

Learning from Survivors of Abuse

By The VIRTUS Programs

Preview

As difficult as it may be to learn the realities of child abuse, behind each statistic is a victim-survivor, each with his or her own unique story and healing journey. This article will review the facts about maltreatment and will highlight one such story to give us helpful insight to better protect the children and youth in our care.

Introduction

As difficult as it may be to learn the realities of child abuse, behind each statistic is a person, a victim-survivor, each with his or her own unique story and healing journey. This article will provide facts about maltreatment, alongside a review of one such story to give us helpful insight to better protect the children and youth in our care.

Research shows that one in four children will experience some type of maltreatment in their childhood, which could include sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal/emotional abuse or neglect.¹ However, most child abuse is under-detected and under-reported, due to fear, stigma concerns, lack of knowledge in identifying abuse, reluctance to “get involved” or involve child protective services.^{2,3} When a child experiences one type of abuse, it is more likely that they are also experiencing other types of maltreatment as well (known as polyvictimization).^{4,5} The actual abuser varies across the different types of maltreatment. For example, the majority of child sexual abuse cases typically have an abuser who is usually known and trusted by the survivor, and it is much less common for child sexual abusers to be a biological parent. Whereas the main abusers of the other types of maltreatment *are* typically in the family nuclear unit. In fact, in the vast majority of cases of neglect, physical abuse or verbal abuse, the offender is a biological parent.

Jennifer's story⁶

By the time Jennifer was 10 years old, she had experienced physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect within her home. Jennifer had immediate and long-lasting trauma from her experience, which is common for children who experience multiple adverse childhood experiences.

¹ The National Library of Medicine (2023). Accessible online at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470337/>

² Kelley, F. (2019). Concealment and Constraint: Child Protective Services Fears and Poor Mothers' Institutional Engagement, *Social Forces*, Volume 97, Issue 4, June 2019, Pages 1785–1810.

³ Committee on Child Maltreatment Research, Policy, and Practice for the Next Decade: Phase II; Board on Children, Youth, and Families; Committee on Law and Justice; Institute of Medicine; National Research Council; Petersen, A., Joseph, J., & Feit, M. (2014). *New Directions in Child Abuse and Neglect Research*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2014 Mar 25. 2. Describing the Problem. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK195982/>

⁴ Jonson-Reid, M., Drake, B., Chung, S., & Way, I. (2003). Cross-type recidivism among child maltreatment victims and perpetrators. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2003;27:899–917.

⁵ Herrenkohl, R. C., & Herrenkohl, T. I. (2009). Assessing a child's experience of multiple maltreatment types: Some unfinished business. *Journal of Family Violence*, 24(7), 485–496

⁶ Name has been changed to protect the victim-survivor.



“Growing up, I never felt safe. I felt like I always needed to walk on eggshells when dad was home. I [...] never knew what kind of day it would be. I used to cry when he hurt me. But one day, I just stopped. I started fixating on the pictures on the wall, my homework, anything else so that I wouldn't be there. I'm not sure I even know how to cry anymore. I kind of ran out of tears before I was 10. [...] I'm better now, but there are still bruises that don't show anymore.”

Jennifer remembers thinking sometimes the abuse was so bad she thought she would die. She would go to bed, only able to think of how much pain she was in and how hungry she was. However, Jennifer knew if she tried to sneak food, her father would become angry and tell her she was ungrateful, worthless, and didn't deserve to eat.

Jennifer recalls that after the abuse, her father would then go to the other extreme and shower her with affection and other behavior that was very confusing. Research has found that “love bombing” is a helpful aspect in healthy relationships with secure attachment, but it can also occur as a possible part of a cycle in abusive relationships. It can be a form of emotional abuse that involves excessive flattery and praise designed to manipulate a person.

“After, he would ‘love bomb’ me. He bought me all of these presents. Told me how sorry he was. That he loved me to the moon and back. But [...] He also said that I shouldn't have made him so angry. Like it was my fault. I was just a kid!”

Jennifer never told anyone about her abuse as a child because she felt that if she told anyone, then things would be worse for her. She felt that people would never believe her, because her father had a great job and was so well respected in the community. Even worse, Jennifer's mother knew about how Jennifer was being treated, and did what she could to try and “keep the peace.”

My mom didn't stop him—I think she was afraid, too—but she should have done something. And if she couldn't, then where was everyone else? [...] And, we went to Church every week and we all pretended everything was fine.

Jennifer would always wear pants, no matter how hot it was outside. She never went to any pools, because she didn't want people to see her bruises and scars. When Jennifer would have visible injuries as the result of the abuse, her mom would tell her to lie and say she was just “clumsy” if anyone asked.

Jennifer was candid when speaking about what she wants people to know, and what she wished had occurred in her childhood. She is hopeful that by sharing her story, she can help children.

“I didn't know how to bring it up to anyone—and I just hoped someone would figure it out. [...] I don't know if my aunts and uncles knew what was happening. No one ever confronted him or asked me if I was OK. I always wonder how things might have turned out differently if a teacher or someone had said something about all of my bruises. I wish there had been someone in my life who gave me permission to tell them something was wrong. Someone calm, supportive—someone who would just listen to me. I wish this person would have told me, up front, that they were going to believe me, even when they didn't have proof. [...] What happened to me could have been stopped.”

What we can learn from survivor stories

From Jennifer and other survivors, we can learn how to both prevent abuse from happening, and to properly respond to it when it has already occurred. There are a few missed opportunities where safe adults could have responded differently in Jennifer's case. Possible indicators of abuse that Jennifer experienced include:

- Wearing clothing inappropriate for the weather or activity
- Avoidance of specific activities, such as the pool
- Unexplained injuries
- Making excuses for injuries or inconsistent explanations

Other common indicators of maltreatment include the following, though a more detailed list can be found [here](#):⁷

- Being fearful or anxious around certain adults.
- Sudden behavioral changes, with aggression, anger, hostility, changes in school performance
- Self-harm
- Withdrawal from people or previously liked activities, anxiety
- Patterns of bruises in different stages of healing, particularly in soft-tissue locations apart from the knees, shins or elbows

All 50 states, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. territories require specific professionals and child-serving institutions to report suspected child abuse and neglect to a Child Protective Services (CPS) agency. All dioceses also require employees and volunteers to report suspected abuse to CPS-type agencies. If you observe or become aware of any possible indicators of abuse of any kind or neglect, communicate your concerns to the appropriate entity as quickly as possible. In 2020, at least half of these reports (of 3,145,000 child victims) were screened and found to possibly meet the threshold of abuse or neglect per the state law, and culminated in either an investigation or alternative response by the state's CPS,⁸ such as connecting the family with necessary support services or addressing issues proactively when there is low risk with the hope of preserving the family unit.

Conclusion

By increasing our awareness of different types of abuse, and paying attention to the children in our lives, we can help be a part of the solution to prevent and stop child abuse. If you see or hear anything that makes you suspect children are experiencing abuse, you must communicate your concerns to child protective services or local law enforcement. You are desperately needed—no matter what your role is! You may end up being a safe adult for a child experiencing abuse, and you can help change the trajectory of their life. Thank you for all you do as a safe and caring adult.

⁷ Mayo Clinic. Signs and symptoms of Child Abuse. Available online at: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/child-abuse/symptoms-causes/syc-20370864>

⁸ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2022). Child Maltreatment 2020. Available online from: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.