

Siblings' Perception of Parental Neglectful Behaviors

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The purpose of this research is to study differences in perceived parental neglectful behaviors between siblings from a child's perspective. The data were collected using the Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scales (MNBS) questionnaire from 158 sibling pairs in grades 4, 5, and 6 who attended the same elementary schools. Younger sibling experienced emotional neglect by their parents significantly more than older siblings. Same gender sibling pairs and older brother-younger sister pairs perceived their parental neglectful behaviors in a similar manner. However older sister-younger brother pairs showed that the younger brother perceived significantly more neglect than his older sister. This study clearly illustrated that siblings' perceptions of their parents' neglectful behaviors exists differently within a family contrary to previous studies which have shown that siblings' perception of parental neglectful behaviors are similar. The results suggest that the younger brother in mixed-gender sibling pairs are far more likely to experience neglect than any other sibling. Thus, even though siblings can be at equal risk in experiencing parental neglect, the effects can vary depending on the birth order.

Keywords : parental neglectful behavior, sibling's perception, children's point of view

Child neglect is one form of child abuse, which also encompasses physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. In South Korea, there have been growing efforts to reexamine child neglect in addition to sexual and emotional abuse. Greater social attention is required in the area of child neglect, since neglect has been one of the most frequently observed types of child abuse (National Child Protection Agency of Korea [NCPAK], 2011). Moreover, neglectful behaviors have been found to have consequences on all aspects of child development including physical, emotional, and cognitive development (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). However, social awareness about child neglect is low compared

to other types of child abuse in South Korea because the immediate impact of child neglect on children is not as severe and obvious to others. As a result, studies on parental child neglect have been limited compared to other types of child abuse.

Despite the fact that child neglect has similar incidence rates and severe consequences to that of other types of child maltreatment, one of the reasons for the lack of research on child neglect is due to the ambiguity of its characteristics and definitions. The definition of child neglect widely varies based on the social, cultural, and ethical values of each country (Korbin, 2002). In South Korea, child neglect is defined as any negligent behavior by the parent that is prohibited by the Child Welfare Law, Article 29 clause 4. In other words, child neglect is defined as parents' or caregivers' failing to provide necessary support or care, which is

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fundamentally different from the nature of other types of child abuse.

Both the cause and effect of child neglect are different from physical and sexual abuse. The characteristics of child neglects and its etiology are significantly different from that of child physical and sexual abuse. Thus, the study of child neglect should be approached differently than other types of child abuse. For example, most types of child abuse occur when a parent expresses his/her emotions only to a selected child rather than to all children in the family (Kolko, 1996). On the other hand, child neglect generally occurs to all the children in a household if a parent exhibits neglectful behavior. Unlike other types of child maltreatment, child neglect is not targeted toward a specific child. This is due to the fact that child neglect occurs when there is an absence in specific caretaking behavior rather than the presence of inappropriate behavior. Therefore, when there is a report of child neglect, NCPAK provides services to all the siblings in a household.

However, studies have found that siblings may have different experiences within the same household. Myers and Winters (2002) suggested that even under the same parents and the same environment, siblings could have different experiences and perceptions of neglect based on their cognitive development, maturity, gender, or age. This implies that siblings can perceive the same parental behaviors differently.

According to previous studies on parent attitudes, parents report that they do not treat their children differently (Kee, 2004). However, children perceive that parents' attitudes toward them differ from their siblings (Feinberg, Neiderhiser, Howe, & Hetherington, 2001). Adolescents reported that parents' attitude toward them were discriminatory over that of their siblings (Plomin, Reiss, Hetherington, & Howe, 1994). Even when adults were asked to recall their childhood memories, they also reported that their parents' behaviors differed between themselves and their siblings (Lichtenstein et al., 2003).

Most parents do not think that they

discriminate between their children. At least they intentionally try not to do so. However, since parent-child relationships and interactions are affected by multiple factors, it is impossible to interact with all the children in the household in the exact same manner. Adler believed that the unique personalities of siblings are due to differences in parents' rearing attitudes based on their birth order (Hyun, Kim, Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2009). That is, depending on their stereotypes, beliefs, or personal preferences, parents may either consciously or unconsciously exhibit different parental behaviors and have different expectations for each child based on their gender, birth order, and age (Sang, 1999). Therefore, children can perceive their parents' behaviors, particularly neglectful behaviors, differently based on their status within the family.

