

Chapter 20

The Dark Side of Sibling Relationships



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20.1 Introduction to the Topic

Sibling aggression and abuse (SAA) are underrecognized as forms of family violence and potentially traumatizing life events. Harmful sibling dynamics are generally not examined due to the wide range of behaviors that are accepted as normal and benign between siblings (Caspi & Barrios, 2016; Ryp, 2023). Further, in comparison to other interpersonal relationships, such as parent-child relationships, the importance of sibling dynamics to mental and physical health and relationship health across the lifespan typically is overlooked (Tucker & Finkelhor, 2017). However, SAA are common, as demonstrated by nationally representative data showing that about a third of U.S. children, aged 0–17 years of age, had been physically or psychologically victimized by their sibling in the past year, with 4% reporting an injury or having a weapon or weapon-like object used on them by a sibling who lives with them (Tucker et al., 2013a). Sibling sexual abuse often co-occurs with physical and psychological sibling abuse (Tener et al., 2020) and is estimated to take place between 1–7% of siblings, based on data collected in Australia, Portugal, and the U.S. (Mathews et al., 2024; Yates et al., 2025). Many children and adolescents live in fear of their sibling (Tucker et al., 2023), and SAA are consistently shown to be associated with negative impacts on physical, mental, and interpersonal health across the lifespan (e.g., Mathis & Mueller, 2015; Noland et al., 2004; Tucker & Kazura, 2013; Tucker et al., 2015a, 2024).

The literature on SAA is divided into multiple, often exclusive, streams of research, which are distinguished by different frameworks and terminology. Though the findings are consistent, the distinct streams of research have impeded the

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formation of a cohesive body of work and limited awareness efforts (Tucker et al., 2025). In this chapter, we describe our classification of harmful sibling behaviors, which is grounded in the idea that SAA are family violence and are not the equivalent of rivalry or bullying (Tucker et al., 2025). We review theoretical perspectives and current research on SAA, including the problematic application of the bullying framework (e.g., Dantchev & Wolke, 2019; Toseeb et al., 2020) to SAA. A cohesive and comprehensive classification of SAA can lead to greater awareness and understanding of the importance of recognizing and responding to SAA by parents, researchers, and professionals.

20.1.1 Sibling Aggression and Abuse Are Forms of Family Violence

Sibling conflicts are a common and expected part of family life given the extensive time siblings spend together, their natural competitiveness for family resources such as love and attention, and their shared spaces. Many sibling conflicts are minor and brief, but serious forms of harm can take place between siblings during conflicts and at other times. Abusive and aggressive sibling behaviors are often equated to sibling rivalry or labeled as conflict by the public and practitioners, thereby diminishing the seriousness of these kinds of behaviors (Kettrey & Emery, 2006). Rivalry is competition for or protests about parents' or caregivers' attention, favor, and resources (e.g., financial, time), and sometimes, rivalrous behavior can be persistent and cause hurt feelings and sibling conflict. As others have suggested (e.g., Caspi, 2012), too much rivalry can lead to behaviors that are aggressive and/or abusive. The distinctions between rivalrous and harmful sibling behaviors are important to helping parents and practitioners and fostering children's well-being and positive family relationships.

Severe harm between family members (e.g., parent-child, spousal) is referred to as abuse (Finkelhor, 2007). Except for sibling sexual abuse, this term is not typically used to categorize harmful sibling behaviors. However, reflecting a sibling-informed framework (Kramer et al., 2026, Chap. 2 of this volume), physical and psychological SAA should be positioned as equal in seriousness to sibling sexual abuse and other forms of family violence (Tucker et al., 2025). There are important practical implications of labeling sibling abuse as a form of family abuse. Most importantly, accurate characterizations of SAA as family violence establishes their legitimacy and provides a pathway for establishing unified approaches to professional screening, prevention, and intervention activities (Tucker et al., 2025).

