



HURT TOGETHER, HEAL TOGETHER

**Adverse Childhood Experiences
& Siblings**

Sibling relationships are among the longest-lasting and most impactful relationships in life.

Around 85 percent of people report growing up with at least one sibling, which is more than those who report growing up in a two-parent household.¹ Our siblings help us become the people we are. However, the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and siblings is under researched.²

Trauma experts frequently stress the importance of a healthy parent-child relationship to help young people process traumas and create positive childhood experiences, but sibling relationships can serve as equal sources of support during hard times.³

In a family affected by parental incarceration or substance use, siblings can act as an important support system. They can help cope, build resiliency, and support each other during traumatic experiences.

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACES, are potentially traumatic events in a person's childhood. ACES can cause chronic stress and lead to health problems in adulthood. Parental incarceration or parental substance use are both considered ACES.¹²

Impact of Parental Incarceration and Substance Use on Sibling Groups

Parental incarceration and substance use during childhood can affect a young person's sense of safety, identity, and their ability to regulate their emotions.⁴ These challenges can seep into every aspect of a young person's life, and their relationship with siblings is no exception. All of this is complicated by the fact that although siblings may share household experiences, each sibling can perceive them differently depending on age, gender, or individual emotional regulation.⁵

One Family, Three Stories

The Quintanilla* siblings explain how the impact of parental incarceration can vary in a single family.

Delia, 30

“I was eighteen when my father was arrested. I’ve never felt a deeper sadness or more all consuming anger. I remember thinking, ‘I didn’t do anything wrong, so why am I being punished?’ My mom couldn’t stop crying and I felt so mad at her because it felt like she wasn’t being strong for us. Every time I would look at my little brother and sister, I would feel sick to my stomach with guilt. I felt like I was failing them by not being able to provide something stable for them. I avoided calling home for a while. I remember feeling like I was living a lie, I didn’t tell anyone at my university for the first year, and I pretended that I had all the support I needed at school when I called home. I didn’t want anyone to worry about me. To this day, that time period right after he was arrested is still the loneliest I’ve ever felt.”

Carmen, 26

“I was thirteen when my father was arrested. When it first happened, I felt like I didn’t have anyone to talk to about it. The only people who were talking to me about it didn’t really know how to handle it and my school counselor was so unhelpful. No one held the people who were supposed to help me accountable for actually helping me, so I felt like no one was looking out for me. I was messing up in school, I was depressed, I felt so isolated, but everyone’s attention was pulled in other directions. I don’t remember feeling super resentful of my siblings, but I ended up dealing with it by getting into really intense romantic relationships. I put all my worth in being a partner.”

Gilberto, 21

“I was eight when my father was arrested. I remember feeling really upset and confused about the whole thing. The transition between him being around to suddenly being in jail was a lot to handle. I can vividly remember crying at school about it. I was so sad but I do remember there being a point where I had a hard time even remembering what my dad was like. I almost got used to it. It’s so weird to look back, I feel like one moment I could understand what was going on and the next moment feeling so confused by why my dad was away. It was a situation where I had to trust the adults around me, but they didn’t seem to have a handle on the situation either. I don’t envy my sisters’ experiences, I don’t think any of us had it easy, but I feel like I was the most helpless compared to them. Carmen was a teenager doing her own thing, and Delia was so far away at college. I got coddled by our mom, but it felt overbearing and almost controlling at the time. I remember feeling so lonely, and angry. I was most angry at my older sister, I felt like she left so that she didn’t have to deal with it. At the time, it felt like she had the easier route.”

Experiences like parental incarceration and parental substance use can significantly disrupt a sibling dynamic.

Potential disruptions include:

Grief

Grief is an emotional response to loss. It's often associated with the death of a loved one, but separation from family due to incarceration, or the loss of stability because of substance use can also cause grief. Grief associated with these experiences can create confusion in young people, because the strategies normally used to process grief may not apply. Additionally, some siblings may experience a grief response and some may not. This can further complicate the experience of the siblings, because one might be confused why the other is grieving, and the other might be confused why they're not.⁶

Separation

Siblings can be separated because of parental incarceration or substance use and placed in foster care or with different family members. This separation can affect siblings' bonding.⁷

Parentification

Children of parents with substance use disorders often take on caretaker roles, especially older siblings. This is referred to as "parentification" and can be both protective and harmful. Older siblings may act as a "shield" for younger siblings and take on the brunt of neglect while trying to care for their younger siblings. This protection can come at the cost of the older siblings' mental and physical well-being and can lead to confusion about their role in the family and resentment of the younger siblings.⁸

Research shows that the single most impactful sibling relationship is the role of an older sibling. This role can also lead to higher levels of stress, which can result in anxiety or depression. It's important for older siblings to practice stress-relieving activities and self-care.

