

## SUPPORT, SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT AND SOCIAL COMPETENCIES IN ADOLESCENTS WITH DISABLED SIBLINGS

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*Abstract:* This research is focused on correlation-comparative analysis of school achievement, social support and social competencies in adolescents with a disabled sibling (physical disability, neurodevelopmental disease, or other) and adolescents with a non-disabled sibling. We used the CASSS (Malecki and Demaray, 2002), the SSI (Riggio et al., 1993) and the average of school marks received on the last year-end report. 69 adolescents with a disabled sibling and 63 adolescents with a non-disabled sibling, aged from 14 to 20 ( $M= 16.77$ ;  $SD=1.615$ ) participated in the study. The results indicate a significant positive relationship between the school achievement of adolescents with a disabled sibling and their social support from their parents, and also between social support from parents and the social sensitivity of adolescents with a disabled sibling. Furthermore, we have proven *significantly worse school achievement in adolescents with a disabled sibling*.

*Key words:* social support in adolescence, social competence of adolescent, sibling with disabilities, school achievement of adolescent.

### INTRODUCTION

Our life is unpredictable and brings various pitfalls even in the form of one of the siblings being born handicapped, or during life one acquires an illness, a disorder or a health problem that to a greater or lesser extent disrupts the optimal state of the family atmosphere. School achievement, social competences and social support are the phenomena that determine a person's life, with adolescence being a particularly sensitive period in this respect.

According to Slavík (1999), school achievement is recognition of a student's level of knowledge, which is in close relation to his/her learning activities. Dubayová and Čekanová (2014) claim that teachers also describe a school-successful pupil as someone who, among other things, is supported by the family. Prchal and Landolt (2011) found that the lack of parents (in the sense that they have to pay more attention to a child with a disability), is the reason for the poor academic success of a healthy individual. Also Gregory et al. (2019) found out that siblings of people with autism are at increased risk of a weaker sense of perceived school belonging and competencies in the school context.

Malecki and Demaray (2002) define social support as the individual's perception of general support or specific supportive behavior provided by people in the social system who improve his/her functioning and/or protect him/her from adverse consequences. Mičková (2014)

examined the relationship between social support and emotional will stability in adolescents, concluding that there is a significant relationship between the level of anticipated social support and the feeling of security. She also stated that a higher level of anticipated social support is significantly related to a positive experience of emotional relationships within the family. Sibs, a British organization, maintains on its website (<https://lnk.sk/dju5>) that it is estimated that there are two children in each class growing up with a sibling who is disabled or has special educational needs or serious long-term health problems. And because teachers do not know this information about them, or their needs are overlooked, it leads to problems with well-being and progress in school.

Riggio et al. (1993) present the results of research by Matson and Ollendick (1988) which showed that the acquisition of social competencies is considered important for the healthy mental adaptation of children and adolescents. Havelka and Bartošová (2019) state that the area of mutual influence of siblings is also the development of the other, primarily in the psychosocial area, i.e. behavior development, nature or ability to create and maintain interpersonal interactions. Strohm (2017) mentions that siblings of children with special needs can often have trouble telling friends about their siblings because they think these friends would not understand them. These healthy siblings usually feel isolated and different from those around them. Even when parents try, it is very difficult for them to be able to allow their healthy offspring the opportunity to participate in various social or extracurricular activities (Havelka and Bartošová, 2019). Healthy siblings may also feel shame or embarrassment in connection e.g. with the appearance or behavior of their sibling with a disability, therefore, they may prefer to avoid social contact. Goudie et al. (2013) empirically examined, based on testimonies of parents, whether an individual who has a sibling with a disability will show a higher impairment of functioning (behavioral, emotional) than an individual who has a healthy sibling. The results showed that siblings of children with disabilities had more problems with interpersonal relationships, psychopathological functioning, functioning at school, and the use of leisure time.

