



Acknowledge, address, adapt -

Closing the gap between sibling sexual abuse as the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes and the most ignored form of child sexual abuse in the UK

RCEW National Project on Sibling Sexual Abuse

Policy Summary Report

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**SIBLING SEXUAL
ABUSE PROJECT**

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Executive summary

Prevalence and incidents in the UK

- Sibling sexual abuse is the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes in the UK. Estimates vary considerably but suggest that a child is two to five times more likely to be abused by their sibling, under the age of 18, than by a parent or adult living in their home environment. The number of children affected by this hidden abuse is far greater than is acknowledged by UK official statistics, policymakers and service providers.
- It is estimated from a range of studies that around 5% of children may be involved in sibling sexual abuse. Even the more conservative estimates of 2% would suggest that in the UK, a country with a population of just over 67 million people, around 1.3m people would be directly affected.
- Nearly a quarter (24%) of reported incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults, where the victim was under 18, to the police in England and Wales from 2017-2021 was sibling sexual abuse. As sibling sexual abuse is one of the lowest disclosed forms of child sexual abuse, these figures confirm that the overall prevalence of this form of child sexual abuse is high. Over a quarter (27%) of the children harmed through sibling sexual abuse were recorded as male. Sibling sexual abuse can involve brothers harming brothers, sisters harming brothers or sisters as well as brothers harming sisters.

A national safeguarding issue for children and young people

- Our current approach to sibling sexual abuse is a safeguarding issue for children and young people.
- National and local safeguarding policies and strategies do not name, measure, or prioritise sibling sexual abuse despite it being the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes.
- There is systemic silence in relation to sibling sexual abuse; potential organisational silencing is also taking place.
- This silence and safeguarding issue can be mitigated by statutory and non-statutory organisations identifying and communicating the biggest risk to children in their homes in terms of intrafamilial child sexual abuse is sibling sexual abuse.
- The top-level systemic silence on sibling sexual abuse is impacting other national and local safeguarding policies and strategies. It must be considered there is a causal link between this and the current lack of professional training, policies and expertise on sibling sexual abuse in the UK.

Impact of sibling sexual abuse

- Sibling sexual abuse is a complex, emotionally charged and destructive form of child abuse; characterised by secrecy, shame and concealment. It is every bit as harmful as sexual abuse by a parent. The short and long-term consequences include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance and alcohol misuse, eating disorders and relationship difficulties throughout life.
 - For years, as a society, as professionals, as adults we have minimised, suppressed, and dismissed sibling sexual abuse. It may not be visible, but the economy and the NHS will be picking up the emotional, mental and physical health bill from sibling sexual abuse that will be costing millions.
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- The ‘long tail’ of abuse means that it can be decades later that an adult survivor will ‘join the dots’ and work out the root cause of their emotional, mental and physical health issues is childhood sibling sexual abuse.

Language, terminology, and communication

- There is an issue in the understanding around what is sibling sexual abuse and the language and terminology used in connection to the abuse. There are inconsistent definitions of sibling sexual abuse and a lack of universal agreement as to how to differentiate between normal and age-appropriate sexual interactions between siblings and sibling sexual abuse. This lack of clarity contributes significantly to the challenges of identifying the abuse and allows for biases around sex, race and social class to influence professional responses.
- Research indicates adult survivors of sibling sexual abuse actively differentiate themselves from the label of ‘child sexual abuse victim or survivor’, which can result in challenges and problems around the availability, fit and acceptance of treatment or support.
- Affected individuals – children, young people and adults - may not be seeking support or even recognise they were abused as their experiences are not validated or mirrored in the words and images of the organisations set up or commissioned to support them including children’s charities and rape crisis centres.
- The lack of a collective voice or organisation for children, young people, families and adults affected by sibling sexual abuse is exacerbating the problems they are facing. The lack of child-centric web-based information written for children and young people who have harmed or are thinking of harming is noticeable.

Professional responses

- Professional responses to sibling sexual abuse can be radically different - in an unhelpful way - compared to other forms of child sexual abuse, for example parent-child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation.
 - Sibling sexual abuse is being mislabelled or under-reported; practice includes hiding it within a code for ‘troubled family’ or child protection plans for ‘neglect’.
 - In terms of current policies and statutory support for sibling sexual abuse, there appears to be a significant amount of confusion amongst professionals and policy makers. This confusion is also seen in the language used around sibling sexual abuse which may vary depending on context. Girls can also sexually harm siblings, there can be a gendered dimension to how parents and professionals respond to this.
 - Professionals potentially respond to children, young people and families affected by sibling sexual abuse in one of three ways:
 1. Minimising the abuse as they don’t know how to respond and/or ignoring the abuse and focusing on issues where they are trained and systems are in place such as child neglect.
 2. Exaggerating the abuse and over-stating the problem in order to gain access to children and young people statutory services.
 3. Catastrophising the abuse and making decisions that are an over-reaction. All three responses are detrimental to children, young people and families.
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- Professional interventions ought to adopt a holistic, strengths-based, restorative approach that works with the whole family rather than looking at each child in a 'silo'. There are pockets of best practice scattered across the UK.
- Professionals need and are demanding consistent professional training and CPD opportunities to increase their knowledge and bolster practitioner confidence in working with those affected by sibling sexual abuse.
- A consistent, national approach to sibling sexual abuse support is needed in order to eradicate the current irregularity of services across the country.

Complex family and household dynamics

- A consistent theme through the project, research and interviews with professionals and lived experience experts was the relational complexity particular to sibling sexual abuse in terms of the split loyalty facing parents, the close family structure, and the fracture and family disintegration that can continue for decades following a disclosure.
- Adult survivors described '*functional dysfunctionality*' in their family systems and how within such a system it is difficult for a child to identify what they are experiencing is not normal but abuse.
- The cause or reason for sibling sexual abuse is complex and multi-factorial; it is likely to have its roots in stress, abuse and trauma. Domestic abuse and child neglect in the home was identified as a significant factor in families where sibling sexual abuse is taking place; suggesting some children may be reflecting behaviour they have seen from other adults or other siblings.

