



“We took turns”: How do child victims of intrafamilial child sexual abuse perceive and experience their siblings?

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Intrafamilial child sexual abuse (IFCSA) is a traumatic experience that occurs within the family system. Although it is recognized with respect to its widespread epidemiology, dynamic and adverse consequences, little is known about the sibling subsystem. The current study was designed to examine the way child victims of IFCSA experience and perceive their siblings.

Method: A thematic analysis was carried out on 60 forensic interviews with children aged 10–14 who were sexually abused by a parental figure. Each child had at least one sibling and referred to his or her siblings during the interview in the context of the abuse they experienced. It is important to note that in all cases more than one sibling was being abused by the parent.

Results: The children's narratives provided a unique glance into three interrelated domains in their lives: the “normal” routine in which no abusive incidents occurred, the abusive routine in which the abuse occurred, and the disclosure process. These three domains identified two family profiles. The first described IFCSA that occurred in the family context, where the perpetrator ruled in terror and the sibling unit became unified, despite the consequences. The second was a profile of family chaos in which the abusive parents acted alongside abusive siblings and the sibling unit was often damaged with the children sharing their loneliness in this tumultuous setting.

Conclusions: The current study spotlights the central role that the sibling subsystem has in the context of IFCSA. Furthermore, the conclusions point to an urgent need to promote efforts to support non-abused and abused siblings following disclosure.

1. Introduction

Child abuse is a worldwide social phenomenon (e.g., Melton, 2013) and there is a broad consensus with respect to its profound consequences on all systems in the children's lives (e.g., Steine et al., 2017), including the family system (e.g., Damashek & Bonner, 2010). Although it has received growing attention recently, the sibling subsystem in the context of child abuse has remained a considerably underdeveloped area. This is surprising given the empirical evidence that sibling relationships are central throughout one's life (Noller, 2005) and can serve as a protective factor (e.g., Buist et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the sibling relationship is typically the longest-lasting family relationship (Dunifon et al., 2017). Approximately 60% of children in the US share a household with at least one biological or adopted sibling (Knop & Siebens, 2018) and often spend the majority of their time outside of school together (Dunifon

et al., 2017). In Israel, where the family size is larger, consisting of 3.72 family members on average, 82% of households include siblings up to the age of 17 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

Siblings can play an enormously constructive part in personal development. They often assume the role of teachers and role models (Bandura & Walters, 1977), through which a child can learn about the social and physical world (Howe et al., 2016) and of action and consequence (Howe et al., 2019). They can encourage language acquisition (Segal et al., 2018), emotional understanding (Kramer, 2014), and social competence (Yeh & Lempers, 2004), particularly in aspects such as conflict resolution and communication (Dunn, 2002).

The current study was designed to examine the way child victims of intrafamilial child sexual abuse (IFCSA) perceive and experience their siblings and their relationship with them in the unique context of abuse. The children's narratives were provided via forensic interviews that

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were conducted in Israel.

1.1. Intrafamilial child sexual abuse

IFCSA is the most common form of child sexual abuse, with particularly severe short- and long-term consequences. Victimization rates are estimated to be 3–17% of males and 8–31% of females (Barth et al., 2013), or 7.6% of males and 18.1% of females (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). In Canada and the US, there has been a recent rise in incidents of abuse (Fallon et al., 2015; Finkelhor et al., 2015, respectively). Additionally, according to an Israeli study, 25% of adults who sought family therapy reported having been sexually abused as children (Schein et al., 2000).

IFCSA occurs in the domestic context, meaning that other children from the same household can be potential victims of the abuse. Therefore, disclosure is of the utmost importance to raise awareness and stop the abuse (McElvaney & Culhane, 2017). Early disclosure can end the current abuse, protect other children, and enable intervention (e.g., Leclerc & Wortley, 2015; Leclerc et al., 2011; Lev-Wiesel & First, 2018; McElvaney & Culhane, 2017). Disclosure can also have unintended negative consequences, depending largely on the disclosure recipients' reactions (e.g., Ahrens, 2006; Ullman, 2011). Such repercussions include denial and disruption within the family, victims being blamed and stigmatized by the family and larger community, having to partake in legal processes and, at times, life-threatening consequences resulting from cultural norms (e.g., Celik et al., 2018).

