

The Effect of "Favoritism" of Older Children on Parent-Child Relationships in Two-Child Families

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Abstract. Since the two-child policy was fully launched in 2016, China has witnessed a significant increase in two-child families. This study examines the effect of parental "favoritism" toward the eldest child on parent-child relationships. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with four groups of families, all with an age gap of 2-4 years between their two children. The results indicate that parental attitudes and behaviors after the birth of the second child significantly impact the eldest children's behavior and well-being. Parents often unwittingly privilege their youngest children, contributing to emotional instability and behavioral problems in their oldest children. Moreover, mothers experience physical and emotional changes after the birth of the second child, affecting their interactions with the oldest child. However, most mothers strive to balance their attention between both children. Children are able to recognize the arrival of younger siblings. They will also express their feelings about their parents' preferences and their expectations of their future siblings. In sum, the current study uncovered the complex dynamics in two-child families and stressed the significance of equality and emotional support in contributing to a harmonious family atmosphere. These findings can provide insights to guide parenting strategies and help tackle the challenges posed by family structure changes in the context of China's two-child policy.

Keywords: Second child, preference, parenting.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Since the full implementation of the two-child policy in 2016, the country has gradually moved from the one-child era to the two-child or even multiple-child era. According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the annual birth population in 2021 will be 10.62 million, with the proportion of two children rising from around 30% in 2013 to around 43% in 2021. With the increase in the number of families with many children, the traditional type of family structure has been transformed as a result. This change has directly led to the allocation of hard and soft resources in the family to become an important issue, such as parental care, attention, room, purchase of new toys, clothes, which has consequently given rise to more problems of family education and parent-child relationship [1].

Most parents in an average family, influenced by traditional concepts, will think that after the birth of the second child, the elder will automatically complete the promotion. They will say to the eldest son, "You are already an elder brother/sister, so from now on, you have to understand, accept unconditionally more attention from mom and dad to your younger brother/sister, know how to share, and also learn how to take care of your younger sibling." And so on. But in fact, many of the oldest are also still children at this time, or even just two or three years old. In their consciousness, not only do they fail to fulfill their parents' expectations, but they also suffer a huge psychological fallout due to their parents' sudden change of attitude. In their own loss and parental reproach, there will be a large number of deviant behaviors, such as behavioral regression, emotional instability, and even for the younger siblings of intentional harm.

Jing Jihuan suggests that external factors and children's own lack of self-confidence can easily cause them to feel insecure and thus resent someone or something. The inner negativity of this part of the child will then be very serious, resulting in serious mental health problems [2].

1.2. Synthesis of Research

There have been studies on how to solve the mental health problems of the oldest child in a two-child family. Kong Yuling proposed to start with family, society and school at the same time. Parents should be good at communication, separate rewards and punishments, and praise each other; schools can let children experience taking care of their younger siblings by carrying out mixed-age activities; and society should provide more positive guidance and strengthen the training of parents' awareness [3].

Su Jing suggests that it is most important for parents not to be biased and to treat their children in a consistent manner. The requirements should not be relaxed because the second child is young. At the same time, it is important to pay attention to the feelings of the oldest, and to achieve consistent standards when dealing with the same problems [4]. Parents should not be partial not only to the second child, but also to the oldest child. In order to create a good family atmosphere conducive to the common development of the two children, parents must not be favoritism too much. For the smooth growth of the second child, the oldest child must also be treated equally without favoritism [5]. In addition, a loving family environment is also crucial. Because the healthy growth of children, need to be full of love. In the two-child family, only to give the two children the same love of the daily environment, can let them have a tolerant heart, to make up for the oldest's "loss", and common inheritance of love and care [6].

As more attention is paid to the mental health of the oldest child in a two-child family, more and more professional resources are taking the initiative to address such issues. The kindergarten helps the oldest child to look forward to the arrival of the second child through on-site sharing by the mother-to-be, the theme activity "I'm going to be a mom", and the drawing activity "Drawing the family of kisses in your heart" [7]. The kindergarten has been helping the oldest child to look forward to the arrival of the second child.

Regarding sibling relationships in second births, some researchers have also suggested that they are influenced by factors related to the age of the parents at childbearing and whether the eldest child is aware of the impending arrival of the second child in advance [8].

The influence of parents' attitudes on sibling relationships, then, still deserves further investigation.