Framed through adult sexual offending frameworks and a criminal justice system lens

- Responses to sibling sexual abuse and children who harm are being framed through adult sexual offending frameworks and a criminal justice system lens. This is a concern.
 - Professionals should not judge children's harmful sexual behaviour without understanding the context of the family and societal ecosystem they are living in or worse, assume they will become an adult sex offender because of their behaviour as a child.
 - A reoccurring theme identified in the project was when and where a criminal justice response was appropriate to a disclosure of sibling sexual abuse. Age is clearly a key factor but the likelihood that the harming child will themselves have experienced childhood trauma and abuse adds to the difficulty for professionals.
 - There are large areas of the UK where there is currently no therapeutic service available to refer harming children to. This is leaving professionals in limbo and putting children, young people, and families at risk.
 - The existence of a large cohort of adults who experienced childhood trauma prior to sexually abusing their sibling needs to be recognised by professionals with support offered while holding them accountable for the harm they have caused.
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Foreword

One of the most important and longest lasting relationships we can have in our lives is with siblings – brothers, stepbrothers, sisters and stepsisters¹. These sibling relationships can outlast relationships with friends, parents, partners, and children. When this relationship goes wrong in childhood and one sibling sexually abuses another sibling, it can have devastating and lifetime consequences.

Sexual behaviour, especially abusive sexual behaviour, is still regarded as adult behaviour. This is not behaviour we associate with children². It is therefore not surprising that the idea of a child being sexually abused not just by another child, but by their brother or sister, is for most people just a step too far beyond our collective conception of what child sexual abuse is. And yet it happens, and it is widespread.

We have to acknowledge, address and adapt to the reality that sibling sexual abuse is the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes in the UK. For years, as a society, as professionals, as adults we have minimised, suppressed, and dismissed sibling sexual abuse. This means 1.3 million affected children and adults are potentially facing or experiencing sibling sexual abuse - the shame, confusion, and stigma – alone and in chronic isolation. It may not be visible, but the economy and the NHS will be picking up the emotional, mental and physical health bill from sibling sexual abuse – the post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance misuse, eating disorders and relationship difficulties³ - that will be costing millions. Affected adults will be paying a lifetime emotional, mental and physical cost⁴. If sibling sexual abuse was a physical health issue, it is difficult not to conclude that there would be a national outcry in the way the affected children and adults are treated.

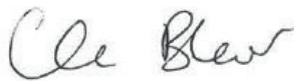
Given the evidence and research, it would be logical to assume that as the most prevalent form of child sexual abuse in our homes, sibling sexual abuse is a strategic priority for statutory and non-statutory organisations tackling child sex abuse. This is not the reality. Our current statutory and non-statutory response to sibling sexual abuse is so weak, when compared to other forms of child sexual abuse, it is difficult not to conclude that it is at the very bottom of the list of strategic priorities. This is a national safeguarding issue for children and young people.

There is no question, sibling sexual abuse is a highly complex and layered form of child sexual abuse for both policy makers and frontline professionals to address, primarily because it involves two children living in the same family with differing and often competing needs. We know that unclear policies and a lack of evidence-based guidance⁵ in relation to sibling sexual abuse is resulting in inconsistent and arbitrary professional responses⁶. Such a scenario is exacerbated by the fact that multiple professionals – with their own different and often competing priorities depending on which child they are supporting - can be involved with an affected family including the police, children's social services, health practitioners, schools and children's charities. That said, the National Project on Sibling Sexual Abuse has worked across the UK with a number of outstanding organisations and individual professionals who are examples of best practice in supporting children, young people, families and adults affected by sibling sexual abuse. And we know there is an immense unmet demand from professionals for more training and information on sibling sexual abuse.

I am pleased that SARSAS (Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support) has overseen this project on behalf of Rape Crisis England & Wales. Over the last two years, we have as an organisation realised how little we knew about sibling sexual abuse and how much we all need to do to acknowledge, address and adapt to this abuse.

I would also like to offer hope for affected children, young people, families and adults with the words of one survivor. She wrote to us that, '*with the right support and help you can face and overcome sibling sexual abuse*'. And she is right. Families can survive this abuse and individuals can recover to live the lives they want.

Today, sibling sexual abuse stands as the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes and the most ignored form of child sexual abuse in the UK. This report offers information for policy makers and organisations in order to support the introduction of evidence-based policies on sibling sexual abuse in the UK.



Claire Bloor

Chief Executive Officer

SARSAS – Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support

Recommendations

The project has identified four key policy recommendations:

1. National and local policies and strategies tackling child sexual abuse name, acknowledge and address sibling sexual abuse as the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes.
 2. Organisations working with affected children, young people, families and adult survivors provide them with a voice; and communication policies, strategies and platforms are reviewed to ensure sibling sexual abuse is named, validated and the experiences of children and adult survivors harmed by siblings are mirrored in the words and images of the organisations.
 3. Professional training and CPD opportunities are provided nation-wide in order to increase knowledge and bolster practitioner confidence in working with those affected by sibling sexual abuse.
 4. Local commissioners support the development of a national network of therapeutic services for children that have exhibited harmful sexual behaviour.
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Introduction

Sibling sexual abuse is the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes in the UK⁷. Estimates vary considerably but suggest that a child is two to five times more likely to be abused by their sibling, under the age of 18, than by a parent or adult living in their home environment⁸. The data is limited, but it is estimated from a range of studies that around 5% of children may be involved in sibling sexual abuse⁹. Even the more conservative estimates of 2% would suggest that in the UK, a country with a population of just over 67 million people, around 1.3m people are currently directly affected.

From 2020 to 2022, Rape Crisis England & Wales (RCEW) in partnership with two universities and two rape crisis centres¹⁰, undertook a ground-breaking project to support victims and survivors of recent and historic sibling sexual abuse. The two-year National Project on Sibling Sexual Abuse (the project) was the largest Government-funded project on sibling sexual abuse to date. Funded by the Home Office and Ministry of Justice ‘Support for Victims and Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse (SVSCSA) Fund 2020 – 2022’, it was also the first England and Wales wide project on sibling sexual abuse. The project was supported and guided by an advisory group that included therapeutic and academic national experts as well as lived experience experts.

