

Sibling Sexual Abuse – A Parent’s Guide (opd 1996)

(Courtesy of Family Services of Greater Vancouver)

Admitting to yourself that sibling sexual abuse might be happening in your family can be hard. The most important thing is to get help.

Why this booklet?

This booklet is written for parents who know or suspect there is sibling abuse in their family and want to do something about it. It’s also written for parents who want to understand and prevent sibling sexual abuse in their family. Many parents are afraid to believe that sexual abuse could be possible in their family, and this booklet is meant to support parents in facing that possibility in an informed and realistic way.

What is sibling sexual abuse?

Sibling sexual abuse, like all forms of sexual abuse, is an abuse of power. If a more powerful sibling, who may be older or stronger, bribes or threatens a weaker sibling into sexual activity, that is called sexual abuse. The abuser usually wins the trust of the victim first, and then violates that trust in order to commit the abuse. The abuser may use force, the threat of force, a bribe, the offer of special attention, or a gift to make the victim keep the abuse secret.

In sibling sexual abuse, the victim and the abuser are siblings. This may include such situations as foster or step-siblings. Also, as in other forms of sexual abuse, sibling sexual abuse doesn’t necessarily involve sexual touching. The abuser may force two or more other children to engage in sexual activity with one another. The abuser may force the siblings to watch sexual activity or pornographic videotapes. The abuser may also abuse them by repeatedly watching them dress, shower or use the toilet when they don’t want to be watched.

Trust is essential in families, but a sibling who has been given a lot of responsibility and power may abuse that trust. Sibling sexual abuse often takes place when parents fail to pay attention to the trust that they have placed in one of their children.

What are the effects of sibling sexual abuse?

Sibling sexual abuse is often very harmful for the following reasons:

Because the siblings live together, the victim may feel pressured and trapped by the abuser over a long period of time. This pressure usually includes bribes, sexual stimulation or physical force. For example, when you allow your oldest son to use physical punishment when baby-sitting, he may continue to use both physical abuse and threats to make sure his younger siblings keep the sexual abuse secret. This kind of pressure can break down the siblings’ self confidence.

The victim usually begins by trusting the abuser because they are siblings. When this trust is violated, the victim feels betrayed by that brother or sister, because someone they expect to love and care for them is hurting them. In addition, your younger children would naturally trust you to choose a safe, kind person to take care of them. When the person you choose abuses them, the victims feel betrayed again, this time by you. They may even believe that you think the abuse is all right.

The victims usually feel powerless to stop the abuse. They feel they can't stop the offender, because he has threatened them. They may also feel powerless if you don't believe them when they tell you they are being abused. This feeling of being powerless can stay with them and affect their adult relationships.

The victims may be made to feel responsible, bad or dirty. If you accuse your younger children of doing something to encourage the abuse, or if you call them 'dirty' or 'slutty', they'll believe you, and feel ashamed as well. They may carry these feelings of shame into adulthood.

Sibling sexual abuse often causes more damage than abuse by a stranger. This is because children are dependent for years on their families and parents to keep them safe. Studies of convicted teenage sexual abuse offenders show that the sibling offenders commit more serious abuse over a longer period of time than other teenage offenders. This is because the victims (brothers or sisters) are more readily available, they are available for a longer period of time and the offenders are protected by family secrecy.

If you know or suspect that one of your children is being sexually abused by a sibling, do something. If you do nothing because you believe 'they'll grow out of it', you allow the abuse and secrecy to continue.

Is sexual curiosity between siblings normal ?

Yes. A four-year old girl who touches her baby brother's penis while her mother changes his diaper is showing normal curiosity. She may never have seen a penis before and may want to know what it feels like. A five year old boy who sees his sisters genitals for the first time may wonder where her penis is, whether she's lost it and whether she's going to grow one. He may have to look a few more times, and ask questions to understand that boys and girls are born with different genitals. As a parent you can use opportunities like these to give your children some information about sexuality that is suitable for their age.

However, a fourteen-year-old boy who wants to look at his five-year-old sister's genitals is not showing normal curiosity. Normally, at his age, he would know what female genitals look like, so you would need to ask why he wants to do this. It could be that he's wondering what it would feel like to touch female genitals or rub his penis against them. But to satisfy his curiosity in this way with his younger sister would be abusive.