Most studies have been conducted with a focus on one child in the family. These study findings have been generalized to all children in the family (Kantor et al., 2004) even though a child has his or her own unique perception and understanding of the surroundings. Thus, studies on child neglect should take all of the children in a family into account. However, there is a limited number of studies involving siblings from the same family in South Korea. This is especially caused by common beliefs that child neglect is due to a lack of parenting skills (Lee & Yoon, 2004). This reflects the focus of previous research on child neglect, which has typically been focused on the micro environment of parents and children. Hines, Kantor, and Holt (2006) studied parental neglectful behaviors across siblings. They found that there were significant differences in the perception of child neglect between male and female children. However, their study focused on the differences in perceptions based on the gender of the sibling, and did not consider sibling status variables such as gender of birth order. Moreover, the research implications from the international studies may also have limitations in South Korea. First, the perception between domestic and international studies about parent-child relationship may be different. Contrary to Western countries, there is a strong preference for male children in South

Korea. This preference is heavily influenced by Confucianism. In addition, only recently has awareness of child abuse and neglect become prevalent in South Korea.

In this study, parental neglectful behaviors are studied from the children's point of view rather than the actual parental behaviors of the neglectful parent. Moreover, this study investigates the effect of parental neglectful behaviors on not just one particular child in the family, but on all siblings to examine how the effects vary based on the gender and the birth order of siblings.

Thus, the goal of this research is to study the overall characteristics of parental neglectful behaviors, and the differentiated perceptions of such behaviors on children. This research, which examines child neglect from a child's perspective, is expected to provide a broader understanding of child neglect for child protection agencies or organizations, and to be used as foundational knowledge for child abuse and neglect education program development.

Methods

Participants

The sample consists of 158 pairs of siblings in grades 4, 5, and 6 who attend the same elementary schools. Among the 316 children who participated in this study, 148 were boys (46.8%) and 168 were girls (53.2%). There were 121 fourth graders (38.3%), 77 fifth graders (24.4%), and 118 sixth graders (37.3%). There were 84 sibling pairs of siblings who were the same gender: 37 boy-boy and 47 girl-girl sibling pairs. Among the 74 pairs of siblings with different genders, there were 32 older brother-younger sister pairs and 42 older sister-younger brother pairs. Table 1 displays the complete demographic information of the participants in the study.

Measures

The participants completed the Multidimensional

Neglectful Behavior Scale (MNBS) questionnaire (Straus, Kinard, & Williams, 1995). MNBS is one of the best multidimensional assessment tools that allows researchers to examine child neglect with diversity and specificity. The questionnaire has been used by the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRCK, 2006) to better reflect Korean culture. The modified questionnaire has 47 questions, which are three questions less than the original questionnaire. The questionnaire also measures five domains.

The first domain measures physical neglect such as not providing proper food, clothing, shelter, and medical care or leaving children in unclean or dangerous environments. The second domain measures emotional neglect such as not complimenting children, not paying attention to children's academic accomplishments and leisure activities, or not consoling them when they are troubled. The third domain measures cognitive neglect such as not paying attention to children's leisure activities, not providing educational opportunities, or not spending quality time with children. The fourth domain measures supervision neglect such as leaving children alone, not paying attention to where their children are or what their children are doing when they are not with the parents, or not addressing children's misbehavior. The fifth domain measures environmental neglect in the family such as letting children observe domestic violence or not being able to protect children from dangerous environments.

Each question is measured using a 5-point scale, where 1 refers to "never" and 5 refers to "always." Any questions that used negative statements were reverse coded. The scores were calculated so that higher total scores indicated greater levels of children's neglect experiences. The overall reliability of the measurement, measured by Cronbach's Alpha, was 0.93. The reliability of each domain was 0.80, 0.79, 0.80, 0.77 and 0.81 for physical, emotional, cognitive, supervision, and family environmental neglect, respectively.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Participants (N=316)

Variables		N (%)	
Gender	Male	148 (46.8)	
	Female	168 (53.2)	
Grade	Grade 4	121 (38.3)	
	Grade 5	77 (24.4)	
	Grade 6	118 (37.3)	
Sibling composition	Same gender	Older brother-Younger brother	37 (23.4)
		Older sister-Younger sister	47 (29.7)
	Different gender	Older brother-Younger sister	32 (20.3)
		Older sister-Younger brother	42 (26.6)

Analysis

A pilot study was conducted prior to this study in order to assess whether children understood the questionnaire correctly and was conducted using convenience samples. Five schools, which included one in Seoul, two in Jeonju, and two in Gunsan (the latter two cities are located in North Jeolla province), participated in the survey. These schools are located in permanent rental housing for low-income families, and school officials in these schools were asked for cooperation. Among the study sample, 156 sibling pairs were selected for the study. Initially, the questionnaires were completed by 441 students from 65 classes from grades 4 to 6 whose siblings were also in grades 4 to 6. However, among them, 122 could not be included because of a lack of information and three did not return the survey.

