

More than just child's play

A study on sibling incest

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This article outlines some of the findings of a study of ten women who experienced sibling incest as children. Using qualitative research methods, this study explores the nature of the sibling incest relationship, how the incest occurred, the family environment, the effects suffered and the participants' experience of intervention. For the majority of women, the effects of unwanted sibling incest were similar to the effects of parent-child incest. The participants provided important perspectives on both intervention and prevention strategies that would assist with the problem of sibling incest.

This study aims to link the perspective of those who have experienced sibling incest with some implications for professional practice.

A special thanks to the courageous women who participated in this research.

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WHY STUDY SIBLING INCEST?

Incest is a taboo subject in most cultures and this has caused restricted discussion of the issues until recently (Justice & Justice, 1979; Arens, 1986). This secrecy remains today about sibling incest. The discussion of child sexual abuse has focused on parent-child incest and ignored other incest relationships (Solomon, 1992). The limited response by the community may be due to the past tendency 'for professionals to group all intrafamily incest dynamics together' (Smith & Israel, 1987, p.101).

Sibling incest is thought to be more prevalent than parent-child incest (Finkelhor, 1979; Goldman & Goldman, 1988; Wiehe, 1990). The duration and seriousness of behaviours of abusive sibling incest are more extensive than other adolescent sex offences (O'Brien, 1991). The sibling perpetrator has more access to the victim and exists within a structure of silence and guilt (O'Brien, 1991; Laviola, 1992; Wiehe, 1990). If the sibling incest is abusive or unwanted, the effects on the victim are similar to the effects caused by parent-child sexual abuse (Wiehe, 1990; O'Brien, 1991; Laviola, 1992).

The lack of information available about sibling incest was the motivation for this research project. Limited awareness of the issues associated with sibling incest was highlighted to me in my professional experience as a child protection worker and a sexual abuse counsellor. In various professional positions, I observed a rise in the notification rates of abusive sibling

incest, as well as the effect it can have on children and families. In the community and amongst professionals, there appears to be a lack of knowledge and consensus about whether the sibling incest is abusive or exploratory, and how best to intervene.

This article will discuss the methodology of the study and some of the findings. The literature on sibling relationships, child sex play and sibling incest is summarised. The findings about the nature of the sibling incest relationship, family environment, coercion used in incest relationship and effects are discussed. This part of the research was chosen to initiate discussion about the implications for practice in cases of sibling incest.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

The role that siblings play in their brothers' or sisters' development has generally been ignored by researchers (Amato, 1987). The sibling relationship is usually the longest relationship in a person's life (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982), and children can form strong emotional attachments with their siblings, much as they form with their parents (Amato, 1987). Siblings can serve as a major resource for children (Amato, 1987), but they can have a negative impact on each other. When considering dynamics of sibling relationships, Dunn and Kendrick (1982) stress that it is misleading to consider this relationship on a single dimension of warmth versus hostility.

CHILDHOOD SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AND SEX PLAY

Theories about the sexual development of children are particularly useful for this study because they can assist in informing us about what type of sexual behaviour is a 'normal' part of child development and what is not.

Historically the sexual behaviour of humans was more or less ignored and the acceptance of a child as a sexual being has only recently been presented in the literature (Patton & Mannison, 1996). Sexual development is an important feature of the maturation process of young people (Chilman, 1980, cited in Thornton, 1990). After years of studying children's sexual behaviour, Cavanagh Johnson (1998, p.1) outlines that:

Children involved in natural and healthy sexual play are of similar age, size and development status and participate on a voluntary basis.

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 at the 'mild' end of the spectrum, but soon result in feelings of uneasiness for the child (Patton & Mannison, 1996). Wiehe (1990) cautions about always assessing sexual experiences between children as harmless:

Sexual activity among consenting participants probably presents the least risk of unfavourable consequences. But often young children may appear to consent but actually do not because they cannot anticipate unfavourable consequences from a behaviour. In many instances what appears to be consent may actually be only a passive consent of the inability to make a rational decision because of limited cognitive skills and life experiences (p.70).