Due to the previous researches we aim to investigate the associations between school achievement, social support (teacher, parents and friends) and social competencies of adolescents who have disabled sibling. We have established assumptions of the negative relationships between school achievement and social support and social competencies and positive relations between social support and social competencies in adolescents with affected siblings. Taking into account previous research, we assumed that school success would be worse for adolescents with disabled siblings and also that adolescents with disabled siblings would show a lower level of social support and social competencies than adolescents with healthy siblings.

## **METHODS**

### *Sample of Research*

The research sample consisted of 69 adolescents with a sibling with a disability and 63 adolescents with a healthy sibling. Disabled siblings had various type of disorders (autism and autism spectrum disorders (ASD), specific learning disabilities and ADHD / ADD, Cerebral Palsy, Down syndrome, hydrocephalus). The total number of participants was 132 (women = 52, men = 80) aged 14 to 20 years ( $M = 16.77$ ;  $SD = 1.615$ ). The selection of the research sample

was occasional. In the case of adolescents under the age of 18, we obtained informed consent from their parents.

### *Instrument and Procedures*

The research participants filled in two questionnaires and basic data about themselves and also answered the question about school grades from selected subjects. The research was carried out by filling in questionnaires mostly online. We used: CASSS - Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale from Malecki and Demaray (2002), specifically, we used a modified translation from Komárek, Ondřejová, and Mareš. CASSS consists of 5 subscales in its basic form, but for a limited scope of work and its purpose, we used only 3 scales – social support from: parents, teachers, and from friends. The task of the participants was to answer 36 items and in each comment only on its frequency of occurrence on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 = "Never" to 6 = "Always"), we omitted the severity for the mentioned reasons. Cronbach's Alpha in this case ranged from 0.936 to 0.951.

Social competencies were measured using SSI – Social Skills Inventory from Riggio. SSI is recommended from the age of 14 and we operated only with the verbal, i.e. social level, where belong subscales (Riggio et al., 1993): Social Expressivity (SE), Social Sensitivity (SS), and Social Control (SC). Participants express their response on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = "Not at all like me" until 5 = "Exactly like me". Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.814 to 0.894.

School achievement was measured through school grades, i.e. participants in the introductory part of the questionnaires wrote school marks from the following subjects: Slovak language and literature, mathematics, English (and/or another foreign language) which they received on the last report. In this research, we worked with the arithmetic mean of these school grades.

## **RESULTS**

Comparative analysis (Table 1) of school achievement of adolescents with siblings with disabilities and adolescents with healthy siblings proved the existence of statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.01$ ). We did not find statistically significant differences between adolescents who have a sibling with a disability and adolescents with a healthy sibling in any of the scales of social support or the scales of social competencies.

*Table 1. Comparative analysis of school success, social support and social competencies of adolescents with siblings with disabilities and adolescents with healthy siblings*

	<b>Sib. with D</b> (n1 = 69)		<b>Sib. without D</b> (n2 = 63)		<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>d</b>
	<b>M<sub>1</sub></b>	<b>SD<sub>1</sub></b>	<b>M<sub>2</sub></b>	<b>SD<sub>2</sub></b>				
<b>SA</b>	1.779	.639	1.460	.506	3.187	127.51	<b>.002**</b>	.554
<b>SSP</b>	51.43	13.146	53.87	10.982	-	130	.252	.020
<b>SST</b>	43.90	11.442	46.48	12.735	-	130	.223	.021
					1.151			
					1.225			

<b>SSF</b>	53.69	11.772	56.14	11.888	-	130	.234	.021
					1.194			
<b>SE</b>	39.62	13.440	42.41	11.315	-	130	.202	.022
					1.284			
<b>SS</b>	50.84	10.866	49.02	9.402	1.027	130	.306	.017
<b>SC</b>	44.86	10.970	48.33	10.981	-	130	.071	.031
					1.819			

*SA – school achievement expressed by the average of marks; SSP – social support by parents; SST – social support by teachers; SSF – social support by friends; SE – social expressivity; SS – social sensitivity; SC – social control; SST – social support from teachers; Sib. with D – siblings with disability; Sib. without D – siblings without disability; t – Student T-test; df – degrees of freedom; p – level of statistical significance; \*\* p < .01; d – Cohen’s d; M – arithmetic mean; SD – standard deviation*

In examining the relationships between the school achievement of adolescents with a disabled sibling and their social support, we have not demonstrated the existence of statistically significant relationships. However, correlation analysis (Table 2) revealed a significant relationship only between school achievement and social expressivity ( $r = 0.309^{**}$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) of adolescents with disabled siblings.

