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Montclair State professor says sibling bullying a widespread issue

Montclair State University's (MSU) department of family and child studies is providing education on the widespread problem known as sibling abuse. Dr. Jonathan Caspi, MSU professor, has covered the topic for more than 15 years and has recently authored a book on sibling aggression, also known as "sibling bullying."

"Besides what has been common knowledge about peer bullying, there's also an underestimated problem, which was covered in a new study released by the Journal of Pediatrics," said Caspi. "Research found that kids who were tormented and insulted by their siblings have had a negative mental health impact. We've known about this for a while, but this study has garnered a lot of attention."

According to Caspi, sibling abuse is the most widespread form of child maltreatment, which outnumbers parental abuse, domestic violence and peer bullying. He said it was generally not talked about because "for too long, society has thought it was part of normal behavior in the dynamics of the family unit."

"This is not a new phenomenon and has been around for some time," Caspi explained. "This latest study involved thousands of children and adolescents and showed that those who suffered attacks, threats, etc. from a sibling, experienced increased levels of depression, anger and anxiety. I have been aware of this issue, which first surfaced in discussions during the 80s and was more recently viewed during the late 90s as a growing concern."

Caspi is also a therapist who helps New Jersey families deal with difficult sibling dynamics and has seen the negative repercussions, which led him into further covering this field and writing about it.

Caspi received his master's degree in social work from Hunter College and his doctorate in social work from the University at Albany. He said the recent study from the Journal of Pediatrics has been catching a lot of attention and is shedding light on the overall problem. A significant part of the issue is attributed to child protective service agencies neglecting to take the abuse as seriously as they would if the abuse was stemming from a parent, coach or teacher. He has authored two books, "Sibling Development," and "Sibling Aggression, Assessment and Treatment," published by Springer Publishing.

"This has become a prevalent problem and becomes harder to correct if things do not get recorded properly through agencies. Typically this form of child abuse gets lumped into parental neglect, which is also a culprit," he noted, adding that how a parent or caregiver deals with the bully and those being bullied does play a major role. However, Caspi contends that it's more of a complicated issue because it needs to be identified more often where "normal" teasing crosses the line to bullying. Too long, many viewed it as beneficial or acceptable if a child was

tormented by their sibling because it was thought to help them with handling conflict or becoming a tougher individual.

"We now know that this isn't the case and it is quite harmful. Studies show that it aids to develop negative feelings in the sibling that's on the receiving of bullying. Favoritism by a parent over one child also is an enabler for sibling bullying. The negative repercussions are tremendous. It's so important for people to pick up on these social cues for those in this predicament. Many times, these children who are abused by their siblings do not feel safe in their own home."

However, Caspi also said that many times, parents do not accept the situation and have taken measures to create a nurturing and fair environment for all of their children. Ultimately, the parents end up feeling powerless and unable to cope despite working to correct the issue. Many parents become frustrated because they can't understand why their children are always at odds with one another and appear as though they hate each other.

"I've done extensive research in this area, and I do not always blame the parent in a situation like sibling bullying," he remarked. "It is a more involved issue so I give a lot of presentations, and attend workshops, including international conferences on this matter. I also teach staff from child protection agencies as well and it's a good thing that the word is spreading on this problem, which has gone on for too long."

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