, audiotapes, and information I write down about you **will be kept very private and will not have your name on it**. I promise that I will not tell your parents or brothers/sisters about anything that you say to me. The only time I might have to talk to someone about something you say to me is if you tell me that you are being physically harmed by someone. If that should happen, I will talk to you about it first, so we can decide what to do. The only reason I am running this research project is to learn more about how brothers and sisters think and feel about each other in families where parents have decided to live apart. It is really important to me to talk to children and teens about their experiences, because they don't often get a chance to tell researchers about what they think and how they feel about their families. I hope that by talking to you I can learn how to help other children and teens in their families. The information I learn from you is to be used only for this research project. I know that for some children and teens talking about their parents not living together anymore can bring up some upsetting feelings. If this should happen to you while you are taking part in this project, you can be sure that I will be very patient and understanding. If you think that you might like to talk to a counsellor or other children and teens in your situation, I can give you suggestions.

Thank you for taking part in this study and for helping us to learn more about families going through changes. Remember that signing on the line below means that you have read this form, have had time to get your questions answered, and that you agree to take part in the project that you have been told about.

I agree to take part in this research project. The researcher and I have practiced how I will say no to answering any questions I do not want to answer.

NAME: _____

SIGNATURE: _____

Appendix F

Individual Child Interview

Little bit about the child

1. What kinds of things do you like to do?
2. Tell me about what an average weekday is like for you. How do weekends differ from weekdays?
 - a. What do you do in the afternoons after school?
 - b. What do you do in the evenings on school days?
 - c. Tell me what you usually do on Saturdays and Sundays.

Overall family relationships

1. Tell me about your family.
2. What's it like living in your family?
3. Tell me about your mother/father.
4. What does she/he do that you like? What does she/he do that you don't like?
5. Tell me about (sibling's name).
6. Tell me the things you like to do with (sibling's name).
7. Do you and (sibling's name) ever argue? What about? How do the arguments end?

Sibling relationships in context of separation

8. Tell me what it was like when your parents separated.
9. Do you think your parents' separation has changed you at all?
10. What was it like for (sibling's name) when your parents separated?
11. Do you think your parents' separation has changed (sibling's name) at all?
12. Do you ever have any worries about your brother?

13. How do you and your brother get along? Has that changed?
14. When you travel back and forth between your mom's house and your dad's house, do you go together? What is that like? Like it? Not like it?
15. How does your sibling help you? When do you want your sibling's help the most?
16. Does (sibling's name) look out for you sometimes?
17. Is it important to you to live with your brother?
18. If you could have a wish for your brother, what would it be?
19. If you could have a wish for you and your brother, what would it be?

Sibling ideology

1. When you think about brothers and sisters, what do they mean to you?
2. How should brothers and sisters treat each other?
3. What do you think a good brother should be like?
4. What would be an ideal brother?
5. Any questions I should be asking in order to understand other children's experiences?

Note: Need to allow for flexibility and digressions in conversation

Note: Ideally, when discussing family in general, opportunities to slip in questions about siblings will arise naturally

Note: If child reluctant to talk may ask to "Show me with a picture" or "would you like to write your answer?"

Second child interview will follow up on anything that was left unexplored.

Appendix G

Sibling Interview

**Most discussion will flow naturally from the activities given—here is an overview of the general areas to explore (most questions will involve prompts in response to the general questions)

General relationship

1. Tell me a little bit about how you two get along together.
2. When do you spend the most time together? What do you like to do?
3. What kinds of things do you like to do together? (explore examples). Can you think of a time when you most recently spent time together?
4. Have things always been like that?
5. What do you do if one of you is upset and the other knows about it?
6. Do you keep secrets for each other? Any examples you are willing to share?
7. Do you ever just hang out?
8. Has your relationship changed in any way? How so?

Sibling relationship before the separation

1. How did you two get along when you were little?
2. What did you like to do together back then? (explore examples)
3. Did you ever argue? What about? (explore examples)

Separation and sibling relationship

1. Tell me what it was like when your parents told you they were separating.
2. What was it like for you when your parents separated?
3. Did the separation affect how you got along with each other? How so?
4. Did the separation affect how you feel about each other? How so?

5. How did you help each other during that time?
6. Did your routines change? How did that affect your relationship?
7. What are your everyday experiences together like?
8. What are your weekends like?
9. What is it like going back and forth between your mom's house and your dad's house?
10. What has the biggest change been?

Conclusion

1. What is the best thing about having a sibling?
2. What is the worst thing?
3. What else should I know about sibling relationships?

