

Is it true that ‘parents are like doctors, but siblings are like nurses’?

The most important role of parents is to protect, maintain and provide a home for their child. Things like discipline, education, health decisions and property management come close behind¹. A sibling’s role however, is a lot less cardinal. In fact, the number of single-child families are on the rise and reached 49% as of 2017 according to the Office of National Statistics². Although it is not imperative to have a sibling, they tend to have a considerable impact on children’s lives; they are usually the first peers a child faces, especially older siblings who sometimes can act as role models or a standard to live up to. Many similarities can be drawn between the roles of parents and siblings and the roles of doctors and nurses respectively. A doctor’s primary duty is the care and safety of their patients according to the General Medical Council (GMC)³. With consultants being at the top of the food chain, doctors (comparable to parents) are in control of decision-making regarding patients, in various aspects from referral to surgery: the buck stops with them. Nurses play a slightly different part in a patient’s journey- the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) believe nursing should be at the heart of minimising the impact of illness, promoting health and helping people to function in a variety of settings⁴. They tend to have a more direct role in patient care and have a more intimate relationship with the patient, just like that of a sibling. Nurses are always available to a patient, from admission to discharge, while other than ward rounds, the doctors are usually called upon for particular reasons.

From a more practical perspective, parents and doctors both take on a more authoritarian role and so are often ensuring their children/patients are meeting certain checkpoints. For example, a parent may check that their child’s grades are acceptable and organise tutoring if further help is needed. Similarly, a doctor may need to do a final examination of a patient before confirming they are okay to be discharged from the hospital. Siblings and nurses tend to have less dominion but can be more helpful throughout the process. Continuing the analogy, a sibling may help with the homework that the child needs to complete in order to get better grades. Equivalently, a nurse could be involved in the administration of the medication that allows the patient to improve in health enough to be discharged as well as training the patient to be able to administer the medication themselves at home. One could say that doctors and parents perhaps have more authority, which therefore causes more obedience in children and patients. This concept was seen in Milgram’s obedience study in 1963 where 65% of people gave shocks of up to 450 volts to a confederate that they thought was another participant. This

¹ Parental responsibility Retrieved from Gov.uk- <https://www.gov.uk/parental-rights-responsibilities#:~:text=choosing%20and%20providing%20for%20the,looking%20after%20the%20child's%20operty>

²Families and households in the UK: 2017 (8 November 2017) - Office of National Statistics- <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017#multi-family-households-have-grown-the-fastest-but-which-household-type-is-the-most-common-in-the-uk>

³ Duty of a doctor (GMC)- <https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/leadership-and-management-for-all-doctors/duties-of-a-doctor-in-the-workplace#:~:text=The%20primary%20duty%20of%20all,quality%20of%20services%20and%20outcomes.>

⁴ Role of nurses (RCN)- <https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/public-health/the-role-of-nursing-staff-in-public-health>

was done just because they were told to by the experimenter (who they believed was a person of authority).

Due to the less formal authoritarian role, siblings and nurses may therefore have a deeper relationship with the child or patient because they have built a personal trust and have more contact time with them. Taking a holistic view, the vast majority of people know their siblings for the longest period of time in their lives- they tend to be with you before you meet a spouse/partner and after your parents have passed. Due to many shared experiences and a similar environment growing up (by nature and nurture), there seems to be an extremely profound relationship between two siblings. After all, blood is thicker than water. Nurses also have the most patient contact time in hospitals and may consequently know more intimate information, from the mundane things like the patient's favourite sandwich to the more sincere things like the detailed palliative care plan of a patient. This perhaps contradicts the initial idea of obedience, as children and patients may be more co-operative with someone they have built a higher level of trust in, like a sibling or a nurse.

A parent's and doctor's instincts may also differ from that of a sibling or nurse. The majority of parents would do almost anything for their child, even take a bullet for them. Bowlby's (1958, 1969) Monotropic theory suggests attachment between a primary caregiver and a child is an innate system that provides a survival advantage (attachment evolved because caregivers could protect young animals from harm). Mary Ainsworth (1969) particularly explored maternal sensitivity and suggested the presence of a maternal figure is important to regulate a child's emotional, social and cognitive systems.⁵ These ideas suggest that a parental instinct to protect their child from harm is not just a legal obligation but a visceral feeling. Although doctors are not biologically hardwired to be attached to patients, they too hold full responsibility for the patient's health and wellbeing so they often feel a stronger inclination to safeguard and support their patients. Siblings and nurses on the other hand, have less accountability. They serve a significant role in the care and development of the child/ patient but ultimately the fault is less likely to lie with them.

