

My story is long and torrid as will be all personal submission to this inquiry I suspect. However, I can condense it to two sections: 'then' and 'now', and the failings of both points in time. I will try to make it as brief as possible. I offer some suggestions and thoughts for consideration for now.

THEN

I experienced violence at the hands of my mother, and then my sister, from possibly the time I was born. My mother was born in [REDACTED], my sister in [REDACTED] and me in [REDACTED]. My mother is most certainly a product of her upbringing however I don't feel it is necessary, or helpful, to talk of why she became the person she is.

My sister and I have different fathers. I do not know who my father is and my mother has always refused to tell me. I carry my sister's father's family name.

There is [REDACTED] years difference between my sister and I. I recollect my mother's violence from the age of [REDACTED], and as a parent now observing my own children's innate behaviours as small children, I often shudder at what I do not recall from an earlier age, and also at what level of violent cooperation my mother had instilled in me at a young age.

Both my sister and I experienced violence from our mother. Daily smacking, slapping, poking, shoving was normal as was regular beatings, with skipping ropes, badminton rackets, sticks, knives, rolling pins, wooden spoons, slippers and often whatever she could get her hands on. A lot of her violence was spontaneous but the worst of it was calculated evil. We were required to fetch the instruments of torture, the beating would go on for hours as we stood naked, or were tied up with ropes, naked, made to confess to something we did not understand and could never 'get right' followed by hours of her consoling us (and herself) and promises of never doing it again.

As a child you think your family is normal. As you get older you start to realise that perhaps what goes on in your house is not normal, or if it is normal it is not right.

As my sister was older she often received worse beatings than me, while she lived at home. Things changed when I was the only child at home. She would challenge our mother, and indeed, provoke her, as I think she already understood that there was nothing rational to mum's behaviour so why try to placate her. By the time my sister was [REDACTED] she had been in and out of the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with broken bones, burns from hot water, an iron and with stabs wounds. My early childhood is full of memories of the daily train trip from [REDACTED], then the tram to the [REDACTED]. We would visit my sister, mum would talk to the social workers, and occasionally, someone would speak to me. But only occasionally and even as a child it was clear to me that the 'issue' was something between my mother and my sister. It was not about the family. And, of course, I had been coached by my mother to not say a word about anything she did to me or when I got home I would get it worse. On the rare occasion I was spoken to I was polite, echoing my mother's instructions. I did not want to leave my mother. I was [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. I just wanted her to stop hitting and hurting me.

My sister never came home from her last [REDACTED] stay. She became a Ward of the State and was placed in a children's home, somewhere near the [REDACTED] on [REDACTED]. It is still there [REDACTED]

██████████ programmes now use it. She escaped. She came home on alternate weekends, got beaten up, beat me up, then went back to the relative safety of the Children's home.

This all happened, the social workers, the court case, the police involvement, because it was decided that my sister's behaviour was uncontrollable, that she was a problem child, unsuccessful at school, rebellious, just uncontrollable. My mother was not at fault.

How this fortified my mother's power. Whereas my sister has always had the consolation that she was 'taken away' I have always been told from my mother "If I had been doing anything wrong they would have taken you too" and from my sister "You clearly didn't get it as bad as me or they would have taken you too".

But neither of these things is true. I was left to fend for myself and having watched my sister's situation unfold I became even more compliant and less willing to breathe a word about what happened at home. Even though I was ██████████ or ██████████ I could not understand why my sister wouldn't just shut up and take it, in the hope that it would not last as long. I became skilled at suffering pain in silence, hoping it would reduce the duration and knowing that there could be no reasoning with my mother.

My mother also became much more clever about how she injured me: always within the clothes coverage and never in front of people. When injured badly I was never taken to hospital, except for my broken arms which she could explain away as me falling off the monkey bars because I had already broken my arm ██████████ at school doing that, so what's another ██████████ times. I was the model child; immaculately dressed, neat, tidy, good at school, polite and communicative. "A child of virtue" a teacher wrote in my Year ██████████ school report. I did not exhibit the 'bad' behaviour that my sister did, the really obvious bad behaviour like stealing or wagging school yet at home things were as bad as they ever had been. Externally though nothing about me looked like a 'troubled child' as it did with my sister, so I was left alone.

But I should not have been left alone. I did seek help. After one spectacular beating when I was in Grade ██████████ I ran away. I ran to a neighbour's house, bleeding and bruised, in the middle of the night, and, she called mum. Mum came, we both stayed the night in the same guest room, mum muttering threats under her breath all night, and we returned home in the morning. For the next week I couldn't sit and could barely walk, so bruised, bleeding and swollen I was, and stayed home convalescing from my new injuries until they subsided. Bad cold my mother told my school. Families should stay together, thick or thin, my deeply Catholic neighbour told me.

Also in Grade ██████████ I told my primary school. Well, my best friend told the Principal. We were caught running to the milk bar at lunch time to buy some chocolate mates (me) and cigarettes (her!). We were caught. My friend begged the Principal not to tell my mother because I would get beaten. I remember her lifting my t-shirt and showing the Principal my bruises. He was horrified. He didn't tell my mother that I went to the milk bar. But he also did nothing to protect me and so it went on.

In High School it got worse. I talked to friends about it. Parents knew. As my mother was so strict I could only go to a couple of people's houses. They protected me from her but they did nothing.

Our immediate neighbours knew. They would often bang on our flat's front door as mother reached her crescendo, just to interrupt her and give her time to settle. They knew what was happening, but people just didn't do anything else.

