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The hidden treasure: Education among siblings in large families



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**By Francesco Belletti,
director of the 'Centro
Internazionale Studi
Famiglia' (CISF)**

Is having brothers and sisters an advantage or a disadvantage? What kind of relationships are built in the family, between brothers and sisters? What do you learn from siblings in the process of growing as a person? Is it

easier or more difficult for parents to manage more children? What happens when there are many brothers and sisters in a family?

These questions were answered by the survey "Horizontal education. The craft of sisters and brothers in large families" carried out in 2018 by Cif (Centro Internazionale Studi Famiglia of Milan), in collaboration with the Centro di Ateneo Studi e Ricerche sulla Famiglia of the Catholic University

(Milan, Italy), on behalf of the Associazione Nazionale Famiglie Numerose (ANFN- Italian Large Families Association). The study was published by Toscana Oggi Ed. in 2018 with the title: "Educazione orizzontale. Il lavoro di fratelli e sorelle" by Francesco Belletti and Raffaella and Giuseppe Butturini.

1. The data: methodological aspects

In order to explore this topic, we chose to focus on the 20-30 age group: young adults in the situation of "already but not yet", halfway between staying in the family and going out into independent life, the "child launching" stage, identified by social psychology as a specific stage of the family life cycle.

We decided not to focus on how being siblings can make a difference at young age, as on this topic there's already an

extensive and documented literature. We wanted to understand if and how siblings can make a difference once grown up, particularly between childhood and adulthood. This methodological choice gave us also the opportunity to give voice to people's personal experience at first hand. We could also understand the influence of the educational processes by analysing its conclusions.

At the heart of the survey is the collection of 113 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with a sample of 113 young people, from different parts of Italy (six regions, equally divided among North, Centre and South: Lombardy, Veneto, Umbria, Lazio, Apulia, Sicily). In order to build a comparative mechanism, we interviewed 62 young people grew up in families with at least three children, and 51 grew up as single child.

This research compares large families with families with only one child, in order to detect in the relationships among siblings the different behaviour linked to the education received by parents. We assume that the transmission of values take place not only in the "vertical" relationship between parents and child, but also in a rather spontaneous and practical transmission of values that takes place "horizontally" among siblings, which is complementary to the parental one, but no less important and often crucial.

Values are fundamental for 'making' a family and also for 'making' society: from solidarity to mutual trust, from responsibility to cooperation, from gratuitousness to a sense of duty, from adaptability to creativity. We call this form of education among siblings 'horizontal' (in-family peer-to-peer education), to distinguish it from the 'vertical' education of parents.

In parallel with the design phase of the survey, a scoping review of the most recent (from 2000 to 2018) international scientific literature on the subject was undertaken. The reading and analysis of this material also made it possible to refine the survey instruments for the interviews with young people and for the focus groups.

After a short online questionnaire collecting structural infor-

mation on the family, a semi-structured face-to-face interview was carried out by qualified interviewers (psychologists), lasting between 40 to 60 minutes. The final part of the interview was dedicated to the compilation of a "family map", related to the persons considered relevant by the respondent in three distinct areas: his/her own family, relatives, other relational circuits.

The interviews investigated the family relations in terms of "giving and receiving", "influence", "parental style" and "future representation"; the sibling and friendship relationship in terms of "support", "conflict", "times and activities spent together". Finally, the more personal area of self-assessment was investigated, in the dimensions of autonomy and of requested and given help.



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and 40 siblings from 14 households divided into five interview groups. Participants were selected and involved through the relational local networks of the Italian Large Families Association.

The results of the research are rich and often surprising, and deserve to be read in detail in the full report. Many common elements emerged among the young people interviewed, confirming that educational processes are multidimensional, and the family, although the main actor, is not the only educational sphere. Significant differences also emerged when comparing "single children" and "large families' children", which are strictly related with social virtues, such as trust, responsibility, the ability to generate strong and solidarity-based ties capable of welcoming the "other from oneself".

2. Common aspects: generational and relational contexts

In order to capture the point of view of the parents and of the sibling as a whole, some exploratory focus groups were carried out with couples of parents of large families (the parents' point of view) and five focus groups with groups of siblings, in order to integrate the individual point of view of the interviews with the interaction between siblings. The focus groups were conducted in different Italian regions with a total of 40 parents (divided into four interview groups)

The generational dimension which characterises the history of the young adults surveyed strongly emerged from the study in a much more decisive way than any other structural characteristic.

Being between twenty and thirty years old in 2018 constitutes a decisive factor that strongly shapes the personalities and the life trajectories of this generation, much more than differences in socio-economic status, culture and geographical area of residence, and also in family structure. Surprising similarities emerged, even between single children and children from large families, stronger and sharper with firstborns. This also suggests the need for a closer look at the condition of young people today, which is marking people's lives much more than other differentiating factor.

We found a relevant homogeneity concerning the richness of relational networks described by young people, especially in the compilation of family maps. They present a very cohesive and dense family relationship, full of meaning and closeness, both with their parents (for both groups) and with their brothers and sisters (for the group of large families, obviously). Young people in both groups also have rich interactions with friends, both with peers and with significant adults. Interaction with kinship is not marginal either; grandparents and/or cousins, or sometimes uncles, appear frequently in the maps, often drawn as "very close".

3. Specific aspects: differences that make a difference

Showing many homogeneous features does not mean, however, that there are no differences that make a difference; none of them, however, is sufficient to fully explain the different life paths of the young people interviewed. For example, being male or female carries strong differences, both in future life prospects and in childhood, but also, in particular, in the way one lives "as a brother/sister". In fact, stereotyped gender roles are still very present, so that daughters have a much stronger mandate of care, of domestic commitment, of family role than male peers and brothers. Another relevant difference comes from being firstborn, lastborn or "middle" generating very different dynamics and growth processes, for example in terms of responsibility, autonomy and problem solving skills.