If however, the sibling needs to take a role of responsibility, they tend to act more parent-like. For example, studies from Knott, Lewis and Williams (2007) looked at sibling relationships with children that have autism or Down syndrome. Studies showed the typical sibling takes on a role similar to that of a parent, perhaps linking with concerns of who will look after the child with a disability in the future when their parents no longer can⁶. On the other hand, when no siblings are present, parents may take on more of a sibling's role perhaps by being more friendly or more lenient with their child. However, only-children tend to seek external sources such as having closer relationships with cousins or friends (like that of a sibling). Likewise, when nurses or doctors aren't available, positions may become adjusted. For example, a nurse may become more managerial or a doctor may undertake more caregiving activities. It is also shown that siblings may have a better relationship with one another if their parents are divorced than if

⁵ J.E. Swain et al.: Parental attachment (September 11 2015) Retrieved from PubMed Central- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4157077/>

⁶ Susan McHale et al.: Role of Child Characteristics in Sibling Relationships (24 September 2012) Retrieved from PubMed Central - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3956653/>

their parents remain married- Kunz (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of eight studies on marital-sibling relationship associations to reveal this⁷. Similarly, nurses may co-operate more, if guidance from doctors is limited.

Some similarities can also be drawn between levels of knowledge and experience. A doctor's university degree tends to be five or six years for example, whilst a nurse would study for three or four years. Parents also tend to have more life experience than a sibling would. However, nurses and siblings may have more current and up-to-date knowledge about the patient or child; nurses have to keep up with the patient's condition, just like how siblings are usually the first people to know what is wrong with their brother or sister.

The schedule of a doctor compared to a nurse also varies like a parent versus a sibling. Nurses usually work in shifts of about eight hours for five days a week or twelve hours for four days a week, while Hospital doctors are usually on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week⁸. Many people can picture the familiar scene of disturbing their parents at a ridiculous time in the morning (perhaps 3:00 am). As much as parents want their sleep, they tend to have a general concern for their children and are quite happy to help with whatever problem their child presents. Siblings on the other hand, don't tend to be as welcoming. There is a stark contrast between parents and siblings in this respect as parents are more willing to make certain sacrifices, just as doctor's do- it is the nature of their job.

Notwithstanding these ideas, with time the role of a nurse is becoming increasingly dominative and much less traditional. Roles like Certified Registered Nurse Anaesthetists (CRNAs) and Nurse Practitioners (NP's) are levelling up to a similar podium as a doctor. Although they don't hold the same degree and responsibility as a doctor, they could soon also be comparable to the familial role of an uncle or aunt. An uncle/ aunt doesn't have the same level of authority as a parent but they still deserve as much respect, just like nurses.

Looking through a different lens, it would seem ignorant to dismiss the fact, that not all parents love and care for their children. In 2017 there were approximately 96,000 looked after children in the United Kingdom⁹. Many of these children would have had parents who were unquestionably unsuitable to care for them (whether unintentionally or purposefully). There may be various reasons for this. For example, some parents are incapable of loving due to substance misuse or severe psychiatric disorders. Others may be too unwell to cope- for instance, single parents with long-lasting clinical depression can struggle. Domestic violence between parents in the household can also be detrimental. These can all lead to abuse and/or neglect of children if not appropriately addressed.¹⁰

⁷ Susan McHale et al.: Family Influences on Sibling Relationships (September 24 2012) Retrieved from PubMed Central - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3956653/>

⁸ Sheena M. Saavedra: Doctors Vs Nurses: What Are the Differences? (January 19 2017); Schedule- <https://nurseslabs.com/doctors-vs-nurses-differences/>

⁹ Looked after children: statistics briefing (2019)(NSPCC)- <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/looked-after-children#:~:text=Publication%20date%202019&text=In%202016%2F17%2C%20there%20were,increased%20every%20year%20since%202010>

¹⁰ Parents who don't love their children (April 7 2020) - <https://toxicities.com/parents-dont-love-their-children/>

Similarly, some siblings have almost non-existent relationships with one another. For example, cross-cultural research by Nuckolls (1993) and Weisner (1989) revealed cultural differences in levels of rivalry and competition¹¹. The creation of rivalry between siblings (sometimes even by parental favouritism) can be destructive to their relationship and cause animosity. Times when siblings are supposed to have each other the most (like after the loss of a parent) would be affected and every man is left to himself. From another perspective, some siblings may not be as close because they are busy acting as a parent to their younger ones. In many neglectful families, childcare duties fall on the oldest siblings. These situations may also lead to unstable sibling relationships later on in their lives once they reach adulthood, for example, if younger children displace their anger at their neglectful parents onto their older, parental-substitute sibling¹².