We are cognizant that labeling SAA as forms of family abuse means that abuse terminology such as 'perpetrator' and 'victim' or 'abuser' and 'abused' are applied to distinguish family members' roles in the incidents. While we believe the concept of family violence should include SAA, because SAA most commonly take place between children, identifying children with these terms could inappropriately

suggest criminality and pathology (Finkelhor, 2007). A sensitivity to these concerns has been demonstrated regarding children's roles in sibling sexual abuse (e.g., McCartan et al., 2024) so that children's roles when abuse happens are characterized as a 'child who harms' and 'child who is harmed.' We advocate this same terminology for abusive and harmful physical and psychological sibling behaviors. Terms like 'perpetrator' are more fitting when harmful sibling behaviors occur in adulthood (e.g., Meyers, 2016).

Aligned with others who advocate for a focus on harm (Gladden et al., 2014) and the developmental victimology framework (Finkelhor, 2007), which emphasizes the effects of victimization, our classification of harmful sibling behaviors considers intent or motivation as well as type, severity, and impact (Tucker et al., 2025). Assessing the intent of others, even of oneself, can be challenging (Gladden et al., 2014), and parents and professionals likely have difficulty thinking that a child intentionally harmed another child and processing that one family member hurt another. Further, children are often viewed as relying on aggression to express frustration, so there is also the belief that they are not capable of causing serious harm (Finkelhor et al., 2006).

A robust research stream characterizes SAA as forms of bullying, and the findings are consistent with other SAA research. Our choice to characterize SAA as forms of family violence rather than bullying parallels the CDC's and others' definitions of bullying, which demonstrate that the application of this framework to siblings is problematic. The CDC and others state that bullying does not apply to sibling dynamics because of the unique relationship between the harmer and harmed that does not characterize peer relationships, such as birth order and shared family context (U.S. CDC, 2024; Gladden et al., 2014; Olweus, 1993). Birth order or age spacing, sometimes in conjunction with siblings' roles in the family, can potentially create more extreme power differentials than those found in peer relationships. Attention to wider family context dynamics, such as intimate partner violence, coalitions, and parental differential treatment, are generally not considered as part of the bullying framework. Further, lack of attention to a shared family context means that, given that most siblings live together and have greater access to one another, the threat of harm can be similar to other forms of family violence and likely more frequent than it is for peers. A bullying framework also diminishes the seriousness of some kinds of harmful sibling behaviors, such as assault or abuse, that in other contexts would be considered criminal (Finkelhor, 2007) and does not easily integrate consideration of sexual abuse or assault. Framing harmful sibling behaviors with a widely recognized term such as bullying is useful for garnering public awareness, but a bullying framework provides a limited view of harmful sibling behaviors and can result in missed opportunities to engage in a whole-family approach that recognizes family conditions and dynamics and the unique characteristics of the sibling relationship (Tucker et al., 2025).

20.1.2 Defining Sibling Aggression and Abuse

Sibling abuse is defined by the use of control or power by a sibling over another due to age, gender, physical size, cognitive ability, or parental favoritism (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005; Rypi, 2023). A power differential is not always easily identifiable (Caffaro, 2014; Tener & Silberstein, 2019; Yates & Allardyce, 2023), so an additionally important characteristic of sibling abuse is that the incidents or patterns of behaviors between siblings pose a high risk of serious physical, emotional, and/or sexual harm (Turner et al., 2015). Abusive sibling actions can happen multiple times, over time, and in conjunction with abuse from others, like another sibling or a parent (Finkelhor et al., 2016). Behaviors associated with physical and psychological sibling abuse can include, but are not limited to, serious injuries like broken bones and strangling, threats to kill a sibling or family pet, blackmail, or a reign of terror. Sibling sexual abuse can involve contact (e.g., fondling, vaginal or anal penetration) or non-contact (e.g., forcing a sibling to watch pornography) behaviors (Caffaro, 2021).

