

Differential Parenting

V. Nidya

Special Educator & Psychologist, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Differential parenting is when parents treat one child different from another. This paper aims to bring out the various aspects of differential parenting among the siblings. Interview method was used to gather data for this qualitative research from 20 participants chosen by convenience sampling. Results show that the first child is more matured and independent. Second child is more pampered. Parents prefer the child who listen and obey them better. Differential treatment exists in most cases to address the different developmental, emotional or physical needs of the children.

Keywords: First child, second child, sibling, differential parenting

Introduction

Differential parenting is when parents treat one child different from another. This can even lead to parental favouritism. Research has found that parental differential treatment can result in a lower self-esteem, more depressive symptoms, and more incidents of anxiety and aggression in the less favoured child. (Meunier 2012)

The firstborn respondents showed a lower level of inferiority than those of the birth order categories but also lower in superiority level compared to only child respondents who notably showed a higher level of superiority than those of different birth orders. While the middle child did not exhibit a higher or lower level of inferiority and superiority. These findings aligned with Alfred Adler's birth order theory and lend support to the hypothesis that birth order plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's perception of inferiority and superiority. (Lacson 2023)

Mothers engaged in more physical encouragement, social exchange, didactic interaction, material provisioning, and language with their firstborns than with their second born. Notably, only maternal nurturing (e.g., feeding, holding) did not differ in mean level when mothers were with their two infants. (Bornstein 2019)

Parental differential treatment has short and lasting consequences for children's development (Buist, Dekovic, & Prinzie, 2013).

Findings suggest that when parent-adolescent relationships were measured at the same age for both siblings, parents experienced less conflict with their second-born as compared with their firstborn adolescent offspring and exhibited greater knowledge of their second-born offspring's daily activities as compared with their firstborns' daily experiences. These results are consistent with the notion that parents may learn from their child rearing experiences. (Shawn 2004)

Analyses revealed greater levels of differential treatment in families with disabled children. Dimensions of differential treatment were linked to children's adjustment and sibling relationships. (McHale 1992)

Mothers' behaviour toward first as contrasted with second children is on the average less warm emotionally

and more restrictive and coercive. The age difference between first-and second-born siblings is an important determiner of the mother's behaviour toward the two children. (Lasko 1954)

Findings suggest that last-borns were most often favoured because they were seen as understanding and empathetic or in greater need of mothers' attention and support. (Kincaid 2022)

Objective

This paper aims to bring out the various aspects of differential parenting among the siblings.

Methodology

Interview method was used to gather data for this qualitative research. 20 participants, who are parents of two school-age children were chosen by convenience sampling. Open-ended questions were asked to the participants to understand their thoughts on differential parenting among the siblings and their experience as a child and a parent.

Results and Discussion

- First child is generally more independent and behaves in a matured manner. The birth of a sibling and the expectations to behave like a responsible big brother / sister might have instilled this behaviour.
- Second child is more pampered. The child remains a child for a longer time than the elder one, whose 'child' tag is taken away with the birth of a sibling.
- Care required by a child varies with age. When the age gap between siblings is more, the different type of care provided to each child may be perceived as differential parenting by the elder child.
- From being 'more pampered', the younger child becomes the 'more scolded' at around the primary level of schooling when the child's playful attitude manifests as a problem.
- The child who listens to and obeys the parent better is preferred, be it first or second.
- In cases where a child has better capabilities than the sibling, say for example in academics, the expectation from each child changes too. The child who is perceived to possess a better capability might be expected to score more marks while the other child's average mark may be considered sufficient. Since it cannot be explained explicitly to the children, it may be perceived as a differential treatment by the child.
- The difference in abilities may continue through higher education, leading to varied course choice and career options to suit each child and further extending to aspects of personal life like choice of life partner, financial status of the family, growth of next generation and so on. At some point, the siblings may become so different from each other in all ways. The less privileged sibling may hold a lifelong thought that the parent was biased towards him/ her.
- Few parents whose one child is more demanding than the other, the parent tries to compensate for the other undemanding child by saving money for him / her or providing support in any other available / required form.

Conclusion

Although parental differential treatment may denote parents favouring one sibling over another, in many instances, differences in parenting may simply reflect parents meeting the varying developmental, emotional, and physical needs of their children (Kowal 1997). Even if parents are not actually participating in parental differential treatment, if children perceive that it is occurring, they can still be negatively

affected. It is the responsibility of parents to make the children understand that the differential treatment that may exist or perceived is to actually address the differences among the children, but not to create it.

References

1. Meunier, J. C., Roskam, I., Stievenart, M., Moortele, G. V. D., Browne, D. T., & Wade, M. (2012). Parental differential treatment, child's externalizing behaviour and sibling relationships: Bridging links with child's perception of favouritism and personality, and parents' self-efficacy. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 29(5), 612-638.
2. Lacson, Jefferson & Lementillo, Dale & Ramoso, Nicole & Saavedra, Jhon. (2023). A Comparative Study of Birth Order and Their Feelings of Inferiority and Superiority Chapter 1. 10.13140/RG.2.2.16848.07688.
3. Bornstein MH, Putnick DL, Suwalsky JTD. Mother-infant interactions with firstborns and second borns: A within-family study of European Americans 2019
4. Buist KL, Dekovic M, & Prinzie P (2013). Sibling relationship quality and psychopathology of children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 33(1), 97–106.
5. What Parents Learn from Experience: The First Child as a First Draft? Shawn D. Whiteman, Susan M. McHale, Ann C. Crouter First published: 13 February 2004
6. McHale, S. M., & Pawletko, T. M. (1992). Differential Treatment of Siblings in Two Family Contexts. *Child Development*, 63(1), 68–81.
7. Lasko, J. K. (1954). Parent behaviour toward first and second children. *Genetic Psychology Monographs*.
8. Kincaid R, Suitor JJ, Gilligan M, Ogle D. "BECAUSE HE'S MY BABY": HOW MOTHERS EXPLAIN FAVORING THEIR FIRST- AND LAST-BORN CHILDREN IN LATER LIFE. *Innov Aging*. 2022 Dec 20;6(Suppl 1):627.
9. Kowal A, & Kramer L (1997). Children's understanding of parental differential treatment. *Child Development*, 68, 113–126.