

LearningNetwork Brief 32

Sibling Abuse as a Family Issue

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Sibling Abuse as a Family Issue

There are environmental factors outside of the family that may increase the likelihood of sibling on sibling aggression such as substance abuse, peer bullying, and low self-esteem. However, sibling abuse tends to develop from certain family conditions that create resentment and hostility between children. Most parents are upset to learn that sibling abuse occurs under their roof; they may be unable to manage the behavior; or they may feel helpless to address it. Additionally, parents may report that their child is also abusing them. It is important to recognize multiple variables within a family that can unintentionally create hostile sibling relations.

1. *Children as caregivers*

Sometimes parents are overwhelmed and need help with tasks. That is ok! However, children should not serve as a substitute spouse or parent. Children, especially from single-parent homes, tend to be burdened with the care giving of younger siblings. This breeds resentment and the child is apt to displace his/her anger onto a sibling. Additionally, the child caregiver feels entitled to utilize a sense of authority that they are not prepared for.

2. *Favoritism*

Granted, each child cannot be treated the same all the time. However, it is important for caregivers to recognize the strengths of each child. Whether the perpetrator of abuse or the victimized child is favored, both dynamics warrant potential sibling aggression. When a child experiences a sibling as favored, he/she may react by mistreating the sibling.

3. *Poor Parental Modeling & External Stressors*

When external environmental stressors, such as economic or social problems occur, parents who have difficulty controlling their emotions may act in ways that disturb the children. When this happens, children must separate themselves from a potentially hostile caregiver or stressful caregiver-child interactions. Parents who are overwhelmed are not able to provide emotional support to their children. Some parents can't tolerate a range or intensity of emotion in their children. These families often create a negative atmosphere of criticism, judgment, and abusive communication and lack appropriate modeling of stress reduction.

4. *Collusion*

In families where there is a single parent, or the parents are not unified in parenting customs, the parent feels alienated. This can create an emotional reliance on a(n) older child to support the parenting role. As with a child who is a caregiver, the implicit role ordained sends a message that the child has the right to discipline, and that the parent will support however that child deems necessary. It can also appear as a special friendship or bond between one child and the parent whereby the isolated child feels ostracized and the abuse imparted by a sibling is supported by a parent, thus creating a "double whammy".

Sibling abuse must be understood from a family systems lens. The existence of this abusive sibling relationship is indicative of parental neglect and is a symptom of dysfunctional family processes. Intervention must address the members of the family system and the system as a whole.