1.3. Research topics

This study will use semi-structured interviews with multiple groups of families in an attempt to explore the impact of parental behaviors on parent-child relationships from the perspective of "favoritism" toward the eldest child.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Semi-structured Interviews

This study will take the form of semi-structured interviews

2.1.1 Definition of Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are informal interviews conducted according to a rough outline. In this kind of interview, the interviewer can make necessary adjustments flexibly according to the actual situation of the interview, as for the way and order of questions, the way the interviewee answers, the form of the interview record, as well as the time and place of the interview, there are no specific requirements, they are all dealt with flexibly by the interviewer according to the situation.

2.1.2 Purpose of the Interviews

This study uses in-depth and detailed interviews to understand how the oldest child in a two-child family behaves differently after the birth of a younger sibling, and the range of changes in the child after the parental family adopts different coping measures. The commonalities and personalities are

summarized, and the comparative analysis infers that the parents' different attitudes towards the eldest child thus have an impact on for the parent-child relationship.

2.1.3 Selection of Interviewees

This study focuses on analyzing the reasons from the conclusions, and in order to reduce the factors affecting the differences, four groups of families were randomly selected for in-depth interviews in the same age range, with the same educational level, and with the same gender of the two babies. The age gap of the children was 2-4 years.

2.2. Design of the Interview Outline

The structure of the interviews in this study was informed by the design of the previous study [9].

2.2.1 Father and Mother

Basic information includes parents' age, education, family's financial status, whether there are elderly people or babysitters, children's age, gender

Parents' Attitude includes parents' attitude toward their children before and after the birth of their younger siblings. For example, when there was only one child, the way they talked and handled problems, etc., and after the birth of the younger sibling, the way they treated the same things with both children and the way they handled the interaction between the two children, etc.

Changes in the child: changes in the oldest child before and after the birth of the younger sibling, ability to take care of himself/herself, dependence on parents, attitude toward the younger sibling, etc.

Detecting the parents' plans and preparations for the second child.

Detecting the parents' specific behavior before and after the birth of the second child (treatment of the oldest child and the second child)

Detecting the changes in the attitude of the oldest child before and after the birth of the second child.

2.2.2 Children

Interview questions concern:

Attitude toward the second child: Whether or not the children are looking forward to the arrival of the younger sibling, and the psychological and attitudinal behavior of the younger sibling.

Feelings toward parents: How did the older child's feelings toward his/her parents change after the birth of the younger sibling?

2.3. Research Process

Through long-term observation and communication, four groups of two-child families were selected for in-depth interviews. These four groups of families all have same-sex second children, with an age difference of 2 to 3 years. The parents were from different backgrounds and had different ways of communicating with their children on a daily basis. These four groups of families were selected for in-depth interviews, and detailed materials will be compiled through parental recollections and descriptions and children's oral narratives and on-site observations. This study will analyze this information to obtain information about the impact of parental "favoritism" on parent-child relationships in two-child families.

2.4. Methods of Analysis

This study will use a comparative analysis drawing on prior study [10].

3. Result

3.1. Findings of Parent Interview

Table 1. Basic information about the interviewees

Family	Age range	Education	Primary caregiver	Child's gender	Age(years old)
A	35-40	Bachelor's degree	Eldest child:mom, second:grandma	Male	Eldest child:7, second child:5
B	35-40	Bachelor's degree	Eldest child:mom, second:nanny	Female	Eldest child:8, second child:5
C	35-40	Bachelor's degree	Eldest child, second:grandma	Male	Eldest child:9, second child:6
D	35-40	Bachelor's degree	Eldest child:mom, second:grandma	Female	Eldest child:4, second child:1

As shown in Table 1, all four groups of families had elderly people or nannies to help with the children in the early stages.

Table 2. Interview respondents' preparedness for the birth of their child

Family	Eldest child	second	Elements of preparation	Did you talk to the eldest child in advance?
A	Six months of pregnancy preparation	unforeseen	Dietary taboos, adjustments to work and rest, see a fertility clinic, adjustments to no avail, give up, accidentally pregnant	no
B	unforeseen	program	Diet, work and rest	There is advance communication, storytelling, picture books
C	unforeseen	unforeseen	No special preparations. I've always been careful with my diet.	The oldest was happy to communicate with him when she was pregnant. But after the second one was born he was often jealous again
D	unforeseen	program	Dietary taboos and exercise	Yes, communicate the benefits of having a younger sibling through picture books, cartoons, etc., and often have your older sister talk to your younger sister when you're pregnant

As shown in Table 2, out of the 4 groups of families, the birth of the second was planned in 2 groups of families and the others were unwanted pregnancies. Three groups of families had communicated with the oldest about the existence of the second child and one group of families did not make any communication.

