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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Child social competence, household chaos and parent-child relationships in early childhood: a multilevel twin-sibling design

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ABSTRACT

Children's social competence enables the maintenance of social interactions with others and is linked to diverse positive outcomes. Existing studies rarely distinguish shared-family factors that explain differences between families from those that explain social competence differences between siblings. In particular, despite general interest in twins' social competence, little is known about differences between twins in the same family. In secondary data analyses of 172 families with 6-year-old twins from the Twins Family and Behaviour (TFaB) study, multilevel models considered between-family correlates (demographics, household chaos, ambient maternal positivity and negativity) and within-family correlates (child-specific maternal positivity and negativity) in the prediction of twins' social competence. Accounting for demographics, twin zygosity and household chaos, only ambient and child-specific maternal negativity were significant predictors. Findings emphasize relative and absolute levels of parental negativity towards children growing up in the same home associated with their social skills in the early school years.

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KEYWORDS Social competence; multilevel modelling; siblings; twins; parenting

Child social competence refers to a child's ability to interact appropriately and effectively with individuals in social situations. Social competence encompasses various social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural skills, such as responding to social cues, turn-taking and relating to others (Rantanen et al., 2012). Synthesizing research on child social competence can be difficult because of the multifaceted nature of the construct. This is commonly overcome by focusing on individual aspects relating to social competence, such as emotion regulation or prosocial behaviour (sharing, helping, being kind).

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Yet, the broader construct of social competence is key. Low levels of social competence in childhood have been linked with behavioural adjustment difficulties (e.g., Erkul & Sonmez, 2020; Hukkelberg et al., 2019), as well as to psychopathology (Huber et al., 2019). In contrast, high levels of social competence have been shown to be associated with positive outcomes, not only in the short term but also later in life, including educational achievement and employment outcomes during early adulthood (D. E. Jones et al., 2015). Understanding factors that promote or hinder the successful acquisition of social competence in children is crucial. However, existing studies typically consider such factors in relation to the social competence of just one child in a family, despite the fact that most families include more than one child (Office for National Statistics, 2023), and neglecting twins. With increasing recognition of the importance of different experiences and outcomes for children living in the same home (Eradus et al., 2024; Jensen & Thomsen, 2024), here, we consider factors important for within- and between-family variance in child social competence.

Household chaos, parenting and child social competence

Bioecological models (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) suggest that, as a part of the child's most immediate setting (the microsystem), the home environment is of remarkable importance for child development. Parentchild relationships are a key aspect of this microsystem, and links between these relationships and children's diverse psychological adjustment have been demonstrated over many years (Maccoby, 2015). Negative aspects of these relationships (e.g., parental criticism, negative parental attributions, harsh parenting) and positive aspects (e.g., warmth, parental sensitivity, affection) are established correlates of socio-emotional and behavioural adjustment in expected directions: parental positivity relates to positive outcomes and parental negativity to negative ones. In terms of social competence, parental negativity has been of particular focus, relating to lower levels of social competence in children (e.g., Attili et al., 2010; S. Jones et al., 2002). Also considered, though less so, is parental positivity, which has been shown to be associated with social aptitude and competence (Guajardo et al., 2009; Jeon & Neppl, 2019).

Other aspects of the microsystem that strongly correlate with children's social development are family factors, such as socioeconomic status (e.g., household income, parental education, occupation; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), family cohesion (e.g., dependability and closeness of family members; Leidy et al., 2010), and household chaos. Household chaos refers to a home environment characterized by high levels of noise, and a lack of a sense of calm and routine (Matheny et al., 1995; Star et al., 2023). Chaos is increasingly seen to relate to adverse outcomes for children as well as



adults in the home (Marsh et al., 2020; Oliver & Midouhas, 2023). Compared to a wealth of evidence supporting a relationship between household chaos and adverse behavioural outcomes in children, our understanding of links between chaos and child social competence is less robust. Household chaos has been negatively associated with some key components of social competence such as prosociality (Marsh et al., 2020) and self-regulation (e.g., Crespo et al., 2019), but findings are mixed, seen to be in part because of differences in measurement and age. For example, a recent longitudinal study of toddlers over one year found no relationship between maternal reports of social competence and chaos as assessed during home visits and personal communication (Chimed-Ochir et al., 2022). Dumas et al. (2005) found no links between maternal reports of household chaos and social competence including laboratory assessments in preschoolers but established notable links among primary-school aged children. Although starting school likely reduces the amount of time children spend in the home environment, it is possible that associations between household chaos and child social competence are manifested more clearly when the demands on children's social competence are greater as they partake in more frequent and intense social interactions with a variety of people (e.g., Kim-Spoon et al., 2017). It is also possible that parental perceptions of chaos are crucial for understanding key aspects of the home (Wachs, 2013).

