

**MORE THAN JUST CHILD'S PLAY:  
A STUDY ON SIBLING INCEST**

**NICKI OWEN BASW  
Private Practitioner,  
Sunshine Coast.  
Ph. 0408 987 870**

**Email: [nickowen@bigpond.com.au](mailto:nickowen@bigpond.com.au)**

## **1. Introduction**

Both topics of child sexuality and child sexual abuse were taboo in our society. The sexual victimisation of children is a common social problem that was previously hidden until the last three decades, behind a cultural veil of denial, secrecy and disbelief (O'Brien 1991). The focus of research and intervention in child sexual abuse has been on adult-child sexual assault.

Sibling incest is poorly understood, yet it appears to be quite common and occurs more often than parent-child incest (Finkelhor 1979 1980; Goldman & Goldman 1988a). The duration and seriousness of behaviours of sibling incest have been found to be more extensive than other adolescent sex offences (O'Brien 1991). Research has demonstrated that if sibling incest is abusive, the effects on the victim are similar to the effects caused by parent-child sexual abuse (Wiehe 1990; O'Brien 1991; Laviola 1992;Owen 1998).

## **2. Children and young people's sexuality.**

It is only recently been accepted that sexual curiosity is a part of a young person's sexual development and that children are sexual beings: "children inevitably think about, try to make sense of and find explanations for the sexual world they encounter" (Goldman & Goldman 1988b,p.3). Research has shown that young people may be involved in some sexual behaviour with each other.

Whilst it is valuable to understand that children are sexual beings, "along with this acknowledgment has been the realisation that children's sexual behaviour is vulnerable to manipulation, coercion, and imposition" (Patton & Mannison 1996,p.5). There is a range of sexual behaviours that begin as the 'mild' end of the spectrum, but soon result in feelings of uneasiness for the child (Patton & Mannison 1996).

### **3. Sibling Incest**

Our limited understanding of sibling incest may be due to the past tendency "of professionals to group all intrafamily incest dynamics together" (Smith & Israel 1987,p.101). In addition, we have generally failed to deal with the issue of sibling abuse because it was a problem that was normalised or ignored (Wiehe 1990).

Exploratory, normal sexual behaviour between siblings will include sexual play that is brief, where there is no instigator and controller of the behaviours and power or coercion is not use to ensure compliance. Research suggests that sibling incest is sex play that has gone too far.

Finkelhor's (1979) child sexual abuse prevalence study on 796 undergraduate college students, found that 13% of the sample had sexual experiences involving a sibling, 15% of the females and 10% of the males. One quarter of these interactions were recorded as exploitative if force was used or if there was at least five years age difference between the young people involved.

### **4. Assessing the difference between childhood sexual exploratory behaviour between siblings and sibling incest.**

The definition of "sibling incest" is confusing, as it could encompass all sexual interactions between siblings, whether sex play, dysfunctional and/or abusive, one-off or multiple incidents. Although the age criterion is still utilised by professionals as part of the assessment of sexual behaviour

between young people, others have suggested that this definition alone is inadequate to accurately assess all the dynamics between two children who engage in sexual behaviours (Owen 1998; Laviola 1992; De Jong 1989). Also other research has demonstrated that often the age difference is less than five years, yet the incest was still abusive.

Cavanagh Johnson (1991) found that there is no single standard for assessing children's sexual behaviour. In Laviola's (1992) study of older brother-younger sister incest, the definition of abuse in sibling incest cases was if coercion or force were used:

Coercion refers to any type of misuse of power or authority, bribery, or appeal to the child's trust and affection. Force refers to verbal threat of physical harm if the child does not comply, physical hitting or pinning the child down in order to perform the sexual act (p.410).

## **5. Causes of sibling incest**

Past researchers have tended to attribute the cause of sibling incest either primarily to the sibling who perpetrated or the family constellation, whilst others argue that sibling incest situations should be assessed and responded to on a case-by-case basis, due to complexity of families and incest situations.

### 5.1. Families where sibling incest had occurred.

- Available research suggests a link between neglect, family dysfunction and sibling incest.
- Studies on sibling incest families have found that the families were often patriarchal.
  - Parental stimulation of the sexual climate in the home and the provision of double or different messages from parents about sexuality have

been observed in studies on families where sibling incest had occurred (Daie, Witztum & Ellett 1989; Smith and Israel 1987).

