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Kids will be Kids?

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Introduction

A woman enters the emergency room screaming for someone to help her son who has been pushed down the stairs. When questioned about how the abuse occurred she replies that her husband was responsible for the state of her son. The police are called, abuse charges are laid, and hopefully the abusive father may spend some time in jail for his actions...

A woman enters the emergency room screaming for someone to help her son who has been pushed down the stairs. When questioned about how the abuse occurred she replies that her oldest son (who is nine years old) was

responsible for the state of her son. The police are called, abuse charges are laid, and hopefully the abusive brother may spend some time in jail for his actions... Not in our society.

The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act defines child abuse “as any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm to the child” ([nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/factshe ...](http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/factshe...)). Many researchers maintain that much of the research in recent decades has been on the behavior and treatment of the abusive parent as the perpetrator of the violent act and that significant attention has also focused on the consequences of abuse, especially the immediate or short-term emotional effects of the abuse on the child-as-victim (Ammerman, Cassisi, Hersen, & Van Hasselt, 1986; Conaway & Hansen, 1989; Hansen, Conaway, & Christopher, 1990; Lamphear, 1985).

When discussing child abuse in Western society three categories are commonly used to outline the different forms abuse can take. The Encyclopedia of Child Abuse (2001) defines the three categories as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. The emotional effects of child abuse in any form can be very serious and may differ for each individual victim. The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect outlines some of the different types of abuse has on the victim. These include (but are not limited to) depression, anxiety, behavioural problems, and dysfunctional social and romantic relationships in the future (Tromc e, & Wolfe, 2001). Most research mentions that childhood experiences of abuse will have negative effects on the emotional state of the victim, and that these effects may persist into adulthood; more specifically that “...abuse is a significant and independent predictor of poor mental health outcomes” (Coker, A. L., Davis, K. E., Arias, I., Desai, S., Sanderson, M., Brandt, H. M., et al., 2002). Unfortunately, most research regarding the area of child abuse focuses on the physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse of a child by their parent or another adult. Conversely, the Encyclopedia of Child Abuse (2001) mentions that violence and abusive behaviour(s) involving siblings may be the most prominent form of family violence (p87).

A sibling is defined by www.dictionary.com as one of two or more individuals having one or both parents in common; a brother or sister. Siblings influence each other in ways of personality and identity formation, as well as acting as models of positive and negative behavioural patterns (Hetherington, Reiss, & Plomin, 1994). Beer (1989) argues that step-siblings must “...share property, possessions, and above all, parents...sharing the love, attention, and approval of parents is never easy and often creates deep and lasting competition among brothers and sisters”. It is for the former reason that step and half siblings will be encompassed while using the term ‘sibling’ for the purpose of this paper.

Sibling abuse has gone undetected by society mostly because the abusive behaviour of one sibling towards another is excused as common forms of sibling rivalry. The statement “only 11 percent of child abuse research over the past three decades specifically addresses sibling concerns” (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998, p11) confirms that more research is needed in the subject area of violent sibling relationships. In his book, *Sibling Abuse: Hidden Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Trauma*, Vernon Wiehe mentions that the time has come for our society to assign a different meaning to the term of sibling rivalry (1990). For the purpose of this paper, sibling abuse will be defined as the physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse of one sibling by another (Wiehe, 1990).

The causes, forms and prevalence of these two forms of child abuse imply that the emotional effects seen in the abused child by a sibling should mimic those of a child who has been abused by a parent. The focus of this research paper is to show the similarities among certain facets of child abuse by a parent and child abuse by a sibling, as well as to stress the need for more research into this social problem.

Types of Child Abuse

Physical Abuse

Definitions

1. **Child abuse:** Acts of commission which results in physical harm including death, to a child ([\[nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/factshe ... \]](http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/factshe...)).
2. **Sibling abuse:** Willful acts resulting in physical injury such as slapping, hitting, biting, kicking, or more violent behaviour that may include the use of an instrument, such as a stick, bat, gun, or knife (Wiehe, 1990).

Forms of Abuse

A help guide website lists many forms that violent acts of parent (s)/guardian(s) may take when parents abuse their child(ren). These may consist of beating, whipping, and paddling, punching, slapping or hitting the child. Many abusive adults choose to punch, slap, hit or shake their child if they are confronted with a situation that they do not know how to handle. The help guide also mentions that any forms of pinching, biting, choking, smothering, and hair pulling are also considered to be abusive behaviours. More severe forms of punishment (e.g., burning with a cigarette or scalding with hot water), or any form of punishment which does not fit the age of the child are also considered to be forms of child abuse ([\[www.helpguide.org/mental/child_a ... \]](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/child_a...)). Siblings utilize some of the same forms of abuse as the abusive adults, but they also employ different abusive strategies in order to maintain control over their sibling and the situation.

