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Sibling Abuse



- **David Finkelhor interviewed 800 college students and found the following disturbing statistic: '15% of females and 10% of males had been sexually abused by a sibling.'**

Sibling abuse is a form of domestic violence. Most cases often go unreported because of the mindset that "kids will be kids" or "sibling rivalry is healthy". The home and family are a child's safe place where they can express themselves free from oppression. Therefore, bullying in the home can be worse than in the schoolyard because the victim must live with this every day. In any household where children grow up together, there can be sibling abuse.

There are three types of sibling abuse:

- **Physical sibling abuse:** Physical sibling abuse is often mistaken for sibling rivalry, or is considered to be part of normal child behavior. Both male and female children can behave in a physically abusive manner. However, it is most common for the dominant child to act aggressively towards the weaker child. Childhood arguments can easily escalate into a physical altercation with slapping, pinching, and hair pulling. If weapons are involved, sibling abuse can even be fatal.

Here is what one survivor said about their abuse:

"My older sister was always left in charge of me when I was younger. I grew up in a single parent home. My mother worked until 5, but we were finished school at 3, so my sister had to take care of me until my mother got home. We had chores to do, one of us would clean the living room, and the other would do the dishes and clean the kitchen. Most of the time my teenager sister did not want to clean at all. She would yell at me and tell me I had better do the dishes and vacuum the living room, or else! I challenged her one day stating that this was unfair, we had to take turns. She then got up and went to attack me. I ran up the stairs to

get away from her, and ran into the bedroom. She pushed through the door, pulled me by my hair down the stairs, threw me to the ground, and kicked me. She was yelling that Mom put her in charge so I better listen, or she will leave the mess, and tell Mom that I didn't do anything, so then I would be in trouble."

This is an example of how abuse can occur when one or both parents put older sibling(s) in charge of taking care of younger sibling(s). The older sibling may be angry at having to be in this position. Then when the younger sibling doesn't do what the older sibling tells them to do there could be threats and physical violence. The younger sibling then must live with this every day, being scared in their own home.

- **Emotional/psychological sibling abuse:** Emotional/psychological sibling abuse can be even harder to detect. Arguments between siblings are part of growing up in a family, making it difficult to judge if abuse is creeping in. Emotional sibling abuse often echoes adult domestic abuse or schoolyard bullying. It can take the form of teasing, name calling, belittling, demeaning, humiliating, frightening and threatening. A child who is emotionally abused by a sibling may become withdrawn; they may not do as well in school or become aggressive in other areas of her/his life. It is, in many ways, worse than bullying outside the home as a child is unable to escape the abusive behavior and has no safe haven to which to retreat.

One survivor gives an example of emotional abuse:

"As a young boy, I was overweight, and I enjoyed school very much. My older brother was on the football team in high school, and always had pretty girls over with his friends. One time when he was babysitting me, I went into the basement where they would all hang out together, I wanted to know when Mom would be home from her date. As I walked down the stairs, they are all stared at me. My older brother rolled his eyes at me and said "What do you want fatty? Some MORE FOOD? Ha Ha. Didn't you have enough at dinner?" Then they all laughed at me, I ran upstairs to my room and cried. I had been hoping they would let me hang out with them until Mom got home. After that I stayed away from my brother and his friends in the basement. My Mother would ask me, "Why don't you go see what your brother is doing? Maybe he will play with you." That would get my hopes up, maybe Mom had talked to him, told him to be nicer. But every time I would be rejected, told I was fat and nerdy, that I would never get married because no one would want me. It caused me to be very depressed, and therefore I ate more and more."

- **Sexual sibling abuse:** Sexual sibling abuse becomes far more common when half siblings or step siblings are brought into a family setting although it can occur between full brothers and sisters. Although the most common scenario is that sexual sibling abuse is perpetrated on a female child by a male child, this is not always the case. Boys can abuse boys, girls can abuse other girls and girls can abuse boys. Sexual sibling abuse may involve such behavior as speaking in a sexual manner, looking at another child's genitals or exposing their own genitals. More serious sexual sibling abuse may involve inappropriate touching, coercing into sexual acts, voyeurism, exposure to pornography or physical sexual assaults and rape.

An example of this can be found in the current news. Josh Duggar admitted to the molestation of four of his sisters and a family babysitter. The reports state that he touched them inappropriately while they slept in the family home, another incident happened while one of the girls sat on his lap. According to the statements that were released some of the touching was on top of the clothes and other times it was under the clothes.

Facts

The exact prevalence of sibling abuse is impossible to report. However, research into the subject gives the following insights:

- According to Vernon Wiehe of the University of Kentucky, some 53% of children have behaved at least once in an aggressive manner to a sibling. This is significant, if counted as sibling abuse, as it would suggest that sibling abuse is more common even than adult domestic violence. However, most experts believe that an isolated act of aggression

does not constitute recordable abuse.