1.2. The sibling subsystem in the context of child abuse

Several researchers have indicated that the phenomenon of child abuse often involves more than one sibling; therefore, in the context of child abuse within the family, all of the children in the household are at a greater risk of being abused (e.g., Hamilton-Giachritsis & Browne, 2005). More than that, researchers have indicated that witnessing one sibling being abused can lead to the development of complex post-traumatic stress disorder, which further emphasizes the sibling subsystem's important role in children's experiences (Teicher & Vitaliano, 2011; Williams et al., 2016). Surprisingly, despite the recognition of the importance of the sibling subsystem overall, and specifically in the context of child abuse, it is still an underdeveloped area (Katz & Hamama, 2018).

Three studies in the field of child abuse have highlighted the narratives and experiences of abused children and have also provided a unique glance into the dynamic of the sibling subsystem in the context of child abuse (Katz, 2013; Katz, 2014; Katz & Tener, 2020). These children, who were often very young (the youngest being 5 years old), conveyed their first-hand horrific experiences. Some survived attempted filicide (Katz, 2013), others witnessed their mother's homicide by their father (Katz, 2014), and others were victims of parental sexual and/or physical abuse (Katz & Tener, 2020). The children's narratives illustrated outstanding sibling bonds and a strong sense of mutual obligation. Siblings were often depicted as risking their own physical well-being to protect one another.

In a recent study (Katz & Tener, 2020), two profiles of the sibling subsystem were identified. The most common profile was the protective sibling subsystem that the children described as a united sibling subsystem in which they latched onto their siblings as their most important coping resource. The second profile was characterized by ambivalence, including mixed feelings of jealousy and fear of additional abuse at the hands of a sibling, alongside feelings of compassion, understanding and forgiveness towards their abusive sibling.

It is important to stress that the first profile of siblings as comfort and protection is also echoed in the systems theory's compensation effect, whereby siblings tend to comfort each other in times of distress and offer mutual support and affection as well as instrumental support (Dunn et al., 1994; East & Rook, 1992). In this way, siblings can compensate, at

least partially, for the parents' unavailability or hostility (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Milevsky & Levitt, 2005; Tucker et al., 2013) by trying to fulfill emotional and physical needs that were neglected by the parents (Williams et al., 2016) and by being each other's allies (Graham, 2018). A recent study offered partial support for the compensation effect by indicating that physical abuse and exposure to domestic violence might be related to more warmth and less conflict in the sibling subsystem when parental emotional abuse or neglect are not present (Witte et al., 2020).

The second profile indicates that dysfunction in the parent-child relationship is associated with a harmful dynamic in the sibling subsystem (Crittenden, 1984; Mangold & King, 2020; Portner & Riggs, 2016; Tucker et al., 2019; Whiteman et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2016; Witte et al., 2020). According to the systems theory's spillover effect, this dynamic could manifest as a mirror image of the parental behavior. For example, sibling aggression may occur in an emotionally and physically abusive family climate (Dirks et al., 2015; Heinrich, 2017) or a distant and hostile sibling relationship in the context of emotional neglect (Witte et al., 2020). In other cases, a spillover might be displayed differently, such as sibling incest in cases of parental neglect (Ballantine, 2012; Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005).

1.3. The current study

The current study was designed to examine the sibling subsystem in the context of IFCSA. The aim was to explore the experiences and perceptions of the children with respect to their siblings in the context of the IFCSA. Therefore, the questions guiding the analyses of the children's narratives were as follows: (1) How is the sibling subsystem organized and shaped in the context of IFCSA?; (2) How do the siblings perceive their relationships with each other in the context of IFCSA?; and (3) How do children perceive the disclosure of the abuse in the context of the IFCSA and the sibling subsystem?

Forensic interviews conducted with children in Israel were selected for the current study's exploration as they provide a unique opportunity to examine children's narratives of their traumatic experiences while they are still in the abusive homes before any interventions occur. Forensic interviews are a rare encounter with a child, often very close to the disclosure phase, when the alleged abuse has not yet been explored or assessed by anyone else. Previous studies in the field of child abuse have illustrated how the exploration of children's perceptions and experiences in their own words during forensic interviews can significantly contribute to both theoretical and practical knowledge in this arena. For example, previous studies have explored the manipulation processes of offenders (Katz & Barnett, 2016), children's experiences following sexual abuse by their peers (Katz, 2019), and an initial exploration of the sibling subsystem in the context of child abuse (Katz & Tener, 2020).

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sample included forensic interviews selected from the total number of interviews ($N = 1800$) conducted in Israel in 2015 with regard to sexual abuse at the hands of a parent (i.e., IFCSA). A set of screening criteria was employed and the cases that met these criteria were included in the sample. Inclusion criteria were: (1) the child was interviewed as a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a parent; (2) the child had at least one sibling and discussed the sibling subsystem in the forensic interview; (3) the interview was the first forensic interview involving the child; (4) the child made allegations of abuse and disclosed the incidents during the forensic investigation; (5) the child's first language was Hebrew; and (6) the child did not exhibit any developmental disabilities.

