**The Effect of Older Sibling, Postnatal Maternal Stress, and Household Factors on
Language Development in Two- to Four-Year-Old Children**

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Furthermore, analysis scripts and data are available on these links as well.

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Abstract

Previous literature has shown that family structure affects language development. Here, factors relating to older siblings (their presence in the house, sex and age gap), mothers (maternal stress) and household size and residential crowding were examined to systematically examine the different role of these factors. Data from mother-child dyads in a Singaporean birth cohort, (677-855 dyads; 52% males; 58-61% Chinese, 20-24% Malay, 17-19% Indian) collected when children were 24-, 48-, and 54-months old, were analysed. There was a negative effect of having an older sibling, moderated by the siblings' age gap, but not by the older sibling's sex, nor household size or residential crowding. Maternal stress affected language outcomes in some analyses but not others. Implications for understanding the effect of family structure on language development are discussed.

Keywords: older siblings, language development, maternal stress, household size, residential crowding, cognitive development

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One of the environmental factors suggested to be critical for language development is the linguistic input that a child receives (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1992; 1995; Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer & Lyons, 1991; Newport, Gleitman & Gleitman, 1977; Pan, Rowe, Singer & Snow, 2005). Most previous research has focused on the language input that a child receives from their primary caregivers. These studies suggest that both the quantity and quality of caregiver's speech later predicts children's language and cognitive outcomes (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003; Gilkerson & Ricards, 2009; Risley, 2006; Romeo, et al., 2018; Rowe, 2012). However, more and more studies from diverse cultures suggest that looking at the caregiver in isolation is not sufficient to capture environmental language input (e.g., Cristia, et al., 2019; Loukatou et al., *in press*; Sperry, et al., 2019). Existing studies suggest that factors related to household compositions such as the presence of siblings (e.g., Huttenlocher et al, 2007), the presence of other adults (e.g., Ramírez-Esparza, García-Sierra, & Kuhl, 2014), or more generally household size and residential crowding (e.g., Evans et al., 2010), may influence language development.

One factor that might mediate these household characteristics is maternal stress, which has been shown to be augmented by environmental factors such as having more children to care for, or living in more crowded dwellings (Evans, Lepore, Shejwal, & Palsane, 1998). In the current study we analyse data from a unique cohort of over 1,000 children growing up in Singapore, to examine the effect of family structure (the presence and characteristics of siblings in study 1, and household size and residential crowding in study 2) on language development. In both these studies we examine maternal stress as a possible mediator between family structure factors and language development.

Older Siblings

Previous epidemiological studies consistently suggest that sibship size is negatively correlated with children's cognitive and educational outcomes (Downey, 2001; Ernst &

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Angst, 1983; Retherford & Sewell, 1991; Steelman, 1985; Steelman et al., 2002). One of the theoretical models that may explain these findings is the *resource dilution hypothesis* (Blake, 1981). According to this hypothesis, caregivers possess a finite amount of resources that they could allocate to their children. Consequently, having more children will increase a dilution of caregivers' resources, with less resources allocated to each. Thus, children with more siblings may be negatively affected by the distribution of caregivers' resources between siblings. In the context of language acquisition, it has been found that caregivers use more responsive language towards their oldest child (Gilkerson & Richards, 2009; Jones & Adamson, 1987; Woollett, 1986), at the expense of the younger sibling when both are present (Huttenlocher, 2007). It has been suggested that the oldest siblings receive on average 1,338 more words per day than the younger siblings (Gilkerson & Richards, 2009). Additionally, previous research indicates that mothers tend to talk less and be less responsive to the younger child while the older child is present (Woollett, 1986). Thus, these findings suggest that caregiver-child interaction and caregivers' language input to a child is affected by the presence of other children in the household. As a consequence, a child's language development may be adversely influenced by them having an older sibling.

Indeed, previous evidence suggests that the presence of an older sibling is negatively related to language development in children (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2005; Havron et al., 2019; Kantarevic & Mechoulam, 2005; Peyre et al., 2016). In order to gain insights into the reasons pathways through which this effect occurs, a recent study (Havron et al., 2019) examined the effect of two characteristics of siblings on language development: the older sibling's sex, and the age gap between siblings. The effect of these factors could shed light on the role of sibling's communication behavior on language development. Havron et al. (2019) hypothesized that older sisters would be less detrimental to language development than older brothers, because they are more likely to care for their younger sibling than older brothers do

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(Tucker, McHale & Crouter, 2001), are more prosocial (Abramovitch, Corter, & Lando, 1979), and because girls show more advanced language skills than boys (Frank, et al., 2019). This hypothesis was confirmed: Children who had an older sister performed just as well as first-born children, but children who had an older brother performed significantly worse (Havron, et al., 2019). This was replicated in a more recent study, which in addition showed that older sisters have more cognitively-supportive interactions with their younger siblings than older brothers do (Jakiela, et al., 2020). As for the effect of the age gap between siblings, Havron and colleagues (2019) hypothesized that siblings would benefit more from having a larger age gap with their older siblings, because parents will be less occupied with the older child when the younger sibling is born, and because older children themselves could provide more quality input, being more socially and linguistically advanced than younger children. Contrary to this prediction, there was no significant effect on language development related to the age gap, although in descriptive terms more narrowly spaced siblings showed better language development. A recent study found significant results in the same direction in a larger sample of over 10,000 French children (Gurgand et al., *in preparation*). Although these findings are somewhat unexpected given previous findings that older siblings in more widely spaced siblings' pairs engage in more prosocial behaviours than those in less widely spaced pairs (Abramovitch et al., 1979), and their younger siblings show better cognitive development (Teti, Bond, & Gibbs, 1986), a possible reason for this finding is that it might be easier for parents to provide quality input to both siblings together when the age gap is small. In such a scenario, parents could, for example, read to both children together a book that would be appropriate for their abilities and interest, while the same would be impossible when the two children have a wider age gap. An alternative explanation is that children with a larger age gap would have less constructive interactions, as the older child would be more independent and spend less time with their younger sibling, at least in some cultural settings.

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For example, a recent study comparing child-directed input in France and Lesotho, found that the majority of child-directed speech in Lesotho was directed to children from other children (mostly siblings and cousins) unlike in France, where almost all child-directed speech came from children's mothers. Other children in Lesotho had a small age gap between them and the younger child, as children with a larger age gap were at school or herding their families' herds (Loukatou, et al., 2021).

Household Size and Residential Crowding

A related family structure factor that may affect a child's language development is the number of adults and child members living in the same household (*household size*). This is a complex factor, since different members may have different roles in the household. Multiple children would compete for parental resources, but additional adult members could provide help (the *household size and infant indulgence hypothesis*, Whiting, 1961), and potentially diminish the siblings' negative effect on language development (Munroe & Munroe, 1971, 1980, 1984a, 1984b; Munroe, Munroe, Westling, & Rosenberg, 1997). Another factor related to the family structure is *residential crowding*, with households considered crowded when there is more than one person per room. Previous evidence suggests that living in crowded homes has a negative effect on children, including an increase in stress, behavioural problems and delayed cognitive development, regardless of the family's SES (Evans et al. 1998; Maxwell, 1996; Saegert, 1982). Furthermore, evidence suggests that higher residential crowding is negatively related to caregiver-child relationships, with caregivers in more crowded homes being less responsive to their children than parents in less crowded homes (Bradley & Caldwell, 1984; Evans et al., 2010; Evans, Maxwell, & Hart, 1999; Hassan, 1977; Wachs, 1989; Wachs & Camli, 1991). In terms of language input, Evans et al. (1999) demonstrated that parents in larger households speak less to their children and use less

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complex language. Thus, household size and residential crowding may be important factors in children's language development.