Some behaviors siblings display during conflicts do not rise to the level of abuse but are distinguished by their severity and impacts and need intervention. Drawing on the literature on inter-parental conflict (Rinaldi & Howe, 2003), sibling conflict can be characterized as constructive, in which siblings work together on an agreed-upon issue to negotiate a mutually satisfying solution (Smith & Ross, 2007; Ross & Lazinski, 2014), or destructive, in which aggressive sibling dynamics often emerge as angry emotions escalate (Caspi & Barrios, 2016; Rinaldi & Howe, 2003). Aggression resulting from destructive sibling conflict can be subdivided into mild or severe physical or psychological aggression that is likely, but not always, mutual (Tucker et al., 2025). It is important to emphasize that these aggressive behaviors between the siblings are mutual and not one sibling trying to defend themselves from the other (Johnson, 2009). The two subcategories of aggression displayed during destructive conflict are distinguished by the severity of behaviors and the likelihood of physical, emotional, and relationship harm. Examples of mild aggressive behaviors include pushing, insulting, hitting, and breaking belongings (Finkelhor et al., 2015; Tucker et al., 2013a). Mild aggression may cause emotional harm, especially if it persists or escalates over time (Finkelhor et al., 2006). Severe aggressive behaviors, such as punching, using a weapon, repeatedly insulting, or threatening harm, have a high likelihood of causing physical and/or emotional injury (Finkelhor et al., 2015; Tucker et al., 2013a).

20.2 Developmental, Family, and Other Ecological Contexts

Aggressive behaviors follow a developmental progression of decline as children age and gain verbal and cognitive abilities. Correspondingly, U.S. national data shows that sibling victimization peaks during early and middle childhood, with past-year

incidence reaching as high as 46% for 6- to 9-year-olds and declining to 28% in adolescence (Tucker et al., 2013a). In the U.S., it is notable that the peak of sibling victimization occurs earlier than the peak of peer victimization (Tucker et al., 2019a), which is in mid adolescence (Finkelhor et al., 2015), and that severity of sibling aggression increases in adolescence (Tucker et al., 2013a). Sexual abuse between siblings tends to start earlier than other forms of child sexual abuse, with Canadian and U.S. studies reporting an average age of onset for the harmed child around 8 years (Bertele & Talmon, 2023). Studies conducted in Canada, Israel, the U.K., and the U.S. find that the most common developmental period for a child to sexually harm a sibling is early adolescence (Yates et al., 2025), although problematic sexual behaviors directed at siblings have been observed in children as young as 3 years old (Barton et al., 2025). According to research conducted in Israel and the U.S., sibling sexual abuse often lasts for years, and longer than other forms of child sexual abuse, only ending when one sibling leaves the house or the harming sibling shifts their attention to dating and peer relationships in mid to late adolescence (Carlson et al., 2006; Yates et al., 2025).

A number of family conditions and dynamics are associated with the occurrence of SAA, with some scholars concluding that SAA is primarily a manifestation of family dysfunction (McCartan et al., 2023). Families in which children observe conflict and violence between their parents and experience a general family atmosphere of violence, including parent-child abuse, often emulate such behaviors in their sibling relationship interactions. Research conducted in the U.K. and the U.S. consistently shows that exposure to inter-parental violence, family violence, child maltreatment (including neglect), and poor parenting quality (e.g., lack of supervision and warmth, harsh parenting) is associated with harming or being harmed by a sibling (e.g., Adams, 2025; Dantchev & Wolke, 2019; Tucker et al., 2015b; Tucker et al., 2020b; van Berkel et al., 2018; Walters et al., 2020; Yates et al., 2025). Families with rigid gender roles and patriarchal values can encourage SAA, especially sibling sexual abuse. In these families, older brothers may assert their assumed power to gain control of younger siblings, particularly sisters (Caffaro, 2021; Hoffman & Edwards, 2004; Marmor et al., 2022). We also know that U.S. children who have been severely victimized by a sibling (i.e., an injury has occurred and/or a weapon or weapon-like object was used on them) are more likely to be part of families in which there is less parental warmth and greater exposure to poor parental supervision, inter-parental conflict, and family violence than children experiencing non-injurious sibling victimization (Tucker et al., 2014a). The overlap among sibling victimization and exposure to child maltreatment and family violence indicates the strong possibility of poly-victimization for some children.

