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Sibling sexual abuse: what do we know about definitions? Stage 2 analysis of a 2-stage scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Sibling sexual abuse (SSA) is a common form of sexual violence within the family and as harmful as other intra-familial sexual abuse. However, there is a lack of consistent understanding of what SSA is. That siblings may engage in a range of sexual behaviours, including normative sex play, significantly complicates the identification of SSA. Furthermore, the changing nature of modern families and cultures adds complexity to defining a sibling relationship. Our comprehensive scoping review of the SSA literature (Yates et al., 2025) identified wide variation in the conceptualisation of sibling relationships and 27 different definitions of abusive sibling sexual behaviour. This lack of consensus creates confusion and inconsistency for how we identify, investigate and intervene in situations involving SSA. In this paper, we critically examine the different definitions before proposing our own definition of SSA to support identification and appropriate professional responses, as well as greater consistency in research.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

By providing a definition of sibling sexual abuse that reflects up-to-date research on this topic, this paper supports practitioners to identify this form of family sexual violence and respond appropriately to children, adults and families affected. It will also encourage greater consistency in future research in order to develop our knowledge in this complex area of practice.

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Introduction

Sibling sexual abuse (SSA) – the sexual abuse of children by their brothers and sisters – is a common form of intra-familial sexual abuse. A survey of a nationally representative sample of 8503 participants in Australia (Mathews et al., 2024) found that 1.6% of the

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population had been sexually abused by a sibling during childhood. This amounts to nearly 429,000 people, and if replicated in other countries, would equate to over one million people in the UK and over five million people in the USA, not to mention the numbers of children responsible for the abuse, parents, other siblings and wider family also affected. Yet, like all child sexual abuse, SSA is under-reported, thus these are likely underestimates of the true prevalence (e.g. Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005; Cole, 1990; Falcão et al., 2014). The harmful consequences of SSA for the survivor are similar to those of other forms of child sexual abuse (e.g. Cyr et al., 2002b; Rudd & Herzberger, 1999; Tyler, 2011) and may include complex post-traumatic stress disorder, guilt and shame, depression, substance misuse, suicidal ideation and behaviour, and relationship difficulties throughout life (e.g. Brown, 1997; Falcão et al., 2014; Gioro, 1992; Welfare, 2008). Depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, alcohol and substance dependence, stigma and social isolation are reported by both children responsible for the abuse and by parents (e.g. Bass et al., 2006; Beard et al., 2013; Boyers, 2020; Lafleur, 2009; Marmor & Tener, 2022; O'Keefe et al., 2014; Stroebel et al., 2013; Stroebel et al., 2013; Taylor, 1996; Vandegriend, 2002; Welfare, 2008). Non-abused siblings, meanwhile, may feel frightened or angry and sometimes withdraw from family engagement altogether (Welfare, 2008; Yates et al., 2025). Sibling sexual abuse affects each family member individually, while also having a profound impact on family relationships collectively (Welfare, 2008; Yates et al., 2025).

Despite being widespread and devastating for families, SSA remains under-studied and under-recognised (Yates et al., 2025). Professional responses are fragmented and inconsistent, including poor communication and misjudged risks, leaving many children unprotected and unsupported (Cain et al., 2025; Yates & Allardyce, 2021). One of the reasons for inconsistencies in identification and response is the lack of an agreed definition as to what SSA is.

Sexual behaviours between siblings can be considered on a continuum, ranging from developmentally appropriate and harmless behaviour, through inappropriate or problematic but mutually initiated behaviour that is harmful to both or all children involved, to abusive sibling sexual behaviour (see Yates & Allardyce, 2021 for examples). Differentiating between these various forms of sibling sexual behaviour is not straightforward and significantly complicates the identification of SSA. A scoping review of the SSA literature (Yates et al., 2025) identified 27 different definitions of abusive sibling sexual behaviour across 91 papers. The authors urgently recommended developing a consistent definition of SSA. This would help children, survivors and practitioners to recognise abuse, increase confidence that research is examining the same phenomenon, and ensure that findings from different studies can be compared and synthesised.

Furthermore, only 44% ($n = 40$) of the papers in Yates et al. (2025) scoping review defined what was meant by "sibling". Moreover, there was wide variation across these papers, in terms of whether the relationship was defined biologically (e.g. having one or both birth parents in common), legally (e.g. including adoptive siblings) or socially (e.g. living and growing up together in the same household). White and Hughes (2018) comment that the term "sibling" has different meanings in different cultures, and that the growth of complex families has led to more fluid definitions of siblings. This further complicates the concept and subsequent definition of SSA.