Children engage in sex play as part of their development, but some sexual relationships between children can be exploitative. One of the common misconceptions about sibling incest is that it is always simply normal child's play.

SIBLING INCEST

A DEFINITION OF SIBLING INCEST

At this time there are no universally accepted criteria that distinguish abusive sexual contact from normal sexual exploration among children (De Jong, 1989). In his study of comparisons between male adolescent sibling incest offenders and other types of adolescent sex offenders, O'Brien (1991) concluded:

There are instances of sibling incest interactions that might be properly regarded as sibling sex play when, for example, the acts are mutually exploratory, limited in both type and duration, and consistent with the peer-age siblings' developmental levels. However, the data reveal that sibling incest may often represent significant individual and family pathology (p.88).

There are instances of sibling sexual behaviour that are sex play, but there are also sibling incest relationships that involve control tactics and abuse.

Finkelhor (1979) originally based his definition of abusive sexual behaviour between two young people on an age criterion of five full years or more difference between the offender and victim, or if force was used. Goldman and Goldman (1988) utilised Finkelhor's (1979) survey in their Australian study, but they extended this age criterion to include an even greater age difference for some age groups. Although the age criterion is still used by some professionals to assess the sexual behaviour between children, others have suggested that this definition alone is inadequate to deal with the issues involved (Laviola, 1992; Finkelhor et al., 1990; De Jong, 1989). In a study to explore the effects of older brother-younger sister incest, Laviola (1992) found that, although:

...half the women reported that the age differential between them and their brothers was 5 years or less, all the women perceived that they were coerced or forced into the incest activity' (p.418).

These earlier definitions are insufficient to explain other more complex issues of power, manipulation and family

relationships. De Jong's (1989) study of incest by cousins and siblings, involving 803 children who presented at a sexual assault centre in Pennsylvania, aimed to differentiate cases of abusive behaviour from normal sexual exploration. He used four categories to define abusive sibling incest:

- use of force, threat or authority;
- five years age difference;
- attempted penile penetration;
- documented injury.

If the victim was less than five years younger than the perpetrator, the incest was deemed abusive if it had one or more of the other abusive categories. In the discussion of the research findings, he stated that developmental difference is more useful than age as a criterion (De Jong, 1989).

Wiehe (1990) surveyed 150 respondents who had been victims of all types of sibling abuse, and developed a process for distinguishing between 'normal' sibling activities and sibling abuse (physical, sexual or emotional). The process of assessment involves:

- Identifying the behaviour.
- Is it age-appropriate?
- How long and how often has the abuse been occurring?
- Is there an aspect of victimisation in the behaviour?
- What is the purpose of the behaviour? (pp.136-142)

It is apparent that age difference is not the only criterion to define abusive sexual behaviour and that other factors need to be considered in assessment.

INCIDENCE OF SIBLING INCEST

Little is known about the prevalence of sibling incest, other than the statistics provided by general child sexual abuse studies. From these studies of child sexual abuse incidence, sibling sexual experience was the most common form of incest. Finkelhor (1979) found in his sample from six New England colleges that:

Fifteen percent of the girls and 10 percent of the boys had such a sexual

experience, which accounted for about half of all the incest and 94 percent of all incest within the nuclear family (p.90).

One out of four experiences of sibling incest were categorised as being exploitative where the age difference between victim and perpetrator was more than five years, and if some type of force or threat was used. Finkelhor (1979) also found that brothers were sexually involved with other brothers almost as often as they were with sisters.

Goldman and Goldman's (1988) prevalence study in Australia showed that sibling sexual experiences were the most frequent. Out of the 228 people who had experienced family sexual contact, 129 had experiences involving brothers or sisters. However, due to their five year age discrepancy criteria, they assessed most of these sexual contacts as sex play activities (Goldman & Goldman, 1988, p.100). From the few studies available on incidence, it appears that sexual activity between siblings is common. What is more difficult to anticipate is how many of these experiences are sibling incest and abusive.