Maternal Stress

Maternal stress is a possible mediator of the effects of all of the environmental factors discussed above on language development for at least two reasons. First, it is likely that environmental factors such as having more children to care for, or living in more crowded dwellings would be stressful for mothers (Evans, Lepore, Shejwal, & Palsane, 1998). Second, it has been shown that maternal stress negatively predicts children's language outcomes (King & Laplante, 2005; Reck et al., 2018). We focus on *maternal* stress and not *parental* stress because mothers are usually the primary caregivers, thus largely influencing child's cognitive development (Csibra & Gergely, 2009; Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baumwell, 2001).

High levels of maternal stress during the perinatal period are related to children's receptive and expressive vocabulary development (King & Laplante, 2005), and verbal intelligence (Laplante, Brunet, Schmitz, Ciampi, & King, 2008; Laplante et al., 2004). Less is known about the effects of postnatal maternal stress on child's language development. However, some evidence suggests that it may have a negative impact (Reck et al., 2018). One of the ways by which maternal stress could affect language outcomes is through diminishing the quality of caregiver-child interactions, by influencing the ability of caregivers to engage with the child sensitively and contingently. Indeed, previous research suggests that higher levels of maternal stress are correlated with mothers being less sensitive and more controlling in their interactions with the child (Muller-Nix et al., 2004; Pett, et al.; 1994; Pianta & Egeland, 2010). Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that mothers experiencing depression and/or anxiety - measures of both are conventionally used as an index of maternal stress - in the postnatal period show differences in their speech to children compared to

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mothers with no depression/anxiety. These differences include a lower pitch range, less positive and more negative affect in speech, less conversational turns, and no differences in mean length of utterances (MLU) to younger compared to older infants (Brookman et al., 2020; Herrera, Reissland, & Shepherd, 2004; Murray, Kempton, Woolgar, & Hooper, 1993; Porritt, Zinser, Bachorowski, & Kaplan, 2014; Reissland, Shepherd, & Herrera, 2003). These modifications to speech in mothers with depression/anxiety have been shown to have a negative effect on children's later expressive vocabulary development (Brookman et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2014).

When a child has an older sibling, their mother may experience more stress than when they are firstborns. Previous evidence suggests that the number of children in the household may affect maternal stress. For example, a cross-sectional study conducted in Sweden by Östberg and Hagekull (2000) with around 1000 mothers of children between six months and three years of age demonstrated that mothers who have more children tend to experience higher levels of postpartum stress. This is in accordance with findings of other studies indicating that having more than one child increases maternal stress (Hung et al., 2011; Lavee et al., 1996; Lundberg et al., 1994).

With regard to maternal stress's possible mediating effect between sibling's sex and language development, older sisters might be less stressful for mothers than older brothers, as one study found that girl babies were less stressful to mothers than boy babies (Scher & Sharabany, 2010). Later on, when babies become children, mothers report boys as displaying more externalizing behaviors than girls (e.g., Miner & Clarke-Stewart, 2008).

Household size and residential crowding may also affect language development via their effect on maternal stress. Previous research indicates a greater level of psychological distress among families living in crowded conditions including increased anxiety, conflict, susceptibility to minor issues and increased irritability (Evans, et al., 1998; Evans, et al.,

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1989; Fuller, et al., 1993; Gove & Hughes, 1983; Lepore, et al., 1991). The greater amount of psychological distress caused by these factors may in turn disrupt parenting. Indeed, studies with infants and toddlers have demonstrated that parents in crowded households are less responsive, less involved and less vocally stimulating to their children (Corapci, 2004; Corapci & Wachs, 2002; Wachs, 2005). Thus, living in larger and more crowded households may increase parental stress, potentially leading to lower quality parenting, which in turn may have negative effects on children's language development.

Additionally, the differential role that adults and children cohabiting with the target child play in this context was not previously explored. While multiple children may be competing for parental attention in a way that increases maternal stress, more adults in the house may provide caretaking help, thus offsetting the cost of having multiple children present. They may, on the other hand, also be a stressful addition to the household. We will thus consider the role of adults and children living in the household, as well as maternal stress as mediating the effect of household size and residential crowding, on language outcomes.

The Current Study

In the current study we investigated the effect of older siblings as well as of household size and residential crowding on children's language outcome measures, in a sample from a culture that has not previously been examined in this context. We analysed data from Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes (GUSTO), a population based birth cohort study from Singapore (Soh et al., 2014). This cohort consists of more than a thousand children, and has data on family composition, as well as on mother and child variables. Singapore has a diverse ethnic composition, with three main ethnic groups making up the resident population (Chinese, Malays, and Indian). Family size and cohabiting patterns show large variability in Singapore, and the average household size of 3.16 (Population Trends, 2020) is larger than that in France (2.38; OECD). The unique nature of our data set

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allows us to separately look at the following factors: siblings, household size and residential crowding, and the number of adult and child members of the household, as well as explore the mediating role of maternal stress in the relationship between these factors and children's language outcomes.

First, in study 1a, we test the effect of having an older sibling, the age gap between siblings, and the sex of the older sibling on children's language development in our sample. We hypothesize that children who have an older sibling will score lower on language measures than children who do not have an older sibling. We additionally hypothesize that the negative effect will be smaller when the older sibling is a female. Last, we hypothesize that a smaller age gap will be associated with better language scores than when children are more widely spaced.

Second, in study 1b, we examine whether maternal stress might be a mediating factor in the effect of siblings on language development, such that having one older child is associated with higher maternal stress, which in turn is associated with lower language scores for the target child. We also hypothesize a mediating role for maternal stress between the sex of the older sibling and the language development of the younger sibling. Thus, the greater negative effect of an older brother than an older sister might be explained by the fact that female children are less stressful for mothers than male children. We test this possibility in two ways. First, we look at the relation between the *target* child's sex, maternal stress and language scores. If girls are associated with less stress, this should be true for both the target child's sex and the older sibling's sex. We next test the relation between the older sibling's sex, maternal stress and language scores.

Third, in study 2 we examine the effect of household size and residential crowding on children's language development. We also examine the mediating role of maternal stress in the relationship between household size and residential crowding and language development.

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We hypothesize that larger and more crowded households will be associated with lower language skills, and that stress will mediate this effect. Next, we attempt to dissociate the role of adult and child members of the household. We predict a negative effect of the number of child members on language development, but we do not have a direct hypothesis about the effect of adult members. Adults may on the one hand provide more childcare, supporting language development, but they may also increase conflict and stress in the house or spend more time talking to each other at the expense of directing their speech at the children. Last, we examine residential crowding, hypothesizing that families living in more crowded dwellings will be associated with more maternal stress and lower language skills than families living in less crowded dwellings when controlling for household size.