This report is a summary of the project’s policy work. This includes the first national statistics on the number of reported police incidents of sibling sexual abuse in England and Wales; the results of a survey of over 700 frontline professionals; and, the key policy findings of two of the largest national academic research projects on sibling sexual abuse, one focusing on children and young people, the other on adult survivors. Key themes have also been summarised. The project has made four recommendations for policy makers.

It should be noted that information on appropriate therapeutic responses to sibling sexual abuse as well as prevention is outside the scope of this report; as is improving responses to the sibling sexual abuse of children in traditionally under-represented communities, children with learning difficulties, and children living with foster parents or in care.

Language and terminology

When referring to sexual abuse involving siblings who are under the age of 18 years, individuals are recommended to refer to this as either 'sibling sexual abuse' or 'harmful sexual behaviour' involving a 'sibling/child who has harmed' and 'sibling/child who has been harmed'.

The terminology 'victim', 'perpetrator', 'offender' or 'suspect' is not recommended. This is because our responses to this abuse should not be based on adult models of sex offending; nor should the child or young person that has harmed be viewed or labelled as a 'mini-adult sex offender'.

The reasons why children sexually harm siblings are complex; it is therefore unhelpful to label children and young people with these terms given the stigma and negative implications often associated with such labels. The project would advise all professionals, where they legally can, to avoid such language and terminology both in writing and when speaking.

For adults, the project advises the use of the term 'adult survivor' or 'adult harmed as a child'; and, where appropriate, using the term 'adult who harmed as a child' especially if the individual was a victim of child neglect, domestic abuse and/or sexual abuse prior to abusing a sibling.

Definition of sibling sexual abuse and wider terminology

There is no universally accepted definition of sibling sexual abuse. This lack of consistency and clarity contributes significantly to the challenges in identifying the abuse with the risk that vague definitions will provide poor guidance to professionals.

The project when needing to summarise what sibling sexual abuse is, described it as *'harmful sexual behaviour with a victimising intent or outcome between children who self-identify as siblings'*. This description has its draw backs as it needs the reader to understand what harmful sexual behaviour is and how this differs from the continuum of sexual behaviour you can see in children and young people ranging from normal through to inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent behaviours¹¹. It does not seem unfair to state, that many policy makers are unaware of this continuum in the same way most parents will also be unaware. Overall, it appears our societal understanding that children and young people typically display a range of sexual behaviours as they grow up is limited.

John Caffaro, a leading American academic, states, *'Sibling sexual abuse consists of sexual acts initiated by one sibling toward another without the other's consent, by use of force or coercion, or where there is a power differential between the siblings. It may involve children of similar or different ages; aggression, coercion, or force; harm or potential for harm; occur frequently or infrequently; and may include minor or advanced sexual behaviours. This includes sexual behaviour that the harmed child is not developmentally prepared for, is not transitory, and does not reflect age-appropriate curiosity. It may or may not involve physical touching, coercion, or force. Non-contact sibling sexual abuse may include behaviour that is intended to sexually stimulate the harmed sibling or the offender. It can include unwanted sexual references in conversation, indecent exposure, forcing a sibling to observe others' sexual behaviour, taking pornographic pictures, or forcing a sibling to view pornography. It also may include sibling sexual contact perceived as non-abusive by both victim and offender, which nonetheless meets these criteria'*¹². It should be noted aspects of this definition have been challenged which again highlights the difficulty in reaching agreement on a universally accepted definition.

The project has identified growing fluidity around the use of the terms 'child sexual abuse', 'intra-familial harms', 'sibling sexual behaviours', 'harmful sexual behaviour' and 'sibling sexual abuse'. This could develop into a concern, as already stated, sibling sexual abuse has no universally accepted definition and needs to be currently explicitly named and identified in order to embed professional recognition and societal acceptance that it is the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes.

Plus, adult survivors of sibling sexual abuse have stated to the project that they don't recognise themselves as 'child sexual abuse survivors' because of the way society, the Government and sexual abuse support organisations communicate what child sexual abuse is – namely adult males abusing predominantly girls. This is concerning. It indicates affected individuals – children, young people and adults - may not be seeking support or even recognise they were abused as their experiences are not validated or mirrored in the words and images of the organisations set up or commissioned to support them including children's charities and rape crisis centres. As one adult survivor stated to the project's research team at UWE, Bristol, *"I wouldn't naturally go to a rape crisis centre. I wouldn't naturally go to child sexual abuse [organisation] either. Because sibling child sexual abuse, it hardly gets talked about. It's almost like you have to do the thinking, like you have to read between the lines of 'we support these people' and then you're like, okay, but 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, there's kind of, it's like, again, you're not fitting anywhere?"¹³

This is also troubling for policy makers as it is indicative of a wider problem; it potentially means when they use the umbrella term 'child sexual abuse' they cannot assume that key audiences within and external to their organisation will understand this term includes children abusing other children, let alone children abusing their own brothers and sisters. Nor can it be assumed that key audiences understand the difference between child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour.

Policy findings

The project survey report, *'Awareness and understanding of sibling sexual abuse amongst professionals in frontline sectors in England and Wales'*

In 2021, a survey on sibling sexual abuse was undertaken by the project in partnership with Claremont, a behaviour change communications agency. The survey, a national and global first, asked professionals about their perceptions of the wider societal awareness and understanding of the abuse as well as their own personal and professional experiences.

Over 700 professionals who work in frontline sectors including education, health, social care, the criminal justice system, policing, local government and the third sector from across England and Wales responded to the survey. Twenty-six individuals also undertook in-depth interviews. The results provided an insight into the first-hand experiences of professionals who are responding on a daily basis to reports of sibling sexual abuse, as well as the perceptions of those working in frontline sectors without direct experience working with those affected. It is a mixed, complex, and contradictory national picture highlighting some areas of serious concern.

