

My Story

Family violence impacts on all ages and genders. Recently, it has become prominent in the media, with much of the focus being on men's violence against women; however this only one part of the picture, as men and children can also become victims.

Some recent tragic cases involving children have prompted me to make this submission because I can relate to these from my own childhood experience. Sibling violence often flies under the radar and I believe it is too often put down to kids just being kids, but violence is violence and the effects, regardless of who is inflicting it, are the same. As child victim of persistent sibling violence coupled with inappropriate responses to it from the adults around me, I feel that my own life has been impacted.

To the outside world my childhood undoubtedly looked very rosy: my parents always made sure I was nicely dressed, I was well fed, my birthday was celebrated, but behind the veneer of our family life I was being physically injured by my older brother in incidents beyond what were normal play or squabbles. Early on, I was a very bright child with great academic and sporting potential. My teachers recognised my capabilities and I was placed with other children who were considered the 'fast learners' because we all excelled. My family life gave me an overall sense of wellbeing and I generally felt happy and healthy.

In my home life, however, I was being subjected to being hurt by my older brother. When I was small, we would begin playing a happy and harmless game, which would take a nasty turn. At just on [REDACTED] years old, I was playing on the backyard patio when my brother hit me with a [REDACTED] on the upper left side of my forehead. The GP stitched my head. [REDACTED]. My parents were very protective of my brother and many times they blamed me for that assault.

My brother was inventive in these mischiefs. For example, he had a game of torture a la The Three Stooges, which comprised of twisting my legs, stretching me out like on a rack, and finally poking me hard in both eyes with two fingers, etc. If my brother was unwell things got worse as I was an easy target for his frustrations, likewise when he got bored at the end of school holidays. Even so, I felt that I was safe, and to this day I believe that my brother just did not know his own strength yet.

When I was [REDACTED], the family drove all the way from [REDACTED] to [REDACTED] without me being hit even once. It was a pleasant surprise.

Things changed for the worse when I turned [REDACTED]. The fun was well and truly over by then. The assaults became more sudden and random, with my older brother always managing to catch me off guard somehow. My brother would sneak up behind me and, standing close, he would quickly bend his knees behind mine, buckling my knees and forcing me to the ground. He would also grab my elbow and hold me still while he repeatedly punched my upper arm, or he would wedge my head under his arm, repeatedly ramming it into a brick wall. I would receive sudden, unexpected punches to the head and torso, or be punched or hit in the solar plexus with a fist or object, or jumped on with his full body weight leaving me

winded and gasping for breath.

I recall noticing that both my concentration and handwriting were beginning to deteriorate around this time.

One day I suddenly found myself lying on the ground in the backyard with my hand bent back under me. Xray showed a greenstick fracture to my forearm and it was put in a plaster splint. It was removed after a just a week or so, without the instruction that it stay bandaged being followed. The next day I commenced the new school year with no apparent injury, despite the fact I was still in pain and my arm clearly had not healed. I could not run without shooting pains along my arm and I held it against my body to try and keep it from hurting. My brother, knowing my arm was still sore, would constantly hit or twist my wrist back, while taunting that it would break again if he pushed it back some more.

When I was [REDACTED] I was at home with my mother and brother when my brother subjected me an unprecedentedly violent and unprovoked attack, of qualitatively different force and duration. It was moment in my life after which things could never be the same, for it signalled both the end of childhood and the end of the person that I had been.

Please refer to the attachment **The Death of Me**, which was created simply for personal records and never intended for a purpose like the Royal Commission.

Following on immediately from the **The Death of Me...**

I heard my mother's voice telling me, "Don't stand out here screaming". I was gasping and spluttering, "I can't see! I can't see!" as she guided me up the back steps and into the house.

That golden time so crucial for getting medical assistance was wasted while my parents spent the rest of the day looking for my brother. I lay on the couch in my PJ's for what I guess ran into quite a few days after the attack. My mother's face looked foggy while she was kindly reassuring me that, "You're such a good little patient. I wish it was me and not you." I felt terrible and I understood something was very wrong with the way I was feeling. I needed treatment.

My pleas to be taken to the doctor were ignored totally and I was powerless to make my parents listen to me. I described thumping and clicking in my head, pains in my left side/ back/ right wrist and shoulders, excruciating feel of light in my eyes, sleeplessness, loud ringing and roaring in my head/ ears, feeling cold/ weak/ numb, and so on. Then one night after dinner, my mother decided that I should be dressed for school, so I would be ready to start the new winter term at, quite literally, the crack of dawn.

