

Sibling Aggression and Abuse Research and Advocacy Initiative (SAARA)

DISENTANGLING SIBLING RIVALRY FROM AGGRESSION AND ABUSE

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This guide distinguishes rivalry, aggression, and abuse in sibling relationships. Rivalry is competition for or protests about parents' or caregivers' attention, favor, and resources (e.g., financial, time). Aggression is behavior intended to cause physical or emotional harm. Abuse is behavior that causes or has a high likelihood to cause physical or emotional harm, and includes serious assaults, repeated bullying, sexual exploitation, or persistent belittlement and intimidation.

Unfortunately, aggression, and even abuse, amongst siblings are often minimized and confused with rivalry. Knowing the difference is important. While sibling rivalry can be a constructive and healthy part of growing up, sibling aggression and abuse are harmful and require intervention.

WHAT IS SIBLING RIVALRY?

Rivalry drives children to find unique successes or develop personal qualities that make them different from their sibling to capture parents' attention. Rivalry also is displayed when children protest favoritism and unfairness. As part of this competitive process, siblings may display jealousy and bicker. Rivalrous behavior can be very persistent, and not mindful of another sibling's needs.

Rivalry is often mistaken for aggressive, even abusive behavior. However, rivalry does not include an intent to mentally or physically harm a brother or sister. Thus, aggressive sibling behavior, such as purposefully pushing, hitting, or persistently belittling is not rivalry. Rivalry does not always lead to aggressive behaviors, but it can if the drive for parents' attention becomes intense.

WHAT IS SIBLING AGGRESSION?

Sibling aggression includes psychological, physical and property aggression, such as bullying, hitting, and theft. Such behaviors are motivated by a desire to cause harm and suffering, like physical pain and humil-

iation, and typically leaves a brother or sister feeling victimized. Aggressive sibling behavior may occur regardless of whether siblings are rivalrous.

Typically, how often sibling aggression occurs is underestimated because it is dismissed. However, national U.S. data show that sibling aggression is the most common form of family violence. A survey of over 4,000 children aged 0-17 found that about one-third suffered aggressive victimization by a sibling in the past year. More children are victimized by a sibling than by a caregiver or their peers.

In some relationships, one sibling is consistently the aggressor, but in others, siblings may trade aggressor or victim roles. Experiencing sibling aggression—whether as the victim or aggressor—can harm children's mental and physical health and social relationships and lead to risky behaviors.

IS IT SIBLING ABUSE?

For some children, sibling aggression is more severe and becomes abusive. This happens when the aggression causes serious physical or emotional harm or a strong likelihood of such effects. Abuse is often chronic, intense, and long-standing, but a serious one-time event may also be abuse.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH SIBLING AGGRESSION

<u>Mental Health</u>	<u>Physical Health</u>	<u>Risky Behaviors</u>	<u>Relationship Health</u>
Distress Depression Anxiety Self-harm Suicide ideation	Headaches Nausea Sleeplessness	Delinquency (e.g., stealing, skipping school) Substance use	Peer victimization Dating violence Family estrangement Poor sibling relationship quality

Being kicked, beaten, or punched has a particularly high risk for serious harm. Use of a weapon or object is abusive, and so is it when injuries are incurred. Abusive sibling relationships may involve serious threats of harm, blackmail, and intentional destruction of cherished items. Repeated bullying and intimidation count as abuse; also, when multiple tormentors are involved. Sexual behaviors that are not age-appropriate, and sexual denigration are also important types of sibling abuse.

About 4% of U.S. children and adolescents report each year receiving an injury at the hands of their brother or sister or facing a weapon of some sort that could cause injury. Some other behaviors like sexual assault or involving a sibling in criminal or self-harming behavior are abusive whether they involve aggression or injury.

When abuse happens, it may be that one sibling is a consistent victim, likely reflecting a power difference in terms of physical size, cognitive ability, gender, age, or role in the family. It is also possible that siblings may experience both roles as the aggressor and victim, either with the same sibling or within their family when there are more than two children.

Parents and professionals may find it difficult at times to make a clear distinction between sibling aggression and abuse, but signs of an enduring emotional impact on a child are a likely marker of abuse. A child who is victimized may feel distressed, fearful, hopeless, or powerless and avoid their sibling or become estranged from the family. Alternatively, they may act overly deferential toward their sibling. However, some children may not realize what is happening or make excuses for the behavior. Parents and professionals must take notice and stop abuse, no matter how it is viewed by the children involved.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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<https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/saara/resources>



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