

Susan C. Ford

My Daughter, How Do I Teach You What I Haven't Learned?

A Personal View of the Impact of Child Abuse on Mothering

The many and varied after-effects of childhood abuse and neglect have been well documented. There is little, however, that discusses how childhood abuse and neglect affect one's parenting and in particular one's mothering abilities. There are even fewer voices of mothers in the literature. This article addresses this gap. It explores one mother's experience of "breakthrough" (rejecting the judgemental medical term "breakdown") to long-buried memories of childhood abuse and the subsequent impact on her relationships with her children, focusing in particular on how the mother-daughter relationship was changed. It discusses how confronting and healing the past can help to make the difference between "surviving" and "thriving" and why we as mothers owe it to our children to do so.

At the bottom of the garden of my house in England, at the end of the straight path from the back door, some bushes or hedges separated the garden from a narrow laneway. Maybe there was a gate? The edges of the memory have faded with the years. I am very young, three years old maybe. I am alone at the bottom of the garden. It's been raining and everything is shiny and wet. The rain has brought out the large snails, the kind with the beautiful spiral shells. I carefully lift several from the branches on which they leave a glistening trail. The snails retract their heads and tiny horns and disappear into the safety of their home. I gently place them, one by one, on the ground. And then I kill them—deliberately, methodically. I calmly stamp on each one with the heel of my shiny clean shoe. I bury them under the wet leaves and walk back up the path, towards the house.

Today, that memory fills me with a mix of shame and deep, deep sadness. Viewing it through a lens brought into sharper focus by maturity and several years of therapy, I know that I was an angry, scared child. But I didn't know it

then. I didn't feel much, back then. I didn't feel much of anything for almost 40 years, when I was left with no choice but to admit that childhood sexual abuse and emotional neglect had marked my life in a number of ways.

The many and varied after-effects of childhood abuse and neglect have been well documented. We know that survivors can develop certain behaviours, have certain feelings and beliefs that are remarkably consistent across a wide spectrum. Initially protective, these behaviours, feelings and beliefs can become harmful to the self and to others over time. There are probably hundreds of books, articles and papers describing these after-effects (to cite a few: Briere, 1992; Gold, 2000; Herman, 1997; Pynoos, Steinberg and Goenjian, 1996). There is little, however, that discusses how childhood abuse and neglect affects one's parenting and in particular one's mothering abilities (although Jan Hindman [1989] writes with compassion on the topic in her work, *Just Before Dawn*). There are even fewer voices of mothers in the literature, as noted in *Mothering Against The Odds* by Cynthia T. Garcia Coll, Janet Surrey, and Kathy Weingarten (1998). The purpose of this article is to add to the knowledge base by offering a personal view of the issue.

I emigrated to Canada from England as a six-year old with my parents and a younger brother and sister. Despite my youth, I was already certain of a number of things: I had to be quiet and never bother Mummy, even if I was sick. If I got hurt, I must have been doing something wrong. Daddies were in charge even though Mummies did most of the work at home. I had to do what I was told and never answer back. Adults were always in charge, children never knew the right answer, and boys were somehow better than girls although I didn't understand why. I was thus the perfect target for the pedophile in the family with whom we boarded for a few months after our arrival in Montreal, Quebec. As a shy, quiet child who had received little loving touch and rarely a kind word, I never had a chance. And, thanks to the survival skills with which all children are born, I was able to push the memories of all this far, far away. I got on with life.

I experienced my first flashback just after my fortieth birthday, triggered by the story of another survivor. At that point in my life, I was divorced and the mother of a son aged twelve and a ten-year-old daughter. I entered therapy and embarked on the journey of "remembrance, mourning, and reconnection," so aptly described by Judith Herman (1997).

As difficult as it was to come to terms with the sexual abuse, confronting my life before it happened was even harder. By the age of 6 I had somehow learned that, given a choice between staying with someone who was hurting me and calling out to my mother in the next room, the safe choice was not to call for Mum. How had I come to learn such a lesson, at such an age?

Early life lessons

I like John Briere's description of childhood abuse as "acts of omission and acts of commission" (2002: 1). It helps me make sense of my life. I didn't

have the horrific, tortured childhoods that too many children suffer. Although the British “stiff upper lip” ruled my home, I always had enough to eat and a place to live. Both of my hard-working parents transmitted values I claim as my own today: the importance of hard work, independence and thrift, an appreciation of stability and security. But while my physical needs were met, emotional needs were completely ignored.

