Notes from the Field: Understanding Why Sibling Abuse Remains Under the Radar and Pathways to Outing

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Notes from the Field: Understanding Why Sibling Abuse Remains Under the Radar and Pathways to Outing

Amy Meyers

The identification of sibling abuse is imperative to the emotional well-being of the victim, the perpetrator, and the family system. Sibling abuse has been identified as the most common form of family violence (Button, Parker, & Gealt, 2008; Reid & Donovan, 1990). It occurs more frequently than parent-child abuse or spousal abuse (Graham-Bermann, Cutler, Litzenberger, & Schwartz, 1994), yet it remains largely unaddressed in the literature and subsequently under the radar of child welfare, social service providers, and mental health practitioners.

Highlighted in this paper is the need for those working in the field of mental health and social service to detect sibling abuse and its significant and detrimental impact. The aim of this paper is to broaden awareness of sibling abuse through the distinction of sibling abuse from normative sibling relational behavior and consider factors which prevent sibling abuse from gaining attention. Pathways to expanding knowledge of sibling abuse and integrating a sibling abuse framework is proposed to arm educators, practitioners, and child welfare staff to take action.

Sibling Relations and Abuse as a Significant Force

The effects of sibling abuse (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; McLaurin, 2005; Simonelli, Mullis, Elliott, & Pierce, 2002; Wiehe, 1990) are underscored by research on the detrimental impact of parent-child abuse on self-esteem (Colman & Widom, 2004; Godbout, Lussier, & Sabourin., 2006) and the culmination of evidence on the influence of siblings on development (Cicerelli, 1995; Leader, 2007). Knowledge that siblings are one's most important peers (Leader, 2007; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010) and that parent-child abuse compromises psychosocial development sets the precedent to insinuate that abuse from a sibling also poses serious effects. This has been confirmed by research which has documented the long-term ramifications of sibling abuse (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Meyers, 2011; Wiehe, 1991).

Parent-Child Abuse

It has been established that emotional, physical, and sexual abuse have adverse effects on the developing child that continues into adulthood. The perpetrator of abuse exploits the emotional dependence of the victim and fuels feelings of helplessness and rage in an effort to deliberately eradicate or compromise the child's separate identity (Shengold, 1989). Childhood abuse manifests in problems with peers, aggression, social withdrawal, isolation (Ferrara, 2002; Trickett & McBride-Change, 1995; Briere, 1992), depression, anxiety, conduct problems, and deficits in intellectual and academic functioning (Ammerman, Cassisi, Hersen, & Van Hasselt, 1986). It has been reported that physically abused children are significantly more aggressive than non-abused children (Feldman, Salzinger, Rosario, Alvarado, Caraballo, & Hammer, 1995; Kinard, 1980; Trickett, 1993) and have more difficulty with trust and separation (Kinard, 1982).

Childhood physical abuse is also linked to adult violence towards dating partners, self-injurious and suicidal behavior, nonviolent criminal behavior, and interpersonal problems in adulthood (Malinosky-Rummel & Hansen, 1993). Adults who experience physical abuse as children are also more likely to abuse their own children (Kalmuss, 1984; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

Since the sibling relationship is a critical and formative relationship, and the effects of parent-child abuse are well established, it is obvious that the effects of sibling abuse may have equal or

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greater significance for the victim as parent-child abuse. Parents, who are protectors of their children, overtly or covertly allow the sibling abusive relationship to exist. Whether sibling abuse is allowed or abstractly supported, it produces a double-whammy whereby the victim not only experiences abuse from their sibling, but parental neglect as well. Furthermore, the similarity in consequences of parent-child incest and sibling sexual abuse highlights the associated distress from any abusive dyadic family relationship.

Sibling Abuse

As important agents of socialization and self-perception, sibling relationships also influence self-esteem (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). An emotionally denigrating or physically violent experience elicits vulnerability to one's well-being. With low self-esteem, an individual potentially lacks assertiveness, social skills, and the ability to resolve interpersonal conflict, resulting in a susceptibility to either victimization or perpetration of aggressive behavior (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001).