- Most studies have shown that male children are more likely to abuse siblings than females, although all have found that abuse can take place between sisters, or be perpetrated by a female on a male. However, the figures are complicated by the fact that violent or even sexual behavior by a male sibling to a female is more likely to be perceived as abuse than the other way around.
- A study by Bank and Kahn found that most sibling incest or sibling sexual abuse could be classified in one of two categories: "nurturance-oriented incest" and "power-oriented incest". The first is characterized by expressions of affection and love, while the second is characterized by force and domination.
- The 2006 work of Bass, Taylor, Kunutson-Martin and Huenergardt, which explored the subject of sibling sexual abuse and incest, concluded that "sibling incest occurs at a frequency that rivals and may even exceed other forms of incest," yet only 11% of studies into child sex abuse examined sibling perpetrators.
- In 2005, G Ryan's work, 'Preventing Violence and Trauma in the Next Generation' stated: 'Child protection has focused on adult-child (sexual) relationships, yet we know that more than 40% of all juvenile-perpetrated child sexual abuse is perpetrated in sibling relationships.'

Reasons why sibling abuse may occur

There are many reasons and theories out there as to why sibling abuse occurs. The three types of sibling abuse (physical, emotional and sexual abuse) may have different roots. However, in common with adult abusive relationships, a common thread seems to be that the abuser wants to obtain power and control over their victim.

Among the most common reasons suggested and discovered as causes for sibling abuse are the following:

- Sibling abuse can occur when an older child is forced to stay home to take care of a younger child and becomes resentful. He or she transfers their anger and frustration at what they see as 'unfair' treatment onto the younger sibling. In adulthood, it could be that one child is expected to care for an ailing parent.
- Sibling abuse may occur when new children are brought into the family through remarriage of parents. This resulting resentment can be for a number of reasons. The children may dislike the fact that their mom or dad has a new partner and feel that they are thus being disloyal to the genetic or former parent. They may also have nothing in common with their new 'siblings'. Just because an adult couple meet and fall in love, it doesn't necessarily follow that their existing children will like each other.
- Sibling sexual abuse can also occur when a teenaged boy who has had little interaction with girls and is naturally sexually developing an interest in the opposite sex is brought into a family where there is a teenaged girl.
- Sibling abuse can also arise through feelings of insecurity and jealousy. Children often perceive a sibling to be a favored child and become abusive in an effort to redress the balance, as they perceive it.
- Sexual abuse of a sibling can arise if an older child crosses the line between normal sexual curiosity and development and carries out his fantasies on a younger sibling. This can happen due to his own insecurities about their sexual development.
- Sibling sexual abuse may also occur if the abusive child has been subjected to sexual abuse themselves, either in their former home or in another setting.

Signs of Sibling Abuse

- One child always avoids their sibling
- A child has changes in behavior, sleep patterns, eating habits, or has nightmares
- A child acts out abuse in play
- A child acts out sexually in inappropriate ways
- The children's roles are rigid: one child is always the aggressor, the other, the victim
- The roughness or violence between siblings is increasing over time

Preventing Sibling Abuse

There are some measures that parents can take to help prevent sibling abuse from occurring.

- Be around the home as much as possible
- Avoid leaving siblings alone together where possible
- Don't give an older child too much responsibility for caring for or babysitting another
- Learn to effectively mediate in disputes between siblings
- Listen to children and address their concerns seriously
- Actively discuss what constitutes abusive sex in an age appropriate fashion, and teach children that they have the right to say 'No.'
- Set and stick to clear ground rules regarding behavior. Make it clear that violence and aggression are not to be tolerated
- Adhere to the rules in your own relationships with family members too. Parents who argue aggressively between themselves are setting a bad example to their children. Equally, calm and reasonable handling of disputes between parents and children will set a good example
- Watch out for signs that an unhealthy interest in sex or violence is developing through a child's use of the internet, video games or television choices
- Stay as actively involved in your children's lives as possible

For more information:

Sibling Rivalry or Sibling Abuse (<http://sasian.org/243-2/>)

Potential warning signs for violence in children and teens (<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/warning-signs.aspx>)

Services at The Women's Center

The Women's Center offers educational trainings on healthy relationships. To schedule any of our trainings please contact the Education Department at 570-784-6632.

If you are a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, incest and want to know the resources that are available to you, then you can always reach out to The Women's Center at 570-784-6631 or toll-free at 1(800) 544-8293. All of our services are free and confidential.

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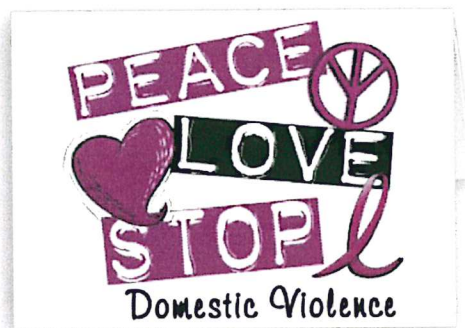
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