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**The risks of young people abusing sexually at home, in the community
or both: A comparative study of 34 boys in Edinburgh with
harmful sexual behaviour**

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1. Introduction

The Lighthouse Project in Edinburgh was established in 2001 to work with young people aged 10-18 who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour. Since then the project has received enquiries about 239 young people (as of February 2008). Forty per cent of referrals to the project have involved incest with a sibling or a close family member and the issue of sibling sexual abuse has therefore been of increasing interest. The Lighthouse Project does not seem to be alone in dealing with a high proportion of cases of sibling sexual abuse. Shaw (2000), in a study of 51 children, found that half of child sexual abuse cases involved children victimizing siblings. Beckett (2006), in a study of 372 adolescent child sexual abusers, also found that half of these children had abused within the family. Hackett et al (1998) reported that a third of referrals to G-MAP in Manchester involved sibling incest. It is clear then, that sibling sexual abuse constitutes a significant proportion of sexual abuse perpetrated by children and young people and is therefore a subject worthy of special attention. What is striking, however, is that there seems to be relatively little written on the subject in standard reference books about sexual abuse perpetrated by children and young people. For example, only one page is given to the subject in Martin Calder's (2001) book on Assessment Frameworks and there is no specific chapter on the subject in O'Reilly et al's (2004) Handbook of Clinical Intervention. It is also notable that sibling sexual abuse does not appear to feature in any of the typologies that are currently being considered in relation to adolescent sexual abusers, nor is it thought about as a pathway into harmful sexual behaviour. Most strikingly it does not appear to be given any consideration in terms of risk assessment. It would seem important, for instance, to assess whether a boy who has abused within the community might also then pose a risk to his younger sibling at home, and whether a boy who has abused his younger sibling might then also be considered a risk to the wider community.

This study, therefore, has been undertaken to begin to find ways towards answering some of these questions around risk assessment, seeking to determine whether or not it is in fact meaningful to think about sibling incest as a discrete type of adolescent sexual abuse and in particular to answer the following questions:

- When a child has abused a younger sibling, what factors may be associated with an increase or decrease in the likelihood that he will go on to abuse more widely in the community?
- When a child has abused in the community, what factors may be associated with an increase or decrease in the likelihood that he may pose a risk to his younger sibling?

In seeking answers to these questions, three lines of inquiry have been followed:

- A literature review
- Re-examination of raw data from a Scottish sample (Hutton and Whyte, 2006)
- Case experience of young people who have been referred to the Lighthouse project

A thorough review of the literature found some information about sibling abuse in general, but little to assist in answering the questions posed in this study. The full review is therefore not presented here, although it will be referred to in later discussion.

Linda Hutton and Bill Whyte from the Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland (based at Edinburgh University) published initial findings from their study in the Journal of Sexual Aggression in July 2006. This study attempts to develop a profile of children who display harmful sexual behaviour by collecting standard information from specialist services in Scotland through “client monitoring” forms, developed in conjunction with the National Development Group for Working with Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours that is hosted by the Centre. These forms contain a series of about 50 questions concerning age, background, behaviour and so on.

With the help of Linda Hutton the original data from this study (a total of 189 cases) were revisited to see what could be learned about sibling abuse and the questions for which answers were being sought. However, although the data collected by the client monitoring forms allow a distinction to be made between those who have abused only siblings, and those who have abused both siblings and someone in the community, the level of detail required to fully consider any differences between the two groups is not present in the data. For example, the forms do not collect information on other siblings in the family who have not been abused.

The Scottish data were helpful, however, in highlighting the fact that children referred to Lighthouse do not appear to be representative of children referred to other such specialist services in Scotland. In general terms the children referred to Lighthouse come from much more abusive backgrounds¹ and display more serious harmful behaviour. Around 29% of Lighthouse clients attend specialist schools, compared with only 9% of the wider Scottish sample, while 91% of Lighthouse clients with sibling victims had at some stage been looked after, compared with only 62% of the Scottish sample. In the study of Lighthouse clients, therefore, care needs to be taken

¹ i.e. have experienced physical, sexual, emotional abuse or abuse through neglect or witnessing domestic violence to a greater degree

when generalising from the findings insofar as it is clear that Lighthouse service users do not appear to be a representative sample of children who display harmful sexual behaviour.

2. The Lighthouse Study

2.1 Method

The young people referred to Lighthouse were categorised in terms of whether they had abused younger siblings, people in the community or both, and comparisons were made between certain attributes of these young people and their behaviours to establish whether or not there is anything that can distinguish between these groups in order to assist in risk assessment.