Studies on sibling abuse have found that victims suffer from depression, anger with the perpetrator, and difficulty with interpersonal relationships (Meyers, 2011; Wiehe, 1991). Survivors report being "overly" sensitive and engage in self-blame (Wiehe, 1991). They describe problems in relationships with the opposite sex, including repeating the victim role in relationships, feeling distrustful, fearful, and suspicious (Meyers, 2011; Wiehe, 1991). Some experience symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders, and alcohol and substance abuse (Wiehe, 1991).

A sense of worthlessness becomes internalized with the betrayal by one's closest peer, trusted family member, and perceived protector. The emotional abandonment that is intrinsic through abuse results in a fear of dependence and a strong need to feel independent; relying on someone becomes dangerous. Since intensity of emotions, particularly anger has become frightening, scarring, and traumatic for victims, confrontation and conflict in relationships is extremely

uncomfortable (Meyers, 2011). As a result, victims develop conforming and pleasing behavior. In an unconscious manner, victims of abuse tend to repeat attachments to new partners that have familiar characteristics to that of the abusive relationship. This results in unconsciously – or consciously – attaching to emotionally unavailable partners, which feeds into their low self-esteem and creates a cyclical process whereby they desire but do not expect they are capable or worthy of obtaining emotional nourishment through relationships (Meyers, 2011).

Sibling abuse is a pervasive and detrimental experience for the victim with long-term interpersonal implications. However, it often gets overlooked as normative sibling rivalry due to a lack of understanding of the distinction. Amongst many differences, sibling abuse is non-normative behavior whereas sibling rivalry is a developmental and growth-inducing experience.

Sibling Abuse is Not Sibling Rivalry

The focus of this paper is to heighten awareness of sibling abuse as a phenomenon in need of recognition by mental health professionals, mandated reporters, and child welfare workers, and offer pathways to broaden awareness. Towards this aim, a clear and distinct definition of sibling abuse is needed.

Defining Sibling Abuse and Distinguishing it from Sibling Rivalry

One contributing factor to the oversight of sibling abuse is its lack of definition both legally and in the empirical research. Studies on sibling violence, aggression, and abuse often use the terms "conflict," "rivalry," "aggression," "violence," and "abuse" interchangeably (Kettrey & Emery, 2006); this neutralizes the intensity of sibling abuse and may contribute to its lack of recognition as a significant and distinct phenomenon.

Sibling abuse involves the presence of consistent and persistent charges of inadequacy, intimidation, or control through physical force and/or emotional denigration (Wiehe, 1997). Perpetrated by one sibling on another, these acts

result in feelings of fear, shame, and hopelessness (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007; Wiehe, 1990). Incidents of sibling abuse can range from devastating emotional assaults to near-death experiences. Abusive sibling acts engender a pervasive state of fear and vulnerability; they result in hyper-vigilance and feelings of loneliness and isolation when they occur and endure into adulthood. The emotional resonance and repercussions highlight sibling abuse as a phenomenon that parallels the risks beset by children abused by adults.

Although one act of violence may constitute abuse, an enduring relationship with unequal distribution of power, humiliation, or control should be categorized as abusive (Meyers, 2011). Simply put, sibling abuse is not merely sibling rivalry. Although sibling rivalry may cause some emotional pain, each child has an equal opportunity for advantage or disadvantage. Sibling rivalry also has positive outcomes of fostering skills of cooperation and negotiation. Sibling abuse, on the other hand does not have any positive effects. It threatens a basic sense of safety in the victim and damages the ego (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005; Wiehe, 1990).

Many people challenge the notion of sibling abuse believing that all siblings have conflict or fights growing up, and in fact sibling abuse is a dramatization of sibling rivalry. This both reflects and reinforces the notion that sibling abuse needs to be distinguished from other acts of violence or more normative aspects of relating.

Sibling Abuse Remains Under the Radar

There are several factors contributing to the silencing of sibling abuse. Research on sibling violence has revealed that the majority of college-aged students experience or perpetrate severe sibling violence but do not identify their experience as a form of violence (Kettrey & Emery, 2006). Developing a common language is the primary task towards detection and prevention (Rapoza, Cook, Zaveri, & Malley-Morrison, 2010).