Given this fluidity, it is not a settled debate as to the ways in which SSA may be distinct from harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) between unrelated children and young people. We need to be clear about why we need a specific and separate concept of “sibling” sexual abuse, what “sibling” means in this context, and what added value this concept brings, rather than simply referring to HSB that just happens to involve siblings. We offer three reasons: First, the immediate consequences are different. For example, decisions need to be made regarding whether children can remain living together or in contact with each other, and, if separated, under what conditions and circumstances they can resume contact or shared living arrangements (Yates & Allardyce, 2021). Second, and relatedly, sibling relationships are different from other children’s relationships in terms of social and cultural expectations around longer-term family contact and attendance at significant family events (Yates & Allardyce, 2021). Third, early indications from comparison studies suggest that there may be differences in aetiology, in the developmental pathways to SSA, rather than SSA differing from HSB only in terms of access and opportunity (e.g. Collin-Vézina et al., 2014; Latzman et al., 2011; Worling, 1995; Yates et al., 2012). However, what is not yet clear is what kind of relationship between children constitutes a “sibling” relationship in this particular context, i.e. that would differentiate SSA from HSB in terms of consequences, cultural expectations and aetiology.

Stage One of the SSA scoping review (Yates et al., 2025) was designed broadly to map the research on SSA and to establish areas of knowledge and gaps requiring attention. The review highlighted how vital it is for future research to define SSA and that establishing a clear definition was a priority. It was beyond the scope of Stage One to explore and analyse definitions in sufficient depth and detail to be able to propose such a clear definition. This is therefore what we address in this current paper.

In order to bring more coherence to the concept of SSA to guide future research and evidence-based practice responses, we require greater consistency in the definition of both the “sibling” and “sexual abuse” components. This paper reports on Stage Two of our scoping review and forms part of a collection of three in-depth reviews (definitions, abuse characteristics and professional responses). Here we examine, in more critical depth, the different definitions of “sibling” and “sibling sexual abuse” identified from an update to the initial scoping review (Yates et al., 2025). We propose a definition of “sibling sexual abuse” in order to support improved identification and appropriate professional responses in practice, as well as greater consistency in research, and thereby promote the development of our knowledge in this complex area of practice.

Our research question is: How is “sibling sexual abuse” defined in the empirical literature?

Methods

This review updates the literature search from Stage One of the Scoping Review as reported in Yates et al. (2025), and adopts a similar approach. It follows the guidelines of Arksey and O’Malley (2005), further developed by Levac et al. (2010), and is reported according to the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018). We followed five key stages: (1) identifying the research question; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) selecting studies for analysis; (4) charting the data; and (5) collating, summarising and reporting the findings.

Table 1. Inclusion/exclusion criteria.

	Inclusion	Exclusion
Type of paper	Original published empirical research (quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods), including peer-reviewed papers, doctoral theses and grey literature	Practice literature (e.g. practice guidance or reflections upon practice), case descriptions, literature reviews, commentaries, opinion pieces or other types of papers that do not constitute an original study
Subject	Children under 18 (including a small number of studies with some adult participants)	Studies primarily looking at adults
Definition of sibling	Biological, adoptive, step or foster, and children who had grown up as part of the same family or household and defined by the authors as siblings	“Social siblings”: not related biologically or legally but raised in close proximity (Yates & Allardyce, 2021)
Definition of sibling sexual abuse	Sexual behaviour defined as abusive or coercive by authors “Sibling incest” (as often used synonymously with SSA)	Sexual behaviour defined as non-abusive (e.g. sexual play)
Language	English	Languages other than English
Timeframe	14/12/23–31/12/24	

Eligibility criteria

The eligibility criteria are outlined in [Table 1](#).

Procedure

We searched the following databases: *PsycINFO*, *PsycArticles*, *CINAHL*, *MEDLINE*, *ASSIA*, *Social Sciences Premium*, *Sociological Abstracts*, *Web of Science core collection*, *PTSDpubs and Ethos*, using titles, abstracts and MeSH headings, or their equivalent. We searched initially for terms related to “sibling” in subject headings, titles and abstracts. We then repeated the process for terms related to “sexual abuse”. We brought these searches together to identify articles that included terms related to both “sibling” and “sexual abuse”. [Table 2](#) provides an example of the search strategy syntax for *PsycINFO*.

Database searches were conducted on the 6th and 7th January 2025, searching for all articles published since Stage One of the scoping review. Stage One searched for empirical literature published since 1979 up until the 13th December 2023. This Stage Two study therefore sought empirical literature published between 14th December 2023 and 31st December 2024.

Table 2. Search strategy syntax for *PsycINFO*.

Search 1	DE (Brothers OR Sisters OR Siblings OR Sibling Relations)
Search 2	TI (Brother* OR Sister* OR Sibling* OR Sibling Relation*)
Search 3	AB (Brother* OR Sister* OR Sibling* OR Sibling Relation*)
Search 4	S1 OR S2 OR S3
Search 5	DE (Incest OR Sexual Abuse OR Victimisation OR Perpetrators OR Sex Offenses OR Child Abuse OR Rape)
Search 6	TI (Incest* OR “Sexual Abuse” OR Victimisation OR Perpetrat* OR Sex* Offen* OR “Child Abuse” OR Rape OR “Child sexual abuse” OR “Harmful Sexual Behavior” OR “Harmful sexual behaviors” OR “Harmful sexual behaviour” OR “Harmful sexual behaviours” OR “sibling abuse” OR “sexual assault”)
Search 7	AB (Incest* OR “Sexual Abuse” OR Victimisation OR Perpetrat* OR Sex Offenses OR “Child Abuse” OR Rape OR “Child sexual abuse” OR “Harmful Sexual Behavior” OR “Harmful sexual behaviors” OR “Harmful sexual behaviour” OR “Harmful sexual behaviours” OR “sibling abuse” OR “sexual assault”)
Search 8	S5 OR S6 OR S7
Search 9	S4 AND S8
Search 10	Limit date of publication: 14/12/23-31/12/24
Search 11	Limit to English only

