



Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse

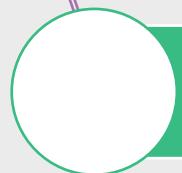
Workshop: **Sibling sexual behaviour and abuse**

19 June 2024

What we will cover today



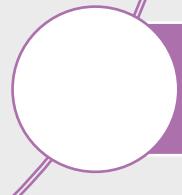
What do we know about the scale and nature of sibling sexual behaviour and abuse?



Understanding the impact of sibling sexual abuse



Identifying and responding to sibling sexual behaviour and abuse



Introducing resources for practice

Looking after yourself

Sexual abuse can be difficult to think about and talk about. Thinking about it and talking about it will affect us all in **different ways**, at **different times**.

It is important that we...

- Be aware of the feelings and experiences of other delegates
- Be kind to ourselves (personally and professionally)
- Respect each other's learning journey

A note on language...

The child who has harmed

**The child who has been
harmed**

Setting the scene

Understanding sibling sexual abuse

- Sibling sexual abuse is **no less prevalent** than abuse by a parent
- Less likely to be **disclosed** than other forms of sexual abuse
- Often involves an **older brother abusing a younger sister**
- Has the potential to be **as harmful** as sexual abuse by a parent
- Entails a **greater number of sexual acts** over a longer period of time
- May start at an **earlier age**. More likely to involve sexual intercourse
- May involve **technology**
- The impact may not be **apparent until adulthood**

Challenges in practice

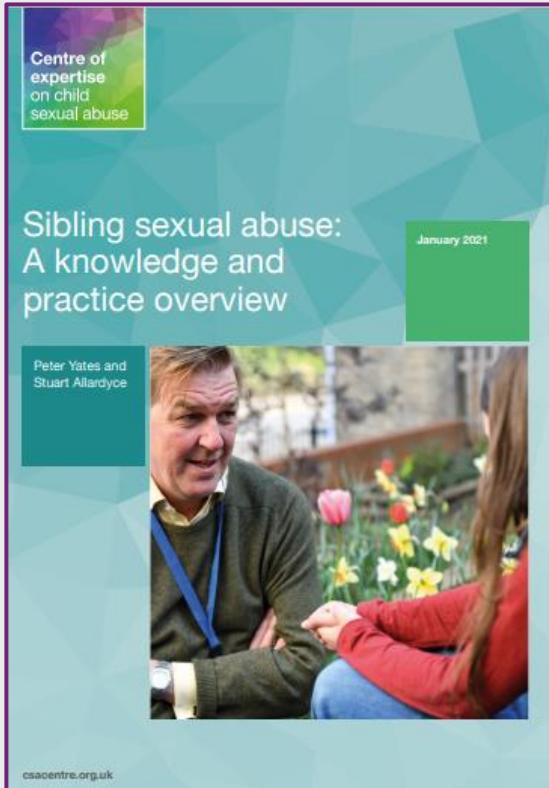
The scale of the problem

Practitioner confidence

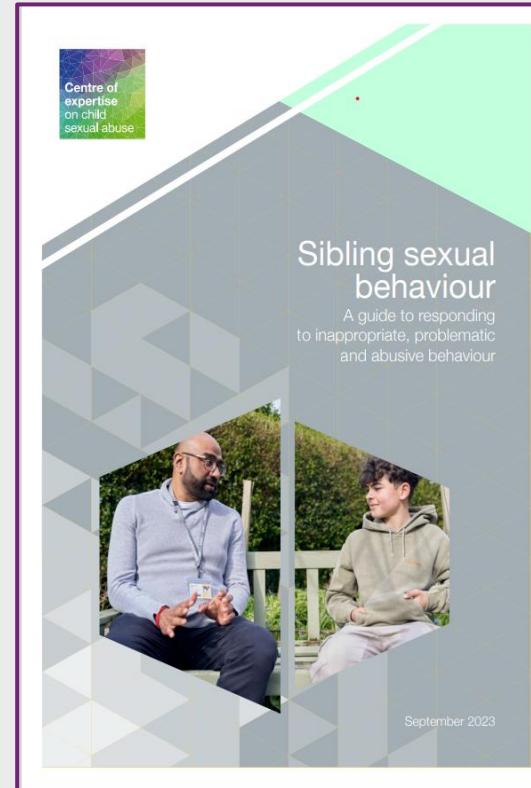
Importance of the whole family context

Lack of existing resources

Developing our knowledge and practice



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Understanding sibling relationships