*Table 2. Correlation analysis of school achievement of adolescents with disabled siblings and their social support and social competencies*

	School Achievement		
	r	p	n
<b>SSP</b>	-.089	.467	69
<b>SST</b>	-.205	.091	69
<b>SSF</b>	-.132	.281	69
<b>SE</b>	.309	<b>.010*</b>	69
<b>SS</b>	.025	.838	69
<b>SC</b>	.174	.154	69

*r – Pearson’s r; p – level of statistical significance; \*p < 0,05; n – number of participants; SSP – social support from parents; SST – social support from teachers; SSF – social support from friends; SE – social expressivity; SS – social sensitivity; SC – social control*

In examining the relationships between social support and the social competencies of adolescents (Table 3), who have a sibling with a disability, we were able to prove a statistically significant positive relationship between social support from parents and social sensitivity ( $r = 0.296^{*}$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) of these adolescents. Other correlations did not prove to be significant.

Table 3. Correlation analysis of social support of adolescents who have a sibling with a disability and their social competencies

	SSP			SST			SSF		
	r	p	n	r	p	n	r	p	n
<b>SE</b>	.050	.682	69	.024	.843	69	.134	.274	69
<b>SS</b>	.296	<b>.014*</b>	69	.165	.175	69	.145	.234	69
<b>SC</b>	.076	.533	69	.213	.079	69	.105	.389	69

*r* – Pearson's *r*; *p* – level of statistical significance; \**p* < 0,05; *n* – number of participants; SSP – social support from parents; SST – social support from teachers; SSF – social support from friends; SE – social expressivity; SS – social sensitivity; SC – social control

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the research was to examine the relationships between school achievement, social support, and social competences in adolescents who have a sibling with a disability. We also focused on examining the differences in the mentioned variables in adolescents with disabled siblings and in adolescents with healthy siblings.

We can state that we have confirmed significant differences between adolescents with a disabled sibling and adolescents with healthy siblings in the area of school achievement. At this level, we are inclined to the opinion of experts that siblings of disabled people face the usual problems that commonly arise among siblings but are also associated with unusual situations related to the specifics of their brother or sister (Havelka and Bartošová, 2019). It is possible that parents may not have enough time or energy to help their healthy children prepare for school, or to be interested in or they do not have time or energy to provide tutoring. It is also possible that a healthy adolescent does not have a suitable environment (e.g. due to manifestations in the sibling's behavior related to his diagnosis) to be able to adequately prepare for school. The explanation may also be that adolescents with a disabled sibling prefer to spend time away from home so that they do not have to face the company of a disabled sibling and the associated challenges, and not have enough time to learn for school.

We found statistically positive relationship between school achievement and the social expressiveness of adolescents with a disabled sibling, which means that the more expressive an adolescent is, the worse the school grades has. It is possible that such expressive behavior may lead them to problematic situations with teacher or authority, which may be reflected in worse school achievement. Possible explanation is that in several surveys (Prchal & Landolt, 2011; Strohm, 2017), respondents mentioned that they are influenced by the reactions of the environment to their disabled sibling, whether to his/her appearance or behavior. It is therefore possible that if an adolescent is used mostly to negative comments, ridiculous or offensive reactions, he/she may not sufficiently distinguish between social behavior and communication of other people, which can be neutral or well-meaning. If he/she also transfers

this to the school environment, where he/she inadequately decodes the communication of teachers or classmates, it can lead to the reluctance to prepare for school and attend it, which also means a path to worse results. However, in connection with school achievement, it is necessary to emphasize the situation that teaching was realized mostly online due to COVID - 19 pandemic, which is associated with new and unusual experiences and opportunities.