The final sample included 60 forensic interviews with children ranging from 10 to 14 years of age (48 girls). In 58 cases, the father was

the alleged perpetrator, whereas in two, the mother was the alleged perpetrator. Ten children also disclosed additional sexual abuse by a sibling during the interview.

Family size ranged from 2 to 7 children. Each of the children came from a different family, meaning there were 60 families in the sample. All reviewed cases included multiple incidents of severe sexual abuse by a parent, including touching the child's genitals under their clothing and penetration or attempts to penetrate. In all cases, more than one sibling was being abused by the parent and the abuse was disclosed by the child or his/her sibling prior to the forensic interview. It is important to note that the sample information was provided as an overview of the included studies and not in relation to any specific interview.

The interviews were conducted by twelve trained forensic interviewers who shared similar professional backgrounds (i.e., a degree in social work and at least one and a half years of experience as a forensic interviewer with children). All interviews followed the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol, a requirement for investigations involving children in Israel. The use of the standardized interview guidelines allowed for the standardization of the interview structure and adherence to best practice. All interviews were recorded and the average time for each interview was 50 min. The identification of themes and analysis were conducted by the authors, who are experienced researchers in the field of child sexual abuse.

2.2. The NICHD investigative interview protocol

The NICHD Protocol (for further elaboration, please refer to [Lamb et al., 2018](#)) is a set of structured practical guidelines for forensic interviewers and aims to cover all phases of the investigative interview. The NICHD Protocol has been found to elicit rich testimony from children of all ages in response to free-recall invitations ([Lamb et al., 2011](#)). The protocol has been implemented in the US, Israel, Sweden, UK and Canada. Additionally, follow-up studies have systematically indicated significant improvements in the quality of investigative interviews ([Cyr & Lamb, 2009](#); [Lamb et al., 2011](#); [Orbach et al., 2000](#); [Sternberg et al., 2001](#)).

The NICHD Protocol includes three phases. The first involves becoming acquainted and establishing rapport, while the second trains the child's episodic memory using a neutral experience. The third and main phase involves open-ended questions about the abuse that may be followed by direct questions, only after the former appear to have exhausted the child's memory.

2.3. Procedure

Data coding and analysis were performed according to a qualitative thematic analysis approach ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#); [Braun et al., 2018](#)). Two of the authors analyzed the interviews. The process included several stages, all of which focused on analyzing the children's experiences and perceptions from forensic investigations' transcripts.

Each of the authors independently read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the children's narratives. In the following stage, the authors independently identified the units of meaning within the text related to the sibling subsystem. More specifically, any narratives concerning the sibling subsystem in the context of IFCSA as well as the siblings' perceptions of their relationships with each other, with their parents and with professionals in the context of IFCSA, were identified as units of meanings and labeled according to their content. The initial categories were thus identified. Following this stage, the authors met and discussed the initial categories and codes were grouped together as initial themes. As a result of these discussions, some themes were removed or changed and additional codes and categories were added. In the next stage, the authors reviewed the themes and subthemes, which were then classified according to their dimensions and properties. During the final stage, the themes were refined and named. Based on a comprehensive thematic analysis, the final themes were identified. The

children's narratives selected to be included in the current manuscript were "back-translated"; that is, they were translated into English from Hebrew and then back into Hebrew by a professional. This process was carried out to ensure that the translation process did not change the children's authentic voices in any way.

Four criteria were assessed to establish the current study's trustworthiness ([Shenton, 2004](#)): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#); [Shenton, 2004](#)). *Credibility* was assessed via the question: "How congruent are the findings with reality?" with the intention to allow the children the opportunity to express themselves authentically and honestly. In addition, during the data analysis and identification of categories, intensive discussions were held with two well-trained forensic interviewers so that the research project would be scrutinized by our peers (i.e., beyond the discussions held among the research team). To achieve *transferability* of the findings, the authors provided a detailed description of the methodology. Furthermore, to highlight the children's perceptions and experiences, comprehensive descriptions of their narratives were provided by the authors. To ensure *dependability*, critical and reflective discussions took place to prevent the influence of the authors' subjectivity throughout all stages of the study. The concept of *confirmability* in qualitative research relates to the researcher's concerns and efforts to maintain objectivity. Extensive measures were taken to ensure that the analyses and findings represented the children's experiences and ideas rather than those of the authors (for further elaboration on these criteria, see [Katz & Tener, 2020](#)).

