Sibling Sexual Abuse

By Amy Adams

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www.sarsas.org.uk/ssap

Introduction

- Amy Adams, previously a Project Officer on the Rape Crisis England & Wales national sibling sexual abuse project
- ESRC- funded PhD student (September 2022) researching the quality and dynamics of sibling relationships, in the context of sibling sexual abuse
- Research Assistant at the University of Edinburgh – conducting a Scope Review on sibling sexual abuse

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Outline of the session

- An important note on language
- Definitions of sibling sexual abuse
- Sibling sexual abuse prevalence
- Spectrum of sibling sexual behaviour
- Understanding sibling sexual abuse
- Sibling relationships
- Family impact and responses
- Professional responses
- A message from an adult victim-survivor

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An important note on language

Children who have been harmed

Children who have harmed

- Avoid punitive language
- Children who harm are not ‘mini sex offenders’
- Dual status
- A need to understand the developmental stance of the child

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Definitions of sibling sexual abuse

A 2020 definition:

Sibling sexual abuse consists of sexual acts initiated by one sibling toward another without the other's consent, by use of force or coercion, or where there is a power differential between the siblings. It may involve children of similar or different ages; aggression, coercion, or force; harm or potential for harm; occur frequently or infrequently; and may include minor or advanced sexual behaviours. This includes sexual behaviour that the harmed child is not developmentally prepared for, is not transitory, and does not reflect age-appropriate curiosity. It may or may not involve physical touching, coercion, or force. Non-contact sibling sexual abuse may include behaviour that is intended to sexually stimulate the harmed sibling or the offender. It can include unwanted sexual references in conversation, indecent exposure, forcing a sibling to observe others' sexual behaviour, taking pornographic pictures, or forcing a sibling to view pornography. It also may include sibling sexual contact perceived as non-abusive by both victim and offender, which nonetheless meets these criteria

(Caffaro. 2020. p.7).

The RCEW National Project on Sibling Sexual Abuse uses, when appropriate, the following summary definition of sibling sexual abuse:

A form of harmful sexual behaviour or activity involving the misuse of power and victimising intent or outcome between children who self-identify as siblings.

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Prevalence of sibling sexual abuse

Sibling sexual abuse is common.

Estimated to be up to **three times as common** as sexual abuse by a parent

(Krienert and Walsh, 2011)

A recent Portuguese survey of university students found **that 11% of males and 5% of females** self-reported sexually coercing a sibling during their childhood

(Relva et al., 2017)

Recent research using England and Wales Police FOI data found that **24%** of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults were categorised as a sibling relationship

(Adams and Crosby, 2022)

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Spectrum of sibling sexual behaviour

Normative sexual interactions between siblings:

Behaviour between young siblings that exists within expected developmental norms

Inappropriate or problematic sexual behaviour involving siblings:

Behaviour between siblings that falls outside developmental norms and which may cause developmental harm to the children involved

Sibling sexual abuse:

Behaviour that causes sexual, physical and emotional harm, including sexually abusive behaviour which involves violence

(Yates and Allardyce, 2021)

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Understanding sibling sexual abuse

- Sibling sexual abuse has lower disclosure rates than other forms of child sexual abuse (some individuals will never disclose)
- Sibling sexual abuse is most likely to involve an older, male brother harming a younger, female sister
- Can be as harmful as child sexual abuse committed by a parent
- Sibling sexual abuse can be more frequent and last longer than other forms of child sexual abuse
- May involve digital mechanisms
- The impact of trauma may not be present until adulthood

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Sibling relationships

- Sibling relationships are one of the most enduring and important relationships an individual will have (Dunn, 2007)
- Sibling relationships can significantly impact an individual's emotional, psychosocial, and personal development and are typically characterised by affection/love and/or rivalry, and hostility (Sanders, 2004; Whiteman, et al., 2011)
- Sibling relationships often develop and change over time, and are subject to complex power dynamics (Yates and Allardyce, 2021)

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The importance of the whole family!

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“Disclosing sibling sexual abuse for my family was like shattering a glass, the glass could be pieced back together and work again, but it was fractured and never the same”.

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Impact on the family

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Family responses

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Professional responses

Minimisation

Exaggeration

Catastrophising

(King-Hill, Gilsenan, Beavis & Barrie, in press)

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Key messages

- Take sibling sexual abuse seriously
- Do not pathologise normal and harmless childhood sexual exploration/behaviours
- Understand first and foremost that both the child who has harmed and the child who has been harmed are **children**
- Take into consideration the quality and dynamics of sibling relationships
- Take a whole family approach

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A message from an adult victim-survivor

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Useful resources

Conference Pack :
https://www.sarsas.org.uk/conference-information-pack/

Dr. Peter Yates and Stuart Allardyce's report (2021):

Podcasts:
Breaking the silence that is keeping sibling sexual abuse quiet – Fleur Strong

#SiblingsToo

Sexual sibling abuse

Learn on the go

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Useful resources

- BBC – File on 4 sibling sexual abuse programme.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00187rz

FOI report showing the prevalence of sibling sexual abuse, as reported to by the Police in England and Wales.

(Located on the SARSAS website)

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Thank you!

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