Table 3. Changes in mothers after the birth of the second child

Family	Changes in motherhood	time-sharing	Changes in older children	The second child's character
A	The body will be worse. Loss of patience with older children	Mothers spend time with their older children.	Mischievous, suspected ADHD, disobedient, needs to be stopped violently	Can read words and is well behaved. Seeing that my brother is often rejected and seldom puts forward his own ideas
B	Much less physical, energy, and more emotionally unstable	Mom spends time with the oldest child when she has time for herself, nannies and seniors with the oldest two mainly	Crying and jealous, but gets better after a while and will take care of her sister voluntarily	He's a good boy. He's obedient. He's very protective of her sister.
C	Physical deterioration and emotional deterioration. With older children Loss of patience		Jealous, often questioning: why did you take your brother and not me?	Better behaved, very considerate
D	Decreased energy, stamina, and all, and more emotional instability. Subconsciously wishing that my sister would know better and could have more time to take care of my sister	Basically, the oldest two are taken by the old man except for bedtime, and when there's time, they take the older sisters	Easily loses his temper and imitates her sister	So far mom can only be seen as easy going, very smiley, and will initiate conversations with people

As shown in Table 3, mothers in all four groups reported that after giving birth to their second child, they became physically and energetically worse, more emotionally unstable, and their attitudes toward their older child became worse.

In terms of time allocation, all four groups of families reported that the older child was the main caregiver and the second child was left to the rest of the family.

After the birth of the second child, the eldest child had obvious changes, jealousy, disobedience, (this is also related to age, because the age difference between the two babies is 2~3 years old, and they are just going through the first rebellious period).

Table 4. Attitudes of the eldest child and other members after the birth of the second child

Family	Big Kid's Attitude	Attitudes of other family members
A	Accept the brother.	Older people will ask older brothers to give way to younger ones, but mom usually corrects them
B	Looking forward to sister	Most of the time she can be independent, but occasionally her parents expect her sister to help and give in to her sister
C	From expectant, to resistant, to very loving.	The younger brother has no patience with the older brother and yells and scolds him at every turn, hoping that the older brother will understand and give in to the younger brother
D	Love her's sister.	Older people will ask to give way to the second, but parents try to be as independent as possible, with the second taking precedence in the matter of sleep

As shown in Table 4, all four groups of families showed acceptance and love in their attitudes towards the second child. Families with male children expressed "love for each other". The parents, on the other hand, made a concerted effort to treat both children equally, with some occasional favoritism on the part of the elderly.

Table 5. Mothers' expectations of their children

Family	eldest child	the second child
A	Don't be at the bottom of the list, character-wise, not anxious, not anxious, more confident	Timid, active mine avoidance, no ideas. Wish I could have my own opinion.
B	Healthy enough to take care of her sister	Two sisters supporting each other
C	Behave yourself and get better grades.	Good health, better grades.
D	Physically healthy, can take good care of myself, strong inside, sunny and confident	Mom is happy with what she has gotten so far and is looking forward to a healthy and happy future.

As shown in Table 5, the expectations of the four groups of families for the eldest child are mainly in terms of obedience, health, and so on. For the second child, it is expected to be more active, to support each other and to be healthy.

Table 6. Relationships between children and between children and parents

Family	Between children	Children and parents	Reasons for change in older children
A	That's good. It's always a united front against your parents.	When disobedient, violently suppress until obedient, run the family like a company, general harmony	Children are born with their personalities. Parents can't change much.
B	Harmony with Love	They're both very protective of their parents.	Greater parental influence
C	They're very friendly now, though they fight a lot, and they're very protective of their brother in front of outsiders.	Family members are used to talking loudly and yelling dominates daily communication	It's hard to share your love, but you can't help it. You have to accept it.
D	Harmony, with love	Calm communication is the main focus, with some threatening language used when disobedient (understand that it's bad, but can't help but use it).	Parental neglect, especially the emotional impact of mothers, is extremely influential

Table 6 shows that in all 4 groups of families, the relationship between siblings is harmonious and loving, and although the boys are more likely to fight with each other, they are unified in their treatment of both outsiders and parents. When analyzing the reasons for the changes in the older children, all three groups of families believed that the children's personality had a great deal to do with the family, and one group of families believed that the personality was innate and had little influence with the acquired environment.

