

LEARNING NETWORK NEWSLETTER ISSUE #21

SIBLING VIOLENCE

SIBLING VIOLENCE IS A COMMON FORM OF FAMILY VIOLENCE, YET IT IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED.¹

This newsletter will: describe the different types of sibling violence; identify signs that sibling violence may be occurring; present factors that increase the risk for sibling violence; describe the impacts of sibling violence for children, youth, and adults; and provide helpful tips to prevent and address sibling violence.

Sibling violence is the physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse of one sibling by another.² It is not the everyday squabbles, rivalry, or physical playing between siblings. Sibling violence often involves a power imbalance that makes it difficult for the harmed child to protect or defend themselves. Much of sibling violence does not take place in front of parents or other caregivers. When it does occur in front of them, the violence is often minimized due to widely-held beliefs that *it helps toughen kids up and prepares them for life*.³ Accordingly, sibling violence is not often recognized as a form of abuse, even by the child being harmed.⁴ Research tells us a different story. Sibling violence is harmful and may have serious short-term and long-term impacts.

In this newsletter, “sibling” refers to children who grow up in the same family, including step-children, foster children, adopted children, or children by birth. Various terms are used in the literature to describe the violent and harmful actions that characterize sibling relationships. These include: aggression, bullying, violence, maltreatment, incest, and abuse. In this newsletter, the term violence will be used to capture all forms of sibling behaviours and actions that are severe and intense in their nature and that likely have negative consequences for the harmed child. However, we will use specific terms when distinguishing types of violence (e.g. physical, sexual, and psychological) and when sharing the findings of a specific study.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

When a man hits his partner, we call it *intimate partner violence*.

When parents hit their children, we call it *child abuse/maltreatment*.

When a child repeatedly ridicules her classmate, we call it *bullying*.

Yet, when a sibling hits a brother or sister, we call it “*horseplay*”.

WHY?

HOW CAN WE IDENTIFY SIBLING VIOLENCE?

There are three facets to consider when trying to identify sibling violence: *perception*, *intent*, and *severity*.⁵

PERCEPTION

How does each sibling view and understand the interaction? If one sibling feels that the behavior is abusive, regardless of whether he or she is the harmed child or the child inflicting violence, it is likely that the scenario is not one of “normal sibling rivalry”.⁶

INTENT

What is the intent of the sibling’s behaviour? When sibling violence is present, the intent of the child inflicting violence is typically to cause injury or harm. This is different than sibling rivalry where one sibling or more attempts to gain access to limited family resources (e.g. space, time, and affection).⁷

SEVERITY

What is the duration and intensity of the behaviour? Sibling violence may involve repeated patterns of abuse with the intent to “harm, humiliate, and defeat”.⁸ Normally, this type of behaviour escalates over time and enforces “victim and perpetrator” roles.⁹

SIBLING VIOLENCE LARGELY INVOLVES THREE FORMS OF ABUSE:

Psychological abuse is any act that diminishes a sibling’s sense of identity, dignity, and selfworth.¹⁰ This is likely to be constant and intense.¹¹ Examples include ridicule and degradation, belittling, intimidation, scorn, provocation, destruction of possessions, and torturing and killing of a sibling’s pets.

Physical abuse by a sibling occurs when one sibling intentionally causes physical harm and pain to a sister or brother.¹² This can include: shoving, hitting, slapping, kicking, biting, pinching, scratching, and hair pulling.¹³

Sexual abuse is behaviour between siblings that is not age-appropriate, not transitory, and not motivated by developmentally-appropriate curiosity.¹⁴ Sibling sexual abuse may involve sexual touching or rape and also includes: forcing two or more children to engage in sexual activity with one another; forcing siblings to watch sexual activity or pornography, and repeatedly watching them dress, shower, or use the toilet when they do not want to be watched.¹⁵

HOW COMMON IS SIBLING VIOLENCE?

Sibling violence, like other forms of abuse, often goes unreported for many reasons including fear, embarrassment, shame, and lack of recognition by parents/caregivers that abuse is happening. When it is reported, siblings are often grouped together with other non-parental family members in data collection, making it difficult to assess the incidence of violence by siblings versus violence by extended family members.

