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Non-lethal physical abuse of siblings

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Abstract

Siblings play an important role on child development and personality. However, several characteristics of the sibling relationship put sibling interactions at risk for frequent incidents of conflict. Several studies report that violence among siblings may be the most common form of family violence, with prevalence rates remaining relatively constant over the past 40 years, but society and people in the family environment still often overlook it, deeming these aggressive interactions 'normal'. Society recognizes child abuse, intimate partner violence, and elder abuse as significant social problems, but awareness of sibling abuse as a serious form of family violence remains low. The aim of the present chapter is to contribute to a better understanding of non-lethal physical abuse of siblings. The chapter will explore: differences between play fighting and sibling violence; differences between rivalry and sibling violence; associations of sibling violence with other forms of domestic violence (parent-to-child violence, dating violence, parent-to-parent violence, bullying at school); prevalence of different types of sibling violence (e.g., physical, verbal, and sexual); and perceptions of sibling violence from victims, perpetrators, and the wider society. The chapter will also explore risk factors for sibling violence (e.g., peer bullying, hostility, and anger), alongside short-term and long-term consequences (e.g., mental health difficulties, increased aggressive behavior outside the home, and interpersonal problems) of these behaviors. The role of other variables such gender, age, family communication, parenting quality, sibling attachment, and differential treatment by parents in sibling violence will also be considered. Cultural differences will be explored. The literature will be discussed in relation to several theoretical perspectives, such as family systems theory, social learning theory, and feminist theory, to help understand sibling violence. Suggestions regarding prevention and intervention are also discussed.

Key-words: sibling violence; risk factors; consequences; intervention; prevention

Non-lethal physical abuse of siblings

The sibling relationship is the most enduring relationship among humans, more enduring than the parent-to-child relationship, and even if "there may be a dissolution of an active sibling relationship under certain circumstances, there is no dissolution of the sibling status" (Cicirelli, 1995, p. 2). Today, families live in unsettled times, with changes in family structure and the ways in which family members relate to each other (Carter and McGoldrick, 2001). Divorce rates have increased, the number of traditional families is proportionately fewer, and the proportionate number of single parents is higher (Rosa, 2015). These changes may affect sibling relationships. Sibling conflict has been associated with parental conflict before divorce, for example (Poortman & Voorpostel, 2009).

Another feature of the sibling relationship – and different from other family relationships - is that siblings are expected to like each other, and even the words that define this relationship (*frater*, *fraternité*) appeal more to a positive relationship, which is not always the reality of this relationship. What is known and observed in the research literature about childhood is that the sibling relationship includes a broad spectrum of emotions ranging from love to hate, which have been found since the first systematic studies on siblings (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Toman, 1961; among other pioneering researchers). From a developmental perspective, the emotional complexity of the sibling relationship makes it a core relationship, especially if it is established during the early years of our lives, because it allows for diverse learning as well, as underlined by Minuchin and Fishman (1981, p. 19): "Within this context, children support each other, enjoy, attack, scapegoat, and generally learn from each other. They develop their own transactional patterns for negotiating, cooperating, and competing. They learn how to make friends and deal with enemies, how to learn from others, and how to achieve recognition". The diversity of sibling types (e.g., full siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings, etc.), the various variables that influence

their relationship (e.g., gender, age differences, number of siblings), the intricate relationships and coalitions of the sibling subsystem with the family system (nuclear and/or extended family) as a whole, make it difficult to describe all the nuances of this subsystem.

Generally, we can understand that, besides the rivalry (e.g., the brother as a rival for the love of the parents) that can guide the early times of the relationship between brothers (i.e. there are those refer to a Cain Complex and Abel Complex, alluding to the relationship between the first siblings; Gayet, 1993), the relationship can include conflict that sometimes leads to violence (Fernandes & Relva, 2019).