2.4. Ethical considerations

As the study was based on confidential files containing highly personal information, the authors made a concerted effort to conduct the research in accordance with the highest ethical standards. To this end, ethical approval was requested for the study from the research board of the Ministry of Welfare in Israel. The forensic interviews were provided to the authors without names or identifying features of the children, parents, or other people and places involved in the incidents to ensure privacy and anonymity. Therefore, identifying details of the children interviewed, including age, gender, number of siblings and specific details about the sexual abuse they experienced, were not provided. The study was also approved by the manager of the Service of Child Forensic Interviews in Israel and by the ethics committee of Tel Aviv University.

3. Findings

The analysis of the children's narratives revealed three themes with respect to their perceptions and experiences regarding their siblings in the context of the IFCSA. The first theme addressed the familial context, specifically, the "daily family atmosphere" in which the IFCSA was initiated, carried out and preserved. It consisted of two types of familial atmosphere: "perpetrator in the center" and "family chaotic routine." The second theme described the sibling subsystem dynamic during the sexually abusive events themselves. The last theme described the sibling subsystem in the context of disclosure of the abuse. The combination of these three themes gives a picture of the experience of the sibling subsystem in the context of parental IFCSA.

3.1. Daily family atmosphere

The children's narratives in the interviews captured the experiences of their daily routines and family dynamics. A thorough examination of their narratives resulted in two identified profiles. The first is, "I don't like to go to the toilet when he is in the house": the perpetrator figure at the center of the family atmosphere. Most of the children ($n = 50$) identified one perpetrator, the father, and described how the family dynamic was organized around his presence or absence in the house. For example, some children shared how they choose to go to the toilet, to the bath or

to change clothes when the father was not in the house, so they were able to be relaxed: “My father is going very early to work, so I love to wake up early and to go into the shower, don’t need to worry about anything.” Another shared:

I have problems in my tummy since I don’t like to go to the toilet when he is in the house. I don’t like it and I need to wait for him to go outside the house and only then I can be a bit more relaxed and use the toilet.

The children’s narratives emphasized the stress around the perpetrator’s presence, which was evident in their emotions and bodies at the same time. Furthermore, the children shared that the other family members (i.e., the other siblings and mother) were more relaxed in the absence of the perpetrator:

When he is at work it is almost like a normal house when you can hear us scream or laugh or, you know, just making noises but when he is at the house, we are becoming how can I say it? More like mannered and quiet so you know we don’t want to add more problems.

When the identified perpetrator is in the house the children described a stressful routine in which they try to keep quiet, not be seen and that the whole family, even the babies and infants, know how to behave: “Even the baby is sleeping when daddy arrives home. It is like he hears us saying to him you don’t have anything to miss here.”

The second profile is, “*I don’t know who is touching me sometimes*”: the family chaotic routine. Ten children in the sample provided a glance into a chaotic family dynamic characterized by multiple perpetrators, usually the father (in two cases the mother) as well as their siblings as additional perpetrators. In comparison to the first dynamic, where the siblings described themselves as a unified unit in the face of the abusive father, in this dynamic the children often described themselves as lonely and alone in a tumultuous setting. One child shared how, once the night started, it was never known how it would end and who would come to their room: “You are asking me who touched me? Well, they all do. When I am going to sleep, I never know who will come. Sometimes it is one after the other like they were organizing everything.” Another shared, “I don’t know who is touching me sometimes. I am just trying not to be there, trying to pray or, I don’t know.”

3.2. “We took turns”: The sibling dynamic during the incidents of the abuse

These two distinct familial atmospheres – “perpetrator as center” and “chaotic family” – elaborated on by the children generated two profiles for the siblings. In the most dominant, the siblings were described by the children as one unified unit that would do anything to protect one another, especially the younger siblings. The 50 children who were abused by their father described the unique dynamic that was created between the siblings. It is also important to pinpoint that an additional five children from the “chaotic family” profile shared unique non-abusive sibling dynamics with some of their siblings (excluding the abusive siblings). According to the children’s narratives, the older siblings took on the responsibility to protect the younger ones, even without words:

You are asking me how do we know that he [the father] wanted to harm our little child but it is not like we talked about it, we just knew that this can happen and that we would do everything to protect [my sibling] so we took turns. [My sibling] is always sleeping at the wall, never alone in the house, no matter what it means for us.