Four- and five-year-olds who take down their pants to look at each other's genitals are probably curious. But if they persist in doing it, or if they touch one another's genitals frequently over

time, you should look at it carefully. If it seems like more than curiosity, consider the possibility that one of them might have been sexually abused, and could be acting out the abuse.

It's not a good idea to think that all play is harmless. It's better to find out what's behind the behaviour. Some questions you could ask yourself, or a professional, are:

- Is this behaviour what you would expect from a child that age?
- How long has the behaviour been going on?
- Does it seem that one of the children involved is being forced to participate?
- What is the purpose of the behaviour?

Here are some examples of behaviours in pre-school children:

Normal behaviour-

- Rubs genitals before falling asleep
- Explores differences between boys and girls
- Is interested in watching adults go to the bathroom
- Plays 'doctor' with other children
- Plays house. Plays 'mommy' and 'daddy' roles

Behaviours that should cause concern-

- Frequently rubs genitals instead of playing
- Keeps asking questions about sex even after questions have been reasonably answered
- Persists in watching adults in the bathroom
- Forces other children to play doctor
- Pretends to have intercourse

If you aren't sure about a behaviour, ask a professional; a doctor, a school nurse or counsellor, a social worker, a daycare supervisor or a child psychologist. There is also a booklet available that could be helpful: *When Children Act Out Sexually: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* available from Vancouver Family Services.

What is the relationship between sibling sexual abuse and other forms of abuse?

Sibling sexual abuse is a misuse of power and authority. Older children who sexually abuse their younger brothers and sisters frequently abuse them in other ways as well.

Persistent putting down, teasing, or belittling younger children about their size, gender or other personal characteristics is called emotional abuse. Scaring younger children in dark rooms, telling them that no one loves them, or that terrible things are going to happen to them are also examples of emotional abuse.

Much of the hitting, pinching and smothering of younger children is dismissed by bigger or older siblings who tell their parents, 'We were only having fun' or 'We were just wrestling.' However, this isn't 'just fun' if it's forced on the younger child; it is actually physical abuse.

If you are able to prevent your children from emotionally and physically abusing one another, you are less likely to have to deal with sexual abuse as well. Children who are allowed to abuse their siblings emotionally and physically may use their power in sexual ways as well.

Frank's Story

Frank was charged under the Young Offenders Act with sexually abusing his younger sister Kathy. His probation officer enforced the court order that he attend counseling.

Frank, who was 15, told his counselor that his classmates were bigger and more sexually 'successful' than he was, and that one of them had dared him to have sex with a girl.

He said that he was afraid to even talk to a girl, let alone ask for a date. He admitted that he made his younger sister Kathy have sexual intercourse with him one evening when he was babysitting her.

Then Frank's mother told the counselor that Frank's father had forced sex on her in front of the children on a number of occasions. She disclosed that he often beat her if his meals weren't ready on time. The counselor encouraged her to take Frank and Kathy to a transition house as a temporary measure, while she decided whether or not to stay with her husband.

There were several factors involved in Frank's becoming a sibling sex offender. His father abused his mother physically, emotionally, and sexually; he abused Frank sexually and emotionally by having forceful, abusive sex with his mother in front of him; and he taught Frank by his example that it was acceptable for a male in authority to use force on the rest of the family. Not only that, his rules for the family were so strict that Frank hadn't learned to socialize with other teenagers. Feeling pressure from his peers, he tried to get information and experience by forcing himself on his younger sister.

There are many benefits to court-ordered counseling for sibling sex offenders. In Frank's case he learned some social skills that helped him get along better with other teenagers, and he stopped copying his father's abusive behavior. He also learned to take responsibility for his own behaviour and to control it. Other outcomes of the family crisis included his mother being able to leave an abusive relationship and Kathy starting to see a sexual abuse counselor. Following his conviction, Frank's father was charged by the court to seek counseling and to change the way he treats women and children.

What Factors contribute to sibling sexual abuse?

