

Sibling Sexual Abuse

A Guide for Parents



Admitting to
yourself that
sibling abuse
might be happening
in your family
can be hard.

The most
important thing
is to get help.

Sexual Abuse Information Series 2008

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Également disponible en français sous
le titre : Les agressions sexuelles entre frères
et sœurs. Guide à l'intention des parents

Special thanks to the staff at VISAC and the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence and the many others who gave their ideas and support.

The opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Public Health Agency of Canada.

VISAC (Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre) is a program of Family Services of Greater Vancouver. VISAC offers a wide range of services including specialized victim support services, individual and group therapy for children, youth, families, and adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and/or trauma.

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THIS PUBLICATION WAS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA.

HP20-6/5-2007

ISBN 978-0-9809135-5-2

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This booklet answers these questions:

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Why this booklet?

This booklet is written for parents who know or suspect there is sibling abuse in their family and want to do something about it. It's also written for parents who want to understand and prevent sibling sexual abuse. Many parents are afraid to believe that sexual abuse could be possible in their family, and this booklet is meant to support parents in facing that possibility in an informed way.

What is sibling sexual abuse?

In this booklet the word "sibling" is used to refer to children who grow up in the same family, whether they are step-children, foster children, adopted children or children by birth. Natural and healthy sexual exploration between children of similar age, size and developmental stage and sexual play that is mutual, voluntary and not coercive, is not sibling abuse. Sibling sexual abuse, or incest, can involve a brother and sister, two sisters or two brothers but abuse by an older brother against a younger sister is the most common form. (Gaffast Conn-Caffrey, 1998).

Sibling sexual abuse, like all forms of sexual abuse, is an abuse of power. If a more powerful sibling, who may be older or stronger, bribes or threatens a weaker sibling into sexual activity, that is called sexual abuse. The abuser usually wins the trust of the victim first, and then violates that trust in order to commit the abuse. The abuser may use force, the threat of force, a bribe, the offer of special attention, or a gift to make the victim keep the abuse secret. As in other forms of sexual abuse, sibling sexual abuse does not necessarily involve sexual touching. The abuser may force two or more other children to engage in sexual

activity with one another; the abuser may force siblings to watch sexual activity or a pornographic video; and the abuser may abuse siblings by repeatedly watching them dress, shower or use the toilet when they don't want to be watched.



What are the effects of sibling sexual abuse?

Sibling sexual abuse is often very harmful for the following reasons:

- Because siblings live together, **the victim can feel pressured and trapped** by the abuser over a long period of time. This pressure may include bribes, threats, sexual stimulation or physical force. Physical abuse and threats are often used to make sure younger siblings keep the sexual abuse secret. This kind of pressure can break down the siblings' self-esteem and isolate the abused children from other family members.

It can be very upsetting to find out that sexual abuse is happening in your family.

- The victim usually begins by trusting the abuser because they are siblings. When this trust is violated, **the victim feels betrayed** by that brother or sister, because someone they expect to love and care for them is hurting them. In addition, your younger children would naturally trust you to choose a safe, kind person to take care of them. When the person you choose abuses them, the victims can feel betrayed again, this time by you. They may even believe that you think the abuse is acceptable.
- **The victims usually feel powerless** to stop the abuse. They may feel they can't stop the abuser, because he or she is bigger, older, stronger and may have threatened them. They may also feel powerless if you don't believe them when they tell you they're being abused. This feeling of being powerless can stay with them and affect their adult relationships.

- The victims may be made to feel responsible, bad or dirty. If you accuse your younger children of doing something to encourage the abuse, or blame them in some way for the abuse, they will believe you and **feel ashamed**. They may carry these feelings of shame into adulthood. If you are able to believe and support your child, it will improve their ability to heal.
- Sibling sexual abuse (incest) **often causes more damage than abuse by a stranger**. This is because children are dependent

on their families and parents to keep them safe. Studies of convicted teenage sexual abuse offenders show that the sibling offenders commit more serious abuse over a longer period of time than other teenage offenders. This is because the victims (brothers or sisters) are more readily available, they are available for a longer period of time and the abuse is protected by family secrecy.

