

The Pain of Child Abuse: A Personal Experience

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Recently, vast media coverage has highlighted the issue of child abuse. While most of this coverage concentrated on the more public and controversial cases involving paedophiles abroad, it also included some in Ireland. This recent attention has given me the courage to speak about my own personal experience as a victim of child abuse. I still want to, or need to, remain anonymous, however, and after 20 years, this underlines how distressing it is for me and for others like myself who have suffered. I find it extremely hard to come to terms with my experiences in my own mind, let alone deal with the knowledge that my family, friends, and neighbours might be aware of what happened to me. For me, it's very much one slow step at a time towards some sort of 'recovery' and I hope that this article will be the first step along that road.

My experiences began as a seven-year-old child. I was as normal and mischievous as most children of my age, and having been brought up in a strict household, I was taught to respect my elders and 'betters.' Like any child, I believed that grown ups knew everything and trusted their judgement without question. One adult in particular, abused this trust. He was always kind and playful towards me, how could I as an innocent child perceive his intentions? He walked around unconcerned, so smug in the knowledge that I could never tell. Who would my parents believe should it be discovered? They would never doubt this man; he would never be capable of such acts.

This thought, and his many threats, made me feel very frightened and unwanted. With no one to turn to, I suffered in silence. I wanted to be on my own where I would hold my pillow tight to my face and cry. No one could hear me then or see my face, my shame. I still find myself reaching out for that pillow when I recall my suffering. I believed him when he said that it was me who had done wrong. My dad would kill me if he ever found out, that is what I believed.

I felt many things during that period without understanding why. I felt lost, alone, frightened, and vulnerable. How I yearned to be comforted and to feel loved, but how could I tell my parents? I still cannot bring myself, not even for this article, to outline in detail the form of abuse that I was put through by this person.

As I got older, everything was a constant reminder of what had happened to me as a child. Paranoia played with my mind. Grown ups playing football with young lads, school teachers paying too much attention to a particular pupil, and even older boys baby sitting, had ulterior motives in my mind. That part of my life was unstable – why me? I kept asking myself.

I felt like a freak because I knew of no similar experiences to my own. I needed to feel that I was not the only one, but then the issue was taboo! I had nightmares where I would wake up sweating and crying which really worried

my parents, but how could I explain to them what was wrong with me? My school work suffered. I shied away from people and became reclusive, trusting no one. When I was 15 or 16 years old, when most young boys discover girls, I met with more problems. One night while out with a girl, she began to touch me – suddenly it wasn't her touching me, it was him again. I pushed her away and ran home where I needed to be on my own.

For the first time I discovered that it was not just a psychological problem I had, but a physical one, also. I have encountered many problems that I feel are directly related to this period of my childhood and I wonder if it will ever end. One man used his power as an adult to abuse and hurt me for his own personal satisfaction, never once thinking about the nightmare I would suffer for the rest of my life.

As can be seen from my personal account my hurt continues, but what of the person who abused me? How has he handled the last 20 years? Given that the issue of child abuse has never been fully explored or understood, it is virtually certain that he has never been confronted and therefore would still pose a threat to young children, possibly a greater threat because he feels he can get away with it.

Now that I am an adult, I do not feel that the public are concerned enough about addressing this issue and I still fear being labelled a freak if I were to identify myself. I have since read quite a bit on the issue of child abuse and paedophilia and I was shocked at first to learn how these abusers of young children are treated once they are caught (which is seldom). In most cases, the abuser is given a short prison sentence with no counselling available while they are in jail. Counselling is only available to those who are sentenced to four years or more, and because of the lenient sentences that child abusers receive, most do not fall into this category.

It is inevitable, therefore, that more children will face a nightmare of sexual abuse because the offenders have not been made to confront their problems, even within a controlled environment. According to a leading expert in dealing with sex offenders, Ray Wyre, (who runs the only rehabilitation centre for offenders in Britain, the Gracewell institute in Birmingham) there are more than 2,000 sex offenders waiting for release from prison who are capable of similar offences and who could even go on to kill their victims. 'Paedophiles have the highest re-offending rate of any category of criminals, most commit a similar crime within three years, because they believe they are doing no wrong.' He further states, 'Most paedophiles believe that the children they abuse welcome and enjoy the experience.'

I, and thousands of others, are testimony to the fact that this most certainly is not the case. What we have had to endure physically and the mental anguish which we continue to suffer, probably for the rest of our lives, is hard proof of that.

Looking back, I wonder if my parents would have coped with such a complex and delicate situation if they had been confronted by it? They had little or no

understanding of child abuse then, nor do they have any greater understanding of it today. Would they have brought him to court? Statistics show that families are almost never willing to bring the abusers to court for numerous reasons. Some believe the child will get over it, that the abuse will somehow disappear from the child's mind. (The recorded facts prove the contrary.) Others do not wish to have their family stigmatised. Another reason is that you have to be able to prove beyond reasonable doubt that you have a winnable case. Remember it's a child's word against that of an adult. The most common reason, I believe, is that the family may feel that the child will only have to endure further hurt and suffering should the child have to go to a court room to relive their horror. Some, but not all court buildings, are equipped with facilities known as a telelink, which goes some way to help children give evidence in child-abuse cases. They should be introduced into all courts.

We all have a responsibility for the sake of our children to confront the issue of child abuse, particularly within our own communities. There should be no cover-ups, no disguising or dressing up the issue. If we turn a blind eye to it, if we ignore it, how will we ever understand and help those, like myself, who have suffered and help save others from having to go through the nightmare of child abuse? There are many (like me) who suffer in silence. Like me, they have the same reluctance to come out and say they have been abused for fear of the reaction they will get from their communities. I believe that most adults know of at least one person, possibly more, who have suffered child abuse. Yet how many of these adults know of cases where those involved have been prosecuted or imprisoned? Very few, I believe, which gives an indication of just how widespread the problem of child abuse is and how such a serious issue is not being confronted.

How do we go about initiating change and getting people to respond and treat child abuse with the seriousness it deserves? People in places of influence must use whatever powers they have to highlight the issue. Prison sentences should be increased and obligatory counselling should be introduced in prison. There is also a great need for rehabilitation centres for sex offenders. But firstly, and more importantly, proper counselling and professional help should be made available for those children who have been victims of this abuse.

The subject of child abuse seems to be strictly taboo, one to be swept under the carpet. But as the recent coverage shows, it exists and will not go away simply by ignoring it. By refusing to ignore its existence, by being concerned about and learning to understand the reality of the suffering caused by it, we may, however, be able to thwart similar instances of child abuse.