Family adversity, which can include events such as natural disasters, family members' hospitalizations, death, and job loss, can cause stressful and unstable family conditions that can contribute to the occurrence of SAA. Using U.S. longitudinal data, Tucker et al. (2018) compared SAA patterns, which included physical, property, and psychological SAA, that are chronic (i.e., present at all waves), begin or increase (i.e., present at later waves of data), and decrease or stop (i.e., present at earlier waves of data), finding that the onset and continuation of adverse events in

families' lives are associated with initiation and persistence of sibling victimization. When such events are resolved or no longer present, sibling victimization stops (Tucker et al., 2018).

Parenting beliefs about normative sibling relationship qualities are particularly important for the nature of sibling dynamics. Parents may inadvertently support concerning sibling behaviors by minimizing their seriousness and dismissing such behaviors as expected and temporary sibling rivalry (Perkins & Shadik, 2018; Perkins et al., 2023; Tucker & Kazura, 2013). Sibling sexual abuse is commonly mistaken for normative sexual exploration (McCoy et al., 2022; Tener et al., 2018). Parents may also tolerate SAA more among siblings who they view as 'equals,' perhaps due to their being similar in age or size. In some cases, parents may directly support SAA, believing that experience with sibling aggression will improve children's ability to manage aggressive peer interactions (Tucker & Kazura, 2013).

Parents' views on sibling behaviors are related to cultural background, particularly whether such behaviors are defined as rivalry and considered concerning (Sakuma et al., 2020; Updegraff et al., 2016; Tucker et al., 2013a). For example, among parents of Asian Pacific backgrounds, physical aggression among siblings is less of a concern than among Black, Hispanic, South Asian, Native American, and White families (Rapoza et al., 2010). Parenting behaviors also reflect highly valued cultural beliefs that are likely reproduced in sibling dynamics. Values such as loyalty, cooperation, and support among family members are commonly held by Black and Hispanic families (McHale et al., 2007; Updegraff et al., 2016) and may explain the lower prevalence of harmful sibling dynamics in these families. More research is needed to understand whether cultural differences in SAA exist due to parents' ability to detect harmful sibling behaviors because of their beliefs about sibling dynamics (Perkins & Shadik, 2018), or whether there are cultural differences in the occurrence of such behaviors.

Sibling and peer relationships are two developmentally important contexts in children's lives. Multiple studies that include samples from Israel, South Korea, and the U.S. show that aggressive sibling dynamics in childhood and adolescence are predictive of similar negative dynamics in peer relationships (e.g., Faith et al., 2015; Kim & Kim, 2019; Tippet & Wolke, 2015). Further, the chronicity of sibling aggression across two time points increases children's vulnerability to peer victimization by 2.5 times compared to non-victimized siblings (Tucker et al., 2019a). Notably, in a sample of U.S. children, sibling dynamics appear to lay the groundwork for peer experiences rather than the reverse; peer victimization is not predictive of sibling victimization (Tucker et al., 2013b, 2014b). Using a broad indicator of victimization that included physical, property, and psychological harm, direct comparison of the family correlates of sibling and peer victimization shows that characteristics such as family adversity, witnessing family violence, and child maltreatment predict children's and adolescents' experiences with both sibling and peer victimization (Tucker et al., 2020b). The extent of overlap suggests the importance of addressing such family conditions in which family members exhibit aggressive and poor relationship skills to reduce sibling and peer victimization. Grounded in a sibling-informed framework (Kramer et al., 2026, Chap. 2 of this volume), we

encourage additional exploration of common familial elements of sibling and peer aggression and abuse to inform the design of programs aimed at enhancing children's and adolescents' experiences in these two critical relationship contexts for development.

20.3 Relevant Theoretical Perspectives

Several theories have guided the work on physical and psychological SAA, including family systems, social learning, attachment, and, to a lesser extent, evolutionary, resource control, and Adlerian theories. Each of these theories suggests familial origins for why harmful behaviors occur between siblings. Theoretical work related to sibling sexual abuse is underdeveloped, but family systems theory is the most common. Central tenets of family systems theory (Bowen, 1966; Minuchin, 1988) are that families are systems, comprised of interdependent units and individuals that exert mutual influence on one another. Thus, the transmission of family dynamics and emotional functioning lends itself to duplication across various subsystems (e.g., parent-parent, parent-child) and influences individual well-being. For example, in families with weak boundaries regarding sexuality, siblings may have difficulty perceiving incest as taboo (Caffaro, 2021).

