Sibling Abuse in Families

‘In troubled families, abuse and neglect are permitted; it’s the talking about them that is forbidden.’

Marcia Sirota
‘Sibling relationships can be the longest & most formative relationships of our lives.’

• Sibling abuse is one of the most common forms of abuse but is often overlooked by society, friends & family

• Abuse occurs when one sibling consistently intimidates, terrorizes or controls another

• It occurs most often in dysfunctional, neglectful or abusive homes

• 60% of children who witnessed abuse between their parents later acted out the scene with their siblings

(Caspi, 2012)
Identifying sibling abuse

• As a rule, parents and society expect fights and aggression among siblings. Because of this, parents often don't see sibling abuse as a problem until serious harm occurs.

• Prevalence rates of sibling abuse are difficult to calculate because of the difficulty in differentiating aggression from abuse; a key question is the balance of power.

• To assess the existence of abuse, questions need to focus upon:
  - prevalence of different types of aggression
  - frequency
  - intention of harm
  - magnitude of the aggression
  - power & dominance
Difference between aggression & abuse

• Age: Determine if the behaviour is age appropriate, since children use different conflict-resolution tactics during various developmental stages

• Pattern: Determine if it is an isolated incident or part of an enduring pattern: abuse is, by definition, a long-term pattern rather than occasional disagreements

• Power balance: Determine if there is an "aspect of victimisation” to the behaviour: rivalry tends to be incident-specific, reciprocal and obvious to others, while abuse is characterised by secrecy and an imbalance of power

• Motivation: Determine the goal of the behaviour: the goal of abuse tends to be embarrassment or domination of the victim

(Caspi, 2012)
Common traits of abusers

- Aggressive temperament
- Lack of empathy
- Lack of boundaries, discipline & understanding of respect
- Fragile ego
- Unmet personal needs (especially for physical contact in emotion-deprived environments)
- Too much responsibility over siblings
- Bored, mindless
- Power-driven
- Mental health issues/psychological disorders, e.g. schizophrenia, alcoholism...
## Common traits & types of targets

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<th>The Passive Target</th>
<th>The accidental target</th>
<th>The provocative target</th>
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<td>Stoical, enduring</td>
<td>In the ‘wrong place at the wrong time’</td>
<td>Challenges the abuser</td>
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<td>Passive</td>
<td>Abuser finds the opportunity</td>
<td>Rails against the dysfunctional family system</td>
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<td>Quiet, gentle</td>
<td>‘The perfect storm’</td>
<td>Provokes deep reactions in people</td>
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<td>Docile, obedient</td>
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<td>Difficulties with boundaries</td>
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Common family roles

• The hero: good leader, organised, goal-directed / over-compensates, can’t relax or have fun

• The rescuer: emotional caretaker, avoids conflict, confuses help with enabling, helps everyone else so they don’t have to focus on their own feelings

• The scapegoat: all the families trauma project upon this person / often has willingness to confront the truth

• The lost child: subservient, good, passive, obedient; often flexible and easy-going / remains hidden, unnoticed, feels worthless & fearful, follows without questioning

• The clown: uses humour to avoid conflict, pretends that everything is ok, can lighten the atmosphere but often disconnected from feelings

• The truth-teller: often avoided & disliked by other family members / might be strident and dogmatic
Psychological Abuse

• The most prevalent type of abuse in sibling conflict. Psychological abuse & aggression between siblings is one of the most common yet often underrecognized forms of child abuse.

• Includes name calling, belittling, teasing, insulting, threatening to harm, and the destruction of personal property.

• Difficulties arise from differentiating between psychological aggression and abuse because it is difficult to identify when the balance of power is not evenly distributed.

• Adult sibling abuse survivors have much higher rates of emotional cut-off (34%) with brothers and sisters than what is evident in the general population (<6%).

(Caffaro, 2005; Whipple & Fenton, 1995)
Physical Abuse

- Sibling physical abuse is far more common than peer bullying and other forms of family abuse, such as spousal or child abuse.
- Includes hitting, biting, slapping, stabbing, shoving, punching and even tickling.
- Families have difficulty recognising this form of abuse – because the aggression is praised; because of denial; because of fear.
- Sisters more likely to be abused than brothers; but brothers’ abuse more likely to be overlooked.

(Caspi, 2012)
Sexual Abuse

• Prevalence rates are difficult to calculate for several reasons (e.g. lack of recognition of abuse / fear / denial / distorted recall / lack of consensus of definition of sibling sexual abuse)

However we know that

~ 50% of all sexual child molestation can be accounted for by juveniles
~ 40% of all juvenile-perpetrated child sexual abuse is perpetrated in sibling relationships

• Sibling abusers: more sexual offences, longer offending history & engage in more intrusive sexual behaviour than other adolescent sex offenders

• Sibling sexual abuse includes penetration, touching, and other behaviour with sexual connotation that not necessarily involves touching, coercion or force; e.g. overt porn use

• There can be 2 categories of sexual abuse:

  Nurturance-oriented incest: characterised by expressions of affection and love
  Power-oriented incest: characterised by force and domination

(Caspi, 2012; Ryan, 2005)
Sexual Abuse / Incest

• **Incest** happens with the consensus of both siblings while **sexual abuse** does not involve consent (however a target may not be aware that he/she did not consent because of innocence or lack of understanding of what was happening)

• To differentiate sexual abuse from sexual curiosity or playing innocent games there needs to be:
  - a lack of informed consent
  - coercion
  - secrecy
  - domination over one sibling

• Can be defined as sexual behaviour between siblings
  - for which the target is not developmentally prepared
  - which is not transitory
  - which does not reflect age-appropriate curiosity

(Caspi, 2012; Rupp, 2005)
Relational Abuse

• Includes gossiping, humiliating in front of others, preventing socialisation with desired groups; campaigns of ostracization from the group

• Challenging to identify and calculate prevalence rates because it is normally done indirectly so the perpetrator is unknown to the victim

• An apparently good sibling relationship, with no physical or emotional direct aggression, can hide this type of abuse

• More female perpetrators than male
Risk Factors

• Parenting behaviour: comparisons, favoured children, over-controlling behaviour, low-involvement, parental approval of aggression
• Family dysfunction: violence, chaotic households, lack of boundaries, lack of discipline
• Economic pressure: lack of accommodation, stress
• Birth order: age spacing; first-born
• Male/Female: older brother/younger sister
• Ethnic/cultural background: patriarchy, primogeniture
• Mental health conditions
• Disability
• Excessive sibling caregiving

(Caspi, 2012)
Prevention

• Families:
  - Parental training
  - Pro-social skill development

• Educators & practitioners:
  - Address issue within the curriculum

• Researchers:
  - Attention to sibling relationships

• Society:
  - Public awareness & educational campaigns

(Caspi, 2012)
Treatment

- “No conjoint sibling or family meetings with the offender until he or she has accepted full responsibility for the abuse and until the therapist is satisfied that the family can and will protect the victim from further abuse”

- Individual treatment for the target and the offender

- Extra precautions to ensure the victim's safety:
  - Cooperation of parents, extended family members, and the community
  - locks on doors
  - increased vigilance & adult supervision

(Caffaro, 2014)
Further reading