Many of the children used the terms “our child,” “our baby,” or “our girl/boy” for their younger sibling, as if the sibling unit was functioning as the parental unit. This was further illustrated in the following narrative: “[My sibling] is not a [sibling], [my sibling] is my

responsibility. If I will not take care of [my sibling], [my sibling] can die. I have a responsibility to protect [my sibling] no matter what will happen to me.”

The children shared various ways in which they protected their younger siblings, whether by offering themselves to their father, instructing the younger siblings how to avoid the abuse or interfering during the abuse itself, risking themselves. The following narratives illustrate this dynamic:

I am trying not to be away when my father is in the house but when I have to go, I am trying to take [my sibling] with me, even to the youth movement. My friends keep asking me why? And telling me that this is weird but I don’t care, if I could take [my sibling] with me to school, I would do it as well.

The sibling dynamic was perceived by these children as a source of comfort and reassurance. Moreover, there were cases in which, after the abuse, the sibling dynamic was a source of rescue and opportunity to be saved. Knowing that their siblings were down the hallway was a source of strength that could be trusted to save the child from the danger that lied ahead. This was sometimes a turning point in the occurrence of the abuse, as a child who was sexually abused by the father shared:

I tried to yell to my siblings but he shut me up with his hand, told me that if I did not shut up, he would kill me. In the end I shouted to my siblings to call Mom because Dad was doing things to me.

Another shared, “I told [my sibling] I was hiding so he wouldn’t hurt me. [The sibling] came with me to the hideout and quietly called Mom.” In some cases, this protection could also be seen physically, as a sibling who became a buffer between the perpetrator and the sibling: “I grabbed my [sibling] tight so Dad wouldn’t take me to his room.” Other children shared, “When I saw him come to kiss my [sibling], I kicked him in the legs to stop.”; “My big [sibling] told me – every time Dad calls you, tell me and I will come with you.”

The shared fate between siblings created a dynamic of unparalleled concern, sometimes even at the cost of self-sacrifice. The sense of responsibility, along with the need to protect their siblings, caused them to bear the brunt of the abuse:

He put all my siblings in a separate room, and because I’m the biggest, I really got beaten up, so he put me in my mom’s room. He took off my pants and underwear and started beating me and then got me in the bed to do it to me.

The siblings’ concern and protection were mutually expressed, not only towards the victim but also towards the sibling who witnessed the abuse: “As I managed to get out of the room, I went to check where my siblings were. I hugged my little [sibling]. I did not let go of [my sibling].” Beyond the concern and closeness between siblings in abusive situations, this quote emphasizes that the power of the sibling relationship lies in understanding the feelings and emotions those siblings experienced without any need for an explanation. The abused sibling managed to escape from the father and went to comfort the other siblings who had been out of the room and heard the abuse occurring, understanding that they were frightened as well.

This dynamic between the siblings gave them a sense of meaning while being held in these horrific childhood experiences. At the same time, it was also a source of future concern, thinking about when they will grow up and how they will manage their responsibility towards their siblings:

You know I want to grow up so I won’t need to be in this house but I am afraid. Is there like a place where I can ask to raise my siblings? Since I am not going anywhere if they will stay there on their own.

Only in few cases did the children describe older siblings as more terrible and harmful than the perpetrating parent, as this child shared: “It is not like the older you get the stronger you are... in my family my

older sibling is worse than my father. ... [This sibling] is a monster.” Another shared, “I do not care what my father is doing to me but my [sibling], this is something else. [My sibling] is the worst in the world.”

3.3. “He was entering the room trying to make it end.” The sibling dynamic and the abuse disclosure

The children’s descriptions conveyed that several family members knew that the abuse was taking place. This included the non-sexual offending parental figure and other siblings. Yet, at the same time, the children expressed that the abuse was not directly spoken about between them. For the children, disclosure became necessary when they assessed that their actions could no longer protect their siblings. They shared two ways of disclosure. One approach was to disclose within the family. The children found this type of disclosure difficult as everyone knew about the abuse but they were not talking about it. This included the possibility of bringing the abuse to “awareness” or “talking” about the abuse within the family as an act of protection. In the following narrative, a child who was being abused by the father shared how their sibling, who was not abused by the father, decided to take action to reveal the abuse to protect the child:

I was sad all day and I saw [the sibling] was sad because of me... Daddy was in the room with me and suddenly we heard a knock on the door. That never happened. ... My [sibling] opened the door and said to him, “What are you doing?”