Sibling sexual abuse appears to be an area where professional responses can be radically different - in an unhelpful way - from responses to other forms of child sexual abuse, for example parent-child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation. Professionals stated at times sibling sexual abuse is mislabelled or under-reported; practice includes hiding it within a code for *'troubled family'* or child protection plans for *'neglect'*. One local government employee stated that even after the topic of sibling sexual abuse was raised in an information-gathering conference, senior management was unenthusiastic to engage with the subject until the Children's Commissioner's Office or Ofsted directly identified it. Another interviewee observed sibling sexual abuse is considered *'too hard'* to bring out into the open.

It appears society considers extrafamilial abuse, child sexual exploitation and *'stranger danger'* as more *'palatable'* forms of child sexual abuse than sibling sexual abuse. One interviewee observed, from a wider societal viewpoint, sibling sexual abuse has taken the place of adult to child sexual abuse regarding ongoing stigma and taboo. Overall, professionals assessed that sibling sexual abuse is significantly less recognised within general society than child sexual abuse where the perpetrator is a parent (8% of professionals stated there was high levels of recognition for sibling sexual abuse within society compared to 56% for parent-child sexual abuse).

The professionals overwhelmingly agreed that the idea of siblings doing sexual things together is *'repulsive'* (87% agreed) and childhood is perceived as a period of *'sexual innocence'* by society (89% agreed). This indicates social norms are a factor as to why professionals can struggle to respond appropriately to sibling sexual abuse and can over or under-react.

The report notes the importance of recognising that girls can also sexually harm siblings, and that there can be a gendered dimension to how parents and professionals respond to this. Such a scenario means that for young girls who harm, their behaviour may not be acknowledged until later in life. Gender was suggested to also play a role in disclosure, with male siblings potentially being less likely to disclose or having less awareness of what happened to them if they were harmed by a female sibling. Fundamentally, there is a need to prevent gender bias when raising awareness of sibling sexual abuse was underlined by these accounts. It should be noted outside of the survey, the project was informed that anecdotal evidence

indicated better professional practice has been identified when a girl is identified as harming a sibling as professionals may be more curious, make less gender-based assumptions and look to understand the causes of the behaviours of the child more so than if the child was a boy.

The survey and interviews highlighted how sibling sexual abuse *'destroys the family'*. Parents and carers are often faced with what is termed the *'double dilemma'*, this is the situation of trying to support both of their children in terms of the child that harmed and was harmed. Some parents never accept or recognise that abuse took place or is still taking place. It was suggested that families often try to *'close ranks'*, viewing sibling sexual abuse as a *'dirty secret'* and lean into an *'instinctive reaction'* to not share the information outside of the family. The situation is often complex with the child that has harmed also needing support as a victim of neglect or abuse themselves. Domestic abuse in the home was identified as a significant factor in families where sibling sexual abuse is taking place; suggesting some children may be reflecting behaviour they have seen from other adults or other siblings. Multiple interviewees suggested that parents would be more likely to come forward if they knew that their harming child would not be criminalised.

In terms of current policies and statutory support for sibling sexual abuse, there appears to be a significant amount of confusion amongst professionals. This confusion is also seen in the language used around sibling sexual abuse which may vary depending on context, for example terms such as *'sexual assault'* may be more common around cases involving older children, whereas *'harmful sexual behaviour'* may be used more commonly around cases involving younger children. It is clear professional responses are often based on adult models of sex offending; this creates the risk of children being treated as *'mini-adult sex offenders'* with their own experiences of trauma ignored.

83% of survey respondents agreed that *'there is little or no training specifically on sibling sexual abuse for professionals'*. One survey respondent wrote that, *'even when shared it [sibling sexual abuse] is not taken seriously. Professionals are pleased to let it fade away... and to be withdrawn or played down'*. Another stated that they thought, *'professionals are scared when working with this type of harm that they can cause more harm than good when trying to help families'*. Within an interview with a health professional, it was suggested that there was a general fear of recording *'harmful sexual behaviour'*.

Professionals were asked what the next steps in response to sibling sexual abuse should be. Their responses can be grouped into the following categories:

- further research into sibling sexual abuse including improving data collection;
- raising awareness and encouraging dialogue within society in general;
- increasing provision of specialist support services;
- training on recognition, responses and prevention for parents and professionals;
- and, guidance on language, including for multi-agency working.

The full survey report is available on the SARSAS website.

The project FOI report, *‘Establishing the prevalence of sibling sexual abuse as reported to and recorded by police forces across England and Wales’*

We now have for the first time, a national picture of the reported and recorded incidents of sibling sexual abuse to police forces in England and Wales.

Using Freedom of Information (FOI) data provided by **21** police forces across England and Wales, the project identified between the years 2017-2020 there were **11,840** police recorded incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults, where the victim was under 18.

Of the **11,840** recorded incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults **2,869** were recorded as a ‘sibling’ relationship (including brother and sister, step/half, adopted and foster siblings). Incidents involving a ‘sibling’ relationship account for 24% of all police recorded incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults, where both the sibling who has harmed and the sibling who has been harmed was under 18¹⁴.

From the FOI data provided by **21** police forces across England and Wales, **16** police forces provided information regarding the gender of siblings who have been harmed and siblings who have harmed. Of this data there were **1,958** police recorded incidents where the gender of siblings who have been harmed could be identified; and **1,977** police recorded incidents where the gender of siblings who have harmed could be identified.

Of the **1,958** police recorded incidents where the gender of siblings who have been harmed by a sibling could be identified:

- **505** siblings were recorded as **Male**, accounting for **26%**
- **1,422** siblings were recorded as **Female**, accounting for **73%**
- **31** siblings were recorded as **Other/Unknown**, accounting for **1%**

Of the **1,977** police recorded incidents where the gender of siblings who have harmed a sibling could be identified:

- **1,463** siblings were recorded as **Male**, accounting for **74%**
- **146** siblings were recorded as **Female**, accounting for **7%**
- **368** siblings were recorded as **Other/Unknown**, accounting for **19%**

The fact that nearly a quarter of reported incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults to the police in England and Wales where the victim was under 18 was sibling sexual abuse is significant and concerning. As it confirms how high the prevalence – unreported incidents – of this form of child sexual abuse is in our country will be. Especially as we know sibling sexual abuse is one of the lowest disclosed forms of child sexual abuse¹⁵.