Sibling abuse differs from parental forms of child abuse in that the acts of

violence are committed by a brother or sister on their brother or sister (step and half siblings are included). Similar to parent-on-child forms of physical child abuse, sibling abuse has been documented as taking the forms of hitting, biting, slapping, shoving, smothering, and punching (Wiehe, 1990).

Wiehe identifies a form of abuse which is nearly exclusive to the abusive behaviours of siblings; tickling. Wiehe (1990) argues that while tickling is not usually regarded as a form of abuse, the act can become physically abusive under certain conditions. He associates the abusive nature of tickling to the fact that the nerve fibers which respond to tickling are the same nerve fibers which respond to pain, and states that "Tickling can be pleasant when it occurs in a context of trust and mutual respect" (Wiehe, 1990) but that tickling becomes a physically abusive act when "the victim requests that the tickling cease, but the perpetrator continues to engage in the behaviour..." (Wiehe, 1990).

Rates of Occurrence

The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS, 2001) showed that there were approximately 135,573 child abuse investigations conducted in Canada in 1998. That gives an estimated overall physical abuse rate of 22 per one hundred children (Tromc e, N., et al., 2001). Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro (1998) argue that sibling violence may be one of the most frequently occurring forms of family violence. A study conducted by Strauss, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) shows that the abuse rate among siblings is incredibly high when compared to the physical abuse rate seen among other child abuse cases, approximately fifty three out of one hundred children (per year) have attacked their sibling. Because this finding involved only those abusive instances reported to child protection services and other agencies, it probably underestimates the true incidence of physical abuse. Another reason that the study of sibling abuse is so important is raised in a study conducted by Coleman (1996). This study found that siblings have a tremendous effect on the development of the identity of each other and that this influence occurs mostly through a "...process of identification, which occurs when siblings use impressions of one another to form their own identity" (Coleman, 1996). This implies that our society has an undetected 'epidemic' on their hands, and much more research is needed into this subject area.

Sexual Abuse

Definitions

1. **Child Abuse:** Acts of commission including intrusion or penetration, molestation with genital contact or other forms of sexual acts in which children are used to provide sexual gratification for a perpetrator (Clark, Clark, & Ademec, 2001).
2. **Sibling Abuse (Sibling Incest):** sexual behaviour between siblings which is not age-appropriate, is not transitory, and is not motivated by developmentally appropriate curiosity (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998).

Forms of Abuse

The child abuse help guide lists many forms that sexual abuse can take when conducted by an adult on a child. Fondling, touching, or kissing a child's genitals, as well as making the child fondle, touch, or kiss the adult's genitals are listed as sexually abusive acts. Also considered to be acts of sexual abuse on a child are penetration, intercourse, oral sex, or sodomy. The help guide also mentions that exposing the child to adult sexuality in other forms is also considered to be sexually abusive behaviours. These include forcing the child to watch pornography or sexual acts, telling the child 'dirty' stories, and using the child in the production of pornography. All of the previously mentioned acts are considered to be acts of child abuse when they are committed by a relative or a caretaker ([[www.helpguide.org/mental/child_a ...](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/child_a...)]). Many of these sexually abusive behaviours are also performed by incest perpetrators.

Wiehe (1990) conducted a study on sibling sexual abuse and defined the act of sibling incest as inappropriate sexual contact, such as unwanted touching, fondling, indecent exposure, attempted penetration, intercourse, rape, or sodomy between siblings. One finding that Wiehe found which was significant to the problem of sibling incest was that when compared with child molesters and non-child offenders, "...the sibling sexual abusers admitted committing more sexual crimes, had longer offending careers, and generally engaged in more intrusive sexual behavior..." (Wiehe, 1990). This reinforces the notion that society needs to address the problem of sibling abuse, in all of its forms, because the rates of occurrence and long-term effects on the victim, perpetrator, and society are too intense to ignore for much longer.

