

# AFCCA: Youth Insights

## What Youth Experiencing AFCCA Want Caregivers to Understand

**What is AFCCA?** Aggression toward Family/Caregivers in Childhood and Adolescence (AFCCA) is a pattern of behaviour that causes significant physical and/or psychological harm to the child/teen showing the aggression, to the person(s) who the aggression is directed at, and to other family members who may witness it.

A recent study sought to identify the **social, emotional, and mental health needs of young people impacted by AFCCA**. Youth who had exhibited AFCCA and siblings impacted by AFCCA from across Canada participated in the study via surveys and interviews. You can learn more about this study [here](#).<sup>1</sup>

*“I needed help, but they weren’t hearing that I needed help.”*

### What We Need Our Parents And Caregivers To Know

*We are scared*

*“Because of the aggression and things that were told [to] me due to my aggression, I have a very, very big fear of abandonment.”*

*We feel alone*

*“It’s very draining and very isolating.”*

*We don’t know how to express our feelings*

*“Yelling was the only thing I knew to do to release my anger.”*

*We need you to be patient with us*

*“I felt like the automatic reaction was usually anger rather than trying to understand.”*

*We need you to understand that adoption comes with trauma*

*“There’s a lot of things going on, thinking back on it...because of the...trauma of my adoption; not knowing about my birth culture and things like that.”*

*We need you to hear us*

*“When I don’t feel my voice is heard, it makes me angry, but I... didn’t have the coping mechanisms to realize why I was feeling how I was feeling and acting how I was acting.”*

*Supporting us means learning about our human rights!*

- We have the right to be heard and have our views taken seriously, but sometimes we don’t know how to express what we’re feeling, so we need your help.
- My sibling(s) and I will likely have competing needs and best interests; you may have to try to balance both.
- We have the right to be supported, access treatment and feel protected instead of punished.
- Please learn more about our rights based on the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

*Some things that might help our family:*

- Understanding that my behaviour may stem from factors related to trauma I’ve experienced, neurodevelopmental abilities, and my capacity to cope and/or communicate in various ways.
- Taking the time to explain your feelings calmly and attentively with me.
- Providing or seeking financial support for my mental health needs.
- Finding caregiver peer supports to help reduce my feelings of isolation and learn best practices from other caregivers.
- Finding respite (time for rest or away from each other). We could all use it. I know you need it, but my siblings and I need it too!
- Learning about children’s rights and making them part of your caregiving to help me feel heard and validated.

<sup>1</sup> DeCarlo-Slobodnik, D., & Gervais, C. (2022). *Young persons’ reflections on their rights as children in the context of aggression toward family and caregivers in childhood and adolescence*. University of Ottawa. <https://www.adopt4life.com/resource-library/young-persons-reflections-on-their-rights-as-children-in-the-context-of-afcca>



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## What Youth Experiencing AFCCA Want Professionals to Understand

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“Children understand a lot more than we give them credit for. And they need to be heard.”

### Young People’s Insights on What Contributed to their demonstration of AFCCA

“The main reason for my aggression was a sexual assault I had experienced by a family member, and I was having a lot of trouble dealing with it, especially with **feelings of anger**.”

“I would **turn a lot of that aggression inwards**... I cut myself for a very long time, I did drugs when I was younger, all as part of like, dealing with that anger.”

“I was in a lot of **emotional pain** and like, you know, very confused... There’s a lot of things going on, thinking back on it... **trauma of my adoption**; not knowing about my birth culture and things like that.”

#### Key Insights From Youth

We need to feel heard and have our views taken seriously.

We need the tools to learn to express ourselves differently and safely.

We need a confidential space with youth-friendly professionals where we can speak freely without fear that the information will be used in court or to separate our families.

We need specialized care for childhood trauma, including adoption trauma and relevant diagnoses.

We need you to know and respect our human rights.

We need mental health support for the entire family unit. This needs to include conflict de-escalation strategies for us and our caregivers.

#### Youth-Led Suggestions on Ways that Could Improve Your Practice

- Learn about specialized supports from professionals who understand AFCCA and its risk factors.
- Ensure all professionals are trauma-informed to support young people’s overall growth and skill development in communication and coping.
- Facilitate ongoing access to support services from childhood into adulthood.
- Increase children’s rights awareness among professionals on your team.
- Ensure that all practices are child rights-informed.
- Employ approaches that center the voices and rights of children and teens – we have the powerful potential to impact outcomes for those affected by AFCCA.

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## What Youth Experiencing AFCCA Want to Help Other Youth Understand

*"[AFCCA] can be like, really lonely and... [feel] like there's like not a lot of options... find your anchors that are going to help you cope through it."*

### What is AFCCA?

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### AFCCA can look like

- swearing a lot, saying mean things or yelling at family members;
- threatening to hurt family members or pets;
- self-harming or hurting yourself;
- damaging objects or stealing money;
- physically hurting family members or pets;
- threatening to cause sexual harm to family members.

