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“In there but not in there”: sibling sexual abuse as a disruptor in the field of child sexual abuse

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ABSTRACT
In this commentary paper, which draws on the authors’ own past research and practice experience in the field of child sexual abuse prevention as well as a thorough knowledge of the extant literature, we argue that sibling sexual abuse challenges conventional thinking about child sexual abuse, both in terms of how the general public conceptualises child sexual abuse and in terms of our practice responses to it. Traditional service responses are often inadequate and inappropriate in situations involving sexual abuse between siblings. The question is further raised as to whether traditional service responses are appropriate for other forms of child sexual abuse. We argue that instead of siloed, individualist therapy and criminal or youth justice responses, whole-family responses are required, which draw on the principles of family therapy and restorative justice.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

This article challenges current practice with families affected by sibling sexual abuse, and other forms of child sexual abuse more broadly It proposes that whole-family responses that draw on the principles of family therapy should be made available to families affected by this issue alongside any individual interventions that may be required. We further recommend that consideration is given to whole-family restorative justice responses as an alternative to traditional criminal or youth justice responses, which have been found to impede family restoration and delay therapeutic support being made available to the child who has been harmed.

Introduction

In this commentary paper, we argue that sibling sexual abuse challenges conventional thinking about child sexual abuse, both in terms of how the general public conceptualises child sexual abuse and in terms of our traditional practice responses to it. The paper draws on our experiences as social workers undertaking assessments and interventions with families affected by sibling sexual abuse over several years. It also drawns on our experience as researchers who have contributed primary research to the field (Yates, 2018; Yates et al., 2012) and as authors of a recent publication for practitioners providing an overview of current research and evidence in relation to sibling sexual abuse (Yates & Allardyce, 2021).

Child sexual abuse is commonly considered by the general public to be the sexual abuse of a child by an adult, who is typically a stranger to the child (Levenson et al., 2007). If the behaviour is discovered or disclosed, support and therapy can be provided to the child who has been abused. If the adult admits or is found guilty of the abuse, treatment can then be offered to the adult through the criminal justice system. These responses are typically managed in isolation from each other. However, they are often inadequate and inappropriate in situations involving sexual abuse between siblings. Sibling sexual abuse involves not only children, but children of the same family as those who have harmed and been harmed. The whole family is affected (Yates & Allardyce, 2021). This indicates that consideration of a whole-family response should be provided, especially when cases are identified within child protection systems. This would allow the needs of respective family members to be supported in dialogue with each other. The question is raised as to whether responses to sibling sexual abuse might usefully be applied in response to other forms of child sexual abuse.

Sibling sexual behaviour

The National Project on Sibling Sexual Abuse, funded by the Home Office together with the Ministry of Justice, is the largest UK study to date on sibling sexual abuse and was carried out by Rape Crisis England & Wales along with the Universities of Birmingham and The West of England, Bristol. The authors of this commentary paper were involved in the Project's Advisory Group. The National Project describes sibling sexual abuse as harmful sexual behaviour with a victimising intent or outcome between children who self-identify as siblings (Strong, 2022, p. 11). There is no consensus within the literature over how to define sibling sexual abuse, and the National Project's definition is not universally accepted, not least because there are debates about what constitutes a sibling relationship. According to White and Hughes (2018), in Western cultures siblings are defined as sharing at least one biological, adoptive or step-parent, but children may also be foster siblings or "social siblings". Some non-Western cultures include just biological siblings while others include cousins, relatives of the same gender or all children in the community. Being biologically related and living with and growing up together seem to be important factors in the extent to which children may be regarded as siblings. With that in mind, what we will discuss in this article relates chiefly to full- and half-siblings who have lived and grown up together in a familial context, but its relevance will extend to other forms of sibling relationships to different degrees.

Siblings may engage in a range of forms of sexual behaviour, from normative and mutual sexual exploration in early childhood through behaviour that is inappropriate or problematic to behaviour that is abusive (Yates & Allardyce, 2021). Sibling sexual behaviour is typically deemed to be abusive when it is differentiated from these other forms of sibling sexual behaviour on the basis of several possible criteria. These include large age gaps between siblings, use of coercion and force and misuse of power (Hackett, 2010). However, many of these criteria are problematised by research to date.