Rates of Occurrence

The National Resource Council (1993) estimates that anywhere from fifty four to sixty two percent of the children in the United States has been sexually abused by a parent or guardian. Striking findings by Gagnon, Pomeroy, and Christenson (1965) found that brother-sister incest may be five times more common than father-daughter incest. Finkelhor (1978) found that of eight hundred students, fifteen percent of females and ten percent of males had been sexually abused by a sibling. This data may underestimate the actual occurrence of sibling incest due to embarrassment and shame of reporting the abusive behaviours to an authority figure. Regardless of under-reporting, the statistics merit more research into preventing the sexually abusive behaviours of siblings.

Emotional Abuse

Definitions

1. **Child Abuse:** Any attitude, behavior, or failure to act on the part of the caregiver that interferes with a child's mental health or social development ([[www.helpguide.org/mental/child_a ...](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/child_a...)]).

2. **Sibling Abuse:** Often associated with teasing between siblings; includes acts of belittling, ridiculing, intimidation, pestering, provocation, and harassment performed by a sibling (Wiehe, 1990).

Forms of Abuse

Emotional abuse can be seen when a parent/guardian exhibits any attitude, behaviour, or failure to act on the best interest of the emotions of the child. Some synonyms recognized for emotional abuse are verbal, mental, and psychological abuse (www.lib.duke.edu). The main difference between 'regular' forms of abusive emotional behaviour and those performed by a sibling is that teasing is seen more often in sibling abusive relationships. The child abuse help guide (2005) lists the following as examples of emotional abuse which are commonly exhibited by both parents/guardians and siblings: ignoring the child, a withdrawal of attention, lack of physical affection, yelling or screaming at the child, threatening or frightening behaviours, name calling, and using bizarre forms of punishment, such as confinement to a closet or a dark room ([www.helpguide.org/mental/child_a ...](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/child_a...)). The similarities seen between the emotionally abusive behaviours of parents/guardians and siblings imply that the effects seen from both should be similar. This shows that if society feels that childhood emotional abuse is a social problem, we need to recognize acts of emotional abuse portrayed by siblings as a problem that has an equal impact on society.

Rate of Occurrence

Emotional abuse is almost always present when another form of abuse is found. Wiehe (1990) found that seventy one percent of his study had been emotionally, physically, and sexually abused. This statistic supports the finding that emotional abuse is a prevalent type of sibling abuse, and is usually co-morbid with other forms of abuse (Garbarino, J., &Vondra, J., 1987). The notion that forms of physical and sexual abuse are present while a child is being emotionally victimized stresses the importance of the issue. Many different emotional effects are evident in children who have been exposed to any combination of the different forms of child/sibling abuse.

Causal Factors of Sibling Abuse

Although the question of what causes sibling abuse is worded to allow the researcher to search for a solitary cause, many studies have documented different causal forces behind the abusive acts of siblings towards one another. Three main themes of causality are prevalent in the literature found on sibling abuse: lack of parental supervision, modeling the behaviours experienced in the home of the child, and the issue of power and control.

McHale and Croute (1996) found that due to increasing levels of dual-employed parental households, the sibling relationship is becoming of utmost importance when looking at child care patterns. This could be one of the main

factors behind the high rate of sibling abuse which occurs in homes with little to no parental supervision (Lystad, 1986). Left with no parent/guardian to help with forms of conflict resolution, the older sibling may not know how to handle the situation, which may increase the chances of abusive behaviours.

Moser et al. (2005) showed that abusive behaviour directed towards a sibling may come from modeling the behaviours exhibited by their abusive parents. Using the social learning theory, one would expect that in a home environment where abusive behaviours are tolerated, a child will learn that those behaviours are appropriate and acceptable. A study conducted by Straus and Gelles (1990), found that parent-child abuse was associated with higher rates of sibling violence. In fact, Hotaling and colleagues (1990) showed that "...sibling violence was related more closely to parent-child physical abuse than to spousal assault" (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998).

Another reason that research outlines as a probable cause behind abusive behaviour(s) is an underlying issue of power and control. Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro (1998) mention that power and control issues are usually reciprocal, especially among children who are the same sex and who are close in age. Also mentioned by the former authors is that an individual risk factor for committing abusive acts on one's sibling may be caused from an internal need for power and control (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998).