All of the cases referred to Lighthouse since its beginnings in 2002 were considered. Those children about whom little was known were immediately excluded from the sample, and therefore only those for whom direct work was undertaken or significant consultancy was given were included. Two girls were also excluded from the study to remove any possible anomalies of the variable of sex, knowing that there is increasing evidence that harmful sexual behaviour displayed by girls may be dynamically different from boys (Erooga and Masson, 2006). Also excluded were those young people whose behaviour was assessed not to have been abusive. The question of what constitutes abusive sexual behaviour (rather than, say, inappropriate or exploratory sexual behaviour) is a vexed one and there seems to be no consensus in the literature around a definition of what constitutes abuse. This creates difficulties when trying to compare results across different studies and this study is not in a position to be able to add clarity to the issue. However, for the purposes of this study, the definition provided by Calder (1999) has been utilised:

“young people who engage in any form of sexual activity with another individual, that they have powers over by virtue of age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, intellect and where the victim in this relationship has suffered a sexual exploitation” (Calder, 1999:2)

Our resultant sample of 50 young people therefore consists only of boys and in particular boys whose behaviour has been at the more concerning end of the spectrum of harmful sexual behaviour. Differentiating the sample on the basis of whether the abuse had been against a younger sibling, only people in the community or both, more difficult than anticipated. For example, one boy had abused his sister but had also displayed sexualised behaviour towards other young people in the residential unit in which he was subsequently placed. He had used sexualised language and engaged in physical play with other residents through which he had gained a degree of sexual arousal. Guided by the definition above, it was determined that he had behaved inappropriately rather than abusively within the residential unit, had therefore abused only his sibling and was accordingly placed in the sibling only category. Another boy was known to have abused in the community and, whilst not proven, was strongly believed to have abused his younger sister. The choice was made to include cases of abuse where it was strongly believed if not actually proven, therefore categorising him as a boy who had abused both his sibling and in the community. In addition, there were cases such as a boy who had abused his brother and a young cousin, raising the question as to whether other family members should be regarded as community victims or under a broad definition of siblings. Again there is no consensus in the

literature around what actually constitutes a sibling, raising further difficulties when trying to compare results across different studies. For the purposes of this study the decision was taken to define siblings narrowly as either full or half siblings and to keep separate those who had abused other family members in a discrete group, providing an additional category of boys whose abuse included other family members.

Initially the sample included 28 young people who had abused in the community only; however, it was soon established that just 12 of these young people actually had younger siblings. The 16 young people who did not have younger siblings were therefore excluded, as they would not be of use in answering the research questions, giving a final sample of 34 boys that can be broken down as follows:

Table 1: Composition of the Study Sample by Group

Category	To be known as:	Number
Boys who had abused only a younger sibling	The Sibling Group	10
Boys who had abused only in the community	The Community Group	12
Boys who had abused both a sibling and in the community	The Mixed Group	7
Boys whose abuse included other family members	The Family Group	5
Total		34

A list of 30 questions (see Appendix 1) was then drawn up to apply to each of these cases, and to each of their victims, to test some of the findings from previous research in this area as well as to test out some premises and ideas that had arisen from considering cases held by Lighthouse. Each case file and report relating to the young person was worked through in detail in order to answer these questions.

As the numbers in this study are small, none of the findings have been analysed for statistical significance. Together with the fact that the sample cannot be said to be representative of all cases in Scotland, the study is by nature exploratory only and the findings should therefore be treated with appropriate caution. Nonetheless the study produced some interesting results.

2.2 Results and Discussion

2.2.1 Learning Disability/Difficulty

Children with a learning disability/difficulty comprised roughly a third of the study sample (12 out of 34), which is in keeping with their representation in the field of children with harmful sexual behaviour in general (Hackett, 2004). This ratio was replicated across three of the four groups, but it is interesting to note that children with a learning disability/difficulty of some description were overrepresented in the mixed group.

Table 2: Children in the study sample with a recognised learning disability/difficulty, by Group

	Present	Not present
Sibling Group	3 <i>(2x Aspergers and AD[H]D; 1x Dyslexia)</i>	7
Community Group	4 <i>(2x AD[H]D; 1 x Dyspraxia with mild learning difficulty; 1x Dyslexia)</i>	8
Mixed Group	4 <i>(2x AD[H]D; 1x Autism; 1x Global Learning Difficulty)</i>	3
Family Group	1 <i>(Mild learning difficulty)</i>	4

2.2.2 Sex of Victims

Brother / sister abuse initiated by the brother is the most common form of sibling incest pairing (Carlson et al, 2006) and that finding is supported by this study. However, there does not seem to be anything in terms of victim sex to assist in our assessment of whether a boy is more or less likely to abuse in more than one setting.