The child shared the surprise of the father and that the sibling’s act caused the father to be abusive less often. Another child shared that their sibling asked several times whether they were ok, which they saw as their sibling’s attempt to convey the message to the perpetrator that the sibling knew about the abuse:

Then my [sibling] started to ask me every dinner when my father was sitting there if I am ok and if I need help and that [my sibling] is there for me and I can see that [the sibling] was talking to me but also to him [the father] like telling him that [the sibling] is watching over me.

When the sibling understood that the abuse was still occurring, usually when they were out of the house, it was the sibling who decided to disclose the abuse. Revealing the family secret to someone outside of the family was identified by the children as the second possibility or stage of disclosure, when they could no longer protect their younger siblings:

You know, I don’t have any problem but I don’t want my little baby to go through this. ...I never thought he will want to do it to [my sibling] but when he started taking [my sibling] to the room and I could not do anything to stop it, I knew that it is the time so I wrote my teacher a letter and then you [the forensic interviewer] came.

Another child shared, “I am here only because this is the only way I understand I can protect my siblings. I already tried everything before.”

4. Discussion

The current study aimed to delve into the sibling subsystem in the unique context of IFCSA, as conveyed by children during their forensic interviews. The children’s narratives provided a painful and rare glance into the familial atmosphere in which the abuse was initiated, carried out and preserved. It also enabled us to observe sibling subsystem dynamics during the abusive events themselves, as well as the siblings’ dynamics during the disclosure of the abuse, to figures inside and outside of the family.

The children described two daily familial routines. One included an identified abusive father figure, around whom the whole family was organized cognizant of his character in an attempt to defend themselves

and prepare for the abuse and reduce suffering. The other daily routine included abusiveness as a constant way of living. The abuse was carried out by multiple family members towards the victims. Previous studies have indicated that abusive families are more likely to display an unstable and unpredictable family structure. These families often engage in relationship patterns that are coercive, unsupportive, and conflictual (Mapp, 2006; Tucker & Rodriguez, 2014). Moreover, this family dynamic, described by the children, echoed the concept of a trauma-organized system in which the subsystems within the family are strongly embedded in the structure that allows the abuse to reoccur (Bentovim, 2018).

The children’s narratives of the parental figure (in this study, the father) who terrorized the entire family, pinpoint the urgent need to further understand the encounter between domestic violence and child parental abuse. Based on the children’s narratives, given the enormous power of the father and the tremendous fear of him, it was clear that their sibling was their sole source of survival.

In focusing on the sibling subsystem within the dangerous and fragile context of the family, most of the children in the current study described this subsystem as a source of security and protection. This was present not only in the children’s descriptions but also in their language. They related to their siblings as their own “children” or “babies,” which speaks to their strong bonds, including intertwined emotions and obligations. This dynamic between siblings has been previously examined (Katz, 2013; Katz, 2014; Katz & Tener, 2020) and relates to two theoretical frameworks. The first relates to the compensation theory, which is part of the family systems theory (Minuchin, 1985). In this theory, the family’s subsystems are mutually dependent, thereby affecting each other to achieve and maintain stability. At the same time, change is inevitable, in particular within the family where the development, needs and wants of its members are always evolving. Hence, IFCSA has a dramatic impact on the family system, possibly leading to compensation, whereby the sibling subsystem’s role is to reduce the impact of the parental abuse and meet the needs not being met by the abusive parental figure.

The protective sibling profile is also related to the attachment theory. The concept of attachment among siblings has been noted as a recurring theme in children’s abuse testimonies. Therein the children detailed the emotional commitment between themselves and their siblings (Katz & Tener, 2020), with intense attachments forming in specific situations (Seibert & Kerns, 2009). Therefore, in the context of parental IFCSA, it may be that a secure attachment can be formed between the siblings. Attachment theory initially focused on the affective bond between mother and child. However, Bowlby (1982) argued that a child could have a hierarchy of multiple attachment figures that ranged in importance. It has since been shown that older siblings can act as temporary or secondary attachment figures who, specifically, meet companionship needs when the parents are unavailable (Brumariu et al., 2020; Seibert & Kerns, 2009). Attachment may also be “mirrored” by the sibling subsystem (for review, see Whiteman et al., 2011) and future research should explore how siblings can develop and act as substitute attachment figures in the context of child abuse.

Some children described chaotic routines in their houses that, in turn, contaminated the sibling subsystem. In these cases, there is evidence of a spillover process, as emotions and behaviors from one subsystem “infect” other systems within the family. For instance, the existence of negative emotions in the marital subsystem could lead to negative parenting behavior. Relatedly, in the current study, the dynamics and characteristics of the abusive parent-child relationship could, thereby, infect the sibling subsystem. This may have a detrimental impact on the abused child, as each of the family subsystems has a negative impact on them. However, this requires further investigation in future studies.