As in other relational contexts, especially in the family, violence occurs in different types (e.g., physical, psychological, sexual, relational or social, patrimonial and economic); however, sibling violence when compared with others forms of family violence is recognized less and, as argued by Khan and Rogers (2015), is often marginalized and considered a harmless and inconsequential form of abuse in the familial context. We will focus on physical abuse in this chapter, although recognizing that most cases of psychological abuse co-occur alongside physical abuse and that it is difficult to separate them (Caffaro, 2014). Caffaro (2014, p. 8) considers that "sibling violence occurs when one member of a sibling dyad nonaccidentally causes physical harm, injury, or death to a brother or sister. It consists of a range of behaviors including pushing, hitting, beating, and using weapons to inflict physical harm". In 1998, Wiehe conducted a study with 150 adult survivors of sibling abuse and the most common forms of physical abuse reported were: "…hitting, slapping, shoving, punching, biting, hair pulling, scratching and pinching. Survivors also reported having been hit with objects such as broom handles, rubber hoses, coat hangers, hairbrushes, belts, and sticks" (p. 170).

Several terms have been used to refer to sibling abuse, such as sibling violence, sibling abuse, bullying, rivalry, and conflict. Throughout the chapter, we will refer to this form of

violence as "non-lethal physical sibling abuse" although in some instances, we will adopt the designation used by the authors of the cited studies.

Difference between play and sibling violence

The variable terminology for sibling violence used within the research literature reflects the fact that there is no consistent or consensus definition for these behaviours, and such ambiguity may unintentionally normalize these behaviors or signal that the behaviours are harmless (Phillips, Phillips, Grupp, & Trigg, 2009). Similarly, those who experience violent behaviours from a sibling might not recognize the behaviours as such (Kettrey & Emery, 2006). It is therefore important to explore the different definitions used to describe sibling violence, acknowledging the similarities and differences among them.

Sibling violence was the term that was used to describe aggressive sibling behaviours in the 1975 National Family Violence Survey (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), one of the first studies to address these behaviours. In the 1975 National Family Violence Survey (Straus et al., 1980), sibling violence was described using the general definition of violence proposed by Gelles and Straus (1979), namely: "an act carried out with the intention or perceived intention of physically hurting another person" (p. 554). A key feature of this definition is the intention of the behaviours. This acknowledges that siblings can engage in behaviours that, from the outset, appear violent in nature, but without the intent to harm, they are not violent.

Sibling bullying can be defined as "a specific type of aggressive behaviour that is repeated over time, intended to both cause harm and to dominate" (Bowes, Wolke, Joinson, Lereya, & Lewis, 2014, p. 2). Similarly to the definition of sibling violence, the intention to harm is a key feature of sibling bullying. However, Bowes et al. (2014) stipulate that for behaviours to be identified as sibling bullying, they need to be 'repeated over time', implying

that single acts of violence are not eligible to be defined as violence. The term appears to be more appropriate when describing instances of sibling violence with a long duration of time.

Sibling rivalry can be defined as a competitive behaviour, used to gain love, attention, or affection from a parent (Taylor, 1988). In contrast to sibling violence and sibling bullying, rivalry does not include an intention to harm. Behaviours classified as sibling rivalry can include those that appear aggressive from the outset (e.g., pushing, shoving), but do not include an intention to harm, only to gain love, attention, or affection from a parent (Taylor, 1988).

Finally, the term *sibling aggression* is often used as a broad term, to include multiple categories: competition, conflict, violence, and abuse (Caspi, 2012). According to Caspi (2012), these categories are ordered by level of severity, with play fighting included in the category of conflict. It appears that this term is a catchall, inclusive of all the different terminologies used.

As sibling violence includes behaviours that from the outset appear aggressive, it does mean that they may often be confused with play fighting. Play fighting behaviours are characteristic of childhood (Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini, 2004). This term can be defined as "verbally and physically cooperative play behaviour involving at least two children, where all participants enjoy and voluntarily engage in reciprocal role-playing that includes aggressive make-believe themes, actions, and words; yet lacks intent to harm either emotionally or physically" (Hart & Tannock, 2013, p. 1). It is said to have developmental benefits for children, which include learning boundaries and developing the skills needed for emotional control (Smith et al., 2004). With play fighting including such beneficial effects, it is important to be able to distinguish between play fighting and sibling violence. Although there are differences between each of the terms used to describe violence and aggression between siblings, one of the key patterns is that none include specific behaviours that are characteristic

of sibling violence. This indicates that sibling violence cannot be characterized by behaviours alone, the motivations and intentions of these behaviours need to be considered.

