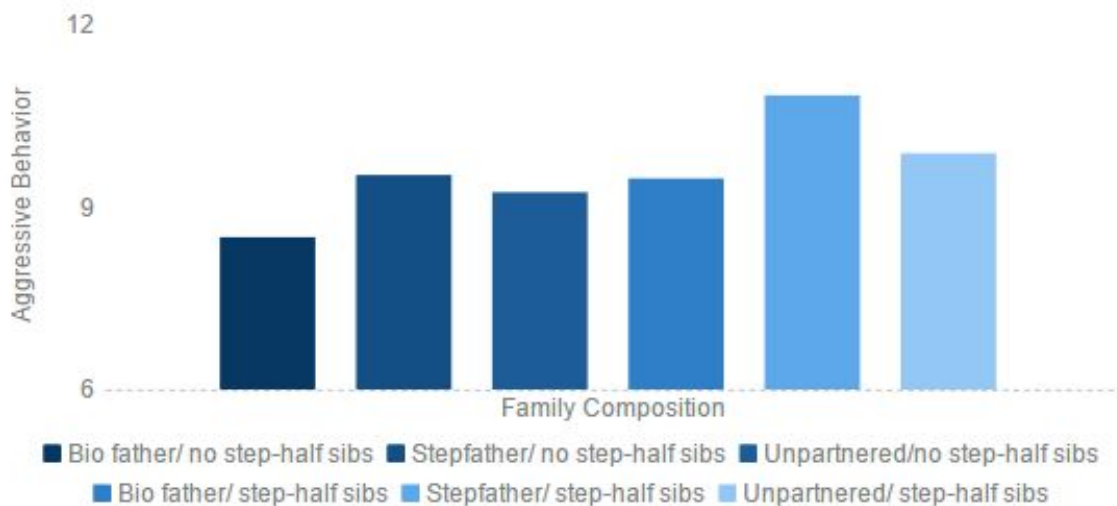


Aggressive behavior more common in children with half- and step-siblings

January 27 2016, by Diane Swanbrow

Aggressive behavior more common in children with half- and step-sibs



About one in six U.S. children—more than previously thought—live with half- or step-siblings just before starting kindergarten, according to a new study.

And these [children](#) behave aggressively more often, on average, than do other children.

Many previous studies on how family complexity affects children's development has focused on the union status of parents and their relationship to the child. But, according to Paula Fomby, a sociologist at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, most [young children](#) in complex [sibling relationships](#) live with both of their own biological parents or with a single mother, not with step-parents.

The role of sibling relationships has received less attention, even though siblings are often a child's most important peer relationships.

Fomby is the first author of an article on family complexity, siblings and children's aggressive behavior at school entry forthcoming in the February issue of the journal *Demography*. The research was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation. Fomby's co-authors are Joshua Goode and Stefanie Mollborn of the University of Colorado.

The researchers analyzed data from a nationally representative sample of approximately 6,500 U.S. children and their families from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study.

Each young child's primary parent, usually the biological mother, reported on how often the child displayed aggressive behavior at age 5. This included temper tantrums, physical aggression, destruction of others' property and shows of anger. Heightened aggression in young children suggests a lack of school readiness.

Parents' union status and the presence of step- or half-siblings operated independently in predicting children's aggressive behavior, the researchers found. But, on average, children living with step- or half-siblings had aggressive behavior scores in kindergarten that were about

10 percent higher than peers whose parents had the same union status but no step- or half-siblings in the household.

In addition to parents' union status, Fomby and colleagues took many factors into account to explain the heightened levels of aggression in these children, including material resources and mothers' parenting styles. But the reason for the link between complex sibling relationships and more frequent aggressive behavior remained elusive, they say.

Other potential explanations might include the developmental timing of when step- and half-siblings enter a child's household, and the potentially uneven distribution of material and emotional resources to each child within a family.

Another factor could be parental absence, Fomby suggests.

"Across family structures, all children living with a step- or half-sibling have one thing in common: at least one child in the household has an absent biological parent, either living elsewhere or no longer living," she said. "Prior work has shown that having an absent parent, and particularly an absent father, is associated with a higher risk of [aggressive behavior](#) in younger children. In future work, we plan to consider how the behavior of children with an absent parent might impact other children in the household for whom both parents are present."

Provided by University of Michigan

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