Conversely, there have been rare cases where doctors and nurses have not acted correctly in their role. A notorious example of this is the case of Dr H. Shipman, a British doctor and serial killer who murdered about 250 of his patients¹³. Similarly, American nurse Jane Toppan was a serial killer of at least 31 people¹⁴. A more recent incident of severe misconduct can be seen in Ian Paterson's case, where he was convicted in 2017 for subjecting hundreds of patients to unnecessary breast operations¹⁵. Although these are exceptional and uncommon cases, they show that not all doctors and nurses are fulfilling their roles and responsibilities.

All things considered, it is important that we ensure people are fulfilling their roles sufficiently. Perhaps having better GMC and NMC (Nursing and Midwifery Council) regulatory checks as well as encouraging patients to report any suspicious activity will help prevent future Ian Patersons. The chair of the Paterson inquiry, Rt Revd Graham James, said there are currently more than enough regulators with sufficient budgets but they still aren't doing enough collectively to keep patients safe- the healthcare system was dysfunctional at every level¹⁵. It is so important that patients have complete trust in the doctors and nurses that treat them, by making sure all healthcare professionals are doing what's best. Similarly, appropriate safeguarding measures for children must be maintained. Professionals like doctors and teachers should ensure they are watching out to prevent irresponsible parenting and child neglect. Signs of child abuse need to be picked up and addressed appropriately- it is often other people in the community that may notice these things and help in solving the problem. On a final note, no matter how similar parents and doctors are, or siblings and nurses, we must respect that they all have their separate parts to play for the smooth running of society.

Word Count: 1983

¹¹ Susan McHale et al.: Cross-cultural perspectives (September 24 2012) Retrieved from PubMed Central - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3956653/>

¹² David M. Allen: Neglectful Parents and Eldest siblings (January 11 2016) Retrieved from Psychology Today- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/matter-personality/201601/neglectful-parents-and-eldest-siblings>

¹³ John P. Jenkins: Harold Shipman (January 10 2021) Retrieved from Britannica.com <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harold-Shipman>

¹⁴ Retrieved from New England Historical Society- <https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/jolly-jane-toppan-killer-nurse-obsessed-death/>

¹⁵ Ian Paterson: Surgeon wounded hundreds amid 'culture of denial' (February 4th 2020) Retrieved from [bbc.co.uk- https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-51369881](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-51369881)

Bibliography:

Allen D.M.: Neglectful Parents and Eldest siblings (January 11 2016); Psychology Today-
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/matter-personality/201601/neglectful-parents-and-eldest-siblings>

BBC: Ian Paterson: Surgeon wounded hundreds amid 'culture of denial' (February 4th 2020)-
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-51369881>

General Medical Council- <https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/leadership-and-management-for-all-doctors/duties-of-a-doctor-in-the-workplace#:~:text=The%20primary%20duty%20of%20all,quality%20of%20services%20and%20outcomes>.

Gov.uk- <https://www.gov.uk/parental-rights-responsibilities#:~:text=choosing%20and%20providing%20for%20the,looking%20after%20the%20child's%20property>

Jenkins J.P.: Harold Shipman (January 10 2021); Britannica.com
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harold-Shipman>

McHale S. et al.: (September 24 2012) PubMed Central-
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3956653/>

New England Historical Society- <https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/jolly-jane-toppan-killer-nurse-obsessed-death/>

NSPCC: Looked after children: statistics briefing (2019)- <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/looked-after-children#:~:text=Publication%20date%202019&text=In%202016%2F17%2C%20there%20were,increased%20every%20year%20since%202010>

Office of National Statistics- Families and households in the UK: 2017 (8 November 2017) -
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017#multi-family-households-have-grown-the-fastest-but-which-household-type-is-the-most-common-in-the-uk>

Royal College of Nursing- <https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/public-health/the-role-of-nursing-staff-in-public-health>

Saavedra S. M.: Doctors Vs Nurses: What Are the Differences? (January 19 2017)-
<https://nurseslabs.com/doctors-vs-nurses-differences/>

Swain JE et al.: (September 11 2015) PubMed Central-
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4157077/>

Toxicities: (April 7 2020) - <https://toxicities.com/parents-dont-love-their-children/>