



# Sibling Abuse: An Often Unrecognized Family History

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## Abstract

Sibling abuse has been recorded in human history since the Old Testament story of Cain and Abel. It is a tragic and often ignored aspect of families. In this discussion we consider 20th and 21st century research dealing with this topic and seek to provide concepts of pathogenesis and prevention. By shedding light on this often dark subject, researchers and clinicians can seek to lower its prevalence and tragic outreach for our children and youth.

**Keywords:** Sibling abuse; Younger sibling; Children

## Introduction

Sibling abuse has been recorded in human history since the story of Cain and Abel as recorded in the Old Testament. It is a tragic and often ignored aspect of families. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century research has established the concept that siblings can physically as well as emotionally abuse their siblings that may lead to severe physical and mental illness sequelae.

## Sibling Abuse Data

In 1982 Pfout et al. [1] reported that 60% of children who saw their mothers abused by their fathers became abusers of their own siblings in a mechanism referred to as “second hand abuse.” Research by Wiehe concluded that as many as 53% of children commit at least one severe aggressive act against one or more siblings making this form of abuse more prevalent than abuse by parents and spouses combined [2].

In 1990 Hotalin et al. [3] reported that 37% of 498 children who were studied had performed at least one serious aggressive act against a sibling in family described as “non-pervasively” abusive; in “pervasively” abusive family, this percentage soared to 100%. Strauss and Gelles [3] noted that 3 in 100 siblings are “dangerously violent” toward a sibling.

In 2006 Straus et al. [4] published their research noting that 74% of siblings are aggressive toward siblings via shoving or pushing while 42% express aggression by biting or punching siblings and 85% of siblings are involved in regular verbal aggression of siblings. Researchers such as Straus MA et al. [4] concluded that the larger and older siblings usually engage in aggressive acts on their smaller and younger siblings.

Violence between siblings can result in severe injury to other siblings especially if a younger child is the victim of severe aggression by an older and more powerful sibling and/or if severe older siblings attack a much smaller and younger sibling in a family. For example if a 3 year old girl (30 pounds, 37 inches) joined with a 5 year old boy (43 pounds, 42 inches), a 7 year old boy (54 pounds, 49 inches), and an 8 year old boy (60 pounds, 51 inches) -their combined weight (197 pounds) could cause major damage to an 18 month old boy (23 pounds, 32 inches). Children can learn to severely hurt siblings by modeling behavior potentially seen in their home, neighborhood, movies, television, and the internet.

Mukaddes and Topcu [5] reported the death of a 6 month old girl at the hands of her 10 year old sister with autism spectrum disorder; the older sister threw her young sister out of a window. Issues noted in this report included a dysfunctional family, limited supervision of the children in this family, and the presence of autism spectrum disorder as well as epilepsy in the 10 year old female [5]. Sabuncuoglu et al. [6] published a case report of the death of an 18 months female who was thrown out of a window by her 8 year old brother who had a history of autism spectrum disorder, aggression, and violence.

Another form of sibling to sibling aggression is sibling incest. In 1978 Finkelhor [7] published survey data that indicated 15% of female college students and 10% of male college students indicated they had been sexually abused by a sibling. The rape of one sibling of another can occur many

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times and for a prolonged amount of time leading to major emotional damage to the victim as a child and as an adult [8-11].

## Causes of Sibling Abuse

Risk factors that lead to sibling abuse are many and include family dysfunction, lack of parental supervision of children, poor parenting skills, parental rejection and/or favoritism of children, parents who are not loving toward their children, limited parental control of sibling conflicts, unhealthy sibling relationships, spousal abuse, and pervasive milieu of violence in society [2].

One problem with identifying the causes of sibling abuse is that the term "abuse" is usually not used when discussing abuse between siblings. Terms such as conflict, aggression, violence, and even sibling rivalry are much more common [12]. Such a problem with terminology is likely a cultural phenomenon in which society does not consider abuse among siblings as a possibility. However, some specific possible causes of sibling aggression (abuse) were identified in the literature which include that aggression is simply likely to occur with the people children are around the most which is often their siblings, sibling competition for resources, or parental attention. Some identified traits include: disruptive behavior disorder diagnoses, "calous-unemotional traits" and/or "limited prosocial emotions" [12].

Numerous factors within family structure and family dynamics have been associated with sibling abuse such as family disorganization, parental physical violence toward children, witnessing parental violence, physical discipline and/or abuse, divorced, and blended or separated families [13]. Other factors identified within the family include parental modeling, abuse between parents, negative parent-child interactions, family stress, financial problems, lack of parental affection, harsh parenting, parents favoring one child over another, type of parental intervention during sibling conflict, unequal division of household labor, family stress, approval of physical force, physical punishment, and patriarchal organization [14,15].

## Conclusion

Prevention of sibling abuse begins with an understanding of its high prevalence and underlying risk factors. Clinicians can assess the overall psychological health of a family and look for risk factors that may indicate the potential for sibling abuse. Parents should receive instruction in spousal relations as well as healthy parenting skills. Trauma that occurs to a sibling, especially a younger sibling, should be carefully assessed with the understanding that anyone in contact with an injured child may be involved, including the child's siblings. Failure to be vigilant to sibling abuse can lead to the child's death as well as severe injury (physical and psychological) with lifelong complications for this young victim.

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