Table 3: Sex of Victims, by Group

	Number in Group	Male Victim	Female Victim
Sibling Group	10	2	8
Community Group	12	12	10
Mixed Group	7	8	12
Family Group	5	7	7

2.2.3 Sexual Acts

Sexual acts are difficult to quantify as in many cases only the most serious offences were recorded (such as rape), masking other offences that may also have been committed at the time (such as exposure or touching of genitals). In some cases, particularly those involving siblings or family members as victims, abuse was repeated and extended over a long period of time involving a range of sexual acts. Boys in the mixed group tended to have had more victims (an average of 2.9 victims per boy) and had committed more sexual offences than in the sibling or community groups, but this merely describes the nature of the group rather than helping to understand why those particular boys are in that mixed group in the first place. Abuse that was repeated over a longer period of time was clearly more prevalent in cases involving family victims than non-family members in the community. Again this describes the nature of those groups rather than helping to assess risk of transferring from one group to another. A full range of offences (such as oral sex, rape, sodomy, digital penetration, exposure) was represented in all four groups.

2.2.4 Parental Separation

All but one of the boys in the study had parents who were separated and as such this factor did not help to differentiate between the groups. This may again be an artefact of this particular sample.

2.2.5 Family Relationships

High levels of marital discord and distant and emotionally inaccessible parents are often described in studies where sibling abuse takes place (Worling, 1995; Rudd and Herzberger 1999; Smith and Israel, 1987), as well as loose sexual boundaries or a sexualised home environment being characteristic of such families (Smith and Israel, 1987). The quality of family relationships and dynamics were considered in the context of this study but no systematic or objective method for measuring and comparing the quality of family relationships across the different groups could be established in order to differentiate them. A general impression was formed, however, that family relationships were very poor in all four of the groups, although perhaps marginally less so in the community group.

2.2.6 Age of Onset of Abuse

For three of the four groups the mean age of onset of abusive sexual behaviour was around 13 years of age. However, it is striking that the mean age of onset for the mixed group was much lower, at 8.7 years of age. This would suggest that early onset of abusive sexual behaviour is associated with a child abusing both a sibling and in the community rather than the abuse being restricted to one setting, a finding that supports an earlier finding by Beckett (2006) in his study of 372 adolescent child sexual abusers. In order to explore this further, the age of onset within the mixed group in terms of age of onset of sibling abuse and age of onset of abuse against a member of the community was then also considered.

The average age of onset of sibling abuse was also 8.7 years; as the average age for onset of abuse in the community was 13.1 years, this would appear to indicate that, in all cases, the abuse of a sibling had taken place before any abuse of a non-family member in the community. There were no cases in the study whereby a boy had abused within the community and then gone on to abuse a sibling, although there were cases where a boy had abused a non-sibling family member and then gone on to abuse a sibling. The vector of abuse in this study therefore seems to run from family to community but not the other way around.

Table 4: Average age of abusing sibling at onset of abusive behaviour, by Group

	Average age of abuser at onset of abuse
Sibling Group	13
Community Group	13.1
Mixed Group	8.7
<i>Sibling in mixed group</i>	8.7
<i>Community in mixed group</i>	13.1
Family Group	12.6

2.2.7 Age of Victims at Onset

The finding described above was also supported by the average age of victims at the onset of abuse. Again, the average age of the sibling victim at onset within the mixed group was considerably lower than for victims in the other groups.

Table 5: Average age of victim at onset of abuse, by Group

	Average age of victim at onset of abuse
Sibling Group	7.4
Community Group	11.8 ²
Mixed Group	9.7
<i>Sibling in mixed group</i>	4.5
<i>Community in mixed group</i>	15
Family Group	8.4

2.2.8 Boys' own experience of having been abused

All 7 boys in the mixed group were either known to have or suspected of having been physically, sexually and/or emotionally abused, compared with only 17% of boys in the community group and 29% of boys in the sibling group. Levels of abuse experienced by the family group were also elevated at 60%, reflecting that some of these boys had abused a family member and a member of the community. This may suggest that the likelihood of a boy abusing across different settings is associated with greater levels of abuse experienced in his own childhood.