Parental Abuse and Neglect

Parental neglect is insinuated when the sibling abusive relationship is undetected or unaddressed. Studies on sibling abuse found that parental responses ranged from passive to active ineffectiveness (Meyers, 2011; Wiehe, 1990). In some cases, parents ignored, disbelieved, or reacted indifferently (Meyers, 2011; Wiehe, 1990). This raises doubt for victims that the abuse they are experiencing is real or valid, and that their perceptions are accurate.

In some families, the abusive sibling assumes the role of caregiver because of parental neglect or absence, parent-child abuse, or simply because in the hierarchical family structure, birth order dictates the expectation that the older children would oversee the younger ones (Meyers, 2011). The older sibling's assignment as disciplinarian in the absence of caregivers creates boundary confusion and abuse of power (Haskins, 2003). In a sense, there is covert permission established for the sibling abuse to occur.

Parent-child abuse is often present in the homes where sibling abuse occurs. When parent-child abuse is a response to managing the sibling relationship, either the victim or perpetrator become the target of the parents' frustration. Often, a parent's strict behavior with the perpetrator induces that child to displace his frustration onto his younger sibling (Meyers, 2011). Parents who are abusive and neglectful in addressing the sibling abuse abdicate their parental responsibilities. Social learning theory views the family as the most influential agent of socialization and asserts that children learn violence through observation and imitation (Bandura, 1973). Witnessing and experiencing violent interactions in the family teaches its members that aggression is an appropriate means of dealing with interpersonal conflict and feelings of anger. Repeated exposure to violence also creates the propensity to perceive violence as normative and therefore acceptable (Herzberger, 1996). Parents who model acceptance of aggressive behavior increase the likelihood that their children would use violence as a way to handle and cope with conflict (Bandura, 1973). Furthermore, parents who do not address the sibling abuse also convey that this is acceptable

behavior. For the perpetrator this means that they are granted permission to continue; the message transmitted to the victim is that they are not valued.

Generally, in homes where sibling abuse is present, parents are contending with their own stressors including financial strains, single parenting, marital conflict, and an inability to modulate their own emotions (Meyers, 2011). They have poor internal and external resources from which they can draw to provide emotional support to their children. As a result, their children do not have models of effective affect modulation, appropriate communication and behavior, and supportive relationships. It appears that these deficits in parenting contribute to the perpetuation of sibling abuse. Aside from ineffective parental modeling and management, closed family systems and abuse as an accepted norm may also contribute to the masking of sibling abuse.

Closed Family Systems and Cultural Perceptions

Currently, the only way to bring sibling violence or abuse to the attention of authorities is for a parent to file charges against the abuser on behalf of the victim (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006). Wiehe (1990) attributes the lack of awareness of unacceptable or damaging behaviors to a culture of freedom, which allows parents to raise children as they see fit. Parents may either not recognize their child's behavior as non-normative or they may feel it is a private matter. The issue of privacy, or a culture of secrecy in the home, undoubtedly contributes to a parent or victim's unwillingness to file assault charges against the perpetrating sibling.

Identification of problems often begins within the family – a parent may identify a "problem child" or solicit help with behaviors or relationships. Without familial or external validation of the sibling abusive experience, most cases of physical and emotional sibling abuse do not come to the attention of practitioners. Sibling abuse does not have the same societal recognition as other forms of domestic violence.

Rapoza, Cook, Zaveri, & Malley-Morrison

(2010) studied ethnic perspectives of sibling abuse. Their research assessed extreme, moderate, and mild cases of sibling abuse and found gender and ethnic differences in the interpretation and experiences of psychological aggression. Women were more likely than men to identify physical aggression as extreme abuse. Asian Pacific Americans were more likely to indicate experiences of physical aggression in their examples of mild abuse and psychological aggression in their examples of severe abuse, while Europeans reported more experiences of sexual abuse (Rapoza et al., 2010). This research highlights the cultural variation and range of perspectives on behavior which constitutes abuse. Cultural norms add another layer to the challenge of child welfare workers, practitioners, and parents in recognizing sibling abuse as a form of abuse.

