

ATSA Blog

Association for the Treatment & Prevention of Sexual Abuse

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Defining Sibling Sexual Abuse: Challenges and outcomes

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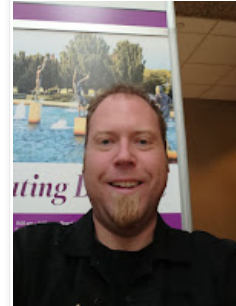
Recently the authors have been involved in a research project funded primarily by the Home Office and overseen by [Rape Crisis England & Wales](#) (RCEW) that examined, in part, [the experiences of adult survivors of sibling sexual abuse \(SSA\) in childhood](#). In the course of time the publication of reports and journal articles from research will emerge, but over the next few months we will be posting blogs relating to some of the key questions and challenges that this area of sexual abuse presents. For if sexual abuse as a topic area is complex and nuanced, this is particularly true of the area of Sibling Sexual Abuse ([Yates and Allardyce, 2021](#)). This blog will discuss some of the complexities that we faced in determining the remit of the study and the challenges of defining what Sibling Sexual Abuse was.

The first main challenge was the definition of sibling sexual abuse, especially because both core terms, Sibling and Sexual abuse, are debated with different professional, practitioners, and policies seeing them in different ways. If we start with the term "sibling" quite often, and historically, that means a direct blood relative that you live with (i.e., a biological brother or sister), but in the modern era with changes to life and family dynamics this definition is no longer meaningful. We had started to see the term sibling broaden in its meaning to include adoptive siblings, foster siblings, and step siblings (either through the blending of existing families or the emergence of new children through a blend of families). In addition to this some participants stated that they counted non-family members as siblings, it certainly closer than existing siblings, like teammates or roommates at boarding school. This threw up another issue, that of location, for not all siblings resided in the same house at all, never mind for part of the week. This presented a challenge as, if we let participants determine their own definition of sibling then the study would start to lose meaning. Therefore, for the purpose of the study we defined siblings as individuals related to each other, through blood or other means, through a common caregiver that may or may not be a blood relative.

The second main challenge was understanding and defining what was meant by "sexual abuse". Sexual abuse is a wide and varied term, and this has an impact on the way that different forms of abuse are recognised and responded to. Research shows that sexual abuse is varied and that experiences of sibling sexual abuse reflect this ([Yates and Allardyce, 2021](#)), which was what our research and scoping work found as well with victims stating that they had experienced penetrative abuse, inappropriate touching, coercive control, as well as exposure to pornography and viewing as well as creating child sexual abuse material. However, interestingly the research study suggested that in a lot of sibling sexual abuse cases there was a broader family sexual, emotional, and psychological dysfunction in their everyday life. And, that it was not until they were teenagers, or adults, that they saw the sexually abusive behaviour for what it was. Unlike the definition of sibling, we thought that the definition of sexual abuse needed to be as broad as possible to really include the full scope and range of sexually abusive behaviour and its outcomes; thereby, including penetrative abuse, inappropriate touching, coercive control, as well as exposure to pornography and viewing as well as creating child sexual abuse material.

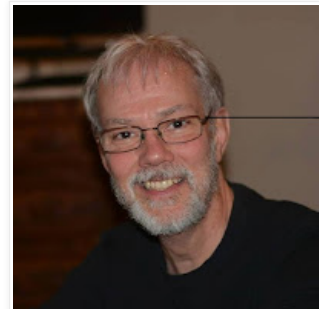
We defined Sibling Sexual Abuse for the purpose of the study as, "*any form of sexualized behaviour or action, contact and non-contact, between siblings*" which led to the third and final challenge the context of the abuse. In some ways this was pre-determined for us by the funding stream, which wanted us to look at the experiences of people who were sexually abuse by a sibling during their childhood. This made the research design

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easier, but it created other issues in that often, as demonstrated by research (Yates and Allardyce, 2021) and our experience, that while the sexual abuse started in childhood too often it continued into adulthood and on some occasions, it starts in adulthood. It's important to state this as often as sibling sexual abuse is seen as a form of child abuse, which it is much broader than that. Which lead to the debate - what was a child and where, if at all, we should draw the definitional boundary. It was decided that as childhood is an ever more contested term, that we would look at official terms and legal definitions of children. Definitions of childhood seem to draw the line at either 16 or 18; we decided to use 18 as the cut off as it was the most inclusive and it's the legal definition laid down by the UN and the most internationally recognised one. This meant that we were going into our research project with the definition of Sibling Sexual Abuse being *"any form of sexualized behaviour or action, contact and non-contact, between siblings when they were under the age of 18"*.

Although we thought that this was the most inclusive definition that we could use, and in the main it was, the research started to show up other definitional factors that would give us pause for thought;

- The gender and age of the siblings involved in the sexual abuse.
- The role of external forces in the Sibling Sexual Abuse, including peers, parents, and other family members.
- The role of professionals in recognising, defining, and responding to Sibling Sexual Abuse and their impact on what was "officially" recognised.
- The victim/survivors' perceptions of their own abuse and what was deemed "worthy" to be counted as sexual abuse such as non-penetrative incidents.
- The overarching family dysfunction linked to the Sibling Sexual Abuse and context it created whereby sexual abuse was seen as normal or completely secretive behaviour, which impacted disclosures and help seeking behaviour. But also, the recognition that the person committing the Sibling Sexual Abuse may be a victim of sexual, domestic, emotional, or psychological abuse themselves.

Some of these issues will be further explored in future blogs, articles, and/or reports but the main thing to take from this blog is that Sibling Sexual Abuse is complex issue that due consideration needs to be given to terminology and definitions surrounding it when planning research, practice, or policy.

Posted by [SAJRT Blog](#) at 7:32 AM 

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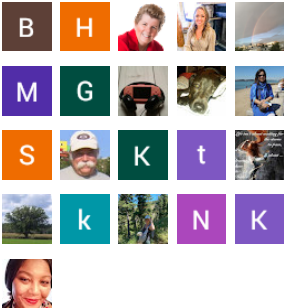
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