If you know or suspect that one of your children is being sexually abused by a sibling, **do something**. If you do nothing because you believe “they’ll grow out of it”, you are allowing the abuse and secrecy to continue.

Is sexual curiosity between siblings normal?

Yes. A four-year-old girl who touches her baby brother’s penis while her mother changes his diaper is showing normal curiosity. She may never have seen a penis before and may want to know what it feels like. A five year old boy who sees his sister’s genitals for the first time may wonder where her penis is, whether she’s lost it and whether she’s going to grow one. He may have to look a few more times, and ask questions to understand that boys and girls are born with different genitals. As a parent you can use opportunities like these to give your children some information about sexuality that is suitable for their age.

However, a fourteen-year-old boy who wants to look at his five-year-old sister’s genitals is not showing normal curiosity. You need to ask why he wants to do this. It could be that he’s wondering what it would feel

like to touch female genitals or rub his penis against them. But to satisfy his curiosity in this way with his young sister would be abusive.

Four- and five-year-olds who take down their pants to look at each other’s genitals are probably curious. But if they persist in doing it, or if they touch one another’s genitals frequently over time, you should intervene. If it seems like more than curiosity, consider the possibility that one of them might have been exposed to adult sexual behaviour or graphic sexual images through pornography or may have been sexually abused, and are acting out what they have seen or experienced.

It’s not a good idea to think all play is harmless. It’s better to try to find out what’s behind the behaviour. Repetitive play can be a sign the child feels distressed.

Some questions you could ask yourself, or a professional, are:

- **Is this behaviour what you would expect from a child that age?**
- **How long has the behaviour been going on?**
- **What is the purpose of the behaviour?**
- **Does it seem that one of the children involved is being forced to participate?**

Here are some examples of behaviours in pre-school children:

Normal behaviours

Behaviours that should cause concern

Rubs genitals before falling asleep.

Frequently rubs genitals instead of playing.

Explores differences between boys and girls.

Keeps asking questions about sex even after questions have been reasonably answered.

Is interested in watching adults go to the bathroom.

Persists in watching adults in the bathroom.

Plays “doctor” with other children.

Forces other children to play doctor.

Plays house. Plays “mummy” and “daddy” roles.

Pretends to have intercourse.

If you aren't sure about a behaviour, ask a professional: a doctor, a school nurse or counsellor, a social worker, a daycare supervisor or a child psychologist. There is also another booklet, available in this series that could be helpful: *When Children Act Out Sexually: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*.

There are many benefits of court ordered counselling for the sibling abuser such as learning to take responsibility for one's behaviour and learning to control it.

What is the relationship between sibling sexual abuse and other forms of abuse?

Sibling sexual abuse is a misuse of power and authority. Older children who sexually abuse their younger brothers and sisters frequently abuse them in other ways as well.

Persistent putting down, teasing, or belittling younger children about their size, gender or other personal characteristics is called **emotional abuse**. Scaring younger children in dark rooms, telling them that no one loves them, or that terrible things are going to happen to them are also examples of emotional abuse.

Much of the hitting, pinching and smothering of younger children is dismissed by bigger or older siblings who tell their parents, "We were only having fun" or "We were just wrestling." However, this isn't "just fun" if it's forced on the younger child, it is actually **physical abuse**.

Frank's Story

Frank was charged under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* for sexually abusing his younger sister Kathy. His probation officer enforced the court order that he attend counselling.

Frank, who was 15, told his counsellor that his classmates were bigger and more sexually "successful" than he was, and that one of them had dared him to have sex with a girl.

He said that he was afraid to even talk to a girl, let alone ask for a date. He admitted that he made his younger sister Kathy have sexual intercourse with him one evening when he was babysitting her.