Under further examination, the spillover effect in the sibling subsystem could also relate to the transgenerational transmission of trauma. However, this phenomenon has not yet been studied generally among

siblings or specifically in the context of IFCSA. Previous initial findings could indicate the potential transmission of maltreatment or abusive behaviors from parents to their children (Fuchs, 2017), with those behaviors then becoming a part of the sibling subsystem. This transmission of abuse can also be viewed in the framework of Ferenczi's groundbreaking work (1932/1988, 1933/1994) relating to "identification with the aggressor." This concept encompasses a process where a child loses his or her agency, which is then replaced by that of the perpetrator. As a result, the child becomes hypersensitive to the perpetrator, adopts the perpetrator's experience concerning the abuse, and identifies with the perpetrator's aggression. However, it should be noted that this was found to be rare in the current study and should be examined further in future studies.

Definitions of IFCSA are known to reflect social norms (Krienert & Walsh, 2011). Therefore, it is common that when sibling sexual abuse is reported to authorities, there are two stereotypical assumptions – that there is a perpetrator and a victim (Griffee et al., 2014). Thus, it is important to note that in the present study, the children sometimes described a parent as well as an older sibling as abusive figures. At the same time, the structure of the forensic interview is based on the same social assumptions that separate the perpetrator from the victim. Thus, a child can only be interviewed either as a victim or an abuser. As such, if a child is being interviewed as a victim, he is not permitted to describe possible sexual situations between him and his siblings during the interview. This dichotomous differentiation may not serve these siblings' needs. Furthermore, previous studies have addressed a contributing factor to the occurrence of sibling sexual abuse that could be related to siblings turning to each other to receive affection, particularly in families where there is a lack of guidance and emotional fulfillment from the parents (Ballantine, 2012; Brennan, 2006; Canavan et al., 1992; Griffee et al., 2014). As was seen in the current study, the children recounted that their siblings were a strong, and often only, source of support. Thus, the tendency to make a clear distinction between the sibling subsystem and its dynamics in cases of parental IFCSA and sibling sexual abuse may be misleading. Moreover, sibling sexual relationships have been found to be more than likely between supportive siblings and be perceived by them as a source of comfort (Tener & Silberstein, 2019).

Alongside the described sibling dynamics, the children in the current study provided a glance into the decision to disclose their abuse. It seems that, although the abuse was known to all of the family members, it was not discussed. Therefore, the children described that disclosure within the family was often the first stage in the disclosure. The children who witnessed their siblings' abuse felt the need to protect them and one strategy was to reveal the abuse within the family. The children's authentic descriptions illustrated how the family secret is expected to be concealed among its members. For example, when a child intruded during the abuse, thereby revealing it, even the perpetrator was surprised. However, although revealing the abuse by speaking about it or making it clear that it was seen might reduce its occurrence, it did not prevent it from continuing. This point essentially brought about the disclosure of the abuse to the outside world as it seems that the siblings decided to disclose when they could no longer protect their siblings.

5. Limitations

When discussing the contribution of the current study, its limitations should also be considered. First, as the interviews were conducted by forensic investigators, they were focused on the abusive events. While the children voluntarily raised the topic of their siblings in the interviews, providing the opportunity to study this relationship, qualitative interviews designed to focus specifically on the sibling subsystem would allow for a deeper understanding.

Second, we were unable to assess the impact of various contextual factors that may play a large role in the children's experiences (Nadan et al., 2015), such as age and gender, socioeconomic status, cultural background, religious affiliation, as well as a comparison between

different types of abuse. These variables should be included in future studies. It is also important to consider that this study was conducted in Israel, where there is a higher average number of children per family compared to other western countries (Lavee & Katz, 2003). This family dynamic may impact the sibling subsystem in a unique way. In larger families, each sibling has a key role, with the older ones often acting as caregivers (Tener et al., 2020), which differs from the dynamics in societies with smaller families. For example, it has been noted that in larger families, siblings may act as attachment figures (Keller, 2013). Future studies should examine unique contexts in this regard.

Third, this study focused only on IFCSA. Other forms of maltreatment may also result in similar experiences for children. Therefore, it is important for future studies to compare different forms of maltreatment. In addition, the sole focus of this study was on the experiences of IFCSA victims. Hence, to gain further insight into this phenomenon, there is a need for future studies to include the voices of others who were significant figures within the abuse dynamic. This should include other family members and relevant professionals to shed light on their perceptions of the sibling subsystem in the context of IFCSA. It could also be that the children's current perceptions of their sibling subsystem in the context of IFCSA may change in retrospect. Future studies should consider a longitudinal approach in which adult survivors of IFCSA reflect on the role their siblings played in this context.