Examination of how behaviors displayed among family members are acquired is also highlighted by social learning theory (Bandura, 1973). According to social learning theory, individuals learn skills and patterns of interaction through modeling and reinforcement. Parents play a central role in their children's development by modeling behaviors in their romantic relationships, with a child directly, or indirectly with other children in the family. In a family, parents may provide models of ineffective relationship skills and aggressive behavior for children that are then enacted with a sibling (Caspi, 2012; Tucker et al., 2014a). U.S. parents have been shown to reinforce physically aggressive behaviors in children and between siblings, for example, by sanctioning such behaviors or ignoring them (Tucker & Kazura, 2013). Such behaviors can become rewarding because they are effective for achieving a social goal. Consistent with social learning theory, learned ways of negatively interacting with siblings generalize to extra-familial relationship experiences, such as friends and intimate partners (e.g., Noland et al., 2004; Tucker et al., 2014b).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) has guided work on the links between sibling and extra-familial victimization and adults' experiences of sibling abuse. According to this theory, children form internal working models based on attachment experiences with family members (primarily parents, but also siblings) that are associated with the nature of their thinking about themselves and relationships with others. Tucker and colleagues (2014b) showed congruency among sibling and peer victimization experiences (either victimization or non-victimization in both relationships) is more common than incongruency in childhood and adolescence. Notably, about 15% of U.S. children and adolescents are victimized by siblings and peers (Tucker

et al., 2014b). Physically aggressive and abusive sibling dynamics also are linked with romantic relationship violence in adolescence (Noland et al., 2004; Simonelli et al., 2002) and adulthood (Hendy et al., 2012). Some have speculated that this link is driven by individuals' struggles with trust, intimacy, and self-acceptance in relationships resulting from abusive sibling experiences (Myers, 2011; Perkins & Lees, 2023; Wiehe, 1997). Myers (2011) asserted that adults who have suffered harm by their siblings repeat a protective attachment style characterized by emotional unavailability and a sense of worthlessness with romantic partners, thus repeating a victim role in their extra-familial relationships.

Evolutionary biology (Mock & Parker, 1998) and resource control (Hawley, 1999) theories suggest that social dominance (sometimes displayed as aggression) creates greater access to resources. Relatedly, Adlerian theory (e.g., Dreikurs, 1964) suggests that sibling conflicts arise from jealousy and rivalry for parental attention. Siblings' assertion of power, which may happen mutually, as in the case of destructive conflict, or unidirectionally as part of an incident or pattern of abuse, enables differential access to family resources. Thus, children who harm a sibling may capitalize on the sibling's fear (Tucker et al., 2023) and vulnerability to limit competition and gain access, creating a social hierarchy among the siblings. In some families, siblings' statuses in the family can be long-term (Wiehe, 1997).

20.4 Central Research Findings

Vulnerability to SAA in childhood is associated with structural characteristics of the sibling relationship, certain behavioral, physical, or emotional characteristics, and sexual orientation. Studies of U.K. and U.S. first-born children show they are more likely to harm their siblings than are later-born children (Dantchev & Wolke, 2019; Tucker et al., 2013a). In addition, older brothers more commonly harm other siblings (Dantchev & Wolke, 2019; Krienert et al., 2025). The findings on gender differences in victimization are mixed: some work suggests brothers are more likely to be harmed by a sibling (e.g., Duncan, 1999; Tucker et al., 2013a), while other work shows that sisters are more likely to be victimized (e.g., Krienert & Walsh, 2011). U.S. crime data show that the most common gender pairing in sibling sexual abuse is an older brother and a younger sister, followed by brother-brother pairs (Krienert et al., 2025). Children who are typically developing are at less risk for sibling harm than children with autism, physical disabilities, or those perceived by their parents as either thinner than average or overweight (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023; Tucker et al., 2017) but children with externalizing problems or antisocial behaviors are more likely to harm a sibling (Dantchev & Wolke, 2019). Chinese adolescents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning are more likely to be harmed by a sibling (Peng et al., 2022). While most work has focused on vulnerability, some research has explored characteristics that may make children less susceptible to SAA. One study showed that children with an internalizing disorder were less likely

to be victimized by a sibling, perhaps due to being withdrawn and less active, making them less likely to be targeted (Tucker et al., 2017).