Then Frank's mother told the counsellor that Frank's father had forced sex on her in front of the children on a number of occasions. She disclosed that he often beat her if his meals weren't ready on time. The counsellor encouraged her to take Frank and Kathy to a transition house as a temporary measure, while she decided whether or not to stay with her husband.

There were several factors involved in Frank becoming a sibling sexual abuser. His father abused his mother physically, emotionally and sexually; he abused Frank emotionally by having forceful, abusive sex with his mother in front of him; and he taught Frank by his example that it was acceptable for a male in authority to use force on the rest of the family. Not only that, his rules for the family were so strict that Frank hadn't learned to socialize with other teenagers. Feeling pressure from his peers, he tried to get information and experience by forcing himself on his younger sister.

There are many benefits to court-ordered counselling for sibling sexual abusers. In Frank's case he learned some social skills that helped him get along better with other teenagers, and he stopped copying his father's abusive behaviour. He also learned to take responsibility for his own



behaviour and to control it. Other outcomes of the family crisis included his mother being able to leave an abusive relationship and Kathy starting to see a sexual abuse counsellor. Following his conviction, Frank's father was charged by the court to seek counselling to change the way he treats women and children.

What factors contribute to sibling sexual abuse?

There is no single cause of sibling sexual abuse, but there are several contributing factors. **Some of these factors are:**

- **Responsibility that can lead to abuse of power.** It's an important part of family life for older children to learn to take responsibility for the care of younger children. It's just as important for children to understand that this responsibility has limits. Responsibility allows older children to make decisions while taking care of younger children. But it doesn't give them the right to boss them around, put them down, threaten them or hurt them. As parents you must help them see that having responsibility doesn't mean they can do whatever they want. Frank's story is a good example of an older brother who is given responsibility and misuses it.
- **Children who have witnessed or experienced sexual abuse.** Children who have been abused, either by family members or by adults or older children, sometimes react by becoming physically aggressive. They may also react by coaxing, manipulating, or forcing younger children into the same kind of sexual behaviour. In this way, brothers and sisters may become the victims of this "second-hand" abuse. Children who act out their own sexual abuse are sometimes called "sexually reactive". It's important for you to know that children who are being sexually victimized may become sexually intrusive.
- **Access to pornography.** Parents who leave pornographic material where children can look at it risk having their children imitate adult sexual behaviour. Children are also at risk if there is unsupervised access to the Internet where they may be exposed to pornography and/or in contact with adults or older teens who prey on children.

- **Neglect.** Children who are neglected, physically or emotionally, and are frequently left without adult supervision, may be more likely to engage in sexual activities. They might try sexual activities they have learned from other children or from pornography, or they might experiment, on their own, to learn how to get sexual pleasure. Part of their behaviour may come from trying to meet the basic need to give and receive comfort.
- Sexual activity between siblings which begins in this way might, at first, appear experimental and mutual. However, because of the power differences between children, it rarely is. If the behaviour continues or escalates, it can become abusive, especially if one of the children wants to stop and the other doesn't.
- **Lack of sex education.** Children and teens who are not taught in an age-appropriate way about their physical and sexual development are more likely to engage in sexually intrusive behaviour.
- **Inadequate socialization.** Children who aren't allowed to play with their peers, and teenagers who aren't allowed to socialize outside the home, may be more likely to sexually abuse younger siblings, just as Frank did.
- **Denial.** When you try to explain away unusual behaviour or pretend it isn't happening, this is called "denial". In some situations, parents may wish to deny abuse has taken place because they don't know how to deal with it or it brings back memories of their own abuse. While denial doesn't cause sibling sexual abuse, it may contribute to its continuation.

If you know or suspect that one of your children is being sexually abused by a sibling, do something. If you think "they'll grow out of it", you allow the abuse and secrecy to continue.

- **Feeling overwhelmed.** If you feel overwhelmed by your own problems – which can include emotional stress, illness and unemployment – you might not be able to detect the abuse even when it's happening. At times like this your extended family or a social service agency might be able to relieve the stress, and give you a chance to look at what's really happening in your family.

