# News Meets Family Science: Sibling Abuse Op-Ed

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*The Guardian's* publication of Ambika's story of surviving years of physical and emotional assaults from her brother brought much needed attention to the issue of sibling abuse (Guha, 2024). Though it is often mistaken as normal sibling rivalry, Ambika's experience highlighted that sibling abuse is both distinct and developmentally harmful (Guha, 2024; Meyers, 2017). The *Journal of Family Social Work* states that abusive sibling relationships are characterized by "intent to harm, a power differential between siblings, and unpredictability" (Perkins & Meyers, 2020, p. 340). Despite this concerning dynamic, sibling abuse remains the most common form of family violence (Tucker et al., 2025). Additionally, its impacts are damaging not only to individual victims but rather, entire family systems (Perkins & Meyers, 2020). Ambika's account emphasizes the detrimental effects of this form of family violence, as well as the need for interventions aimed at preventing the perpetuation of these abusive experiences for others (Guha, 2024).

**A**ccording to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, childhood and adolescence is a time in which individuals navigate crises related to trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, and identity (Miller, 2016). Crucial to how these crises are resolved are siblings whose closeness and interactions influence ego development (Meyers, 2017; Perkins & Meyers, 2020). Though siblings positively influence development for many, abusive sibling relationships can interrupt normal developmental trajectories (Perkins & Meyers, 2020). For instance, consistent attacks from siblings without intervention often leads victims to distrust others (Perkins & Meyers, 2020). Additionally, a sibling's chronic demeaning and aggression can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and inferiority, as well as erode a victim's emerging sense of self (Guha, 2024; Perkins & Meyers, 2020). The negative developmental implications of this are many as research from the *Journal of Family Social Work* indicates that sibling abuse is associated with mental

health issues, troubles with interpersonal relationships, distress, and low self-esteem, among other issues (Perkins & Meyers, 2020). Unfortunately, research also shows that these poor outcomes can continue to affect victims, even in adulthood after experiences of sibling abuse have ceased (Tucker et al., 2025).

Ambika's account is useful in illustrating this finding. Though she was in her forties and had since cut ties with her brother at the time her story was published, Ambika still experienced issues with self-esteem and anxiety, as well as had fears of not being good enough (Guha, 2024). This highlights the impact of sibling abuse on her ability to favorably overcome psychosocial crises, particularly related to identity. Also, her persistent guilt upon ending communication with her brother likely indicates a failure to resolve the crisis of initiative versus guilt (Guha, 2024; Miller, 2016). However, Ambika's experiences appeared to not only derailed her development but also accelerated it in other areas as she experienced parentification (Guha, 2024). Though this is not a commonly identified outcome of sibling abuse, family stress research indicates that parentification can occur when boundaries are unclear in situations of chronic stress (Walsh, 2016).

Over time, families navigate various life cycle tasks and transitions. Normative family life cycle passage includes meeting socially constructed milestones, such as having children, at culturally expected times (Walsh, 2016). When families encounter these transitions earlier or later than typical in their sociocultural context, the transition is considered off time (Walsh, 2016). Sibling abuse does not represent this type of transition as it is an unexpected stressor for families at any point in a family's life cycle. However, as Ambika's experience portrays, sibling abuse can produce other off time transitions. For instance, the parentification Ambika

experienced led her to take on a caregiving role many years before it was considered developmentally appropriate (Guha, 2024).

Additionally, sibling abuse can significantly challenge families in navigating tasks and transitions. For example, parent's may struggle to meet the developmental tasks of establishing healthy attachment and encouraging positive sibling bonds among their children (Walsh, 2016). The transitions of adolescence and young adulthood are also complicated by sibling abuse. For instance, emerging independence is often overshadowed by emotional control including silencing (Tucker et al., 2025). In Ambika's case, the developmental task of maintaining strong sibling bonds was also disrupted by her abuse (Guha, 2024).

For many, sibling abuse co-occurs with family rules that encourage minimizing abusive behaviors and portraying victims as problematic (Tucker et al., 2025). This was true for Ambika whose abuse was long ignored to maintain a false sense of peace (Guha, 2024). Though Ambika adhered to her family's rules regarding her abuse growing up, in adulthood she began to challenge her family's collective perception (Guha, 2024). Family stress researchers note that "when even one family member begins to see things differently, change is on the way for the entire family system" (Boss et al., 2017, p. 45). Recognizing that her family's denial was no longer a sufficient coping mechanism, Ambika made the decision to renegotiate boundaries (Guha, 2024). This is typically when family stress reaches a crisis as former boundaries and rules are no longer able to be maintained (Boss et al., 2017). For Ambika, this led her to cut ties with her brother and move towards understanding her experiences as valid (Guha, 2024). Additionally, Ambika's experiences of sibling abuse appeared to ripple into her relationship with her parents as she now struggled with anger geared towards them for not protecting her (Guha, 2024). It was unclear from *The Guardian's* article how Ambika and her parents decided to move

forward with their relationship. However, it is important to note that unresolved issues from sibling abuse may lead a victim towards conflict and abuse geared towards their parents later in life (Perkins & Meyers, 2020). Thus, the experience of sibling abuse can lead to systemic changes within the family, reshaping rules and boundaries, as well as impacting those not directly involved in the physical and emotional attacks.

Based on Ambika's account and current research, it is evident that sibling abuse is a major familial issue that needs to be addressed. A challenge to this has been the view that harmful sibling dynamics merely represent healthy rivalry, rather than abuse (Meyers, 2017). Thus, it appears that awareness campaigns aimed at educating the public on sibling abuse could be useful for families and those working with children to identify and prevent abusive acts (Tucker et al., 2025). Education for families could also include intervention strategies, such a conflict management techniques (Tucker et al., 2025). However, it is important to note that sibling abuse is often indicative of parental neglect (Perkins & Meyers, 2020). Thus, clinicians and policy makers should not rely solely on families to report and intervene in cases of sibling abuse. For instance, it would be helpful for clinicians to be "trained on the nature and dynamics of parent-child and sibling relationships the create conditions where sibling abuse is likely to occur" (Meyers, 2017, p. 347). This would lead to more cases of sibling abuse being reported. Policy makers are also responsible in preventing sibling abuse and could assist in the process by creating policy explicitly addressing this form of family violence (Perkins & Meyers, 2020). Together, increased training, education and explicit policy on sibling abuse could help prevent more individuals and families from suffering like Ambika.

## References

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