EFFECTS OF SIBLING INCEST

The more recent studies into sibling incest have found that the effects of unwanted sibling incest are similar to the effects suffered from parent-child sexual abuse. The repetitious nature of sexual abuse for siblings resembles that of children who are victims of sexual assault by an adult in the family (Wiehe, 1990). The effects of sibling incest on victims may include sexual dysfunction as adults (Daie et al., 1989; Wiehe, 1990; Laviola, 1992), lowered self-esteem (Finkelhor, 1979; Laviola, 1992; Wiehe, 1990), 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 incest, a majority of sibling sexual abuse victims also experienced some form of physical and emotional abuse by their siblings.

Cole (1990, cited in O'Brien, 1991) found no difference in the reactions of adult survivors of brother-sister sexual

abuse than for survivors of father-daughter sexual abuse. This includes the frequency of self-harming behaviour, physical and sexual problems, or level of guilt and shame about the experience (cited in O'Brien, 1991).

Abrahams and Hoey (1994) wrote of a sibling incest case study:

This case reinforces the already-known fact that sexual abuse doesn't have to be physically violent, forced penile penetration, to be damaging. The emotional consequences of the more subtle forms of abuse should not be minimized (p.1032).

Wiehe (1990) argues that the problem has not been brought into the open and as its symptoms go unrecognised, its devastating effects continue to be disregarded.

SIBLING INCEST AND INTERVENTION

Although research into sibling incest has shown some development over the past ten years, there is still insufficient information to enable the development of satisfactory guidelines to assist the community to appropriately respond to this type of abuse. Professionals may be inadequately sensitised to the occurrence of sibling incest since it is considered to be less traumatic than other types of child sexual abuse (Canavan, Meyer & Higgs, 1992). Wiehe (1990) maintains that:

In the past parents have excused sibling abuse in a variety of ways. Some have looked the other way. Others have ignored the problem, and still others haven't believed their children when they were told what was happening. Others have blamed the victims for the abuse they experienced - as if they had been asking for it or deserved it. Still others said it is normal behaviour and that all kids do it (p.1).

The punishment of children is different to that of an adult and these difficulties are reflected both in legislation and in community attitudes (Canavan, Meyer & Higgs, 1992). Sibling offenders are less likely to be charged for their offences than other adolescents who have sexually offended (O'Brien, 1991). A further reason that intervention may be difficult is the requirement of the

family to weigh loyalties and parenting care between a victim and a sibling offender (Flanagan & Patterson, 1996). Furthermore, families where sibling incest has occurred are usually dealing with other problems in the family that may compound the parents' inability to deal with the issues.

Through a general study of sibling abuse, Wiehe (1990) argues that many professionals have already seen sibling abuse in the families with which they work:

They may have seen the effects in adults who have sought help for their emotional problems, but they were not able to link the effects to the cause (p.3).

Unless a professional has some awareness of the issues, survivors are less likely to reveal such a history due to negative feelings such as guilt and shame about the experience (Canavan, Meyer & Higgs, 1992). Canavan, Meyer and Higgs' (1992) research into the female experience of sibling incest found that when these women were seeking counselling to assist with some of the effects, they had not recognised that sibling incest had been a cause of their current symptoms.

THE SIBLING INCEST STUDY

This study is exploratory in nature and aims to initiate discussion about the complex dynamics involved in sibling incest, in an attempt to raise awareness and to link the findings to practice implications.

Participants were contacted through letters to over one hundred counsellors in the Brisbane area and a short article in the University of Queensland Family Centre newsletter. People with various experiences of sibling incest were sought for the interviews. The description in the information sheets was for participants who had experienced mutual sibling incest, or had been in an abusive sibling incest situation. Whilst it may have been useful to include experiences of male victims and offenders in the study, only women contacted me with queries about participating.

In-depth interviews were conducted with ten women who had various experiences of sibling incest as children. This method was able to capture the participants' range of perspectives and it facilitated a multi-faceted examination of the issues. There was a single interview held with each woman that lasted for approximately one hour, although some flexibility was required to account for the different time needed by each individual to tell her story. The central interview technique was to create safety as 'a relationship of

trust with the respondent is absolutely essential if the researcher is to be successful in gaining the insight into respondents' feelings that usually is sought' (Yegidis & Weinbach, 1991, p.99).