There are differences between single children and children in large families, but they are more complex and articulated than a direct correlation between the number of family

members and the availability of social resources. For example, single children are strongly aware (and sometimes scared of) that in the near future they will have to take care of their elderly parents, a task they cannot - but also they don't want to - escape. They know very well that they will not be able to share it with others which is something that children of a large family are aware of (we are many brothers and sisters, we will know how to help each other in helping our parents).

Beyond these particular aspects, it can be said comparing single children and siblings of large families there are differences that make a difference, that can be summarised into three binomials: realism and solidarity, autonomy and conflict, identity and belonging.

Realism and solidarity. The only child's perception of him/herself can be idealised and egocentric, running the risk of



expecting solutions from outside, struggling to question him/herself and adopting antagonistic attitudes. On the other hand, siblings of a large family have a greater capacity to adapt and take account of the contexts and people involved. They are able to cope with difficulties and unexpected events on their own, but

also to ask others for help. They do not believe themselves to be at the centre of the world, but are socio-centric. In case of need their motto is: "I'm there anyway". They are open to society and supportive as they have learnt this in fraternal relations, a special bond characterised by a spirit of solidarity and protection, relational skills that the children of large families seem to freepik.com spend within a wider social context. Unlike single children, in fact, the young children of large families reported situations in which they offered their help in contexts of social aggregation.

Once again, however, the difference is not always so marked as to legitimise a clear-cut polarity. In other words, it is more likely to find pro-social and solidaristic behaviour among the children of large families (participation in voluntary work, participatory bodies in school, ability to exchange help with friends), but not all children of large families are "pro-social" outside their own families. Some of them, even within the family, "escape like eels" from the sharing of tasks and commitments, as it emerged above all from the focus groups with siblings, where the siblings often "caught each other in the act".

Autonomy and conflict. Among young people born in large families, "early autonomy" emerges in particular as a significant capacity (and desire) to leave home soon, to soon have

spaces of responsibility and freedom of choice, a room or house finally of their own, which they do not have to share. This pushes/allows these youngsters an earlier socialisation, often a faster entrance in the labour market, and also marriages and maternity/paternity much earlier than the average of their peers. It is moreover evident, also from the interviews, that this hurry is conscious, "mature" and not approximate; they almost never escape from the family of origin, but they "anticipate autonomy". This could really be a not marginal "competitive advantage", in a social context that tends to keep young people in a limbo of social irrelevance, apparently protected by their families, but in fact depowered in their possible adult protagonism. For single children, on the contrary, the "family nest" seems to be more welcoming and protective, for a much longer period ("I stay at home with my parents").

The availability of relationships and close ties within the family, with one's own siblings, makes it possible to enjoy a relational capital that is certainly more solid in a large family than in the experience of an only child. Those who live with brothers and sisters have to deal with ties that they did not choose and that they cannot ignore; therefore they learn, not always easily, that conflict cannot be destructive, and that it has to be recomposed in some way, because your brother is still in front of you the next day (which does not happen, for example, with friends, whom you can 'choose'). This too is an increasingly ethical quality in a social context that sees the other as a threat, or even as an 'enemy'.

There's no uniformity concerning family projects of children of large families: not all of them declare that they want to have the same family in which they grew up, but each of them clearly wants to "make their own family": with two, three children (almost never with an only child), and maybe even with five children. However, it is clearly perceived that the choice to have a large family is not made by tradition,

nor "because my parents want it", but because "this is how I imagine - I dream and want - the family I will build".

Identity and belonging. In Western society, the family not only gives the children a relational and social imprint, but also an identity imprint, that is, the enhancement of the self, of the discovery of one's own deep identity.

On one hand a large family has a vivid sense of the uniqueness and unrepeatability of each one of their children; on the other hand they are conscious of the need for each of them to move on from "who I am" to "for whom I am", something that occurs in the various "reality check" of the real life, at home, school, work. It's the way to enter into the marvellous adventure of welcoming the others as they are, of learning to love and walk together. If we, if the family, if the children - brothers and sisters - do not achieve this, we close ourselves up and we die.

An even more objective differentiation emerged from the research, in the comparison between single children and children of large families; it deals with the presence, for the latter, of an objectively bigger resource of reliable relations and close ties, within the family and with their brothers. This is something that is difficult to replace outside the restricted family. Children of large families can very often benefit from a more solid relational capital.

At an overall glance, for the children of large families, having and being able to come to terms with their brothers is a precious potentiality: it helps them (and forces them) to come to terms with others, but also to early learn to ask (and give) help, to negotiate, to understand that "one does not live alone" (for better or for worse). Moreover it allows them to think about their own future in which some persons will surely be there (the brothers), in a much more reliable way than other ties.

In brief

The survey confirms the centrality of the family experience in education, in building the personality and opportunities of the new generations on their way to adulthood, and the value of the presence of brothers and sisters. Without pretending to be omnipotent, because there are so many subjects besides the family that can contribute to the growth of people, but also with a renewed sense of responsibility for the families, and for large families in particular.

This research is confirming that the fraternal bond can be a precious gift and a special resource, both in childhood, inside the family, sharing daily life "under the same roof" with your siblings, and as adults, once you leave your parents' home, so as not to feel alone. Siblings are therefore a precious legacy that parents of large families leave to their children, maybe to the detriment of the patrimonial inheritance (houses, economic resources, goods of various kinds), which will inevitably be smaller, because it has to be 'divided'. But in this case it is confirmed that the real value of things is not always measured by money, because the value of a fraternal relationship "is priceless".