The database search retrieved 398 citations. We hand-searched the 10 most commonly occurring journals identified through our initial search of Web of Science (Child Abuse and Neglect, Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Plos One, Children and Youth Service Review, Child Maltreatment, Psychological Medicine and Pediatrics) using the term “sibling sexual abuse”, retrieving a further 37 citations, and therefore a total of 435 citations. Citations were uploaded to reference management software (Endnote) to remove duplicates ($n = 189$), leaving 246 papers for initial screening.

All references retrieved through databases and journals were uploaded to an online collaboration website for literature reviewers (Rayyan at <https://www.rayyan.ai/>) to facilitate the screening process by the first and second authors. A trial blind-screening of title and abstract was conducted of the first 50 citations, reaching 100% agreement.

We screened the remaining citations independently, and excluded 204 citations, for reasons such as papers being irrelevant, editorials, newspaper articles, fiction book reviews, or related to sibling physical abuse. An interim total of 42 papers remained for full-text screening, but we were unable to retrieve one report (i.e. Kambouridis, 2024). We searched grey literature using search terms “sibling sexual abuse” and “child abuse siblings” through OpenAIRE, OpenGrey, National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) Evidence Search: Health and Social Care and Social Care Online and Google, but identified no additional citations.

After title and abstract screening, the first and second authors screened the 41 remaining full texts. We excluded 31 papers for reasons such as the papers not having any findings specific to SSA, or not being empirical research. Consistent with the initial scoping review we included papers where SSA was the specific focus of the study and excluded papers in which SSA was discussed only in the context of a broader study. We conducted forwards and backwards citation tracking of full-text included papers using Google Scholar, identifying a further three citations. This resulted in 13 additional papers to add to the 91 papers identified from the initial scoping review, therefore a total of 104 papers. The first author extracted data using the data extraction table that had been used in the initial scoping review: author, year, title, country of origin, sample demographics (age, gender, ethnicity), definitions of sibling and SSA, study aim, design, method, sample description, sample size, findings, MMAT quality score (Hong et al., 2018), limitations, major themes, discussion points.

A summary of the search and screening process (initial and updated search combined) is represented in the Prisma diagram (see Figure 1).

Definitions of “sibling” and “sibling sexual abuse” were grouped where identical or nearly identical, compared and contrasted, and critically analysed in relation to the available evidence on SSA. Reporting then broadly follows the PAGER framework (Patterns, Advances in knowledge, Gaps in knowledge, Evidence for practice and Research recommendations) (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2022).

Findings and discussion

Of the 104 papers included as part of this review, only 56 papers (53%) define either “sibling sexual abuse” or the particular behavioural concept they are studying (e.g. “sibling incest” or “sibling sexual behaviour”). Only 46 papers (44%) define what is meant by “sibling” for the purposes of their study, and only 31 papers (30%) provide

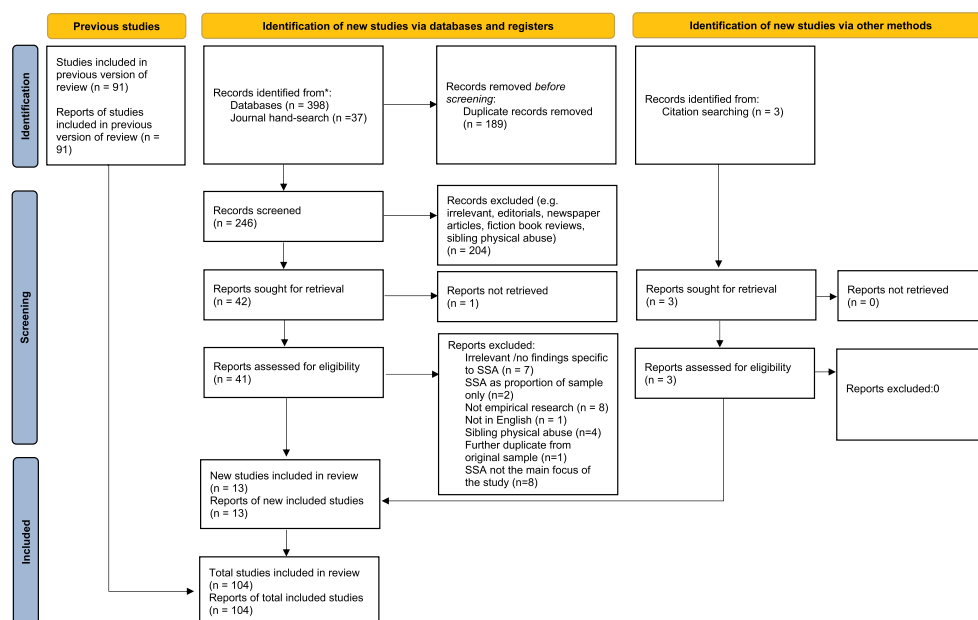


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for updated systematic reviews which included searches of databases and other sources. Source: Page MJ et al. *BMJ* 2021;372:71. doi:10.1136/bmj.n71. This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