Firstly, large age gaps between the siblings would indicate that the behaviour is abusive, and studies of clinical presentations of concerns about sibling sexual interactions often describe age gaps of between 2 and 5 years between siblings (Carlson et al., 2006). However, there is disagreement in the literature over how large the age gap needs to be. Krienert and Walsh's (2011) study of over 13,000 incidents of sibling sexual abuse found so many examples of sibling sexual abuse occurring with only small age gaps or where the abuse was by a younger of an older sibling, that they concluded large age gaps should no longer be used as part of any definition of sibling sexual abuse.

Secondly, although the use of force or obvious coercion is typically seen as a key indicator that children's sexual behaviour is abusive (Hackett, 2010), some studies suggest that use of force and coercion features in only a minority of instances of sibling sexual abuse (Cyr et al., 2002). Thirdly even though significant power imbalances resulting from size, cognitive ability, or, in certain circumstances, gender, may indicate abuse (Caffaro, 2014), in the absence of obvious indicators, an examination of the complex power dynamics within the sibling relationship is necessary to determine the nature of the sibling sexual behaviour (Allardyce & Yates, 2013). It is sometimes straightforward to determine that the sibling sexual behaviour is abusive but the boundaries between different forms of sexual behaviour between siblings are not always easy to draw. It may be more helpful to think about this field as being broadly that of sibling sexual behaviour rather than the narrower one of sibling sexual abuse, the latter term bringing a restricted lens to this complex range of possible sexual behaviours. It is important on the one hand not to pathologise what may be normal and harmless sexual behaviour between siblings; on the other hand, it is essential not to dismiss as experimental or exploratory behaviours that are abusive and potentially extremely harmful.

The minimisation of sibling sexual abuse

One of the consequences of inconsistent definitions and the challenges involved in differentiating abusive from other forms of sibling sexual behaviour is that it opens up a space whereby sibling sexual abuse can be minimised (McCoy et al., 2021). Yates (2017, 2020) argues that the reasons for this minimisation may be quite profound. Despite our understanding of the evidence to the contrary, we tend as a society to think about the perpetrators of child sexual abuse as being predatorial adults, who are strangers to the children they have abused (Weatherred, 2015). When considering child sexual abuse it is important to resist media driven stereotypes of who causes sexual harm to children and to hold in mind that most sexual abuse is carried out by adults known to the child, and very commonly by family members (Karsna & Kelly, 2021). Our ideology of family is one of safety, security and belonging (Gittins, 1985; McCarthy, 2012), quite at odds with the idea of child sexual abuse and our socially constructed stereotypes of those who commit sexual offences. It is even more of a challenge to recognise that child sexual abuse can be carried out by other children as well as by adults (Hackett et al., 2016). Children are commonly idealised as innocent and asexual, as vulnerable and potentially the victims of child sexual abuse, not as sexual agents, who may carry out the sexual abuse of other children (Gittins, 1998; Jenks, 2005). However, it is estimated that at least 1/3 of all sexual offences against children in the UK involve another child as responsible for the abuse (Hackett et al., 2016).

For many members of the general public – as well as many childcare professionals – recognising that children may be sexually abused not just by another child, but a child of their own family such as a brother or a sister may be inconceivable. It is the presence of children that transforms an adult couple relationship into a family (Chambers, 2012) – a place of safety, security and belonging. The children of the family – the brothers and sisters – may be expected to love, support and care for each other. They may argue and squabble; they may be jealous and rivalrous, but it is not within our expectations of sibling relationships that they may be abusive (McIntosh & Punch, 2009; Mitchell, 2003; Sanders, 2004; Yates, 2020). The language of siblinghood, of brotherhood and sisterhood – "we band of brothers", "sisters are doing it for themselves" – is one of mutuality, shared endeavour, allies, above all of equality, not of abusive power relationships (Calvi & Blutrach-Jelin, 2010).