Understanding sibling relationships

- Enduring
- Involving complex power dynamics
- Informed by a range of gendered and cultural differences.
- Mostly taking place 'backstage', away from the gaze of adults
- Can change over time



Sibling sexual behaviour and abuse

Sibling sexual behaviour

Normative sexual interactions between young sibling children are relatively common, harmless, and serve a developmental function.

The sexual behaviour may be **exploratory** and **mutual** and driven by **curiosity** and **playfulness**.

It is important not to dismiss sibling sexual behaviour as harmless exploration; equally, it is important not to pathologise developmentally normal sexual behaviours between sibling children as exploitative or harmful.

Assessing the nature and context of sibling sexual behaviour

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- If concerns about sexual behaviour involving siblings have been identified, the first action should be to **assess the nature of the behaviour**.
- Children's sexual behaviours can be considered to be on a **continuum**, ranging from developmentally appropriate or expected behaviours through to behaviours that are abusive
- While it is common to think of children's sexual behaviour in terms of physical contact, it may involve **online behaviour** such as producing/sharing child sexual abuse material (e.g. images and videos) and sexualised interactions online.

Normative sexual interactions between children

- Takes place between young siblings of a similar age and developmental stage.
- Are voluntary, light-hearted and playful are about curiosity, involving exploration of bodies or gender roles.
- Are balanced by a curiosity to explore all sorts of other things in the child's world.
- Diminishes if told to stop by an adult.

Inappropriate sexual behaviours

Single, isolated instances, where:

- In the case of young siblings, the behaviour moves a little beyond a curious exploration of bodies or the context for the behaviour is inappropriate.
- In the case of older siblings, the context for the behaviour is inappropriate and misjudge.

Problematic sexual behaviours

- Behaviours are repeated and patterned.
- Fall more clearly outside developmental norms
- Involve a lack of clarity around consent or reciprocity but are not assessed as abusive.

Sibling sexual abuse

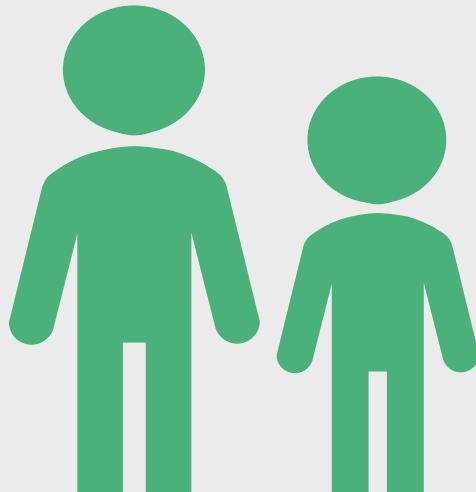
- Significant power differences (e.g. size, strength, cognitive ability, position of authority)
- A large age gap (of three years or more) between the children.
- the use of violence threats, force or other coercion (e.g. bribes, trickery
- Manipulation, such as the giving or withholding of affection).