definitions of both “sibling” and SSA or the behavioural concept they are studying. Over a quarter of the papers ($n = 30$, 29%) define neither “sibling” nor “sibling sexual abuse”. A proportion of the papers discuss the complexities of the concept of SSA without following up with a clear definition for the purposes of their study (e.g. Tener et al., 2021), or otherwise prefer adult survivors themselves to identify whether they consider the behaviour to be abuse by a sibling (e.g. Bateson Brazeau, 2009; Kambouridis, 2014; Kiegelman, 1997; King-Hill et al., 2023). The lack of clear definitions of both “sibling” and “sibling sexual abuse” characterises most of the studies throughout the time period of the review.

Defining “sibling”

The range of definitions offered in the studies examined

Where definitions are offered, there are a variety of definitions of “sibling”, ranging from very narrow definitions, such as full or half biological siblings only (i.e. children having one or both parents in common) (e.g. Brown, 1997; Cole, 1990; Tidefors et al., 2010; Winters & Jeglic, 2023), to broader definitions including biologically and legally related siblings (i.e. full-, half-, step-, adoptive and foster siblings) (e.g. Latzman et al., 2011; Lewin et al., 2024; Worling, 1995). Every possible combination of options is represented with no clear pattern across the time period of the review. Two studies explicitly include fictive siblings (sometimes referred to as “social siblings”) (Bachman, 2017; James, 2015), i.e. children not biologically or legally related but who have grown up together or in close proximity and share a close and enduring bond (Sanders, 2004). Additionally, eight papers throughout

the period of the review refer to siblings as children living together and regarded as part of the family, sometimes as an alternative to a biological or legal relationship, and sometimes as an extra criterion in addition to the children having a biological or legal relationship, in order to be classed as siblings (e.g. Barton et al., 2024; Bass et al., 2006; Carlson, 2011; McLaurin, 2005). Some papers require the children to have been living together for a certain period of time (Bass et al., 2006; Fontana, 2001), and others from a particular age (Corotis, 1992).

Discussion of these definitions

Sibling relationships differ fundamentally from peer relationships because they are life-long, embedded in family systems, and shaped by shared histories and obligations (Sanders, 2004; White & Hughes, 2018). These dynamics create unique patterns of intimacy and dependency that influence both the occurrence and interpretation of sexual behaviours (Yates & Allardyce, 2021). As argued in the introduction, for SSA to have coherence as a phenomenon distinct from, say, HSB between unrelated children, there need to be differences in consequences, cultural expectations and aetiology. These differences require professional responses that are also different from those required in response to HSB between unrelated children (e.g. support for parents torn between the needs of the sibling harmed and the sibling responsible; decisions needing to be made around the children's living and contact arrangements; particular interventions and prevention strategies that address the pathways into, and out of, this form of abuse). There is consensus across the SSA literature that relationships entailing:

- a) having one or both parents in common and
- b) living and growing up together as part of the same organised family

can be classed as sibling relationships.

Notwithstanding the wide variety and lack of definitions, the majority of the evidence within studies across the SSA literature is in relation to this narrow conceptualisation of "sibling".

Where it becomes less clear is the extent to which SSA might be similar or different from HSB between unrelated children when only one or other of the components are present (i.e. the children have one or both parents in common but have not lived and grown up together, or the children have lived and grown up together but are not biologically related). The causes and consequences of sexual abuse between step-, foster-, adoptive - or biologically related siblings, who have lived and grown up together from an early age, are likely to be quite different from those, who have got to know each other or moved in together only recently as teenagers.

What we learn from the wider literature on sibling relationships

Whether it is the biological or the social relationship that has more salience in SSA is unclear. Research around modern, complex family relationships argues that it is family practices, the "doing" of family, that takes precedence over biological relatedness (e.g. Morgan, 2011). Studies of sibling relationships suggest that living together is the more influential component in terms of whether the relationship is one of siblings (White & Hughes, 2018). However, Pollet (2007), while reinforcing the importance of co-habitation, finds that biological relatedness also plays a part.