Institutional Barriers

Despite the extant literature which reveals short-term and long-term ramifications for victims of sibling abuse, social service and mental health settings servicing children and families continue to focus primarily on assessment of the quality of parent-child and parent-parent relations.

In child welfare there are no current statues distinguishing sibling abuse as separate from incest. In fact, currently when sibling abuse is uncovered in child welfare it is primarily through the co-occurrence of parent-child abuse. However, sibling abuse also exists in the absence of parent-child abuse. Although by the nature of its existence it is a form of parental neglect, authorities are not trained to identify symptoms and behaviors associated with sibling abuse . Furthermore, since no specific federal law protects siblings from other siblings, it is unlikely people outside of the family will take action as in cases of parent-child abuse. Without societal recognition of sibling abuse, victims are prone to perceive and accept their experience as normative.

Discussion

Despite widespread knowledge about the

influential aspect of sibling relationships on development, social service and mental health settings continue to focus on the parent-parent and parent-child system regarding assessment and intervention. Unless there is a presenting symptom based on sibling dynamics, and likely to be referenced by a parent, the sibling subsystem is often overlooked. Awareness of family dynamics, sibling relationships, and sibling abuse and child welfare can be addressed through academic programs. Programs in social work and counseling can incorporate sibling abuse material from a psychodynamic, child welfare, systems, and human behavior lens, and professional programs that focus on clinical training and child welfare can institute trainings on sibling abuse assessment and intervention.

Steps Toward Broadening Awareness

Higher Education. Undergraduate and graduate social work classes have the potential to broaden awareness of sibling abuse, its effect on clients, and the development of methods of prevention and intervention. Competencies in family systems and human development courses should include knowledge of the sibling subsystem and the manner in which hierarchical structures and role expectations exist within families. Discussions on child welfare or the child welfare system should also incorporate sibling abuse. Clinical practice classes that address child, family, and adult intervention can integrate risk assessment, family interventions and strategies to contend with sibling abuse. This would include a risk and resiliency paradigm and a theoretical underpinning regarding the manifestations of adult relationships for survivors. Discussions on transference and countertransference could include potential manifestations when working with survivors of sibling abuse and their families. The addition of content that clearly differentiates sibling abuse and sibling rivalry into the core social work curriculum would help students identify when sibling behaviors were normative and when they might pose a danger to children.

Child Welfare/Protective Services. Currently, there are no national statistics on sibling abuse. The child welfare system does not specifically include risk and safety factors that would point to the detection of sibling violence. Without policies that identify this as a formidable phenomenon, there is no mandate for professionals and mandated reporters to act on.

Linares (2006) studied 254 African-American and Latino maltreated children and adolescents who entered foster care as sibling groups to determine any association of sibling violence with other risk factors and to understand the ways in which sibling experiences might affect the well-being of these children. The parenting role in the foster home was found to be a moderating factor. The researcher was able to establish a link between sibling violence and quality of caregiving; high quality of caregiving correlated with fewer behavior problems whereas high sibling violence was associated with lower quality of caregiving. The study concluded that foster children were at high risk of being victims and perpetrators of sibling aggression and violence due to prior familial victimization. As both a preventive and protective service, foster care is under the auspices of child welfare, which underscores the need for awareness.

Assessment. Assessment forms in clinic settings typically do not include the nature and quality of sibling relationships. The Sibling Abuse Interview (SAI), a psychosocial assessment tool (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005), can help to identify sexually and physically sibling abusive families and lead to planning the course of treatment intervention. Although extensive, it can be modified for incorporation into any biopsychosocial assessment or intake form. The SAI assesses the history and current quality of sibling relationships focusing on the effects of abuse on the victim, the role of the perpetrator, and the family dynamics. This tool has potential for adaptation to incorporate emotional sibling abuse and modification according to the needs and services of communities and organizations.

