

7 FACTS EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT SIBLING VIOLENCE

Learning Network Research Snapshot Fall/Winter 2017

1. SIBLING VIOLENCE IS ABUSE, NOT “HORSEPLAY”.

Sibling violence is not every day squabbles or rough-housing. Like peer bullying, it involves a power differential that makes it difficult for the harmed child to protect him/herself. Sibling violence can include physical abuse, which involves intentional physical harm and pain to a sibling, sexual abuse which is behaviour that is not age- appropriate, not transitory, and not motivated by developmentally-appropriate curiosity, and psychological abuse which may be any act that diminishes the sense of identity, dignity and self-worth of a sibling.¹

2. IT IS A COMMON FORM OF FAMILY VIOLENCE.

Studies suggest sibling violence is a pervasive issue. For instance, research from the U.S. and U.K. suggest that sibling bullying is the most frequent form of maltreatment experienced by children.² Sibling sexual abuse has also be shown to be more common than parent-child incest, and may be the most prevalent form of intrafamilial sexual abuse.³ These findings show that for many children, the home is not a safe place.

3. IT CAN AFFECT WELLBEING AND HEALTH ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE.

Sibling violence is linked with negative child and adult outcomes. Some studies show that chronic sibling violence contributes to the development of traumatic symptoms⁴, depression in child and adult survivors, lowered self-esteem⁵, anxiety⁶, eating disorders, problems with drugs and alcohol⁷, school violence⁸, and aggressive behaviour and delinquency among boys.⁹ Sibling abuse is a risk factor for dating violence.¹⁰

4. EXPOSURE TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE MAY INCREASE THE RISK FOR SIBLING VIOLENCE.

Research shows a relationship between other forms of family violence and sibling violence, such as intimate partner violence (IPV).¹¹ In a Canadian sample of children exposed to IPV, approximately half directed aggressive behaviour towards siblings during unstructured time.¹² When children have been exposed to IPV, the possibility of sibling violence should be considered and vice versa.

5. SIBLING VIOLENCE IS LINKED TO PEER BULLYING.

Research indicates a significant relationship between experiences of sibling abuse and peer bullying.¹³ This link to peer bullying exists for survivors and perpetrators of sibling abuse. This may be because children who engage in sibling violence believe that this is acceptable and part of relationships with other children.

6. IT IS NOT PART OF MOST VIOLENCE PREVENTION INITIATIVES.

Sibling violence has not received the same attention as other forms of family violence or peer bullying. It is overlooked, or seen as “beneficial” so that children can learn how to deal with aggressiveness and conflict in other situations. Accordingly, opportunities for intervention are missed for both the harmed child and the child doing the hurting. Given sibling violence affects a significant proportion of youth¹⁴, it is critical to include sibling abuse in broader family violence prevention and parent education initiatives.

7. PARENTAL MEDIATION TRAINING AND CHILDREN’S SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IMPROVE SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS.

While research is limited, some sibling interventions show improvements in sibling relationships, children’s social and cognitive development, parenting practices, and quality of family life.¹⁵ Central to these interventions is the emphasis on strengthening children’s social skills and parental mediation training.¹⁶ These interventions also promote positive sibling interactions, regardless of whether siblings directly or indirectly (through parents) participated.¹⁷ Additional outcome research is needed to better understand the best ways to intervene in sibling violence for different families.

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