An older sibling, usually a boy, is given too much responsibility

It's an important part of family life for older children to learn to take responsibility for the care of younger children. It's just as important for children to understand that this responsibility has limits. Responsibility allows older children to make decisions while taking care of younger children. But it doesn't give them the right to boss them, put them down or threaten them. As parents, you must help them see that having responsibility doesn't mean that they can do whatever they want. Frank's story is a good example of an older brother who is given responsibility and misuses it.

Children who have witnessed or experienced sexual abuse

Children who have been sexually abused, either by family members or by adults or older children, sometimes react by coaxing, manipulating, or forcing younger children into the same kind of sexual behaviour. Brothers and sisters may become the victims of this 'second hand' abuse. Sexually intrusive children who act out their own abuse in this way are sometimes called 'sexually reactive'. It's important for you to know that children who are being sexually victimized may become sexually intrusive.

Access to pornography

Parents who leave pornographic videotapes or magazines where children can look at them run the risk of having their children imitate adult sexual behaviour.

Neglect

If children are neglected, either physically or emotionally, they might engage in a full range of sexual activities. They might try sexual activities they have learned from other children, or they might experiment, on their own, to learn how to get sexual pleasure. Part of their behaviour might come from their need to give and receive comfort when they're getting none from their parents.

Sexual activity between siblings which begins in this way might, at first, appear experimental and mutual. However, because of the power differences between children, it rarely is. If the behaviour continues, it can become abusive, especially if one of the children wants to stop and the other doesn't.

- Lack of sex education
- Children and teens who are not taught in an age-appropriate way about their physical and sexual development are more likely to engage in sexually intrusive behaviour.
- Inadequate socialization
- Children who are not allowed to play with their peers, and teenagers who aren't allowed to date, dance or socialize outside the home, are more likely to sexually abuse younger siblings, just as Frank did.
- Denial

We often tend to see our own families as free from the trouble and tensions that other families have. When you do this, or try to explain away unusual behaviour or pretend it isn't happening,

this is called ‘denial’. In some situations, parents may wish to deny that abuse has taken place because it brings back memories of their own abuse. While denial doesn’t cause sibling sexual abuse, it may contribute to it’s continuation.

Feeling overwhelmed

If you feel overwhelmed by your own problems — which can include emotional stress, illness and unemployment — you might not be able to detect the abuse even when it’s happening. At times like this your extended family or a social service agency might be able to relieve the stress, and give you a chance to look at what’s really happening in your family.

Why might it be difficult to recognize sibling sexual abuse in my family?

- As a parent you might find it hard to see that one of your children is being sexually abused by a sibling. There are several reasons why parents of sibling sexual abuse victims have difficulty recognizing that it’s happening:
- While the abuse is happening, the victim might be too young to know it’s abuse. The victim may believe that the abuse is something that happens in all families.
- The abuse might be happening when the abuser is in a position of authority; for example, when an older sibling is the baby-sitter.
- The abuser may be enforcing secrecy by threatening the victim with physical abuse if he or she tells.
- Victims blame themselves, especially if they experience pleasure while they’re being abused, so they may not tell you about it.
- Children may want to tell, but not know how to talk to you about what’s happening. Also, many children are afraid to upset their parents.
- You may see some of the symptoms of sibling sexual abuse, but tell yourself it isn’t happening.
- Parents who talk to their children about what has happened during the day and who ask about their feelings may be more likely to recognize sibling sexual abuse than parents who don’t.

If one of my children is abusing another child in my family, what should I do?

If your child is sexually abusing another child in the family, you report the abuse to your local child protection agency. While the way you do this may vary from province to province, the child protection agency in your province is responsible for helping both the victim and the offender. If your child is 12 or over, the child protection agency must report the abuse to the police. The police will decide whether or not to charge the child. If your child is under the age of 12, he or she cannot be charged with a sexual offense.

Admitting to yourself that sibling sexual abuse might be happening in your family can be hard. Admitting it to someone else can be even harder. The important thing is to get help. It is often helpful to get support from family and friends, but you might have to rely on others. Often these others are professionals. As a parent you may feel in a state of despair and confusion when you realize that one of your children, is abusing their sibling. You may feel disappointed and may

feel that you have failed as a parent. Joining a parental support group may help you acknowledge and accept your feelings.