Family-wide and child-specific effects

The majority of research on children's psychological adjustment only includes data from one child per family. Such studies overlook the reality that within-family differences in how parents raise and interact with their children can be influential (Jensen & Thomsen, 2024) and that this parental differential treatment (PDT; e.g., receiving less parental positivity and more negativity than one's sibling) can predict differences in sibling outcomes. For example, in a recent meta-analysis, children experiencing more parental hostility than their siblings are likely to have more internalizing/ externalizing problems than them (Eradus et al., 2024). Importantly, multilevel sibling models, as used here, allow the simultaneous examination of child-specific and family-wide (shared by siblings) predictors of social competence. Evidence of using these models to better understand child social competence is scarce, but implications are that there is an important role for child-specific parenting over and above what the family-wide 'ambient' parenting environment can predict. For example, a recent study of primary-school aged children in China suggested that, over and above ambient parenting, child-specific parental warmth and conflict were associated with empathy and peer exclusion, and child-specific negative



parenting was associated with empathy, peer exclusion, emotion regulation and prosocial behaviour (Lam et al., 2021).

Current study

Although prosocial behaviour has been a focus of prior multilevel sibling studies considering household chaos as well as parenting (e.g., Aytac & Pike, 2018), to our knowledge, no previous study to date has examined overall social competence predicted by chaos and parenting in this way. In a sample of primary-school aged twins born in England and Wales, we used multilevel modelling (MLM) to consider between- and within-family factors in the prediction of maternal reports of children's social competence. Demographic variables (household income, marital status and maternal education), twin zygosity and household chaos, as well as shared (family-wide) maternal positivity and negativity were included as between-family factors. Childspecific maternal positivity and negativity (i.e., PDT in positivity and negativity) were the within-family factors. Note that positive and negative parenting are considered within the same model since, while not two sides of the same coin, positivity and negativity are associated and important to consider in parallel (Oliver & Pike, 2018). We anticipated that a) household chaos and parenting would independently significantly predict children's social competence over and above other sociodemographic factors and that b) familywide and child-specific maternal positivity and negativity would significantly and independently predict child social competence in expected directions.

Method

Sample and procedure

Data were previously collected as part of the Twins Family and Behaviour Study (TFaB). TFaB is a longitudinal study of families with twins born in England and Wales between 2009 and 2010. Recruitment and details of the full sample (283 single- and two-parent families) are described elsewhere (Mark et al., 2017). Four waves of data were collected for which informed consent was provided at each stage; the current secondary analysis focused on cross-sectional parent-questionnaire data from the fourth time point. Onehundred-and-seventy-three families participated at this time point ($M_{child age}$ = 6.00 years (SD = 0.50)), of whom 172 families (344 children; 54.1% girls) had complete data for both children for all relevant measures. Zygosity was determined using maternal reports that have been shown to be more than 95% accurate when compared to DNA testing (Price et al., 2000); 38.7% of the twins were categorized as monozygotic (identical) pairs; 29.2% same-sex dizygotic pairs, and 32.1% opposite-sex dizygotic pairs. Mothers' age at birth of the twins ranged from 18 to 46 years (M = 34.25 years; SD = 4.42

years), and 90.6% of the mothers were married or cohabiting with the twins' birth father. The sample was highly educated (68.6% of mothers' highest education was a first degree or higher) compared to the national average for women of comparable age around the time of data collection (33.9%). Families categorized their net total household income, endorsing a wide range (<£5,000 to >£100,000), with an 'average' category of £50,000-£74,999 for the analysed sample, higher when compared to the UK average (£44,330) close to the time of data collection (UK Census, 2011). Ethnicity was not collected.

TFaB was approved by the NHS Health Research Authority, the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) committee, and the University of Sussex Science & Technology Cross-schools Research Ethics Committee (CREC). The current secondary analysis was approved by the Institute of Education's Research Ethics Committee at University College London.