Method

Study Design

The data were obtained from the GUSTO population based birth cohort study (Soh et al., 2014). This cohort consists of children born to pregnant women who were recruited in the first trimester from two large public hospitals in Singapore (N = 1,217), Kandang Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital and the National University Hospital, between June 2009 and September 2010. Ethical approval was obtained from the National Healthcare Group Domain Specific Review Board and the SingHealth Centralised Institutional Review Board. Mother-child dyads were followed after birth, and data from fathers was also collected. The study is still ongoing, and the children are currently 11 years old. 56.1% of participants were of Chinese ethnicity, 25.4% of Malay ethnicity and 18.5% of Indian ethnicity at the study outset.

Sample

Since the main dependent variable of the current study was the language data collected at two, four and four and a half years of age, participants were included if such

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language data were available. In the current study, 677 children had language data available at two, four, or four and a half years. At two years of age, language data were available for 401 children. At four years of age, language data were available for 613 children. Finally, at four and a half years of age language data were available for 359 children. There were 289 children with language data available at all three ages. 47.71% of the participants were girls (see Table 1 for participants' details). In study 1a and study 1b we included only full-term born children who had no older sibling or only one older sibling, and did not have a twin. We excluded children with more than one older sibling from Study 1, but these were included in Study 2. Regarding ethnicity, 60.71% of participants in study 1 and study 2, were Chinese, 20.09% Malay, and 19.05% Indian.

Materials

Predictors of Language Skills. Predictors included: having an older sibling (binary variable), the age gap between the target child and the older sibling, and the sex of the older sibling.

Control Variables. Control variables included: the target child's sex, birth weight (kg), gestational age (weeks), age at testing, language of test administration, maternal alcohol consumption during pregnancy (grams/day), maternal smoking status at the 26th week of pregnancy, maternal education (six categories: no education, primary, secondary, ITE/NITEC, GCE (polytechnic/diploma), university (bachelor/masters/PhD), paternal education, maternal age at delivery (years), and paternal age at delivery. These data were collected from obstetrical records (gestational age and birth weight) and from questionnaires administered to the parents.

Language Skills (Outcomes Measures). *Two Years.* At two years of age, parents filled in the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, 3rd Edition (ASQ-3®), which assesses the child's development from 2-to-60 months of age and has good validity and reliability (Squires,

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Bricker, & Twombly, 2009). The ASQ-3 has five independent subscales focused on five domains of development: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem-solving, and personal-social. For the purposes of this study, we only used data from the Communication subscale.

Additionally, at this age, the Bayley Scales of Infant and Toddler Development (version III, BSID-III, Bayley, 2006) were administered in participants' homes by trained examiners who had at least 10 hours and eight cases of supervised administration and scoring. The BSID-III is an individually administered instrument that evaluates cognitive, communicative, and motor development in children from 1-to-42 months of age and has good reliability and validity (Bayley, 2006). In this study, only data from the language scale was used. The Language scale consists of two subscales: receptive communication and expressive communication. The receptive communication subscale consists of 49 items measuring the child's auditory acuity and their ability to understand and respond to verbal stimuli. The expressive communication subscale consists of 48 items that measure the child's ability to vocalize, name pictures and objects, and communicate with others. Both the ASQ-3 and the BSID-III were administered in the participant's dominant language.

Four Years. At this age, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-4, Dunn & Dunn, 2007) was administered to the children in English. The PPVT is a test of the receptive vocabulary in which the child's task consists of pointing to one of four pictures that is named by the examiner. It consists of 228 items grouped into 19 sets of 12 items arranged in order of increasing difficulty. The PPVT- 4 demonstrates strong psychometric properties (Dunn & Dunn, 2007).

Four and a Half Years. At this age, the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test, second edition (KBIT-2, Kaufman & Kaufman, 2004) was administered to the children in their dominant language. The KBIT-2 is an individually administered assessment of intellectual

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ability normed for 4-to -90 years of age that assesses both verbal ability and nonverbal reasoning ability. The administration of the battery results in three scores: a verbal score, a non-verbal score, and an IQ composite. For the purpose of this study, only the verbal score was used. The KBIT-2 demonstrates good validity and reliability (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2004).

In order to ensure that the scores from the different questionnaires have the same weight in our analyses, each test score was transformed into a z score. Thus, in our statistical analyses, we used the z transformed outcome scores at each testing age: the average score of z transformed ASQ3 and Bayley's scores at age two, z transformed PPVT scores at age four, and z transformed KBIT-2 scores at age four and a half.

Postnatal Maternal Stress (The Mediator). Postnatal maternal stress was measured at the age of three, 12, 24, 36 and 54 months by administering the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger, Lushene, Vagg, & Jacobs, 1983), and at three and 24 months by administering the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS; Cox, Holden, & Sagovsky, 1987). Although these inventories were developed as screening tools for anxiety and depression, previous studies have shown that they are sensitive predictors of caregiver stress over time (Green, Cohen, Siskowski, & Toyinbo, 2017; Elliot, Shewchuk, & Richards, 2001; Shewchuk, Richards, & Elliot, 1998; Ugalde, Krishnasamy, & Schofield, 2014). Due to the high correlation between these scores at different ages, the z scores for both measures were calculated, and the average z score was used as a measure of maternal stress (see Table 1 for average stress scores at each testing age).

Study 1a

The first aim was to replicate the previous findings of an overall negative effect of the presence of older siblings on language outcomes (Black et al., 2005; Havron et al., 2019; Peyre et al., 2016) by comparing children with no older sibling to children with one older

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sibling. The second aim was to assess whether the age gap between children and the sex of the older sibling affects children's language skills.

Preregistration

All variables and analyses reported in this paper were preregistered via Open Science Framework prior to data analysis. These preregistrations can be accessed via the following links: Study 1a (https://osf.io/xwnps/?view_only=877427d7cfa64160929dac304f45a7dc), Study 1b (https://osf.io/8dmge/?view_only=1ea7577f7f414873bd328c5b8deb8691), and Study 2 (https://osf.io/acdnf/?view_only=b3c0fae5cb0349f7a782035a3ad9f4f8).

Furthermore, analysis scripts and data are available on these links as well.

Statistical Analyses

Since in our sample each child had between one and three observations, we ran linear mixed-effects models to analyse the data. First, we fitted three linear models, one for each testing age (two, four, and four and a half years) with the child's precise age at testing and with aforementioned control variables but without predictors (control variables were: child's sex, birth weight, gestational age, age at testing, the language of test administration, maternal alcohol consumption, maternal smoking status, maternal education, maternal age at delivery, paternal age at delivery, paternal education, and household income). Next, residuals were extracted from these models and combined into one dataset used in our main mixed-effects regression analysis to explain any residual variance left after adjusting for our control variables (the predictors were: having an older sibling, the age gap, and the sex of older sibling). The reason the adjustment was done this way is to enable us to control for the exact age at the time of evaluation, which would not be possible if the adjustments were done directly within the main model. In the analyses, the mean-centered age was obtained by subtracting the average age for each age group from each individual participant's age at testing, in order to have an interpretable intercept of age. The presence of an older sibling and

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the older sibling's sex were sum-coded, while the age gap was mean-centered. For our main analyses, we first run a linear mixed-effects regression model with the adjusted language scores (the measure of child's language skills) as the dependent variable, age at testing (two, four, and four and a half years of age) as a within-participant independent variable, and the presence of an older sibling as a between-subject independent variable with a random intercept for participants (Model 1). In a second model, we added the between-subject independent variables of the older sibling's sex, and the age gap between the child and the older sibling (Model 2). The models were fitted using the *lmer* function of the *lme4* package (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015) in R (R core team, 2020).

