Nightmarish Reality

*A Child Called It*

By

Jessica Perkins
Imagine yourself as a child—living in a world where nothing could be predicted. Imagine your source of food and survival being used against you in a game your mother called life. Imagine having to work like a slave all day—trying your hardest to accomplish tasks and chores to her liking, her standards, and never being able to succeed. Imagine not eating for days and days on end because you couldn’t physically do all the work that was required of you in such a short period of time. Imagine what it would be like to go to school in old, run-down clothes, be made fun by your peers and rejected by your teacher because you were the “smelly kid”. Could you possibly conceive of stealing other children’s lunches in order to sustain yourself and then go home to Mom who would make you throw up in the toilet to make sure you weren’t sneaking any sustenance outside of the home? Ponder falling asleep in the basement of your house with no blankets, only newspapers to cover your child-like frame. Could you possibly imagine food and love being held from you as a weapon in a cynical game by the one person who is supposed to love and care for you. Some people don’t have to imagine. For many children, this is a nightmarish reality. One, in particular, is a man named Dave who wrote A Child Called It.

There are four different types of abuse. Dave experienced three of these significantly, and on a day-to-day basis. He could not escape the grip of manipulation and abuse that his mother had. These three types are: Physical abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse. Physical abuse is defined as assaults on children that produce pain, cuts, welts, bruises, burns, broken bones, and other injuries. Incidents that ended in Dave’s hospital arrival would illustrate this form. The second, neglect, are living conditions in which children do not receive enough food, clothing, medical attention, or supervision. As described, Dave’s day-to-day life condition would fit under this category. His mother withheld food from him, clothing, attention, and supervision among other important things. She used food as her weapon of choice. The third type of maltreatment; psychological abuse, is defined as the failure of caregivers to meet children’s needs for affection and emotional support, and actions—such as ridicule, humiliation, or terrorizing—that damage children’s cognitive, emotional, or social functioning. This was very prominent in Dave’s life. He
was constantly referred to as “the boy”; not regarded as part of the family. He was always told he was bad and he yearned for love and affection that he was never given.

Dave is a child from what became a five-child family. He was the only one of all the boys who was abused. He was neglected, physically battered, emotionally and psychologically bruised. His mother made him do chores, clean up after his brothers and her, and remain in a constant submission and servitude for his elementary life. Dave’s life, however, was not always in servitude. When he was younger he and his three brothers used to play together and live like normal happy children. He recounts many times when his mother would comfort him, fix his boo-boos and teach him about the world. He remembers the good time when they went on family vacations together and enjoyed each others’ company. His mother would bring them to the zoo and on picnics; she would cook authentic foods, dress up, and play music from different countries just so that she could show her children different ways of life. He went as far as to say that they were the “Brady Bunch” of the time. His family was perfect, or so he thought. This world as he knew it drastically changed. His parents both drank, and his dad was hardly ever at home. While his parents were together, all they would ever do is drink and argue about “the boy”—their son. Dave was not accepted as part of the family; or even regarded as a human. Dave soon found himself in a nightmarish reality. He constantly fought to win his mother’s affections, but to no avail. Every attempt he would make would be met with a slap to the face or a slam to the ground. He soon found himself a slave to the family, trying to win little rewards of food—trying to survive.

His attachment with his mom started out normally. She cared for him, talked with him, read with him, taught him, and loved him. He felt secure and safe when he was around her. As he began to develop further, however, his time with her became more uncertain. Dave was unsure of his own mother’s motives and it caused him great turmoil and stress. Everything he had ever known, trusted, and believed in ceased to exist and he found himself in a nightmare—trying to believe that people were good and trying to believe it would all blow over. One time after playing with his brothers, his mother came into the room in a stupor. His brothers fled but he remained sitting in a chair. Dave explains the incident:
As she came closer and closer, I backed my chair towards the wall. Soon, my head touched the wall. Mother’s eyes were glazed and red, and her breath smelled of booze. I closed my eyes as the oncoming blows began to rock me from side to side. I tried to protect my face with my hands, but Mother would only knock them away. Her punches seemed to last forever. Finally, I snaked my left arm up to cover my face. As Mother grabbed my arm, she lost her balance and staggered back a step. As she jerked violently to regain her stability, I heard something pop, and felt an intense pain in my shoulder and arm. The startled look on Mother’s face told me that she had heard the sound, too, but she released her grip on my arm, and turned and walked away as if nothing had happened (P. 35).

