



SAARA BULLETIN

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A Five-Step Model to Help School Mental Health Professionals Identify and Respond to Sibling Abuse

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School mental health professionals (SMHP) are trained to assess and intervene if students are suspected of being abused by a parent or another adult. As mandated reporters, they must report any suspicion of child abuse and have a duty to protect children from harm. Typically, SMHP receive training on child abuse, but it rarely includes sibling abuse.

Research consistently shows that sibling abuse occurs more frequently than other forms of child maltreatment^{1,2} and has negative short- and long-term psychological impacts on K-12 students. Such evidence supports the importance of educating SMHP on sibling abuse and establishing a protocol to follow when a student is being abused by a sibling. In this bulletin, a five-step model will be described to provide guidance to SMHP on identifying and responding to sibling abuse.

What Is Sibling Abuse?

Knowing how to recognize sibling abuse and support students is key to addressing this form of family violence and helping students. Sibling abuse, like child abuse, is about power and control over another and is accompanied by lasting emotional and sometimes physical impacts on the harmed child.³ It occurs when a sibling aims to control or overpower another sibling sexually, physically, or psychologically. Siblings typically have extensive access to one another, so abusive behaviors also can include destruction of cherished items (including school books and projects) or harm to family pets. Sibling abuse is child abuse and should be stopped (see *SAARA Bulletins #1 and #4*).

Sibling abuse is not sibling rivalry. Sibling rivalry does not include psychological or physical efforts to harm a sibling; rather, it is competitive behavior between siblings. Competitive behaviors are normal and expected between siblings, given that they compete for shared family resources like parents' attention. For some siblings, though, rivalrous behavior can cross the line, so that it becomes abusive. SMHP play an essential role in recognizing and protecting students from harmful sibling experiences, especially if caregivers are unaware that sibling abuse is happening.

Five-Step Model to Address Sibling Abuse

The five-step sibling abuse model was created based on research on sibling abuse and aims to create best practices for school counselors to address and protect students experiencing the harms of sibling abuse. Detailed information about each step can be found in the *Professional School Counseling* journal,¹ or a summary can be found in the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) state newsletter.⁴

The first step is to **Assess**, just as one would for suspected child abuse or neglect. Assess the types of behaviors occurring between siblings, their frequency, and who is involved (often more than one sibling). Also, determine if the caregiver is aware of the situation and has taken any action to intervene, and whether the student feels safe at home. With child abuse, SMHP are trained to call child protective services (CPS) anonymously without notifying caregivers that a report has been made. However, in the case of sibling abuse, it is important to determine if caregivers are able and willing to act on behalf of all their children to provide the supervision and guidance necessary to stop abuse amongst siblings. Caregivers may be unaware that the behaviors between their children are violent or abusive.

The second step is to **Conceptualize**. SMHP often already teach or run small counseling groups about healthy vs. unhealthy relationships with peers, and these lessons can be extended to include siblings. In addition, bullying prevention curriculum in the school setting could be expanded to help students conceptualize healthy vs. unhealthy sibling interactions. However, it is important to recognize the differences between peer bullying and sibling abuse, including the influence of birth order and the shared home environment, which can enhance one sibling's control and power over the other.³

The third step is to **Plan**. If appropriate, let the student know how they will be supported (e.g., talking to caregivers, referring to mental health professionals outside the school setting, reporting to CPS). SMHP can collaborate with the school and home to choose interventions and create a safety plan, if needed. A safety plan for home might focus on preserving privacy and keeping personal property and pets safe from siblings. A safety plan for school might focus on keeping siblings safe in public areas such as the playground, cafeteria, or hallways.

The fourth step is to **Intervene** and advocate on behalf of the student. The protocol established for the school to report child abuse can, and should, include sibling abuse. If the organization where sibling abuse is reported to does not recognize sibling abuse as a type of abuse, then it can be reported as parental neglect. A report of parental neglect would be appropriate if the caregivers are aware of the sibling abuse and do not take steps to prevent or stop it.

The fifth step is to **Evaluate** whether these first four steps have helped the student. After intervention, check in with the student regularly to see how things are going at home. If things have not improved or have worsened, this should be reported to CPS again, and additional resources should be sought.

A final consideration for SMHP is to consider ways to create awareness and policies in their schools to protect students from sibling abuse. This may include offering training and adopting this five-step sibling abuse model school- and/or district-wide. Training could start with K-12 school personnel and then extend to students, caregivers, and stakeholders. Helpful information for K-12 personnel about sibling abuse is available on the SAARA website, including the handout, Practical Tips for K-12 Personnel to Address Sibling Aggression and Abuse. 

References:

¹ Stutey, D., & Clemens, E. V. (2014). Hidden abuse within the home: Recognizing and responding to sibling abuse. *Professional School Counseling*, 18(1), 206–216. <https://doi.org/10/gsb6vr>

² 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/f5bnkk>

³ 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>

⁴ Stutey, D. M. (2016). Breaking the silence around sibling abuse. *ASCA State Newsletter, Special Issue: Violence in Students' Lives*, 18–21. <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aa-id:sc:VA6C2:8a19e9e0-dbb6-4ac9-a0d3-a34958489be8>



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