Understanding sibling sexual abuse

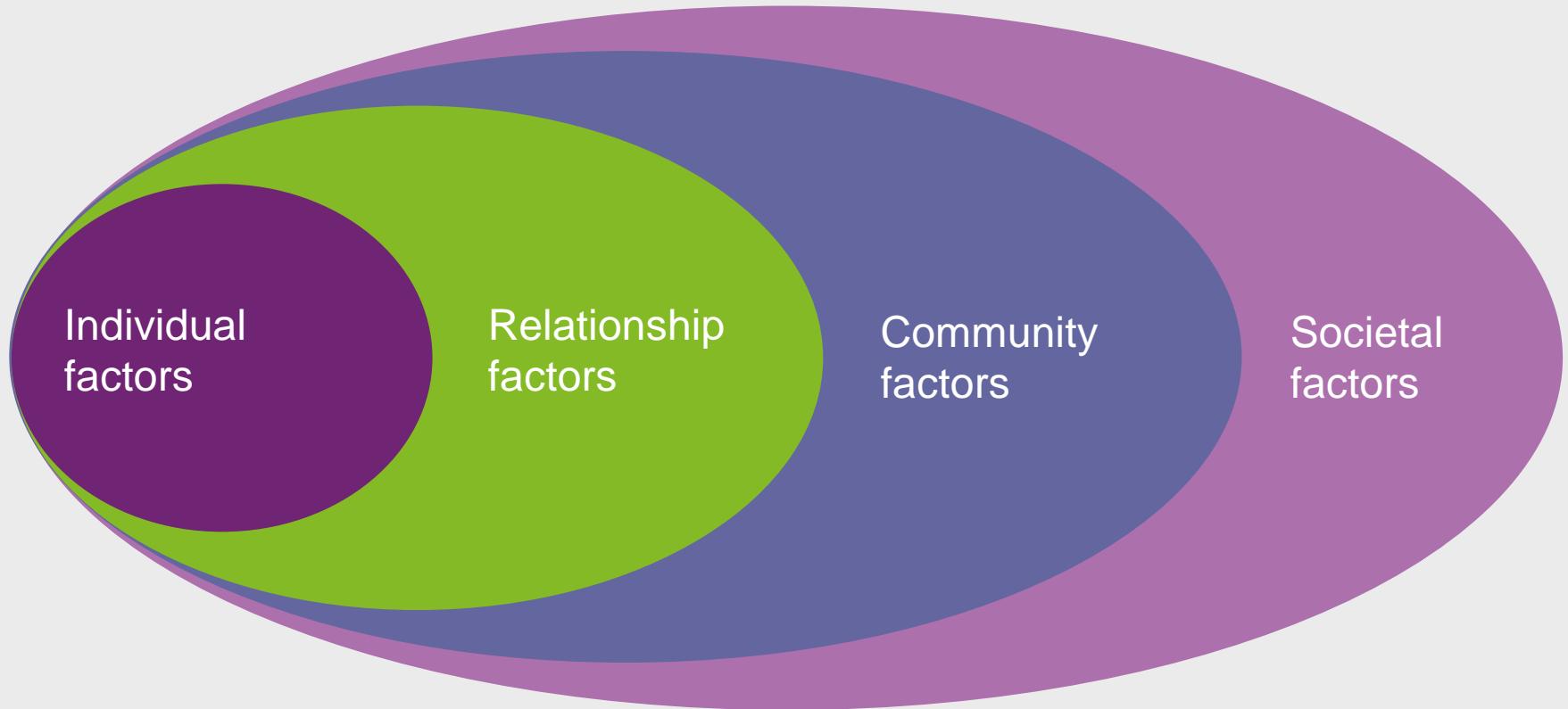
“Sibling sexual abuse includes the physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuse of one sibling by another in the context of sexual behaviour”

Yates & Allardyce, 2021

What else do we know?