Like many men of his generation, my father was a distant, forbidding figure. Despite his derisive attitude towards women in general and to my mother in particular, he was the one who performed the “nurturing” work, although I experienced it as an obligation rather than as compassionate caring. Someone should tuck the kids in at night, I guess, and he did it because Mum didn’t. I learned that taking care of children was just another of life’s many chores.

Today I know my mother is a victim of emotional abuse. Like most victims of abuse, she is a strong, proud woman. For the most part, she suffered in silence, storing her hurt and humiliation in pursed lips and bowed shoulders, taking her anger out on her three children at times. I felt invisible to her most of the time. The mothering I received led me to believe there is no such thing as maternal instinct. I share the opinion offered by Adrienne Rich, author of *Of Woman Born* (1976), that motherhood is earned through a rite of passage that includes learning to nurture, “... which does not come by instinct” (xiv).

Based on my experiences, I believe my mother did not learn how to nurture. She is extremely creative—she can knit a four-piece baby layette in one evening. My sister and I had the best-dressed dolls in the neighbourhood. But when it came to caring for the bumps and scrapes of childhood, I soon learned not to expect sympathy or compassion, and knew I would have to take care of myself, even during the terrifying asthma attacks I suffered. A cry of “Mum! I hurt my...” or “Mum ... I can’t breathe ...” would most often be met with a sigh and an accusatory “You should/should not have been ...”

In writing this I am in no way attempting to blame my mother; rather, it is offered as context. Although I may never achieve a loving connection with her, I can view her with empathy and compassion today. I will not join the “mother-blame” that is so rampant in our society. As Garcia Coll et al. (1998) have noted, a 1985 study of articles published in a range of clinical journals found that mothers were blamed for 72 different kinds of psychopathology, and the ratio of mentions of mother to father was five-to-one. (3).

The impact of child abuse

Robin Badgley’s 1984 work reported that one in four girls had received unwanted sexual attention before the age of 18. I would like now to consider the ways in which this abuse might impact on such a girl’s mothering abilities later in life.

Survivors of childhood abuse often find it hard to trust others; as a result, forming and keeping a healthy relationship can be a challenge (Herman, 1997:

52). How, then, does an adult survivor of abuse establish a healthy relationship with her children? I'm not even sure I knew I was supposed to develop a "relationship" with my children. Children were ... well, just there. I expected them to do what I told them and of course I loved them, that was taken for granted, but beyond that? I had to learn, painfully, that what I thought was a healthy relationship was really one of control and enmeshment. Despite my determination to be a different kind of mother than the one I had grown up with, I found myself reacting to ordinary parenting situations in sometimes extraordinary ways. Hindman's (1989) words describe my experience:

When the victim becomes a mother herself, armed with vows to be different, she may find herself evolving as a mother very much like her own mother. She may actually perceive her children being distant from her, much the same as she felt with her mother. (140)

From the time my children were infants, my parenting style could probably have been described best as "command and control," a common general behaviour pattern for survivors of childhood trauma. The more I could control, the safer I felt and the better it was for me. And, I believed, it was also better for my children. This is perhaps effective when children are pre-verbal and immobile and need to be kept safe (a debatable point, I am sure, and beyond the scope of this paper), but as a parenting strategy for teens, it is bound to fail. As all parents of adolescents know, the harder a parent tries to control, the harder the child will fight back.

Children of emotional neglect don't have parents who can teach them healthy communication skills. If one of our coping skills in childhood has been to numb out or dissociate, it's not hard to understand that we will have a hard time standing up for ourselves as adults, even if the person before us is our child. When confronted with the need to say "no" to my daughter, my childhood skill of numbing out was most often expressed as giving in, no matter how unreasonable her demand. She soon learned that, with enough cajoling on her part, my "no" was quickly and predictably transformed into a "maybe" and then into an "I can't stop you, so it's a yes."

In early adolescence my daughter seemed to change overnight from a sweet, loving, obedient child to a raging, out-of-control teen. Of course, this did not happen overnight, but it was during this crucial period in her development that I was often pre-occupied with the work of healing my past—experiencing and processing flashbacks interspersed with long periods of fatigue and grief. I was eventually diagnosed with depression. By the time she was 13, she had become involved with a new group of friends and was engaging in a variety of what I considered to be dangerous behaviours—staying out late, refusing to provide contact information, attending all-night parties with adolescents much older than she. I suspected drug use but had no idea what to do about it if my suspicions proved true. I did my best to pretend that this

was “normal adolescence,” whatever that was. I flip-flopped through a range of emotions—terror, powerlessness, anger, and guilt. I had lost control as a parent and our communication pattern ranged from hostile silence to outright screaming matches. I felt completely incompetent, as a mother and as a person. I was sure everything was my fault, even as I was screaming at her that she was the one to blame.