After this event his mother gave him dinner and sent him to bed early—this time not in the basement, where he was usually forced to sleep, but in the boys’ room, on the top bunk. He felt relieved and had a sense of hope that perhaps she was going to take care of him and treat him like she used to; like a son. He didn’t know that her love and care was only falsified in order to better her own situations. She did not bring him to the hospital until the following morning. She told the doctors that he had fallen out of the top bunk and landed on his arm. Dave followed along with her story for fear of being beaten later. Another such event happened later in his life when his mother stabbed him with a knife in the heat of the moment and then told him to finish his chores. He could barely move but tried to wash the dishes anyway. He eventually fainted. When he woke he tried to finish his chore but knew if he didn’t finish on time he, again, would get nothing to eat. He lost his strength. He tried to tell his father that his mom stabbed him, but he didn’t want to hear about it—he told Dave to go back to the kitchen and finish the dishes like his mother ordered. Dave painfully struggled with his chore. Then he was again faced with a similar manipulation of niceness by his mother. Dave writes:

Mother met me at the bottom of the stairs. As she tore the shirt from my body, I could see Mother was doing it as gently as she could, however, she gave me no other comfort. I could see it was just a matter of business to her. In the past, I had seen her treat animals with more compassion than she did me.
I was so weak that I accidentally fell against her as she dressed me in an old, oversized T-shirt. I expected Mother to hit me, but she allowed me to rest against her for a few seconds. Then Mother set me at the bottom of the stairs and left. A few minutes later, Mother returned with a glass of water. I gulped it down as fast as I could swallow. When I finished, Mother told me that she couldn’t feed me right away. She said she would feed me in a few hours when I felt better. Again, her voice was monotone—completely without emotion (P. 93).

This whole scenario is filled with meaning about a boy who yearns for his mother’s affections, even though she does such horrible things to him. He writes about how he has seen her treat animals better than she treats him; implying that he wants at least the attention that a four-legged creature would receive. He seems to feel inadequate when he speaks of how emotionless she is towards him—he wants affection; it’s the human condition to want to be loved. Despite the fact that she beats him, neglects him, and tortures him physically and mentally, he still yearns to be near her and be taken care of by her. It is amazing to see the power of affection and love—and how it can be used as a manipulative tool. Dave is completely insecure in his relationship with his mother. He doesn’t know what to believe or what not to believe. He constantly tries to impress her, but to no avail. He doesn’t want to let go of the memories of his mother’s nice and loving ways. He keeps himself in the past, hoping she will revert to her old self. She uses this hope to her advantage. He takes her abuse and covers up her lies—hoping that she will send an ounce of love in his direction. He is caught in a hope-cycle that continuously fails him.

There was not a day that went by that Dave didn’t fear his for his life. His mother physically beat and battered him consistently—it was one of the only things he could count on. Dave recounts a time when he was “ordered to strip off [his] clothes and stand by the kitchen stove” (page 40). There his mother revealed his crime; he was seen earlier that day at school playing on the grass. Dave rejects this accusation, but his mother doesn’t listen. She, instead, reached over and turned the gas burners on the stove, and this is the abuse he incurred:
‘You’ve made my life a living hell!’ she sneered. Now it’s time I showed you what hell is like!’

Gripping my arm, Mother held it in the orange-blue flame. My skin seemed to explode from the heat. I could smell the scorched hairs from my burnt arm. As hard as I fought, I could not force Mother to let go of my arm…Mother then ordered me to climb up onto the stove and lie on the flames so she could watch me burn. I refused, crying and pleading. I stomped my feet in protest.

But Mother continued to force me on top of the stove (P. 41).