Measures

Household chaos

A short form of the Confusion, Hubbub and Order Scale (CHAOS; Matheny et al., 1995) was used to measure mothers' perceptions of household chaos. This six-item short-form has been used in a number of studies (Marsh et al., 2020), with items of positive (e.g., 'The atmosphere in our house is calm') and negative (e.g., 'You can't hear yourself think in our home') valence. In the current study, one of these items ('There is usually a television turned on somewhere in our home' was a poor fit to the scale and was dropped (Cronbach's alpha with this item = 0.68; without the item, i.e., as used = 0.72). Response options were on a Likert scale from 1 'definitely untrue' to 5 'definitely true'. Positive items were reverse coded such that a higher score on the scale indicated higher levels of household chaos.

Child social competence

The Social Competence Scale (Corrigan, 2002) is a parent-report measure of child social competence with 12 items referring to how well behaviours describe the child, coded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 'not at all' to 5 'very well'). The scale measures prosocial behaviours, social communication skills and emotion regulation abilities with positively worded items such as, 'Child can accept things not going his/her way', 'Child is good at understanding others' feelings' and 'Child resolves problems with friends on their own'. Mothers were asked about each child separately (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87/ 0.88 for Twin1 and Twin2, respectively; note that members of the twin pair were randomly allocated to be Twin1 and Twin2 to account for birth order effects.).



Maternal positivity and negativity

Mothers completed three parenting questionnaires for each child, namely, the Parent-Child Relationship Scales (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), the Parental Feelings Questionnaire (Deater-Deckard, 2000) and the Parenting and Family Adjustment Scales (Sanders et al., 2014). As reported elsewhere (Oliver & Pike, 2021), to yield the most robust parenting scales, items across these questionnaires were subjected to principal components analysis, removing items endorsing child as well as parent behaviour and those addressing parental inconsistency. Two factors emerged. Parental Positivity consisted of five items, for example, 'I give [my child] attention such as a hug, wink, smile or kiss when [they] behave well' and 'I usually feel close to [my child]' ($\alpha =$ 0.69/0.68, first and second born twin, respectively). Parental Negativity consisted of eight items, such as, 'I sometimes feel very impatient with [my child]' and 'I shout or get angry with [my child] when [they] misbehave' ($\alpha = 0.81$ / 0.80, Twin1 and Twin2, respectively).

Demographics

Mothers reported on their marital status in eight categories, representing single unmarried/separated/widowed, married/cohabiting with biological father/other). We used a dummy code where 1 = married or cohabiting with biological father which represented the majority of mothers (90.6%). Net yearly household income was reported in 10 categories from <£5,000 (1.8% of the sample; coded 1) to >£100,000 (9.8% of the sample, coded 10). Maternal education was reported in eight categories from no formal qualifications (1.2% of the sample; coded 1) to masters/postgraduate qualifications (32.9% of the sample; coded 8).

Data preparation and analytic strategy

Members of the twin pair were randomly allocated to be Twin1 and Twin2 to account for birth order effects. Family-wide (ambient) positive and negative parenting variables were calculated as the means of maternal positivity and negativity (respectively) reported across the siblings. Child-specific parenting variables were calculated as relative departures from these averages, indexing PDT in positivity and negativity as potential contributors to sibling differences in social competence (Jenkins et al., 2009). To illustrate, if one twin in a family scored 5 and the other scored 3 for maternal positivity, familywide positivity would be (5 + 3)/2 = 4, and positive PDT for the first twin would be (5-4) = 1 and for the second it would be (3-4)=-1. In this way, a high positive PDT score indicates that the child experienced more maternal positivity than the family average (i.e., more than their cotwin). Mirroring positive PDT, a high negative PDT score indicates that the child experienced



more maternal negativity than the family average (i.e., more than their cotwin).