Much research on SAA has focused on its links to well-being. Consistent evidence from several countries, including Australia, Canada, Israel, Portugal, Sweden, the U.K., and the U.S., demonstrates that harming a sibling or being victimized by one is associated with negative impacts on mental and physical health across the lifespan, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, sleeplessness, headaches, and nausea (Carlson, 2011; Glatz et al., 2019; Perkins & Meyers, 2020; Tucker et al., 2013b, 2015a, 2024; Tucker & Kazura, 2013; Wiehe, 1997; Yates et al., 2025). Notably, the associated negative impacts of SAA on mental health are consistent across various sociodemographic characteristics, including ethnicity (e.g., Laopratai et al., 2023) and sexual orientation (Peng et al., 2022). Even experiencing a single incident of sibling victimization in the past year is associated with worsened mental health, regardless of whether the harm took place in childhood or adolescence (Tucker et al., 2013b). Examination of patterns of sibling victimization across two time points, 2 years apart, shows that about 20% of U.S. children and adolescents experience victimization by a sibling as a stable condition characterized by repeated victimization. These siblings and those newly victimized suffer worse mental health than those youth who had not experienced any sibling victimization (Tucker et al., 2018). Importantly, in childhood and adolescence, persistent sibling victimization is more likely to be characterized by severe physical victimization (includes an injury and/or weapon used) and experiencing two or more types of sibling victimization (i.e., physical, property, psychological) than sibling aggression that stopped (Tucker et al., 2024). Additional longitudinal data on patterns of those who harm their siblings is needed.

Studies of U.S. children show that the associated impacts of SAA on mental and physical health are independent of those of peer victimization, child maltreatment, and family violence and are similar or stronger in their associations (e.g., Coyle et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2013b; van Berkel et al., 2018). Although peer aggression is generally perceived as being more serious than sibling aggression (Hoetger et al., 2015), adolescent mental health of those experiencing sibling versus peer aggression, for example, do not differ (Tucker et al., 2014b). Further, other studies comparing the strength of the impact of sibling versus peer aggression on mental health indicate that SAA have stronger links comparatively (Renner et al., 2020). The negative impacts of sibling sexual abuse on mental health are equal to those of parent-to-child sexual abuse (Cyr et al., 2002; Rudd & Herzberger, 1999).

SAA is also linked to difficulties in forming healthy relationships, and these negative relational impacts extend beyond the family context and persist across the lifespan (Perkins & Meyers, 2020; Wiehe, 1997). SAA experiences, especially when they are severe and/or persistent, contribute to poor relationship quality with parents and siblings (e.g., Monahan, 2010). Many harmed children describe a negative effect of SAA on their relationships with their parents, who they believe did not protect them from their sibling or believe what was happening (Benderix & Sivberg, 2007; Elliott et al., 2020; Lewin et al., 2023; Tener et al., 2021). Harmful sibling behaviors are also linked with worse sibling relationship quality. Emerging adults

who were harmed by a sibling do not feel as close to them and receive less help from them 4 years later (Tucker et al., 2019b). Qualitative work shows that due to sibling abuse, U.K. adults who have been harmed often choose estrangement from their siblings and parents (Blake et al., 2023), thus ending the abuse (Blake, 2026, Chap. 25 of this volume). For others, it is likely that SAA continues in adulthood (Meyers, 2016). U.S. adults who experienced physical, psychological, or sexual abuse from a sibling in childhood and/or adolescence frequently report difficulty trusting others and often recreate victimizing dynamics in adult relationships (Caffaro, 2021; Perkins & Meyers, 2020; Wiehe, 1997).