Clinical Practice. Service providers unaware of the influence of sibling abuse are not able to recognize how to help each sibling involved in the abusive relationship, the family system, or the

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adult who has this traumatic past. Sibling abuse is not only a psychological issue for the victim, but also representative of a dysfunctional family system in which the dyadic relationship or the behavior of the perpetrator is a symptom of greater pathology. When a parent is unaware that his or her child is abused by a sibling yet recognizes symptoms which need to be addressed through treatment, the child internalizes an inner sense of "badness." She often assumes that she did something to incur the abusive behavior in much the same way as rape victims who are blamed for seducing their attacker by the way she dresses.

An adult client's sibling abuse history also has significant implications for treatment. From an object relations perspective (Fairbairn, 1952), clinicians need to understand potential projections from the past onto current perceptions and relationships and the subtle ways in which an adult survivor may then relate to others as if they were the abusive sibling. Clinicians need to be aware of clients who present with interpersonal difficulties and the ways in which siblings might have influenced partner choices and a client's behavior in relationships (Leader, 2007; Mones, 2001). Sibling abuse engenders feelings of inadequacy and helplessness and compromises the attainment of mature intimacy in adulthood (Meyers, 2011). Overlooked, the client is bound to repeat interpersonal dynamics that reflect his or her childhood experience. As important, identification of the sibling relationship or validation of the sibling abuse experience is healing for the survivor.

Family Intervention. There are opportunities to protect children from the devastating and long term repercussions of sibling abuse. Detection, prevention, and intervention can occur on multiple fronts, specifically in child welfare and clinical practice. These fields have the potential to develop awareness of the gravity of sibling abuse; contribute to the development of policy regarding mandated reporting; enhance risk assessment; improve parenting skills; develop appropriate interventions for victims, perpetrators, and adult survivors; and extend theories to amplify

understanding of this phenomenon.

Future Research. Parental intervention is absent in the homes of victims of sibling abuse. Clinicians who are skilled to assess the family climate to ascertain the presence of sibling abuse would be able to treat the family as a unit and its individual members. Future research might explore the ways in which family involvement with community organizations and resources may offset sibling abuse. What might we learn further about parental resilience and the management of sibling abuse?

In order to understand more about the presence of sibling abuse in an environment of parent-child abuse, future study of families involved in the child welfare system may determine risk factors and agency-wide responses to sibling abuse. In fact, evaluation of current child welfare practices may help to uncover obstacles to the development of policies to promote risk assessment and detection of sibling abuse. An area of further investigation would be to explore whether survivors who endure both parent-child abuse and sibling abuse are more strongly affected by sibling abuse than those who withstand sibling abuse alone. These findings would potentially contribute to the development of family and risk assessments which could also be adapted by mandated reporters and the global community. Likewise, gaining knowledge as to gender dyads of parent-child relationships that may promote hostile sibling relationships would provide insight as to variations in parental responses to female victims, male victims, female perpetrators, or male perpetrators. A study that involved members of the family, including perpetrators, would add dimension to understanding sibling abuse within the context of the family system.

Conclusion

Existing studies on sibling abuse demonstrate that it has devastating consequences for the victim. Although there is increased research on the subject, it continues to remain under-recognized. There are several potential explanations for this and action is needed in several domains – academic, mental health, child

welfare, community, organization, and policy – to protect children from the long-lasting and traumatizing effects of sibling abuse. We cannot continue to remain idle and view family dysfunction from the lens with which we are so familiar: minimizing abuse by rationalizing its normative presence and only looking at the quality of parent-child relationships. Sibling abuse represents a complex family system in which every member has a role. While sibling abuse has made its way into the literature, action to address its toll has been virtually absent in practice. First, we need to recognize sibling abuse as a trauma with which to contend and universalize its distinction from sibling rivalry. Second, assessments of family dynamics and trauma should equally explore the quality of sibling relationships to the same degree as parent-child relationships. And finally, action must be taken to detect, prevent, and intervene on behalf of a duty to protect children from all types of abuse within the household. Merging research and evidence-based practice is a beginning.

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