Sibling sexual abuse therefore simultaneously threatens our stereotypes of those who sexually abuse children, our ideology of family, our ideals of childhood, our archetypes of siblings, and our very constructions of what child sexual abuse is. In Yates' study of social workers' decision making in 21 cases involving sibling sexual abuse (2018, 2020) he concluded that these factors can lead to minimising responses by social workers and other professionals. Because sibling sexual abuse does not equate with what we commonly conceive child sexual abuse to be, a belief prevails that sibling sexual abuse must be rare; sibling sexual abuse is not recognised as being abusive even when it is reported; and the degree of harm it may cause is underestimated. In Yates (2018, 2020), it was found that social workers sometimes doubted that the abuse had happened at all when it was reported. They otherwise tended to talk about the behaviour as being merely inappropriate, experimental or sexualised, therefore understating the potential impact, particularly the emotional impact, of the abuse. If they did recognise the behaviour as abusive and harmful social workers had a tendency to think that it was only the behaviour that needed to be addressed rather than considering the need for any repair of the sibling relationship.

This tendency to minimise sibling sexual abuse and to consider that it is not as serious or as harmful as other forms of child sexual abuse – that it somehow does not count as child sexual abuse – is also experienced by adult victim-survivors of sibling sexual abuse, as this quote from a participant in the National Project on Sibling Sexual Abuse attests:

"What happened to me, it didn't matter. It's not really abuse. And I always feel like a fraud when I hear people talking about abuse,…because I feel like well, I feel like I struggle to categorise myself as being abused, but I live with extreme sexual trauma from abuse."
(Victim/survivor participant 2: (McCartan et al., 2022))

King-Hill et al. (2022) similarly found a tendency by professionals to minimise, but also occasionally to catastrophise, sibling sexual abuse. This again would make sense: if sibling sexual abuse so contravenes our common conceptions of what children are like, what sibling relationships are like, and what families are like, it is understandable that sibling sexual abuse may be regarded as calamitous when it happens. Neither a catastrophising nor a minimising response is helpful to families who have been affected by sibling sexual abuse.

The prevalence and impact of sibling sexual abuse

The evidence, however, is that far from being rare and relatively harmless, sibling sexual abuse is both widespread and harmful. Due to differences in definitions and methodology, estimates of prevalence vary from 1.3% (Griffee et al., 2016) to 6.1% (Atwood, 2007). The most recent known study of sibling sexual abuse prevalence in Portugal produced an even higher estimate, finding from a survey of University students that 11% of male and 5% of female students self-reported having sexually coerced a sibling during childhood (Relva et al., 2017). Even a conservative estimate of 2% would suggest that 1.3 million people in the UK may be affected. In terms of incidence, a recent Freedom of Information request to all 43 police forces across England and Wales received 21 useable responses, finding 2,869 incidents of sibling sexual offences and assaults reported to the police between 2017 and 2020, accounting for 24% of all intrafamilial sexual offences (Adams & Crosby, 2022). Sibling sexual abuse is probably the least disclosed form of child sexual abuse (Carlson et al., 2006) and sometimes not criminalised if it is discovered (O'Brien, 1991), so these figures will under-represent the scale of this form of harm. Whilst we are unable to say quite how common and widespread sibling sexual abuse is, we can conclude from current evidence that it is both frequent and endemic.

A number of studies, as summarised in Yates (2017), have found that the short and long-term consequences of sibling sexual abuse may include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance and alcohol misuse, eating disorders and relationship difficulties throughout life – all the kinds of sequelae that might commonly be associated with other forms of child sexual abuse. As one adult victim-survivor interviewed as part of the National Project on Sibling Sexual Abuse put it:

"I remember throughout my teenage years, and into my early adulthood, just feeling quite dirty, and ashamed. And I wish that I wasn't here. I just wish that I didn't exist. But inside, I had lots of very strong, really low, low feelings and feeling very depressed and just wishing that I just wasn't here basically. I'm haunted by it every day."
(Victim/survivor participant 3: (McCartan et al., 2022))

Indeed, sibling sexual abuse has been found to be every bit as harmful as sexual abuse by a parent (Cyr et al., 2002; Rudd & Herzberger, 1999). As with other forms of child sexual abuse, however, children may not present symptoms of harm contemporaneously with their experience of abuse or themselves recognise the harm caused at the time.