Emotional Effects

All of the literature utilized for this paper reinforces the point that Coker, A. L., Davis, K. E., Arias, I., Desai, S., Sanderson, M., Brandt, H. M., et al. (2002) made, that experience(s) of childhood abuse will be important predictors of poor mental health in the future. Tromcé and Wolfe (2001) showed that abused children have considerable problems in child functioning across several areas; in 56% of the substantiated abuse cases the child was described as having some type of functioning issue. 39% of the abused children showed negative peer interaction and involvement, 15% showed depression and/or anxiety, and 11% showed severe developmental delays (Tromcé & Wolfe, 2001). Another finding, made by Grover (2004), was that there is a strong correlation between individuals who have been victims of some form of childhood abuse and violence encountered in later dating relationships. This result also showed up in a study conducted by Malinosky-Rummell and Hansen (1993).

Malinosky-Rummell and Hansen (1993) showed that being a victim of sibling abuse (in any form) will increase the likelihood of experiencing violence in later dating relationships; either by being victimized or by committing the abusive behaviour. They also showed that being abused by a sibling has been associated with many emotional problems including (but not limited to) anxiety, depression, hostility, paranoid ideation, psychosis, and dissociation (Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993). Studies conducted by Jaffe et al. (1986) and Wolfe and Mosk (1983) showed that children who are exposed to sibling violence tend

to show various social incompetence's and have difficulties internalizing and externalizing their behaviours.

Although much of the research in recent decades has been on the behavior and treatment of the abusive parent as the perpetrator of the violent act, significant attention has also focused on the consequences of abuse, especially the immediate or short-term effects (Ammerman, Cassisi, Hersen, & Van Hasselt, 1986; Conaway & Hansen, 1989; Hansen, Conaway, & Christopher, 1990; Lamphear, 1985). The similar emotional effects that child and sibling abuse have on the victims shows how equal of a problem they are in today's society. Sibling abuse is a crime that is drastically under-reported because society sloughs the abusive acts off as child's play or rough-housing. Knowing that sibling rivalry can lead to abuse, and is a common problem among children who are the same sex and close together in age (Graham-Bermann, Cutler, Litzenberger, & Schwartz, 1994) allows society to have a starting point when looking for ways to prevent sibling abuse.

Prevention Ideas

In his book *Sibling Abuse*, Vernon Wiehe gives some ideas as to how parents and society can begin to gain control over, treat and possibly prevent sibling abuse; first he maintains that there is a need to build awareness about the subject of sibling abuse. Wiehe places great importance on people gaining knowledge about sibling abuse and "...that it can occur in any family and that it can be a serious problem" (Wiehe, 1990). Educational programs in schools teaching children about sibling abuse could be one possible way to help increase awareness of this type of abuse. Once society realizes that sibling abuse can happen in any family, we can begin to take the first steps towards preventing it.

A second idea that Wiehe puts forth as a step in the direction of preventing sibling abuse deals with one of the causal factors previously mentioned; lack of parental supervision. If parents spend more time with their children, they can monitor their behaviour and ensure that there are no actions of sibling violence occurring between their children. Wiehe (1990) mentions that if parents must leave their children unsupervised for any amount of time, discussing the rights and responsibilities of each child with them may decrease the occurrence of abusive behaviours. Community involvement can help as well; schools need to acknowledge that many of their students are latchkey children and initiate after school programs that could ensure proper supervision. Guerney and Moore (1978) offer another alternative in the form of after school phone lines that children can call to discuss any problems they may encounter while home alone.

One other way that parents and society can help to prevent sibling abuse is to attempt to promote the prosocial behaviours of the children whom they have ties to. Most discourse utilized by parents when disciplining their children

is negative (e.g., **don't** hit your brother; **stop** yelling at your sister). Wiehe (1990) recommends that if more positive discourse is used, the children will be encouraged to continue the behaviours which they were rewarded for. This may discourage the children from engaging in abusive behaviours aimed at their siblings.

The causes and effects of child abuse are so similar to those of sibling abuse, yet it is not very highly recognized by anyone, including the parents of children being abused by one of their siblings. Society needs to realize that sibling abuse is a significant social problem and take the necessary steps to attempt to prevent this form of child abuse. Because most acts of sibling abuse are disregarded as behaviours typical to most sibling relationships more research needs to be conducted in this area in order to determine more precise rates of occurrence, motivational factors, as well as preventative measures.

Website References

Definitions of child abuse taken from the website:

<http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/factsheets/whatiscan.cfm>

Definitions of sibling rivalry taken from the website:

[\[www.mercksource.com\]](http://www.mercksource.com)

Types of Child Physical Abuse taken from the website:

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