Prevalence of non-lethal physical abuse

According to Tompsett, Mahoney, and Lackey (2016), "assessing prevalence of relatively mild to severe forms of sibling aggression is further complicated by the use of different reporters of aggression in different studies" (p. 2). It has also been found that non-lethal physical abuse of siblings is one of the most prevalent forms of family violence; however, the inconsistence of definitions make it difficult to determine its prevalence (Caspi & Barrios, 2016). Nevertheless, the results from some studies are alarming. In 1980, a study conducted by Straus et al. in the US called attention to the problem of sibling violence, where a high prevalence of sibling abuse was reported. Other studies have shown that high prevalence rates are found not only in the US (e.g., Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990; Hardy, Beers, Burgess, & Taylor, 2010; Graham-Bermann, Cutler, Litzenberger, & Swartz, 1994; Kettrey & Emery, 2006) but also in the UK (Khan & Cooke, 2008) and Portugal (Relva, Fernandes, Alarcão, & Martins, 2014). Hardy (2001) found, in a study with 203 participants with ages between 17 and 48 years, that almost half of the sample (47.8%) reported that they had been victims of physical aggression by a sibling. Finkelhor, Turner, and Ormond (2006), in a national sample of 2,030 children and adolescents with ages between 2 to 17 years, found that 586 children had been victim of a sibling aggression. Some explanations can be offered for this high prevalence. Child-to-child violence has been seen as a normative experience for development with lesser impact when compared with adult violence (Finkelhor et al., 2006). Additionally sibling abuse is frequently labeled as sibling rivalry (Irfan & Corbow, 2004; McDonald & Martinez, 2016) but also as "a natural and normal part of sibling relationships and/or gendered biology" (Phillips et al., 2009, p. 13). In accordance with this perspective, and because sibling abuse is seen as "normal" and sibling aggression is often dismissed by

parents, victims of sibling abuse "may ignore the reality of their experience by conforming to a dominant discourse that does not recognize this as a form of violence or abuse" (Kettrey & Emery, 2006; p. 409). Additionally, this normalization seems to be more typical for males than for females (Khan & Rogers, 2015). Most of the studies have been conducted with non-clinical population; studies exploring the prevalence of non-lethal sibling abuse in clinical populations is scarce (Tompsett et al., 2016). In 2008, in the UK, Khan and Cooke explored the prevalence rates of sibling violence in a sample of 111 youth offenders, both male and female, where the prevalence rates were expected to be high. Ninety percent of the young people reported to have intentionally perpetrated at least one severe act of sibling violence.

Few studies have explored sibling physical abuse in clinical populations. A recent investigation, conducted in the UK with a sample of 231 individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and 8,180 without ASD, with ages ranging between 11 and 14 years, found that adolescents with ASD reported more sibling bullying as both perpetrator and victim in early adolescence when compared to those without ASD (Toseeb, McChesney, Oldfield, & Wolke, 2019). Also, children that were perceived by their parents as overweight and those with a physical disability, according to Tucker, Finkelhor and Turner (2017), "were at increased risk of experiencing more types of sibling victimization" (p. 378).

Regarding several specific populations, there is a lack of research. Martinez and McDonald (2016) conducted a study with 64 heterosexual and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, , bisexual, transgender, and queer) women, aged at least 18 years. Results suggested that LGBTQ participants experienced less physical aggression when compared with heterosexual participants.

As we have seen, studies regarding clinical and specific populations are few, which suggests that more research with both more non-normative and normative samples is needed.