- Some research has found a link between the incidence of parent-child sexual abuse and sibling incest in families (1/4 to 1/3).
- Family functioning can influence sibling incest dynamics, rather than causes it.

### 5.2. The sexually abusive sibling/s

Research has found that despite the sibling sexual offenders being younger than their adult counterparts, the abusive behaviours are often serious. The repetitious nature of sexually abusive behaviours by siblings resembles that of children who are victims of sexual assault by an adult in the family (Wiehe 1990). It is speculated that the serious level of abuse is due to the sibling perpetrator having more access to the victim and that sibling incest exists within a structure of silence and guilt (O'Brien 1991; Laviola 1992; Wiehe 1990; O'Brien 1992).

Similar to Bank and Kahn's (1982) findings, Hellesnes (1998) study on sibling incest in Norway found that brothers who sexually perpetrated fit into two main categories. One is the brother who is feeble, isolated and the weakling, and other strong, manipulative and the family favourite. In addition, many of the women in this study were fond of their brothers and had a complicated love/hate relationship with them after the sibling incest commenced (Hellesnes 1998).

### 5.3. Entrapment in the sibling incest relationship

O'Brien (1991) found that the sibling incest offender makes the victim feel responsible for what is taking place:

Clinical experience reveals that victims of sibling incest are likely to be implicated gradually as co-conspirators by the abusive sibling so they will share in the responsibility, blame, and punishment for the behaviour if the “secret” is disclosed. Once established, this dynamic makes it difficult for victims to resist offenders’ more intrusive sexual demands (p.79).

Being sexually victimised by a ‘peer’ may influence the entrapment in sibling incest.

## **6. Effects of sibling incest on those victimised**

Studies on sibling incest have found that the effects of unwanted sibling incest are similar to the effects suffered from parent-child sexual abuse. Being sexually victimised by a sibling has been found to influence lowered self-esteem (Finkelhor 1979;Laviola 1992; Wiehe 1990;Abrahams & Hoey 1994). As noted by Laviola (1992) this negative self-image of survivors of sibling incest is caused by feelings about their perceived role in the incest.

In addition to negative self-image, research on sibling incest survivors has found a range of consistent symptoms. These have included sexual dysfunction as adults (Daie, Witztum & Eleff 1989;Wiehe 1990;Laviola 1992), intrusive thoughts of the incest (Laviola 1992), re-victimisation in later life (Wiehe 1990) and difficulties with intimacy and trust (Wiehe 1990;Laviola 1992). In Wiehe's (1990) study of adults who had experienced sibling abuse, a majority of sibling incest victims also experience some form of physical and/or emotional abuse by their siblings. These other types of abuse are likely to further impact and contribute to the effects suffered because of the sibling incest.

Hargett (1998) and Flanagan and Patterson (1996) found that the sibling offended against often experiences grief about the sibling relationship and loss of approval by the sibling due to the disclosure, as well as being upset about “breaking up” the family.

It has been reported in research that survivors of sibling incest are likely to be unsupported when they disclosed their abuse to family members as adults, especially if the person victimised is a female (Wiehe 1990;Owen 1998;Hellesnes 1998;Laviola's 1992). It appears that if families handle sibling incest inappropriately, it can increase the negative effects felt by the person involved and can have consequences for family relationships.

## **7. The sibling incest study**

### 7.1. Overview of the study and findings

Ten women who experienced sibling incest as children were interviewed for this study. The aim was to explore their retrospective perspective of the experience and whether there was a subsequent impact caused by the incest.

The age of the girls when the incest started ranged from approximately three years old to twelve years old. The median and mode age of the girls when the incest started was eight years old. The duration of time in which the incest continued ranged from six months to twelve years. The average duration of the incest in all ten cases was four and a half years. Suzie experienced the shortest time duration over which the incest occurred (6 months) and was the only person who experienced someone in the family (eldest brother) intervening to stop the incest from continuing.

Seven of the sibling incest situations involved one other sibling. Two cases involved two other siblings, and one involved five brothers. All the siblings involved in the incest behaviours were male except in Katrina's case, whose older brother and sister were both involved. The incest involved blood related siblings in eight cases, whilst the other two involved stepsiblings (Phillipa, Kylie).