Appendix H
Parent Interview II

General sibling relationship

1. Tell me about your children's relationship with each other.
2. What do you think plays a role in their relationship?
3. Are they close? How do you know?
4. Do they fight? How do you know? What do they fight about? How are fights resolved?
5. Do you think they are different when alone together than when you see them?

Sibling relationship and separation

1. What was your children's relationship like before your separation?
2. What were the main influences on their relationship back then?
3. Were they close? In what way?
4. Did they fight? In what way?
5. Has their relationship changed since the separation? How so?
6. What do you think accounts for such changes?

Parent sibling ideology

1. Do you think sibling relationships are important? If so, how?
2. Do you think you have tried to shape your children's relationships with each other?
3. What does a good sibling relationship look like?
4. What creates a good sibling relationship?
5. What were your sibling relationships like?

Conclusion

1. Anything else about your children's relationships that you think I should know?

Appendix I
Sentence Completion

1. I wish my brother would _____
2. A good brother _____
3. When I am sad, my brother _____
4. Some brothers _____
5. Brothers should _____
6. At home, my brother _____
7. When I was little, my brother _____
8. Brothers should not _____
9. The best thing my brother has done is _____
10. I worry that my brother _____
11. My brother is _____
12. A bad brother _____
13. Being an only child _____
14. I want my brother to _____

15. When Mom and Dad fight, my brother _____
16. My brother comforts me when _____
17. My brother doesn't understand that _____
18. My greatest worry is _____
19. When I am scared, my brother _____
20. When I go to my Dad's, my brother _____
21. My job as a brother is to _____
22. My brother makes me happy when _____
23. Before my mom and dad separated, my brother _____
24. Since my parents separated, my brother _____
25. I know my brother cares about me when _____
26. When I go to my mom's, my brother _____
27. I like it when my brother _____
28. I don't like it when my brother _____

Appendix J

Vignettes

Vignette 1

Liam and his younger brother Sam attend the same elementary school. One day during recess, Liam sees Sam being teased by some boys.

General questions (more prompts will follow from responses)

1. What do you think Liam will do?
2. What do you think Liam should do?
3. What would you do?
4. Has something like that ever happened in your family?

Vignette 2

Sarah and her older brother Finn attend the same high school. Report cards were handed out at school today and Finn told Sarah that he got a D in Biology class. Finn has changed the D to look like a B so his parents will not get angry.

General questions

1. Will Sarah keep Finn's secret from their parents?
2. What should Sarah do?
3. What would you do?
4. Have you and (sibling's name) ever been in a situation like that?

Vignette 3

Julia is reading in her room. Her parents are having a loud argument and she can hear her brother Jake crying in his room next door.

General questions

1. What will Julia do?
2. Do you think Julia understands why Jake is crying?
3. What should Julia do?
4. What would you do?
5. Have you two even been in a situation like that?

Vignette 4

Maggie and Jessica are going to their father's house to spend the weekend. When they arrive, their Dad introduces them to his 'friend' Karen who will be joining them for dinner. Jessica starts crying.

General questions

1. What will Maggie do?
2. Do you think Maggie understands why Jessica is crying? If yes, how?
3. What should Maggie do?
4. What would you do?
5. Has something like that ever happened to you two?

Appendix K

Sample of various reflections made while transcribing

- competing over attention—function of less time with each parent?
- family 2—increased fighting at dad's when time cut short—ended up better off when separated siblings
- acceptance of parents' new romantic partners—in both families such individuals were introduced early—function of modern custody arrangements?—more time with each parent, so less threatening?
- on-line dating facilitating parent finding new partners so quickly?
- Draper family—page 19 of transcript—kids banding together against parents when say bad things about other parent—different to X (therapy case—only child) who has been struggling to cope with that on her own.
- kids protecting parents during study, but completely honest about each other—sign of comfort, strength of relationship? Feeling of continuity?
- Family 2—when father talks about Luke and Sadie, refers to the brothers as a unit (rather than saying, does she look up to him, he asks, does she look up to them?)

Sample of Memo regarding Negotiation of Time

Does children's negotiation of time with each parent have an impact on the sibling relationship, and if so, how? See the differences in sibling dynamics in Families 1 and 3 compared to Family 2

To what extent do custody arrangements play a role in managing the negotiation of time? Joint custody vs. sole custody—Families 1 and 3 vs. Family 2—when more time with each parent, there seems to be less conflict post-separation than when the separation involves restricted time—how do parents with limited time manage that conflict?—seems to be a trade off—e.g., separate siblings to decrease conflict, but each child has even less time with a parent (Family 2)

Similarly, how does flexibility of custody arrangements have an impact?

Parent responsiveness and changes to the custody arrangement seem to play a role—allowing the children to have some control in how they manage time with each parent