Evaluation of sibling violence

Methodological issues seem to influence rates of prevalence when we compare studies. In fact, the way that prevalence is evaluated may affect the results. For example, Krienert and Wash (2011, p. 333) stated that "large samples are frequently out of date, or were initially for a different purpose". Two of the instruments used are the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS, Straus, 1979; cf. Graham-Berman et al., 1994) and the Conflict Tactics Scales Revised - sibling version (CTS2-SP), the latter designed by Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman (1995; cf. Relva, Fernandes, & Costa, 2013; Mackey, Fromuth, & Kelly, 2010). Also, the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ; Hamby, Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2004), which explores 34 specific types of victimization, including sibling victimization, has been used (cf. Finkelhor et al., 2006). Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro (1998) developed the Sibling Abuse Interview (SAI), which can be used to assess abuse not only by interviewing individual children, but also sibling dyads, non-abused children, and parents or adult caregivers (cf. Caffaro, 2014). The interview gathers information on eight key areas: "(a) the offender's motivation for the abuse and for treatment; (b) the family's ability to take responsibility for the sibling abuse; (c) the family's reaction to disclosure of the activity; (d) the family's ability to protect the victim; (e) sources of support for the victim; (f) evidence of divided loyalties among children and parents; (g) discipline and limit setting, and level of disciplinary consistency; and (h) sources of family strength and resilience" (Caffaro, 2014, p. 135).

Risk factors for non-lethal physical abuse of siblings

Age: When we look at age, research findings are inconsistent. In research conducted by Menesini, Camodeca, and Nocentini (2010), having an older brother appeared to be a risk factor for being a victim of sibling abuse. The peak for sibling violence, according to Straus et al. (1980), occurs in adolescence and after this age risk declines. Tucker, Finkelhor, Shattuck, and Turner (2013b) observed a peak between the ages of 6 and 9 years. However,

in 2006, Finkelhor et al. found that older adolescents report a higher rate of victimization with injury but also using an object/weapon when compared with younger adolescents. According to Krienert and Walsh (2011, p. 334) "gender may play a role in observed age differences".

Gender: Regarding gender, females are more at risk of being victims of sibling abuse when compared with males (Foody, Samara, & Norman, 2019), with males being more often the perpetrators of severe sibling violence (Krienert & Walsh, 2011). Recently, Dantchev, Zammit and Wolke (2018) found that males were less frequently victimized than girls but when exploring the perpetration of sibling abuse, there were no gender differences. Other studies have also found no gender differences (Hardy et al., 2010; Straus et al., 1980). Analyses by gender can also allow us to explore sibling violence according to the sibling dyad: brother-brother, sister-sister, brother-sister, and sister-brother. Graham-Bermann et al. (1994) study suggested that the dyad brother (older)-sister (younger) is at increased risk for sibling conflict. Several researchers (e.g., Goodwin & Roscoe, 1990; Hoffman, Kiecolt, & Edwards, 2005; Relva et al., 2014) have also found that in the brother-brother dyad, the prevalence rates of physical aggression are higher. However, the results are not consistent, with different results reported by Graham-Bermann et al. (1994). As Relva et al. (2014) explained, methodological questions might explain discrepancies (e.g., age effect, dynamic of reporting behavior) but also social cultural and environment factors such as parental supervision and time spent together might be relevant. Also, Caffaro (2014, p. 121) suggested that the discrepancies may be due to underreported cases but also commented that, "males in our society are rewarded for being emotionally and physically strong and self-reliant".

Psychosocial characteristics: A recent study by Tucker, Finkelhor, and Turner (2019) with a nationally representative sample of U.S. children and adolescents ages 5-17 years

showed that sibling victimization was associated with inconsistent or harsh parenting. Similar results were found by Tippett and Wolke (2015) in the UK, where harsh parenting increased the risk of sibling aggression. White and educated families (Tucker et al., 2015), a large family size, male siblings, and financial difficulties were also associated with greater rates of sibling aggression (Tippett & Wolke, 2015). Hardy (2001, p. 265) also found that, "financial/business strains and illness were significantly correlated with physical aggression". The co-occurrence of different forms of violence is frequent in victims of sibling abuse. In fact, Hoffman et al. (2005) found that being a victim or witness of several forms of family violence such as parent-to-parent and parent-to child abuse increased the likelihood of sibling violence. It is important here to highlight the high risk for lasting, physical, mental, and emotional harm of polyvictimization for children and youth (Finkelhor, Turner, Hamby, & Ormond, 2011).