A majority of the women described emotional distance as a common feature of their childhood relationships with their parents. Some of the participants came from strict, insular families (Sally, Dorothy, Kylie, and Anne). Three of the participants had parents with drinking problems or alcoholism (Samantha, Rebecca, and Kylie). Two of the women experienced physical or parent-child sexual abuse in their family environment (Phillipa, Katrina). Others were neglected or emotionally abused (Kylie, Phillipa, Katrina, Dorothy and Rebecca). It became apparent in the interviews that a number of the women came from families in which crises or problems occurred during the girls' childhoods. Three of the women described a generally satisfying childhood, despite some family difficulties (Samantha, Julia, and Suzie).

Two of the women described their relationship with their brothers as close which influenced their compliance with the incest behaviours (Samantha, Phillipa). Neither brother used force, lied or other types of abuse to make the girls comply with the incest, yet coercion was used. These girls participated in the incest due to affection for their brothers. For both of the women, this has caused conflicting feelings about the incest and the sibling involved.

Eight women experienced the sibling incest as abusive and traumatic. Samantha and Julia felt they had not been traumatised by the incest, although they did not enjoy the sexual behaviours and the coercion used by the older brothers indicates that the incest was non-mutual. They have experienced some minor effects that they partly attribute to the incest.

Much of the incest took place when opportunities occurred that would allow the older sibling time alone with the girls (sometimes parents were nearby). It appeared that in some of the more chaotic or neglectful families, the older siblings had more opportunity to engage in the sexual behaviours.

Table (1) The **age of the women at the onset of sibling incest, duration of incest relationship, the siblings involved and their age, and the age gap between siblings involved.**

The woman's code name.	Their age when incest began.	Duration of incest relationship (approx.).	The sibling/s involved and age when incest began.	Age difference between the sibling/s involved
<b>SAMANTHA</b>	8 years old	3 years	Brother 15 years old	7 years age gap
<b>SALLY</b>	3 years old	12 years	Five brothers 2 years old - 16 years old *	-1 - 13 years age gap
<b>KATRINA</b>	8 years old	3 years	Brother aged 14 Sister aged 11 *	3 - 6 years age gap
<b>SUZIE</b>	10 years old	6 months	Two brothers aged 13 and 16 years	3 - 6 years age gap
<b>DOROTHY</b>	8 years old	5 years	Brother 12 years old	4 years age gap
<b>JULIA</b>	7 years old	2 years	Brother 9 years old	2 years age gap
<b>ANNE</b>	9 years old	3 years duration	Brother 12 years old	3 years age gap
<b>PHILLIPA</b>	10 years old	Approx. 8 years (then continue briefly in adulthood)	Stepbrother 14 years old	4 years age gap
<b>REBECCA</b>	4 years old	9 years	Brother 10 years old	6 years age gap
<b>KYLIE</b>	12 years old	Fragmented memory, approx. a few years	Stepbrother 16 years old	4 years age gap

In a majority of the situations, the incest behaviours were serious and invasive. Four of the women experienced vaginal rape (Sally, Katrina, Suzie, and Phillipa). A number of the girls were orally abused. From the women's accounts, it is not just the type of sexual behaviours that influenced the level of impact on them, although it is a significant factor. Additional factors such as the other abuse perpetrated by the older siblings and the general treatment of the girls in the family seem significant to the effects suffered due to the incest.

All ten women outlined coercive behaviours that their older siblings used to manipulate, encourage or force the girls' involvement in the incest. However, the level of coercion and force used varied between the cases. Five of the older siblings used physical force and physical abuse to make their sisters comply with the incest (Sally, Anne, Rebecca, Katrina & Kylie). In some situations, this was used only in relation to the incest, whereas others recalled being physically bullied generally by the sibling involved. Sally, Katrina, Rebecca and Kylie all experienced insults and emotional abuse from the older siblings involved in the incest. Four of the women recalled their older siblings initiated the incest by pretending it was a game. In three situations, the incest was presented by the older brothers as being for educational and exploration purposes.

In five cases, the older siblings told the girls not to tell anyone about the incest (Suzie, Dorothy, Sally, Anne and Julia).