During this time I was seeing a therapist who was helping me sort through my experience of childhood sexual abuse, and I can remember thinking, “How can I be a mother to her? I’m the one who needs a mother.” I wanted to tell my daughter how much I loved her, how I was afraid for her, of my hopes for her future—but she didn’t want to listen. I wanted to help her, but she didn’t want my help. She was on her own path. Our relationship deteriorated over a period of about 15 months to the point where I believed she would be emotionally harmed if she stayed with me; I felt I had no other choice but to allow her to be placed her in a Children’s Aid Society foster home.

Of the several dark periods in my life, this ranks as one of the worst. The feeling of being backed into a corner, of having no options, was all too familiar. When I wasn’t numb, I was in extreme physical pain. I felt an utter failure. At times I had such a pain in my chest that I thought I was having a heart attack. But I wasn’t—my heart was broken, of course it hurt.

My experience of mothering my daughter during this time of chaos triggered in me long-buried childhood feelings, beliefs and expectations: the feeling that I was invisible, unloved and unlovable; the belief that I was stupid, that I was not worth listening to; the expectation that something really horrible was about to happen to me. At a time when my daughter—and son, embroiled in his own way—needed me most, I was caught in a web of complex emotions that belonged to the past. During this time, I know there were many occasions when I was a less than effective mother. Part of my journey to health and wellness has been to forgive myself for what I put them through, for effectively abandoning them at such a crucial time in their lives. Today I know I did the best I could, but I also know that my children must have felt motherless at times because they in fact were.

What I know now

I persisted in the work of healing my past; indeed, I often felt that this too was beyond my control. I had to learn to let go, to trust that I was safe and well and that my children were too. I am grateful to have been able to make amends with both my children, but healing the relationship with my daughter has been especially rewarding for it was more difficult. After all, her brother didn’t have to spend a year in a CAS foster home.

There’s a line in a Bob Dylan song, *My Back Pages*: “Ah, but I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now.” This describes how I feel. The more I have learned about myself as I have dealt with my past, the younger I feel. I used to believe that if I only acted in the right way, said the right thing, was

a certain way, then my parents would acknowledge me, appreciate my efforts, and love me the way I wanted to be loved.

I now know that many of the messages I incorporated as an infant and child were lies—told with the best of intentions, perhaps, by people and institutions doing the best they knew how, but nevertheless untrue—at least for me. This is what I know now:

No one is to blame—not my mother, not my father, and certainly not me—that I am not the son my parents longed for. I am not “less than” as a result and I do not need to carry this burden any longer. I know that I have intrinsic value, just because I am alive. If there is blame to assign, put it on those who uphold the social and economic forces that combine to make it acceptable to place a higher value on sons than on daughters and, as a result, perpetrate violence against women all over the world.

Babies and young children understand far more than anyone gives them credit for. They know what’s going on around them and they find a way to adapt their behaviour in order to keep themselves safe in their family and in their world. Sometimes what they learn may not actually be true and may even be harmful to them as adults. Along with values of honesty and hard work, I learned from my parents that to be accepted meant to take up as little space as possible and to stay quiet. At the age of 6 I learned from a pedophile that I was dirty, shameful and bad. I learned to fear that to speak out would lead to my death. I am grateful that my parents were able to provide life’s basic necessities—always enough to eat, a home, stability. I survived. But I only began to thrive when in adulthood I was able to grieve and release the past.

Parents do the best they can with what they have—and what they have is what they learned in their own families of origin. Some parents have had a healthier source of learning than others. Some have more resiliency than others—more insight, more ability to face their fears, a desire for an honest emotional connection with their children and ultimately with themselves that transcends their fear. For some the fear of experiencing deep emotions like grief, hurt and abandonment, which may be rooted in their own childhood, is just too great to overcome. In facing my fears I have been able to reconnect on a deeper emotional level not only with my children but with myself. As for reconnecting on that level with my mother (my father is deceased), I accept that it may never happen. I have learned to accept her as she is.

As for myself, I never learned how to create a family. I didn’t know what a healthy parent-child relationship was; I didn’t know it was my job as a mother to create and maintain such a thing. I didn’t realize life was supposed to be fun, that children are meant to be playful and free and light. I hadn’t learned how to play. Too often when my children were small and wanted me to play, I turned them away because I wanted to read. I expected them to entertain themselves, as I had. Playing felt like wasted time. Today I know we all—adults and children—connect through play.

