



## Sibling Sexual Abuse

Sibling child sexual abuse is defined as "sexual behavior between siblings that is not age appropriate, not transitory, and not motivated by developmentally, mutually appropriate curiosity" (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro). Studies have shown that between 2% (Leder) and 4% (Finkelhor, Hammer, Sedlak) of people have been sexually victimized by a sibling, as the sexual contact involved some degree of forced or coercive activity. This Advocacy Station is written for community-based advocates and will explore advocacy considerations with those victimized by a sibling and supporting the nonoffending caregivers of those children.

### Providing Advocacy

Sibling abuse brings complicated family concerns. Usually the person who offends and the person who is victimized both are minors, and they may live in the same home, and share the same parent or parents. Other scenarios could include involvement of stepsiblings, adopted or foster children, or cousins in extended family homes, all of whom present complicated family situations and dynamics. When it is discovered that the abuser is a son or daughter, the whole family system will be impacted.

While sibling sexual abuse is extremely complex, the advocacy principles for serving all sexual assault survivors remain the same.

#### **Work with the survivor to establish safety: physical as well as emotional.**

Advocates can do this a couple of ways:

1. We provide orientation to clients on advocacy services and agency policy and practices to help establish feelings of safety, thereby creating clear

expectations for our working relationship with our clients and maintaining consistency and predictability in our services.

2. We work with clients to discover what feels safe and help them to establish those environments and interactions in their lives through safety planning. Even with children, there are choices they can be empowered to make regarding their own safety and work with an advocate on harm reduction strategies.

Overall, with child or adult clients, advocates help establish safety by letting survivors know what to expect in situations and discussing the possibilities.

In practice:

Even if you, as an advocate, are unfamiliar with what might happen in court, because perhaps it is your first time working on a case like this, you can still help the survivor establish some emotional safety by drawing the layout of the courtroom, showing a picture of the judge, or explaining what commonly used legal terms mean.

**Use advocacy as an opportunity for the survivor to exercise choice and control.**

All choices, even small ones, are important. The personal experience of choice builds the ability to direct one's own life and embrace more possibilities about the future.

Advocates are a roadmap for survivors, rather than a GPS system. Each survivor knows what healing or justice means to them. We cannot tell them how to get there, because it's not our journey. We can help survivors navigate the aftermath of sexual violence by bringing our expertise about systems, options, reactions, and choices (Bein, Davis, Green)

Choice will also help foster the safety planning aspects of advocacy and build trusting relationships with your clients. In addition, for children, choice is that much more important considering their societal disenfranchisement. The choice of reporting is not an option for a child and their choices at school and home can be limited, so giving back even small instances of choice and power can make a positive impact toward healing.

In practice:

Choosing a toy, a time to meet, a place to sit-- these all contribute to overall healing of survivors.

**Encourage the concepts of self-determination, autonomy, and empowerment.**

Sexual violence—regardless of the type of victimization— is about silence and powerlessness. A relationship with an advocate can increase positive outcomes for sexual assault survivors. These positive outcomes are related to decreased anxiety, increased self-efficacy, increased resilience, and decreased isolation. We can help empower clients by focusing on survivor strengths, choice, and allowing them to direct their healing process.

In practice:

Disclosure and testimony are often required of child survivors. Focus on the bravery it takes to tell the story, as opposed to the reactions of others or outcomes in court. Help the client measure success on their abilities and strengths throughout the process.

- “This is your story to tell and I am here to listen and support you if you want to talk through, write, or think about how you will go about telling it if you find that helpful.”

**Research and collaborate.**

Working with sibling sexual assault survivors might be new to you or it might not. Either way, we know that because each survivor is unique in their experiences and goals, we are never quite prepared for what could come up.

When challenges arise and answers are uncertain, it is helpful for an advocate to use language such as, “I don’t know but I have some ideas on how we can find out together.” Such phrasing can help keep survivors involved as well as fosters empowerment and collaboration.

Again, like choice, this is particularly significant in work with young people. Often, children are just told answers and not given opportunities to collaborate in

solving problems. Empowerment is particularly significant when working with those who experience less societal power.

In practice:

- Google your client's questions together at the computer.
- Make phone calls on speakerphone so you can both hear the answers.