*"When I don't feel my voice is heard, it makes me angry... but I... didn't have the coping mechanisms to realize why I was feeling how I was feeling and acting how I was acting."*

*"I needed help, but they weren't hearing that I needed help."*

*"...I guess [I was] trying to communicate that I was... in a lot of distress. That I was in a lot of emotional pain and... very confused."*

*"I didn't care what was happening because I felt like no one [cared] about me."*

*"I was like really overwhelmed and... didn't know how to... cope and deal with the stuff I was feeling."*

### What's really happening:

### Learn About Our Human Rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important agreement by countries who have promised to protect children's rights.

We have the right to be heard and to have our views taken seriously:

- We know it's hard to express our feelings, but we have the right to tell people how we feel.
- The adults in our lives want to help us, but it may be hard for them to understand how we're communicating.
- It's okay to ask our family and other adults or friends for help!
- We have the right to support and treatment that can help us, and for our families to make sure that our feelings are better understood.

Please learn more about our rights based on the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

### When a youth is experiencing AFCCA, here's what they want other youth to know:

- It can feel lonely and isolating, sometimes. But we are not alone, and we have the right to receive help!
- Sometimes it can feel like the adults in our life don't understand our feelings. Finding other young people to connect with may help us feel seen and understood.
- It often gets better! For some young people, AFCCA stopped as we got older and we were able to learn and grow from their experiences. In many cases, our family relationships got better too.

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## Siblings' Experiences with AFCCA, and What They Want Caregivers to Understand

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*“As an older sibling, I felt like a lot of the parenting responsibility fell onto me.”*

### What We Need Our Parents and Caregivers to Know

*We need to be okay too*

*“I was always quieter... and I think that contributed to them thinking ‘oh she’s fine because... she’s not freaking out or destroying the house... she’s okay’; even though I wasn’t okay.”*

*We need to express ourselves*

*“...oftentimes the psychologist met with my mom, my sister and my dad... but I was never included in any of that, and I feel like that opportunity may have helped...”*

*We are under a lot of pressure*

*“...I was kind of expected... to avoid setting her off rather than her being expected to not explode... So, a lot of the responsibility... kind of fell on me.”*

*We need to be supported*

*“...nobody protected me as a child...”*

*We need to feel heard*

*“I wish that my mom had been more open to listening to me and hearing about my experience.”*

*Our needs sometimes feel secondary to our sibling’s*

*“...she spends all her energy trying to make sure he’s okay... and like, there’s very little energy for me...”*

*Supporting us means learning about our human rights!*

We have the right to:

- feel, and be, safe in our own home.
- be heard just as much as our siblings who exhibit AFCCA.
- have our needs and best interests balanced with those of our siblings who are experiencing AFCCA.

Please learn more about our rights based on the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

*Some things that might help our family:*

- Understanding that while we may not be showing aggressive behaviour, we may not be okay either. Please ask us about how we are feeling, and really listen to what we have to say.
- Upholding our best interests too, by balancing our needs with those of our siblings experiencing AFCCA.
- Seeking trauma-informed (and adoption-informed, if appropriate) support for our entire family.
- Finding caregiver peer supports to help you reduce your own feelings of isolation and learn best practices from other caregivers.
- Finding respite (time for rest or away from each other) – for my sibling, for you, and even for me. We could all use it!
- Learning about children’s rights to help me feel heard, validated and protected.

In the study, young people with AFCCA indicated that their aggressive behaviours were directed at siblings 74% of the time.

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## What Siblings want Professionals to Understand about their Experiences

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A recent study sought to identify the **social, emotional, and mental health needs of young people impacted by AFCCA**. Youth who had exhibited AFCCA and siblings impacted by AFCCA from across Canada participated in the study via surveys and interviews. You can learn more about this study [here](#).<sup>1</sup>

“...I wonder if there would have been a difference in having the opportunity for me to share what was going on, because... the psychologist met with my mom, my sister and my dad... but I was never included in any of that...”

## Siblings' Perspectives on Professional Services & Supports for Families Experiencing AFCCA

“...having you know, a third party involved [like] a counselor... would have been very helpful... for all of us.”

“I definitely think that when [my sibling] aged out of the services, there needs to be **better transition to continued services**.”

“Definitely going to a therapist and the therapist that I'm going to is... adoption-informed... and I think that makes a very big difference, too, because I do think that **the adoption piece contributes to a lot of what happened**.”

“...children's services... their first instinct is to take the kid away... even the police, justice system. It's almost the same thing... And then they're **not really speaking to one another** and trying to create beneficial solutions for children and their families...”

### How can you help a sibling experiencing AFCCA in their family

We need to feel heard and have our best interests equally considered.

We need you to know and respect our human rights.