We do our daughters no favours by teaching them to be “good girls”—quiet,

still, and submissive. Far better to teach them to stand up for themselves, to speak out against injustice and abuse. I wish someone had given me the skills that my daughter learned. For as much as she rebelled against me in adolescence, I can see now that she was doing what I had hoped she would do—stand up for herself. Today I know she was trying to tell me that my way did not fit for her and nothing I could do would make her turn away from what she knew was right for her. She tried hard to get me to listen. Trapped in my own fears, I was not able to hear her. I learned that dreams have a strength of their own and must not be denied.

We do our sons no favours by encouraging them to be “little men”—stoic, responsible, uncomfortable in the realm of the emotions. I never intended for it to happen, but I virtually ignored my son during the chaos of having to handle the simultaneous crises generated by my mental health issues and my daughter’s acting out, because he had those characteristics. I thought he was just fine, coping admirably. I know now that he tried to make my life easier by taking up as little of my time as possible. Another inter-generational pattern: this was how I survived as a child. I will probably never know how close he came to falling into a dangerous, self-destructive lifestyle.

Too many mothers are victims of abuse on too many levels. Mothers are easy targets of blame and we are too easily dismissed by those with authority—be it social, judicial, economic, or medical. As a child, I witnessed my father’s dismissal of my mother on a daily basis. His words and actions made it clear that he believed that, like most women, she was stupid and had nothing worthwhile to contribute to a conversation. I often wonder what it must have been like for her, when she was pregnant with me, knowing that she was expected to produce a son because nothing else would do. Did she consider herself a failure when the longed-for Christopher failed to materialize? I have compassion for her today. I know she did the best she could.

Worth the effort

My relationship with my daughter not only survived the chaos but has grown stronger with time. Families marked by childhood abuse and neglect do not offer opportunities for children to learn how to be honest with themselves and others, to take risks easily, to be creative, to believe in themselves, to be comfortable with change. Mine certainly didn’t. But it is possible to learn these skills. We owe it not only to ourselves as women and mothers, but to our daughters. We can’t teach them what we don’t know.

I used to spend much time wishing I could change the past, wishing that my healing journey could have happened before I ever had children, or once they had reached adulthood and were away from home, where they wouldn’t have had to experience my chaotic behaviours, my bouts of depression and grief, my uncontrollable rage. But I have learned that in order to heal deeply and truly, we have to be able to take the risk of letting it happen in its own time and on its own terms.

Almost a year after my daughter returned home from care, we celebrated my birthday. She apologized as she pulled out an envelope, saying "It's not much, Mum; I don't have a lot of money." A letter, and a drawing of a smiling rabbit. I started to cry almost as soon as I began to read:

Well Mum—another year for you to plug through. I just want to say I admire your strength and courage. You're an amazing woman and Mum. You've always been there for me even when I didn't want you there. So thanx for helping me be who I am today and I know sometimes I'm not much fun. But I will always ♥ you 3 x ∞, Alyson

References

- Badgley, Robin. 1984. *Sexual Offences Against Children: Report of the Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youth*. Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing Centre.
- Briere, John. 1992. *Child Abuse Trauma: Theory and Treatment of the Lasting Effects*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Briere, John. 2002. "Treating adult survivors of severe childhood abuse and neglect: Further development of an integrative model." *The APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment*. 2nd Edition. Ed. J. E. B. Myers, L. Berliner, J. Briere, C. T. Hendrix, T. Reid and C. Jenny. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. 1-26.
- Garcia Coll, Cynthia T., Janet Surrey and Kathy Weingarten, eds. 1998. *Mothering Against the Odds: Diverse Voices of Contemporary Mothers*. New York: The Guilford Press,
- Gold, Steven N. 2000. *Not Trauma Alone: Therapy for Child Abuse Survivors in Family and Social Context*. New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Herman, Judith. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Hindman, Jan. 1989. *Just Before Dawn: From the Shadows of Tradition to New Reflections in Trauma Assessment and Treatment of Sexual Victimization*. Ontario, Oregon: AlexAndria Associates.
- Pynoos, Robert, Alan Steinberg and Armen Goenjian. 1996. "Traumatic Stress in Childhood and Adolescence: Recent Developments and Current Controversies." *Traumatic Stress*. Eds. Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth. New York: The Guilford Press. 331-358.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1976. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.