Quality of sibling relationship: The quality of the sibling relationship appears to predict sibling abuse. In 2010, Menesini et al. found in a sample of 195 children with ages ranging between 10 and 12 years that girls were more at risk of bullying from their older brothers, who are more dominant in sibling relationships, when compared with older sisters, who tend to be more responsible and protective. More recently, Relva, Alarcão, Fernandes, and Graham-Bermann (2019) in a study with 192 adolescents with ages between 12 and 19 years explored the association between sibling attachment, sibling abuse, and parental deferential treatment, concluded that perpetration of physical aggression was positively associated with sibling distance.

Consequences

Non-lethal physical abuse by siblings has short-term and long-term consequences notable across the life cycle. Depression (Bar-Zomer & Klomek, 2018; Bowes et al., 2014; Foody et al., 2019) and behavior problems (Foody et al., 2019) have been found in adolescent

victims of sibling abuse. Recent findings by Berkel, Tucker, and Finkelhor (2018), in a sample of 2,053 children with ages ranging from 5 to 17 years from the National Survey of Children's Exposure to violence showed that sibling victimization was related to mental health problems and delinquency. Sibling aggression also seems to be related to an increased risk of suicide ideation (Bar-Zomer & Klomek, 2018), anxiety (Lopes, Relva, & Fernandes, 2017; Graham-Bermann et al., 1994), difficulties in emotional adjustment, low self-esteem (Graham-Bermann et al., 1994), substance abuse, and aggression (Button & Gealt, 2010). Also, in a study conducted by Bar-Zomer and Klomek (2018) with 279 Israeli students with ages between 10 and 17 years, it was found that participants involved in sibling bullying had less secure attachments to their parents when compared to those not involved in sibling bullying.

Moreover, the association of non-lethal physical sibling abuse with other forms of aggression has been explored in the research literature. This has been explored from two different perspectives (1) investigating the link between experiencing violence from a sibling in childhood and using aggressive behaviours in adulthood or (2) investigating the links with other forms of aggression at the time when the sibling violence occurs.

There has been a link established between experiencing aggression from a sibling in childhood and using violence towards a partner in adulthood (Hendy, Burns, Hakan Can, & Scherer, 2012). Large-scale studies in the US and the UK have investigated at the association between intimate partner violence, child abuse, and sibling violence (e.g. Goodlin & Dunn, 2010; Radford et al., 2011). The co-occurrence rate of all three types of aggression is approximately at 5% (Goodlin & Dunn, 2010). Radford et al. (2011) also identified that experiencing child abuse was a risk factor for experiencing multiple types of aggression in the home, including violence from a sibling. This is a problematic as it could have negative

consequences on children as they go into adulthood. (o revisor refere que deveríamos ter mencionado a violência intergeracional)

Non-lethal physical abuse of siblings has also been shown to have a strong impact on peer relationships (Wolke & Skew, 2012). One of these associations is peer bullying. Studies have found that engagement in violent behaviours with a sibling is strongly related to engagement in peer bullying (Bar-Zomer & Klomek, 2018; Menesini et al., 2010; Tippett & Wolke, 2015; Wolke & Samara, 2004; Wolke & Skew, 2012; Wolke, Tippett, & Dantchev, 2015). More specifically, being a victim of aggression from a sibling is strongly associated with being bullied in the school environment and being a perpetrator of aggression from a sibling is strongly associated with perpetrating bullying behaviours in school (Tippett & Wolke, 2014). Wolke and Samara (2004) aimed to explore the association between victims of sibling violence with (1) involvement in peer bullying and (2) behavioural problems. Overall, 921 participants, aged 12-15 years, were recruited from two Israeli lower secondary schools. Through self-report questionnaires, it was found that the children involved in bullying in the school environment had higher levels of behavioural problems when compared to those not involved in bullying (Wolke & Samara, 2004). Additionally, those participants who were victims of aggression from a sibling were at an increased risk of behavioural problems, when compared to those who were not victims of sibling violence. Along with this, victims of aggression from a sibling were likely to be involved in bullying from peers at school (Wolke & Samara, 2004). Wolke and Skew (2012) state that this suggests a scenario in which children are bullied in both the school and home environment, leading to a difficulty in finding an environment where they are not experiencing aggression.