Another important figure to note is that over a quarter of the children harmed were recorded as male; this is of concern as the project struggled to identify research or engage with harmed boys and adult male survivors. They appear to be ghosts in the system despite the evidence showing they do exist; this may partly be due to the extra layers of shame and stigma boys and men may feel disclosing abuse especially if they were harmed by their sister.

The full FOI report is available on the SARSAS website.

Key findings

11,840

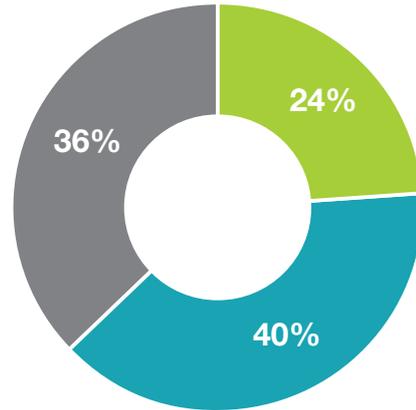
Across **21** police forces in England and Wales, between the years **2017-2020** there were **11,840** police recorded incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults, where the victim was under 18.

Of the 11,840 recorded incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults:

4,287 were other family member relationship – accounting for 36%

2,869 were recorded as a sibling relationship – accounting for 24%

4,684 were parent-child relationship – accounting for 40%

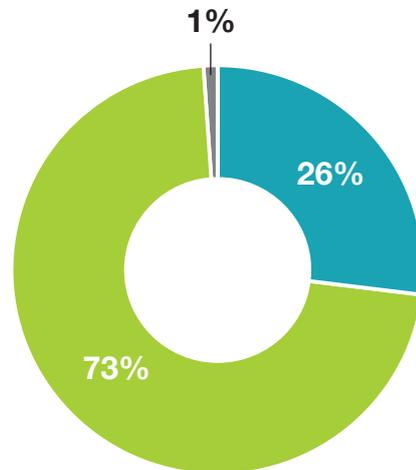


16 police forces were able to provide a breakdown of sibling sexual abuse by gender. Of the recorded incidents of siblings who have been harmed:

505 siblings were recorded as Male – accounting for 26%

1,422 siblings were recorded as Female – accounting for 73%

31 siblings were recorded as Other/Unknown – accounting for 1%

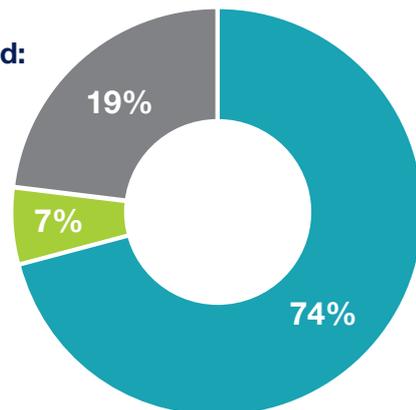


Of the recorded incidents of siblings who have harmed:

1,463 siblings were recorded as Male, accounting for 74%

146 siblings were recorded as Female, accounting for 7%

368 siblings were recorded as Other/Unknown, accounting for 19%



The project research report, *'Assessing sibling sexual abuse in children and young people'*

The project research undertaken by the University of Birmingham identified a lack of training, processes and expertise is resulting in professionals potentially responding to children, young people and families affected by sibling sexual abuse in one of three ways:

1. Minimising the abuse as they don't know how to respond and/or ignoring the abuse and focusing on issues where they are trained and systems are in place such as child neglect.
2. Exaggerating the abuse and over-stating the problem in order to gain access to children and young people statutory services.
3. Catastrophising the abuse and making decisions that are an over-reaction.

All three responses are detrimental to children, young people and families. The research findings also reflect the findings in the project's survey of 700 professionals of the need and demand for consistent professional training and CPD opportunities across England and Wales to increase knowledge and bolster practitioner confidence in working with those affected by sibling sexual abuse.

The research also identified the difficulty in defining sibling sexual abuse due to its complex nature, this is further compounded by challenges in defining 'sibling' and misunderstandings in terms of what constitutes harmful sibling sexual behaviour. It recommends ongoing research consideration of the language and definitions surrounding sibling sexual abuse and how these are used in professional settings. Again, this is reflected in the project's survey report, as was the identification by the University of Birmingham that interventions ought to consider the whole family and adopt a holistic, strengths based, restorative approach; and, a consistent, national approach to sibling sexual abuse support is needed, thus eradicating the current irregularity of services.

The full University of Birmingham research report is available on the SARSAS website.

The project research report, *'The impact of sibling sexual abuse on adults who were harmed as children'*

The University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE, Bristol) research commissioned by the project focused on adult survivors of sibling sexual abuse.

Similar to the University of Birmingham research and the professional survey, the UWE, Bristol research identified issues in the understanding around what is sibling sexual abuse and the language and terminology used in connection to the abuse.

The research identified that adult survivors of sibling sexual abuse do not necessarily know whether their experiences of sibling sexual abuse count as sexual abuse and/or falls within the definitions of child sexual abuse or intrafamilial sexual abuse. Survivors questioned the 'validity' of their own abuse and whether they themselves, society, professionals, or their family would recognise it as abuse.

The research also identified that adult survivors of sibling sexual abuse appear to actively differentiate themselves from the label of 'child sexual abuse victim or survivor'. Such a differentiation could result in challenges and problems around the availability, fit and acceptance of treatment or support. All the survivors who took part in the research felt that there was not enough specialised support to suit their specific needs.

Significant threads in the research were family dynamics; and, responding to sibling sexual abuse needs a holistic whole family approach rather than looking at each child in a 'silo'.

Adult survivors identified significant parental dysfunctions within their childhood homes. The survivors often talked about the 'functional dysfunctionality' of their family systems and how within such a system it is difficult for a child to identify what they are experiencing is not normal but abuse.