Descriptive analysis was first conducted. The paired t-test was then performed on children's perception of parental neglectful behaviors.

Results

The mean of siblings' overall perception of

parental neglectful behaviors was 2.43 ($SD=0.78$), which is between "sometimes not" and "often not." In other words, siblings generally perceived that their parents occasionally committed neglectful behaviors. The cognitive ($M=2.98$, $SD=.81$) and emotional ($M=2.85$, $SD=0.78$) neglect scored highest, which suggested that children experienced cognitive and emotional neglect most frequently. Children perceived that their parents occasionally neglected to provide adequate supervision ($M=2.46$, $SD=0.71$). Family environmental ($M=1.95$, $SD=0.58$) and physical ($M=1.86$, $SD=0.58$) neglect were perceived least frequently.

There was no statistical difference in children's perception of parental neglectful behaviors across gender. However, children perceived parental neglectful behaviors with significant differences depending on their birth order. Younger siblings ($M=2.40$, $SD=0.57$) perceived neglect more frequently than older siblings ($M=2.28$, $SD=0.59$; $t=2.44$, $p<.05$). When differences in parental neglectful behavior were compared across the five domains of neglect, younger siblings perceptions of emotional neglect were greater than those of the older siblings at a statistically significant level

Table 2
Siblings' Perception of Parental Neglectful Behaviors

Types of Neglectful Behaviors	Total n=316 M(SD)	Order		Same Gender				Different Gender			
		Older (158 pairs) M(SD)	Younger (158 pairs) M(SD)	Older Brother (37 pairs) M(SD)	Younger Brother (37 pairs) M(SD)	Older Sister (47pairs) M(SD)	Younger Sister (47pairs) M(SD)	Older Brother (32pairs) M(SD)	Younger Sister (32pairs) M(SD)	Older Sister (42pairs) M(SD)	Younger Brother (42pairs) M(SD)
		t		t		t		t		t	
Physical	1.86 (.58)	1.72 (.59)	1.80 (.56)	1.67 (.61)	1.82 (.52)	1.81 (.58)	1.86 (.59)	1.71 (.53)	1.55 (.47)	1.66 (.65)	1.90 (.62)
		1.56		-1.42		-.53		1.35		-2.14*	
Emotional	2.85 (.78)	2.66 (.77)	2.85 (.76)	2.75 (.72)	2.96 (.67)	2.77 (.76)	2.90 (.73)	2.62 (.84)	2.53 (.81)	2.48 (.78)	2.93 (.79)
		2.78**		-1.53		-1.24		0.57		-2.86**	
Cognitive	2.98 (.81)	2.90 (.86)	3.03 (.76)	2.90 (.76)	2.99 (.68)	3.05 (.85)	3.14 (.79)	2.99 (.95)	2.73 (.75)	2.66 (.84)	3.17 (.74)
		1.79		-0.60		-.73		1.78		-3.48**	
Supervision	2.46 (.71)	2.31 (.73)	2.42 (.74)	2.35 (.79)	2.43 (.69)	2.36 (.65)	2.49 (.72)	2.40 (.81)	2.26 (.86)	2.14 (.70)	2.45 (.73)
		1.77		-0.51		-1.21		0.99		-2.66*	
Family Environment	1.95 (.58)	1.92 (.56)	1.98 (.60)	1.97 (.58)	2.00 (.62)	2.04 (.56)	2.03 (.67)	1.82 (.49)	1.81 (.57)	1.83 (.60)	2.05 (.53)
		1.05		-0.18		.06		0.08		-2.12*	
Total	2.43 (.59)	2.28 (.59)	2.40 (.57)	2.31 (.59)	2.43 (.51)	2.38 (.57)	2.47 (.56)	2.29 (.61)	2.16 (.60)	2.14 (.61)	2.49 (.58)
		2.44*		-1.18		-1.18		1.29		-3.40**	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

($t=2.78$, $p < .05$). There were no statistical differences in siblings' perceptions of the other four types of neglect.

The same gender sibling pairs perceived their parental neglectful behaviors in a similar manner while the mixed gender sibling pairs had different perceptions of their parent's neglectful behavior depending on their birth order. Older brother-younger sister pairs showed that their perceptions of neglect experiences by their parents were similar. On the other hand, older sister-younger brother pairs showed that younger

brothers' perceptions of parental neglectful behavior were significantly greater than those of their older sister ($t = -3.40$, $p < .05$).