The significance of models was assessed using Satterthwaite's method using the *anova* function of the *lmerTest* package (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2017). As a measure of effect size, Cohen's *d* was calculated from the *F*-statistic using the function *F_to_d* from the package *effectsize* (Ben-Shachar, Makowski, & Lüdtke, 2020).

Additionally, in order to evaluate the evidence for the null hypotheses, Bayes Factors (BFs) were determined using the marginal likelihoods (bridgesampling) method. In order to interpret the BFs, we used the conventional cut-offs based on Jeffreys (1998), with a BF greater than 3 representing sufficient evidence for the experimental hypothesis, and a BF less than .33 representing sufficient evidence for the null hypothesis. BFs with values between .33 and 3 indicate that the data are inconclusive. BFs were determined using the functions *bayesfactor_models* and *brm* from the R packages *bayestestR* (Makowski, et al., 2019) and *brms* (Bürkner, 2017). Note that when the null hypothesis testing and BFs give contradictory results, we discuss the results in terms of their significance, while also mentioning whether these were supported by the Bayesian analyses as a measure of robustness of these results.

We also reran the main models excluding the children for which English was not the dominant language. While ASQ3, Bayley, and KBIT-2 were administered in the child's

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dominant language, PPVT was only administered in English regardless of the child's dominant language. Thus, in order to control that PPVT administration in English did not influence our results, all main models were also conducted without children for which English was the non-dominant language. The results of these models are reported in Supplementary Materials, since they were not preregistered.

Results

Model 1: Having an Older Sibling Versus Having No Older Sibling. The fitted LME model revealed a significant main effect of the presence of an older sibling ($F(1, 648.51) = 7.28, p = .007, BF = 5.45$). The BF suggests substantial evidence for the experimental hypothesis. Children with no older sibling demonstrated higher language scores ($M = .045, SE = .037$) compared to children with one older sibling ($M = -.116, SE = .047, p = .007, Cohen's d = .21, 95\% CIs: .06, .37$, see Figure 1). There was no significant main effect of age at testing ($F(1, 810.39) = .019, p = .89, BF = .0008, Cohen's d = .01 (95\% CIs: -.13, .15$, see Table 2 for model summary), which was supported by BF indicating the evidence for null hypothesis.

Model 2: Having an Older Sister vs. Having an Older Brother. The fitted LME model for the sex of older sibling and the age gap between siblings revealed a significant main effect of age gap ($F(1, 205.16) = 5.83, p = .02, BF = .026, Cohen's d = .34 (95\% CIs: .06, .61)$), indicating that children with a smaller age gap between them and their older siblings show better language skills than those with a larger age gap (though note that the BF shows evidence for a null effect). There was no significant main effect of the older sibling's sex ($F(1, 212.80) = .57, p = .45, BF = .21, Cohen's d = .10 (95\% CIs: -.17, .37)$), no significant main effect of age at testing ($F(1, 282.40) = .001, p = .984, BF = .001, Cohen's d = .004 (95\% CIs: -.23, .24)$) and no significant age gap by older sibling's sex interaction ($F(1, 205.21) = .104, p = .747, BF < .0001, Cohen's d = .05 (95\% CIs: -.23, .32$, see Table 3 for

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model summary; see Figures 2 and 3) with BFs showing evidence for null hypothesis in all three cases.

Discussion Study 1a

In Study 1a, we replicated previous studies on the negative effect of having an older sibling on language development (e.g., Havron et al., 2019), thus demonstrating better language skills in children with no older sibling compared to children with one older sibling. We also found a significant effect of age gap, such that a smaller age gap between target child and the older sibling predicted better language scores, in line with a result from two recent studies (Havron et al., 2019, though it was not statistically significant; Gurgand et al., *in prep*). Finally, we did not find evidence for sex differences in the effect of the older sibling on language outcomes, although descriptively our result was consistent with previous results in that children with older sisters showed better languages scores than children with older brothers.

Study 1b

The first aim of Study 1b was to assess whether maternal stress mediates the relation between having an older sibling and language skills in children. The second aim was to examine whether maternal stress mediates the relation between sibling sex and language skills in children. In study 1a, we did not find an effect of sibling sex on language outcomes. We nevertheless examine whether there is a mediating effect of maternal stress, since controlling for maternal stress might change this outcome.

We should note here that there are different theoretical views on conducting a mediation analysis in cases when there is no direct effect between two variables. According to the traditional school of thought, mediation analysis should be conducted only if there is a direct effect of variable X on variable Y (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Judd & Kenny, 1981). On the other hand, a more recent school of thought suggests that mediation analysis, if

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theoretically warranted, can be conducted even if there is no direct effect between two variables. For one thing, the indirect effects assessed by mediation analysis may have greater explanatory power than direct effects (Agler & DeBoeck, 2017; Loeys, et al., 2015; O'Rourke & MacKinnon, 2015; Rucker, et al., 2011); for another thing, if there are two effects in opposite directions (i.e., a direct and an indirect effect in opposite directions) they may suppress each other, resulting in a near-zero total effect (MacKinnon, et al., 2000). Thus, in order to understand the potential role of maternal stress in the context of sibling effects on language development, we conducted mediation analyses regardless of the presence of direct effects.

Analyses

Three mediation analyses were run: one mediation with the presence of an older sibling as an independent variable (Mediation 1), another with the target child's sex as an independent variable (Mediation 2), and a third with the older sibling's sex as an independent variable (Mediation 3). These analyses were conducted in four steps using the R package *mediation* (Tingley, et al., 2014). In Step 1, a linear model was fitted to assess the direct effect of independent variable (older sibling in Mediation 1, target child's sex in Mediation 2, older sibling's sex in Mediation 3) on the dependent variable (language skills). Step 2 assessed the effect of the independent variable on the mediator variable (maternal stress), while step 3 assessed the effect of the mediator variable on the dependent variable while controlling for the effect of the independent variable. Finally, in step 4 we run the causal mediation analysis, thus, assessing whether the relation between the independent variable and dependent variable is mediated by the mediator variable (indirect effect). The significance of indirect effects was tested using bootstrapping procedures. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of 1,000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence intervals were computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles.

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Additionally, Bayesian mediation models were fitted using the function *brm* from R package *brms* (Bürkner, 2017).

Results

Mediation 1: The Presence of an Older Sibling and Maternal Stress. Table 4 presents the results of step 1, step 2, and step 3 of the mediation analysis. The results of the causal mediation analysis (step 4) demonstrated that the indirect effect of the presence of an older sibling on language skill through maternal stress was not significant (*Indirect effect* = $-.0004$, $p = .93$, 95 % *CI*s: $-.01$, $.01$, see Figure 4). The results of the Bayesian mediation analysis confirm these results (*Indirect effect* = $-.0004$, 95% *CI*s: $-.01$, $.01$) with maternal stress accounting for only 0.38 % of the relation between the presence of an older sibling and language skills. Thus, the results do not support the hypothesis that the effect of the presence of an older sibling on language skills was mediated by maternal stress.