Table 7. Parents' willingness to reproduce

Family	How to Evaluate Yourself	Willingness to reproduce
A	There's no such thing as a perfect parent. Try your best.	regret having a second child
B	They tried to do their best.	Mom said she could have the baby if she wanted to.
C	Mom thinks she's not a perfect parent and will be biased because her brother is small and understanding	unwilling
D	Qualified parent, but would like to be able to better manage my emotions	Getting older and otherwise wanting more kids

As shown in Table 7, all 4 groups of families felt that they did not do a perfect job and that there was room for improvement, but that they did their best. Two groups of families with girls expressed the desire to have another child, while 2 groups of families with boys said they did not want to have another child.

3.2. Content of Children's Interviews

Table 8. Knowledge of the older child about the second child

Family	Did you know there would be younger siblings?	Knowledge of the second child	Do you want your parents to have another one?
A	they don't know. They're too young.	I know a little bit about it. I know the games my brother likes to play.	The older brother said he would like to have another brother and more good friends
B	I know. Mom said so.	It's cute.	Wouldn't mind another sister.
C	I know. I'd love to have a brother.	Know a little. Know brother's preferences.	The younger brother is fine, the younger sister is not (when interviewing the younger brother, the younger brother thinks that the older brother has been bullying him and doesn't like him)
D	I know. Looking forward to it.	Carefully observe the changes and growth of your sister (related to the family environment, parents will often share the changes of your sister)	Pushing for a baby, hoping for another brother and sister, "I take care of my sister and my mom takes care of my younger siblings"

As shown in Table 8, all 3 groups of families communicated in advance about the arrival of the second child, and the oldest child indicated that he was aware of it and was looking forward to it. They were concerned about their younger siblings and were able to speak fluently about the preferences of the older two. the older children in all 4 groups of families indicated that they could accept more siblings.

Table 9. Changes at home in the eyes of older children

Family	Changes at home	Signs of Love	Who loves you more	Who's the favorite?	What parents are expected to do
A	With an extra brother, parents have less time to share everything.	More companionship	Mom, when things get tough, mom will fix them.	Mom	Big kids want their moms not to yell at them when they don't do their homework.
B	Nothing's changed.	Doing crafts together	mother	Mom and sister.	play more together.
C	Nothing's changed.	Let me play the game.	He's not thinking. He doesn't care.	younger brother	A little less control.
D	More kid stuff in the house, fences and such	There's always someone to comfort when you're not happy. Like grandparents when mom doesn't like it.	Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa and Sister love	both love	Allowed to do things that you normally wouldn't be allowed to do. (like buying ice cream) and it's just fun for everyone to play together

As shown in Table 9, when the second child was born in the four groups, the older child was basically 2-3 years old and did not have many memories, while the older sister in one group of families said that there were many more things for the younger child to play with at home.

Regarding the expression of love, the older children of the four groups of families said that they were accompanied by their mothers, two groups of families thought that their mothers loved them the most and they loved their mothers the most, one group of families said that they did not care who loved them the most and they loved their younger brothers the most, and one group of families thought that all the family members loved them, and they loved all the members of the family.

4. Conclusion

The parents of the above four groups of families have a certain degree of knowledge about how to deal with the relationship between the two babies. Under the premise of having someone to share the burden, each mother will consciously give more time and energy to the oldest child. Most of the time, they can treat both children as independent individuals, but subconsciously there are still some expectations that "the elder one should give in to the younger one" and "I hope the elder one knows better".

After giving birth to the second child, the mothers of the four groups of families experienced a certain decline in health, energy and emotions, and their attitudes towards the oldest child also changed significantly, resulting in the oldest child's behavioral regression and emotional instability, but the situation improved as the child grew older.

The children's interviews showed that the parents' clear "preference" for the oldest child in terms of time and energy did not have a significant negative effect on the relationship between the parents and themselves, but, on the contrary, had a significant positive effect on the relationship between the siblings.

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