The inadequacy of traditional services

This all suggests that, notwithstanding some of the complications in identifying sibling sexual abuse, when it does occur we need to be clear in naming it as such. It is essential that when sibling sexual behaviour is identified as being abusive that we do not perpetuate its minimisation by calling it inappropriate, sexualised, or exploratory. The tendency for practitioners but also survivors to think that sibling sexual abuse somehow may not count as child sexual abuse also means that policy, guidance and the promotional literature for services set up to support people who have experienced child sexual abuse – as children who have harmed or as children who have been harmed – need explicitly to name both sibling sexual abuse and sibling sexual behaviour. Otherwise the people affected may feel that services are not for them:

“I wouldn’t naturally go to a rape crisis centre. I wouldn’t naturally go to child sexual abuse [service] either. Because…I’m not in there, but I’m in there but I’m not in there. And in a way that kind of feeds into then you not having your own voice and you not being heard. So…it’s like…you’re not fitting anywhere?”
(Victim/survivor participant 10: (McCartan et al., 2022))

However, making traditional services and approaches more available and accessible to both victimsurvivors and children who have harmed their siblings through sibling sexual abuse does not go far enough if we are to embed services that respond to the nature of the harm identified in recent research into sibling sexual abuse. Conventional services have evolved in response to traditional constructions of child sexual abuse as being carried out by adults outside the family. What this means is that children who have been harmed, as children or later as adult victim-survivors, may be able to benefit from therapeutic support to address the harm caused by the abuse. Quite separately, children who have harmed, once they have worked their way through what may be a lengthy criminal or youth justice process, may benefit from an intervention to address their abusive behaviour. These services do not meet the needs of families affected by sibling sexual abuse. Sibling sexual abuse is like other forms of child sexual abuse in that it is both widespread and potentially extremely harmful. It is very unlike other forms of child sexual abuse in two important ways. First, not only the child who has been harmed but also the child who has harmed are both children. This means that we need to consider the safety, human rights and developmental needs of both children involved in our responses to the abuse. Second, and more significantly, these children are brothers and sisters. They are members of the same family.

This simple and obvious fact has a number of important ramifications:
First, the rights and developmental needs of the children may not be compatible with each other. For example, whilst it might be most supportive and developmentally helpful for the child who has harmed to remain living at home, this may not be physically or emotionally safe for the child who has been harmed (Yates, 2018). Some difficult decisions need to be made with respect to the siblings’ living arrangements, the impact of any safety plans on family life, and if separated whether and how the siblings should maintain contact with each other. At some stage in the future it will need to be decided whether the siblings can return to having contact or living together again.

Second, the roots of sibling sexual abuse very often – although not always – lie in pre-existing sibling relationship dynamics, in family dynamics and family stress (Yates & Allardyce, 2021). The root causes of children's harmful sexual behaviour are often complex, but a number of studies have found common factors in the family backgrounds of children involved in sibling sexual abuse, such as domestic abuse, parents having affairs, physical chastisement, poor sexual boundaries within the family home, parent–child sexual abuse, and a lack of supervision (e.g. Griffee et al., 2016; Latzman et al., 2011). In order to support the safety and development of the children in the family these are important issues to address in their own right. If we are also going to address sexually abusive behaviour between siblings effectively then we also need to address these wider family issues that have contributed to the abusive behaviour emerging. Responsibility for the behaviour does not lie solely with the child who has harmed.