Mediation 2: The Target Child's Sex and Maternal Stress. The results demonstrated that the indirect effect of the target child's sex on language skills that goes through the mediator, maternal stress, was not significant (*Indirect effect* = $-.002$, $p = .73$, 95 % *CI*s: $-.01$, $.01$, see Figure 4). The results of the Bayesian mediation analysis confirm these results (*Indirect effect* = $-.002$, 95 % *CI*s: $-.01$, $.01$) with maternal stress accounting for only 0.84 % of relation between the target child's sex and language skills. These results suggest that the effect of the target child's sex on language skills was not mediated by maternal stress.

Mediation 3: The Older Sibling's Sex and Maternal Stress. Here, the indirect effect of the older sibling's sex on language skills that goes through maternal stress was not significant (*Indirect effect* = $-.003$, $p = .75$, 95 % *CI*s: $-.03$, $.02$). The results of the Bayesian mediation analysis confirmed these results (*Indirect effect* = $-.003$, 95 % *CI*s: $-.03$, $.02$, see

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Figure 4). Thus, mediation 3 indicates that maternal stress does not mediate the relation between the older sibling's sex and language skills.

Discussion Study 1b

Study 1b examined the potential mediating effect of maternal stress in the relation between language outcomes and having an older sibling, the target child's sex, and the older sibling's sex. While we found direct effects of the presence of an older sibling and the target child's sex (but not sibling's sex) on language outcomes such that having an older sibling and being male were both associated with lower language scores, these effects were not mediated by maternal stress.

Study 2

In Study 2, we go beyond looking at the effect of a single older sibling and explore the effect of the presence of other household members on children's language skills, as well as the role of maternal stress therein, by particularly focusing on the effects of household size and residential crowding.

Sample. Since in Study 2 we include all children regardless of the number of older siblings, the sample size in Study 2 differs from the sample size in study 1a and study 1b. In the current study, 855 children had language data available at two, four, or four and a half years. At two years of age, language data were available for 511 children. At four years of age, language data were available for 771 children. Finally, at four and a half years of age language data were available for 467 children. There were 379 children with language data available at all three ages. 47.6 % of participants were girls, and 58.25% of participants were Chinese, 24.33% Malay, and 17.31% Indian (see Table 5 for participants' details).

Analyses

We ran three sets of analyses. The aim of the first set of analysis is first to assess whether household size and maternal stress influence language skills in children (model 1)

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and then to assess whether maternal stress mediates the relation between the number of household members and children's language scores (mediation 1). In the second set of analyses, the first aim is to assess whether the number of adults, the number of children in the household, and maternal stress influence language skills in children (model 2), and the second aim is to assess whether maternal stress mediates the relation between the number of adults (mediation 2.1), and the number of children (mediation 2.2) in the household, and children's language scores. Finally, the third set of analyses aimed first to assess whether residential crowding and maternal stress influence language skills in children (model 3), and second to assess whether maternal stress mediates the relation between the residential crowding and children's language scores (mediation 3). All models were conducted in the same way as in studies 1, thus, residuals from the analysis predicting language outcomes from the control factors were used as a dependent variable.

Results

Model 1: The Effect of Household Size and Maternal Stress. The fitted LME model revealed a significant main effect of maternal stress ($F(1, 728.55) = 3.89, p = .049, BF = .18, \text{Cohen's } d = .15, 95\% \text{ CIs: } .00, .29$), though the BFs show moderate support for the null hypothesis. There were no main effects of household size ($F(1, 719.56) = .16, p = .692, BF = .01, \text{Cohen's } d = .03, 95\% \text{ CIs: } -.12, .18$) nor age at testing ($F(1, 1035.43) = .001, p = .995, BF = .001, \text{Cohen's } d = .002, 95\% \text{ CIs: } -.12, .12$). BFs also show strong support for the null.

Mediation 1: Household Size and Maternal Stress. We found no significant indirect effect of the household size on language skills through the maternal stress (*Indirect effect* = $-.002, p = .34, 95\% \text{ CIs: } -.01, .00$, see Figure 5 and Table 6). The results of the Bayesian mediation analysis confirm these results (*Indirect effect* = $-.002, 95\% \text{ CIs: } -.01, .00$). These

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results suggest that the effect of household size on language skills was not mediated by maternal stress.

Model 2: The effect of adult Members, Child Members and Maternal Stress. The fitted LME model revealed a significant main effect of maternal stress ($F(1, 726.86) = 4.11, p = .043, BF = .18, Cohen's d = .15, 95\% CIs: .00, .30$; though note that the Bayesian analysis supports the null hypothesis), but no main effects of number of adult members ($F(1, 721.97) = 2.28, p = .13, BF = .05, Cohen's d = .11, 95\% CIs: -.03, .26$), number of child members ($F(1, 688.39) = 1.18, p = .28, BF = .03, Cohen's d = .08, 95\% CIs: -.07, .23$) nor age at testing ($F(1, 1035.18) = .001, p = .99, BF = .001, Cohen's d = .002, 95\% CIs: -.12, .12$). This is in line with the strong support for the null obtained by the Bayesian analysis.

Mediation 2.1: The Number of Adult Members and Maternal Stress. The casual mediation analysis demonstrated no significant indirect effect of number of adult members on children's language skills, via maternal stress (*Indirect effect* = $-.003, p = .16, 95\% CIs: -.01, .00$, see Figure 5), which was confirmed by Bayesian mediation analysis (*Indirect effect* = $-.003, 95\% CIs: -.01, .001$). These results suggest that the effect of the number of adult members on language skills was not mediated by maternal stress.

Mediation 2.2: The Number of Child Members and Maternal Stress. We found no significant indirect effect of number of child members on children's language skills via maternal stress (*Indirect effect* = $-.0004, p = .81, 95\% CIs: -.01, .00$), which was confirmed by the Bayesian mediation analysis (*Indirect effect* = $-.0004, 95\% CIs: -.01, .01$). Thus, the effect of the number of child members on language skills was not mediated by maternal stress.

Model 3: The Effect of Residential Crowding and Maternal Stress. The fitted LME model showed no significant main effects of maternal stress ($F(1, 462.63) = 2.16, p = .14, BF = .07, Cohen's d = .14, 95\% CIs: -.05, .32$), residential crowding ($F(1, 455.81)$

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= .01, $p = .92$, $BF = .03$, *Cohen's d* = .01, 95 % *CI*s: -.17, .19) nor age at testing ($F(1, 847.74) = 1.36$, $p = .24$, $BF = .002$, *Cohen's d* = .08, 95 % *CI*s: -.05, .21). This is in line with the strong support for the null obtained by the Bayesian analysis.

Mediation 3: Residential Crowding and Maternal Stress. The results showed no significant indirect effect of residential crowding on language skills through maternal stress (*Indirect effect* = -.01, $p = .08$, 95 % *CI*s: -.03, .00, see Figure 5). The results of the Bayesian mediation analysis confirm these results (*Indirect effect* = -.01, 95 % *CI*s: -.03, .00). Despite this non-significance, maternal stress accounted for a large portion, 26.12%, of the relation between residential crowding and language skills. Additionally, the effect of residential crowding on maternal stress was significant (see step 2 for mediation 3 in Table 6). As mentioned above, some recent views on mediation analysis suggest that there can be an indirect effect even if there is no direct effect (Agler & DeBoeck, 2017; Loeys, et al., 2015; O'Rourke & MacKinnon, 2015; Rucker et al., 2011), and thus, these results do seem to suggest that the relation of residential crowding and language skills was partially mediated by maternal stress.

