

Hey, that's my shirt! Sibling conflict harms trust and communication between adolescent siblings

April 5 2010

Whether it is about who gets to ride shotgun or who wore a shirt without asking, siblings fight. While seemingly innocent, a recent study at the University of Missouri reveals that certain types of fights can affect the quality of sibling relationships. MU researchers identified two major types of conflict among adolescent siblings and found that conflicts about personal space have a negative impact on trust and communication between siblings.

"The first conflict area we found includes issues about physical and emotional personal space, such as borrowing items without asking and hanging around when older [siblings](#) have friends over," said Nicole Campione-Barr, assistant professor in the MU Department of [Psychological Sciences](#). "When these issues were present, both younger and older siblings reported less trust and communication. The second conflict area includes equality and fairness issues, such as taking turns and sharing responsibilities. These conflicts had no impact on [relationship](#) quality."

While both younger and older siblings reported personal space conflicts, older siblings reported these conflicts more frequently, according to the researchers. This suggests that older siblings are more sensitive to personal space issues and may indicate the beginning of their separation from the family.

The findings of this study can help parents, psychologists and other individuals who work with teens understand the impact that conflicts can have on sibling relationships. For parents, Campione-Barr suggests setting up family boundaries to reduce sibling conflicts about personal space.

"Parents need to establish and enforce family rules about respecting privacy, personal space and property," Campione-Barr said. "However, when sibling conflicts occur, there needs to be negotiations between siblings. Previous research tells us that parents should step aside because they have a tendency to make matters worse."

In the study, the researchers interviewed and surveyed pairs of siblings, ages 8-20. This study is the first to examine types of sibling conflict between [adolescent](#) age children. Research has traditionally focused on sibling relationships among younger children. Campione-Barr is conducting a follow-up study to examine the impact that conflicts have on the adjustment of adolescents as individuals.

More information: The study, "Who Said You Could Wear My Sweater? What Adolescent Siblings Fight About and How it Affects Their Relationship," recently was published in *Child Development*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Hey, that's my shirt! Sibling conflict harms trust and communication between adolescent siblings (2010, April 5) retrieved 22 November 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-04-hey-shirt-sibling-conflict-adolescent.html>

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