Variables were corrected for age and sex at birth before the multilevel models (MLMs) were conducted. This is standard in twin studies to minimize potential artificial inflation of variable associations (McGue & Bouchard, 1984). Models used centred variables and Full Maximum Likelihood with robust standard errors (MPlus v8.1). MLM was conducted in consecutive steps. First, the baseline model (Model 0) estimated the between- and within-family variance in social competence, yielding the intraclass correlation (ICC) as a measure of sibling similarity in social competence. Thereafter (Models 1-4), we added predictors incrementally in order to consider the additional variance afforded by them. Specifically, Model 1 included the basic family-wide predictors (twin zygosity and family demographic variables (household income, marital status and maternal education)); Model 2 added household chaos at the family-wide level to this contextual model: Model 3 added both family-wide (ambient) and child-specific positive parenting before finally, in Model 4, including ambient and child-specific negative parenting. The majority of existing studies have not included positivity and negativity in parallel. We chose to include positive variables before negative parenting variables in the final model due to the expected dominance of negativity from prior works. The study was not preregistered.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables.

	Descriptives [†]			Correlations [Twin1 (Twin2)]		
	M (SD)					
	First Born	Second Born	Twin Sibling <i>r</i>	1.	2.	3.
1. Maternal positivity	4.34 (0.34)	4.34 (0.35)	.83***	-		
2. Maternal negativity	2.70 (0.57)	2.69 (0.56)	.81***	20** (21**)	-	
3. Child social competence	3.28 (0.64)	3.27 (0.56)	.74***	.20** (.17*)	49*** (52***)	-
4. Household chaos	2.20	(0.66)	-	22*** (20**)	.43*** (.44***)	47*** (41***)

[†]No mean sibling differences indicated by paired-samples t-tests; ***p < .001; **p < .05; *p < .01. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) are given using raw scores. All correlations, including sibling correlations, select a random member of the twin pair as 'Twin1' to account for birth order effects on these associations and are calculated using centred variables adjusted for age and sex.



Results

Preliminaries

Descriptive statistics, twin-sibling correlations and correlations between all study variables are presented in Table 1. Results of paired-sample t-tests indicated that there were no mean differences between twin siblings for any of the variables, and twin-sibling correlations revealed high similarity across measures (Table 1). Correlations between construct variables were all in expected directions and were moderate to large in magnitude.

Multilevel modelling

The initial baseline model (Model 0) provided estimates of between- and within-family variance for social competence. The ICC, calculated as the between-family variance divided by the total variance, indicates sibling similarity for social competence. Reflecting the simple twin-sibling correlations (Table 1), the ICC was 0.268/(0.093 + 0.268) = .742, suggesting substantial sibling similarity (74.2%) in these maternal reports, with the remaining variance (25.8%) residing within families. MLM model results with predictors (Models 1-4) are shown in sequence in Table 2. Model 1 indicated that twin zygosity and family demographic variables (household income, marital status and maternal education) explained negligible

Table 2. Predicting child social competence: fixed and random effects.

	Unstandardized Parameter Estimate (SE)					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4		
Fixed effects						
Between-Family						
Twin zygosity	-0.13 (0.09)	-0.15 (0.08)	-0.13 (0.08)	-0.08(0.08)		
Marital status	0.11 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.15)	-0.02 (0.16)	-0.06(0.14)		
Maternal education	0.06 (0.38)*	0.06 (0.03)*	0.06 (0.03)*	0.05 (0.3)		
Household income	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)		
Household chaos		-0.41 (0.07)***	-0.39 (0.07)***	-0.25 (0.07)**		
Average positivity			0.18 (0.14)	-0.08 (0.13)		
Average negativity				-0.39 (0.10)***		
Within-Family						
CS positivity			0.15 (0.19)	-0.06 (0.13)		
CS negativity				-0.58 (0.12)***		
Random effects						
Within-Family	0.097 (0.02)***	0.095 (0.02)***	0.094 (0.01)***	0.075 (0.01)***		
Between-Family	0.267 (0.04)***	0.203 (0.03)***	0.200 (0.03)***	0.179 (0.03)***		
Model fit indices						
AIC	460.63	415.30	416.41	365.61		
RMSEA	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00		
	$\chi^2(4) = 6.66$	$\chi^2(5) = 41.14***$	$\chi^2(7) = 42.10^{***}$	$\chi^2(9) = 85.31***$		

Social Competence, Positivity and Negativity and Chaos are adjusted for twin age and sex. All variables are grand- or group-mean centred as appropriate. CS = child-specific; Positivity = mother-child relationship positivity; Negativity = mother-child negativity; Average = family average; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

