

Sibling Aggression and Abuse Research and Advocacy Initiative (SAARA)

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN SIBLING AGGRESSION AND ABUSE

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KEY POINTS

- Sibling aggression rates vary across gender, race and ethnicity, social class, ability and sexual identity.
- Beliefs about the “normalcy” of sibling aggression vary by gender, race and ethnicity.
- Children who are caregivers for their siblings face a unique risk of abusive behavior.
- Regardless of variation in norms and rates, sibling aggression and abuse are associated with negative impacts on mental and physical health and should be stopped.

Sibling aggression is a widespread phenomenon, both in the U.S. and globally. While rates are generally high across socio-demographic factors, research finds that some populations are more or less likely to experience sibling aggression. There is also variation in awareness of sibling aggression and how it is perceived. This diversity in sibling aggression experiences is just beginning to be examined, but some key patterns have emerged.

This bulletin will review variation in sibling aggression rates and perceptions across race and ethnicity, gender, social class, ability, and sexual identity to help make researchers and practitioners aware of potential sources of difference in how sibling aggression is experienced.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

National U.S. survey data shows that sibling aggression is more common among White children than among Black or Hispanic children. White families tend to emphasize individuality and competitiveness in their children, which may promote more sibling conflict and

aggression. Ongoing discrimination and economic marginalization reinforce cultural norms of familism and family solidarity among Hispanic and Black families, which may discourage aggressive behavior toward siblings. Importantly, when sibling aggression does occur, there are no racial or ethnic differences in the fear children experience.¹

One study² found racial and ethnic variation in perceptions of sibling aggression. Asian Pacific American families were more tolerant of physical aggression between siblings than other ethnic groups in the U.S., but they were also most likely to view psychological aggression as extremely abusive. South Asian American and Hispanic families perceived physical sibling aggression as especially severe.

GENDER

Cultural norms around gender also shape perceptions of and responses to sibling aggression and abuse. In both mainstream U.S. culture and many ethnic and religious cultures, physical aggression is viewed as expected and healthy for boys but not girls. Girls are often encouraged to be nurturing and agreeable, and it can be harder to believe a girl can be a bully.

Brother-brother pairs are the most likely to experience physical sibling victimization and most likely to experience multiple incidents in the past year, while sexual abuse is most common in older brother-younger sister pairs. When boys are victimized by a sibling, concern about being perceived as less masculine or non-heterosexual may discourage help-seeking.

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

Ability, sexual identity, and social class are also associated with variation in sibling aggression experiences. Children with autism spectrum disorder, physical disabilities, and overweight children are all more likely to be targeted by sibling aggression. There is some evidence that LGBTQ children may be at increased risk of sibling victimization, but more research is needed. Sibling aggression occurs across the social class spectrum but is more common in families with college-educated parents and families experiencing financial stress.

Children who are caregivers for their siblings—by choice or circumstance—face a unique risk of abusive behavior. In some families, this can take the form of older children being responsible for physically disciplining younger siblings. In others, the “parentified” sibling may lash out in frustration. Sibling sexual abuse can also occur, although it is not always perceived as abusive by the siblings involved if it offers an otherwise missing source of closeness and comfort in families where adult caregivers are physically or emotionally absent. There are various reasons that children become caregivers for their siblings, including economic necessity, parental substance addiction, and ethnic and religious traditions that emphasize hierarchy or gendered roles within the family.

CONCLUSION

The above information is intended to provide context on ways that aspects of identity, structural location in society, and cultural traditions can shape the risks for sibling aggression, perceptions of the behaviors, and the likelihood of recognition and disclosure. Yet, sibling aggression is everywhere in society and cannot be isolated to any subgroup. In national U.S. survey data, about one-third of children and adolescents experienced physical, psychological, or property victimization from a sibling in the previous year.³ Estimates for the prevalence of sibling sexual abuse vary from 2-5%.

Practitioners and parents should be attuned to the potential for harmful aggression in sibling relationships, relying in each case on a sensitive and careful evaluation of the children involved. While doing such work, it

is important to keep in mind that although there are different beliefs regarding sibling aggression and abuse, the impacts are the same: sibling aggression and abuse are associated with negative impacts on mental and physical health across the lifespan and should be stopped (see [SAARA Bulletin #1](#)).

NOTES

¹Tucker, C. J., Finkelhor, D., & Turner, H. (2023). Emerging Ideas: Is sibling aggression as scary as peer aggression in childhood and adolescence? *Family Relations*. <https://doi.org/10/grwfbw>

²Rapoza, K. A., Cook, K., Zaveri, T., & Malley-Morrison, K. (2010). Ethnic perspectives on sibling abuse in the United States. *Journal of Family Issues*, 31(6), 808–829. <https://doi.org/10/cct4fg>

³Tucker, C. J., Finkelhor, D., Shattuck, A. M., & Turner, H. (2013). Prevalence and correlates of sibling victimization types. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 37(4), 213–223. <https://doi.org/10/f5bnkk>

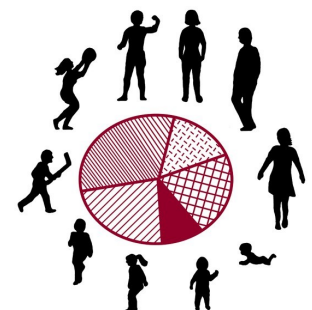
A complete reference list is available online at <https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/resource/saara-bulletin-5>



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