

Authorities fail to recognize emotionally scarred brothers and sisters of child abuse victims

In many cases, when abusive parents with multiple children target just one child for emotional or physical cruelty, authorities often remove the abused child from the home and return the non-abused siblings.

But brothers and sisters of abused children can suffer lifelong emotional scars from helping parents conceal the abuse or, in extreme cases, from being forced to participate in torturing their siblings, according to a study published in the current issue of the *Journal of Emotional Abuse*.

While psychologists have repeatedly studied the lifelong emotional carnage of untreated abuse victims, scant attention has been paid to their siblings, according to author Jane Hollingsworth, a licensed clinical psychologist and executive director of the Child Abuse Program at Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters.

"Many children survive by becoming callous to the suffering or even torture of their brothers and sisters," Hollingsworth. "Those children require therapy, but don't get it."

The article, co-authored by Hollingsworth and Joanne Glass, a child abuse social worker, distills what these clinicians have learned handling hundreds of cases at the hospital's Child Abuse Program.

The King's Daughters program gathers forensic evidence for police and prosecutors in jurisdictions throughout Virginia and also provides counseling to victims.

in dozens of cases throughout their careers, Hollingsworth and Glass have seen parents who focused all their abusive rage on one child, a "scapegoat," as they term it.

In chilling anecdotes extrapolated from cases, the study chronicles how parents can force siblings to become either emotionally numb or hostile toward the abuse victim.

"The coldness of the calculated torment of children detailed in these case histories is so disturbing that it is easy to overlook the effects on siblings," the study observes.

In one case, Francine (not her real name), a first-grader, was locked in a nine-square-foot closet for eight weeks. She was fed only dry cereal, water and bread.

"She could not lie down except in a very cramped position," the study relates. The abuse of Francine "escalated into beatings with a wire antenna... The children were encouraged to harm their sister."

When the therapist spoke to members of the family "all the children agreed that John, the brother who had once taken pity on Francine and released her briefly, was the mother's chief assistant in tormenting his sister."

In the vast majority of cases, brothers and sisters of the abused child are returned to the home without treatment. In cases such as this, Francine would be treated, and John would be ignored.

Children such as John "have been taught to be callous, even cruel, to their sibling," said Glass. "Deliberately depriving children of the chance to love a brother or a sister is emotionally abusive. The message to these siblings is that it isn't safe to identify with their brother or sister."

Untreated, John may suffer an “empathy deficit,” the inability to feel empathy for the targeted child and possibly others, a hallmark characteristic of both abuse victims and perpetrators.

While researchers have documented the chaotic lives of untreated abuse victims, the authors could find little research documenting how child abuse affected the lives of brothers and sisters of scapegoated children.

The study offers a guide to identifying cases in which siblings of scapegoated children are at risk and urges therapists to identify and treat these collateral victims.

They also urge researchers to investigate whether the psychic damage to siblings plays out in the dysfunctional lives common to untreated abuse victims.

Source: Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters

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