Discussion Study 2

Study 2 set out to examine the effects of household factors beyond the presence of a single older sibling on language outcomes, with and without the mediating effects of maternal stress. In our analyses of the effects of overall household size and maternal stress on language skills, we found that stress, but not household size, affected language outcomes, with higher stress predicting lower language scores. A similar pattern was found in the analyses looking at the effect of child and adult members separately, where we again found a significant effect of stress, but not any of the different groups of household members, on language outcomes. Finally, our analysis of the effect of residential crowding suggests that it is related to maternal stress, which in turn has a marginally significant effect on language outcomes. Although not a

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significant causal mediation effect, the proportion of explained variability was quite large, and suggests a possible partial mediation of the effect of residential crowding on language outcomes by maternal stress.

General Discussion

Several family structure factors have been previously shown to adversely affect children's language acquisition outcomes. Here we focused on the presence of an older sibling, and household size and residential crowding. We analysed a multi-ethnic child cohort from Singapore, a society much different from the mostly Western cultures previously tested, examining the generalizability and possible reasons for this recurrent pattern. Looking more in depth into these two factors, we also examined whether their effect on language outcomes was mediated by maternal stress, given that they may increase maternal stress, and that maternal stress has been previously shown to adversely affect children's language outcomes. We start by discussing the effect of older siblings, and the (lack of) a mediating role of maternal stress before moving on to household size, and residential crowding.

Older siblings are generally found to have a negative association with language acquisition, such that the more older siblings a child has, the lower their language skills (e.g., Black et al., 2005; Peyre et al., 2016). In study 1a we tested the effect of having an older sibling, the age gap between siblings, and the sex of the older sibling on children's language development. In study 1b, we examined whether maternal stress is a mediating factor in the effect of siblings on language development, such that having an older child, and the child being a male, is associated with higher maternal stress, which is in turn associated with lower language scores for the younger of the two siblings. In study 1a, we found that, like in previous studies on mostly Western cultures, having an older sibling was associated with lower language scores, providing corroborating support for this pattern from a non-Western society. We also found a significant effect of age gap, such that siblings with a narrower age

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gap showed higher language scores than siblings with a wider age gap. This result is in line with a result from two recent studies (Havron et al., 2019, though it was not statistically significant; Gurgand et al., *in prep*). One possible explanation for this finding is that when siblings are closer in age it is easier for parents to engage them in a shared activity that is developmentally appropriate for both children (e.g., reading a story which is suitable for both ages). An additional explanation is that more narrowly spaced siblings tend to have closer relationships (Furman & Burhmester, 1985; though see also Samek & Rueter, 2011 who did not find an effect of age gap on relationship quality). Thus, this finding still leaves open whether it is parents' or siblings' linguistic input that affects language acquisition when there are older siblings in the house.

Finally, our results did not show that the older sibling's sex was related to the younger sibling's language scores. This is in contrast with previous findings (Havron et al., 2019; Jakiela et al., 2020), and may have three different reasons. The first is that our study was simply underpowered to detect such an effect. This interpretation is supported by the fact that our effect size was similar in size to that of Havron and colleagues (2019), though, in our case, not significant, perhaps due to our smaller sample size. It is also supported by the fact that our obtained BFs only moderately supported the null. The second is that the effect in previous studies was a false positive, as indeed, Gurgand et al., (*in prep*) also did not find an effect of the sibling's sex (though they did find an interaction between the sibling's sex and the age gap between siblings). While these are both viable interpretations, a more theoretically interesting interpretation is that our sample of Singaporean children is inherently different from the French sample used in Havron and colleagues (2019) and the Kenyan one used in Jakiela and colleagues (2020). However, given that we did not compare these cultures directly, any discussion of such possibility would be speculative and we therefore refrain from it in the present article. In addition, remember that Singapore is made up of three major

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ethnic groups (which we did not look at separately in this study, due to low statistical power for this comparison), and it is thus not suitable to make sweeping generalizations about the population. In study 1b, we investigated the possibility that maternal stress would mediate the effect of having an older child, as well as the effect of the sex of the target child and their older sibling, on language development. First, unlike we hypothesized, we found that having two children was not associated with more maternal stress than having one child. The finding that having two children was not associated with increased maternal stress can contribute to understanding the possible causes of the decades-long finding that having an older sibling is associated with lower language skills. If maternal stress is not a reason for the negative effect of older siblings on language development, this leaves open one other proposed route: That parents are more occupied with the older sibling at the expense of providing high-quality input to younger siblings (despite not being emotionally occupied with the burden of also having an older child). In other words, this is a mere matter of allocation of time, or a differential treatment of the two children (e.g., Bornstein et al., 2019). Indeed, it was previously shown, in US families, that when both siblings are present, parents may be more responsive to the older child, at the expense of providing (quality) language input to the younger child (Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Waterfall, Vevea, & Hedges, 2007; see also Hoff-Ginsberg & Krueger, 1998). Given the lack of a maternal stress effect in the present study, this may be a more likely explanation for the older sibling effect than the emotional burden on parents.

However, it is also possible, as with any null effect, that there was no effect of maternal stress simply because of statistical power issues. This would be in line with previous literature which showed that maternal stress is indeed negatively associated with language development (e.g., Reck et al., 2018). The way maternal stress contributed to language development in previous studies could be by lowering the amount and quality of maternal

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linguistic input (e.g., Porritt et al., 2014). Previous studies found delayed response onset to infants' vocalizations by depressed mothers (Bettes, 1988). Additionally, it was found that mothers with depression are less likely than non-depressed mothers to adjust their speech input to younger babies by shortening the mean length of their utterances (Reissland, Shepherd, & Herrera, 2003). Our findings in study 2 support this option, because when we use a larger sample from our study (not limiting ourselves to children who have only one older sibling or none), we do find an effect of maternal stress on language scores. We elaborate more on this below when we discuss study 2.

Maternal stress neither mediated the effect of the older sibling's sex on the younger siblings' language development, nor was it significantly related to either the sex of the target child themselves nor the sex of the older sibling

We next looked at the effect of our second set of family structure factors, household size and residential crowding. In study 2, we first examined the role of household size generally, and then dissociated the role of adult and child members of the household. In addition, we examined the role of residential crowding.

We found no effect of household size on language scores nor on maternal stress. Likewise, we did not find an effect of residential crowding on language scores. This is contrary to previous research which showed that these factors do influence cognitive and language development, such that larger households and denser residences are associated with lower language and lower cognitive scores (Evans et al., 1999; 2010). One reason for this difference in finding might be that in Singapore many parents are working full-time and children might, to a great extent, be raised by grandparents or live-in hired help (Graham et al., 2002). The added stress or hardship associated with larger households or denser habitation might be offset by the help offered by these allo-maternal carers. As with studies 1a and 1b, it is also possible that this effect is due to a smaller sample size than previous

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studies (study 2 in Evans et al., 2010 had 10,000 children, however, note that study 1 in that paper, as well as Evans et al., 1999 had only several dozen children).

