

Sibling Sexual Abuse: A Variant of Childhood Sexual Abuse or an Entirely Different Experience?

Anat Talmon, PhD and Tova Lewin, BA



ACEs Health Champions Network
April 24, 2025





The nature of the sibling relationship

- ❖ Long-lasting and critical relationship
- ❖ Multifaceted and evolving
- ❖ companionship, support
- ❖ conflict, competition, rivalry

“I was so shocked it was my two children- ‘never in my family’.”

What do we know about sibling sexual abuse?

Systematic Review
Professional Think Tank
Public Inquiry
Participatory Research

Mapping the knowledge

Systematic Review (Bertele & Talmon, 2021)

- 14,680 participants across 15 empirical papers
- Average age of onset: 8; Younger sibling victim
- Duration and frequency: Mostly more than a year, occurrence of 2-10 times in total but much more frequently for around 1/3 of participants
- Adult implications: Depression, anxiety, reduced self-esteem, impaired sexual functioning
- An immense pathological burden: > 75% of adult survivors sought out counseling later in adulthood

Professional Think Tank

- Multi-center epidemiological study
- International collaboration with medical and mental health professionals
- Cooperative scale development to assess sexual experiences between siblings
- Initial results indicate high experience of sexual interaction against will and significant levels of depression between groups

Starting to explore

Public Inquiry (Lewin et al., 2023)

- Qualitative survivor testimonies
- Collaboration with the Israeli Independent Public Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse
- Environmental factors: Polyvictimization, unaware/unavailable parents, prior abuse, access to pornography
- Minimization of abuse due to lack of understanding and playful context
- Attempts of disclosure during childhood
- Immense psychological implications: i.e., shame, guilt “It is not easy to hate and love the same person”

Participatory Research (Lewin et al., 2024)

- Mixed-methods with parents
- Collaboration with 5WAVES (<https://www.5waves.org/>)
- Parents experience unique trauma in relation to sibling sexual abuse at time of disclosure or witnessing it and as well as after
- “At first you are in denial. You don’t want to believe it...That day was rage, denial, sadness, sorrow. I describe the emotions as being like a terrible car accident, bodies everywhere, your car is on fire but you are trying to fix the brakes. Confusing, alarming, bewildering, it’s like being pulled under a wave and you are being tossed and turned and you don’t know which way is up or down until you surface, and by then you wish you would have just drowned”

Lewin, T., Spaegele, N., Attrash-Najjar, A., Katz, C., & Talmon, A. (2023). I got played by my best friend in my own home: survivor testimonies of sibling sexual abuse. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*. 10.1080/13552600.2023.2197929

Lewin, T., Black, B., Socolof, M., & Talmon, A. (2024). The parental experience and emotional response to sibling sexual abuse: When a parent's most valuable gift becomes a source of trauma. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 162(3) 107079. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107079>

Special Issue: Child Abuse and Neglect

- Characteristics, Definitions, and Dynamics
- The Family Perspective
- Intervention and Implications

13 manuscripts that delve into the complexities of SSA from theoretical, empirical, and practical lenses:

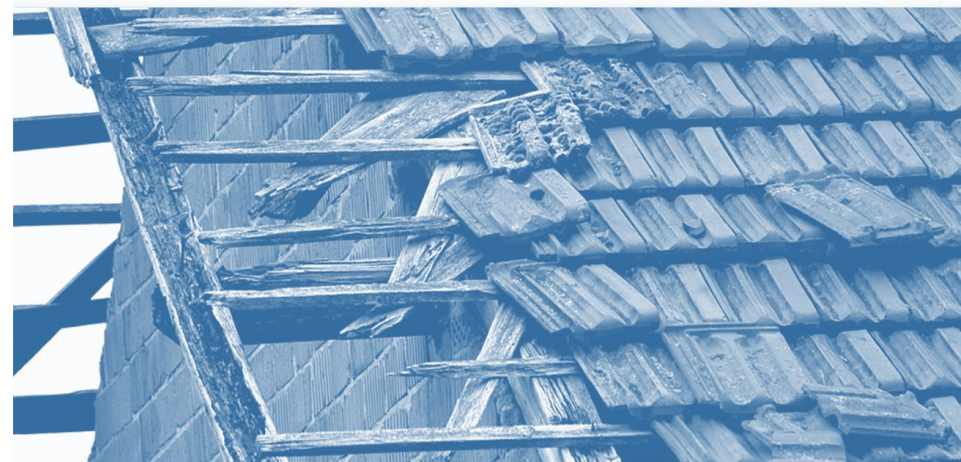
- Complex dynamics and familial interactions
- Lifelong impact on families
- The need for unique models of intervention
- Challenges and opportunities for professionals