(<0.5%) variance in social competence, calculated as the reduction in between-family variance from Model 0 to Model 1, divided by the between-family variance from Model 0, ((0.268-0.267)/0.268 = 0.004). Model 2 added household chaos to the prediction, demonstrating its key role over and above the demographic variables, relating negatively to children's social competence. This model explained 24.3% of the betweenfamily variance, calculated as the reduction in between-family variance from Model 0 to Model 2 (0.268-0.203) divided by the between-family variance from Model 0 ((0.268-0.203)/0.268 = 0.243). Models 3 and 4 introduced maternal positivity and negativity, respectively, at both family-wide and child-specific levels. Here, a considerable dominance of maternal negativity was evident. Specifically, maternal positivity alone (Model 3) added negligible explanation of variance at the within-family level, calculated as the reduction in within-family variance from Model 0 to Model 3 divided by the within-family variance from Model 0 ((0.097-0.09)/0.097 = 0.030 (3%)). Moreover, while this model explained considerable variance (25.4%) in social competence at the between-family level calculated as the reduction in between-family variance from Model 0 to Model 3 divided by the between-family variance from Model 0 ((0.268-0.200)/0.268=0.254), little additional variance (\sim 1%) was explained from Model 2 (0.254–0.243 = 0.011), and the model fit was marginally worse. No significant prediction by maternal positivity at either within- or between-family levels was seen in this less parsimonious model. In contrast, Model 4 implicated the key role of maternal negativity for children's social competence over and above demographic variables and household chaos, and even after ambient and child-specific maternal positivity was considered. Specifically, with the addition of maternal negativity, Model 4 explained over 30% of the between-family variance calculated as the difference in between-family variance from Model 0 to Model 4 ((0.268-0.179)/0.268 = 0.332), explaining an additional almost 8% of the variance compared with Model 3 (0.332--0.254 = 0.078). At the within-family level, Model 4 explained more than 20% of the variance calculated by the reduction in within-family variance from Model 0 to Model 4 divided by the within-family variance from Model 0 ((0.097-0.075)/0.097 = 0.22.7). In other words, ambient maternal negativity contributed to how twin siblings' social competence differed from that of those in other families, and, for twins in the same home, being the child to experience more maternal negativity than one's cotwin associated with having lower levels of social competence than the cotwin.

Discussion

Capitalizing on a multilevel twin-sibling design, this cross-sectional study examined the role of child-specific and family-wide predictors of young children's social competence. Twin sibling similarity in mother-reported social competence was considerable, in part likely due to shared method variance, and in part developmental similarity. Supporting the hypotheses, over and above twin zygosity and sociodemographic variables (household income, marital status and maternal education), household chaos and both ambient and child-specific parental negativity (PDT in negativity) were significant predictors of children's social competence. Contrary to expectations, maternal positivity, either ambient or child-specific, did not significantly predict social competence in this context.

In line with other studies of school-aged children (Dumas et al., 2005) and adolescents (Kim-Spoon et al., 2017), we found a clear association between household chaos and children's social competence at the between-family level. There is some suggestion from studies with infants - albeit based on limited extant research – that an association with chaos may not be apparent in the very early years (e.g., Chimed-Ochir et al., 2022; Dumas et al., 2005). This has been posited to suggest that early on, the effects of household chaos manifest initially as anger and aggression and/or poor awareness of social cues and interaction skills, with subsequent implications for social competence later in childhood (Dumas et al., 2005). Another consideration is that it may not be until the school setting places significant demands on children's social skills - of particular pertinence for this twin sample (Wood et al., 2024) and indeed on parents to engender an organized and routinized home (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988) that the importance of these impacts is evident. Note that these suggestions do not account for the role of children in their environmental experience (see below).

We found negligible effects of both ambient and child-specific maternal positivity on child social competence, and a dominance of maternal negativity. Previous one-child-per-family research has produced mixed evidence regarding the relationship between maternal positivity and child social competence, suggested to partly be a function of not considering different aspects of maternal positivity (e.g., emotional support, positive reinforcement, positive affect) that may have different salience for social outcomes (see, Pettit et al., 1997). Such differentiation was beyond the scope of the current data and analysis, but we encourage further research in this area. Nevertheless, prior research has commonly demonstrated a relationship between greater maternal negativity and lower social competence (Attili et al., 2010; S. Jones et al., 2002). Importantly, some studies have included only parental positivity in their models (Jeon & Neppl, 2019) or positivity and negativity in different models rather than in concert (Lam et al., 2021). We argue that the inclusion of both parental positivity and negativity in models examining the importance of parenting is crucial. In part, this is because of the dominance of negativity's influence in interpersonal relationships (Baumeister et al., 2001) as well as the notion, at least in parenting, that



parental positivity may be a modifier of this negativity bias (Oliver & Pike, 2018) as is commonly capitalized on in parenting intervention programmes (e.g., Sanders et al., 2003; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010).