So then and there it was all over for the rest of my family and not one of them ever acknowledged in any way that attack or the withholding of medical care from me ; the aftermath is still all mine, and mine alone...

After that violent assault in the backyard, where I believe I came ever so close to never

coming back to life again, I was not the same. I had to do more than lie on the couch, and that was a very big problem. My development had regressed. While struggling to recall how to do things like tie up my shoelaces, I kept on asking, "I don't know why everything's so difficult to do now?"

I went from being one of the brightest students in my grade to the child who could not make anything make sense. Numeracy had been my forte and I had never got anything wrong in maths prior to **The Death of Me** assault, afterwards I could not understand it at all. Reading novels had been my favourite pastime, and I could read a classic like *Alice in Wonderland* or *Anne of Green Gables* in a day or two prior to the assault. After it the words were a blurry mess on the page and they made me feel nauseous. At school, my teacher sent me to remedial group because I was no longer keeping up with class work; however, my mother was advised of this and it was a great pity that I was taken out of it after only one session. My mother told me nicely that I needed to try to work more quickly in class. Even with my best effort, it would now take me the whole morning to line things up and rule the page ready to begin writing.

Next my teachers treated me as if I was lazy and not trying, even though I was trying harder than ever. I suffered from vision and hearing disturbances and would become easily overwhelmed when I was required to concentrate on more than one thing at once. I was made to sit aside from the rest of the class for half a year because I could not manage group work. "You can do better than that. Why don't you wake up to yourself?", the teacher said scornfully to me in front of the entire grade every day. Quite often I was singled out as the reason the whole class had to stay in at lunch time, because I was too slow at the work.

Needless to say this led to bullying in the playground and isolation from my peers. I lost my friendships. At home I became further isolated when my family changed our phone to a silent number, meaning friends and extended family could not get in contact with us. Neither could the school, I guess.

As a young girl I remember being fit and running fast. After the **The Death of Me** attack, physical exertion caused head and chest pains. Even standing up was a major effort. One day in a sport lesson, I had to stand for a while and was facing the sun. I zoned out. I saw a hard ball heading towards me, but it was like watching it happen on film and I could not do anything about it. The ball hit me hard in my solar plexus, winding me and knocking me to the ground, stunned. The teacher shouted at me in anger.

A couple of months prior to the **The Death of Me** attack we had begun swimming lessons. I took to it like a duck to water. The very experienced swimming teacher quickly identified me as 'a future champion'. Following the big assault my mother asked me why I was turning sideways when swimming. I replied forcefully, "Because my head's going black in the water and I need to go to the doctor!". She ignored me and I was never taken to another swimming lesson again. Of course, I begged my parents to let me continue, just like my brother was still doing, but this was ignored as well.

The one doctor who did see me (a medical specialist for a routine annual check up for a prior condition some months after **The Death of Me** attack and not in relation to it), did raise a concern about an aspect of my health, but my mother hurriedly deflected his questions with a red herring. We did not attend any follow up appointments in subsequent years.

I realised very early on that there was no one who was willing to help me. My parents turned their backs on this problem. Long-term friends and extended family had dissipated out of my life. I could not rely on doctors to recognise my ongoing health issues as a cause for concern because I had no continuity of care and very seldom went to doctors anyway. And instead of regarding the changes in my academic and sporting abilities as a sign something was amiss, my school teachers provided me with another set of difficulties.

After the **The Death of Me** attack, my parents took a zero tolerance stance towards sibling violence. They encouraged my brother to do sport and hobbies, while they liked to keep me right out of the public eye. I continued to ask and ask for years to go to the doctor for my head and chest pain. It was ignored.

Over time I began to work out the reason why 'three ghosts' had made a courtesy call to me at the age of ■■■. These apparitions left me with some crucial understandings about life and death through what I term as extra sensory projection.

Suffice to say, I think any person reading this submission would be aware that there would be some longer-term consequences for me. Hard work and perseverance turned things around, though. Between the ages of ■■■ and ■■■ years I did 30-40 hours of homework each week and even studied in the holidays. I caught up every subject in the end, including even Maths for a short time. I struggled on, working out my own learning styles and graduated from university without ever requesting an extension or special consideration. My life and general wellbeing, including my academic performance, fluctuated depending on how much my energy I could divert to push through some lingering symptoms.

