

# PROJECT 1 - SIBLINGS AND FRIENDS: THE CHANGING NATURE OF CHILDREN'S LATERAL RELATIONSHIPS



What is the significance of sisters, brothers and friends in the lives of children and young people? Do such relationships change over time?

This project has been tracking the lives of 50 children from mid-childhood to young adulthood to help answer these questions. It provides valuable data, collected over time, that documents the meanings, experiences and flows of children's sibling and friendship relationships. Over the past eight years, the project has explored how such relationships connect to young people's sense of self as their individual and family biographies unfold.

People's relationships with their brothers and sisters can be one of the longest lasting links in their lives – longer than with parents, partners or children. In 2008, researchers from London South Bank University and the Open University invited members of the public to take part in a UK-wide 'postcard' event, exploring how people felt about their siblings.

Nearly 800 people, aged from 2 to 90 years old, filled in the postcards. They wrote about lots of different things, from how many siblings they had, to how their relationships with their sisters and brothers had shaped their lives. You can see examples of what people said below. They show you that people can have the same sorts of feelings about their sisters and brothers, whether they are 13, 39 or 93!

## ROLE MODELS

My sister left home at the age of 20 when she bought a house with a friend. She got married at 22 which spurred me onto go travelling and experience lots of the world before I 'settled down'!  
*Female, 37 years old*



I always looked up to my big brother and he looked out for me.  
*Female, 41 years old*

I thought my eldest sister was a heroic daredevil role model, challenging our mother, and an adolescent trailblazer, having boyfriends and staying out late, even though she herself did not experience it like that at all.  
*Female, 55 years old*



## CONFFLICT AND DISTANCE

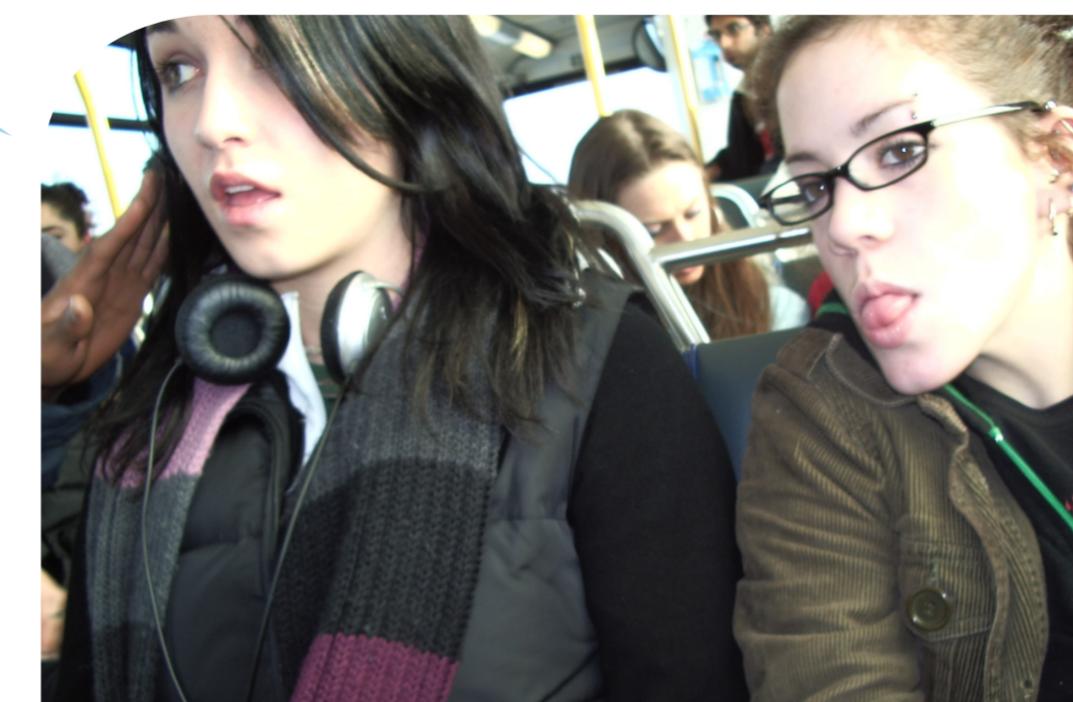


My brother is really annoying and irritating.  
*Male, 11 years old*



My brother and sister are a pain in the neck.  
*Female, 35 years old*

We don't really get on. I have no time for her. We have nothing in common really- we look completely different, we have completely different lifestyles, completely different interests, completely different values, yet we are biological sisters and grew up together.  
*Female, 40 years old*