The complete analytic results with the mean and standard deviation of children's perceptions of parental neglectful behaviors based on birth order and gender are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

Despite the fact that neglect is the most

frequently occurring child abuse type, there is a lack of social awareness and policies to prevent and regulate child neglect occurrence. In addition, there is only a small number of studies on child neglect. In this regard, this study makes a significant contribution to the field by addressing an issue that has not been well-examined.

The findings from the analysis suggest that children perceive cognitive, emotional, and supervision neglect more frequently than physical and family environmental neglect. This implies that children are more sensitive to the lack of parental care in the cognitive and emotional domain compared to the physical environment. This finding is consistent with the report from the NHRCK (2006), suggesting that research on child neglect should examine its consequences not only on children's physical development, but also on emotional adjustment as well. Considering that the income level of research participants was concentrated on the lower and middle class levels, there needs to be greater improvement in policy efforts focused on addressing problems of low-income children's physical neglect, which often occurs when children have to be alone at home without supervision after school or wander around the neighborhood because they do not have anywhere to go until their parents return from work (e.g., expansion of after school programs and community child centers). In particular, policy efforts to enhance cognitive and psychological development of these children are needed.

Younger siblings perceived parental neglectful behaviors more than their older siblings at a statistically significant level; they were especially sensitive to emotional neglect. In other words, younger siblings perceived that they were receiving less attention compared to their older siblings. This could be explained by higher expectations and greater emphases on responsibility of older siblings by their parents (Sang, 1999). Since emotional neglect is related to parents being inattentive to child's play or achievement or the lack of praise and comfort, the difference in perception between the first and the second child may be due to the fact that the

first child is more likely to receive a parent's attention. The perceptual difference between elder and younger siblings may be mostly in the area of emotional neglect, but it also seems to reflect Korean parents' sentiments that require the first child to take on the parental role in their absence. Also, if the age gap between siblings was large, perception of parents' neglect by the second child might be mitigated by the attention received from an elder sister or brother. However, the age gap of the siblings in this study was less than two years so that the elder child's care for the second did not have much impact on the younger sibling. As a result, the awareness of parents' absence of certain behaviors may have been perceived to be greater.

When gender and birth orders were considered, older sister-younger brother pairs' perception of parental neglectful behaviors was significantly different. For mixed gender sibling pairs, younger brothers experienced significantly more perceived neglect in all subscales. This finding was partially similar to the research findings that were reported by Hines et al., (2006). Thus, younger brothers in mixed gender sibling pairs are far more likely to experience neglect than any other sibling gender or sibling pair. No differences were found in the other three types of pairs. Taking the birth order and gender into consideration, in particular, the gender difference in perception is only significant when the first child is a girl and the younger child is a boy. The perceptual differences that were found between elder sister and younger brother in all aspects of child neglect in this study were surprising. That is, a boy with an older sister may experience more neglect from parents than other siblings in various life domains. The result is contrary to the expectation that girls are more likely to perceive parents' neglect than boys based on the traditional preference for sons in South Korea. The same-sex siblings seemed to have perceived their parents' behavior similarly because parents' behavior pattern, expectation, and demand toward same-sex siblings had no difference. However, parents' rearing attitude and intervention might be different depending on the child's sex, which may result in perceptual

differences by the opposite-sex siblings. Parents may be more protective of their daughters due to the greater risk of child sexual abuse than sons. While the elder son may understand his parents' special care for his younger sister, younger sons may recognize this as alienation, which may result in greater perceptions of parents' neglectful behavior for him than for his elder sister.

This study clearly illustrates that children may have significantly different perceptions of parental neglectful behaviors even with the same parents. This finding is contradictory to what has been found in the study by Jean-Gilles and Crittenden (1990), which suggested that siblings' experiences of neglect are uniform unlike other types of child abuse. Previous theories that support every child's perception of neglect to be at a similar level within a family need to reflect upon the findings of this research.

Additionally, children's perceptions of neglect were not similar to adults' perceptions, suggesting that neglect should be studied from the children's point of view rather than solely from the parent's view. Even though siblings can be at an equal risk of experiencing parental neglect, the perceptions of the neglectful experiences can greatly vary depending on the child's gender and birth order.

Future study should focus not only on gender and birth order, but also on personal characteristics, adaptive skills, and other related variables. In addition, if subsequent studies include perceptions of the father and mother, which were not included in this paper, findings from these studies may provide additional insights. A greater number of studies in child neglect between siblings that employs diverse research methods is needed.

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