Competition

In situations where there are many siblings, children may feel the need to compete for limited emotional resources. This can increase conflict among siblings, loneliness, and the impact of ACES.⁹

HOW CAN SIBLINGS SUPPORT EACH OTHER?

Emotional Sharing

Encouraging open communication among siblings is crucial for emotional support. Siblings should share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This mutual sharing can help siblings feel understood and validated. Emotional sharing is a reminder that you are not alone.¹⁰

Building Positive Routines

Creating routines or rituals, such as shared activities and sibling traditions, can strengthen sibling relationships and provide a sense of normalcy. These positive routines can also offer relief from stress and small moments of connection that have nothing to do with shared trauma.¹¹

Maintaining Positive Boundaries

It is natural for siblings to want to protect each other, but it is important to maintain boundaries that allow each sibling to care for their own emotional needs. Siblings can encourage each other to practice regulating their own emotions while still offering a listening ear in tough times. It's all about balance.

Encouraging Empathy

Siblings can help build empathy with each other by listening to understand each other. Siblings who develop empathy can better support one another through their challenges, especially when the emotional burden of ACEs becomes overwhelming.¹⁰

HOW CAN SIBLINGS SUPPORT EACH OTHER?

Solving Problems Together

Younger siblings benefit from the guidance of older siblings in making decisions and solving problems. Older siblings can model problem-solving for their younger siblings by sharing the struggles they are experiencing. Together, siblings can try to create coping strategies. This can increase the resiliency of the struggling sibling and the sibling who helps solve problems.¹⁰

External Support

Sibling support is invaluable, but seeking help from external sources is also essential. Siblings can encourage each other to go to therapy, counseling, or attend support groups to help them process their experiences.

In the absence of reliable parental figures, siblings can act as confidants, protectors, and sources of emotional support. Research shows that when young people have close and supportive sibling relationships, they demonstrate more resiliency when faced with challenges.¹⁰

HOW CAN SIBLINGS SUPPORT EACH OTHER?

Encourage each other to attend separate online support group meetings. Talk about your experiences with each other.

Make commitments to each other, like Friday night movie nights, or Tuesday ice cream nights, and stick to them.

Do homework together. Try to help each other when one person is stuck.

Watch a movie or favorite tv show together. Talk about how the characters might be feeling. Can you relate? Why or why not?

Cry together. It's okay to feel emotional about your challenges, sometimes crying makes us feel better!

Sometimes, we need to take space and be alone. Respect each other's wishes when that happens. When it's time to talk, be there.

One Family, Three Stories

The Quintanilla* siblings explain how they have supported each other throughout their father's incarceration.

Delia, 30

"We communicate with each other so differently as siblings than we communicate with the rest of our family. It's definitely not perfect, but I feel like we try to just be honest with each other and remember we experienced one thing in three different ways. As the eldest, I find myself wanting to repeat the behaviors that I saw growing up, I want to be more closed off and act like I have all the answers, but our relationships are strongest when I'm just honest. So I try to tell them when I'm struggling, and we try to problem solve together. It's not how any of us were taught to be, so like I said, it's an ongoing process, but when I'm open, I'm less lonely and I know they are too. It feels like even in the context of our own larger family, we're a team. We're our own little family, trying to do right by each other."

Carmen, 26

"I think talking to each other about it all has been huge. It's very validating to hear [from my siblings] that what we went through was a really big deal, especially when the adults around us wanted to pretend like it wasn't. We have worked to put aside our own experiences so that we can really listen to each other's. We keep a safe space and allow all our experiences to coexist. We're not defensive. We're curious, like 'What is your experience?' versus, 'This is my perception of your experiences.'"

Gilberto, 21

"What's most helpful is that us siblings have never been afraid to talk about what happened with each other. I feel like all three of us can safely verbalize our feelings regarding our father's incarceration. We don't feel like we have to justify all the complex emotions that come up. We just know how hard it was and there's an understanding there. We don't have to make the other person understand, we get it because we lived it together. It's nice to know you're not alone, especially when it feels like nobody else in the world knows how you feel."

GET IN TOUCH

For more information on the impact of parental substance use or incarceration on young people and resources to support yourself and others, please visit:
www.prevention.org/youth-and-caregiver-resource-center



800.252.8951



www.prevention.org



ycrc@prevention.org

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