The research identified survivors of sibling sexual abuse experience more varied long-term difficulties than child sexual abuse survivors who were harmed by an adult would usually experience. There can be significant long-term implications around the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships and for some female survivors, this included deciding whether or not to have children. The 'long tail' of abuse means that it can be decades later that a victim will 'join the dots' and work out the root cause of emotional, mental and physical health issues is childhood sibling sexual abuse.

The research highlighted survivors felt as though the professionals surrounding them did not have adequate knowledge of sibling sexual abuse which was also reflected in professional interviews. Survivors identified that sometimes professional engagement negatively impacted their ability to form relationships as they often felt not listened to after struggling to open up and disclose the abuse in the first place.

Adult survivors identified the sibling who harmed them when they were a child had themselves experienced childhood trauma including neglect, domestic abuse and sexual abuse. The research noted children, young people and adults who harmed their sibling but were also harmed by childhood trauma need to be more recognised by professionals and offered support while holding them accountable for the harm they have caused. Outside the remit of this research, the project has come across anecdotal evidence of mental health issues and death by suicide of adults who harmed their sibling/s when children. Adults that have harmed as children often have to deal with the dichotomy of their actions as a child and themselves now as an adult. This cohort of adults need to be acknowledged and addressed.

A larger than expected number of sisters harming siblings was identified in the research as it was in the FOI report and the professional survey report.

The adult survivors felt that the general understanding sexual abuse, but especially sibling sexual abuse was poor across society and was not helped by media, policy, and professional framing of the issue. The survivors felt that there needs to be a stronger and more concrete national approach to acknowledge, address and adapt to sibling sexual abuse in order to enable professionals to support survivors fully and appropriately.

The full University of West of England, Bristol research report is available on the SARSAS website.

Lived experience insights

Ruth's story¹⁶

When I first came across the sibling sexual abuse project, I read some of the information and cried as I was like this is me, someone is saying my story, whereas for years there was no information out there on this topic.

My story involves an older brother, but sibling sexual abuse can be between brother/sister, sister/brother, brother/brother, sister/sister and even involve stepbrothers or sisters. In my case the abuse started at a very young age, as games of doctors but very quickly the games turned inappropriate. I didn't understand what was happening to me or what I was doing, I felt that I was a co-conspirator at times, it's only years later that I understood we can feel like co-conspirators but in fact we are victims. The abuse wasn't just a one-off incident it happened regularly over many years and got worse over time. The abuse included penetrative sex, oral sex and non-penetrative sex, as well as watching pornography and the use of it. I felt dirty and confused in the content I was made to watch, and it was re-enacted on me, including the violence. When I realised that what had happened to me was sibling sexual abuse I remember crying and feeling like someone was finally validating a part of my life that I had kept very hidden. I had felt so ashamed and confused, but suddenly I didn't feel like it was a dark secret anymore.

In my case I felt that the sibling sexual abuse was about being controlled to get what he wanted. I thought I did something wrong that I was a horrid sister, especially as before the sexual abuse started there was years of physical and emotional abuse as well. I have come to understand that sibling sexual abuse can happen because there is a power imbalance, and the abuse can sometimes happen if parents are absent for long periods of times, or parents are not emotionally present. This was very true in my case, my family worked long shifts and I was left alone in the house with my brother in charge, he knew how long they would be at work, leading to many opportunities for him to abuse me. I think because my family often was not at home that this is why there were lots of incidents of abuse over many years. I was too scared to speak up and I thought my brother was the favourite child and I wouldn't be believed. When it did come to light with social services and my family were informed, I felt I wasn't believed and that it was seen as 'children being children' and I felt my parents protected my brother. This made me feel that what I went through was my fault and totally minimised it.

I have now started to understand that parents can find it hard to find out what is going on and can feel shame, guilt and will often try to keep it a secret even after disclosure. Parents may feel the need to protect the child who has abused from charges or from being in trouble, which to the victim can look like the parents are choosing the abusers side, this can stop you from talking and can make you feel incredibly isolated. I'm starting to understand sibling sexual abuse effects all the family but that still doesn't mean it's ok to be happening. So, if you feel that your parents walked away, knowing, or choosing your sibling, I understand as I feel all of that, but I'm starting to process this and heal from that pain.

Georgia's story

Hi, my name is Georgia I am a survivor of sibling sexual abuse. The abuse started when I was 5 and didn't end until I was 13, when my mum discovered it. Me and my older brother we grew up in a chaotic home with domestic violence happening around us I think this affected our development and created an environment where abuse was normalised. I think that it has taken me a long time to understand that being sexual abused by my brother who was a child also for some of the abuse added to me feeling complicit and feeling a huge sense of shame from that. I know that he was seen as less responsible for his actions at least until he was 16.

I started to see a pattern the first thing people would ask me when I disclosed the abuse was what was the age gap between you both. I am not sure that people know what children are capable of doing to another child and the lasting trauma that has on the victim. I want people to take it seriously and to understand the severity of it. We have to talk openly and that means in families and larger societal conversation, but this really needs to be happening within families. Often families carry this sense of shame as well and put things under the carpet in my experience.

I hear a lot about normal exploratory behaviour between siblings and how it can be an innocent part of child development and I believe this, I really do. But I also believe there are an overwhelming number of cases where it is not innocent and not normal exploratory behaviour it is forceful, violent, coercive, and manipulative. But because it is between siblings it means that the perpetrator often has easy and frequent access to abuse the victim.

A parent shares their experience

'We are the parents of a much-loved son who was sexually abused by his older brother as a child. The abuser, also our much-loved child, recently committed suicide following investigations by Social Services as to whether or not he constituted a risk to his own young child. No evidence was found. The revelation of the abuse has caused our family to fall apart. There are two other, older siblings who were as ignorant as we were of the abuse but almost all relations within the family are very fractured and we are geographically scattered which makes matters much harder. Currently my husband feels he needs a break from the pain of trying to understand and address the fallout. I am hoping he'll find his way back before too long.'

