

## **Sibling Sexual Abuse**

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Sibling sexual abuse (SSA) is a continuum of childhood sexual behaviors that do not fit the category of age-appropriate curiosity. Although SSA may be the most prevalent and longest lasting form of intra familial sexual abuse – as well as the one with the worst repercussions – it is also the least reported, studied and treated. In the last decades, there have been major developments in the empirical literature concerning sexual abuse, including the emergence of SSA literature. Yet our understanding of SSA is still in its infancy and many of its aspects have yet to be understood. The main challenge we face is further understanding its characteristics and dynamics, as well as available legal and therapeutic interventions and their effectiveness (Ballantine, 2012). Accordingly, this panel aims to enrich our understanding on SSA from multiple perspectives: Those of siblings involved in SSA, those of parents whom their children were involved in SSA, those of professionals working at the CAC, those of child investigators and those of therapists who conduct therapeutic interventions with survivors of SSA.

**Symposium coordinator: Dr. Dafna Tener**

**Abstracts to be presented at the symposium:**

- 1. "Victim, Perpetrator or Just My Brother?" Sibling perceptions on SSA: A Child Advocacy Center Study**

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Based on 100 mostly religious Jewish families referred to a child advocacy center (CAC) in Jerusalem from 2010-2015, this qualitative study examines SSA characteristics, dynamics and perceptions of deviancy in multi-sibling subsystems. The findings are based on an analysis of case summaries, demographic charts and documented conversations between social workers and siblings. Qualitative document analysis reveals two types of SSA dynamics: “identified perpetrator” and “routine relationship”, the latter being a particularly understudied dynamic that challenges common stereotypes. We also found sibling perceptions of deviancy to vary along a continuum from deviant to completely normative. These perceptions are affected by the type of dynamics as well as by factors associated with disclosure.

Our findings highlight the importance of studying the lived experiences of children involved in SSA as an input with critical policy, treatment and research implications. Interventions must be adjusted to the family system and sibling subsystem's perceptions and needs in order to avoid treatment that exacerbates the crisis already experienced by the family. Common assumptions – there must be a “perpetrator”; abuse is necessarily traumatic; and treatment should focus on the trauma – are challenged by the routine type. We conclude that treatment should account for the complexity of SSA by shedding these assumptions and considering the sibling subsystem as an autonomous unit within the large family.

## **2. Parental attitudes following disclosure of sibling sexual abuse: A Child Advocacy Center intervention study.**

*Efrat Luski,*

*Paul Baerwald school of social work and social welfare, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

This qualitative study is based on a sample of 60 mostly religious Jewish families referred to a child advocacy center (CAC) in Jerusalem from 2010-2015. It examines parental attitudes to SSA and their reconstruction, during and following their experience at the CAC. Analysis of case summaries and documented conversations between child protection officers and parents reveals two main initial parental attitudes after the disclosure SSA. The first is the attitude that no sexual acts took place at all. The second is that they did occur, with three different variations: the sexual acts as “not serious”, as a “rupture in the family’s ideal narrative” and as “another tragic episode in the family’s tragic life story”. Findings also

suggest that the CAC intervention is a turning point, leading most parents to reconstruct their initial attitudes from "never happened" or "not serious" to "rupture in the family image" or to "another negative event in the family". These findings underscore the need to study the experiences of parents whose children were involved in SSA in order to inform policy, treatment and research. This is critical, as interventions that are not aligned with family attitudes and needs are known to exacerbate the family crisis.

### **3. It's much more of family issue than a legal one": Examining the decision making process of forensic interviewers in cases of sibling sexual abuse.**

*Carmit katz*

*The Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University*

This study put in focus the decision making of forensic interviews as was analyzed in 42 cases of SSA. The qualitative thematic analysis addresses the forensic interviewers assessment of the children and their families and the decisions they make in future referrals of the investigated children. The findings from the current study highlight the complexity of practitioners decision making in cases of SSA and the need to further enhance the knowledge on that phenomenon in general, and more specifically in areas where considerable lacunas in knowledge exists: lack of standardization in the process, lack of understanding of family dynamic and abuse dynamic in these cases which stress that there still a need to legitimize SSA as abuse. Implications for research, policy and practice are discussed in the unique societal and cultural context of the Israeli society.

### **4. Understanding and coping with cases of sibling sexual abuse: Focus groups with the Child Advocacy Center staff members**

*Shosh Turgeman*

*BEIT LYNN - Child Advocacy Center, Jerusalem*

This study included content analysis of six focus groups conducted with the CAC staff. . The CAC studied here is located in mostly Jewish West Jerusalem. Its team of experts provides multidisciplinary initial treatment to minors under 18 following sexual, physical, or

emotional abuse, as well as to their families. The team includes a director, a physician, two social workers who serve as child protection officers (CPOs), two child investigators (also social workers), and a police officer. The current study included written documentation of ten focus groups conducted with the Center's staff once a month between March 2016 and July 2017. During the meetings, members of the center were asked to express their views, thoughts and feelings regarding issues raised during their work with cases of sibling sexual abuse. The authors documented the sessions, then analyzed them, and the themes that emerged during the operation were used as raw material for future sessions. The presentation will discuss the main theme: Professionals' negotiation between legal and therapeutic roles. This theme presents the effect of the mandatory reporting in cases of SSA and the way this intervention affects families. The presentation focuses on the difficult and complex dilemma for the professional regarding his or her therapeutic functions as opposed to his legal duties. The analysis reveals that in order to balance the two positions, professionals at the CAC are frequently assisted by the exemption committee.

## **5. "In the eye of the storm": Therapeutic responses for sibling sexual abuse**

*Merav Sabban*

*Meital Center, Therapeutic Center for children and adolescents victims of sexual abuse*

Therapeutic responses for a family in which sibling sexual abuse occurred is characterized as a struggle that ranges between fragmentation and integration. The family faces two distinct forces that determine the family interactions and responses to the abuse: the first seeks to preserve the family structure and unity; while the second forces the family to make an impossible choice between siblings involved, one that may undermine the integrity of the family. The family arrives to the treatment while torn between the two forces, making every solution unbearable. The perpetrator, the victim and the parents, are in need of their own private space as a first stage of the family healing process. Thus, the therapeutic response will be split, until they are ready for family treatment meetings in different group compositions. The therapeutic structure is constantly in danger and embodies "the storm" the family feels. The therapists sometimes find themselves representing different voices in the family, and the therapeutic system has to find its balance, answering intricate questions: Whose voice will be heard? Whose needs will dictate the pace? The therapists often find themselves divided or

angry, yet they have to keep moving forward in a joint, balanced process, one that promotes healing.