Defining Sibling Sexual Abuse

WORDS
CREATE A
REALITY

What constitutes sibling sexual abuse?

- There is a great inconsistency in available definitions of sibling sexual abuse
- Lack of definition complicates research, recognition, and intervention efforts.



Barriers to defining sibling sexual abuse

Difficulty in assessment

- Exists within the broader concept of normal sexual behavior and accepted as a natural part of children's development.
- Recognizing its abusive nature is difficult

Difficulty in reporting

- Underrepresented in research inquiries, studies and reports
- Characteristics of SSA are unique to other forms of child sexual abuse

Supporting Families

AERIE
FRAMEWORK

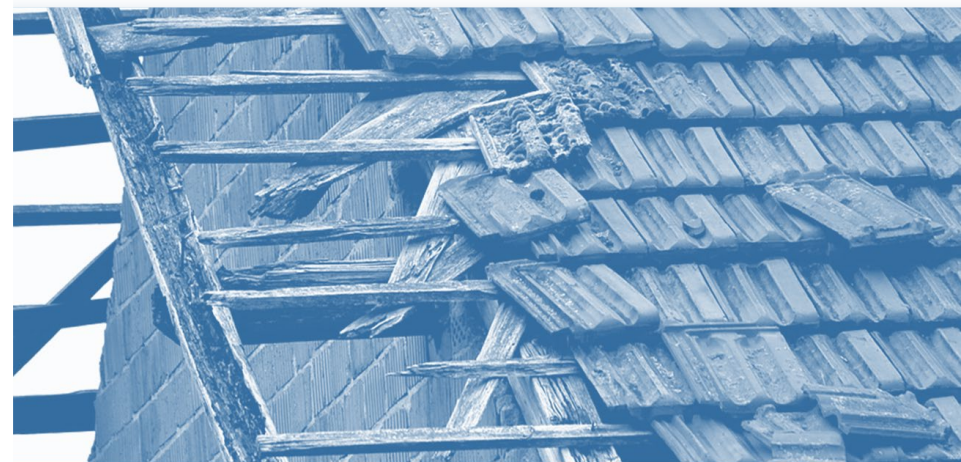
Sibling sexual abuse is a family issue

Wider family context

Sibling sexual abuse is either the result of or the precursor for an intrafamilial crisis

Reverberating outcomes

"I had nurtured their sibling relationships and thought that having siblings was a lifelong gift for all of them. The thing that I thought would be the most valuable, lifelong gift has turned into a source of trauma that will reverberate through their lifetimes."



AERIE Framework to Combat SSA

Sibling sexual abuse can happen in any family. This must be spoken about and acknowledged.

Ensure home safety including clear boundaries on privacy, respect, consent and secrecy

Support *all* family members through healing processes, with the belief that recovery is possible