Research around the so-called incest taboo supports the view that living arrangements may be more salient than relationships of biology, while not being able to discount biology altogether. While contested (e.g. De Mause, 1991; Shor & Simchai, 2009), Westermarck's hypothesis regarding the origins of the incest taboo to prevent in-breeding is that an innate sexual aversion exists "between persons living very closely together from early childhood" (Westermarck, 1891, p. 320) on the basis that people brought up together are more likely to be biological siblings. Shor and Simchai (2009) and Aberle et al. (1963) argue instead that the incest taboo is a cultural phenomenon to preserve the social order among people brought up in small, involuntary groups with high levels of social cohesion (e.g. organised families). Examples from different cultures (e.g. Aoki, 2005; Storrie, 2003; Webster, 1942) would appear to support this latter point of view. It is worth highlighting that categorisations of "sibling" in the SSA literature are shaped by Western cultural contexts, as most of studies are from countries such as the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada. Understanding this phenomenon from different cultural perspectives is a significant gap in our knowledge of SSA. These findings highlight why definitional boundaries of siblinghood is not a fixed biological category but a lived, negotiated relationship influenced by cultural norms and family practices. Thus children living and growing up together as part of the same organised family may be more salient than biological relatedness in terms of whether the relationship is one of siblings, and may therefore be the more influential component when it comes to the consequences and aetiology of SSA. Biological relatedness cannot be discounted altogether, however, and may still carry cultural expectations around ongoing and lifelong family contact even if the siblings had not lived and grown up together. Further research is required to understand the part biology may play in SSA aetiology and to understand the phenomenon of SSA. This fluidity complicates assumptions about power, consent, and harm, reinforcing the need for definitions that integrate relational and cultural dimensions rather than relying solely on legal or biological markers. Indeed, it may be misleading to include broader definitions of sibling relationships (e.g. step-, foster- and adoptive-siblings) uncritically and without considering how long and from what age the children have lived and grown up together, and the associated socio-cultural expectations around enduring relationships and obligations.

Defining "sibling sexual abuse"

There is further inconsistency and, moreover, confusion and disagreement, over definitions of the "sexual abuse" component of SSA. Among the 56 papers that define sibling sexual behaviours for the purposes of their study, we were able to discern 27 different definitions of SSA.

The studies propose several criteria, in a multitude of combinations, to determine whether sexual behaviour between siblings is abusive. These include:

- Gender of the children
- Age of the children
- Age differential between the children
- Whether the behaviour involves physical contact
- Use of force

- Use of coercion (e.g. pressure, persuasion, deception, threats, secrecy, fear, use of authority, bribery, the giving or withholding of affection, manipulation)
- Whether the behaviour is unwanted/without consent
- Harmful consequences of the behaviour (e.g. anger, sadness, fear, confusion, betrayal of trust)
- Whether the behaviour is developmentally inappropriate
- Frequency or duration of the behaviour (being “not fleeting” or “not transitory”)
- Misuse of power or power differential between the children (such as due to age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, physical size, intellect, the nature of the emotional relationship between the siblings).

Unlike other forms of child sexual abuse, SSA occurs within relationships characterised by ongoing intimacy and dependency. This makes conventional indicators, such as some of these proposed by sources in our present review, less reliable. Without consistent definitions that account for these relational dynamics, research risks conflating qualitatively different phenomena, and practitioners face uncertainty in assessing risk and planning interventions. We briefly summarise each criterion here as outlined in the studies included in this review, noting issues related to definition.

Sex of the children

Three papers specify that to be sexual abuse, the behaviour must be carried out by a brother towards a sister (Crowder, 2002; Gioro, 1992; Shaw, 2008). There is, however, broad agreement in papers published since 2008 that SSA may also involve brother-brother, sister-brother, and sister-sister abuse, as well as groups of more than two children of the same or opposite sex.

Age of the children

Two papers specify that the sibling sexual behaviour must take place before the children are aged 13 or 14 to be abusive (Gioro, 1992; Rayment-McHugh & Nisbet, 2003); however, the evidence strongly indicates that SSA can begin or occur with children of any age, and indeed may continue into adulthood (Yates et al., 2025). SSA involving siblings who are both adults and that started in adulthood remains a gap in our knowledge.

Age differential between the children

Four papers specify that SSA must entail an older sibling abusing a younger sibling, most specifying a required age difference between the children for the behaviour to be classed as abusive (e.g. at least 2 years, 3 years or 5 years) (Gilbert, 1992; McGrath, 2008; Rayment-McHugh & Nisbet, 2003; Vandegriend, 2002). A number of papers, from Finkelhor's (1980) seminal study right through to Babchishin et al.'s (2024) study of characteristics and risk factors, use an age gap of 5 years or more as sufficient (but not necessary) to indicate sibling sexual behaviour as being abusive, assuming children's development to be in keeping with their chronological age. Smaller age gaps would require other factors (e.g. use of force) to be considered to identify whether the behaviour is abusive and which child is responsible.

While a large age difference often continues to be invoked as one of a number of possible indicators of power disparity between the children (e.g. Babchishin et al., 2024), there

are no papers since 2008 that specify an age disparity between the children as necessary for defining sexual behaviours between siblings as abusive. This recognises the volume of cases involving siblings close in age and younger siblings abusing older siblings, recognised as abuse based upon other criteria, such as the behaviour constituting a substantiated crime. Thirteen papers in this current review report instances where the child responsible was younger than the child harmed (Barton et al., 2024; Beard et al., 2013; Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005; Carlson et al., 2006; Cyr et al., 2002a; Doyle, 1996; Hardy, 2001; Kiegelman, 1997; Krienert & Walsh, 2011b; Krienert et al., 2024; McDonald & Martinez, 2017; McLaurin, 2005; Tener et al., 2020).