Despite the lack of reliable data on sibling violence in Canada, findings from other countries help us better understand its pervasiveness. For instance, research from the U.S. suggests that sibling violence is an extremely common form of family violence¹⁶, and studies across the U.S and U.K. indicate that sibling bullying is the most frequent form of maltreatment experienced by children.¹⁷ Research also shows that sibling sexual assault may be the most prevalent form of intra-familial sexual abuse.¹⁸ These findings indicate that the home and family relationships are not safe for many children.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SIBLING VIOLENCE

Despite the prevalence of sibling violence, research has typically focused on descriptive analyses, rather than trying to explain what causes it. Although sibling violence is widespread, many children do not participate in it. A range of systemic and individual factors can contribute to the risk of sibling violence. Below are *some* factors associated with sibling violence:

EXPOSURE TO DIFFERENT FORMS OF VIOLENCE

There is a strong link between sibling violence and other forms of family violence, such as spouse abuse¹⁹, parent-child abuse²⁰, and dating violence.²¹

*Negative sibling interactions occur at four times the rate of positive sibling interactions in families where abuse and neglect are prevalent.*²²

ACCEPTANCE OF ABUSE

Normalizing abuse within the family has been found to influence the severity and frequency of abuse among siblings. For instance, when parents model inappropriate sexual behaviours and interactions or condone abusive behaviours, a child may act in the same way with a sibling.²³

UNHEALTHY FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Unstable parental behaviour and disorganized family structures have an impact on sibling relationships. For instance, when power imbalances, strict gender roles, differential treatment of siblings, and lack of parental supervision exist in the family structure, the risk for sibling sexual abuse increases²⁴. In addition, a sexual climate in the family that is either too pronounced or too repressive increases the risk of sibling sexual abuse.²⁵

SEX OF CHILD

Whether the sex of a child plays a role in sibling violence remains unclear. Some studies have suggested that boys are more likely to engage in sibling violence than girls²⁶, however others have found no gender differences.²⁷ Older brother–younger sister pairs have been shown in some studies to represent the most common pair for sibling violence, however, in others, boys with brothers committed more types of sibling violence.²⁸

AGE OF CHILD

Some studies have shown a link between age and sibling violence, suggesting a possible developmental component to the behaviour. For instance, younger sibling pairs are more likely to engage in violence than older sibling pairs.²⁹

*While sibling physical aggression appears to decline with age, injuries tend to be more serious as the age of the hurtful sibling increases.*³⁰

EXPERIENCES OF BULLYING

Emerging research has found that there is a significant relationship between experiences of sibling abuse and peer bullying.³¹ This link to peer bullying exists for survivors and perpetrators of sibling abuse. Violence in one context may teach children that violence is an acceptable way to behave in other settings.

RED FLAGS THAT YOUR CHILD MAY BE EXPERIENCING SIBLING VIOLENCE<

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR

- Afraid or nervous around certain siblings
- Fear, anxiety, depression, withdrawal, not wanting to go home
- Changes in sleep patterns such as frequent nightmares, difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Changes in school/sports performance and attendance; deteriorating grades
- Unusual eating habits that lead to extreme weight gain or weight loss
- Loss of self-confidence, self-esteem

PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Unexplained bruising, marks or injuries on any part of the body
- Trouble walking, sitting, running, doing normal activities

NATURE OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIP

- Children's roles seem to be fixed; one is always the aggressor
- A child acts out abuse in play
- Violence or roughness between siblings increases over time

OVERLY SEXUALIZED BEHAVIOUR

- Use of explicit sexual language that is age inappropriate
- Sudden interest in sexual pictures, movies, media
- Sexual drawings or language
- Acting in a sexually explicit way towards adults
- Asking about or making statements about sexual abuse

These signs can occur for other reasons as well (e.g. experiencing a significant stressor such as migration trauma, loss of a parent, child abuse by an adult, etc.).