I told teachers. I was getting unhappier and unhappier at home but happier and happier at school. I dreaded school holidays and thrived at school where feedback was positive, effort rewarded and I didn't seem to fuck up everything I touched the way I did at home. Still, the teachers did nothing. I had a pot of boiling peas thrown over my head. My whole scalp blistered, bubbled and weeped for weeks. It was excruciatingly painful yet I saw no doctor and despite teachers asking what happened my, "I knocked the pot of the stove" story was sufficient. My name at school was [REDACTED], because apparently I was very clumsy.

It was not until early in Year [REDACTED] when the intensity of mum's outbursts had increased and the violence more random and scary that I sat with my year level teacher and told her all the gory details. I am thankful for her. She said, "Get out. You will be 16 soon and legally allowed to leave home." She told me not to call the police. Just leave. But I couldn't. Where would I go?

So I stayed, and endured, and then finally one day in [REDACTED] after one of mum's knife attacks bounced off my collar bone and took a chunk of skin off. On that day I thought I was going to die and I was petrified. I left.

As I get older I get angrier about why all the 'systems' in place that should have helped me failed me. I can excuse people but not the institutions that should have had a duty of care towards me, especially the [REDACTED] social workers who completely neglected me. Because I was not failing at school, not rude, not the chaotic child my sister was, everything was presumed to be fine. No one helped me. No one stopped mum. I did not get the opportunity to finish high school, to achieve the things I might have been able to if I had been supported, removed or maybe even if mum was helped. She was not told she was behaving badly. She was told to go for it. She was given the power and encouragement to damage me physically, and emotionally, with impunity. I heard "I am doing nothing wrong" all the time and taunted with "Go on, leave home. They'll just bring you back and you know what will happen then."

My sister was able to access her [REDACTED] records a few years ago through a FOI request. I have no records. It is like I did not exist and what happened did not occur.

Do these things happen now? I want to hope not but I know they do. I worry what the consequences; the unintended yet predictable consequences of Mandatory Reporting are for children.

Which brings me to now.

NOW

The very same things that meant no one helped years ago prevent me from getting help now. I am the child of a violent mother, and a sexually abusive and violent sister. I do not know why I am so 'strong' but I am constantly being told this. My sister is "what you would expect from your background" a psychiatrist told me six years ago. "You are the anomaly." And while I understand this it still means now that when I clearly ask for help people don't believe me. My 'reasonable' behaviour as a child masked horrible things and as an adult I think my 'reasonable' behaviour masks

much doubt and fear and at times chaos. I feel like unless I am exhibiting some psychotic behaviour everything is assumed to be ok with me.

It is not. I am the daughter of a violent mother. Everything I learned about parenting I have learned from my mother. Intellectually I may believe a whole range of things but instinctively I often exhibit some of the same strange outbursts my mother did. I do not know how to manage anger very well. I sometimes hit my children. I often say things I wish I had not. I am nowhere near my mother in behaviour but that doesn't mean I do not need help. I would like to be supported to be a better parent but there is no safe place in Australia where a parent can say "I hit my children" and expect to have help and support that is not terrifying to them and doesn't instil the fear that their children will be taken from them.

I also find myself asking my children not to tell anyone that I have smacked them, so scared am I that they will be taken from me. I see a pattern here. It both disturbs me and it angers me. I was left to fend for myself and now I have to tell my children to 'shhhhh' because there is no help for me.

There seems to be so much research and emphasis on children of my background who grow up to be 'products of their environment'. There seems to be little information about people like me, the 'anomalies' who don't end up completely shattered by the experience but who still need assistance and help nonetheless. If I am going to see a psychiatrist, and paying a fortune for it, it is not because I am feeling strong. It is because I need help. I do not need someone to tell me how strong I am. I need someone to help me with basic parenting skills that I should have learned growing up: How much anger is reasonable? What things can I reasonably expect from a child and what can't I? And this help is needed on an ongoing basis, not sporadically. The pot of peas was poured on my head because I got 99% in a test (where is the other 1%), the regular beatings because the sheets weren't completely smooth or there was lumps in the porridge. Reasonable is not something I learned as a child. I was silent, spoke when spoken to, polite. I had no mind of my own and would never have dared to speak out of place. I do not expect this of my children but I also do not know how to manage what I see as normal behaviour. At times I fear for me and I fear for my children.

So what should be done? There needs to be more acknowledgement, research, and therefore insight, in to people like me who lead 'productive' lives but are broken parents. There needs to be more support to prevent people like me from repeating the mistakes of their parents - and not just as an intervention when it is too late - real prevention. Education. A safe place for people like me to gather and talk, to fortify each other with suggestions, strategies and solutions with some shared black humour about 'you too'.

This is not the domain of your standard parenting group, many of which I have been to, where all the participants are already enlightened and they are certainly not the space where you can stand up and say you do anything 'wrong'. The standard parenting sessions I have been to are about reinforcing how well you are doing and everyone is patting themselves on the back. They are not helpful for 'us'. They just make you feel worse.

And I would like some acknowledgment. As I get older I feel this to be more and more important to me. Like knowing who my dad is. I never used to care. Now I do. And now I want to be told that it was not my fault. I want someone to say sorry and to accept some responsibility for the fact that I was left to the dogs. The police that never intervened, even after my mother [REDACTED]

██████████ the Family Court in ██████████ when they handed down the decision to make my sister a Ward of the State. Like the ██████████ when no one looked at my body or asked my questions or took my welfare in to consideration whilst they focused on my 'naughty' sister. Like all the social workers, and I remember their names, that came to our house and talked all things mother and sister, but not me. Did they really believe nothing was happening to me?