None of the parents became overtly aware of the sibling incest when it was happening. In five situations, a sibling not involved in the incest witnessed some incestuous behaviour, although the parents were not told. Suzie was the only person who experienced someone intervening to stop the incest (the eldest brother). For six of the women, the incest stopped only when the older siblings' circumstances changed. In three cases, the incest

stopped after the girls stood up to their brothers as adolescents (Anne, Rebecca, and Kylie).

A majority of the women perceived as children that if their parents found out about the incest, they would be blamed for the behaviour, get into trouble or not be believed. In fact when a family member asked Sally and Phillipa directly if their brothers had touched them, they denied it. This perception appears to have been influenced by the girls' position and treatment in the family. Three of the women believed that the brother involved in the incest was the parents' favourite (Samantha, Kylie, and Phillipa). For Phillipa and Kylie this was further influenced by the stepfamily dynamics.

### 7.2. Disclosing the incest to family as adults and subsequent response

Seven of the participants told people in their family about the sibling incest as adults, as part of a need to deal with their lives, the family relationships and the impact the incest had on them (Samantha, Sally, Suzie, Dorothy, Anne, Rebecca & Kylie). All seven women were either not believed, blamed for what happened or were called trouble makers for bringing up the past and upsetting the family. Some of the parents responded that they just could not believe this of their sons (Sally, Dorothy, and Anne). For Rebecca and Dorothy, although they had eventual understanding from parts of their family about the sibling incest, it was a painful journey. Anne's father's response: "You asked for it". Sally's mother responded: "You had to enjoy it or you would have told someone". After years of keeping the abuse a secret, most of the women were devastated by their families' response.

### 7.3 Relationship as adults with the sibling who perpetrated

Most of the women have distant relationships with the siblings involved. Two of the brother's were confronted and eventually owned up and promised to support them in their healing (Sally, Rebecca). The other brothers confronted with the incest denied that it occurred

#### 7.4 Effects caused by the sibling incest

The effects on the eight women who have experienced traumatic sibling incest appear similar to those caused by parent-child sexual abuse. The two women who described non-mutual, non-traumatic sibling incest experienced effects that would be anticipated from involvement in an inappropriate and non-mutual sexual relationship between children (Samantha & Julia).

The affection that Phillipa and Samantha have for their brothers did not make the incest less damaging, but rather caused a complicated range of feelings about the incest and their brothers' actions.

There is a main difference, however, between sibling incest and other types of child sexual abuse, in that there is limited awareness and many of the women did not initially realise that the effects they were experiencing was caused by the incest. It appears that due to our ignorance of the power issues in sibling incest, the women and their families were more likely to see them as co-conspirators.

The extent and nature of effects that the women experienced because of the incest appears to be directly linked to a range of different factors. These include:

- the power dynamics within the sibling relationship
- invasiveness of the sexual behaviours
- duration and frequency of incest
- the number of siblings involved
- the emotional and physical abuse used by the dominant sibling
- less obvious coercion methods that led the girls to believe that they were responsible for the incest
- the quality of the girls' family life, which influenced their feelings of self-worth and life skills

- how their family reacted to any disclosure of incest

## **8. Intervention in cases of sibling incest**

If professionals are unaware of the possibility of sibling incest and the effects it causes, this could influence lack of recognition that some of the current difficulties may be caused by the incest. Unless a professional has some awareness of the issues, survivors are less likely to reveal a history of sibling incest due to negative feelings about the experience such as guilt and shame (Canavan & Meyer 1992). The lack of understanding of the coercion and lack of consent in abusive sibling incest may affect the victims' shame and feelings of responsibility for what took place.

From the women's' experience and perspective, I surmise that the assessment of sexual contact between siblings needs to involve a range of indicators, including:

- age and developmental level of the children involved
- age difference between the children and young people involved
- extent and duration of sexual behaviour
- power dynamics in sibling and family relationships
- physical size and difference between siblings
- did the behaviour stop when either of the children wanted it to?
- coercion and manipulation techniques used by the older sibling
- the extent of emotional and physical abuse in the sibling relationship (Owen 1998).

Many professionals in the field have reported the usefulness of involving parents in the intervention to prevent future sexual victimisation of the sibling (Rayment & Owen 1999; Flanagan & Patterson 1996; Hargett 1998). What can make intervention difficult in sibling incest cases is the requirement of the family to weigh loyalties and provide parenting care for both the victim and a sibling offender (Flanagan & Patterson 1995).