Me and my twin sister, we do everything together. We are in the same class in school, we love being in the same class  
*Female, 13 years old*



Although my brother and I fought as children and our sisters were much younger than us and therefore not too close at the time, we are now a very close sibling group going on holiday together with our families when we can and having frequent get togethers.  
*Male, 57 years old*

## DOING THINGS TOGETHER

My brother and sister are very important to me and a source of love, support (practical and emotional) and fun. Sometimes I have been on holiday with them. We organise together a family and friends party every Christmas and usually go to the opera or theatre together for a birthday treat once a year. Should anything happen to either of them, a lot of the joy would go out of my life. They are a treasure.  
*Female, 63 years old*



# ANNE'S CHANGING RELATIONSHIP WITH HER SISTER OVER TIME



Anne is a White British young woman, born in 1991, who has been interviewed three times between 2002 and 2009. She lives with her mother, who is a support worker in a school. Her father lives nearby, has a disability and is no longer able to work. Anne has two half siblings: a sister, Natasha, who is 10 years older than her and a brother who is 8 years older. Natasha has lived some distance away in another region of the country for the whole period that we have known Anne, and she and her partner, Dean, now have a young daughter. Anne's brother lived with her and their mother when we first knew her, then moved out to live locally, and latterly has been living in another town. By 2009 Anne was working in social care and studying part-time for a qualification in the field.

## THE RESEARCH

The following chart demonstrate Anne's relationship with her sister over time.

ANNE AGED 11: WAVE 1

At the time of the first interview Anne appeared particularly close to her archetypal 'big sister' Natasha. She was regarded as kind, helpful, supportive, someone with whom she could talk. Whilst her sister lived some distance away, Anne was extremely positive about visits to her house and much of her narrative centred on fond recollections of occasions (mainly birthdays and Christmas). The sisters kept in regular contact and experiencing what her sister looked and sounded like was important in maintaining their connection.

*"My birthday, it was really fun. I went to my sister's house, cos we were in Shropshire before my birthday and then when it was the day of my birthday because I slept round my sister's house, yeah. She went out shopping to get my presents and get decorations, so when she came back me and my sister's boyfriend sat outside the house, right, while my mum and Natasha were putting up all the decorations. When I went in they went 'surprise' and everything. And erm Katie and Jodie came up, that's my sister's boyfriend's nieces, and they erm made me a card and bought me a present. And then [my sister] gave me a present which was this special sister necklace, and then Dean bought me this ring. And I remembered that, cos it was my last birthday so I remember it quite well."*

ANNE AGED 15: WAVE 2

Around four years later being a sister still seemed to be an important feature of Anne's identity although she did have concerns about becoming emotionally distant from her sister. During the second interview she was also nostalgic and reflected on fond memories of the past. Although she felt they were quite different they shared a fairly close emotional attachment, for example, they enjoyed talking and spending time together. Anne portrayed herself as the 'naughty' one in comparison to her 'good girl' sister and believed that had they shared more time together as children/young people her sister would have been able to offer her greater moral guidance.

*"If there wasn't such a big age gap between me and her I think it would have been better. I don't think we would have got on as much as we do but I think it would have been better for my life, my school life. I think it would have been better if my sister was there"*