Table 6: Type of Abuse (known or suspected), by Group

	Number in Group	Physical	Sexual	Emotional	Neglect	Witness to Domestic Violence
Sibling Group	10	5	5	4	2	2
Community Group	12	4	6	5	5	4
Mixed Group	7	7	7	7	4	6
Family Group	5	3	4	4	2	0

2.2.9 Jealous Anger

Having considered cases of sibling abuse more generally within the Lighthouse Project, one issue, in which the study was particularly interested, was the degree to which jealous anger seemed to be a significant motivating factor fuelling sibling abuse. Neither a strict definition for this concept, nor an objective way of measuring it to compare across the different young people, was established, but professional consideration was given to the concept in terms of whether that that young person appeared to harbour resentful, rivalrous and angry feelings (towards the victim or someone else) and whether it seemed that these feelings were a significant factor in fuelling the abuse.

For example, one of the young people worked with by the Lighthouse Project talked about his (much) younger sister always in very negative terms and maintained that she was loved more and treated better by their mother, always getting what she wanted, never getting into trouble and so on. The mother confirmed to staff from the Project that this was the case; that she was able to offer her younger child much more love and affection than the boy being worked with. In the end the older boy was accommodated, leaving his sister at home, adding further fuel to the jealousy.

² The average age of victim is elevated for community offences because the victims included adults. The same is true for the community victims within the mixed group. For instance, one of the victims in this group was a woman in her thirties.

In this case, it was considered that the boy's eventual sexual abuse of his younger sister was probably significantly motivated by a jealous anger towards her.

Many if not all of the young people worked with at the Lighthouse Project harbour strong angry feelings, but it was this jealous anger that was of particular interest in the context of the current study. Some of the assessment reports and case files that were considered in the study did not make reference to whether these feelings were present or not, and it was not possible in hindsight to agree one way or another whether jealous anger was present. In other cases, whilst not expressed in those terms precisely, it could be agreed that jealous anger clearly either was or was not known to be a feature of the abuse. In many cases it was specifically highlighted as a factor. Although this methodology has its limitations, it was nonetheless of interest to consider whether jealous anger was in fact such a feature of sibling abuse as was anticipated.

The result of this consideration, however, was that while jealous anger did seem to be a feature of all the cases within the sibling group (where known to exist or not), it was not a particular feature of sibling abuse within the mixed group, accounting for just two of the six cases where known. The score of 2 for jealous anger (see Table 7) being present in sibling offences in the mixed group reflects one boy who abused both siblings simultaneously. The allegation of his abuse in the community was not repeated at joint interview and it is possible that it did not take place, though at the time of the study it was believed that it had. Jealous anger was not known to be a feature of any community offences and was not a feature of non-sibling family abuse.

Table 7: Consideration of whether jealous anger may or may not have been a motivating factor behind the abuse, by Group and by victim

	Victims where jealous anger may have been a motivating factor	Victims where jealous anger was not considered a motivating factor	Not known
Sibling Group	7	0	3
Community Group	0	16	6
Mixed Group (sibling offences)	2	4	4
Mixed Group (Community Offences)	0	10	3
Family Group (Sibling Offences)	2	0	1
Family Group (Non-sibling family offences)	0	3	2
Family Group (Community Offences)	0	2	3

These findings suggest that jealous anger may be a motivating factor in the abuse of a sibling and is not associated with the abuse of a non-family member in the community. The authors would not wish to suggest from this small study that sibling abuse is rarely likely to develop into community abuse, and an example of this transition does exist in the study. It is, however, worth considering whether a window of opportunity may exist to undertake therapeutic work with an abusing boy to prevent a risk of their abuse spreading to the wider community. The particular boy in this study had been abusing his siblings for several years before abusing in the community, which is when his abuse became known to services.

The findings suggest that there may be a different dynamic or pathway to abuse for those in the mixed group from those in the sibling only group. A good example would be a boy in this study, who experienced so much sexual and other abuse in his childhood and was so severely

traumatised, that he sexualised most of his needs and most of his relationships and therefore was prone to abuse any vulnerable child no matter who they were; including of course his younger sibling who was most readily available to him, and to whom he harboured no particular jealous or angry feelings (quite the opposite, in fact). This hypothesis, of a different dynamic and pathway, would be supported by the larger degree of abuse that appears to have been experienced by the boys in the mixed group.

What is not known, but would be valuable to explore, is what dynamic might exist between siblings where an older boy had abused in the community but had or had not abused his younger sibling(s). It would be valuable to explore what the dynamic might be between siblings which might make it more likely for a young boy to make the transition from abuse in the community to abuse within the family, although there are no examples of this happening in this study.