Dave’s mother liked to play these kinds of sadistic games. One such encounter involved the bathroom, Clorox, and ammonia. She said she had “read about it in the newspaper and wanted to try it.” Dave wasn’t worried about its affects until he was locked in the bathroom with a bucket filled with this noxious mixture. His eyes began burning, he couldn’t breathe and he began coughing up. When he finally was allowed out of the bathroom, he coughed up blood for over an hour. Dave’s mother liked to play another bathroom game. She filled the bathtub up with cold tap water, tore off Dave’s clothes, and ordered him to lie in the tub. He submerged himself in the water, only to hear her yell: “‘Lower! Put your face in the water like this!’ She then bent over; grabbed [his] neck with both hands and shoved [his] head under the water” (p. 112). He kicked, trying to escape her force but was unable to do so. He struggled to breathe and finally, in one last attempt, he reached up and grabbed her shoulders, digging his fingers into her, and she let go. She then left the bathroom, ordering him to remain immersed in the ice cold water. Dave was freezing cold in the tub, but he feared his mother’s wrath so much that he remained under water-as ordered, for hours. His mother entered the bathroom right before dinner, ordered him to get out of the tub and put his clothes on. He reached for a towel but she took it away. He put on his clothes on top his cold, wet body as she commanded. He was then sent to the backyard to sit in the shade, shivering. This soon became a game of routine.

Dave was a victim of child neglect. He was not cared for properly, not shown love, refused food, and healthy living conditions. The fight for food was always traumatic. His mother constantly used food as a weapon. She would not allow him to eat for days on end. He began to pick food from the garbage can just so that he could eat something. Eventually she caught on to him and would purposefully allow meat
to rot, and then put it in the trash; ensuring sickness if he ate it. She eventually began to pour Clorox in the garbage can so that he could not eat any of the scraps or left over food parcels. Just to survive, he would creep to the wash basin in the basement and crack the faucet open, praying that the pipe would not alert his mother. There he would suck on the metal faucet until his stomach was full. On his sixth day of not eating, he was so weak he could barely move. There was no way he would be able to finish his chores in the allotted time and get his food reward. Dave begged for food and his mother refused. Then another game idea developed. One evening, she went to him with a plate of food. “Two minutes!” she yelled. “You have two minutes to eat. That’s all” (p. 105). He picked up the fork to eat. The cold metal and food touched his lips. She snatched it away. “Too late!” she sneered. This two-minute food-game also became routine. Dave had to worry about something most children his age didn’t have to worry about—survival and the constant fight to fill his stomach. At school he would steal other students’ lunches just so that he could eat something. He lost his ability to behaviorally self-regulate--He knew what he was doing was wrong; stealing was not the right thing to do. He knew that all the other students hated him because of his deception and thievery. As much as he wanted to fit in socially, the first order of business was to ward off his hunger—it was a matter of survival. Any one in a similar situation would do the same. When it’s a life or death issue, you hang on for dear life. He constantly fought, trying to hang on, but the psychological effects were devastating.

Throughout Dave’s elementary life, he had to deal with problems other children his age didn’t even know about. Dave coped with things most adults could not even begin to deal with. He was faced with trauma, punishment, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. All he wanted was to be loved and cared for, but he was refused these basic desires. Despite the horrible things his mother did to him, he continued trying to win her approval: like the time he rushed home to show her a paper he had done well on, hoping she would put it up on the refrigerator and acknowledge him. She did no such thing. Instead she went on and on about how he was an embarrassment to the family and he was a “bad boy.” He was constantly told he was bad. She would make him stand in front of the bathroom mirror while looking at himself and repeating “I am a bad boy. I am a bad boy.” She told him she’d “received a letter from the
North Pole. She claimed the letter said that [he] was a “bad boy” and Santa would not bring [him] gifts for Christmas” (p 38). Christmas time came around and there were no presents for him under the tree—he was a “bad boy” and didn’t deserve to get anything. He felt completely isolated and alone. Nothing he did was good enough. He tried to please his mother and never could. He was constantly being degraded and constantly fought to fit in. Little by little the degradation was smearing into his self-image. Dave’s lonely world can be summed up with these words of hopelessness: “I began to give up on God. I felt that He must have hated me. What other reason could there be for a life like mine? All my efforts for mere survival seemed futile. My attempts to stay one step ahead of Mother were useless. A black shadow was always over me. Even the sun seemed to avoid me…” (p. 111).