Whether the behaviour involves physical contact

One paper defines SSA as involving “hands-on” behaviour (Rayment-McHugh & Nisbet, 2003). However, it is widely understood that abuse may involve non-contact behaviour, such as exposure to pornography and, increasingly, technology-assisted abuse such as the sharing of images (e.g. Boyers, 2020; Internet Watch Foundation, 2020; Tener, 2019; Tener et al., 2018; Tener et al., 2020; Tener et al., 2020).

Use of force or other coercion

While 12 of the papers indicate use of force as one of a number of possible indicators of abuse, there is only one paper (Lafleur, 2009) that requires force to have been used for sibling sexual behaviour to be defined as abusive. A number of studies have found force being used in only a minority of cases of SSA, the sibling sexual behaviour identified as being abusive based on other factors (e.g. Cyr et al., 2002b; Falcão et al., 2014; Marmor & Tener, 2022; Rudd & Herzberger, 1999; Winters & Jeglic, 2023). Twenty papers define SSA as involving either the use of force or other form of coercion (such as bribes, threats, or manipulation) (Babchishin et al., 2024; Carlson, 2011; Carlson et al., 2006; Cole, 1990; Collin-Vézina et al., 2014; Griffée et al., 2016; Hilkes, 2024; Krienert & Walsh, 2011a; Krienert et al., 2024; Lafleur, 2009; Laviola, 1992; Noble, 2022; O’Keefe et al., 2014; Schutte, 1992; Shaw, 2008; Stroebel et al., 2013; Stroebel et al., 2013; Tener et al., 2020; van Berkel et al., 2024; Winters & Jeglic, 2023), but it is worth noting that often a careful reading is required in order to understand whether the criteria are sufficient or necessary in order for the behaviour to be categorised as abuse (i.e. whether the criteria are combined with “or” or “and”). For example, one study specified that to be abuse the behaviour was required to involve the use of force and be unwanted and for the children to be at different developmental stages (Lafleur, 2009). On that basis, the use of force would be necessary but not sufficient on its own to classify the behaviour as abuse. By contrast, six studies differentiate SSA from other forms of sibling sexual behaviour on the basis that it was carried out without consent or involved force or coercion or in the context of a power differential between the siblings (Carlson, 2011; Carlson et al., 2006; Collin-Vézina et al., 2014; Noble, 2022; van Berkel et al., 2024; Winters & Jeglic, 2023). The use of force or coercion would therefore be sufficient on their own, but not necessary, to characterise sibling sexual behaviours as abusive.

Misuse of power

Ten papers define sibling sexual abuse as involving a power differential between the siblings without requiring the use of force or other coercion (Adams & Crosby, 2022; Carlson,

2011; Carlson et al., 2006; Collin-Vézina et al., 2014; Katz & Hamama, 2017; Noble, 2022; Rowntree, 2007; van Berkel et al., 2024; Winters & Jeglic, 2023; Yates et al., 2012). A power differential may be due to any number of factors, such as differences in age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, physical size, intellect, family culture, or the nature of the emotional or power relationship between the siblings. Sometimes there are no clear and obvious indicators, and a broader understanding of the nature and dynamics of the sibling relationship within the context of wider family dynamics is required in order to understand the power dynamics of the sibling sexual behaviour (Rowntree, 2007; Yates, 2015; Yates et al., 2012). For instance, a younger brother may be able to abuse an older sister in the context of gendered power dynamics within the family. Examining the dynamics of the behaviour on its own may not be sufficient.

Behaviour being unwanted

As noted by four papers, closely related to the concepts of power and coercion is the idea of the sexual behaviours being exploitative (Fontana, 2001; Gioro, 1992; Rudd & Herzberger, 1999), or the behaviour being unwanted, which Babchishin et al. (2024) use to define the concept of “coercion”. Again, an examination of the wider dynamics within the sibling relationship may be needed to understand that the sexual behaviour is exploitative or unwanted. Corotis (1992) provides an example of a sister initiating sexual behaviours with her brother, but a deeper exploration reveals that this was to avoid the likely alternative, which was to be physically beaten. The behaviour was unwanted, extremely harmful, and clearly abusive. Epstein’s (2024) memoir similarly provides an account of initiating sexual behaviours with her older brother due to hyper-sexualisation resulting from the abuse (Epstein, 2024). These examples also illustrate why definitions, which describe “sexual acts initiated by one sibling toward another” may be mis-leading (e.g. Carlson et al., 2006; Collin-Vézina et al., 2014; van Berkel et al., 2024).

Harmful consequences of the behaviour

Six papers across the time period of the review invoke the idea that a victimising outcome (such as anger, fear, confusion or sense of betrayal) for the child who has been harmed may be either necessary or sufficient in order for the behaviour to be regarded as abusive (Adams & Crosby, 2022; Bass et al., 2006; Boyers, 2020; Katz & Hamama, 2017; Rowntree, 2007; Schutte, 1992). There are two points to raise here. First, non-abusive and mutually initiated sibling sexual behaviour has been found to be harmful to both children involved (e.g. Stroebel et al., 2013). That harm has been caused does not necessarily mean that the behaviour is abusive. Second, this raises an interesting question as to who defines the behaviour as abuse, and when the behaviour is defined. If adult survivors seeking support say that the behaviour was abusive and that they have experienced harm or trauma as a result, it would seem unreasonable not to accept that the behaviour was indeed abusive. On the other hand, it is well-known that the harm caused by SSA during childhood may not be apparent at the time or may not be recognised by parents or other adults. Therefore, requiring a victimising outcome at the time to classify the behaviour as abuse could exclude children from support and potentially allow them to remain in unsafe situations. That said, while acknowledging that children may retract disclosures or express distress in non-verbal ways, it remains important to ask children their views about the behaviour and its impact. If children say they have been abused