No matter what your child's age, there are options as to what happens after you make the report to your child protection agency.

Under 12

Many counseling centres that treat victims of sexual abuse also have programs for “sexually intrusive” children. These are children who have been acting in sexually aggressive ways towards other children, but are under the age of 12. In many cases these children are sexual abuse victims themselves. They need counseling for this as well as to change their behaviour towards other children.

12 and Over

There are several advantages to involving the police and the criminal justice system when the offender is a child over the age of 12. By using the court system:

- We make a statement about how seriously our society views sexual abuse.
- The victim knows he or she is believed.
- The offender can get the help he needs.
- The judge can make plans for the offender's treatment.

Treatment can take many forms. One option could include placing a teenage sibling sex offender on probation with an order to have counseling while living at home. In this case the teenager will have a probation worker who will make sure the judge's orders are followed.

If offenses are serious enough, the teenage abuser could be confined for a period of time in a detention centre. These centres are staffed by counselors and social workers who specialize in treating adolescent sex offenders. Treatment could include attending groups where the offender looks closely at his behaviour, and receiving individual counseling to help him understand it. The offender may also be taught basic social skills, such as how to make friends his own age, or how to ask for a date and learn appropriate sexual behaviour. Most important, compulsory counseling can help prevent the young offender from growing into an adult offender.

If the province where you live has a criminal injuries compensation program, the victim(s) of sibling sexual abuse might be eligible for free counseling. Your social worker or a victim assistance worker should be able to give you this information. After reporting the abuse, counseling for both the offender and the victim(s) can be an important step to healing in your family.

Jamie's Story

Jamie, 12, became sexually excited by watching a rock video. He wondered what it would be like to watch his eight-year-old sister, Carole-Anne, dance in the nude. Two or three times when

his parents were out for the evening he talked her into taking off her clothes and dancing in front of the television set. Then he told her that one day she'd be a great dancer and a rock star. After that Carole-Anne started running in front of the television set all the time just to get his attention. When Jamie complained that Carole-Anne was a nuisance, Carole-Anne told her mother what Jamie had made her do. Her mother recognized that Jamie's behaviour had been abusive.

HOW can I intervene to stop sibling sexual abuse?

- When you discover abusive behaviour, remember that you should report it to the child protection agency.
- You may want see a counselor or join a parent support group to get support for yourself.
- You might try to find an opportunity and a place in which you and your children can talk quietly and calmly. This might be in a living room or at the kitchen table. It depends on where you're used to having family conversations.
- Ask the children involved how they feel about the behaviour. Ask the abuser how he/she thinks the victim might feel. For example: "How do you think Carole-Anne felt while she was doing that, Jamie?"
- Describe the problem, then talk about it. For example: "Carole-Anne danced nude in front of the TV set because she believed she had to do everything you told her to do."

Agree on what to do instead. In Carole-Anne and Jamie's case, Jamie agreed not to force Carole-Anne to do things she didn't want to do, and to respect Carole-Anne's privacy. Carole-Anne agreed to report any future abuse of authority to her mother. Both children agreed to ask one of their parents to intervene if they couldn't handle this conflict on their own.

Check regularly to see whether the agreements on both sides are being kept.

Use occasions like these to think and talk about some of the underlying issues. For example, how would you deal with Jamie's interest in sexually stimulating rock videos? With his bossiness? How would you deal with Carole-Anne's willingness to do whatever Jamie tells her to do? With her enjoyment of flattery? With her need for attention? These are problems that many families have to deal with on a daily basis. Your success in handling these problems is important in both preventing and stopping sexual abuse.

How can I best prevent sibling sexual abuse in my family?

- The best way to prevent sibling sexual abuse is to pay attention to your children
- Set aside a time each day when your children have a chance to tell you about what they've done or felt that day. This might be after school or before bed-time.
- Ensure that children are well looked after by babysitters, whether the sitter is a family member or not. At breakfast you can ask your children specific questions about the previous evening; for example, did they watch their favourite TV program? did they play video games? did they cooperate with the sitter? was the sitter kind? would they like to have the same sitter again?

