

SIBLING SEXUAL ABUSE / INCEST DURING CHILDHOOD

By Katy © Pandora's Project 2009

Sibling child sexual abuse is defined as "*sexual behavior between siblings that is not age appropriate, not transitory, and not motivated by developmentally, mutually appropriate curiosity*" (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998). In the literature it is sometimes referred to simply as "*sexually harmful behavior*" rather than abuse, but I will refer to it as "abuse" so as not to devalue the impact that this experience can have on the survivor. It can refer to abuse which takes place between brother - brother, brother - sister, sister - sister, as well as between half siblings, step - siblings, and adoptive siblings.

Sexual abuse between siblings remains one of the last taboos to be addressed by society - and as such, it is rarely discussed in the media, or even among survivors themselves. It comes as a shock to many people that children can present a risk to other children, but it is becoming increasingly apparent that children (even children within families) can post a very real risk. Obviously, with this silence surrounding it, it is perfectly understandable why, if you are a survivor of sibling sexual abuse, you may believe you are the only one this has happened to. It's not!

It is estimated that approximately 15% of all people report some kind of sexual activity with a sibling in childhood. More specifically, studies have shown that between 2% (Leder, 1991) and 4% (Finkelhor, 1999) of people have been sexually victimized by a sibling as the sexual contact involved some degree of forced or coercive activity.

IF YOU ARE A SURVIVOR OF SIBLING SEXUAL ABUSE, YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Like all sexual abuse, behaviors which are regarded to be abusive are varied and numerous. Therefore sibling sexual abuse can include touching, kissing, masturbation, oral sex and penetrative sex. However, perhaps more frequently than found in adult – child sexual abuse, sibling sexual abuse is frequently non – touching. Non - touching sexual abuse may involve introducing a much younger child to pornography, or insisting on watching them in the shower, or telling them to watch them masturbate.

ISN'T SEXUAL ACTIVITY BETWEEN SIBLINGS JUST NORMAL EXPERIMENTATION / EXPLORATION?

It is true that children of all ages engage in some degree of sexual interaction between themselves, as well as self – exploration. In fact, it is considered that such behavior is healthy and necessary for normal sexual and social development. As siblings are generally close in age and locational proximity, it stands to reason that the opportunity for sexual exploration between siblings is fairly high - and that, if

appropriate and based on mutual curiosity, then these activities are not deemed to be harmful or distressing, either in childhood or later in adulthood (Borgis, 2002). For the sexual exploration to be deemed "*appropriate*" then the interaction is between children of a similar developmental age, where prior knowledge and experience, and physical and emotional development are on a par with each other.

However, the line is crossed from sexual exploration to sexual abuse when sexual activity occurs between siblings where there is a significant difference in developmental age (more than 3 years), or where there is any use of force, tricks or coercion by one of the siblings.

Therefore, if you had sexual contact with a much older sibling, OR if you were forced, tricked, or coerced into it, then you are a survivor of sibling sexual abuse.

WHY DIDN'T I TELL AS A CHILD?! WHY IS IT STILL SO HARD TO TELL SOMEONE?

The majority of survivors of childhood sexual abuse do not tell as children, or at least do not tell at the time the abuse is ongoing. The reasons for this are numerous, and it may help to see the following article: [Understanding Why You Didn't Tell](#).

It is very easy to look back as an adult and think of all the missed opportunities for when we could have broken the silence, or dismiss all of the reasons we felt we couldn't tell as unimportant. But it's important to remember that you are going to have a very different perspective about what your sibling did to you when looking back at it from your adult perspective, than you would have had when you were a confused and abused child.

"It's like it's a wall – don't talk about it. You can talk about this, this and this but don't talk about that" (a survivor)

When sexual abuse is perpetrated by a sibling, in many ways, it is even harder to break this silence, and there are certainly some special reasons that make sibling abuse especially difficult to disclose:

- **I didn't understand what was happening was "abuse"**

:Often, sibling abuse can start off seeming fun and exciting.....messing around with your brother / sister in a way that seems playful. As a child, we often don't have the cognitive ability to understand that something which *may* feel *nice* or *thrilling* can be wrong. Often, sibling abuse is more coercive than physically forceful i.e. you may have been gently persuaded that it would be fun; or you may have been bribed with sweets; and so even as adults, survivors are unclear as to whether what happened was abusive or not. A younger siblings cooperation does not suggest that they understood the nature of the sexual interaction.

- **I thought it was just what siblings did:**

For some children, especially if the abuse has been on-going since they were very young, they can believe that this sexual interaction is just what happens between siblings. From childhood, we are usually told that, as siblings, we are supposed to love each other - and especially where we are not clear what "love" involves, it may have felt that this was part of that special sibling bond. Therefore, it may have been that it was only as you got older and learned about other people's sibling relationships, and about the different kinds of love, that the questioning begins.