Long-term effects of sibling abuse were recently explored by Dantchev et al. (2018), who found an association between victimization and perpetration of sibling bullying and an increased risk of psychotic disorder in early adulthood. Caffaro (2014) define a "sibling

survivor" as those adults who were victims of sibling abuse in children and are dealing with the long-term consequences of that abuse. In Wiehe's (1998) study with sibling survivors, participants reported low-self esteem, difficulties with interpersonal relationships, and self-blame. In some cases, participants also reported depression associated with suicide attempts.

Perceptions of non-lethal physical abuse

Sibling violence is often described as being normalized within society, where behaviours are often dismissed as rivalry (Kiselica & Morril-Richards, 2007). For this reason, when victims report their experiences to parents, they are often dismissed or dealt with incorrectly, encouraging the violence to continue (Kiselica & Morril-Richards, 2007). This normalization is said to be reflected in prevalence rates of violence between siblings, in that the high prevalence of these behaviours is indicative of attitudes that condone them (Reese-Weber, 2008). For this reason, it is important to consider how the wider society views this form of violence.

Perceptions of sibling violence have been explored using vignette style methodological designs, where participants are asked to read a brief scenario about an incident and then report their opinions using a questionnaire. When using this design, violence between siblings is often found to be more acceptable, and less severe than dating violence (Khan & Rogers, 2015), with male victims being perceived more negatively when compared to female victims (Harris, 1991). These general perceptions are found to be consistent across the sex of participants, meaning that there are no differences in how males and females view the severity of sibling violence (Reese-Weber, 2008). However, male participants have been found to approve more of physically violent behaviours being used within the context of a verbal argument when compared with female participants (Hoffman et al., 2005). The authors state that this difference between males and females reflects the wider

culture where males are more likely to view males dominating their sibling, through violence, to be a method of demonstrating their social power, right, and masculinity.

Individuals that have experienced violence with a sibling have been found to perceive the behaviours as more acceptable than those without such experiences (Khan & Rogers, 2015). For example, in a UK study, Khan and Rogers (2015) asked 605 participants to rate their opinions based on one of four vignette scenarios: sibling, dating, peer, and stranger violence. They found that violence between siblings was perceived to be more acceptable than between dating partners. In addition, those participants that had experience with sibling violence viewed the behaviours as less severe and the victim as more responsible, thus blaming the victim, than those who had no experience of violence with their sibling. Similar findings were reported by Hardy et al. (2010), who found that more experience with sibling violence was associated with stronger views on the acceptability of the behaviours. However, the sex of the participant also played a role. For men, the experience of being a victim was associated with greater acceptance of the behaviors, whereas for women, it was the experience of being a perpetrator that predicted greater acceptance of the behaviors (Hardy et al., 2010). It therefore seems that individuals who have experienced aggression from their sibling often blame victims of sibling aggression more than those who have no experience of such behaviors. This can be explained through cognitive dissonance theory. Cultural norms traditionally infer males to be perpetrators of violence and women to be victims of violence. Experiencing violence from a sibling that does not fit these cultural norms can cause a feeling of dissonance, so to ease this tension, individuals may change their attitudes towards the roles, increasing their levels of acceptance for sibling violence, seeing the behaviours as characteristic of their relationship (Hardy et al., 2010).

The perceptions of parents are also important in sibling violence, particularly when people report their experience with these behaviors. It can be seen from the stalking literature,

however, that the way that people respond to disclosures of violence can impact the help that people receive (Taylor-Dunn, Bowen, & Gilchrist, 2017). Perkins and Shadik (2018) explored perceptions of physical and emotional sibling violence in an interview with an African American parent, Marie, based in the US, who was identified as a parent who was at risk for child abuse and neglect. One of the key themes identified from the interview was the parental normalization of violence between siblings (Perkins & Shadik, 2018). In her interview, it was apparent that the normalization of the violence between her children had developed based on the experiences that she had with her siblings in childhood. One of the quotes from Marie's interview was as follows:

> "I was 12 and she was 10 and we got to fighting, because it was the last
>
> juice in the refrigerator and I got it, and we were fighting and I tried to
>
> run for the door and she chased me and stabbed me in the back with a
>
> fork because I took the last juice."