The participants were exploring the sibling incest experience in retrospect, which captured both past and current perspectives. The interviews focused on the participants' childhood; the nature of the sibling incest experience; when and how it occurred; effects

experienced; and the women's ideas about effective intervention and prevention.

An analytical log was kept throughout the research process, and the interviews were audiotaped. The Ethnograph software program for the analysis of text based data assisted with organisation of the data for analysis. Extensive coding of the transcripts assisted with the analysis of these viewpoints and experiences.

The participants were aged from thirty to fifty years. They had a range of backgrounds and current circumstances. Eight of the women had heard about the study through past or current counsellors, pointing to the fact that the majority of the participants had experienced professional intervention. Two of the women had read about the study in the Family Centre newsletter.

Using code names, Table 1 sets out the overall details of the incest including their age when the incest started, duration of the incest relationship, age and relationship of the other sibling/s involved and the age gap between the siblings.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

All women in the study were from two parent families. Eight women lived with both biological parents and two had mothers who died when they were young and had stepfamilies. None of the parents became overtly aware of the sibling incest as it was occurring, although in some circumstances there were indicators of the incest and in some families other siblings discovered the incest relationship. None of the participants had received any intervention as children for the sibling incest experiences

There is some obvious commonality in these women's families which reinforces the previous studies on families where sibling incest has taken place. Some of the families had crises that had an impact on the parents' ability to meet the children's needs, including a death in the family or divorce (Phillipa, Kylie, Rebecca). Other participants came from strict, insular families with some physical

Table 1 The age of onset of sibling incest, duration of incest relationship, age of other sibling/s involved and age gap between siblings involved.

Participants' code name	Age that incest commenced	Duration of incest relationship (approx).	Relationship and age of sibling/s involved at time incest started	Age difference of sibling/s involved
SAMANTHA	8 years old	3 years	Brother 15 years old	7 years
SALLY	3 years old	12 years	Five brothers 2 years old – 16 years old (age of their involvement varies)	-1-13 years
KATRINA	8 years old	4 years	Brother aged 14 Sister aged 11	3 – 6 years
SUZIE	10 years old	6 months	Two brothers aged 13 and 16 years	3 – 6 years
DOROTHY	8 years old	5 years	Brother 12 years old	4 years
JULIA	7 years old	2 years	Brother 9 years old	2 years
ANNE	9 years old	3 years duration	Brother 12 years old	3 years
PHILLIPA	10 years old	Approx. 7 years (up to 17 and continued for a period in early adulthood)	Step-brother 14 years old	4 years
REBECCA	4 years old	11 years	Brother 10 years old	6 years
KYLIE	12 years old	memory blank, few years	Stepbrother 16 years old	4 years

discipline being used (Sally, Dorothy, Suzie, Kylie). Three of the participants had parents with drinking problems or alcoholism (Samantha, Rebecca, Kylie). Phillipa and Katrina experienced other types of child abuse in their family. Smith and Israel (1987) found that 32% of cases involved instances whereby father-daughter incest preceded a brother's participation as perpetrator of abuse of the same victim. All the participants described their relationship with their parents as being emotionally distant. The other problems in most of these families meant that issues and confusion for these children went unnoticed.

A common experience for most of the ten women was that their families were patriarchal. The patriarchal nature of the families also influenced the dynamics that the boys had more power in the family than the girls. 'Why would they believe me, especially as he was the favourite?' (Anne). In all four case presentations on sibling incest, Canavan, Meyer and Higgs (1992) found that the power differential between males and females was significant, with the family rules being made by the men. Gender has some influence in the power dynamic in brother-sister incest in sexist families, but is less useful when assessing power in other sibling incest couplings.