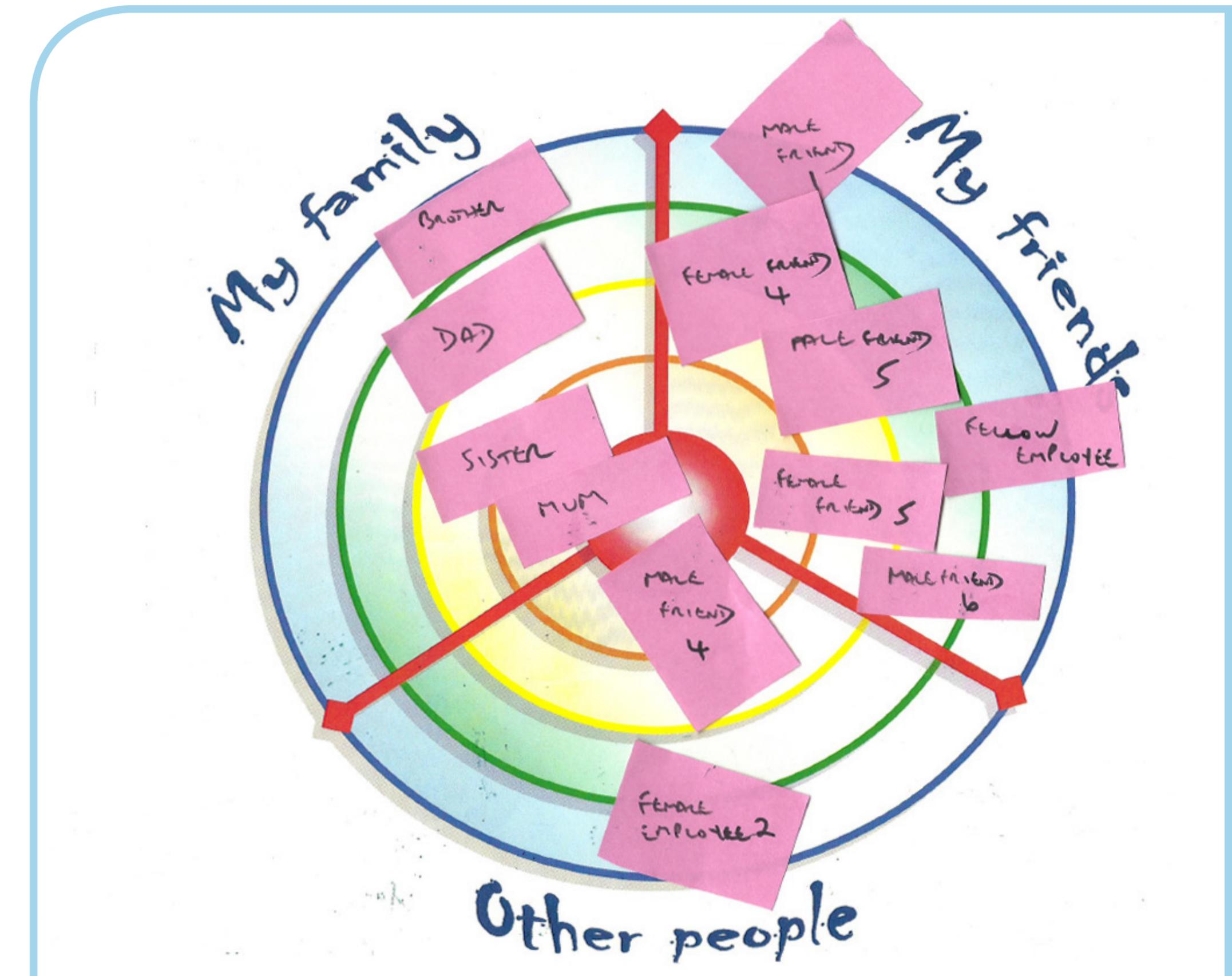
ANNE AGED 17: WAVE 3

By the third interview, Anne sees her relationship with her sister as based on a shared concern with children. Anne now has expertise in childcare, gained through her job, while Natasha has become a mother. Alongside her new self-sufficient maturity as a working adult, however, Anne also expresses some ambivalence that she is no longer at the centre of her sister's (and the rest of her family's) caring affections in the same way as previously.

*"I think since she's had her baby we've got a bit closer cos I work with children and she's had her baby so we've got that little connection... ... I don't get spoilt no more, it's not fair! And since my sister's baby has come as well everything is just like moving onto her... No, I'm not the youngest in the family no more, it's not fair. I'm older now so I understand more. I think if I was younger and my sister had the baby I think I'd be like ... 'Oh it's not fair... why are you treating her better than me?'. But now I understand she's the baby of the family now and I'm the older and I don't need to be spoilt because I've got my own money coming in"*