Observations

“

‘Sibling sexual abuse should be treated in exactly the same way as any other type of intrafamilial sexual abuse. It leaves you feeling that nowhere is safe and no one is to be trusted. It feels as though your entire sense of self is defined by what happened. It takes a long time and a lot of work to break down and rebuild these beliefs’ - **Lisa**

“

‘Look at the bigger picture, it is not just the abuse it’s the family ramifications too that can last for years and can tear survivors’ away from the family’ - **Sadia**

“

‘It is just as a severe if its same sex, or female to male abuse, just because it doesn’t involve stereotypical abuse it doesn’t make it not the same’ - **Alex**

“

‘Professionals need to spend more time learning from families who have lived through these circumstances. Textbook scenarios are not real life, and every single situation is different so there cannot be a cookie cutter approach every case of sibling sexual abuse’ - **Sam**

“

‘No matter how old the person is, or how long ago the assault was you have to remember that this person has carried this around with them like a dirty secret’ - **Trudi**

“

‘I’ve been fumbling around in the dark for so many years trying to understand myself, my reactions, relationship difficulties, feeling the way I do about myself totally inferior with nothing to offer anyone, worthless in other words’ - **Shereen**

Overall themes identified through project

Sibling sexual abuse and the child that harms is often framed through the lens of adult sexual violence and abuse

An adult male abusing a female child is the current victim and survivor socially constructed paradigm of child sexual abuse. The fact that sibling sexual abuse contradicts this and challenges professional assumptions, may contribute to why it is often ignored, minimized or re-framed into another form of adult-based abuse such as child neglect.

The current societal and professional framing of what child sexual abuse is, could help to explain why responses to sibling sexual abuse are often based on adult models of sex offending with children who have harmed viewed as 'mini-adult sex offenders'. This creates risks including the harming child being feared and 'monsterised'; and, professionals catastrophising the family situation - as highlighted in the University of Birmingham research. Supporting external evidence that this is occurring, can be found in the HMICFRS JTAI 2020 report on intrafamilial abuse that noted in reference to a case, *'Professionals did not consider, as they should have, that these children's harmful sexual behaviours may be a result of having been sexually abused themselves and that they, too, may be victims. The abused children are then re-victimised and their needs as victims of abuse are not addressed.'*¹⁷

Children and young people who harm their siblings are a varied group with diverse needs that cannot be addressed by a 'one size fits all' model of service provision. The cause or reason for sibling sexual abuse is complex and multi-factorial; it is likely to have its roots in stress, abuse and trauma. Many harming children will have hitherto unrecognised learning difficulties, specific educational needs, a range of psychosocial risk factors and co-occurring mental health problems. Professionals should not judge children's harmful sexual behaviour without understanding the context of the family and societal ecosystem they are living in or worse, assume they will become an adult sex offender because of their behaviour as a child.

When disclosure occurs when the children are still both living at home, there are multiple layers of impact with difficult decisions to be made for both professionals and parents regarding living arrangements and contact arrangements. A reoccurring theme identified in the project was when and where a criminal justice response was appropriate to a disclosure of sibling sexual abuse. Age is clearly a key factor but the likelihood that the harming child will themselves have experienced childhood trauma and abuse adds to the difficulty for professionals and policy makers. On top of this there are large areas of the UK where there is currently no therapeutic service available to refer harming children to. This is leaving professionals in limbo; and, children, young people, families at risk.

The acknowledgment of a harming child's own potential childhood trauma does not take away or minimises the trauma and harm the abused sibling has experienced. There is no question that the harming child must acknowledge and be held to account for their behaviour; but the responsibility for addressing the sibling sexual abuse and ensuring future safety should also be shared by the parent/s or adult carers. All members of an affected family need to be offered support.

National and local safeguarding policies and strategies tackling child sexual abuse do not name, measure or prioritise sibling sexual abuse

There is no question that sibling sexual abuse sits at the ‘crossroads’ of a number of different bodies of policy, knowledge and practice: child development, child protection, youth and criminal justice system, trauma, sibling relationships and family relationships¹⁸. This makes a policy response more complex with a whole systems response needed and different national and local statutory and non-statutory organisations working together. However, it appears sibling sexual abuse is ‘falling between the cracks’ as it consistently fails to be even acknowledged.

Over two years, the project noted a pattern in strategic documents, reports, and strategies written by statutory and non-statutory organisations on child sexual abuse in our homes. They are adult-centric with little or no focus on children that harm. National and local safeguarding policies and strategies do not name, measure, or prioritise sibling sexual abuse despite it being the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes. No targets are set in relation to this abuse and no national or local data is gathered. Brothers and sisters are not named or listed as potential abusers.

There is systemic silence in relation to sibling sexual abuse; with potential organisational silencing also taking place. Even the 2021 Home Office Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy, described by the Home Office as its ‘whole system response to all forms of child sexual abuse’ does not acknowledge or address sibling sexual abuse (other than one mention in the context of research near the end of the report). It is difficult not to conclude that this ‘silence’ is a safeguarding issue for children and young people as the biggest risk to them in their homes in terms of intrafamilial child sexual abuse is not being currently identified or communicated.

Up until March 2022, sibling sexual abuse had not been referenced by an M.P. in Parliament for over 20 years. It is difficult to believe that the most common form of child sexual abuse in UK homes was not mentioned in either House in committees, divisions, petitions, ministerial corrections, written statements, members, debate titles for 22 years. But that was the case and is further evidence that sibling sexual abuse is not acknowledged or addressed at a strategic level across the UK.¹⁹

It appears this top-level systemic silence is impacting other national and local safeguarding policies and strategies tackling child sexual abuse all of which fail to acknowledge and address sibling sexual abuse. It must be considered there is a causal link between this and the current lack of professional training, policies and expertise on sibling sexual abuse in the UK.

The lack of a collective voice or organisation for children, young people, families and adults affected by sibling sexual abuse is exacerbating the problems they are facing

Adult survivors from across the UK contacted the project over two years. The individual age, gender and experience was different for each survivor but what was shared was the impact of the current lack of a collective voice or organisation in the UK for adults affected by sibling sexual abuse. This situation has chronically exacerbated feelings of individual isolation, shame, confusion and stigma resulting in detrimental health and wellbeing implications. Some of the adult survivors' stories and messages to professionals who contacted the project can be read in this report.