2.2.10 Where the Abuse Took Place

There was nothing about the location of the abuse to differentiate between the groups. However, in the sibling group it was interesting to note that in 3 of the 10 cases the abuse initially took place during a home visit after the older (abusing) sibling had been accommodated and while the younger sibling remained at home with the birth parent. With jealous anger being a potential motivating factor behind the abuse, the accommodation of the older child might only add further fuel to this particular fire. It would therefore seem prudent to exercise considerable care around the supervision of contact arrangements between siblings where there may be a risk of sexual abuse (i.e. where the older sibling has already demonstrated inappropriate sexualised behaviour and/or where there has been sexual abuse in the family history).

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

It should be noted again that the study sample is relatively small, is unrepresentative of the wider Scottish picture (Hutton and Whyte, 2006) and that there are some limitations to the methodology. The study is exploratory in nature and further work would be needed to ascertain whether or not the findings could be replicated. In order to be useful, if further research is to be conducted into this area much more attention needs to be paid to the details of individual victim characteristics and household composition than has so far been the case in the literature reviewed by the authors. This study has nonetheless raised some interesting questions which could have implications for practice.

In answering the first research question – when a child has abused a sibling, what factors may be associated with an increase or decrease in the likelihood that he will go on to abuse more widely in the community? - the following suggestions are made. Sexually abusive behaviour progressing from siblings to the wider community may be associated with an earlier age of onset of the abuse, high levels of abuse suffered by the boy himself and an absence of jealous anger as a motivating factor behind the sibling abuse. It is possible that the presence of a learning disability/difficulty may also be an additional risk factor.

To this extent risk assessment tools such as AIM2 (Print, B. et al., 2007) could provide a good guide to the risks of abuse transferring from the family into the community; however, it is

suggested that an additional assessment of sibling dynamics and relationships would be an important addition. Frameworks for this kind of sibling assessment are limited, although the Sibling Abuse Inventory Schedule (SAI) developed by John Caffaro and Allison Conn-Caffaro shows considerable promise as a tool for assessing sibling abuse dynamics from a systemic perspective (2005).

If a boy abuses his sibling with an older age of onset, has little abuse in his own history and where jealous anger is a significant feature of the behaviour, it is not suggested that abuse would never transfer into the wider community. It may, however, make it less likely and should provide a window of opportunity to offer therapeutic support to decrease these risks further.

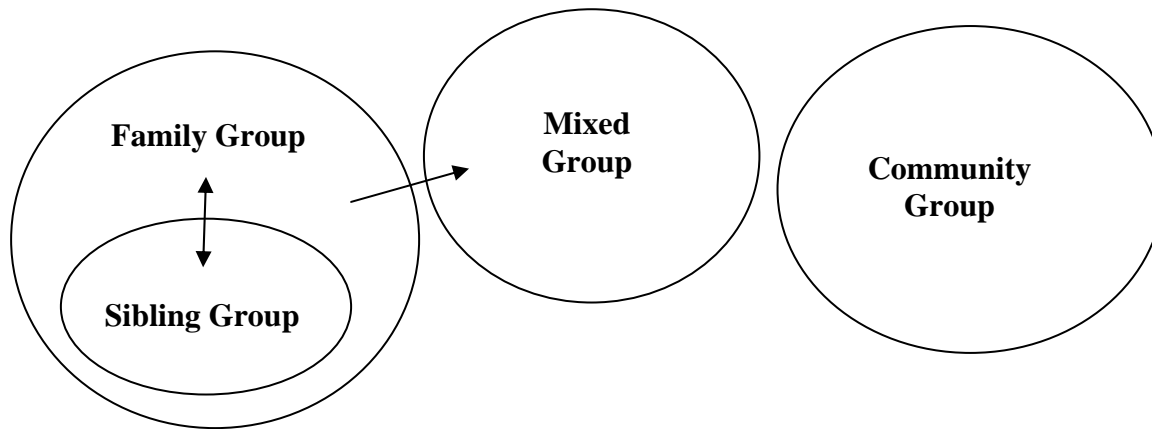
The study also suggests that particular care needs to be taken around contact arrangements between siblings after an older sibling has been accommodated while the younger sibling remains at home, especially in those cases where there has already been a history of inappropriate sexual behaviour. In the study sample, there were 3 cases of sibling abuse having taken place after the older sibling had been accommodated, where it was well known that they had a history of inappropriate sexual behaviour, and where the abuse took place during a home contact visit with little or no supervision.