20.5 Future Directions for Research

Increased recognition of SAA as harmful has coincided with a burgeoning yet disparate literature partially informed by the bullying framework and in need of a common terminology (Tucker et al., 2025). We advocate for SAA to be considered forms of family violence that are associated with negative short- and long-term indicators of well-being. SAA are stressful and trauma inducing, particularly for the harmed sibling, and deplete emotional and physical resources, creating vulnerabilities to a range of health issues (Tucker et al., 2024). Traditional measures of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have included multiple types of adult-perpetrated family violence but not SAA. An important future research direction is to establish SAA, like other forms of family violence, as ACEs (Perkins et al., 2023; Tucker et al., 2021, 2026). Studies of U.S. children and adolescents show that SAA have similar and sometimes larger associations with mental health than traditional ACEs, including family violence (e.g., Tucker et al., 2013b), but additional work is needed to document cumulative impacts on mental and physical health in adulthood. This work would highlight the importance of broadening the ACE inventory to include SAA and support screening for SAA and the development of prevention and intervention resources (Tucker et al., 2026).

Given SAA's negative impacts on well-being, more research on protective factors that mitigate potentially damaging effects of SAA is critical to evidence-based clinical and programmatic intervention and prevention efforts. Supporting positive sibling relationship dynamics through parent coaching, mediation, and promotion of prosocial skills appear to be key to tamping down SAA (Kramer, 2010; Kramer et al., 2025). Social support from family members and friends is also protective through its mitigation of the association between being harmed by a sibling and adolescent mental health distress and self-esteem (Tucker et al., 2020a). Though family and friend support can uniquely reduce the relationship between sibling victimization and mental health distress and self-esteem, the greatest protection was when adolescents received both kinds of support. Exploration of additional protective effects and sources of resilience across the lifespan would enhance understanding of how to help children and adults affected by SAA.

Research on sociodemographic variation in frequency, perceptions, and correlates of SAA is needed to highlight areas of vulnerability and the need for awareness. Very little is known about cultural differences in views of harmful sibling dynamics and their links to parenting and sibling well-being and relationship quality. There is also an absence of literature on how SAA is linked to structural inequalities. For example, in the U.S., SAA may occur more frequently in urban areas due to exposure to higher levels of community violence (Perkins et al., 2023). SAA is also associated with financial stress and family adversity (Tucker et al., 2018), which are created and reproduced by processes of racism and socioeconomic inequality. Other sociodemographic indicators that need more investigation in relation to SAA include family size (i.e., families with more than two siblings), family structure, and the experience of gender and sexual minority siblings. Incorporating multiple family reporters across various sociodemographic indicators would provide a comprehensive picture of family perceptions and dynamics linked to SAA.

In the literature on sibling sexual abuse, there are also a few gaps worth mentioning. High-quality data on the prevalence of sibling sexual abuse is sparse, leading to wide-ranging estimates (McCartan et al., 2024). Additionally, the absence of this topic from representative survey data collection efforts and existing administrative datasets (McCoy et al., 2022) means that much of what is known about the experience and impacts of sibling sexual abuse is based on qualitative research. To further the scientific understanding of this topic, administrative datasets on child maltreatment and family violence need to be updated to include sibling sexual abuse, and population-based surveys need to be undertaken that include questions about sibling sexual abuse. Lastly, as pointed out by others (Yates et al., 2025), most research on sibling sexual abuse has investigated the experiences of the harmed sibling, parents, and professionals, while comparatively little research has considered the experience of the sibling who causes harm. Research that considers the motivations, risk and protective factors, and short- and long-term impacts of sibling sexual abuse on the harming sibling would contribute significantly to the understanding of this form of SAA.

20.6 Implications for Evidence-Based Practice

SAA are serious social problems and as deserving of public, media, and practitioners' attention and resources as other forms of family violence (Tucker et al., 2026). A disparate literature, lack of recognition as forms of family violence, and dismissal as harmless rivalry or sexual exploration have limited the identification of SAA and subsequent responses to address them (Tucker et al., 2025). There is a critical need to develop resources and evidence-based programmatic work with siblings and their families across the lifespan to address SAA. Currently, no evaluated programs exist to effectively address forms of SAA (Leijten et al., 2021; Perkins & O'Connor, 2016; Tucker & Finkelhor, 2017), representing a significant gap in services and resources available (Elliott et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2022). Prevention and

intervention activities to address SAA could be accomplished through stand-alone programs or infused into existing evidence-based parenting, family violence, child abuse, and child sexual abuse prevention programs that adopt a broader view of family violence and child abuse inclusive of SAA (Tucker et al., 2025, 2026). We also believe that work to address SAA should incorporate family systems and social learning theoretical lenses to educate participants about the links between harmful family, inter-parental, parent-child, and sibling dynamics.