## **Advocacy Strategies with Child Survivors**

Self-determination is an important factor for long-term recovery. An advocate's role is to provide choices and support whatever the client chooses, including minors. Self-identity, connection to the self, and autonomy are all impacted by sexual trauma. As stated previously, exercising choice helps to mitigate these impacts, particularly for children who may feel very little autonomy and control, not only over their particular victimization, but broader aspects of life.

Though their primary support still comes from their parent, school-age children are old enough to:

- Have their own questions about what is happening,
- Understand the criminal justice system if it is explained to them in simple terms, and
- Benefit from an additional supportive person.

It is important to build a relationship with child survivors outside of legal and medical appointments to increase rapport, trust, and credibility with an advocate. If a child survivor only sees an advocate during legal/medical appointments, the advocate is only another unfamiliar adult in an unfamiliar and potentially scary meeting.

Child clients will have their own questions that they are likely hesitant to ask at home given the complex family dynamics involved. It is important that advocates provide a safe space to ask these questions and explore.

### **Consider questions carefully.**

One of the best things about being an advocate is that we only need to know what our clients need us to know; we are not investigators. We are able to provide support, resources, and validation without having very many details about the assault or abuse that took place. Allow the survivor to tell their story in their own time or not at all. This is of particular importance with youth and young children. We don't want to be another adult who asks a lot of detailed questions about painful experiences. We want to be a person of support and allow survivors to guide their own processes— regardless of age.

In practice:

Sometimes we ask questions to get a conversation going. Use open-ended and choice-centered questions.

- "What's been going on?"
- "How would you like to spend our time today?"
- "I have a few ideas of what we could do during our time together today, is it okay if I tell you about them and then you can choose which one you like best?"
- "I have a lot of things in this room/on this table/in this drawer/etc. Would you like to pick something out for us to do today?"

**Center the survivor in your advocacy.**

In all advocacy with survivors of all ages, but particularly with young people, we want to show that we work with and for them. Avoid phrases like "your mom told me you like your teacher." This might be a challenge but it helps establish more trust with the survivor if you are not discussing or passing information, even seemingly innocuous information, between the caregiver and the survivor.

Another way to enhance centering the survivor is to ensure they have their own advocate. Whenever possible, having different advocates for the primary and secondary survivor is best. This will help maintain better boundaries for the advocate, separate client files, and safeguard confidentiality, as well as show the survivor that they have someone just for them.

In practice:

Give the child your business card so they can contact you if they choose. Even if the child is too young to use the phone independently, having a business card still provides the child with a sense of control over their situation.

### **Engage with play.**

A marked consequence of childhood sexual assault is reduction of creative and critical thinking, which are linked to free play. Because of the disconnection to themselves, distrust in others, and inability to be present in time or imagine the future, the ability to play and the resulting benefits are often underdeveloped in childhood survivors. It is appropriate for children and the advocate to play during advocacy appointments. The goal of this is to provide a safe place to explore play again. Advocates do not provide play therapy, which is the processing of that trauma acted out in in play. In advocacy, we are looking to explore joyful, silly, free play. We want to allow and encourage the child freedom to direct the play with the advocate, again offering essential choice and control.

#### In practice:

Have creative activities around so children can feel free to explore them. For example, if they pick up a coloring sheet and begin to color, sit at the table with them and color on your own coloring sheet. The child may come over and begin coloring on your sheet with you or enjoy coloring independently side-by-side.

- Ask them about their drawing. Instead of “What are you drawing?” you can say “Would you like to tell me about your drawing?”
- You can even simply begin coloring and explain your choice of colors and why you like them to open up dialogue.

Drawing and coloring together can be a great way of building trust and it allows the survivor not to have to look directly at the advocate if they feel shy.

## **Advocacy Strategies with Nonoffending Parents/Caregivers**

A parent’s response to their child following a disclosure of sexual abuse is one of the most significant factors influencing the impact of the abuse on the child. Accordingly, your work with parents also has direct effects on child survivors.

Parents' reactions change over time and range from anger and denial to wholehearted support of the child. Your time with them is a snapshot of their healing process at one point along this continuum of responses and may not necessarily represent who they are as parents and people.