My main interest now is for the lives of my own ■■■ (now young adult) children. In a nutshell, I think my experiences has simultaneously added both extra vigilance and some limitations to my parenting of them. Aiming for some low common denominator was not what I wanted for my children and nor does it reflect who they are. My children are succeeding against more challenging odds, which I think come through from my own childhood.

During my childhood, the impacts from sibling assaults and the consequences of them were numerous and on-going. I think many children would not have survived the combination of both the attack that I sustained at the age of nine and no medical treatment for it whatsoever. I have shared my story with the Royal Commission in the hope that it will be of assistance to other child and adult survivors.

What I would like to see happen to address family violence in Australia:

My wish list begins with the hope that we can all watch out for people who are suffering in silence.

I would like Australia to be more inclusive in its media portrayals of family violence. Family violence is not only a case of men abusing women. Children's experience of family violence is not necessarily limited to traumatized offspring standing passively watching as their father beats their mother. It is, of course, more complex than this. Any person of any age can become a victim of family violence, including the young and the old. Extended family violence might take the form of a young girl isolating and beating her grandfather. Pets are also part of the family, and I would like to see them recognized as well. Also, there is a relationship between practicing violent behaviours on pets first and then later doing the same to people.

I believe mandatory reporting of child abuse is a positive reform; however, prior to this teachers need to ask more questions, particularly if they see obvious changes in a child's behaviour or capabilities, as was the case with me. I am certain a lot has changed since I attended school, but even so, teachers need to be careful they are not making matters worse by treating a child as if they are lazy or bad. Teachers should be educated to spot tell-tale signs of violence and given support at the school level to report their concerns. Children often lack the voice to speak on their own behalf and my advice in the case of children is 'dig deeper'. I also feel that a lot of pressure to be more than just an educator is placed on teachers. Instead of funding the Chaplaincy program in schools, governments might look at getting more focused support workers for the many children who need someone to look out for them.

Likewise, doctors need to ask more probing questions if they suspect there might be a problem, and raise a red flag if the response to their questions results in a child not attending follow up appointments or taken to another doctor. In the appointment with the one doctor who saw me after my very bad injury, my mother threw in a distracting question and changed the topic, and then we did not return.

I feel sorry that extended family members just gave up on me, rather than questioning what was really going on. In my circumstances family violence occurred because there was a size and power imbalance between my brother and me, and this was not addressed by my parents. Most of the violence occurred when there was just my mother at home, and it was not in the public view. Those who still knew me after the injuries assumed I was to blame because my behaviour had changed. It was kept 'under control' in front of extended family, who were kept away anyway.

Our community attitude to boys is also part of the problem. In my case my parents brushed aside my brother's violence as a 'boys will be boys' thing. Suitable role models are needed, unlike the Three Stooges who set a bad example. Acceptance of violence, particularly screen violence, was a big part of the problem, and because my brother's actions against me were

not dealt with appropriately, his violence escalated.

Identifying long term impacts must include all forms of abuse such as financial, psychological, social, etc. and not only the impacts of physical violence. The long term impacts of family violence on the individual and to the whole community are not properly understood. There needs to be more money for research into these long term impacts and support provided both for victims to overcome these effects, and for perpetrators to change their behaviour.

Behaviour change programs may potentially help perpetrators see how their actions have impacted others; however in my circumstance any change in behaviour has all been mine. I have learned to modify my responses to ensure I don't 'upset' or 'disturb' people or challenge their perceptions. In my case, no member of my immediate family has ever acknowledged their actions or the problems they have caused me, and so I doubt they would feel a need to change.

The impacts do not end when the violence ends. Current processes, as I understand them, place very little responsibility or accountability on the perpetrator. My experiences aside, people fleeing family violence are taken out of their homes, lose their possessions, are more often than not forced into poverty, and receive very little ongoing support for their mental and physical health issues.

Because the violence occurred to me as a child and I was never given treatment or the opportunity to access services, I am not fully able to answer how services could better support victims; however I would like to point out the impacts of the violence I experienced did not end once I grew up. Throughout my life I have struggled to get medical or other help to deal with the injuries and other effects I have sustained, particularly as many of my injuries do not show up in general medical examinations. Doctors rarely have time to holistically analyse the range of symptoms. I have struggled to get members of the medical profession to refer me to appropriate services, and I believe I am seen as 'exaggerating' or 'hypochondriac', and have been told "You should be over that by now." Seeking assistance has often amounted to wasted time, costs and frustrations for me.