EXPERIENCES OF SIBLING VIOLENCE ACROSS DIFFERENT GROUPS OF FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Despite the growing body of research, little is known about the nature and extent of sibling violence across different groups of children and families (e.g. children living with disabilities, Immigrant and refugee children, racialized children, children living in poverty). Closing this gap in knowledge is important because understanding how different groups perceive and experience sibling violence impacts the extent to which significant adults recognize the abuse. Also, this knowledge can inform effective responses and prevention initiatives. While additional research with larger samples in Canada is required, early efforts to study sibling violence in different groups or contexts suggest the following:

- There are cultural variations in what is perceived as mild or severe abusive behaviour. For instance, some groups may perceive psychological aggression as an example of severe abuse, whereas another group may view it as an example of mild abuse.³²
- Children living with a physical disability are at increased risk for sibling victimization (i.e. physical assault, property destruction, psychological abuse).³³
- GLBTQ individuals experience more severe forms of verbal victimization from their brothers than their heterosexual counterparts.³⁴

IMPACTS OF SIBLING VIOLENCE CAN BE LIFE-LONG

Increasing evidence suggests that sibling violence is harmful to the wellbeing and mental health of children, youth and adults. Many survivors do not seek or receive informal or formal support, and often, the consequences extend into adulthood. Below are some of the impacts of various types of abuse faced by children, youth and adults who have experienced sibling violence.

CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS³⁵

- Internalizing and externalizing problems (e.g. depression, anxiety, acting out)
- Trauma reactions (e.g. sleep difficulties)
- Social isolation and poor social interactions
- Disruptions and potential compromises in development
- Delinquency

ADULTS³⁶

- Psychological difficulties (e.g. depression, suicide, anxiety)
- Substance and alcohol misuse
- Repeated negative patterns and roles (e.g. revictimization in interpersonal relationships)
- Sexual promiscuity or avoidance
- Negative impacts on relational ties among siblings

EARLY INTERVENTION IS KEY: SUPPORTING THE CHILD WHO IS HURTING OTHERS

In addition to supporting the harmed child, parents and caregivers must address the aggressive sibling's behaviour. Aggression that starts at an early age often continues throughout development. Children

who do not receive the appropriate supports needed to address this aggression are more likely to use aggressive behaviours in future relationships.³⁷ For instance, studies investigating the link between sibling aggression and later dating violence found a positive relationship between childhood sibling aggression and both victimization and perpetration of dating violence in adulthood.³⁸ Parents and adults should monitor aggressive behaviour closely and take appropriate action when needed.³⁹ There may be many different reasons for aggression in children (e.g. mood disorders, psychosis, frustration, impulsivity, conduct disorders, and trauma), and it is important for parents and caregivers to address the underlying problem that may be causing their children to abuse their siblings.

FAMILY RESPONSES TO SIBLING VIOLENCE MAY BE HARMFUL

Sibling violence is not taken as seriously as other forms of child maltreatment. Minimization and inappropriate responses to sibling violence by parents can compound the negative impacts of the abuse.⁴⁰ For instance, victims of sibling sexual abuse may risk “secondary victimization” when they disclose the abuse to someone and are not sufficiently supported by family members.⁴¹ When parents and caregivers fail to recognize sibling behaviour as abusive, they are unable to protect the child being hurt. Their responses and reactions can be emotionally damaging, as seen in several studies with adults who experienced sibling physical violence and received little to no support during childhood.⁴²

SIBLING VIOLENCE DOES NOT ALWAYS END WHEN CHILDREN GROW UP.⁴³

Relationship dynamics between siblings often stay the same from childhood to adulthood and a sibling may continue to victimize his or her sibling. Siblings may avoid contact and eventually, become estranged from their brother or sister.

“Sibling violence has the power to shape a child’s relational life and an adult’s self-esteem and worldview.” Dr. John Caffaro⁴⁴

RESPONDING TO SIBLING VIOLENCE

Offer reassurance and support to the harmed child.

If you learn that your child is being hurt by their sibling, allow your child to tell her/his story. Make sure your child knows that you are glad they told you and that violence is not their fault and that you want everyone in the family to be respectful. Reassure your child that the safety and wellbeing of children is an adult responsibility. Remember, a major problem is that children don’t feel they can tell someone about the sibling abuse.