From the available literature, it seems widely accepted that family characteristics may influence the occurrence of sibling abuse. Smith and Israel (1987) argue that sibling abuse is an effect rather than a cause of family fragmentation and that in some situations, sibling incest assists to make up for what is lacking in the parent-child bond. O'Brien (1991) found that nearly half (47%) of all families in their study of sibling incest were assessed as being severely disturbed. Smith and Israel (1987) presented three dynamics distinct to the sibling incest family: 'distant, inaccessible parents; parental stimulation of sexual climate in the home; and family secrets and marital affairs' (p. 103).

Although it is impossible to suggest that the family environment is the sole cause of sibling incest, it does appear to

be a contributing factor. Family dysfunction can influence sibling relationships, as the children learn less functional ways of relating to others. The extent of conflict in the sibling relationship can reflect the dynamics of the family environment but this does not mean that the young person who offended should not take responsibility for their behaviour. Most of the participants as children did not seem to have any adults in their lives whom they felt they could talk to about their concerns. Also a majority of the participants' families and schools did not teach them sex education, which may have prevented the children from understanding the implications of the incest relationship.

One of the major tragedies for these women is that they were further harmed by their family when they disclosed the sibling incest.

THE SIBLING INCEST RELATIONSHIP

Seven of the sibling incest situations involved one other sibling. There were two that involved two other siblings, and for one of the participants the incest was with five siblings. All the older siblings involved were male except for one female sibling who offended. The incest involved a broad range of sexual behaviours. For Samantha and Julia, the behaviours mostly included fondling. Five of the women were raped as part of the incest. Generally for the eight women who were sexually abused, the range of sexual behaviours was extensive, invasive and frequent. In my opinion, it is not just the type of sexual behaviour that is the sole significant indicator of later effects, but also the frequency of the abuse and the other dynamics in the incest relationship.

COERCION

The coercion methods used to make the girls take part in the incest are similar to the methods used by adults who sexually abuse children. They involved a spectrum of behaviours that the older child used to manipulate the other sibling.

Two of the women had close relationships with the brother involved and, due to neglect issues in the family, this sibling relationship provided them with much needed affection (Samantha and Phillipa). 'I just loved him, I would have done anything he wanted me to do' (Samantha). Phillipa's brother was her only protector in an abusive home environment where she was scapegoated. It appears that their affection for their brothers was used to influence the girls' involvement.

There was a range of coercion methods that the older siblings used in the abusive sibling incest relationships. Some used physical force and emotional abuse to entrap the girls in the incest relationship (Sally, Suzie, Anne, Rebecca, Kylie). 'I mean if you fought them, they'd get really hurtful so it was better to go with it and maybe they wouldn't hurt me so much' (Sally). In most of the women's situations, the brothers tried to present the sexual behaviours as a game. Suzie was told by her brother that this was normal behaviour. Dorothy's brother used her affection for her mother to ensure her silence - 'This will hurt mum if you tell' - and he pretended that the abuse was educational. Kylie was told that if she went along with the incest, she would be included in her brother's friendship group. Julia's brother undermined her in the family - 'for years I'd been passed off as just a trouble-maker and my brothers used to say I was crazy'.

As can be seen in Table 1, the majority of the age gaps were less than five years; however the sibling incest relationship was abusive. This indicates a need for a more extensive definition. Age is an important indicator of abuse, but there are also many other factors that give one child power over another. Coercion was used by the older sibling

in most of these cases, and in some cases these coercion techniques did not have to be sophisticated due to the victimised child's level of development. On the subject of mutuality, one of the participants commented, 'I have difficulty with this because while I agreed and said yes, I didn't really understand what I was agreeing to and the implications of that' (Suzie).

EFFECTS EXPERIENCED AS CHILDREN FROM THE INCEST

Eight out of the ten women in the study believed the sibling incest was abusive and suffered various degrees of effects that are similar to the effects of parent-child incest. Two of the women (Samantha and Julia) felt they had not been significantly affected by the incest experience. However, both felt that there were power dynamics in the sibling relationship and they had not agreed to or initiated the sibling incest. These women still experienced some effects. Samantha showed sexually inappropriate behaviour at school when nine years old and Julia was extremely shy around boys. The limited effects on these two women in comparison to the other participants appear to be related to their experiencing less invasive sexual behaviours.