- Young people who sexually harm siblings are more likely than other young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour to have themselves been **sexually abused**
- Non-abusive sibling sexual behaviour **can escalate** if left unchecked
- **Environmental factors**, such as siblings of different ages and genders sharing beds or bedrooms, lack of supervision, may also be significant



The impact of sibling sexual abuse

Impact of sibling sexual behaviour

Potential to be just as harmful as parental abuse

Short and long-term impact: physical & mental health

Can lead to relationship difficulties throughout lifetimes

Impact may not be apparent until adulthood

Doesn't equally affect all involved

Not acknowledging, or misplacing abuse, in a family can amplify the impact

Professionals must not make assumptions

Impact on parents and carers

Sense of shame, self-blame, stigma

May trigger past trauma/abuse experiences

Some may over-react, others minimise or deny

Parents may struggle to balance needs of both children and focus on one child more than another

May blame either child and struggle to see their own responsibility

Increase in parent/carer stress

Important to avoid assumptions about parental failure to report abuse or parent reporting abuse

'It was like a grenade going off in the family'

Stuart Allardyce, quoting a mother from his experiences in practice

How families may respond

- Blame the child who has been harmed
- Deny anything happened
- Blame the other parent
- Seem unconcerned about the behaviour
- Reject the child who has harmed
- Take no action



“The impact on other siblings not directly involved in the abuse is often overlooked, they may be profoundly affected, including experiencing symptoms of trauma. They may feel a loss of a sense of family, and experience problems at school in relation to friendships and educational performance.”

Yates & Allardyce, 2021

Identifying and responding to sibling sexual behaviour and abuse

Sarah's Voice – I hear you



To listen,

The importance of reflecting on your own practice

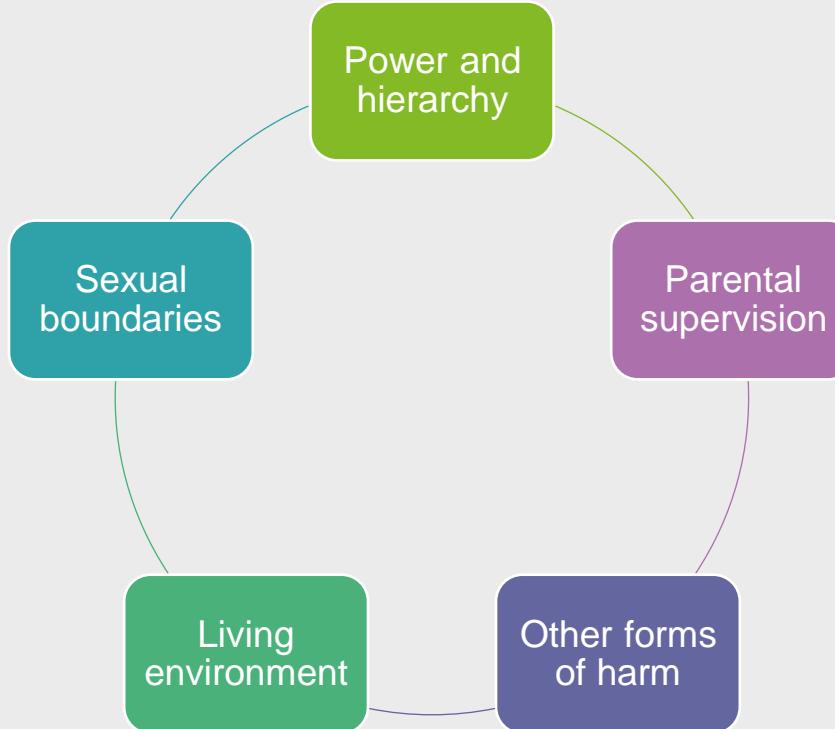
- When children think, feel and/or behave in a sexual way, this can raise **considerable but sometimes unwarranted anxieties** – both for their families and for professionals.
- Adults may feel uncomfortable with the idea that children, and especially siblings, may engage in sexual behaviours with each other – **even if those behaviours are developmentally appropriate and harmless**.
- They may be confused if siblings engage in **problematic yet mutually initiated** behaviours.
- It can be particularly difficult to accept that children may behave in **sexually abusive ways more commonly associated with adults**.
- The anxieties and dynamics of families (and other professionals) may raise additional challenges to **responding appropriately and proportionately to children's needs**.