- **I wanted it:**

Many survivors of sibling sexual abuse look back and feel a great deal of guilt about the fact that they welcomed the sexual contact. Statistics show that sibling sexual abuse is more likely (although not exclusively!) in emotionally dysfunctional families who are reluctant to show love or have overt displays of affection. It is generally accepted that children have four psychological needs, namely love and belonging, power, freedom and fun (Glasser 1998), and so especially in situations where the abuse was carried out by an older sibling in a way which felt nurturing, you may have welcomed or even sought out the sexual contact as it was the only type of close physical contact that you had from a family member - and it made you feel loved, wanted, and accepted (Laviola, 1992). This may have made you feel like a co-conspirator and you may have believed that what you were doing was wrong, and disclosure would have resulted in punishment from your parents.

The fact that you may have welcomed the sexual contact from your older sibling does not make you culpable. Children need affection - and will accept affection from wherever and however it is offered if it is not offered in the traditionally appropriate ways.

- **I enjoyed it:**

Like many survivors of child abuse, children may get physical pleasure from the abuse - including sexual arousal and orgasm. When a sibling is responsible for this arousal, the shame can feel enormous. Incest - particularly sexual arousal during incest - is still very much taboo in western society - and associated shame may even stop adult survivors of sibling sexual abuse from getting help. Please see: [Sexual arousal and sexual assault](#).

- **I didn't want my sibling to get into trouble:**

Despite the sexual abuse, even when forced sexual assault takes place, children can feel a sense of loyalty towards their abusive sibling and not want them to get into trouble. You may still love your sibling, despite what pain they have caused you, and reporting them can feel very disloyal. You may have feared that your sibling would have been ejected from the family home, or sent to prison, or even

killed - and therefore silence felt like the only option.

As an adult survivor, you may still have fears over disclosing the abuse because of sibling loyalty. In particular if your family was dysfunctional or unhappy, you may now be able to look back and even understand what led your sibling to abuse. Please try to appreciate that it is okay to love your sibling, but still want them to take responsibility for the hurt they have caused you, and for them to get treatment for themselves.

- **I didn't want to upset my parents:**

Many children of sibling abuse will not report it because they believe that the knowledge will devastate their parents. Therefore, the children stay silent in order to protect their parents - and again this can carry on into adulthood. Furthermore, there may be the belief that this truth would be too hard for their parents to bear, and so they would not believe the disclosure.

- **I was just too scared of my brother / sister:**

Some sibling sexual abuse is enforced by threat and / or physical violence. Because the sibling is a family member and likely to be living in the same house, the opportunity to carry out threats, and to reinforce these threats on a daily basis, is very real.

- **I was told it was a "family matter":**

: There is an assumption that things that happen within families are private....that they are "family matters", and as such, should not be discussed outside the family. Undoubtedly, this would have implications for any children seeking to disclose sibling abuse to a person outside the family (i.e. a teacher) because - again - family disloyalty may be an issue.

- **I just didn't / don't want anyone to know that my sibling is doing / did this to me:**

While childhood sexual abuse is now widely talked about in our society, sexual abuse by siblings is still very much a taboo subject. As such, survivors feel a great deal of shame which perpetuates the need for silence.

****"To speak the truth is a painful thing. To be forced to tell lies is much worse" (Oscar Wilde)****

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF CHILDHOOD SIBLING ABUSE ON SURVIVORS NOW IN THEIR TEENS AND ADULTHOOD?

For many years, it was ascertained that sibling sexual abuse was harmless and didn't cause any significant detrimental effects on adult functioning, health, or relationships. In fact, what can make sibling sexual abuse particularly traumatising for survivors is the two concurrent views that sibling incest is both a cultural taboo and at the same time not harmful. Leading child mental health experts not refute the claim that sibling sexual abuse is unharmed (Russell, 1986).

Following any type of child sexual abuse, adult survivors can experience:

Somatic disturbances: Insomnia, nightmares, night terrors.

Parenthood problems: Worrying what effect childhood abuse may have on a their relationship with children. Please see: Pregnancy, childbirth, parenting as a survivor.

Poor self-concept / self-esteem.

Revictimization.

Self Blame / Shame / guilt.

Sexual dysfunction.

Relationship problems: issues with trust and intimacy.

Psychiatric ill-health: PTSD, self-injury, eating disorders, suicide, DID.

Physical ill health: i.e. STD's, substance abuse.

Research has heralded that sibling relationships are extremely important for a child's development, and thus it makes sense that sibling sexual abuse could have a profound and major impact upon its victims (Jones, 2002). Whilst the above effects are common to many survivors of childhood sexual abuse, there are certain areas that are particularly worthy of further discussion when focusing of sibling sexual abuse:

The situation: Siblings often spend a great deal of time together, perhaps more than any other family relationship, as they may not only be together when in the family arena, but they may also share a bedroom, school, friends, clubs, toys etc. Therefore, where sibling abuse is occurring, the sense of powerlessness and lack of control over their lives, can feel even more pervasive and invasive when compared to sexual abuse perpetrated by others (Maddock et al, 1995). This can lead to learned helplessness, which for the adult survivor can result in revictimization, clinical depression, extreme anxiety disorders etc.

