

## **Sibling Sexual Abuse**

### **Introduction**

This guidance was produced in response to an increase in calls to our helpline, concerning sibling sexual abuse and child on child sexual abuse. In addition to seeking emotional support the most frequent questions asked by parents and carers are: Why didn't I know? How do I stop it? How can I prevent it from happening again? What can I expect in terms of my child's development? What can I do about my child's behaviour? What will happen to the abusive child?

Once you suspect, have discovered, or it has been disclosed to you that your child has been sexually abused by his or her sibling or another child it is important to have an understanding about what is "normal" sexual development and behaviour in children and teenagers and what behaviours might be a cause for concern.

As with other areas of development a child's sexual behaviour is something which develops overtime. Expected behaviours become a cause for concern when excessive, where there is a preoccupation, and/or when it involves other children in inappropriate ways. When apparent, it is likely your child has become sexualised. This term refers to pre-pubescent boys and girls who are or who have been in contact with inappropriate sexual activities.

A sexualised or sexually reactive child may engage in a variety of age/stage-inappropriate sexual behaviours as a result of her/his exposure to sexual experiences and may begin to act out or engage in sexual behaviours or relationships. These include excessive sexual play, inappropriate comments or gestures and/or mutual sexual activities with same age or older children. In some cases this may involve the sexual abuse of younger children.

This guidance is designed to help parents and carers deal with immediate concerns and ongoing issues following discovery of sibling sexual abuse/child on child sexual abuse, thereby promoting a healthy outcome for all.

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*(The term “sibling” is used to refer to children who grow up in the same family, whether they are stepsiblings, foster siblings, adopted siblings or siblings by birth. From hereon only the term sibling sexual abuse will be used, but this guidance is also relevant to child on child sexual abuse by other children).*

## **What is sibling sexual abuse?**

Sibling sexual abuse as with emotional and physical abuse is an abuse of power. For example, a more powerful sibling who is older and/or stronger, who coerces a younger sibling into sexual activity. This may be through force, the threat of force, bribes or a promise of special attention or gift to make the victim keep the abuse secret.

Sibling sexual abuse does not always involve sexual contact. The older sibling may force two or more other children to engage in sexual activity with one another and watch. The older sibling may force a younger sibling to watch sexual activity or pornography. The older sibling may also abuse a younger sibling by repeatedly watching them in the shower or when toileting, whilst they themselves don't want to be watched. The older sibling may force a younger sibling to watch while they masturbate. All the above constitute sibling sexual abuse.

## **Is sexual curiosity between siblings normal?**

Yes. A four-year-old girl who touches her baby brother's penis during a nappy change is exhibiting curiosity. A five-year-old year girl who sees her brother's genitals for the first time may wonder where her penis is. Likewise, a boy may wonder why he has one. Four and five year olds who undress to look at each other's genitals are usually curious. (Sexual behaviours that persist and occurs frequently overtime should be examined carefully). A twelve-year-old boy who is interested in his five-year-old siblings' genitals is not showing curiosity

## **Some questions to ask yourself or a professional are:**

- Is this behaviour what you would expect from a child that age?
- How long has the behaviour been going on?
- Does it seem that one of the children involved is being forced to participate?

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- What is the purpose of the behaviour?

## **What sort of sexual behaviours do young children exhibit?**

Toddlers and young children often touch themselves when naked. They have no modesty and soon let you know when they develop it. A parent's reaction will let them know whether their behaviour is acceptable or not. Sexual exploration is part of expected development and it is important that children are not be made to feel guilty, dirty, or be scolded for this. Parents should find ways of making it clear that it is private matter.

## **Some examples of behaviours in pre-school children:**

### *Appropriate behaviours*

- Rubs genitals before going to sleep
- Explores genital differences between boys and girls
- Is interested in watching adults using the bathroom
- Plays doctors, and other role play activities with other children

### *Behaviours that could cause concern*

- Frequently rubs genitals
- Frequently exposes genitals
- Keeps asking questions about sex after they have been reasonably answered
- Persist in watching adults in the bathroom
- Uses force to get other children to play mummies and daddies, doctors etc, which involves sexual activity
- Pretends to have intercourse
- Any significant change in behaviour at home or at school (angry, destructive, withdrawn, etc)

*(If you are unsure about your child's behaviour, ask a professional)*

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## **What is expected sexual development?**

### **Early childhood: 0-5 years**

- Sexual curiosity, arousal, and behaviour are spontaneously expressed unless the child is taught to inhibit them
- 0-2 year olds engage in simple pleasurable handling of their genitals
- 2-3 year olds may begin masturbating
- Unsupervised, play among 2-3 year olds can be sexual but sex play is not dominant
- 4 year olds are curious about their own and other children's genitals
- 4-5 year olds like to talk about things that they sense adults would consider dirty or taboo

### **Middle childhood: 6-9 years**

- Tend to enjoy rule breaking, including "talking dirty" and get visibly excited. Sexual language and jokes also increase at this time. May perform sexual play on each other
- May talk with caregivers about sex, marriage, pregnancy, and birth
- Continue to be curious about physical differences; playing "show" and "doctor" to help satisfy this curiosity
- Unsupervised, sex play may occur. How the sexual activity manifests itself depends on how much sexual activity the child has observed and how permissive the society is
- Sex play with older children may occur. Some is pleasant to the child, some is not.
- Children become interested in girl/boy relationships and may have a boyfriend/girlfriend, but these relationships tend to be short lived with little personal involvement. Relationships are predominantly social rather than sexual

### **Middle childhood: 10-13 years**

- Most children understand the rudiments of sexual intercourse but relationships are predominantly social rather than sexual

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- Kissing games may occur and are frequently marked by excitement, embarrassment, or guilt.

