

Submission

A form of family violence too often overlooked is sibling violence. Overseas (USA) research indicates this is the most common form of family violence but is misconceived as "kids being kids" or "normal" sibling rivalry. Parental conduct can factor significantly in sibling violence.

The New York Times reported: "Nationwide, sibling violence is by far the most common form of family violence, occurring four to five times as frequently as spousal or parental child abuse, Dr. Caffaro [clinical psychologist] said."

http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/17/when-the-bully-is-a-sibling/?_r=5

<http://healthland.time.com/2013/06/17/bullying-in-the-family/>

A recent Insight program (Siblings Showdown) on SBS featured Australian experts who advised that, beyond a reasonable limit, this becomes bullying and can have extremely serious consequences. The experts mentioned that it can recur later in life in the context of parental death and dealing with estates. In other words, it is not just left behind in childhood but can live on in mental health damage, damaged relationships and ongoing sibling bullying in the context of later life family matters.

Yet, our society has not recognised this form of family violence, let alone acted to prevent it or to try to rectify its detrimental impact on victims.

The issues that need consideration are:

- 1) The prevalence of sibling violence in Australia of all sorts - physical, psychological, emotional etc at different life stages, including adulthood

- 2) The extent to which this involves male on female violence, ie brother on sister violence, replicating the most common form of domestic violence
- 3) The role of parents eg father modelling violence towards his daughter mimicked by the son; mother's favouritism of son empowering his bullying
- 4) (i) Why daughters' voices on this have been silenced and ignored, including within the systems that should be most responsive eg the legal system, with training of lawyers and judges on sibling violence to prevent this continuing
 - (ii) Action to redress injustice to adult survivors of sibling abuse
- 5) The need for public education on the damaging practice of parental favouritism of a "golden child" and the scapegoating of another child (instead of the parents fixing the family's actual problems), and the serious ramifications for the latter child, including mental health damage, unfair ostracism by the family and unfair treatment in the dispersal of family assets
- 6) How these patterns feed into adult bullying behaviour eg a son who bullies his sister becoming a bully of a woman at work and/or of his wife; a child bullied by a parent and/or sibling being bullied in adult contexts eg work
- 7) A particular form of violence is when a sibling knowingly lies to invalidate the other sibling trying to report family violence. For example, the sister has been physically and emotionally abused by the father across childhood and adolescence. The brother is the "golden child" and observes the mistreatment of his sister, learning to do it himself.

It is well-established that abused children are very loyal to their parents despite the abuse, knowing how dependent they are on the parents for survival and fearful of breaking codes of silence for fear of more abuse.

Whenever in life the person tries to report the abuse, even as an adult, it is extremely hard to overcome those strongly reinforced taboos and do so.

In this context, a sibling (or parent or other relative) lying to try to invalidate the exposure is extremely cruel and constitutes further abuse. Siblings are well-placed to observe violence so their lying about it is especially damaging.

The victim should not have to work so hard to be believed that it becomes re-traumatising and makes it even harder for other abused children to report it at any age, even as adults, resulting in under-reporting. Could polygraphs be used?

There needs to be a way that family violence can be reported without exposing the victim

to further violence in this way. That requires legal penalties for a sibling who knowingly tries to conceal and perpetuate the violence by denying it occurred in the family.

School, university counselling offices and doctors' records where a victim of family violence reports it need to be kept not just for 7 years but for life so they are available as evidence if and when a person tries to take action on the violence, making it more difficult for a parent or other sibling to lie about it.