Nevertheless, I did not give up and can now share some great news about allied health care. Exercise physiology and physiotherapy are health sciences that seem embedded with the principle that "everything's connected". Since the age of [REDACTED] I have suffered some chronic pain and restricted movement from old injuries to my back and hips, along with limping and difficulty running. These were observed while at rest and moving, and then a treatment plan of exercises was created for me. Old conditions, which had been left untreated (because I had been advised that nothing could be done after so many years), are showing measurable improvements beyond what I ever hoped for, thanks to exercise physiologists and physiotherapists.

For the victims of family violence, I would like to see Australia create designated polyclinics (as a one-stop shop), purpose-built and family friendly, staffed by a wide range of medical

professionals, specialists and both allied and alternative health staff. No pop-up clinics please! A policlinic model could help streamline our Australasian system of medical protocols, which can consume time, money and energy, while the patient is caught up in the merry-go-round of GP referral to this specialist and that specialist and then back again.

Such clinics could be attached to general hospitals, which can provide access to pathology, diagnostic imaging and other outpatient or inpatient services not provided in the policlinic. Policlinics would also need to be linked into a network of other services, such as accommodation, education, financial, legal, and emergency relief providers.

Hopefully victims with historic cases can access treatment, without the need for medical, police or other official reports. Please believe the survivors!

Finally, I would like antenatal services and Maternal and Child Health Centres to be more inclusive of the whole family in their routine questions about safety and well-being in the home. At the moment these questions are addressed to and focus solely on the mother. Age appropriate questions could be directed to all the family or household members. The whole family, including men and fathers (who would not only be directed to Dad's Pizza Nights) could be made more welcome at information sessions and playgroups.

Overall, we need more awareness of family violence itself, and for services for survivors to be expanded in depth and breadth.

The Death of Me

Suddenly I'm aware of a graze across my lowest right rib as I walk aimlessly across the backyard patio, as then this contact becomes one full force punch into my solar plexus. Pain.

Shocked and completely winded, I catch a glimpse of my older brother's trousers and runners, as he swiftly moves around to stand in front of me, forcefully shoving my left shoulder sideways. My right upper arm is pushed up into my shoulder socket as my hand hits the the hard surface. Head and right hip quickly follow. More pain.

Bodyweight the size of a full grown man jumps onto my chest, kneeling on me to pin my torso down. I'm unable to breathe, for my lungs have been emptied of air and my chest is so outstretched that it feels torn apart. Still more pain.

My head is rapidly pummeled. His right fist repeatedly punches my forehead, initially hurting most on the left side, while each impact sends my head smashing back onto the hard surface below. The inside back of my nose and ears are awash with stinging fluid. Much more pain. The crashing goes on, then there is a squash and a snap in the right side base of my skull. A few more whacks and then I'm alone. With the sound of silence and a dim sky above.

And the need to breathe. I really should work on that, but first prefer planning how to stand up. At this stage I can still think in words, reassuring myself that I'll be alright, and that I'll get up and breathe soon. Just wait a bit till my head feels better. Not yet. Rest first. Too much pain.

Shock as next moment my body is covered with a large piece of board and a hefty body slam. Again, my left side takes the brunt of it. I still cannot breathe. The agony in my chest...I ask myself why he is so cruel. The rythmic pounding of his weight is relentless. Pain builds upon pain.

No longer can I think in words, but rather, I somehow intuit that I will never be the same again. If I ever get out of this alive, that is. I give up waiting and wanting to breathe. Another mighty impact causes something to break or tear apart just under my left rib cage. Not so bad now, for I am dying.

Indescribable... beautiful nothingness mingles with velvety blackness as the relief of death takes over and comforts me. Bliss. No more pain...

The worst pain ever.

Shock, my God- am I alive? My upper body doubles over shaking, staggering legs. Get breathing. Wait. Work out how... begin by trying to force exhaling a bit. Impossible to start with on empty lungs. Keep trying. Draw in that first tiny gasp of burning air. Little by little. I resuscitate myself. Drawn out agony.

Then I am standing upright, screaming at the top of my voice. I no longer know the

whereabouts of my attacker and neither can I take care of myself. With eyes wide open, total loss of sight overwhelms me in terrifying darkness.

A short time earlier, while striding ahead of him and calling out a triumphant, "I won our race!", I could never have predicted in my [REDACTED]-year-old mind that such a trivial victory would push my brother over the tipping point. Culminating in this rapid sequence, he inflicted a series of assaults that had previously been mastered one-by-one. And then, quite literally, I was left for dead.