

# Sibling Rivalry

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How can dysfunctional families lead to pathological sibling rivalry and sibling abuse? There are various reasons; these include:

1) Children in dysfunctional families may often have very little, or a complete absence of, emotional support from their parents or caregivers. This, in turn, means the children themselves have not acquired the emotional resources to care for each other.

2) It has also been suggested that, in dysfunctional families, the parents or caregivers may, either on a conscious or unconscious level, employ the use of a 'divide and rule' strategy leading to the children being in perpetual conflict with one another. This leads, from the parents' perspective, to their offspring being more vulnerable, more exploitable and more easily manipulated.

Certainly, in my own case, my mother would join in with my older brother's verbal abuse of me. They would both call me 'poof' (I was highly sensitive) and 'scabby' (I self-harmed so always had wounds on my arms and legs) deriving great pleasure from doing so.)

3) Thirdly, the effect on the children of living in a highly stressful environment can lead to them taking out their anger and dissatisfaction on one another.

4) Fourthly, because there is generally a high level of conflict within dysfunctional families, the children are likely to have learned aggressive and bullying behavior from the very people who should have been acting as their role models.

5) Important research in this area has found that abusive siblings are very likely to have been significantly abused themselves by their parent or parents.

6) Another finding is that, in some families, the abusive sibling is, on an unconscious level, given covert permission to behave aggressively towards the sibling who is the victim. In other words, the parent can be complicit in the abuse.

7) It has been suggested that by bullying a sibling in an extreme way the sibling who is doing the bullying gains a sense of control and power in an environment in which he or she is otherwise largely impotent.

Further to the above, it has been found that those who inflict serious injuries upon their siblings frequently:

- have frequently been subject to physical abuse themselves;
- are part of families which are in extreme crisis;
- have suffered maternal rejection/deprivation;
- have recently lost a family member;
- has a parent who has picked a sibling as his or her favorite.

## **The Effects of Being an Abused Sibling**

Experts now believe that significant sibling rivalry can lead to adverse effects upon brain development in the same way as parental abuse can. This, in turn, can again cause cognitive, psychological and physical symptoms similar to those caused by parental abuse. Such symptoms include poor concentration, loss of pleasure in life, loss of social interest (withdrawal and isolation), depression, anxiety, anger, hostility and psychosomatic symptoms (symptoms caused by the effects of stress on the body) such as an upset stomach, headache etc.