- Be willing to talk about sexuality. Informal sex education could include watching educational videos and reading books with your children. Try to find library materials on sex education that are appropriate to the age of your child.
- Encourage your children's school to present sexual abuse prevention films and programs. Most of them do, but it doesn't hurt to ask. The programs usually carry the message, "If someone is making you do something that doesn't feel good, tell a trusted adult."
- Find out where your children are playing, and who they're playing with. Be especially concerned if they're playing with children who are focused on sexual games.
- Teach your children that they own their bodies and everyone should respect that.
- Monitor television violence. Movies and television programs that link sex and violence carry a dangerous message to children. Research shows these messages have a strong negative effect on children.
- Encourage non-sexist attitudes and behaviour. For example: give power, responsibility and privileges equally to male and female siblings; assign household tasks fairly, and discourage sexist jokes and sexist put-downs.
- Believe them. Children rarely invent stories of sexual abuse to get a brother or sister into trouble.

Will our family ever recover?

YES! Even if the abuse went on for a long time, your children can get over it. They'll need love and understanding, and help in sorting out their thoughts and feelings. But in the end, they'll feel just like normal kids again.

All families have rocky periods when one or more members have problems. What makes the difference is whether you work on the problems. The communication and support you develop while you do this may establish a new sense of trust in your family.

Suggested Reading:

Wiehe, Vernon. *Sibling Abuse: Hidden Physical, Emotional and Sexual Abuse* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997.

O' Brien, Michael. *Characteristics of Male Adolescent Sibling Incest Offenders: Preliminary Findings*. Brandon, Vermont: Safer Society Press, 1993.

Cunningham, Carolyn and Kee MacFarlane. *When Children Molest Children: Group Treatment Strategies for Young Sexual Abusers*. Brandon, Vermont: Safer Society Press, 1991.

Bank, Stephen and Michael Kahn. *The Sibling Bond*. United States: Basic Books, 1982.

Justice, Blair and Rita. *The Broken Taboo*. New York: Human Sciences Press, 1979.

Harper, James and Margaret Hoopes. *Uncovering Shame*. New York: Norton, 1990.

Napier-Hemy, John. *When Children Act Out Sexually: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*. Vancouver: Family Services of Greater Vancouver, 1991.

This is one of five booklets in the Sexual Abuse Information Series II:

[When Girls Have Been Sexually Abused](#)

A Guide For Young Girls (Cat. # H72-21/101-1994)

When Males Have Been Sexually Abused

A Guide For Adult Male Survivors (Cat. # H72-21/102-1994)

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[Sibling Sexual Abuse – A Guide For Parents](#)

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Sexual Abuse Information Series I includes the following booklets:

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The booklets are available from:

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence
Family Violence Prevention Division

Health Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada KIA 1B5

Tel: 1-800-267-1291
Fax: 1-613- 941-8930
TDD line: 1-800-561-5653

Credits -

VISAC Directors
Naomi Ehren-Lis
Terri Nicholas

Project Coordinator
Leonard Terhoch

Writer
John Napier-Hemy

Editors
English – Joanne Broatch
French – Johanne Raynault

VISAC – Vancouver/Richmond Incest & Sexual Abuse Centre
(604) 874-2938 / (604) 244-9319

Definition of ‘sibling’ as used in this booklet

In this booklet the word ‘sibling’ is used to refer to children who grow up in the same family, whether they are step-children, foster children, adopted children or children by birth.

In the examples of sibling sexual abuse we’ve chosen for this booklet, the offenders are male. We’ve done this because there’s little information about sibling offenders, and what little information there is comes from studies of teenage boys who have been charged by the court system. We know some teenage girls sexually abuse their younger brothers and sisters, but there’s hardly any information about it. We also know that both boys and girls too young to be charged do act out sexually against their younger siblings. There’s little information about this either, because it doesn’t have to be made public.

For these reasons please remember that although the examples we use are true ones, they may not reflect how often girls and younger children engage in ‘sexually intrusive behaviour’.

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1616 West 7th Avenue
Vancouver, B.C. V6I 1S5
Tel: (604) 731-4951 Fax: (604) 733-7009

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