Restricting the information that children and young people have about sex is not only confusing but can put them at risk of sexual misuse. All the women in this study received no sex education or information over the time the incest took place. Importance of age-appropriate sex education for children.

If a person shares with you that they have experienced sibling incest, they should be congratulated on their courage to discuss such a personal and taboo subject. A client deciding for themselves how they feel about what happened, whether the incest has been damaging to them and how they feel about the person who perpetrated against them. Have the understanding that sibling incest cases are on a spectrum. Professionals working with sibling incest cases should seek to assist the client to understand the power dynamics and nature of the victimisation/offending relationship. If they have strong connection with sibling involved, assist clients to understand that they wanted and needed the sibling relationship but this does not mean that they invited or needed the sexual abuse.

**Thank you to the courageous women who participated in this study.**

## **9. Bibliography**

Abrahams, J., Hoey, H. (1994) Sibling incest in a clergy family: A case study. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. 18 (12), Dec., pp.1029-1035.

Cavanagh Johnson, T. (1991) Understanding the Sexual Behaviour of Young Children. September, NSW Child Protection Council, Paper No. 1, Seminar series No. 3.

Canavan, M., Meyer, W., Higgs, D. (1992) The female experience of sibling incest. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. Vol 18, No 2, pp 129-142.

- Daie, N., Witztum, E., Eleff, M. (1989) Long-term effects of sibling incest. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 50:11, November, pp.428-432.
- De Jong, A. R. (1989) Sexual interactions among siblings and cousins: Experimentation or exploitation? *Child Abuse and Neglect*. Vol. 13, pp. 271-279.
- Dominelli, L. (1989) Betrayal of trust: A feminist analysis of power relationships in incest abuse and its relevance for social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work*. 19, pp.291-307.
- Finkelhor, D. (1979) *Sexually Victimized Children*. Free Press, New York.
- Flanagan, K., Patterson, J. (1996) Working with sibling incest: Maintaining the balance. *Children Australia*. Vol.21, No.2,pp.12-16.
- Goldman, R., Goldman, J. (1988a) Sexual abuse in a national survey of adult men and women: Prevalence, characteristics, and risk factors. *Australian Journal of Sex, Marriage and Family*. 9:2,pp.94-106.
- Goldman, R., Goldman, J. (1988b) *Show Me Yours. Understanding Children's Sexuality*. Penguin Books, Ringwood.
- Hargett, H. (1998) Reconciling the victim and perpetrator in sibling incest. *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*. No. 2, Vol.5, pp. 93-106.
- Hellesnes, M. (1998) Sibling incest may seriously damage your mental health. Lecture to the 12th International Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, Auckland, Sept. 1998.
- Hellesnes, M. (1998) Danger from brothers and mothers 'ignored'. In *The New Zealand Herald* 9<sup>th</sup> September 1998, article by C. Masters, p.A13.

Jackson, S. (1982) *Childhood and Sexuality*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Laviola, M. (1992) Effects of older brother - younger sister incest: A study of the dynamics of 17 cases. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. Vol. 16, pp.409-421.

Martinson, F. (1994) *The Sexual Life of Children*. Bergin and Garvey, Westport.

O'Brien, M. (1991) Taking sibling incest seriously. *Family Sexual Abuse - Frontline Research and Evaluation*. Patton, M. (ed). Sage Publications, Newbury Park, ch. 5, pp75-92.

Owen, N. (1998) More than just child's play. A study on sibling incest. *Children Australia*. Vol. 23, No. 4, pp. 15-21.

Patton, W. Mannison, M. (1996) Unwanted sexual experiences during childhood. *Children Australia*. Vol. 21, No. 2. pp.5-11.

Rayment, S., Owen, N. (1999) Working with individuals and families where sibling incest has occurred: The dynamics, dilemmas and practice implications. *Children and Crime: Victims and Offenders Conference*. Australian Institute of Criminology, Brisbane, 17-18 June.

Smith, H., Israel, E. (1987) Sibling incest: A study of the dynamics of 25 cases. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. Vol. 11, pp. 101-108.

Wiehe, V. (1990) *Sibling Incest. Hidden Physical, Emotional and Sexual Trauma*. Lexington Books, New York.