

Dr. Avidan Milevsky

Dr. Avidan Milevsky is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania and a family psychotherapist at Wellspring Counseling in Towson, MD. Dr. Milevsky earned a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology (Florida International University) and a B.L.S. in Behavioral Sciences (Barry University). Additionally, he has graduate training in mental health counseling and child and adolescent therapy from Chestnut Hill College. While at Florida International University he received the GSA Social Sciences prize for his work on sibling relationships.

He was the founding chair of the Psychology Department at Touro College South and is a visiting professor at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Dr. Milevsky serves as the director of the Center for Parenting Research at KU. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in child and adolescent development. His research on families, parenting, and siblings has produced over 100 papers presented at conferences in the United States, Canada, and Europe. He published close to 20 papers in peer-reviewed journals and is a contributor to the Encyclopedia of Adolescence. His most recent book on siblings titled "Sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence: Predictors and outcomes" was published by Columbia University Press.

He has been interviewed by national media about his work including stories in The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Associated Press, Real Simple, and Allure Magazine. Additionally, Dr. Milevsky is a columnist for Psychology Today and The Huffington Post on sibling issues. He has been a guest expert on TV and radio including an appearance on Public Radio International's "The Takeaway."

Testimony Submitted by Dr. Avidan Milevsky to the Pennsylvania House of Representative's hearing of the Children and Youth Committee on House Bill 642 "Standing for siblings to seek partial custody or visitation"

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Good morning Chairwoman Kathy Watson and other distinguished members of the Children and Youth Committee. As someone who has researched and worked with children for many years it is a particular honor for me to be presenting here today. Allow me to begin by thanking Representative Youngblood for inviting me to offer testimony on this important piece of legislation.

My name is Dr. Avidan Milevsky. I am an Associate Professor of Developmental Psychology at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania and a family therapist at Wellspring Counseling in Towson, Maryland. I have published extensively on sibling and family issues including my most recent book by Columbia University Press on sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence.

After being contacted by Representative Youngblood about offering my assistance with this legislation, I had the opportunity to delve into sibling issues in the law. I was disappointed to learn about the minimal role played by siblings in family law. It seems as though the majority of domestic-relations law focuses on the parental and matrimonial dyads with little attention given to the sibling bond.

Even grandparents have greater leverage in family law issues than siblings. Although grandparents are beloved and they clearly are important support providers for children, their role pales in comparison to the role played by siblings, as we will see. This limited focus on siblings is particularly disturbing considering the overwhelming scientific evidence highlighting the importance of the sibling relationship throughout life.

Allow me to elaborate:

Over fifty years of research on families has indicated that warm family relations in childhood and adolescence is associated with multiple positive outcomes including happiness, emotional maturation, close social connections, and even academic achievement. These studies have shown effects across gender, ethnicity, religion, and race.

Within the complex web of family dynamics, a relationship that has been receiving considerable attention in more recent psychological research is the sibling bond.

The inimitable and vital role played by siblings throughout life is becoming more evident by family researchers and clinicians. The evolving focus on siblings is being perpetuated by several factors. First, recent statistics suggest that close to 90% of western individuals have some type of sibling (i.e., biological, half, step, adoptive). Furthermore, the most long-lasting and enduring relationship an individual develops during life is the sibling relationship. Considering the average proximity of age between siblings and the fact that the relationship between siblings begins early in life, a sibling bond may exist a lifetime.

The sibling bond early in life serves as the foundation for learning about future relationships with friends and significant others. Fostering the sibling relationship in childhood can create a bond that is particularly supportive as the siblings develop throughout their adolescent and adult years – a true lifetime gift. Studies have even indicated that successful aging is linked with closeness between siblings.

Empirical investigations by myself and others have revealed that children who have a positive relationship with siblings show greater emotional understanding, greater cognitive abilities, greater social understanding, greater moral sensibility, and better psychological adjustment. These positive findings have been replicated in studies with adolescents and adults. For example, one of the many children we interviewed in our ongoing study on siblings noted “I love my brother dearly. He is my other half. He completes me. Without my brother I don’t know what I would do. I love him more than the world. He is like my right hand and I am his.”

Beyond the advantages of sibling support in normative situations, researchers and clinicians are beginning to appreciate the advantages of sibling warmth for non-normative family situations and disadvantaged youth as well.

Known in the literature as experiencing ecological risk, this risk includes a myriad of personal, family, neighborhood, and community risk factors. Studies have pointed to multiple negative cognitive, social, emotional, and psychological outcomes resulting from being raised with these adverse conditions. However, research on sibling relationships and ecological risk suggests that positive sibling relationships may buffer against the negative outcomes found in children experiencing these elevated levels of risk.

For example, in a series of studies known as sibling compensation research, the topic of my doctoral dissertation, sibling relationships have been found to compensate for the absence of parental emotional or psychological support. When siblings grow up in a family which is not offering them an ideal parental relationship, children are often forced to form their own supportive social structure including an intensification of the sibling bond.

Furthermore, studies have shown that for children under high family stress conditions having a close sibling bond is associated with less emotional disruptions. More specifically, and critically relevant to the legislation being considered here today, several studies have focused on sibling support as a buffer from the risk associated with parental marital dissatisfaction and divorce. Children with a close relationship with siblings have been found to have lower levels of emotional and behavioral problems during the divorce process and after. These positive findings have been seen in some studies even after a ten-year follow-up. Clinical accounts of the post-divorce transition have reported on many sibling dyads who felt the need to take care of each other as a response to the familial turmoil. Similarly, this protective effect of siblings has been seen in studies that examine joint sibling placement in foster care.

Hence, examining the aggregate of studies on the buffering effects of sibling support indicates that siblings may offer protection for children and adolescents experiencing elevated ecological risk. Siblings have been shown to serve as a buffer for children and adolescents experiencing family distress, living in single-parent homes, and those placed in foster-homes. As an adolescent participant in one of our studies indicated about her sister “I think the biggest reason why we are so close is because growing up our family had problems. So we both realized that we had to be each other’s supporters in life. As of today my sister is the greatest sister and is also my best friend, I could not ask more from her.”

Legislation to allow for siblings to seek partial custody or visitation when appropriate is a natural extension of the overwhelming scientific evidence highlighting the critical and unmatched role played by siblings throughout life. By definition, this legislation will be impacting children who have experienced some type of family turmoil. Allowing for the sibling relationship in these circumstances to offer warmth, support, and comfort is clearly in the best interest of children.

The extent of the application of my work on siblings has been limited to the benefit derived from my publications by clinicians integrating sibling issues in family therapy and my own clinical work. The potential of applying my work on siblings to public policy, as this legislation does, is profoundly gratifying and will enhance the lives of countless children in meaningful and long lasting ways. I commend this committee for considering such important legislation.

Thank you for this opportunity to present here today and for your continued work and efforts on behalf of the children of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

I will be glad to take your questions.

Submitted by:

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