### **Allow the caregiver to tell their story.**

The caregiver will need to process the intrafamilial abuse from their perspective and in their role as a caring parent to both children: the one who harmed and the one who was harmed. A parent may be negotiating their understanding of the world. As one researcher found, "The traumatic grief and numerous losses nonoffending mothers experience when they learn about their children's abuse seem to negatively influence their perceptions of self (as mother and wife), others (as trustworthy), and the world (as safe)." (Willingham)

This can also look like processing their own abuse history or the offending child's experiences with abuse. (A resource for caregivers specific to this is located at the end of this document.)

#### In practice:

Provide active listening and validate the intense difficulty of the situation. Remind them they are not alone even though it feels overwhelming.

### **Listen and provide education to dispel myths.**

Caregivers will likely be confused, hurt, or surprised about this recently discovered abuse. These reactions coupled with entrenchment in rape culture, are likely to cause the caregiver to engage with some myths about sexual violence.

#### In practice:

- "Many children who have been abused do not grow up to abuse others and can live happy and healthy lives." (Even if the offending child has an abuse history.)
- "Your child (who was harmed) did nothing to cause the abuse."
- "It is possible to love your child (who offended) and still hold them accountable for their actions. It is also possible to keep your other child (who was harmed) safe. All these can be both true and hard."

Help them learn the facts and provide reading and resources (some of which are located at the end of this document.)

### **Center the survivor in your advocacy.**

As advocates, we are committed to center survivors in all that we do.

In cases like these, sometimes a lot of emphasis is placed on getting help for the offending sibling. The parent(s) will be busy taking care of system-related activities for the child who offended. The sibling who was abused may feel as though they are being ignored.

#### In practice:

“Parents can benefit from gentle reminders to provide attention to the victim’s needs in equal measure. Advocates may also need to remind those involved that the family system was broken while the abuse was going on; it is not the disclosure from the child who was victimized that breaks down the family.” (Yamamoto)

Again, whenever possible, having different advocates for the primary and secondary survivor enhances not only centering the survivor, but provides more focused support for the caregiver.

### **Take the time to learn the family's values, beliefs, and practices and focus on their strengths and protective factors.**

In our advocacy with caregivers, we are exploring two of the most sensitive topics: parenting and sexual abuse of children (inherent in this are beliefs and values around sexuality). The families’ culture, religion, experiences, values, beliefs, and practices will affect their understanding and response. At times, we can use these aspects as springboards to discuss parenting strategies, communication, and appropriate healing modalities.

Although harm has been done, there is always opportunity for prevention-laced healing strategies. One of the value we can come up against is “respect your elders.” It is helpful to reframe what this means to both honor this cultural norm while creating empowerment and safety for younger ones. An older sibling in a position of power generally perpetrates sibling abuse. Continuing a family narrative where older children are in charge of younger children or “respecting



our elders” means doing what they tell you to do, can be harmful to an already harmed child as well as create risk for additional abuse.

In practice:

Work with the parent on redefining this important value and empower the child who was victimized. Physical touch does not have to be one of the ways a family demonstrates respect for elders. Explore how the parent can talk with other family members to negotiate these new boundaries, like not having to hug or kiss an elder family member (sometimes how respectful greeting is shown). Parents can talk with children to think about other ways to show that same respect, like encouraging them to say “I am really glad to see you” when they don’t want to hug or kiss a relative.

**Help problem-solve obstacles and provide additional referrals needed to address family safety, treatment for sexually abusive behavior, and legal options.**

Parents may be:

- Dealing with the loss of a family, home, or financial hardship. Having a sexually abusive child in the home often means moving or splitting the family living situation for the protection of other children. This can mean twice the rent bills, utilities, etc.
- Struggling with their own experiences of abuse.
- Trying to care for other children in the home and keep up with the family’s day-to-day needs.
- Navigating child welfare and/or legal processes.

In practice:

Talk with the parent about their immediate needs. Food, shelter, and safety needs have to be met in order for the family to engage in any healing. A need for new living arrangements for entire family units or individuals is probable. Housing advocacy, shelter, rental assistance, and

other types of economic assistance, as well as legal advocacy related to leases may be important options to review with these families.

## References

Bein, K. / Davis, V. / Green, L. (2016) "Strengthening Our Practice: The Ten Essential Strengths of Sexual Violence Victim Advocates in Dual and Multi-Service Advocacy Agencies" (Second Edition), Resource Sharing Project.