### **Early adolescence: 13-14 years**

- The age of pubescence is highly variable, usually between 11 and 13, and generally occurs earlier in girls
- Sexual behaviours respond to biological triggers and the genital focus intensifies
- Masturbation increases in frequency
- Pornographic materials are often acquired
- May fall in love and openly express this
- Many experience physical sexual excitement from romantic involvements
- Kissing is a favourite activity
- Many show an interest in having sex but few actually seek sexual partners
- Genital fondling can occur and may involve genital to genital contact or mouth to genital contact

### **Mid to late adolescence 15+**

- By age 15, most teens have established a regular pattern of sexual activity; masturbating increases, and some have regular sex with others
- Due to the sexual urgency of adolescence, some teens attempt to persuade, manipulate, or coerce others into intercourse
- Many at this age feel they are not ready for sexual intercourse and may engage in mutual masturbation or oral sex

*(Inside the home, children's curiosity about sex may be exploited by older siblings, extended family members, and friend's of family, babysitters, parents and carers)*

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## **How is normal sexual development disrupted?**

- Sexual abuse
- Regular witnessing of sexual acts between adults
- Access to pornography

*Parents and carers whose children can access pornographic material run the risk of having their children imitate adult sexual behaviour and who may react by coaxing, manipulating, or forcing younger children into the same kind of sexual behaviour.*

## **What factors might contribute to sexual abuse?**

- **Neglect**

*Sexual activity between siblings may develop in response to unmet emotional and/or physical needs.*

- **Lack of boundaries**

*Sexual activity between siblings can develop if parents fail to respect the child's privacy or may result from lack of boundaries in terms of age/stage appropriate sexual activities. This can cause children to grow up unaware that they and others need privacy.*

- **Inadequate socialisation**

*Sexual activity with younger siblings or other children can result from an inability to socialise or having intimate relations with peers.*

- **An older sibling given too much responsibility and power**

*It is an important part of family life for older siblings to learn to take responsibility for the care of younger siblings and it is important for them to understand this has its limits. Parents must ensure they don't do whatever they want.*

- **Denial**

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*Not being prepared to accept sexual abuse is happening does not cause sexual abuse but it may contribute to its continuation.*

### **Are there signs that sibling sexual abuse is occurring?**

When children have been sexually abused or subjected to unwanted sexual attention it is often followed by a change in behaviour. For example, night fears, anger, aggressive destructive behaviour, cruelty to pets, school refusal, school failure and withdrawal from friendships and activities.

### **What do I do if I discover sibling sexual abuse?**

Safeguarding the child from further sexual abuse is paramount, and to ensure adherence to Child Protection procedures incidents should be reported to Social Services and/or the Police. Investigations should determine whether the child involved has been sexually abused themselves. In the meantime, you will need to talk to the children involved and you might require practical and emotional support to do this. In the longer term, a non-intrusive monitoring of the boundaries imposed on siblings is advised. This is also an appropriate time to discuss with your child the difference between good and bad touch.

### **How do you respond to children who abuse other children?**

Whilst the behaviour may repulse you and feelings such as anger, hurt and guilt dominate, children who sexually abuse other children should be treated with compassion. These children need help just as much as their victims. Children who abuse other children who are not stopped not only hurt other children they may go on to harm themselves. Because they relate to other children in a sexually inappropriate way children who sexually abuse other children are unable to develop real friendships and can become lonely and isolated. This makes it harder for them to stop.

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## **How can parents and carers deal with their own feelings?**

Finding out your child has been sexually abused by his or her sibling or another older child is one of the most difficult life experiences you will ever have to face. Shock is a common initial response and for a short period thereafter denial. For a while you might feel as though you are on a roller-coaster ride of unfamiliar and conflicting emotions. If you are feeling overwhelmed and/or isolated seek professional help.

## **Can sibling sexual abuse be prevented?**

Sibling sexual abuse can happen in any family. Listen to and believe your children, they may be trying to tell you they are being abused. In addition, monitor what your children watch on TV, provide good supervision for children when you are not there, teach them the difference between good and bad touch, encourage an open climate for airing and discussing problems, work together to set up a contract stating the rights and responsibilities of each child, specify appropriate ways of acting and the consequences should abusive behaviour continue or occur in the future and reward sensitive, positive behaviour.

## **Will our family recover?**

YES! Even if the abuse went on for a long time, with support your children can recover. They will need love and understanding and help in sorting out their thoughts and feelings. You have already begun this process.

## **Bibliography**

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child\\_sexuality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_sexuality)

Questions and Answers about Sex.

<http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/sex.html>

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Sibling Sexual Abuse: A Parents Guide (courtesy of Family Services of greater Vancouver) [http://www.sasian.org/guide/aguide\\_en.htm](http://www.sasian.org/guide/aguide_en.htm)

This document was produced by Marcia Burke (2005).

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