The Most Common Form of Family Violence: Sibling Aggression and Abuse

Corinna Jenkins Tucker, PhD, CFLE
Tanya Rouleau Whitworth, PhD
David Finkelhor, PhD
Crimes against Children Research Center
University of New Hampshire
Durham, NH, USA

The Sibling Aggression and Abuse Research and Advocacy Initiative is funded by a grant from the Louis and Anne Abrons Foundation.

DEFINITIONS

Rivalry: competition for or protests about parents’ or caregivers’ attention, favor, and resources (e.g., financial, time). As part of this competitive process, siblings may display jealousy and bicker, but without the intention to harm.

Aggression: the intention to cause physical or psychological harm to a sibling and includes hitting, attacking, denigrating, humiliating, and destroying possessions and property.

Abuse: an ongoing pattern of aggression or bullying by a sibling with more power that causes evident harm or a strong chance of harm. A serious one-time event can also be abuse.

Sexual abuse: sexual activities with a sibling that are unwanted or involve a considerable developmental or age difference.

STOPPING AGGRESSION AND ABUSE

Raise awareness and change perceptions (i.e., that sibling aggression is harmless, “just rivalry,” and ignorable).

Teach parents effective conflict mediation techniques.

Train professionals to screen for, recognize, and treat sibling aggression and abuse.

Provide trauma-informed care that takes a multi-systemic approach to the harmed child, the child who caused harm, and the family.

Add information about sibling aggression and abuse to family violence, anti-bullying, and parent education programs.

Classify sibling aggression as an adverse childhood experience (ACE).

BARRIERS TO RECOGNITION

Sibling aggression is seen as less serious than other forms of family violence, dating violence, and peer bullying.

Sibling aggression is commonly perceived as normal, acceptable, or even beneficial (i.e., to make children tougher). Aggressive and abusive behaviors between siblings are often dismissed as sibling rivalry by parents, professionals, and even the victimized sibling.

The lack of clear and widely-agreed definitions of sibling aggression and abuse creates confusion.

Professionals who work with children and families generally receive no relevant training or evidence-based guidelines.

There is a social and legal policy vacuum around sibling aggression and abuse.

SELECTED REFERENCES