We also confirmed the statistically significant relationship between social support from parents and social sensitivity in adolescents with disabled siblings. Kao et al. (2012) state that active communication between parents and a healthy child about a sibling's disability is important, as they try to explain to him/her why it is important to understand and help the disabled sibling. On the other hand Hastings (2003) highlights the finding that healthy siblings are less affected by a sibling's disability if the family has sufficient financial resources. Transferred to our results, if the adolescent considers e.g. "Pocket money", or the option to buy what he/she wants, with the support of his/her parents, then it is possible that this in some way strengthens his/her ability to be socially competent in terms of sensitivity, control, but significantly especially in the area of expressiveness.

In association with teachers, Kolaříková (2018) found that 40% of them had information that their student had a disabled sibling, but in no way paid special attention to him/her or supported him/her. We can therefore assume that although the teachers of our participants do not have to express such negative attitudes, their support is not high enough to significantly affect the social competencies or support adolescents who have a sibling with a disability. It is also possible that the online environment (due to COVID-19 pandemic) does not allow teachers or friends to provide as much support to adolescents with a disabled sibling as it would be in an optimal epidemiological situation, which may be reflected in our statistically insignificant results.

The results can be also influenced by the adolescent's attitude to the sibling's disability. While some take disability as punishment and ask "why their family," others call it a gift that has taught them to appreciate little things. Similarly, the social experiences of these adolescents are diverse, as some do not have friends or do not meet them in any significant way, while others do not suffer significantly in this area.

## **LIMITS**

The present study has several limitations. At first we used self-explanatory methods that were filled in online that might distort the results. Secondly the research sample should consist of more participants to generalize the results.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

In Slovakia and abroad, the issue of siblings of children with disabilities is not sufficiently researched as the respondents themselves expressed the pleasure that someone is interested in them. Therefore, we recommend that further research pay more attention to the issue of children or adolescents who have a sibling with a disability and examine various factors that can help them to live better life.

## CONCLUSIONS

We face many challenges during adolescence. These can be multiplied if the adolescent has a sibling with a disability. Although the results in this area are not completely uniform, it seems that the presence of a disabled sibling in adolescents is associated with a higher level of social expressiveness than one of the social competencies and poorer school achievement. These data have been confirmed by others, suggesting that the school achievement of adolescents with disabled siblings is worse than that of adolescents with healthy siblings. It is important to mention that the social sensitivity of adolescents with a disabled sibling is significantly associated with social support from parents. It is therefore necessary to say that although the presence of a sibling with a disability does not automatically mean a negative phenomenon in the life of an adolescent, it is especially important for parents to pay attention to him/her and be interested in his/her school functioning.

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## SOCIÁLNA OPORA, ŠKOLSKÝ PROSPECH A SOCIÁLNE KOMPETENCIE ADOLESCENTOV SO SÚRODENCOM S POSTIHNUTÍM

*Predkladaný príspevok sa zameriava na korelačno- komparačnú analýzu sociálnej opory, školského prospechu a sociálnych kompetencií adolescentov, ktorí majú súrodencia s postihnutím. Použili sme dotazník na meranie sociálnej opory (CASSS, Malecki et al, 2002), dotazník mapujúci sociálne kompetencie SSI (Riggio et al, 1993) a priemer známok na koncoročnom vysvedčení. Výskumnú vzorku tvorilo 69 adolescentov, ktorí majú súrodencia s postihnutím a 63 adolescentov so zdravým súrodencom vo veku od 14-20 rokov (M=16,77, SD= 1,615). Výsledky preukázali signifikantne pozitívny vzťah medzi školským prospechom adolescentov, ktorí majú súrodencia s postihnutím a sociálnou oporou od rodičov a tiež medzi sociálnou oporou od rodičov a sociálnou senzitivitou týchto adolescentov. Potvrdil sa tiež štatisticky horší prospech u adolescentov, ktorí majú súrodencia s postihnutím.*

**Kľúčové slová:** sociálna opora, školský prospech, sociálna kompetencia, súrodenec s postihnutím