Awareness

Education

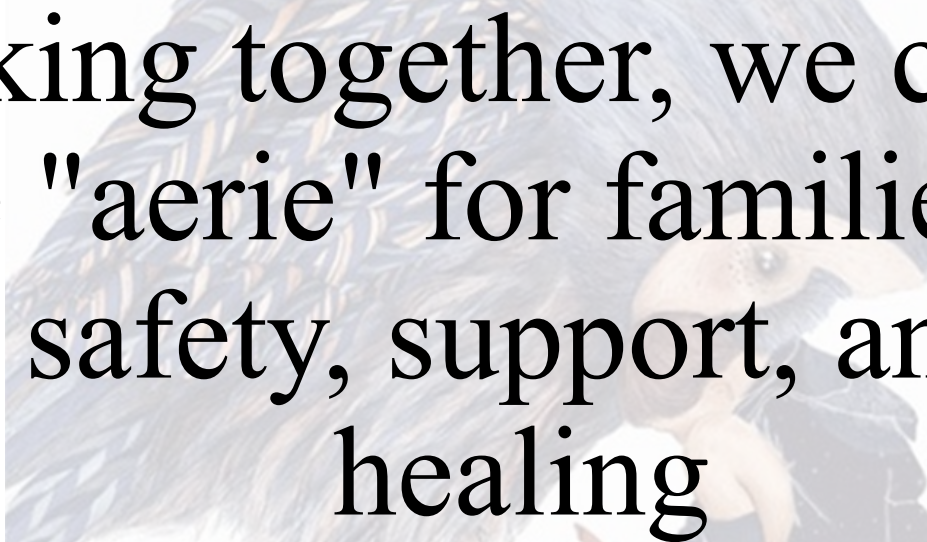
Regulation

Intervention

Empowerment

Understand the parameters of age-appropriate sexual interaction between children and when behaviors may be concerning

Recognize the signs that something may be wrong and take action. Early detection and intervention is key

A faint, artistic illustration of a large blue bird, possibly a booby, with a child sitting on its back. The child is wearing a dark shirt and shorts, and is holding a small object. The bird is standing on a light surface.

By working together, we can build a protective "aerie" for families—one that provides safety, support, and a path to healing

Key takeaway



Next Steps



The Path
Forward

What is still needed?

Quantitative Studies

- Great need for additional quantitative studies
- People who were harmed, people who harmed, uninvolved siblings, parents.
- Therapists and professionals

Longitudinal Studies

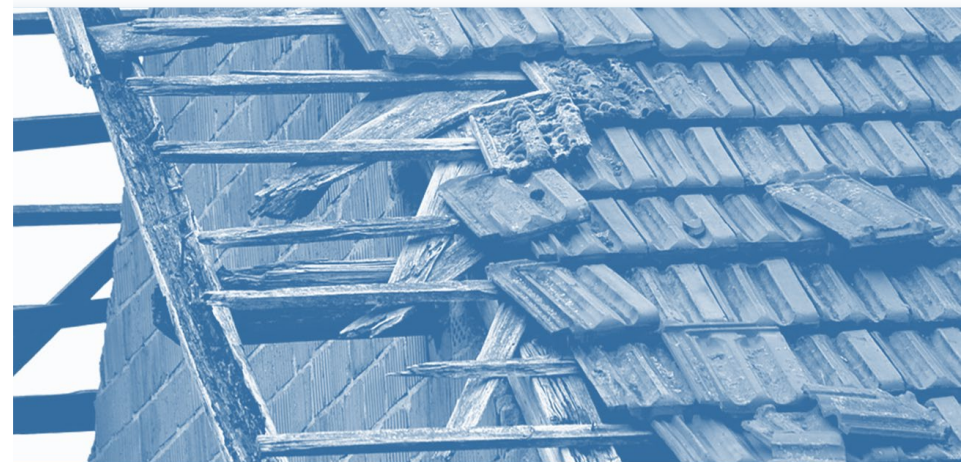
- No longitudinal study has ever been conducted
- Study specific consequences at various timepoints and timepoints across the lifespan

Definition

- Consistent universal definition and criteria
- Report on prevalence

Influence policy surrounding sibling sexual abuse

- Sibling sexual abuse needs to be more specifically addressed in state and federal policy
- Through building an expert community and working with those with lived experience we can impact a policy change



Thank You!



Tova Lewin
tovalewin5@gmail.com

Professor Anat Talmon
anattalmon@gmail.com



<https://thetraumagroup.huji.ac.il/>