Try to get a better understanding of the violence taking place between your children.

Ask specific questions about the incidents in a way that does not blame the children and note as many details as possible including when/where/how often it took place. Discuss this with the harmed child separately from the child doing the harming. Do not dismiss or downplay sibling violence -- it is harmful.

Strengthen coping skills.

Build on existing strengths and develop strategies (e.g. problem-solving) for navigating future incidents of sibling violence with your child. Rehearse specific words and actions that can be used and identify safe people to go to for help. Remember that a nurturing adult is a protective buffer against the impacts of stress on a child

Support children hurting their siblings to change their behaviour.

Consider whether the child who is doing the hurting has learned this behaviour from someone or somewhere else, especially in cases of sibling sexual abuse. Clearly communicate that the hurtful behaviour is not acceptable and will have consequences. Recognize and acknowledge respectful behaviour.

Make a safety plan.

Parents are responsible for keeping children safe. Develop a safety plan and make sure it is clearly communicated. This may include separate bedrooms, establishing safe zones, removing or restricting access to harmful objects, and identifying adults to go to for help.

Get outside help when needed.

Seek assistance from community support agencies or other outside helpers if the child's behaviour continues to be harmful to his or her sibling. Also, assistance is needed for the harmed child if the impacts interfere with day-to-day adjustment and persist over time. For instance, in cases of sibling sexual abuse, children need immediate help to both recover from it (as the hurt child) and get help to stop (as the child doing the harm).

PREVENTING SIBLING VIOLENCE

Talk to your children, together and individually, on a regular basis.

Ask them specific questions and listen carefully to the answers. For example, ask "what happens when I leave you and your brother/sister alone to play?"

Explain the difference between 'tattling' and 'telling'.

Teach your children that 'telling' is when they tell you that a situation is not safe and they need your help to make things safe.

Set expectations to foster healthy relationships.

Explain to your children that you want everyone to treat each other with respect and kindness and that there will be consequences for abusive behaviours. Encourage them to acknowledge respectful behaviours by family members. Promote connections to others and participation in positive youth activities.

Encourage non-sexist attitudes and behaviours.

Assign chores equally and discourage sexist jokes and sexist put-downs.

Model good conflict-solving skills and respect towards others.

Children learn by example. Teach your children that it is better to settle arguments using calm but firm words, instead of hitting, threatening, or insulting another person. Keep in mind that hostile and aggressive arguments between parents not only scare children, but set a bad example.

Teach your children to "own" their bodies.

Teach your children to say "no" and "stop" to unwanted physical contact. Never force a child to hug, touch, or kiss anybody. Model consent by asking for permission to touch your child when giving them a bath, tucking them in, or helping them get dressed.

Keep violence out of the home.

Make home a safe and peaceful place and always discourage violent behaviour in the family. Reduce exposure to media violence (e.g. through television, web, video games).

Know when to intervene in your children's conflicts.

When a conflict arises between siblings, determine if one child is clearly more powerful than the other and what kind of effect it is having on the harmed child. If the harmed child is hurt (physically or emotionally), intervene immediately. Say, "Stop! It's not safe for you two to be together right now" and separate the kids. Follow up with each child.

RELATED RESOURCE: Sibling Sexual Abuse: A Guide for Parents (2007)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Sibling Abuse: A Study of School Counselors' Shared Attitudes and Beliefs (2015)

This article provides findings from a phenomenological study examining eight practicing school counselors' attitudes and beliefs about sibling abuse and the contexts or situations that have influenced them. Recommendations for advocacy for children and youth are offered for those in the counseling field.

Sibling Sexual Abuse: Legal Responses and Mothers' Experiences (2013)

This presentation paper provides an overview of the current state of the research on sibling sexual abuse, data from two studies in South Australia, and four case studies of sibling abuse that were handled with a youth justice conference.

Hidden Abuse Within the Home: Recognizing and Responding to Sibling Abuse (2014)

This article provides school counselors with a five-step model to recognize and respond to sibling violence. A decision-making tree is used as a framework when working with students and families.

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