

Introduction

There is no doubt that child abuse of any kind is a terrible act that may result in various mental health problems, but the trauma doesn't stop at that individual. Exposure or disclosure of childhood abuse causes issues not only in the victim but in their siblings, who witness the abuse. [Sibling vicarious trauma is the exposure to violence against one's sibling without being physically affected. It is a major problem in abusive households and should be studied alongside other forms of child abuse.] Although many studies review the effects of childhood abuse on the victim, there is a minimal number of studies looking at how exposure to abuse in one child may affect a nonoffending, nonabused sibling(s).

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While searching for studies conducted in the past ten years, only four explicitly focused on the siblings of abused children and adolescents. Of those four, only one was based in the US, and the other three were located in Western Europe and Israel, showing a minimal focus on this area of research globally.

“Sometimes it’s Harder to See Than to Experience”: The Sibling Subsystem in the Context of Parental Abuse as Conveyed by Adult Survivors (2022, Israel)

In an article by Carmit Katz et al., they wanted more information on how adult survivors of child abuse retrospectively perceived their siblings during childhood and how their perceptions have evolved in adulthood. They achieved this by recruiting participants through a website targeted at their population. Unfortunately, the response rate was low, and they only received 83 responses in three months, where 20 fit their desired population. Interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data, in which they found that in most cases, the sibling subsystem was described as loving and comfortable, in which the older siblings often referred to their younger siblings as their babies. They also discovered that positive relationships between siblings were associated with better adjustment and emotional regulation. However, with this sample being conducted using only Israeli Jewish adults, there is a lack of cultural and racial diversity that could change the results. Katz et al. suggest further research where the information is from the child's narrative soon after disclosure and includes other individuals close to the family dynamics.

It’s a Family Affair: Individual Experiences and Sibling Exposure to Emotional, Physical, and Sexual Abuse and the Impact on Adult Depressive Symptoms (2020, Netherlands)

Research done by Marie-Louis Kullberg et al. aimed to examine the extent to which the reports on the three types of child maltreatment (physical abuse, emotional maltreatment, and sexual abuse) are similar among siblings. Also, to find whether the family level of emotional maltreatment, physical abuse, and sexual abuse is associated with depressive symptoms, and additionally examine whether the experience of being

maltreated more, being the black sheep, is associated with more depressive symptoms. They used a national study to gather their desired population, where they found 256 families, 380 siblings, and 636 participants. Of this population, 62% were female, with participants between the ages of 20-78. Kullberg recommends further research to focus on underlying factors of child maltreatment to better understand how one individual may feel more or less depressed than their sibling in a similar adverse childhood experience. Also, further research should concentrate on the sibling subsystem and the effects abuse has on the family system. Kullberg also mentions that in clinical practice focusing on the improvement of the home environment may prevent child maltreatment and psychopathology in the long run.

Siblings' Perspectives of the Impact of Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure on Sibling and Family Relationships (2021, Ireland)

For the third study, we will explore how siblings responded to the disclosure of child sexual abuse from their siblings affected the relationships between them, and the family relationships. Rosaleen McElvaney et al. used another national survey which is based in Ireland, and targeted adult siblings of victims of CSA. The survey took about 20-30 minutes to complete via Qualtrics, where they gathered 45 participants over 28 years old, had a sibling who experienced CSA and were not a victim themselves. This recruitment method gave them a low response rate since siblings were difficult to access, and the online survey was limiting because it had no empathetic interviewer to support the participants during potentially difficult questions. The study's findings included three main themes. First, intense emotional reactions occurred after disclosure. Secondly, there was a change in the sibling relationship, and finally, there was difficulty managing the family dynamics. Because the participants found out about the abuse in different ways, for example, right after the abuse, from a parent or the sibling, or years after the abuse occurred, it allowed the researchers to understand which had the best effect on the relationships. The main emotion the participant felt was immense guilt that they couldn't protect their siblings, which strained their relationships. Some victims also experienced guilt for being exempt from the abuse or not having done anything to protect their siblings. McElvaney concluded that openness about the abuse from the victimized sibling helped the participants understand and helped them make sense of their sibling's experience. They also found evidence that CSA may affect all household members, not only the victim and parents. Ideas for future research that the study recommended was to look into the siblings' experience with a more in-depth interview that this study was not able to produce, which would allow for building on the current study's findings.

Exposure to Parent Assault on a Sibling as Childhood Adversity (2021, US)

For the final study done by Corinna Jenkins Tuckett et al., they wanted to explore the relationship between exposure to parent-on-sibling abuse (EPAS) and the participant's reports of being afraid at the time of the abuse, as well as the mental health status of

the participants. They also wanted to know if the fear differed depending on which parent was abusing their sibling, with the hypothesis being that there would be more fear if the fathers were the perpetrator. The study used a combination of three cross-sectional National Surveys of Children's Exposure to Violence conducted in 2008, 2011, and 2014. Participants ranged in age from 1 month to 17 years old. And they received a population of 51% male, 56% white, non-Hispanic, 23% Hispanic, any race, 14% Black non-Hispanic, and 7% non-Hispanic. The children were randomly selected by whose birthday was the most recent. Unless the child was below the age of 10, in which the child was accompanied by a caregiver who was most familiar with the child's experiences of EPAS. The study found that EPAS is associated with distress symptoms in children and adolescents, that the exposure to the father's violence was most frequent, and that the children/ adolescents were more afraid of the father's physical abuse than the mother's. Finally, they also found that the effects of EPAS were independent of the impact of interparental violence. Tuckett explains that abuse does not happen to all children in a household and that there should be a revision of family violence exposure inventories, including EPAS. They also suggest that education should be provided to children exposed to EPAS on supporting the abused sibling and telling an adult.

Conclusion

Commonalities between these studies are in their reflection that there needs to be more research done on how exposure to violence on a sibling affects the individuals. Only one study was found and based in the United States, making it difficult to check the validity of these studies. Especially since some of the reactions in other cultures, like Israeli- Jewish, have a polar opposite response to EPAS than the study based in Ireland. Because child abuse is still widely prevalent in the US, and the world, studies that aim to understand the effects and to prevent the abuse from recycling through the generations will be beneficial for reducing psychopathology in upcoming generations.