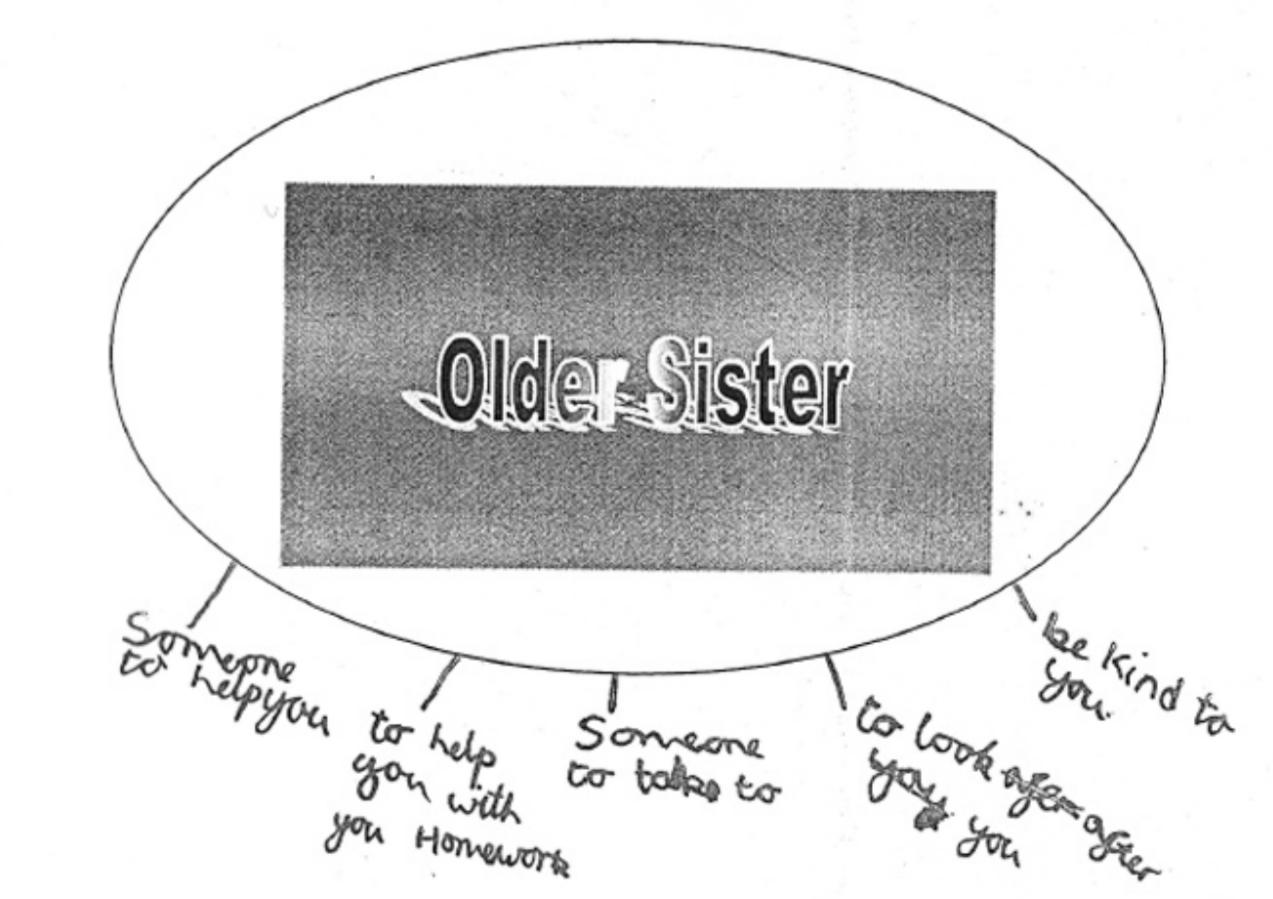
## RESEARCH TEAM

Professor Rosalind Edwards - University of Southampton  
Dr Susie Weller - London South Bank University



Participants were invited to complete circle or network maps to show how close or distant they felt to various family members and friends. They were given a copy of the map, some sticky 'post-it' notes and pens, and were asked to imagine that they were in the centre of the red circle.

They were encouraged to write the names of family, friends and other people on the stickers provided. They then placed stickers on the circle map. People they felt closest to were placed in the orange circle, whilst people they felt least close to were positioned in the blue circle and so on. There was one section for the family, one for friends and one for other (significant) people.



Spidergram illustrating participants' understandings of what they consider to be important elements of sibling relationships