It should be noted that the situation is only marginally better for parents and families affected by this abuse with information limited, hard to find and often written in professional language. The lack of child-centric web-based information for children and young people who have harmed or are thinking of harming is noticeable and concerning.

Sibling sexual abuse 'destroys the family'

Sibling sexual abuse has been described as a *'hand grenade going off in the family'* and the impact is different compared to child sexual abuse involving an adult. A consistent theme through the project, research and interviews with professionals and lived experience experts was the relational complexity particular to sibling sexual abuse in terms of the split loyalty facing parents, the close family structure, and, the fracture and family disintegration that can continue for decades with a disclosure of sibling sexual abuse. Some adult survivors had decided to continue a relationship with their harming sibling within a family unit; but, for many disclosure had resulted in ostracisation and family breakdown with their now adult siblings.

Conclusion

Our current approach to sibling sexual abuse is a safeguarding issue for children and young people.

We know sibling sexual abuse is a complex, emotionally charged and destructive form of child abuse; characterised by secrecy, shame and concealment. The lifetime impacts are no less harmful than when a parent or other adult is the abuser. For years, as a society, as professionals, as adults we have minimised, suppressed, and dismissed sibling sexual abuse. This needs to end.

Professionals – understandably - find this area of practice very difficult but the project identified clear evidence that there is frontline demand and support for further research into sibling sexual abuse including improving data collection; raising awareness and encouraging dialogue within society in general; increasing provision of specialist support services; training on recognition, responses and prevention for parents and professionals; and, guidance on language, including for multi-agency working.

The main issue we face today is the lack of clear national and local strategic recognition of sibling sexual abuse and its absence in Government-level policies and approaches tackling child sexual abuse in our homes. This can be addressed as highlighted in this report's recommendations on page 8.

We can, if we choose to, close the gap between sibling sexual abuse being the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes and the most ignored form of child sexual abuse in the UK.

Endnotes

- ¹ The majority of children in the UK grow up with siblings (Office for National Statistics, 2012). There are many forms of sibling relationship: biological brothers and sisters, stepsiblings, half-siblings, adoptive siblings, foster siblings and social siblings – children not biologically or legally related but who have been brought up together or in close proximity and share an enduring bond. In some cultural and social contexts, extended family relationships exist that share many of the characteristics of what may be conceptualised as that between siblings. Early research on sibling sexual abuse focused mainly on full and half-siblings, but some more recent research encompasses a broader spectrum. Most of what we discuss in this paper relates to brothers and sisters who have lived and grown up together. The extent to which sibling or other familial relationships share these circumstances will determine the extent to which the issues discussed are relevant
- ² Gittins, 1998; Jenks, 2005
- ³ Yates, 2017
- ⁴ Although the personal emotional costs of abuse are not quantifiable, it was estimated that in the UK in 2014 that the annual health costs in response to child sexual abuse was £182 million; approximately £150 million was spent on the criminal justice system each year and about £100m million was spent on children’s social care services. Significant long term economic costs to the UK can also be calculated in lost productivity among adults who have been victims of child sexual abuse; conservative estimates for the annual economic cost of child sexual abuse in the UK are between £1.6 and £3.2 billion. As the most common form of child sexual abuse in the home, sibling sexual abuse is having a significant impact and cost – both financially and personally - on individuals, families and society in the UK. (Saied-Tessier, A. 2014. Estimating the costs of child sexual abuse in the UK. London: NSPCC (Sanders, 2004). Sanders, R. (2004) Sibling Relationships: Theory and Issues for Practice. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.)
- ⁵ Kelley et al., 2019
- ⁶ Kelley et al., 2019; Masson & Hackett, 2004
- ⁷ Caspi, 2011; Kreinert & Walsh, 2011; Yates & Allardyce, 2021
- ⁸ Carlson et al, 2006; Cawson et al, 2000; Krienert and Walsh, 2011; Stroebel et al, 2013; Smith & Israel, 1987
- ⁹ Yates & Allardyce, 2021
- ¹⁰ Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support (SARSAS), Purple Leaf (The Trading Arm of West Mercia Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre – WMRSASC); the University of Birmingham and the University of the West of England, Bristol
- ¹¹ Hackett 2010
- ¹² Caffaro, 2020
- ¹³ McCartan et al, 2021
- ¹⁴ Of the 11,840 recorded incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults 4,684 were recorded as ‘a parent-child’ relationship (including father and mother, step, adopted and foster parents). Incidents involving a ‘parent-child’ relationship account for 40% of all police recorded incidents of intrafamilial sexual and offences and assaults, where the victim was under 18.

Of the 11,840 recorded incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults 4,287 were recorded as ‘other family member’. Incidents involving a ‘other family member’ relationship (including cousins, uncles and aunts, grandparents, nephews and nieces, other family and unknown) account for 36% of all police recorded incidents of intrafamilial sexual offences and assaults, where the victim was under 18.
- ¹⁵ Sibling sexual abuse has lower disclosure rates than other forms of child sexual abuse (Yates & Allardyce, 2021); intrafamilial abuse carried out by an adult perpetrator is more likely to be reported to the police than abuse carried out by a child who is a sibling; and sibling sexual abuse may not be processed through the criminal justice system due to factors including the age of the children involved and the context of the abuse
- ¹⁶ All names have been changed
- ¹⁷ The 2020 Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) report, undertaken by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, HMI Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service and HMI Probation, on the multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment
- ¹⁸ Yates & Allardyce, 2021
- ¹⁹ As a benchmark, ‘child sexual abuse’ has been referenced in the Houses 2,451 times from 2000 to 2021. In March 2022, Wera Hobhouse M.P. was the first M.P. to highlight sibling sexual abuse in Parliament for over 20 years at a Westminster Hall debate with Rachel Maclean, the Home Office Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Safeguarding).

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