As already mentioned above, in study 2, unlike in study 1b, we *did* find an effect of maternal stress on children's language development, which is in line with previous studies (e.g., Reck et al., 2018). This might be because we were able to include a larger sample from our cohort in study 2 and in study 1b, since we included families with more than two children (studies 1a & 1b: 677 children, versus study 2: 856 children). Reck et al. (2018) used a small sample of mother-child dyads (34 mothers with anxiety disorder and 47 healthy mothers), and found that the strongest predictors of children's language development were maternal anxiety cognitions and joint activity in mother-infant interaction. Here, we complement these findings in three ways: We examine a subclinical sample, thus showing that maternal stress is related to language development not only when mothers fit diagnostic criteria for an anxiety disorder; we examine a much larger sample; and we examine a different culture (dyads in Reck et al., 2018 were German). These three facts speak to the generalizability of the effect.

Additionally, in study 2 we found that residential crowding affects maternal stress and that maternal stress accounts for 26.12% of the relation between residential crowding and language skills. Despite the large amount of variability being mediated by maternal stress, one should be careful with interpretation of these findings as we did not find a significant direct effect (i.e., effect of residential crowding on language skills), which increases the chances of a Type I error when assessing the mediation effect (Loeys et al., 2015). Still, if this effect is real, then it would mean that children's adverse language outcomes could be partly the result of maternal stress associated with living in denser residences. This pathway is one possible reason why lower-SES parents differ on average from higher SES parents in their speech to children, as they would tend to live in dense dwelling, associated with greater maternal stress (see Rowe, 2018 for other possible reasons). This finding joins a recent study

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by Ellwood-Lowe, et al., (2021). They suggest that structural constraints that vary according to SES affect caregivers' speech, and exemplify this by showing that even in mid- to-high SES families, financial concerns may suppress child-directed speech. Likewise, we find that residential crowding (a factor associated with low income, see Evans, & Saegert, 2000) is associated with stress, and through it with language development, despite statistically controlling for families' income and education.

To summarize, we find a negative effect of having an older sibling on language development. When siblings are closer together in age, their language scores are better than when they are further apart. The sibling's sex, however, did not significantly affect children's outcomes, though the effect size was similar in magnitude to previous studies. We did not find that the effect of having a sibling on language scores is mediated by maternal stress. Other factors (child and sibling sex, and household size) were likewise not mediated by maternal stress. These results might be the result of insufficient statistical power, or false positive results in previous studies, but a more theoretically interesting possibility is that they are the result of cultural differences between our Singaporean sample and previously studied samples (all but one Western). Last, we found that residential crowding affects maternal stress and that maternal stress accounts for a large proportion of the variance in the relation between residential crowding and language skills. Our findings shed light on open questions about the role of family structure variables such as older siblings and household size and density on language development within a given child's social environment.

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Table 1*Characteristics of children in the analysis sample with no older sibling or one older sibling*

Variable	Children with no sibling or one older sibling (<i>n</i> = 677)	Children without an older sibling (<i>n</i> = 407)	Children with one older sibling (<i>n</i> = 270)
Sex of the older sibling (male)	-	-	39.88 %
Age gap (months)	-	-	<i>M</i> = 49.18 (<i>SD</i> = 38.16)
Language skills at 2 years	<i>n</i> = 401	<i>n</i> = 246	<i>n</i> = 155
ASQ3 communication score	<i>M</i> = 47.54 (<i>SD</i> = 14.27)	<i>M</i> = 47.22 (<i>SD</i> = 14.28)	<i>M</i> = 48.08 (<i>SD</i> = 14.29)
Bayleys Receptive Communication score	<i>M</i> = 9.58 (<i>SD</i> = 2.88)	<i>M</i> = 9.63 (<i>SD</i> = 3.02)	<i>M</i> = 9.49 (<i>SD</i> = 2.65)
Bayleys Expressive Communication score	<i>M</i> = 9.36 (<i>SD</i> = 2.55)	<i>M</i> = 9.45 (<i>SD</i> = 2.65)	<i>M</i> = 9.22 (<i>SD</i> = 2.39)
Age of testing	<i>M</i> = 24.05 (<i>SD</i> = .58)	<i>M</i> = 24.07 (<i>SD</i> = .57)	<i>M</i> = 24.01 (<i>SD</i> = .60)
Language skills at 4 years	<i>n</i> = 613	<i>n</i> = 378	<i>n</i> = 235
PPVT-4	<i>M</i> = 51.27 (<i>SD</i> = 20.57)	<i>M</i> = 53.35 (<i>SD</i> = 21.17)	<i>M</i> = 47.92 (<i>SD</i> = 19.14)
Age of testing (months)	<i>M</i> = 48.61 (<i>SD</i> = .51)	<i>M</i> = 48.62 (<i>SD</i> = .51)	<i>M</i> = 48.6 (<i>SD</i> = .52)
Language skills at 4.5 years	<i>n</i> = 359	<i>n</i> = 233	<i>n</i> = 126
KBIT-s verbal subtest score	<i>M</i> = 87.54 (<i>SD</i> = 15.94)	<i>M</i> = 89 (<i>SD</i> = 16.56)	<i>M</i> = 84.84 (<i>SD</i> = 14.42)
Age of testing (months)	<i>M</i> = 54.54 (<i>SD</i> = 5.22)	<i>M</i> = 54.54 (<i>SD</i> = 5.06)	<i>M</i> = 54.54 (<i>SD</i> = 5.54)

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Predictor of cognitive skills			
Gender (male)	52.29 %	50.37 %	51.11 %
Gestational age (in weeks)	$M = 38.8 (SD = 1.5)$	$M = 38.9 (SD = 1.5)$	$M = 38.7 (SD = 1.5)$
Birth weight (in kg)	$M = 3.1 (SD = .45)$	$M = 3.08 (SD = .45)$	$M = 3.13 (SD = .45)$
Mother's age at delivery (years)	$M = 30.14 (SD = 4.82)$	$M = 29.99 (SD = 4.74)$	$M = 31.3 (SD = 5.28)$
Father's age at delivery (years)	$M = 33.5 (SD = 5.89)$	$M = 33.14 (SD = 5.68)$	$M = 36.13 (SD = 6.81)$
Alcohol during pregnancy (grams per day)	$M = .01 (SD = .16)$	$M = .003 (SD = .04)$	$M = .02 (SD = .25)$
Maternal smoking during pregnancy	2.22 %	1.47 %	3.33 %
Maternal education (<i>median</i>)	Polytechnic/diploma	Polytechnic/diploma	Polytechnic/diploma
Paternal education (<i>median</i>)	Polytechnic/diploma	Polytechnic/diploma	Polytechnic/diploma
Household income (kSGD/month, <i>median</i>)	4000 -5900	4000 -5900	4000 -5900
Postnatal maternal stress			
STAI (3 months)	$M = 36.38 (SD = 9.81)$	$M = 36.40 (SD = 9.55)$	$M = 36.35 (SD = 10.23)$
STAI (12 months)	$M = 71.72 (SD = 19.33)$	$M = 72.53 (SD = 19.29)$	$M = 70.38 (SD = 19.31)$
STAI (24 months)	$M = 70.01 (SD = 19.45)$	$M = 69.85 (SD = 18.88)$	$M = 70.3 (SD = 20.39)$
STAI (36 months)	$M = 69.43 (SD = 18.78)$	$M = 70.23 (SD = 18.66)$	$M = 67.94 (SD = 18.9)$