As children, the effects varied from the mild to the extreme end of the spectrum. Some of the participants showed their distress as children through self-harming behaviours (Sally, Phillipa, Rebecca, Kylie). Katrina attempted suicide when she was fifteen years of age. Dorothy and Kylie were both sexually revictimised by another offender, which may be directly related to their sibling incest experience. Katrina and Kylie had ongoing physical difficulties that were linked to emotional problems caused by the sexual abuse. Rebecca began drinking as a young teenager and became promiscuous. Many of the women reported feeling dirty and disgusting as children, having ongoing fear, worry and confusion, and withdrawing from the people around them.

EFFECTS OF THE INCEST IN ADULTHOOD

The eight women that were traumatised by the incest suffered a range of effects as adults. Although Samantha does not feel significantly harmed by the experience, she has some issues in her sexual relationships with men. Both Sally and Anne had a major onset of effects in adulthood after the birth of their children. Before parenthood, they both attempted to suppress the effects of the incest and the memories of the experience.

Due to the extensive sexual abuse by a number of her brothers, Sally experiences severe symptoms that are consistent with post traumatic stress disorder. Kylie also suffers many symptoms, including self-harming behaviours, extreme fear and depression. Many of the women reported low self-esteem (Sally, Suzie, Phillipa, Kylie). Issues in their sexual relationships or sexual identity were also described (Sally, Katrina, Rebecca, Dorothy). Katrina and Samantha feel a need to be in control in their relationships with men. Both Phillipa and Suzie have suffered from types of eating disorders, and Kylie experiences body-image problems. Two of the women were revictimised in their adult life (Phillipa, Rebecca). Apart from Samantha and Julia, other common effects for the women are shame, fear, guilt, isolation, feeling powerless, depression, mood swings and relationship problems.

The eight women who experienced the sibling incest as abusive have experienced effects that appear similar to the effects of parent-child incest. The extent and nature of effects that the women experienced as a result of the incest appear to be directly linked to a range of different factors, including:

- 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;
- how their family reacted to any disclosure of incest.

It is also important to note that most of the women suffered other effects that were caused by their families' other problems. In the study, the women were generally clear about the effects suffered due to the incest, in comparison to those difficulties caused by their families' other issues.

FAMILY REACTION TO THE INCEST DISCLOSURE

A common experience for the women was the impact the incest had on the relationship with their family of origin. A majority of the participants told their families about the incest as adults, as part of their healing. Most experienced difficulties with their family from the disclosure and were emotionally abused as a result. The women have generally distanced themselves from their family of origin due to the incest, or have been rejected by their family after their disclosure. Many were told they were just making trouble or a fuss over nothing (Samantha, Anne, Rebecca). Other relatives said that they just could not believe this of their brothers or sons (Sally, Dorothy, Anne). Suzie wrote two letters to her brothers involved but did not tell her family, and the brothers never responded. The brothers denied the incest or remained silent in most situations when confronted by the family. The best outcome was in two situations where the women confronted the brother, who eventually owned up and supported his sister in her healing (Sally, Rebecca).

These findings are consistent with Laviola's (1992) study where parents found out about the sibling incest in just five of 17 cases, and in all five, parental figures reacted negatively towards the sisters and added to their negative feelings about themselves and their feelings of isolation in the family. Hellesnes (1998), in discussing the experiences of sibling incest survivors, found that in many cases the family took the brother's side and minimised

the impact the sibling incest had on the women. It appears that if sibling incest is handled inappropriately by families, it can increase the negative effects felt by the person involved.

I'm finding that talking to other women, they don't get any support from their family...They don't want to know about it. They don't know how to handle it' (Anne).

This demonstrates the importance of the community having adequate information on sibling incest and its consequences, so that survivors receive the support they require.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The experiences of these ten women provide an important insight into the dynamics of the sibling incest experience. Sibling incest is different from mutual sex play between siblings. There appears to be several degrees of abuse and coercion in different sibling incest relationships. Two of the women were coerced into the incest situation but did not experience it as traumatic. This did not mean that sibling incest was harmless, as both these women suffered some effects from the experience. The other eight women had clearly been sexually abused by their siblings. For these eight women, the impact is very similar to other forms of child sexual abuse, and has similar implications for their family of origin relationships. The varying experiences suggest the importance of assessing sibling incest on a case by case basis.

