

# Nearly 30% of kids experience sibling bullying—as either bully or victim

1 July 2019, by Rachael Sharman



Bullying among siblings isn't the same as teasing and occasional sibling spats. Credit: shutterstock.com

Australia has invested an extraordinary amount of time and effort into putting in place [bullying prevention programs](#)—especially across schools. But what happens when your bully is your own flesh and blood, and lives with you, so you have no escape?

Sibling bullying [tends to fly under the radar](#), in large part because many bullies and victims see it as a normal part of sibling relationships.

But [sibling bullying](#) is different to typical sibling spats, teasing or playing rough. It is ongoing and repeated use of physical or psychological power to control and dominate another person.

A [recently published study](#) tracked more than 6,000 [children](#) in the United Kingdom. It explored just about every factor you could nominate in [family](#) bullying including family, parent and child characteristics such as the number of family members, and individual mental health, IQ, personality, social skills and self-esteem.

The authors came to some surprising conclusions that overturned a few previously held assumptions.

## What is sibling bullying?

In the study, 28% of children reported being involved in sibling bullying—either being the bully, victim, or taking turns being both. The onset of bullying typically occurred around eight years old.

The study defined sibling bullying as repeated aggressive behavior between siblings intended to inflict harm, either physically (for instance hitting, kicking or pushing), psychologically (for instance saying nasty and hurtful things), socially (for instance by telling lies or spreading rumors) or property based (such as stealing or damaging property).

For it to be classified as bullying, the behavior must involve a real or perceived power imbalance.

## Who is at risk?

The strongest factors that predicted whether sibling bullying would occur was the presence of older males (especially first-born), families with larger numbers of siblings, or in households under financial stress.

Parents in a high conflict relationship with each other slightly increased the odds of children experiencing bullying.

Children who displayed antisocial characteristics in early childhood were more likely to bully their brother or sister. And children with higher self-esteem were slightly protected from the risk of being bullied.

Surprisingly, single-parent households and lower parental education or [social class](#) didn't increase the risk of sibling bullying. Social conditions and parenting factors, even including parental maltreatment mattered only slightly, if at all.

Nefariously, bullies were found to have more

advanced [social skills](#), allowing them to adapt and hone their bullying behaviors to maximum effect.

### Impacts of sibling bullying

Other research shows that sibling bullying [increases the risk](#) of the victim becoming the target of peer bullying and developing emotional problems in adulthood. The child who is bullied by both siblings and peers is in a particularly awful predicament, as their childhood is marred with no escape from this treatment.

The impacts of [sibling](#) bullying have been shown to persist long-term. The experience can damage the possibility of a healthy relationship between the siblings, and [double the risk](#) of the victim experiencing depression and self-harm in adulthood.

### Playing favorites

Research also shows if one child is favored over another, this can [compound hostility and jealousy](#) between siblings well into adulthood. While favoritism is often denied by parents, parents can favor a child based on gender, and similar personality or interests.

Parents should remain vigilant and ensure they are giving similar levels of attention, time and interest to all their children.

Extreme levels of favoritism are particularly pronounced in narcissistic parenting where a "golden child" is showered with love and attention and can do no wrong while another child is deliberately cast into the role of the family scapegoat and can do no right.

This [pathological style of parenting](#) is especially damaging. It typically increases the likelihood of the golden child becoming narcissistic themselves and the scapegoat developing a raft of mental-health, addiction and identity problems.

### Advice for parents

The research paints a particular picture: bullying among siblings is more likely to occur when

parental resources such as time, money, attention and affection are stretched too thin between siblings. This is especially the case in a family with males who are older or first born.

Such findings are in line with [recent Australian research](#) that showed adding a brother or sister to keep the elder [child](#) company typically backfires, and instead just places the family under further pressure.

The take-home message for [parents](#) is to thoughtfully plan your family structure.

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