and harmed this should be taken seriously. Anecdotally, some adult survivors have reported that professionals determined that the behaviour they experienced during their childhood was experimental, without seeking their views, despite the survivors even at the time being clear that the behaviour was abusive. At present, however, there seems to be very little evidence in the literature of children themselves being involved in the interpretation of sibling sexual behaviour.

Whether the behaviour is developmentally inappropriate

Of some concern is that seven papers since 2005 define SSA as being either age/developmentally-inappropriate behaviour that is not transitory or fleeting (Bachman, 2017; McLaurin, 2005; Morrill, 2014; Tener & Silberstein, 2019); as age/developmentally-inappropriate behaviour (Simons et al., 2022; Tener & Katz, 2018) or simply as any sexual behaviour taking place between siblings (McCartan et al., 2022). There are three significant concerns about these sorts of definitions. First, there is a risk of net-widening, that any sexual behaviour between siblings, or sexual behaviour regarded as age-inappropriate, is automatically classed as abuse, even if the behaviour is mutually initiated. Conversely, requiring the behaviour to be “not transitory” would exclude very serious behaviour, such as rape, from being regarded as abuse if the evidence suggests it happened once. The scoping review by Yates et al. (2025) found that while SSA often involves multiple incidents sustained over long periods of time, it sometimes consists of a single incident. Furthermore, official records may understate the frequency of abusive incidents compared to survivor reports. Only one incident may be known about, but this does not necessarily mean it did not happen more often. Requiring the behaviour to be “not transitory” could risk mis-labelling the behaviour and leave children without adequate support in unsafe situations. Third, there is a risk that abusive behaviour is discussed in terms of being merely “inappropriate”, which would understate the seriousness of the behaviour, minimise the potential impact on the child who has been harmed, and may contribute to an inadequate response. Finally, developmental benchmarks vary across cultures and family norms as such, an over-reliance on developmental criteria risks pathologising developmentally appropriate behaviours or excluding serious harm, reinforcing the need for a nuanced, context-sensitive definition.

The centrality of power in defining SSA

Most of the criteria discussed above for defining sibling sexual behaviours as abusive (e.g. gender, age differentials, use of force or other forms of coercion, the behaviour being exploitative or unwanted) are grappling in some way with the idea of a misuse of power. We use the term “power” here in the sense of “power over”, defined by Lukes (2017, p. 37) as “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests”. As discussed above, there are myriad sources of power imbalance as well as possible tactics to exert power. Sibling relationships are complex (Sanders, 2004), and power dynamics within sibling relationships are also complex (McIntosh & Punch, 2009; Punch, 2008). Rather than specifying particular sources or tactics as part of a definition, which risks excluding alternative misuses of power, we need to consider examining in depth the nature of the sibling relationship in the context of broader family dynamics in order to make sense sibling sexual behaviour.

Implications for practice

The implications of the above discussion need to be separated out in terms of whether we are concerned with adult survivors or with children. In practice situations such as when adults are seeking support around childhood sexual experiences, it would seem sufficient to accept their account that they have had such experiences with a sibling and have found them to be harmful, distressing or confusing in some way. They may or may not recognise or identify the behaviour as being abusive. Labelling the behaviour can be the prerogative of the adult, can be arrived at through a therapeutic process, or may simply be unnecessary. Practitioners would nonetheless need to exercise critical judgement as to the extent to which the evidence on SSA applies to the situation. At present, most of the research, implicitly or explicitly, concerns people who have one or both parents in common and who have lived and grown up together as part of the same organised family. Where relationships deviate from this narrow conceptualisation of “sibling”, judgements will need to be made as to the extent to which the practice implications of the research apply.

This is equally true for practitioners working with children. For these practitioners, who are often in the position of needing to make sense of sibling sexual behaviour to inform decision-making (such as around whether the siblings can continue to live together), a clear definition of SSA to differentiate it from other forms of sibling sexual behaviour is necessary. It is apparent from this review that the sex and age of the children, whether the behaviour involved physical contact, whether the behaviour was developmentally appropriate and whether or not the behaviour was transitory, should not be included as part of any definition.

While a large age gap may be indicative of abusive behaviour, relying on age differentials to make sense of sibling sexual behaviour risks mis-identifying behaviours as non-abusive or making incorrect assumptions about which child is responsible. As such, we recommend that the respective ages of the children are considered within the context of an assessment of the power dynamics of the sibling relationship, and that specifying age gaps should no longer be included in practice guidance to define sibling sexual behaviour as abusive.