Admitting to yourself that sibling sexual abuse might be happening in your family can be hard. Admitting it to someone else can be even harder. The important thing is to get help.

Why might it be difficult to recognize sibling sexual abuse in my family?

As a parent you might find it hard to see that one of your children is being sexually abused by a sibling. There are several reasons why parents of sibling sexual abuse victims have difficulty recognizing that it's happening:

- While the abuse is happening, the victim might be too young to know it's abuse. The victim may believe that the abuse is something that happens in all families.
- The abuse might be happening when the abuser is in a position of authority; for example, when an older sibling is the babysitter.
- The abuser may be enforcing secrecy by threatening the victim with physical abuse if he or she tells.
- Children may blame themselves, especially if they experience some pleasure while they're being abused, so they may not tell you about it.

- Children may want to tell, but don't always know how to talk about what's happening to them. They may think they have told you indirectly or that you already know. Also, many children are afraid to upset their parents.
- You may see some of the symptoms of sibling sexual abuse, but tell yourself it isn't happening. It may be hard for you to believe that one of your children could be sexually abusive.

Parents who talk to their children about what has happened during the day and who ask about their feelings may be more likely to recognize sibling sexual abuse than parents who don't have these kinds of discussions with their children.

If one of my children is abusing another child in my family, what should I do?

If your child is sexually abusing another child in the family, **you must report the abuse to your local child protection agency.** While the way you do this may vary from province to province, the child protection agency in your province is responsible for helping both the victim and the abusing child. **If your child is 12 or over,** the child protection agency must report the abuse to the police. The police will decide whether or not to charge the child. If your child is **under the age of 12,** he or she cannot be charged with a sexual offence.

Admitting to yourself that sibling sexual abuse might be happening in your family can be hard. Admitting it to someone else can be even harder. The important thing is to get help. It is often helpful to get support from family and friends, but you might have to rely on others. Often these others are professionals. As a parent you may feel in a state of despair and confusion when you realize that one of your children is abusing their sibling. You may feel disappointed and may feel that you have failed as a parent. Joining a parent support group may help you acknowledge and accept your feelings.



No matter what your child's age, there are options as to what happens after you make the report to your child protection agency:

Under 12.

Many counselling centres that treat victims of sexual abuse also have programs for children with sexual touching problems. These are children who have been acting in sexually aggressive ways towards other children, but are under the age of 12. In many cases these children are sexual abuse victims themselves. They need counselling to change their behaviour towards other children and to help them heal from the abuse they have experienced themselves.

12 and Over.

There are several advantages to involving the police and the criminal justice system when the abuser is a child over the age of 12. By using the court system:

- **The victim knows she or he is believed and supported**
- **The offender can get the help he or she needs.**
- **The judge can make plans for the offender's treatment.**
- **We make a statement about how seriously our society views the sexual abuse of children.**

Treatment can take many forms. One option could include placing a teenage sibling sexual abuser **on probation** with an order to have counselling while living at home. In this case the teenager will have a probation worker who will make sure the judge's orders are followed.

Depending on the severity of the offences the teenage abuser could be confined for a period of time in a **detention centre**. These centres are staffed by counsellors and social workers who specialize in treating adolescent sexual abusers. Treatment could include attending groups where the abuser looks closely at his/her behaviour and receives individual counselling to help understand the behaviour. The abuser may also be taught basic social skills, such as how to make friends his/her own age, or how to ask for a date and learn appropriate sexual behaviour. Most importantly, counselling can help prevent the young abuser from growing into an adult offender.

If the province where you live has a victim assistance program, the victim(s) of sibling sexual abuse might be eligible for free counselling. A police officer, social worker or a victim services worker should be able to give you this information. After reporting the abuse, counselling for both the abuser and the victim(s) can be an important step to healing in your family.

After reporting the abuse, counselling for both the offender and the victim(s) can be an important step for healing in your family.