Marie stated that these behaviours were characteristic and normal within the relationship with her sister (Perkins & Shadik, 2018). The perceptions described by Perkins and Shadik (2018) are not unique. The way that parents deal with their children using violence with one another can impact their use. For example, when parents do not provide any intervention, it not only signals to the children that the behaviours are acceptable, but also may be perceived to support and encourage the violence (Kramer, Perozynski, & Chung, 2009). This can contribute to family perceptions and schemas that see the use of violence between siblings as a normal part of childhood.

Kettrey and Emery (2006) explored how people talk about acts of aggression with their sibling and the terms that they use to discuss these behaviors. To do this, they asked 200 university students, in the US, to complete a series of three questionnaires: demographic information, the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979), and a modified version of the

Domestic Violence Self-Labeling Scale (Hamby & Gray-Little, 2000). Kettrey and Emery (2006) found that 70.5% of the participants had experienced severe physical violence with their sibling, as a victim or a perpetrator. When asked to label their experience, however, it was found that participants did not recognize the aggressive behaviours as violent, and therefore, as problematic (Kettrey & Emery, 2006).

Cultural differences

The sibling relationship is associated with family life, which can differ according to cultural characteristics. In a study conducted with a British Pakistani community, Irfan and Cowburn (2004) found a high prevalence of sibling abusers (35%) when compared with mother (33%) and father (19%) perpetrators. According to the authors, in Pakistani culture "males are more highly valued. (…) Elder brothers, or on some occasions even younger brothers, take over the role of father and never get challenged by the parents. This is considered normal" (p. 97). In 2010, Rapoza, Cook, Zaveri, and Malley-Morrison explored the occurrence of sibling abuse in different ethnic-minority groups in the US, with convenience samples of Native American (n = 25), Latino/Hispanic (n = 45), African American (n = 30), European American (n = 78), Asian Pacific American (n = 31) and South Asian American (n = 29). The results showed that, when compared with other ethnic groups, Asian Pacific Americans reported physically aggressive acts between siblings as less abusive.

As most of the studies have been conducted in higher-income contries, more studies in low-income and midle-income countries should be conducted in order to explore cultural differences in sibling abuse (Wolke et al., 2015).

Theoretical perspectives

Social Learning Theory has been suggested by some authors (Button & Gealt, 2010; Hoffman et al., 2005; Wiehe, 1997) to explain the occurrence of sibling abuse. According to this theory, children tend to reproduce behaviors that are learned from their parents, in their

sibling relationship (Hoffman et al., 2005). Indeed, Button and Gealt (2010) analysed data from the 2007 Delaware Secondary School Student Survey with a total of 8,122 students (living with a sibing) with ages between "12 or younger" and "18 or older." Button and Gealt observed that, "students who reported witnessing violence in the home or experiencing abuse by parents were substantially more likely to report sibling victimization" (p. 138). This study demonstrates that children may repeat the behaviours that they see occurring between parents and using them with a sibling. However, the likelihood of children using the behaviours in practice increases if the perpetrator achieves their goal (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). Furthermore, the observation and modeling of aggressive behaviours to resolve conflict can encourage children to develop cognitive schemas that endorse aggression (Huesmann, 1988). Huesmann (1988) states that the way that children observe people using aggressive behaviours will be developed into a script, which is then referred to when presented with a situation of conflict. However, it is important to acknowledge that reinforcement of aggression will play a part in whether children model or use the behaviours in the future (Bandura, 1977).

Previously, in Wiehe's (1998) study, adult sibling survivors reported that the way siblings treated them was similar to the way parents treated them. More recently, Perkins, Spira, and Key (2018) used social learning theory to explore the link between sibling abuse and later elder abuse. The authors explored in a case study how sibling violence may increase the risk of elder abuse, as Wiehe (1997) has also argued, suggesting intergenerational transmission of family violence.