**Pulling it all together**

_A Child Called It_ is an autobiography. No matter how unbelievable the horrors found inside are, Dave Pelzer wrote about and experienced these things first hand. I had to keep reminding myself this was not just a nightmare, but a reality—his reality. Dave experienced three of the four types of child abuse: physical, psychological, and neglect. All of these are extensively recalled in his memories. After reading through, one may wonder: why Dave? He has four other siblings, and none of them were abused, why him? This is a question I struggled with. In _Development Through the Lifespan_, Berk says one of the origins of child maltreatment within as family are children whose characteristics make them more of a challenge to rear and therefore are more likely to become targets of abuse. In the book it says that Dave and his brothers would always do normal child’s play and get into trouble, but his brothers never got caught. Dave says he had an affinity for getting caught. Perhaps this gave him the label: “problem child.” Another reason, perhaps, is that he was a lot like his father. He looked up to his father for a while and his father, at first, would look out for him. His mother did not like the relationship they shared together. Maybe she was jealous that she and her husband no longer had that kind of connection or bond and so she took it out any way she could—on Dave.
Another prediction of maltreatment is the community. Typically abusive or neglectful parents are ones found in unstable, run-down neighborhoods and lack social connections. These parents are also typically isolated and have very few friends. Dave’s mother definitely fits this mold. She had no friends with whom she talked to; no one to keep her “in check”. Only once did Dave write about any sort of social connection with a neighbor who would ask about Dave. Eventually his mom stopped talking with her because she didn’t like having to answer questions regarding “the boy”. She didn’t like lying about why Dave never went out to play or why he always had bumps and bruises. She didn’t like having to cover for herself all the time. She abandoned the neighbor’s friendship and told her children they could no longer play with her the woman’s children. Dave’s mother removed herself completely from the community—anyone who would look down or question what she was doing behind closed doors. In attempt to reinforce her actions she avoided people who may have indicated that her abusive ways unjustified and uncalled for.

Consequences

Berk describes consequences of child maltreatment in several ways: impairing the development of emotional self-regulation, empathy and sympathy, self-concept, social skills, and academic motivation. Over time, these youngsters show serious learning and adjustment problems, including academic failure, severe depression, aggressive behavior, peer difficulties, substance abuse, and delinquency. We find all of these consequences present in Dave’s case. Toward the end of elementary school, Dave wished his mother would die. He also wished harm upon his brothers, even though he knew they had nothing to do with the way he was being treated. This shows his empathetic and sympathetic impairment.

One reason he lacks social skills is because no one likes him. No one is willing to give him a chance because he doesn’t look “normal”. His tattered clothes, dirty appearance, and smelly aroma keep others, even teachers, far away. Even though he may be justified in his delinquent actions, the fact remains that he steals food from other children. Due to his lack of positive social interaction and his pattern of getting beaten up and made fun of his self-esteem level drops significantly.
Because he feels the things he does don’t matter, Dave isn’t academically motivated. At one point in time he was as seen when he was excited to show his mom the paper he received with a good grade. He rushed home, only to find she would tear it up and tell him what an embarrassment he was. He failed academically for many reasons: poor nutrition, poor health, poor social skills, lack of time and encouragement at home, and lack of motivation. He was always striving to be recognized, noticed; always trying to win his mother’s approval, but she would never respond. Constantly hearing that he was a “bad boy” altered his self concept. He was basically told every day that he wasn’t a person but, rather, an embarrassment. This brought about a sense of worthlessness. Depression plagued every day of his existence. He didn’t think he deserved to live. He didn’t feel worthy to do anything but live and be the slave he was. He didn’t think it was fair, but it was the way life was. He wanted to give up, but didn’t want to give his mother the satisfactions, so he hung on.

Abusive nightmarish realities await children like Dave every day. They affect the way these children think and feel. Abuse affects behavior presently as well as future mentalities. They are constantly plagued by the uncertainty and pain that awaits them, often times at home, not knowing where to turn for help or what to do. Its immediate effects can be seen now, and its long term effects are apparent all throughout life. It is not something that Dave will ever forget. He was raised in an environment that will constantly undermine the things he does, even as an adult. The effects of abuse are countless and detrimental. Whether they are cognitive results or behavioral repercussions, these children are still greatly affected by their environments; environments which bare inconsistent parental figures, lack love, encouragement, and care: Ways in which children should never be accustomed to living without.