



Full Length Article

Risk of maltreatment for siblings: Factors associated with similar and different childhood experiences in a dyadic sample of adult siblings

Susanne Witte^{a,b,*}, Jörg M. Fegert^b, Sabine Walper^a

^a German Youth Institute, Germany

^b Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Ulm University, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Siblings share the same environment and thus potentially a substantial number of risk factors for child maltreatment. Furthermore, the number of siblings and the sibling constellation itself might pose a risk for child maltreatment. Little is known about the likelihood that more than one child in a family is maltreated and which factors increase the risk. This study sought to investigate similarities and differences in maltreatment in siblings and risk factors associated with the maltreatment of more than one child from the same family. Data on maltreatment during childhood and adolescence, family background, and sibling constellation were collected from 870 pairs of siblings. In the dyadic analyses, siblings reported similar maltreatment experiences, especially when any type of maltreatment was considered. Parents' mental health problems were significant predictors for maltreatment of at least one sibling. Father's mental health problems were predictive of maltreatment of both or only the younger sibling, mother's mental health problems of both or only the older sibling. Closeness in age and same gender of siblings did not emerge as a consistent predictor. The increasing number of siblings was a risk factor for any type of maltreatment of both siblings. The results highlight the need for preventive measures for families with a large number of children and with parents with mental health problems as well as a repeated risk assessment of all siblings in a family when one sibling was maltreated.

1. Introduction

Siblings usually grow up in a similar environment (Bank & Kahn, 1994). Most siblings spent their childhood in the same household and difference in age is rather small. Even half and stepsiblings share similar experiences as they have at least one caretaker in common. Siblings with greater differences in age are still raised with similar values and child rearing behaviors as their siblings. Thus, they make similar but not the same experiences (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Zukow, 1989). Although, most risk factors for maltreatment are characteristics of the parents or the family (e.g. Stith et al., 2009) surprisingly little research has addressed the risk for sibling groups to be maltreated. Moreover, knowledge about risk factors for maltreatment of one or more siblings may be useful for making decisions about preventive measures in families in which maltreatment of one child was substantiated. In the following section a comprehensive literature review over findings on similarities and differences in maltreatment experiences of children in the same family for each type of maltreatment as well as risk factors contributing to the maltreatment of either one or more than one child in a family is provided. For the latter, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is used to structure the literature review.

* Corresponding author at: German Youth Institute, Nockherstr. 2, 81541 Munich, Germany.

E-mail address: witte@dji.de (S. Witte).

1.1. Similarities in maltreatment experiences

The limited amount of research on similarities between siblings in terms of maltreatment focused mainly on sexual abuse. Rarely, more than one type of maltreatment was considered in the same study. To our knowledge, no study investigated differences between siblings in witnessing domestic violence.

1.1.1. Maltreatment

Hamilton-Giachritsis and Browne (2005) found in their study of families referred to a child protection unit that in about 57% of the families with more than one child at least two siblings suffered maltreatment. Jean-Gilles and Crittenden (1990) reported similar findings.

1.1.2. Physical abuse

The similarities of physical abuse between siblings vary widely based on the method used. Studies with administrative data reported that 47% to 83% of the siblings of an index child were also physically abused (Baldwin & Oliver, 1975; Hamilton-Giachritsis & Browne, 2005; Jean-Gilles & Crittenden, 1990). Lindberg et al. (2012) reported lower rates of physical abuse of more than one sibling following the outcome of a medical examination. A dyadic study reported that over 50% of the index children had one physically abused sibling (MacMillan, Tanaka, Duku, Vaillancourt, & Boyle, 2013). In a college sample, the severity ratings of physical punishment of themselves and their siblings were very similar (Rausch & Knutson, 1991). Regardless of the method used for data collection, about 30% of severely abused children had at least one severely abused sibling (MacMillan et al., 2013; Smith, 1976; Smith & Hanson, 1974).

1.1.3. Sexual abuse

Most studies of sexual abuse focused on girls and women. 23% to 48% of the sisters (biological or social) of sexually abused girls or women also reported sexual abuse (Herman, 1981; MacMillan et al., 2013; Muram, Speck, & Gold, 1991; Russell, 1986). Based on therapists' reports, rates of sexual abuse of more than one sister in families undergoing treatment for sexual abuse varied between 22% to 82% (Meiselman, 1978; Phelan, 1986, 1995). The wide range reflects the differences in the definition of sexual abuse in those studies. A high variety in prevalence rates can also be found in research using perpetrators as the source of information (Proeve, 2009; Proeve, Day, Mohr, & Hawkins, 2006; Studer, Clelland, Aylwin, Reddon, & Monro, 2000). For intrafamilial sexual abuse, 22% to 34% of the perpetrators reported sexual abuse of another family member (Ballard et al., 1990; Studer et al., 2000). The only two studies with comparison groups found significant differences between the likelihood of sexual abuse of another family member between non-abused and abused participants (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995; Harrison, Edwall, Hoffman, & Worthen, 1990).

1.1.4. Emotional abuse

Only one study reported on emotional maltreatment using a large sample. In 64% of the families in which one child was emotionally maltreated another child also suffered from the same type of abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis & Browne, 2005).

1.1.5. Neglect

In 61% to 91% of the families in which one child was neglected, at least another child suffered from neglect as well (Hamilton-Giachritsis & Browne, 2005; Jean-Gilles & Crittenden, 1990). Sibling's reports about their mother's neglectful behavior correlated positively with each other (Hines, Kaufman Kantor, & Holt, 2006). In case studies, severe undernourishment of more than one sibling was reported (Barroso, Salvador, & Fagundes Neto, 2016) as well as selective neglect of one child within a family (Hollingsworth, Glass, & Heisler, 2008).

1.2. Risk factors for maltreatment of more than one child in a family

Hamilton-Giachritsis and Browne (2005) assumed an increased risk to more than one or all siblings with an increasing number of risk factors on the level of parents and family. In contrast, individual characteristics of the child may lead to an increased risk for one child but not the other children within the family.

1.2.1. Child characteristics

For sexual abuse, the gender of the identified victim as well as his or her siblings is considered a risk factor (Wilson, 2004). Sexual abuse of a boy is more likely to be associated with both more female and male victims within a family (Finkelhor, 1984; Proeve, 2009; Vander Mey & Neff, 1986). A twin study reported a greater similarity between same-sex twins than mixed-sex twins both for sexual abuse as well as for physical abuse (Nelson, Lynskey, Heath, Madden Pamela, & Martin, 2010). In contrast, gender constellation is also related to differences in parental behavior. In one study, boys with a sister reported more maternal emotional neglectful behavior than sibling pairs with any other gender constellation (Hines et al., 2006). Hamilton-Giachritsis and Browne (2005) did not find differences between the maltreatment of children based on children's gender, age, or behavioral problems.

1.2.2. Characteristics of the parents and the parent-child relationship

Given that parents play a key role in abuse and neglect – either as perpetrators or as protectors from external risk – it is no surprise that there is an increased risk of maltreatment of all children from one family based on parents' characteristics. When parents abuse

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