Because both problematic and abusive sexual behaviour between siblings is harmful to all of the children involved, including any child responsible for the harm, and because the nature and extent of harm may not be apparent or may be difficult to recognise at the time, establishing the harmful consequences of the behaviour should not be a requirement in order to define sibling sexual behaviour as abusive. That said, if children are expressing sentiments such as fear, a betrayal of trust or that the behaviour was unwanted, this would indicate that the behaviour was abusive. Similarly, the use of force or other forms of coercion are not necessary in order for the behaviour to be defined as abusive but would be sufficient indicators of abuse if present.

Proposal for a definition of “sibling sexual abuse”

There is consensus within the SSA literature that children are siblings when they have one or both parents in common and have lived and grown up together as part of the same organised family. Furthermore, the weight of research evidence within this literature concerns children who fit that description. The wider literature on sibling relationships and the incest taboo suggests that living and growing up together is more salient than the

biological relationship between the children, but that the biological relationship cannot be discounted. On that basis, and pending further research on sexual abuse taking place within other types of sibling relationships and across different cultures, we propose the following definition of “sibling” for the purposes of SSA research and practice:

“Siblings have one or both parents in common and/or have lived and grown up together as part of the same organised family”.

Drawing this together with the latter discussion of SSA, the definition of SSA that we propose is:

Sibling sexual abuse is any sexual behaviour between siblings where there is a misuse of power, whereby siblings are those who have one or both parents in common and/or have lived and grown up together as part of the same organised family.

Often a detailed assessment of the dynamics of the sibling relationship is required to make sense of the sibling sexual behaviour. SSA is complex behaviour within complex relationships, and, as Hanson (2024) comments, understanding the dynamics of the behaviour within the context of sibling and family dynamics may be more useful in guiding professional responses than simply determining whether the behaviour was abusive or not.

Nonetheless, indicators that would be sufficient, but not necessary, for the behaviour to be defined as abusive would include: the use of force or other coercion, the behaviour being unwanted, or large discrepancies of age, emotional maturity or intellect. An absence of these indicators should not be taken to mean that the behaviour was not abusive. Likewise, the harm caused by the abuse may not be apparent at the time. Where possible the views of the children involved should be sought. As Yates and Allardyce (2023) argue, speaking to the children involved will help to assess their overall wellbeing and to consider whether there are any other concerns around the safety of the children, as well as helping to understand their perspectives on the behaviour and on their relationship with their siblings.

We appreciate that children or adults who have been sexually abused by someone they regard as their sibling, but who is not biologically related and has not lived and grown up together with them as part of the same organised family, may object to the definition of SSA that we have proposed. We are not suggesting that what they have experienced is not sexual abuse, that it is in any way less serious or harmful, or indeed that is inappropriate for them to regard the person who abused them as a sibling. The purpose of the definition is not to exclude people from recognition and support; rather it is to encourage clarity around policy, research and evidence-based practice.

Implications for research

We do not yet have sufficient definitional clarity over the concept of “sibling”. In short, we do not know what a “sibling” is. There is a need for stronger links to be made between the literature on SSA and the literature on sibling relationships. This should include cross-cultural research. Understanding the nature and dynamics, particularly the power dynamics, of sibling relationships more generally can help to inform the SSA literature, and the SSA literature can also serve to encourage greater precision in our understanding of what constitutes a sibling relationship. Further research is required to understand, in the context of SSA, the relative salience of the biological and the social relationship between the children in terms of consequences, cultural expectations and aetiology.

Research should adopt our definition, or otherwise define what is meant by “sibling” for the purposes of the study in order to allow for comparisons to be made between the different forms of sibling relationships. Findings should be reported separately for different types of sibling relationships. The limitations of any definition offered should be acknowledged. Comparison studies of different types of sibling relationship would further help to elucidate any similarities and differences in the characteristics and aetiology of the abuse. Ultimately there is a need to continue to work towards an agreed definition of “sibling” that brings coherence to the concept of “sibling sexual abuse”.

It is also imperative that future research is clear in defining abusive sibling sexual behaviour for the purpose of the study. For consistency, we would again recommend that the above definition is adopted. Adult survivors will be able to say for themselves whether or not the behaviour was wanted, recognising that perceptions of “want” may be shaped by power dynamics within the sibling relationship. Where survivor input is unavailable, the criteria indicated above including indicators of power imbalance should be referred to. Depending upon the nature of the research, it may not be possible to undertake a detailed assessment of the sibling relationship dynamics. Narrow definitions, such as including the use of force or an age gap, should acknowledge that the research may not be representative of all SSA. Once again, the gender and age of the children, whether the behaviour involved physical contact, whether the behaviour was developmentally appropriate and whether or not the behaviour was transitory, should not be included as part of any definition. Future research should also examine the potential for children themselves to be involved in the interpretation of sibling sexual behaviour.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the definitions of “sibling” and “sibling sexual abuse” across 104 papers reporting empirical studies specifically on SSA conducted since 1980. We have proposed a definition of “sibling” that brings greater coherence to the concept of “sibling sexual abuse”, and a definition of SSA that will support greater consistency in research as well as identification and appropriate professional responses in practice to this form of family sexual violence. We encourage researchers and practitioners to adopt this definition, thereby to promote the development of our knowledge in this complex area of work.

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