Jamie's Story

Jamie, 11, became sexually excited by watching a rock video. He wondered what it would be like to watch his younger sister, Carole-Anne, dance in the nude. Two or three times when his parents were out for the evening he talked her into taking off her clothes and dancing in front of the television set. Then he told her that one day she'd be a great dancer and a rock star. After that Carole-Anne started running in front of the television set all the time just to get his attention. When Jamie complained that Carole-Anne was a nuisance, Carole-Anne told her mother what Jamie had made her do. Her mother recognized that Jamie's behaviour had been abusive.

How can I intervene to stop sibling sexual abuse?

- When you discover abusive behaviour, and the child is age 12 or older, remember that **you should report it to the police or child protection agency.**
- You may want to **see a counsellor or join a parent support group** to get support for yourself.
- You might try to find an opportunity and a place in which you and your child can **talk** quietly and calmly. This might be in a living room or at the kitchen table. It depends on where you're used to having family conversations.

- **Ask** the children involved separately, **how they feel** about the behaviour. It's important to find out if the younger child is afraid or intimidated by the older sibling. Ask the abuser how he or she thinks the victim might feel. For example: "How do you think Carole-Anne felt when you asked her to do that, Jamie?"
- **Describe the problem**, then talk about it. For example: "Carole-Anne danced nude in front of the TV set because she believed she had to do everything you told her to do."
- **Agree on what to do** instead. In Carole-Anne and Jamie's case, Jamie agreed not to force Carole-Anne to do things she didn't want to do, and to respect Carole-Anne's privacy. Carole-Anne agreed to report any future abuse of authority to her mother. Both children agreed to ask one of their parents to intervene if they couldn't handle this conflict on their own.
- **Check regularly** to see whether the agreements on both sides are being kept, so that the children feel safe.
- Use occasions like these to **think and talk about** some of the **underlying issues**. For example, how would you deal with Jamie's interest in sexually stimulating rock videos? With his bossiness? How would you deal with Carole-Anne's willingness to do whatever Jamie tells her to do? With her enjoyment of flattery? With her need for attention? These are problems that many families have to deal with on a daily basis. Your success in handling these problems is important in both preventing and stopping sexual abuse.

Teach your children that they own their bodies and everyone should respect that.

Will our family ever recover?

YES! Even if the abuse went on for a long time, your children can heal and move on. They'll need love and understanding, and help in sorting out their thoughts and feelings.

All families have periods when one or more members have problems. What makes the difference is whether you work on the problems. The communication and support you develop while you do this may establish a new sense of trust in your family.

How can I best prevent sibling sexual abuse in my family?

The best way to prevent sibling sexual abuse is to pay attention to your children:

- Set aside a time each day when your children have a chance to tell you about what they've done or felt that day, both positive and negative. This might be after school or before bed-time.
- Ensure that children are well looked after by babysitters, whether the sitter is a family member or not. At breakfast you can ask your children specific questions about the previous evening; for example, did they watch their favourite TV program? Did they play video games? Did they cooperate with the sitter? Was the sitter kind? Would they like to have the same sitter again?
- Be willing to talk about sexuality. Informal sex education could include watching educational videos and reading books with your children. Try to find library materials on sex education that are appropriate for the age of your child.
- Encourage your children's school to present sexual abuse prevention films and programs. Most of them do, but it doesn't hurt to ask. The programs usually carry the message, "If someone is making you do something that doesn't feel good, tell a trusted adult."



- Find out where your children are playing, and who they're playing with. Be especially concerned if they're playing with children who are focused on sexual games.
- Teach your children that they own their bodies and everyone must respect that.
- Monitor television violence and internet access. Movies and television programs that link sex and violence carry a dangerous message to children.
- Encourage non-sexist attitudes and behaviour. For example: give power, responsibility and privileges equally to male and female siblings; assign household tasks fairly, and discourage sexist jokes and sexist put-downs.
- Believe them. Children rarely invent stories of sexual abuse to get a brother or sister into trouble.

Additional resources are available at your community resource centre, your local library or the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

Yes! Even if the abuse went on for a long time, your children can get over it!