Third, therefore, not just the siblings directly affected by the abuse but everyone else in the family is potentially affected. It is a problem of and for the whole family, not just the individual children. Parents may feel like they are in an impossible situation, torn between the needs of their different children (Tener et al., 2020). They may feel shocked, not able to believe this has happened; they may feel ashamed, blame each other, or just feel totally overwhelmed (Yates & Allardyce, 2021). Grandparents and other relatives may echo some of these responses, and there may be safety concerns about other children in the wider family. Other siblings not involved in the abuse are often forgotten about in practice and in the literature, but they may feel upset by the loss of a sense of family and their education may suffer (Welfare, 2008). They may try to advocate for the child who has been harmed, perhaps putting them at odds with their parents or the abusive sibling, or otherwise they may try to stay neutral and risk distressing the child who has been harmed. Alternatively, they may become quite isolated and withdrawn, immersing themselves in other interests and becoming disconnected from the family altogether (Welfare, 2008).

Welfare's (2008) qualitative research into the experiences of family member's experiences after sibling sexual abuse is identified helps us to understand some of the ways in which different family members' responses affect each other. To be most effective we therefore need to work with the whole family in dialogue, not just separately in silos, to help them work through these issues. Unless work with the whole family is offered, these issues can continue to affect the family throughout the lifetime of the children as they grow into adulthood. Evidence about the nature of the issue of sibling sexual abuse suggest that – especially when such issues are identified by children's services – work with whole families to try to help restore and repair damaged relationships so that they can find ways to move on more safely, and in more honest, open and mutually supportive ways may contribute to optimum outcomes for everyone affected by the abuse.

There is an important caveat here. There are a minority of situations in which sibling sexual abuse emerges from such pervasive family violence and abuse that it may be considered by professionals involved or adult survivors that recovery from the abuse is best served by having no further contact with all or some family members. Research to date on outcomes in adulthood of children harmed by sibling sexual abuse suggest that many distance themselves from siblings as adults (Tener, 2021) or from parents because they have not been believed or no longer experience the family as an emotionally safe space (Klar-Chalamish & Peleg-Koriat, 2021). As with other forms of intra-familial abuse, it is important to be careful not to hold on to an ideology of family as one of security and belonging to such an extent that maintaining some kind of family links is always and without question assumed to be in the victim-survivor's best interests. Some adult victim-survivors have good reason to want to cut all ties with their family, and this needs to be respected and accepted as one of a range of possible appropriate and proportionate responses. For most families, however, their relationships are likely to endure in some form, or they may be thrown together in future on birthdays, religious festivals, at weddings and funerals.

Notwithstanding this important caveat, the roots, but also the solutions to sibling sexual abuse, therefore, lie to a large extent with the family rather than individualised and siloed responses to the child who has harmed and to the child who has been harmed. Family relationships as a whole need to be addressed and as far as possible repaired and restored.

This means that traditional criminal and youth justice responses are often inappropriate in these situations. Indeed, if the behaviour is largely determined by factors in the family environment, then a justice response which holds only the individual child to account may not be any form of justice at all. Far from supporting families to address the causes of harm and to repair and restore their relationships, instead these traditional justice responses have been described as actively impeding the family restoration process (Streich & Spreadbury, 2017). Legal advice to the child who has harmed is likely to recommend that they do not admit to the allegations; prosecutions are difficult without admission and there is a reluctance to ask children to testify against their sibling. There are also barriers to supporting children while legal proceedings are pending, exacerbating the impact of the abuse. The outcome is to send a signal to the child who has been harmed that they are not believed unless the child who harmed is convicted.

Furthermore, criminal justice procedures may be "extremely difficult, stressful and sometimes traumatising experiences" (Streich & Spreadbury, 2017, p. 21), with the court itself described as:

"…a vile place, it is such a vile, vile place, it's like there are no boundaries and they don't care what age you are, what has just gone on, they don't care…"
[Making Noise interviewee; female; 15 years old: (Warrington et al., 2017))

Indeed, while there may be a desire on the part of the child who was harmed for some form of justice, this may not be a traditional form of justice:

"I didn't want to have to start an entire investigation against my brother – he's still my brother after all – I can't explain – he's a c**t, but he's my brother – it's like a mental messed up love."
(IV12, Female 18 years: (Warrington et al., 2017))