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STAI (54 months)	$M = 69.14$ ($SD = 18.36$)	$M = 69.32$ ($SD = 18.17$)	$M = 68.78$ ($SD = 18.72$)
EPDS (3 months)	$M = 6.67$ ($SD = 4.79$)	$M = 6.82$ ($SD = 4.6$)	$M = 6.43$ ($SD = 5.09$)
EPDS (24 months)	$M = 6.3$ ($SD = 4.91$)	$M = 6.3$ ($SD = 4.71$)	$M = 6.31$ ($SD = 5.23$)

Table 2

Summary of adjusted LME models fitted for language skills as dependent variable and the presence of older sibling and age at testing as independent variables

Model and predictor	β	SE	p
Intercept	.05	.07	.47
Age at Testing	-.0001	.001	.89
Older Sibling (reference: without older sibling)	-.161	.06	.007**

** $p < .01$

Table 3

Summary of adjusted LME models fitted for child's language skills as the dependent variable and the older sibling's sex, age gap, and age at testing as independent variables

Model and predictor	β	SE	p
<i>Intercept</i>	<i>.14</i>	<i>.13</i>	<i>.31</i>
Age at Testing	.0001	.003	.98
Age Gap	-.003	.002	.02*
Sex (reference: brother)	-.06	.08	.45
Age Gap: Sex	.001	.001	.75

* $p < .05$

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Table 4

The results of Step 1 (effect of IV on DV), Step 2 (effect of IV on mediator), and Step 3 (effect of mediator on DV) for the mediation analyses in Study 1b, significant effects are in bold

	<i>b</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>BF</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>	95 % <i>CI</i> s
Mediation 1 - having an older sibling (IV), language skills (DV), maternal stress (mediator)						
Step 1 (<i>df</i> = 1, 678)	-.13	4.91	.03	1.75	.17	.02, .32
Older Sibling on Language Skills						
Step 2 (<i>df</i> = 1, 609)	.01	.01	.91	.18	.01	-.15, .17
Older Siblings on Maternal Stress						
Step 3 (<i>df</i> = 1, 608)	-.05	1.75	.19	.20	.11	-.05, .27
Maternal Stress on Language Skills						
Mediation 2 - the sex of the target child (IV), language skills (DV), maternal stress (mediator)						
Step 1 (<i>df</i> = 1, 678)	-.20	10.91	.001	33.66	.25	.10, .40
Child's Sex on Language Skills						
Step 2 (<i>df</i> = 1, 609)	.03	.21	.65	.19	.04	-.12, .20
Child's Sex on Maternal Stress						

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Step 3 ($df = 1, 608$) -.05 2.05 .15 3.49 .12 -.04, .28

Maternal Stress on

Language Skills

Mediation 3 - the sex of the sibling (IV), language skills (DV), maternal stress

(mediator)

Step 1 ($df = 1, 271$) .13 1.87 .17 .61 .17 -.07, .40

Sibling's Sex on Language

Skills

Step 2 ($df = 1, 264$) .05 .14 .70 .32 .05 -.20, .29

Sibling's Sex on Maternal

Stress

Step 3 ($df = 1, 263$) -.08 2.65 .10 .19 .20 -.04, .44

Maternal Stress on

Language Skills

Table 5

Sample characteristics in Study 2

Household size (excluding the target child and mother)		Child members (excluding the target child)		Adult members (excluding the mother)	
No members	5	No child members	361*	No adult members	9**
One member	197	One child member	291**	One adult member	426

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Two members	184	Two child members	140	Two adult members	152
Three members	186	Three or more	63	Three adult members	151
Four members	163			Four or more	117
Five or more	120				
Total:	855	Total:	855	Total:	855

* Note that this number differs from the number of children with no older siblings in Study 1 and 2 ($n = 407$), since here we only include participants with no other child members at home, while in the Study 1 and 2 we include participants who do not have an older sibling, but may have other children at home (e.g., relatives).

** There are 21 households that have one child member in the household that is not their own child (e.g., niece or nephew).

***There are four mothers that did not have adult members in the household but had an older child or children at home.

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Table 6

The results of Step 1 (effect of IV on DV), Step 2 (effect of IV on mediator), and Step 3 (effect of mediator on DV) for the mediation analyses in Study 2, significant effects are in bold

	<i>b</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>BF</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>	95 % <i>CI</i> s
Mediation 1 - household size (IV), language skills (DV), maternal stress (mediator)						
Step 1 (<i>df</i> = 1, 774)	.003	.02	.88	.05	.01	-.13, .15
Household Size on Language Skills						
Step 2 (<i>df</i> = 1, 774)	.02	1.30	.25	.10	.08	-.06, .22
Household Size on Maternal Stress						
Step 3 (<i>df</i> = 1, 773)	-.07	5.17	.02	.05	.16	.02, .30
Maternal Stress on Language Skills						
Mediation 2.1 - number of adult members of the household (IV), language skills (DV), maternal stress (mediator)						
Step 1 (<i>df</i> = 1, 774)	.02	.85	.36	.09	.07	-.07, .21
Number of Adults on Language Skills						
Step 2 (<i>df</i> = 1, 774)	.04	1.91	.17	.18	.10	-.04, .24
Number of Adults on Maternal Stress						
Step 3 (<i>df</i> = 1, 773)	-.07	5.37	.02	.11	.17	.03, .31
Maternal Stress on Language Skills						

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Mediation 2.2 number of child members of the household (IV), language skills (DV), maternal stress (mediator)

Step 1 (*df* = 1, 774) -.02 .65 .42 .10 .06 -.08, .20

Number of Children on

Language Skills

Step 2 (*df* = 1, 774) .01 .03 .86 .08 .01 -.13, .15

Number of Children on

Maternal Stress

Step 3 (*df* = 1, 773) -.07 5.12 .02 .10 .16 .02, .30

Maternal Stress on

Language Skills

Mediation 3 - residential crowding (IV), language skills (DV), maternal stress (mediator)

Step 1 (*df* = 1, 662) -.05 .63 .43 .20 .06 -.09, .21

Residential Crowding on

Language Skills

Step 2 (*df* = 1, 662) .18 7.61 .01 7.31 .21 .06, .37

Residential Crowding on

Maternal Stress

Step 3' (*df* = 1, 661) -.07 3.75 .05 .11 .15 .00, .30

Maternal Stress on

Language Skills

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Figure 1

Language skills of children with no older siblings compared to children with one older sibling (The circles represent individual data points, dark blue symbols represent the means, the error bars represent ± 2 SD, and the boxes encompass interquartile ranges)

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Figure 2

Language skills of children with one older brother compared to children with one older sister

(The circles represent individual data points, dark blue symbols represent the means, the error bars represent ± 2 SD, and the boxes encompass interquartile ranges)

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Figure 3

Scatterplot depicting the relation between language skills and age gap between participants and their older siblings, separately for children with an older brother (blue circles) and an older sister (orange circles). Dashed lines represent the best-fitting regressions

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Figure 4

The results of mediation analyses for the mediative effect of maternal stress (p values in brackets) on the relation between the presence of an older sibling and language skills (top left), target child's sex and language skills (top right), and the older sibling's sex and language skills (bottom middle)

Figure 5

The results of mediation analyses for the mediation effect of maternal stress (p values in brackets) on the relation between the household size and language skills (top left), number of adult members and language skills (top right), number of child members and language skills (bottom left), and residential crowding and language skills (bottom right)