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Do siblings help or hinder child development?

Evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort

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Context. Child development has been described as strongly related to parental economic and time investments in their child. Under such a model, siblings “compete” for parental resources and are considered as a hindrance for child development. However, having siblings could also bring benefits.

Objective. To explore the association between having siblings and child development.

Data. The Millennium Cohort Study included 19,244 UK families with children born in 2000-2002. Families were interviewed when the cohort child was 9 months, 3, 5 and 7 years. The child's development was measured in terms of cognitive, verbal and behavioural outcomes. The impact of number of siblings on the risk for a child to fall into the bottom 10% of the distributions of these developmental outcomes was explored.

Results and discussion. Number of siblings increased over time. The probability of being in the bottom 10% of the developmental distributions is higher when the cohort child had at least 2 siblings. It is also higher if the cohort child is a boy, and particularly, if the mother is less educated. Being an only child was also less favourable than being in a two-child family (having just one sibling), on some of the outcomes (especially those measuring cognitive development).