Lastly, due to the use of forensic interviews, only children who disclosed their IFCSA and received an intervention from official authorities were included in this study. As such, child victims of IFCSA who have never disclosed the abuse they are experiencing were not included. Although it is difficult to attain the specific number of children in this group, it is likely to be a large group and have its own unique characteristics. Future retrospective studies of adult survivors would provide critical information in expanding the understanding of this topic.

6. Implications for future research, policy, and practice

Through their own narratives, the children in this study revealed their experiences in complex and multidimensional ways. Although the forensic interviewers' intention was to focus on the IFCSA by the parents, the children shed light on their families' many layers in the context of the abuse. Professionals meeting with abused children immediately after the initial disclosure play a key role that comes with great responsibility (Tener et al., 2017). Research has indicated the need for professionals to be sensitive to the complexity surrounding the experiences and feelings of the children for the perpetrating family members (Tener & Silberstein, 2019). The forensic interview is formal and unlike a therapeutic setting. The child is being questioned to garner a detailed testimony about the abuse for legal purposes, however, it is of the utmost importance for the interviewer to acknowledge the child's feelings. By doing so, the child, and not the abuse, is at the center of the interview. This gives the child the power to reveal their complex relationships with their parents and other family members, without labeling themselves as the victim or the others as perpetrators, certainly not automatically or prematurely. In addition, such an approach allows for a focus on the child's welfare, including their need for protection and well-being within their family. The child's point of view regarding the overall family dynamics and interactions, as well as the sibling subsystem, is critical as this is the knowledge that informs and influences child welfare and protection policies and practices.

The current study's findings hold essential information for child protection practitioners in regards to important questions, such as out-of-home placements. Furthermore, to establish a base for future studies in regards to family trauma and, namely, child abuse within the family, the development of a conceptual and theoretical framework would be beneficial. In concentrating on this subsystem, professionals would be better able to identify the resiliency and agency coming from these relationships in cases of trauma and abuse. The sibling subsystem has been neglected in child abuse and family trauma literature (e.g.,

Katz, 2013, 2014; Katz & Hamama, 2018). However, it appears to be a vital and potentially life-saving resource for children. Abused children's survival often depends on them staying together with their siblings. Their separation in out-of-home placements could severely impact their mental health and well-being. Indeed, studies have indicated the importance of a shared placement for siblings when their relations are strong and supportive (Leathers, 2005; Whelan, 2003). At the same time, the sibling subsystem can also be harmful and abusive. Thus, each sibling relationship should be taken into consideration separately when deciding on the appropriateness of a shared or separate out-of-home placement. Prevention programs and community interventions should also take into account the importance of the sibling subsystem in cases of IFCSA. The siblings should be provided with support and ways to strengthen their relationships. Treatment should also be provided for abusive sibling relationships, which have severe negative impacts on siblings' mental health, even at times similar to that of parental abuse.

Studies of therapeutic interventions directed at the sibling subsystem are scant and often based on clinical experiences (e.g., Caffaro, 2013). The approach often addressed is individual therapy for the abused/abusive sibling or abusive parent. Therapy for the sibling dyad or group and improving the siblings' relationships have yet to be explored (e.g., Dirks et al., 2015; Shadik et al., 2013; Tener & Silberstein, 2019). Caffaro's pioneering book (2013), which is based on clinical experience, offers detailed guidelines regarding the assessment of the sibling subsystem for therapists working with IFCSA. The assessment aims to ascertain a number of aspects of the sibling subsystem, including strengths, empathy, conflict-resolution and communication skills, awareness and acknowledgment of the abuse, etc. Despite these guidelines, the sibling subsystem is rarely a part of the treatment programs for the children abused by a parental figure (Baker et al., 2002).

The purpose of the current study was to accentuate the sibling subsystem's central role in regards to the abused children's experiences. The findings point to the vital support that is often gained through such relationships. Therefore, future efforts should include the sibling subsystem in both prevention and intervention efforts. Another goal was to inspire further research in the area of child abuse and prevention, advance the theoretical knowledge, and develop training programs for practitioners. Although the children's narratives are bleak, the sibling subsystem's ability to protect and care for its members, even under severe abuse, is remarkable. These strengths should be given further attention in both research and practice.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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