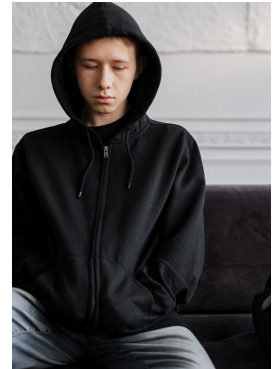


Sibling Sexual Abuse: What Practitioners Need to Know

The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse defines **Sibling Sexual Abuse** as **harmful sexual behaviour** or **activity** involving the **misuse of power** with a **victimising intent or outcome** between **children who self-identify as siblings** (including half siblings, step siblings, foster and adoptive siblings).



This may involve **sexual behaviours within a family environment** over a prolonged period. Including **non-contact forms of sexual abuse** such as voyeurism or forcing a sibling to watch pornography and **contact forms** including penetrative sexual acts and sexual touching.

Sibling Sexual Abuse is behaviour that causes **sexual, emotional and physical harm**. It includes **sexually abusive behaviour** which can involve **violence**.

SSA is the most common type of child sexual abuse within the family home, however it is the **least likely to be disclosed**. SSA can occur in **all families** regardless of **sexual orientation, disability, age, class or ethnicity**.

Prevalence:

- SSA is estimated to be **three to five times** more common than parent to child sexual abuse.
- 15% of children may engage in sexual behaviour with their siblings, and around **5% may be involved in sibling sexual abuse**.

Key Information:

- SSA is **more likely** to occur when children have **experienced abuse, neglect** or have a **convicted sex offender** within their **close network**.
- **Do not rely on verbal disclosures**. Consider **behaviour that indicates** something **harmful** may be happening such as using **inappropriate language, playing with toys in a sexual way, not wanting to spend time with certain people**.
- **A third of the children** that display **sexually harmful behaviours towards siblings** have a **learning disability**.

The Importance of Language

Instead of using **language** such as 'perpetrator' and 'victim', it can be **helpful** to use language which reaffirms that we are **working to safeguard both children**. Terms such as '**child who has harmed**' and '**child who has been harmed**' can help everyone involved to **remember** both are **children, first and foremost**. **Avoid language that minimises the abuse or implies consent** for the child that has been harmed.

How Can I Recognise Sibling Sexual Abuse?

One of the **signs** that a child has been sexually abused can be that they **exhibit harmful sexual behaviour towards others**, including other children at school or in their family. Instead of focusing solely on the harmful behaviour, **consider whether the child has been sexually abused themselves**.

The **context of sibling sexual abuse is complex** and can include **trauma, isolation, viewing inappropriate images or videos, lack of sex and relationship education** and **additional/developmentally inappropriate caring responsibilities**.

Children are more likely to come to the attention of services for secondary concerns including self harming or going missing. The sexual abuse may not be identified until later, when they develop trusting relationships with an adult.

It is important for practitioners to be aware of the signs and indicators to look out for. Here is a 7 Minute Briefing on child sexual abuse.



Hackett (2010) developed a continuum model of sexual behaviours in children that provides a helpful framework.



Barriers to Disclosure

It can be **extremely difficult for any child who** has been sexually harmed **to tell anyone about the abuse. Not all children realise that they have been sexually abused.** It is **important for children to build a trusting relationship** with an adult so that they can tell them about their worries. They may show their **discomfort non-verbally** particularly if they have a disability or English is not their first language. Please **use professional interpreters if required** and not family members when discussing safeguarding information.

It can be difficult for some parents or carers to acknowledge that sibling sexual abuse has occurred. Appropriate support and responses are required for parents or carers to manage their feelings so they can focus on creating a safe environment for their children.

What can help?

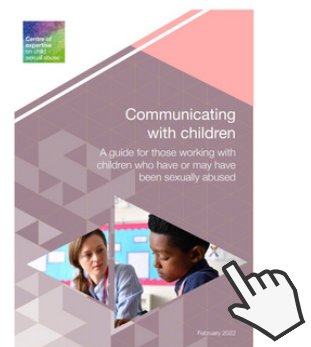
Educate:

- **Talk about safe touch** - use resources like [NSPCC's PANTS](#) to support and reinforce this
- **Ensure children know it is okay to seek help** if they need it

Be curious:

- I have noticed XXX and I wonder what is going on for you
- Tell me about...
- Help me understand...

Follow Safeguarding Procedures



This is a useful guide for communicating with children that have or may have been sexually abused

Sibling Sexual Abuse is a Safeguarding concern

SSA impacts the whole family. Interventions need to be provided to all children, including those that have not been harmed and **carers that have been affected**. The professional network should **consider the family dynamics, relationships, daily functioning, lived experiences, attitudes, responses, roles and status of each family member**. Any **decisions should be proportionate** and communicated whilst **considering the emotional impact on the family**. Remember to **identify the areas of strength** within the family to **maintain hope** that **they can recover from the trauma**. **Reflective supervision** is important to challenge bias and consider culture and diversity.

Safety Plans Should Consider:

- The **emotional needs** of the children and adults
- Whether it is **realistic for the carers to keep the children safe** (can they use the bathroom, go to sleep?)
- The **sexual and physical safety** of each child in the household
- **Sensitively sharing information** about risks within sibling relationships
- **Building on positive relationships**
- **Identifying the best professional for the children to talk to**

Resources to improve safeguarding practice:



What should you do if you are concerned:

- Speak to the **safeguarding lead** within your organisation
- If you are worried a child has been sexually abused, contact the **Stronger Families Hub** on **01895 556006** and complete the referral form.
- Sexual Abuse is a crime, if you believe a child is at **immediate risk**, call the **police** on **999**.
- Think about the **therapeutic and emotional support** for the children and carers regardless of the police investigation or outcomes.

