



SAARA BULLETIN

A publication of the Sibling Aggression and Abuse Research and Advocacy Initiative (SAARA) at the Crimes against Children Research Center

Resources for Professionals and Parents to Improve Sibling Relationships

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Parenting education programs and clinical screening tools generally do not address sibling aggression and abuse. This is surprising given that it is the most common form of family violence and is linked to worse mental and physical health and difficulties in other interpersonal relationships for both aggressors and victims across the lifespan.

The goal of this bulletin is to provide guidance for parents and professionals on preventing and responding to sibling aggression and abuse and improving sibling relationships. The significant impacts of sibling aggression make such guidance a wise investment in children's safety and healthy development.

Education, Prevention, and Intervention Efforts to Stop Child Aggression

Sibling aggression varies by age, context, and contributing risk factors. Research shows, however, that parents play a key role in preventing and stopping it. Several established parenting programs that are cost-effective and culturally sensitive exist that can help parents address child aggression (although they generally do not address sibling dynamics directly). Such programs may help parents recognize harmful behaviors between siblings and encourage them to intervene immediately, while also improving their children's interpersonal skills and sibling relationship quality.

In addition to these parenting education programs, any kind of program to address peer bullying should be adapted to include significant content on sibling aggression in its lessons and activities. Research shows that sibling aggression can lead to peer bullying (see *SAARA Bulletin #9*). Thus, for some children, neither home nor school is a place free of bullying experiences.

National and Web-Based Resources



Child Abuse Content

Prevent Child Abuse America
American Academy of Pediatrics
Childhelp



Sibling Abuse Content

SiblingSexualTrauma.com
5Waves.org
Incest Aware



Child & Sibling Abuse Content

Stop It Now!
Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network
National Children's Alliance

Examples of Existing Relevant Evidenced-Based Parenting Education Programs:

- **The Incredible Years** – reduces sibling conflict in children with high levels of initial conflict.
- **Triple P Positive Parenting Program** – reduces problem behaviors and emotional problems in children.
- **Parenting Wisely** – improves family problem solving; reduces child problem behavior and adolescent violent behavior.
- **More Fun with Sisters and Brothers** – reduces children's sibling conflict and rivalry and increases sibling warmth.
- **Play Nicely** – increases parents' and health care professionals' knowledge of how to respond to child aggression.

Recommendations for Professionals to Stop Sibling Aggression and Abuse

An important first step to stop sibling aggression and abuse is for professionals and practitioners to educate themselves on the differences between normative and harmful sibling behaviors (see *SAARA Bulletins #1, #4, and #7*). With education, recognition of such behaviors will increase, likely followed by steps to prevent and stop their occurrence.

Professionals working with parents, children, and adults seeking help for mental health or relationship difficulties should routinely inquire about the nature of sibling relationships. Screening tools for family violence, bullying, child sexual abuse, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) should be amended to include the presence of sibling aggression and abuse (see *SAARA Bulletin #8*). It will also be important to develop resources for children and families who are identified through these screenings.

Teaching parents to use mediation techniques may be helpful when dealing with sibling conflict and minor aggression (see *SAARA Bulletin #2*). Research shows that mediation benefits children's relationship and thinking skills, lessens aggression, and shortens the time of children's disputes.

A mediational approach, however, is not appropriate when sibling abuse is present. In cases of sibling abuse, such techniques may further victimize the harmed child due to the power imbalance among the siblings. Also, encouraging parents to have their children "work it out" on their own is not recommended for abuse. Some parents and children may not recognize that a sibling's behavior is abusive, so routine screenings for violent, coercive, and harmful sibling behaviors are critical.

In some cases, harmed siblings may need trauma-informed care and to be referred to child welfare and mental health professionals. Children and young people can talk with their pediatrician, school counselor, or nurse. Parents can also reach out to these sources, as well as to a therapist or local family resource center for help. Adults harmed by their siblings could consider exploring therapeutic help, too. (See *the SAARA resource, Tips for Choosing a Therapist to Treat Harmful Sibling Dynamics*). 🇺🇸

For More Information:

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- Sellars, E., Bowes, L., Oliver, B. R., Gardner, F., Axberg, U., Berry, V., Seabra-Santos, M. J., Hutchings, J., McGilloway, S., Menting, A. T. A., Overbeek, G., Scott, S., & Leijten, P. (2024). Effects of the Incredible Years parenting program on children's interpersonal conflict: An integrative data analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 38(6), 847–857. <https://doi.org/10/gtx6gw>
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