



A publication of the Sibling Aggression and Abuse Research and Advocacy Initiative (SAARA) at the Crimes against Children Research Center

Disentangling Sibling Rivalry from Aggression and Abuse

CORINNA JENKINS TUCKER, TANYA ROULEAU WHITWORTH, AND DAVID FINKELHOR

This guide distinguishes rivalry, aggression, and abuse in sibling relationships. Rivalry is one-sided or mutual competition for or protests about parents' or caregivers' attention, favor, and resources (e.g., financial, time). Aggression is behavior intended to cause physical or emotional harm. Abuse is behavior that causes or has a high likelihood of causing physical or emotional harm, and includes serious assaults, repeated bullying, sexual exploitation, or persistent belittlement and intimidation.

Unfortunately, aggression, and even abuse, amongst siblings are often minimized and confused with rivalry. Knowing the difference is important. While sibling rivalry can be a constructive and healthy part of growing up, sibling aggression and abuse are harmful and require intervention.

What Is Sibling Rivalry?

Rivalry drives children to find unique successes or develop personal qualities that make them different from their siblings to capture their parents' attention. Rivalry also is displayed when children protest favoritism and unfairness. As part of this competitive process, siblings may display jealousy and bicker. Rivalrous behavior can be very persistent, and not mindful of another sibling's needs.

Rivalry is often mistaken for aggressive, even abusive behavior. However, rivalry does not include an intent to mentally or physically harm or control a brother or sister. Thus, aggressive sibling behavior, such as purposefully pushing, hitting, or persistently belittling is not rivalry. Rivalry does not always lead to aggressive behaviors, but it can if the drive for parents' attention becomes intense.

What Is Sibling Aggression?

Sometimes, aggressive behaviors are a normal part of development, such as when young children are frustrated and lack communication or conflict management skills. Such behaviors predictably decline with age and better social and emotional skills.

Harms Associated with Sibling Aggression and Abuse



Mental Health

Depression, Anxiety,
Self-harm, Suicide ideation,
Eating disorders



Physical Health

Injuries, Headaches,
Nausea, Sleeplessness



Risky Behaviors

Delinquency (For exam-
ple: stealing, skipping
school), Substance use



Relationship Health

Peer bullying, Dating violence,
Family estrangement, Poor
sibling relationship quality,
Elder abuse

Sibling aggression includes psychological, physical, and property aggression, such as intimidation, hitting, and theft. Such behaviors can cause harm and suffering, like physical pain and humiliation, and typically leave a brother or sister feeling victimized. Aggressive sibling behavior is often mutual, can be mild or severe, like leaving a sibling with an injury, and may occur regardless of whether siblings are rivalrous.

Typically, how often sibling aggression occurs is underestimated because it is dismissed as harmless. However, national U.S. data show that sibling aggression is the most common form of family violence. A survey of over 4,000 children aged 0-17 found that about one-third suffered aggressive victimization by a sibling in the past year. More children are victimized by a sibling than by a caregiver or their peers.

In some relationships, one sibling is consistently the aggressor, but in others, siblings may trade aggressor or victim roles. Experiencing sibling aggression—whether as the victim or aggressor—can harm children’s mental and physical health and social relationships and lead to risky behaviors. Even if siblings’ aggressive behavior is developmentally or age-appropriate, it should still be stopped immediately. Any display of aggression is an opportunity to teach children of any age better ways of communicating and channeling their frustrations.

Is it Sibling Abuse?

Some sibling relationships become abusive. This happens when the harmful behavior is one-sided and causes serious physical or emotional harm or a strong likelihood of such effects. When abuse happens, one sibling is typically a consistent victim, likely reflecting a power difference in terms of physical size, cognitive ability, gender, age, or role in the family. Attempts to fight back or resist the abuse should not be mistaken for mutuality or ‘fair’ fights. Abuse is often chronic, intense, and long-standing, but a serious one-time event may also be abuse.

Being kicked, beaten, or punched has a particularly high risk for serious harm. Use of a weapon or object is abusive, and so is it when injuries are incurred. Abusive sibling relationships may involve serious threats of harm, blackmail, and intentional destruction of cherished items. Repeated humiliation and intimidation count as abuse; also, when multiple tormentors are involved. Sexual behaviors that are not age-appropriate, and sexual denigration are also important types of sibling abuse.

About 4% of U.S. children and adolescents report each year receiving an injury at the hands of their brother or sister or facing a weapon of some sort that could cause injury. Some other behaviors, like sexual assault or involving a sibling in criminal or self-harming behavior, are abusive whether they involve aggression or injury. Frequently, multiple types of sibling abuse can occur at the same time.

Parents and professionals may find it difficult at times to make a clear distinction between sibling aggression and abuse, but signs of an enduring emotional impact on a child are a likely marker of abuse. A child who is victimized may feel distressed, fearful, hopeless, or powerless and avoid their sibling or become estranged from the family. Alternatively, they may act overly deferential toward their sibling. However, some children may not realize what is happening or make excuses for the behavior. Parents and professionals must take notice and stop abuse, no matter how it is viewed by the children involved. 

For More Information:

Caffaro, J. V. (2014). *Sibling abuse trauma* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Tucker, C. J., Finkelhor, D., Shattuck, A. M., & Turner, H. (2013). Prevalence and correlates of sibling victimization types. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 37(4), 213–223. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.01.006>

Tucker, C. J., Whitworth, T. R., & Finkelhor, D. (2025). Clarifying labels, constructs, and definitions: Sibling aggression and abuse are family violence. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 42(7), 1800–1817. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075251332741>



ADDRESS

Crimes against Children
Research Center
125 McConnell Hall
15 Academic Way
Durham, NH 03824

CONTACT

phone: (603) 862-0936
email: UNH.SAARA@unh.edu
web: www.unh.edu/saara

IN COLLABORATION WITH