Importantly, any efforts to address SAA should not cast sibling abuse as a form of conflict (Tucker et al., 2025). Abuse is not mutual, and conflict implies mutuality of behaviors. It is possible that established protocols and resources available for parent-to-child maltreatment, intimate partner violence, or sexual violence by a non-family member could help prevent and stop SAA. Thus, an inclusive approach to family violence and child maltreatment that incorporates SAA could mean that services such as referrals to clinicians and programs and information related to domestic violence and child abuse could address current gaps in the intervention needs of children harmed by siblings (Tucker et al., 2025, 2026). The development and use of these needed resources also underscore the importance of training for professionals, such as those in child protective services, law enforcement, education, and healthcare, to screen, know how to respond, and provide resources to address SAA (McCoy et al., 2022; Perkins & Meyers, 2020; Perkins et al., 2023; Yates, 2020). Given their prevalence and impacts, SAA should be regularly screened as part of family violence, child maltreatment, and ACE screenings (Hudson & Bowie, 2020; Tucker et al., 2025, 2026).

Without a stand-alone program available, aggression displayed during destructive sibling conflict could be addressed through existing programs focused on reducing child aggression, such as the Incredible Years (Sellars et al., 2024) or conflict mediation techniques (e.g., Ross & Lazinski, 2014). Conflict mediation efforts include teaching constructive conflict management skills such as perspective-taking, problem-solving, communication, and self-regulation techniques to siblings directly or indirectly through parent coaching (e.g., Nakaha et al., 2016; Smith & Ross, 2007). Such training offers the possibility of improving siblings' social and cognitive development, parenting practices, sibling relationship experiences, and quality of family life while preventing or disrupting the intergenerational transmission of dysfunctional sibling dynamics (Kramer, 2010; Perkins & Meyers, 2020).

All forms of SAA could be included in school-based prevention programming. Although not widely recognized, likely due to differing social norms regarding the acceptability of aggressive behaviors in sibling versus peer relationships (Caspi & Barrios, 2016; Elliott et al., 2020; Tucker et al., 2014b), it is important that the links between sibling and peer aggression are addressed (e.g., Tucker et al., 2014b). Thus, the focus of peer social-emotional and anti-bullying programs should expand to include information on SAA and the importance of creating a positive sibling relationship (Tucker et al., 2014b, 2019a). Evidence-based programming could be supported by research in which observational, caregiver or self-reports show that children taught relationship and conflict management skills with their sibling demonstrate similar behaviors with peers. Information about sibling sexual abuse could

also be part of sexual abuse prevention and healthy relationships and sexuality programming, given the link between sibling sexual abuse and later experiences of sexual assault and intimate partner violence (Carlson, 2011). Preventing SAA will likely have a positive effect on reducing peer victimization in childhood and adolescence. It is also likely that the promotion of positive relationships and stopping aggression in both sibling and peer relationships would benefit children, families, and schools.

20.7 Conclusion

For some, sibling relationships are a place of physical, psychological, and sexual trauma associated with worsened mental and physical health and interpersonal relationship functioning across the lifespan. Because SAA remains hidden, many children and adults suffer needlessly because harmful sibling relationship dynamics are overlooked. Given the prevalence and impacts of SAA, greater awareness of all forms of SAA is critical, and will be supported by SAA's inclusion as forms of family violence that parents and professionals should be encouraged to prevent and stop across the lifespan. Harnessing the influence of a sibling-informed framework (Kramer et al., 2026, Chap. 2 of this volume), these efforts will likely have a positive impact on children's and adults' well-being and familial and extra-familial relationships.

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