Caffaro, J. & Conn-Caffaro, A. (1998) *Sibling Abuse Trauma Assessment and Intervention Strategies for Children, Families, and Adults*.

Finkelhor, D. / Hammer, H. / Sedlak, A. (1999) "Sexually Assaulted Children: National Estimates and Characteristics," National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children.

Leder, J. (1991) *Brothers and Sisters: How They Shape Our Lives*.

Willingham, E. (2007). "Maternal Perceptions and Responses to Child Sexual Abuse," Counseling and Psychological Services Dissertations.

Yamamoto, D. (2015). "The Advocate's Guide: Working With Parents Of Children Who Have Been Sexually Assaulted," National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

## Reading, Resources & Tools

### Advocacy with Children

- In Practice: Advocacy with Children, WCSAP  
<http://www.wcsap.org/practice-advocacy-children>
- Confidentiality Considerations When Providing Sexual Assault Advocacy Services to Minors, WCSAP  
<http://www.wcsap.org/confidentiality-considerations-when-providing-sexual-assault-advocacy-services-minors>
- Sexual Assault Forensic Exams in Your Community and Special Considerations for Youth Survivors, WCSAP  
<http://www.wcsap.org/sexual-assault-forensic-exams-your-community-and-special-considerations-youth-survivors>

- Youth Activity Guide for Advocates & Preventionists, WCSAP  
<http://www.wcsap.org/youth-activity-guide>
- From Hurt to Hope: Child Sexual Abuse Advocacy Guide, WCSAP  
<http://www.wcsap.org/hurt-hope-child-sexual-abuseassault-advocacy-guide>

### **Advocacy with Parents**

- The Advocate's Guide: Working With Parents Of Children Who Have Been Sexually Assaulted, NSVRC  
<https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications-guides/advocates-working-parents-children-who-have-been-sexually-assaulted>
- Research on Risk and Protective Factors, WCSAP  
<http://www.wcsap.org/research-risk-and-protective-factors>
- Parent Survivors: When Your Child Has Been Sexually Abused, and You Were Also Abused as a Child, WCSAP  
<http://www.wcsap.org/parent-survivors>
- Sibling Sexual Abuse: A Guide for Parents, Family Services of Greater Vancouver  
[http://www.ksacc.ca/docs/sibling\\_sexual\\_abuse.pdf?LanguageID=EN-US](http://www.ksacc.ca/docs/sibling_sexual_abuse.pdf?LanguageID=EN-US)
- Grounding Techniques Parents Can Use with Children  
<https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/groundg/groundg%20tools%20doodles%20%28Web%29/html5.html>

### **Family Dynamics**

- Sexualized Behaviors Among Siblings, WCSAP <http://www.wcsap.org/sexualized-behaviors-among-siblings-0>
- Helping Families Understand and Respond to Children's Sexual Behaviors, WCSAP <http://www.wcsap.org/helping-families-understand-and-respond-children%E2%80%99s-sexual-behaviors>
- A Balancing Act: A Family Perspective to Sibling Sexual Abuse, WCSAP  
[http://www.wcsap.org/sites/default/files/uploads/resources\\_publications/research\\_advocacy\\_digest/RAD\\_Sibling\\_Abuse\\_2014\\_05\\_Final.pdf](http://www.wcsap.org/sites/default/files/uploads/resources_publications/research_advocacy_digest/RAD_Sibling_Abuse_2014_05_Final.pdf)
- Safer Society Clinician Referrals <https://www.safersociety.org/press/treatment-referrals/>
- Considering Family Reconnection and Reunification after Child Sexual Abuse: A Road Map for Advocates and Service Providers  
<https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications-guides/considering-family-reconnection-and-reunification-after-child>
- Understanding and Coping with Sexual Behavior Problems in Children: Information for Parents and Caregivers, The National Child Traumatic Stress Network [http://nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/caring/sexualbehaviorproblems.pdf](http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/sexualbehaviorproblems.pdf)

- Discussion Paper: Youth with Sexually Harmful Behaviors, National Alliance to End Sexual Violence  
<http://endsexualviolence.org/files/NAESVDiscussionPaperYouthCausingSexualHarmon.pdf>