

Changes and Implications of Parents' Differential Treatment of Adolescent-Aged Offspring from Before to During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

- Restrictions and regulations during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns presented unique challenges for families.
- Both children and parents were forced into unprecedented situations, increasing the time they spent together and limiting the time they spent with others (Cassinat et al. 2021).
- Maternal differential treatment (MDT), the degree to which mothers treat their children differently, is associated with youths' sibling relational qualities (Shanahan et al., 2008). Specifically, more differential treatment is associated with less harmonious sibling relationships.
- Household chaos, a marker of household disorganization that increased during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cassinat et al., 2021), is positively associated with maternal differential treatment (Atzaba-Poria et al., 2008).
- We hypothesized that mothers' differential treatment of their children would increase from before to during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic given the multiple stressors that families experienced.
- We also expected that mothers' differential treatment of siblings would be negatively related to siblings' relational intimacy and this link would be further moderated by the level of family chaos in the household.

Method

Participants

- Two adolescent siblings and one parent from 682 families from five US Midwestern states.
 - Older siblings (51% girls): $M_{age} = 15.67$ ($SD = .68$)
 - Younger siblings (48% girls): $M_{age} = 13.14$ ($SD = 1.11$)
 - Parents (85% mothers): $M_{age} = 45.15$ ($SD = 5.37$)

Procedures

- Adolescents and parents provided self-report data using confidential web surveys.
 - Wave 1: March 2019 – February 2020 (prior to COVID-19 pandemic)
 - Wave 2: May – June 15, 2020 (COVID-19 pandemic shutdown phase)

During the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns, **maternal differential treatment** was **negatively** associated with youth's **sibling relationship intimacy**, but **only** when the household was characterized by a **high degree of chaos**

Figure 1. Youth Siblings' Relational Qualities as Predicted by Maternal Differential Treatment and Household Chaos During the COVID-19 Pandemic Shutdowns



Method (continued)

Measures

- Both older and younger siblings reported on their intimacy with mothers and siblings respectively using Blyth & Foster-Clark's (1987) measure of perceived relational intimacy. Maternal differential treatment (MDT) was indexed using the absolute difference between reports of older and younger siblings' perceived intimacy with their mothers.
- Parents reported on the level of household chaos using the Confusion, Hubbub, and Order Scale (CHAOS; Matheny et al., 1995).

Analytic Strategy

- To test whether MDT changed from before to during the COVID-19 pandemic, we used repeated measures ANOVA.
- To test the links between MDT, family chaos, and youth's sibling relationship qualities we used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression.

Results

- Inconsistent with expectations, MDT did not change from Wave 1 to Wave 2.
- Consistent with hypotheses, MDT was negatively related to sibling intimacy for both older and younger siblings.
- These MDT main effects were further moderated by the level of household chaos during the pandemic (see Figure 1).
- In conditions of low chaos, MDT was not related to sibling intimacy for either older or younger siblings; however, in conditions of high chaos, MDT was negatively related to sibling intimacy for both older and younger siblings.

Discussion

- Despite the increased levels of chaos that families experienced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, mothers did not increase their differential treatment of siblings.
- The links between maternal differential treatment and sibling intimacy, however, were shaped by the amount of chaos in their household.

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