Another theory proposed to explain sibling violence is *feminist theory* (see Hoffman & Edwards, 2004; 2005), which proposes that we live in a patriarchal society in which males have a privileged role. Indeed, males when compared with females are more often perpetrators of sibling assault (Caffaro, 2014). Also, Hoffman and Edwards (2004) proposed

that older, male children are more powerful than both younger and female children, and express this power by violence towards their siblings. According to this theory, it can be said that males have a need to exert control and power over females, and use violence to do so (Wiehe, 1997).

Finally, *Family System Theory* proposes that families are a system, hierarchically organized into interdependent subsystems in which each subsystem influences the others (Whitman, McHale, & Soli, 2011). Violence is seen as a power exercise, with an aggressor and a victim (Alarcão, 2000). According to Whitman et al. (2011), "coalitions in families are subsystems within families with more rigid boundaries and are thought to be a sign of family dysfunction" (p. 11). In fact, and as Caffaro (2014) argues, when parents violate boundaries by selecting a favorite child, they can contribute to abusive sibling relationships.

Prevention and intervention

As seen earlier, sibling aggression is associated with short-term and long-term consequences not only for the victims but also for the sibling aggressors, as suggested by Tucker and Finkelhor (2015), with implications for intervention. The authors conducted a systematic review identifying programs that intend to reduce sibling aggression and promote healthier behaviors between siblings. Tucker and Finkelhor found gaps regarding sibling aggression interventions, due in part to the lack of recognition of this issue as a social problem, as noted earlier in this chapter. In 2013, Shadik, Perkins, and Kovacs found little research on parenting intervention programs in which sibling violence was addressed. Interventions took place at school and parents need to be taken into account to have more success. Indeed, studies have shown that when there are interventions that help parents proactively respond to their child's challenging behaviors, prosocial behaviors and improvements in their school outcomes are promoted (Purcell-Gates, Lenters, MacTavish, & Anderson, 2014). Thus, intervention programs should be designed and directed not only to a

particular individual, but to the individual in their environment, assuming that he or she is influenced by and able to influence that environment.

Conclusion

As Perkins, Coles and O'Connor (2016) recently argued, "it is imperative that policy stakeholders begin addressing sibling violence to provide interventions that both prevent and respond to this underemphasized form of violence" (p. 16). Also, not only parents, but also the public and professionals should treat sibling aggression as harmful, and not as normal or minor (Tucker, Finkelhor, Turner, & Shattuck, 2013a). Future studies should explore sibling relationships in residential care but also in different types of families, and contexts such as social media, and clinical samples. Relva et al. (2014) also proposed the exploration of the influence of the environment (exposition of violence on the internet or on social networks) in sibling abuse. Additionally, more studies are needed that intend to increase knowledge of non-lethal physical abuse of siblings; however, it is important for these future studies to clarify what kind of violence and behaviors are being evaluated as a way of reducing inconsistencies. This methodological clarification can help to distinguish rivalry from sibling violence. As Caspi and Barrios (2016) found, sibling aggression content is rarely a part of education programs. We recommend that future education programs, in different professions (psychologists, social workers, nurses, doctors, teachers, etc.), should introduce this issue as a serious form of family violence so that new practitioners will be better prepared to lead. Also, parents should have more information available to them about how to identify sibling abuse and also how to address it (McDonald & Martinez, 2016). Polyvictimization interventions should also be re-evaluated (Finkelhor et al., 2011) to acknowledge that different forms of violence may be present in the family. Sibling-abused children may also benefit from therapy that "increases self-esteem, shapes identity, and validates a sense of self" (Meyers, 2016, p. 155).

The few qualitative studies found (e.g., McDonald & Martinez, 2016; Meyers, 2016; Wiehe, 1997) suggest that more studies are needed where motivation, causes, and consequences from both the victim and aggressor perspectives are explored. As some authors argue (Irfan & Cowburn, 2004), child protection legislation should reflect sibling abuse as a risk for harm to children, while also providing the same support as other victims of family violence receive (McDonald & Martinez, 2016). It is important to stress that this form of violence has been considered "pandemic" (Finkelhor & Dzuiba-Leatherman, 1994), so sibling violence should be explored across all life stages and viewed as a serious social problem with both short-term and long-term effects.

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