Protecting and supporting the wellbeing of all children involved in sibling sexual behaviour, as well as any siblings who are not involved but may be affected by the behaviour, is of paramount importance

Initial responses

A whole-family response to sibling sexual behaviour essential

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Initial support for the children's parent(s)

Parents are likely to need

- **space** and time to ventilate their feelings
- **emotional support** and containment (feeling held and protected)
- **sensitive challenge** if they are denying that the harmful sexual behaviour has happened
- **clear information**, including reassurance that:
 - most children do not go on to repeat the behaviour.
 - help and support is available .
 - it's OK to be angry about the behaviour, and to express that anger away from the child in a contained environment that will not shame them.
 - it's important to continue loving and supporting all their children .
 - they can play a very important role in helping the child who has harmed to address their behaviour.

The children's living arrangements

Considerations

- The likely **impact** of the sexual behaviour
- The **views** (however expressed) of the children, and particularly the child who has been harmed
- The parent(s)' **ability and capacity** to protect their children
- The **physical safety** of the household environment
- The **risk of further** sibling sexual behaviour
- The children's **ages and developmental stages**, and any issues of learning disability or neurodiversity
- The **quality and value** of the sibling relationship



There is no possibility of avoiding making a decision about this; maintaining current living arrangements while further assessment is undertaken is still a decision not to separate the children in the short term

Contact between the children

You should consider:

- The **likely impact** (including the emotional impact) of the **sexual behaviour** on the children involved, and in particular on the sibling who has been harmed
- The **views** (however expressed) of the children, and in particular the sibling who has been harmed
- The **quality and value** of the sibling relationship, including consideration of the sexual behaviour's likely impact on the relationship
- The **possible impact** on both/all the children of seeing each other and **spending time together**
- The **protective abilities and capacities** of the adult(s) who would supervise and manage the contact, and their ability to understand and respond to the children's needs



Safety planning

The plan should outline boundaries and supervision requirements in relation to:

- ✓ Bedroom and sleeping arrangements
- ✓ Bathroom/toilet arrangements (e.g. locks on bathroom doors)
- ✓ Play and other activities inside and outside the family home (e.g. at school, school camps, youth clubs, sports activities, play dates and sleepovers)
- ✓ Sibling roles and responsibilities, including ensuring that a child who has harmed does not have any position of trust or authority with respect to younger siblings or those with other vulnerabilities
- ✓ Family nudity
- ✓ Family sexuality.



Key messages from today

Key messages -Sibling sexual behaviour and abuse

- ✓ Must be understood as a **problem for the whole family**
- ✓ Sibling sexual abuse has the potential to be as **harmful as abuse by a parent**
- ✓ A **multi-disciplinary/multi-agency** approach is necessary to support the whole family
- ✓ Young people who sexually harm siblings are more likely than other young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour to **have themselves been sexually abused**
- ✓ Non-abusive sibling sexual behaviour **can escalate** if left unchecked
- ✓ Families need opportunities to **make sense** of the trauma of sibling sexual abuse if they are to be able to move in a healthier way

Over time - and with the right kinds of support - an experience that may be one of the most catastrophic any family can live through may also become a window of opportunity through which positive growth and change become possible.

CSA Centre

Useful resources



[Stop it now Toolkit](#)

[ThinkUKnow.co.uk](#)

If you are affected by anything discussed today...



The Survivors Trust - Helpline: 08088 010 818

Find help, support and advice in your area:

<https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/>



Rape Crisis helpline 0808 500 2222

www.rapecrisis.org.uk



National Association for People Abused in Childhood 0808 801 0331 (not 24 hours)

<https://napac.org.uk/>



SurvivorsUK

Online help for male survivors of sexual abuse and rape.

<https://www.survivorsuk.org/>

Questions?

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Tell us what you think

Remember to complete our post event survey to tell us what you thought about the CSA Centre Roadshow



Thank you!



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