Although we tentatively suggest that children's social competence is directly and indirectly vulnerable to household chaos and parenting, it is crucial that such associations are not seen as causal. For example, while it is easy to perceive household chaos as driven by external factors such as crowding in the home or by parent characteristics such as their ability to be organized, a large cohort study recently demonstrated a dominance of children's externalizing problems (including anger and aggression) in the prediction of household chaos (Oliver & Midouhas, 2023). In this way, household chaos is likely to be shaped by parent and child characteristics among other factors. Moreover, numerous studies over many years show that childon-parent effects can and should be just as well as considered parent-onchild effects (Bell, 1968; Paschall & Mastergeorge, 2016; Speyer et al., 2022), that is, parent and child behaviours are mutual influences. Moreover, substantial empirical work evidences that these bidirectional processes are due to parent and child characteristics that are partially genetically influenced, and, just as is found with PDT (e.g., Knafo & Jaffee, 2013), that children's genetically driven traits in part shape and create the family environment. In other words, any association between chaos and social competence is likely not purely environmentally driven, but rather is confounded by genetic influences (Agnew-Blais et al., 2022). The sample of twins used here was not large enough to unpick these confounders, and we encourage future genetically informed work in this area.

Limitations

Although this study has provided some novel insights, there are limitations to acknowledge. First, we note that there may be nonlinear effects at play, as has been suggested elsewhere, including for children's social competence (Roberts, 1986). Indeed, PDT influences may be strongest at their most extreme (Oliver & Pike, 2018). Here, we did not test for nonlinear effects due to lack of statistical power, but we do suggest this as an important direction for future research. Second, we were reliant solely on questionnaires and maternal reports for all variables; reporter biases may artificially inflate construct associations as well as affecting reports of sibling (dis)similarity, an issue empirically tested elsewhere (Hudziak et al., 2003). A more comprehensive view of the constructs considered here using multiple reporters and methods is welcomed, and, depending on results, may be informative for future practice. Third, the lack of diversity within the sample (well over half of the mothers had a first degree or higher) means that generalization may be difficult. Notably, although chaos has been shown to be associated with demographic disadvantage, there is considerable evidence that it is not a proxy for poverty or low socioeconomic status (Evans & Wachs, 2010; Marsh et al., 2020). Moreover, while existing literature has a bias towards deficit models - i.e., considering contextual factors like household chaos as 'risks' for poorer outcomes - increasingly children's development is seen as contextually contingent, with development adaptive or maladaptive as a consequence (Doebel, 2020) and different societal norms and expectations influential. We encourage further research in this area using larger, more demographically diverse samples. Fourth, as discussed above, the cross-sectional nature of this study allows only speculation of the developmental importance of chaos and parenting for children's social competence. Finally, the nature of this study design means that the findings, though likely relevant, may not necessarily apply to families with only one child or to non-twin siblings.

Implications and conclusions

Using multilevel modelling in a UK twin sample to consider children's social competence, this study provides strong foundations for better understanding the role of household chaos and relative differences in experiences of parenting compared to a sibling, on children's social competence. To date, much research focuses on one-child per family studies or examines individual components of social competence only. We highlight a key role of household chaos and ambient maternal negativity for explaining between-family variance in social competence, and of child-specific maternal negativity for considering sibling differences in social competence at a key transition point for one's social life, the start of the school years. The role of sibling differential treatment in families is commonly ignored and neglected in supporting parents whose children are having social difficulties. Here, the relative experiences of one child in a family compared to another are emphasized. While there is considerable understanding of the importance of differential parenting in association with externalizing and internalizing problems (Eradus et al., 2024), less is known about social competence, and we highlight a potential key role for differential parental negativity.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



Data availability statement

Data are not publicly available due to ethical approval restrictions.

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