The assessment of sexual abuse by siblings needs to involve a range of indicators, including:

- age or developmental level of the children;
- age difference;
- extent and duration of sexual behaviour;
- power dynamics in sibling and family relationships;
- physical size;
- did the behaviour stop when the children wished it to;
- coercion techniques; and

- the extent of emotional and physical abuse in the sibling relationship.

The families' overall dynamics seem to influence the occurrence of sibling incest. The multi-problems in these families obviously affected all the siblings, including those that offended. There seems to be a link between the parents' emotional distance and the sibling incest continuing over an extended period. Also the incest has serious consequences for these families' relationships now, as the women need to distance themselves from their families to stay safe. One of the major tragedies for these women is that they were further harmed by their family when they disclosed the sibling incest. This indicates a need for future community education around the issues of child sexual behaviour and sibling incest.

As professionals, it is essential that we understand that sibling relationships can sometimes cause the symptoms that individuals are experiencing. This is relevant for work with all individuals that experienced sibling incest, whether as a mutual participant, a person victimised or a sibling that has offended. A number of the brothers in these families went on to sexually offend against other children as adults. This indicates a need for these boys or men to receive appropriate intervention about the sibling incest, to assist them with this experience and to prevent further offending. Parents of children who have engaged in sibling incest may require assistance to safeguard their child from further incest, and to respond appropriately to the children. For some of the women in the study, the professionals' lack of understanding of the sibling incest relationship meant that the symptoms for the women were unrecognised.

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Interstate Comparison of Foster Parent/Careprovider Payments

Background

In September 1996, a meeting of the former Protection and Care of Children Sub-Committee of the Standing Committee of Community Services and Income Support Administrators, agreed that Queensland would undertake an analysis of payments made to careproviders across Australian States and Territories, and New Zealand. This analysis was intended to provide a source document for each state/territory/country in the development and assessment of policy in relation to foster parent/careprovider payments.

When this subcommittee disbanded in early 1997, there was ongoing interest in the analysis and all contributors decided to continue this work. The report produced provides a considerable amount of information about the similarities and differences that exist in the way careproviders are paid across Australia and New Zealand.

Methodology

The task of comparing careprovider payments is complicated by differences in approach across state, territory and national borders. A comparison of the standard rates alone does not consider the large array of other allowances and payments made.

This analysis used three perspectives to provide a more complete picture. These are:

- ◆ Descriptive - which provides a general overview of how payments are made. Standard subsidy, add-on loading to the standard subsidy, add-on allowances, one-off grants or contingency payments and services in kind are examined;
- ◆ Comparative - which provides, in table form, a comparative overview of how various basic commodities or services are funded; and
- ◆ Sample cases - which enables a demonstration of how each system works in action and which gives a more concrete method of comparison. This is of particular value given the large proportion of discretionary payments that are used.

The report is a compilation of the responses of each contributor to specific questions, using these three perspectives. Currently, work is under way to update the report.

Findings

While the primary purpose of the report was to compile information, a number of observations were made. Similarities exist across Australia and New Zealand in the method of payment (which is EFT, ie. Electronic Funds Transfer, directly to careprovider's bank account, fortnightly) and the basic goods and services covered by the standard subsidy.

There are significant differences in terminology and in the method and rates of payment.

Costings of sample cases were used to enable a practical comparison. On these sample cases, all states except one paid an amount significantly lower than the Australian Institute of Family Studies indicates it costs to care for an average child of the same age. These sample cases were chosen as typical cases and do not represent the extreme range of expenditure that can occur to meet the special needs of individual children.

This report highlights the benefits of collaboration across state and national borders.

If you would like further information or a copy of the report *Comparative Analysis of Careprovider Payments: Australia and New Zealand 1996/97*, please contact Julie Bray on (07) 300 64053. The updated 1997/98 edition should be available in early 1999.