A possible way forward

Our current justice responses to sibling sexual abuse risk making an already difficult situation even more traumatic for everyone within families affected by this issue, especially the child who has been harmed. An alternative may be child-friendly, trauma-informed spaces where children who have harmed and children who have been harmed can disclose abuse and trauma they have experienced and for the evidence they provide to be admissible without having to attend court. Recovery work could then commence without delay. A restorative, family group conferencing approach could sit alongside recovery work with the children, if appropriate as part of a diversionary disposal from the legal system. This is not to say that prosecution would never be in the public interest but could be reserved for situations involving the most serious concerns about future risks and where families are unwilling to participate in a restorative process. Indeed, there have been some promising early indications that responses based upon some of the principles of restorative justice may be more helpful for families in these situations. The Restore pilot on Bristol (Streich & Spreadbury, 2017), diversion from the courts to a family conferencing system in Australia (Daly & Wade, 2014) and a similar exemption committee scheme in Israel (Tarshish & Tener, 2020) all provide evidence of being robust approaches that can hold the child who has harmed to account, but which can contribute to successful family restoration and rehabilitation. Streich and Spreadbury (2017) in particular stress the importance of understanding the family to be a "traumatised system" and for any restoration work to be cognisant of the trauma experienced not only by individuals but by the family as a whole. Rather than the Good Lives Model being applied to individual work with the child who has harmed (Print, 2013), the complex and systemic nature of harm caused by sibling sexual abuse suggests that we should work with families to co-construct a “Good Family Life Plan”. These are attendant challenges with family orientated responses to sibling sexual abuse. A small clinically orientated literature on treating sibling sexual abuse through family therapy has developed over the years (DiGiorgio-Miller, 1998; Keane et al., 2013). However, family therapists have noted challenges created by resistance from family members in engaging with the idea of developing family based solutions after sibling sexual abuse (McNevin, 2011). It may also be the case that family therapy models are not always a good fit in working with families where the ongoing management of risk within the family created by a child who presents a significant risk of harm towards others (Helimäki et al., 2022). Moving towards more family based ways of working with cases involving sibling sexual abuse will require training and support for professionals working with families affected by this issue if we are to find solutions congruent with the nature of the problem. The question then arises as to whether such approaches to sibling sexual abuse challenge existing responses to other forms of child sexual abuse. Karsna (2022) reports that there were over 89,000 identifiable child sexual abuse offences in England and Wales in 2020/21, yet only 12% of investigations ended in a charge and there were only 4,649 convictions in the year to December 2020.

Furthermore, the time taken for child sexual abuse cases to reach court is on average 1 year and 10 months (NSPCC, 2022). A more systemic and welfare orientated approach could serve to avoid children harmed by any form of abuse, including child sexual abuse, having to attend court and having unnecessary delays to recovery work. Being believed, listened to and supported as a victim-survivor of abuse is likely to provide a sense of justice that is more achievable than is possible through the current court system. Whilst there remains a place for prosecution, it is not clear that current processes lend themselves to people who have committed offences taking responsibility and making amends for the harm they have caused. Given that the majority of offences are committed by people known to the child, and very often family members (Karsna & Kelly, 2021), restorative and perhaps restorative family group conferencing approaches may hold potential for such accountability to take place.

Conclusion

To conclude, sibling sexual abuse challenges our conventional thinking about child sexual abuse, both in terms of how both the general public commonly construct child sexual abuse to be and in terms of our traditional practice responses to it. Sibling sexual abuse is both prevalent and potentially as harmful as sexual abuse by a parent. There is a need for consistent policy and guidance at a national and local level to recognise this. Such policy and guidance, as well as the promotional literature for child sexual abuse services, need to name sibling sexual abuse and sibling sexual behaviour explicitly. Beyond that there is a need to develop and evaluate trauma-informed restorative whole family responses rather than individualist programmes, which work with the child who has harmed and the child who has been harmed in isolation of each other and without recognition of their relationship as brothers and sisters, as sons and daughters. The question this raises is whether such responses might also be more appropriate in relation to other forms of child sexual abuse.

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