We need the tools to understand what our siblings with AFCCA are trying to express with their behaviours.

We need support from adoption- and trauma-informed professionals with an understanding of AFCCA.

You can help my caregivers to understand that we often feel unsafe and “on edge.” In addition to physical aggression, verbal and emotional forms of aggression significantly impact our self-esteem, sense of personal boundaries, and abilities to express ourselves.

We need mental health support for our whole family. This support should also provide conflict de-escalation strategies for us, our siblings, and our caregivers.

### Supporting us means learning about our rights!

- We have the right to feel and be safe in our own home.
- We have the right to be heard just as much as our siblings who exhibit AFCCA.

Please learn more about our rights based on the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

### Some Things that Could Improve your Practice:

- Provide specialized support from professionals who understand AFCCA and its impacts.
- Ensure all professionals are trauma-informed to support the entire family affected by AFCCA.
- Provide ongoing access to support services from childhood into adulthood.
- Increase children's rights awareness among professionals.
- Ensure that all practices are rights-informed.
- Employ approaches that center the voices and rights of children and teens, which have the powerful potential to impact outcomes for those affected by AFCCA.

**In the study, young people with AFCCA indicated that their aggressive behaviours were directed at siblings 74% of the time. Our family is not alone in experiencing this.**

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## What Siblings want their Siblings Exhibiting AFCCA to Understand

“People have depth and there’s always going to be something going on to explain why they are behaving the way they are...”

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- physically hurting family members or pets;
- damaging objects or stealing money;
- threatening to cause sexual harm to family members.

### A new study in Canada asked the questions:

What are the needs of young people impacted by AFCCA?

How does it feel to live in a home where your sibling displays aggressive behaviour?

Siblings of young people who demonstrated AFCCA helped to answer these questions, from a human rights perspective, through interviews and surveys. You can learn more about this study [here](#).<sup>1</sup>

### We both have rights!

We both have the right to:

- be heard and have our views taken seriously.
- feel, and be, safe in our own home.
- have our best interests balanced and protected.
- get support that can help us communicate with each other better.

Please learn more about our rights based on the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

### When a youth is experiencing AFCCA, here’s what their sibling often wants them to know

I understand that when you need help, you sometimes express that need through aggression.

I understand you don’t always know how to communicate what you are trying to get out.

I want to understand what you’re trying to communicate through your actions.  
Can we find a way to talk about it, so I can know if I can help you?

I care about you, and I want to understand why you act the way you do sometimes, so that we can get along better.

I need support (and maybe therapy) too, so I can better understand how to help you and build our relationship.

We need to communicate with the adults in our lives, so they can support both of us and our relationship.

Your behaviour affects me, so I’m allowed to have opinions about what help we all need.  
I want it to get better for all of us.

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## What Siblings want other Siblings to Understand about Witnessing AFCCA

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### Our sibling may have demonstrated AFCCA by

- Swearing a lot, saying mean things or yelling at family members;
- physically hurting family members or pets;
- threatening to hurt family members or pets;
- damaging objects or stealing money;
- self-harming or hurting themselves;
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In the study, young people who had exhibited AFCCA indicated that their **aggressive behaviours were directed at their siblings 74% of the time**. Siblings discussed impacts related to feeling “on edge” or as if they were “walking on eggshells” around their brother or sister, particularly when their behaviour was reported as unpredictable.

### How Siblings are feeling about their experiences within their families

*“I think [my sister] feels emotions very, very strongly... so when it’s anger, she [doesn’t] know how to process that or... how to express it in a non-destructive way.”*

*“As an older sibling, I felt like a lot of the parenting responsibility fell onto me.”*

*“I’m putting boundaries in place, because nobody protected me as a child, and so I’m going to protect myself now.”*

*“I felt scared, protective, and guilty - like simultaneously all at once.”*

*“He does take like a lot of energy from people in the family, so as my mom explains it, like, she spends all her energy trying to make sure he’s okay... and like, there’s very little energy left for me...”*

### Siblings have rights too!

- Sometimes, it may feel like our interests come in second. We have the right to have our best interests balanced with the best interests of our sibling who is experiencing AFCCA.
- We have the right to be heard and to have our views taken seriously.
- We have the right to feel, and be, safe in our own home.

Please learn more about our rights based on the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

### Some suggestions from siblings, that may help

- Our sibling with AFCCA is hurting and confused too, and we may have ideas on how to help them and our families get through the challenges. We have the right to share our opinions about solutions.
- It’s okay to set boundaries to protect ourselves and our feelings.
- We don’t have to be the parent.
- Our parents and caregivers may think we’re okay. We have the right to tell them if we’re not, how we feel, and to ask for help.
- It can get better. It’s ok to speak up and say our family needs more help, or to ask our parents/caregivers to seek out professional help.
- It may help to stick together! Connecting with other young people who live with AFCCA in their home may make us feel supported and validated.

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