In terms of the second research question – when a child has abused in the community, what are the factors that are associated with an increase or decrease in the likelihood that he may pose a risk to his younger sibling? - the study makes the following points. A number of boys in the study, who had abused within the community but not against siblings, either did not have younger siblings at all or had no contact with their siblings. The study suggests that the direction of abuse progression may run from family to community rather than the other way around. This does not mean that a boy who has abused within the community poses no risk to his younger siblings. It is possible that abuse of the sibling has already taken place, and it is therefore suggested that where community offences become known, a sensitive investigation needs to be undertaken to consider the possibility that siblings have been abused or may continue to be abused. The study would suggest that the more the boy has been abused himself, and the younger that his own abusing behaviour started, the more concern there should be about sibling abuse also occurring. It is further suggested that the levels of opportunity and quality of supervision in the family home should be given close attention, as well as an assessment of the sibling dynamics and relationships. If it is felt that the sibling relationship is characterised by jealous anger, there should be more concern about sibling abuse already having taken place. Of course, there may well be other relevant factors that it has not been possible to consider in this study.

At the beginning of this paper the question was posed as to whether it is meaningful to think about sibling incest as a discrete type of adolescent sexual abuse. During the course of this study the response to that question has vacillated, but ultimately it is proposed that it is indeed a useful concept. The study would suggest that sexual abuse can progress from the wider family to siblings, from siblings to the wider family and from the family to the wider community, but not seemingly so easily from the community to the family. It is suggested that there seem to be particular dynamics to the sibling relationship which have implications for whether abuse will progress from the family into the wider community. It is therefore concluded that the

Community, Mixed Abuse and Family Groups be retained, with a subgroup in the family group of Sibling Abuse, as is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the four abuse groups



As a more general point, although child development literature traditionally has focussed on the influence of parents upon children it is increasingly being recognised that sibling relationships and attachments can also have a powerful influence upon a child's development (Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Dunn and Plomin, 1990). Over the last 15 years or so there has been a growth in research on sibling relationships; however, this research is not often discussed in more general social work literature or training. In addition, the link is not yet being made very strongly between this literature on sibling relationships and research into sibling incest and abuse specifically. It is proposed that both areas of research and professional literature could usefully inform each other if brought closer together.

Appendix 1: List of questions applied to each young person and each of their victims, with instructions for application

1. Young persons age at time of onset	- Sexual Abuse?
2. Age of victim at time of onset	- Emotional Abuse?
3. Age difference between young person and victim	- Neglect?
4. Were both the young person and victims living with the biological parents at the time of abuse? - If not, who are they living with?	- Witnessed Domestic Abuse?
5. Where did the abuse take place?	15. Is the victim the child of a perpetrator of abuse?
6. Where was the young person living at the time of the abuse?	16. What is the relationship between young person and victim?
7. Were the young person's parents separated at the time of the abuse? - If yes, how long had they been separated?	17. Sex of the young person?
8. Was the victim living with a birth parent - Mother or Father?	18. Sex of the victim?
9. Has the young person abused outside of the family? - If yes, did this happen before or after the sibling abuse?	19. How many children were in the family home?
10. Did the worker feel that jealousy is an important factor?	20. What number is the young person in the family?*
11. Did the worker feel that anger is an important factor?	21. What number is the victim in the family?*
12. Is abuse of a sibling known or suspected?	22. What did the young person come out as on AIM?
13. Is the young person known to have experienced: - Physical Abuse? - Sexual Abuse? - Emotional Abuse? - Neglect? - Witnessed Domestic Abuse?	23. Was the young person responsible for care of victim - including babysitting?
14. Is the young person suspected to have experienced: - Physical Abuse?	24. Was the young person responsible for care of siblings who didn't become victims - including babysitting?
	25. Was the level of care expected by the young person inappropriate?
	26. Were there previous concerns regarding sexual or non sexual behaviour problems? - If so what was the age of onset?
	26. Was the young person's mother the victim of sexual abuse?
	27. Did the young person use threats/bribes/coercion?
	28. What was the nature of the abuse against the victim?
	29. Does the young person have a learning disability? If so what do we know about this? How does it affect them?
	30. What were the relationships within the family like? Were parents physically or emotionally remote? What was the sexual climate like? Were there any extra-familial affairs?

*Use 1 for the eldest, 2 for the second eldest etc

Please base these figures on who was living in the family home, including the young person. Eg, YP = 1, victim = 3, but 2 was living elsewhere so there are 2 children in the house.

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