Intimate relationships / sexuality: Sibling relationships in childhood can have a major impact upon the development of later relationships, and ultimately many survivors will have difficulty forming and maintaining intimate adult relationships (Daie et al, 1989), and in fact almost half never marry (Russellis, 1986; Alpert, 1991). However, this is largely attributed to the stalling of development (Caffaro, 1988), and therefore with support and therapy, survivors can learn to develop socially, sexually and emotionally - and form healthy attachments.

Survivors of sibling sexual abuse may have a very poor sexual self-concept, and because of the taboo nature of sibling incest, you may even view yourself as a "sexual deviant" - which can undoubtedly have an impact upon sexual development (Finkelhor, 1980). This was NOT your fault, and the guilt is not yours to own.

Pregnancy: Pregnancy rates are said to be higher in sibling abuse, often because the opportunity for acts of rape to occur are higher than with other types of child abuse. In this situation, not only does the child have to deal with the issue of pregnancy by itself, but also the added complications that result in regards to the genetic risks to the infant. Full siblings are 50% genetically identical and 99.95% biochemically identical, and therefore there is a far greater risk of sharing the same recessive genes which, when combined, can result in severe medical abnormality.

However, there is also some evidence that female victims of sibling sexual abuse who become pregnant are less likely to abort the pregnancy, either because they see the pregnancy through as they see it as a way of exposing or terminating the incestuous relationship, and because they are less likely to feel hate for their abuser. (Maloof, 1999). Consequently, the adult survivor may have to care for a child where they know the father is their brother, and the increased likelihood that this child will have a genetic medical condition.

The adult relationship with sibling and family: Although some adult survivors of child sibling abuse may report a primarily neutral relationship with their sibling (Hardy, 2001), others may experience extreme difficulties with this relationship, which can be problematic for the family as a whole (particularly if the abuse is undisclosed). Family occasions and functions may be particularly traumatic for you because you may feel a loyalty to attend the family function, yet feel very uncomfortable around your sibling.

One particular problem of sibling abuse, particularly where the abuse has been nurturance – orientated, is that as the child turns into an adult, they may have particular difficulty in separating from the abuser (Cicirelli, 1995) as a kind of dependence and attachment as formed. Particularly when it comes to forming romantic relationships with others, this attachment can feel very strong, and some have reported feeling like they are being disloyal or even cheating on their abusing sibling when they are attracted to someone else (Meiselman, 1978).

You may also feel a great deal of resentment towards your family as you were not afforded adequate protection - and you may even feel a need for revenge (Johnson, 1989). You are very entitled to your anger, and you may need help in learning to express this in a safe and appropriate way.

The most important thing at this time is your safety and your perceived safety, and it may be that you need to withdraw somewhat from your family at times rather than put yourself through the pain of confronting your abuser. YOU need to come first.

WHY?

It is not in the scope of this article to look in any details why a child may abuse their sibling(s) as the reasons are complex and the focus is on the survivor. However, in sibling abuse, the question “WHY?” is often asked even more frequently – because of the backgrounds you share. Family dynamics, previous history and power differentials clearly have an important role to play in what makes a sibling sexually abusive towards another sibling. Some sibling survivors spend a long time trying to understand why? - and that’s a legitimate question - but its not a necessary one for healing to take place. The most important thing to realise is that none of what happened is your fault.

RESOURCES FOR SURVIVORS OF SIBLING SEXUAL ABUSE AND THEIR SUPPORTERS

BOOKS

Understanding Your Child’s Sexual Behavior, By Toni Cavanaugh Johnson

Sex Is More Than a Plumbing Lesson: A Parents' Guide to Sexuality Education for Infants Through the Teen Years by Patty Stark

From Diapers to Dating: A Parents Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children, By Debra Haffner

A Very Touching Book: For Little People and Big People, By Jan Hindman

Sibling Abuse: Hidden Physical, Emotional and Sexual Abuse

When Children Molest Children: Group Treatment Strategies for Young Sexual Abusers. By Cunningham, Carolyn and Kee MacFarlane.

The Sibling Bond. By Stephen Bank.

The Broken Taboo. By Blair & Rita Justice Harper.

Uncovering Shame. By James and M. Hoopes

Sibling relationships across the life span. By. V.C. Cicirelli.

What Parents Need to Know About Sibling Abuse: Breaking the Cycle of Violence. by Vernon R. Wiehe

Secret Survivors: Uncovering Incest and Its Aftereffects in Women by E. Sue Blume

Allies in Healing. By Laura Davies.

A Walk In The Woods: An Incest Survivor's Guide to Resolving the Past and Creating a Great Future. Nan O'Connor

Heal & Forgive: Forgiveness in the Face of Abuse. by Nancy Richards

OTHER READING

Myths about incest.

SASIAN - Sibling Violence & Abuse

Thread on child-on-child sexual abuse (at Pandys)

[Thread on sibling incest / abuse \(at Pandys\)](#)
[Pandy's articles on child sexual abuse.](#)

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