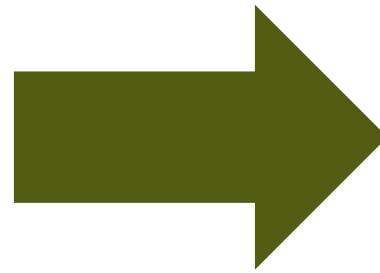


# **Unspoken, Undefined, Untreated: Understanding Atypical Sibling Sexual Experiences**

Tova Lewin  
AVA Conference, 2022

# AVA Scholar, 2021



## Project Aim:

collaborate with medical and mental healthcare providers in order to raise awareness about the current discrepancies in the field

# Sibling sexual abuse

*“I love and hate him in the same breath always. I am disgusted with him, but I worry about him madly... I have moments when I still dream of the moment, we all sit together ...I will never do it but... there are moments I want to... (Tener et al., 2019).”*



©Josie, 2016

Please take a moment and label each scenario as Normative, concerning, problematic or abusive

1. Thirteen-year-old male twins watch pornography online together and mutually masturbate each other while doing so.

2. A 12-year-old boy locks himself in the toilet with his intellectually impaired 10-year-old sister and tells her to perform oral sex on him or he will tell their parents that she has been stealing from their mum's purse.

3. A mother goes to check on her children in their shared bedroom and interrupts her eight-year-old son and his six-year-old sister touching each other's genitals under their clothes. The children appear very embarrassed and admit that they have been doing this on repeated occasions. There are some wider concerns about domestic abuse within the household.

4. A mother comes across her five-year-old son and his four-year-old sister laughing and showing their genitals to each other. She tells them off and has not seen them doing it again. There are no other reasons to be concerned.

# Sibling Sexual Abuse: Parameters Undefined

“sexual abuse committed by a sibling albeit thought to be the most common form of sexual abuse has gained marginal attention...The phenomenology of sibling sexual abuse... is not well understood (Bertele and Talmon, 2021).”



What details are needed to create a universally accepted definition of sibling sexual abuse?

# Methods

- 31- item anonymous online questionnaire sent to 25 board members at the Academy of Violence and Abuse, all of whom hold MD or PHD.
- Various questions to ascertain their knowledge on the topic (e.g., *where do you see most of the abuse taking place?*) and their thoughts on the parameters of the definition of sibling sexual abuse .

# Demographics

- 5 responses
- Practicing between 10- 45 years ( $M= 27.4$ )



# Results

- Variety in characterizations and lack of consensus in responses
- Age, force/coercion, frequency as defining factors varied
- Level of harm or child's feelings towards it seen as an indicator
- Physical behaviors criterion for what constitutes abuse



# Results

“How would you define explorative sexual play, concerning sexual play, problematic sexual behaviors, sexual abuse between siblings?”

“Explorative: comfortable being naked...Concerning: touching each other sexually  
...Problematic: touching each other and engaging in sexual acts...Abuse: coercive sexual acts”

“Explorative: Taking a bath together...Concerning: force, power relation, become more intense...Problematic: A sense of a secret...Abuse: all of the above that last for a long period of time, when with an older and young siblings”



# Results

“When does sexual  
play turn  
concerning...  
concerning play turn  
problematic...  
problematic behaviors  
turn abusive?”

“Turn Concerning: A pattern that continues...Turn problematic: they are uncomfortable or feel violated...Turn abusive: when it becomes coercive”

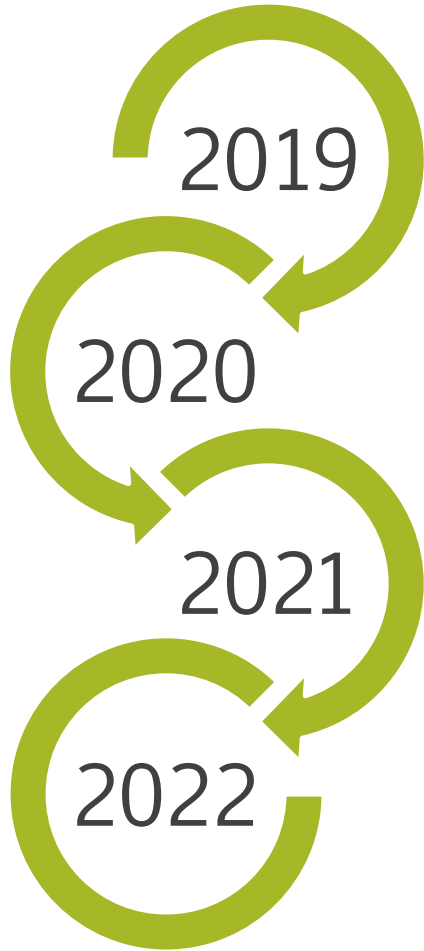
“Turn Concerning: Occurs over time with young child...Turn problematic: non-consensual...Turn abusive: force, physical/psychological distress”

# Challenges through the Project



- IRB was not successfully obtained for the initial large project design requiring us to pivot
  - Extended wait time due to COVID-19
  - University affiliation and state residency lacking at the time

# A Virtuous Circle



- Casual conversation with librarian on campus
- Informational conversation with Dr. Shira Berkovitz, Esq PhD after which she sends AVA Scholar application

- AVA Scholar, 2021
- Mentorship by Dr. Randell Alexander, MD PhD

- Dr. Alexander sends a recent published article by Anat Talmon, PhD and Nina Spaegele, MSc on the topic
- Acceptance to the Trauma Group at Stanford University's Psychophysiology Lab under the direction of Dr. Talmon

- Opportunity to collaborate with both Dr. Talmon and Dr. Alexander on a project

# Next Steps For Research

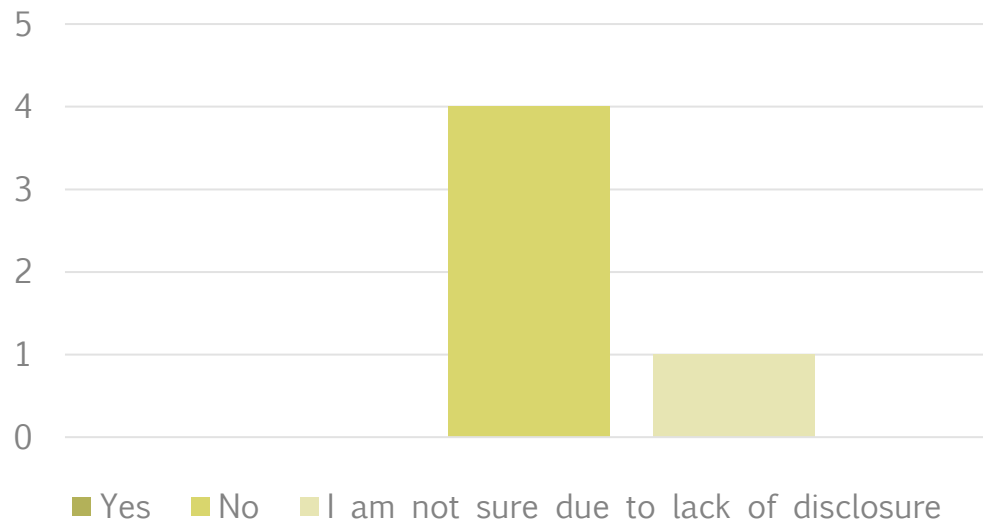
Multinational study utilizing a new and novel questionnaire in order to examine atypical sibling sexual experiences and assess its consequences and lasting effects.



**Stanford** | The Trauma Group  
Psychophysiology Laboratory

# Way Forward Together

Do you think that there are enough resources for families who have gone/are going through this?





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