

# The Effects of Abuse on Children



Children do not have to be themselves the victims of abuse to suffer from its effects. They are also badly affected by seeing abusiveness between significant adults — parents, caregivers — and often develop some kind of health or behaviour problem as a result. Health problems may include bed-wetting, nervousness, stomach aches, headaches, nightmares and soiling. Common behaviour problems are truancy, stealing, disruptiveness and poor achievement.

James came to counselling in a last-ditch effort to save his marriage. He had been abusive to his wife, Julie, and his two stepchildren. What James came to recognise was that he wanted to:

*'...enjoy my children growing up. I don't want them to know Dad as a big mean grump and a guy who is unapproachable. I want the children to be able to confide in me ... I want to get back the trust and respect I have lost. I know it takes time for respect to grow because if you have hurt someone over many years, trust will take a long time to rebuild.'*

In another group, Brent set out all of the people affected by his abusive behaviour and how they had changed as a result. He was surprised by the sheer number of people who were affected. His partner Mary was edgy around him, uncertain of how he would react to issues she would raise. She had become depressed and withdrawn, having gone off to the family doctor who prescribed medication to help her cope. Brent was annoyed at Mary not being her old energetic self and described his relationship as 'being married to nothing'.

The situation was profoundly affecting their three children. Kim (3) was becoming clingy and demanding, Jane (6) was withdrawn and quiet, while John (8) was beginning to treat Mary in a similar way to his father. He would argue, abuse her verbally and threaten by saying things like, 'Dad says you are a no-good mum', and 'I don't have to do what you tell me.' John's school was also concerned about his aggressive behaviour towards his teacher and the other children.

Mary's mother, June, was most concerned about what she saw happening to her daughter, and spent considerable time trying to support the family. Brent hated what he saw as her interference and was rude to her, letting her know she was not welcome. When she wasn't present Brent would berate Mary about how interfering her family was and would attribute most of their problems to them.

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June had talked with Kathy, Brent's mother, about her concerns. This resulted in Sam, his father, and Kathy trying to talk with Brent about his behaviour. Brent was angry at his father's 'holier-than-thou' attitude; he remembered what it was like during his own childhood — his father's abusiveness, and the expectation that he would be independent. Brent described his early life as very difficult.

*'In the family I grew up in my father exercised his rights. There was this attitude that men and boys would be independent while girls got everything they wanted ... even at high school I had to go out and work for what I got ... they didn't have to go out and work ... if they wanted clothes they just had to ask Mum and Dad and they got them ... I resented them for that all the time ... my birthday was on the 29th of December and my birthday and Christmas present were always the same.'*

These memories meant Brent was not able to clearly hear his parents' concerns. He was also becoming increasingly isolated from his own brother and sister, with whom he had shared a great deal of time. Brent saw a bleak future with everything he had 'worked for' slipping away.

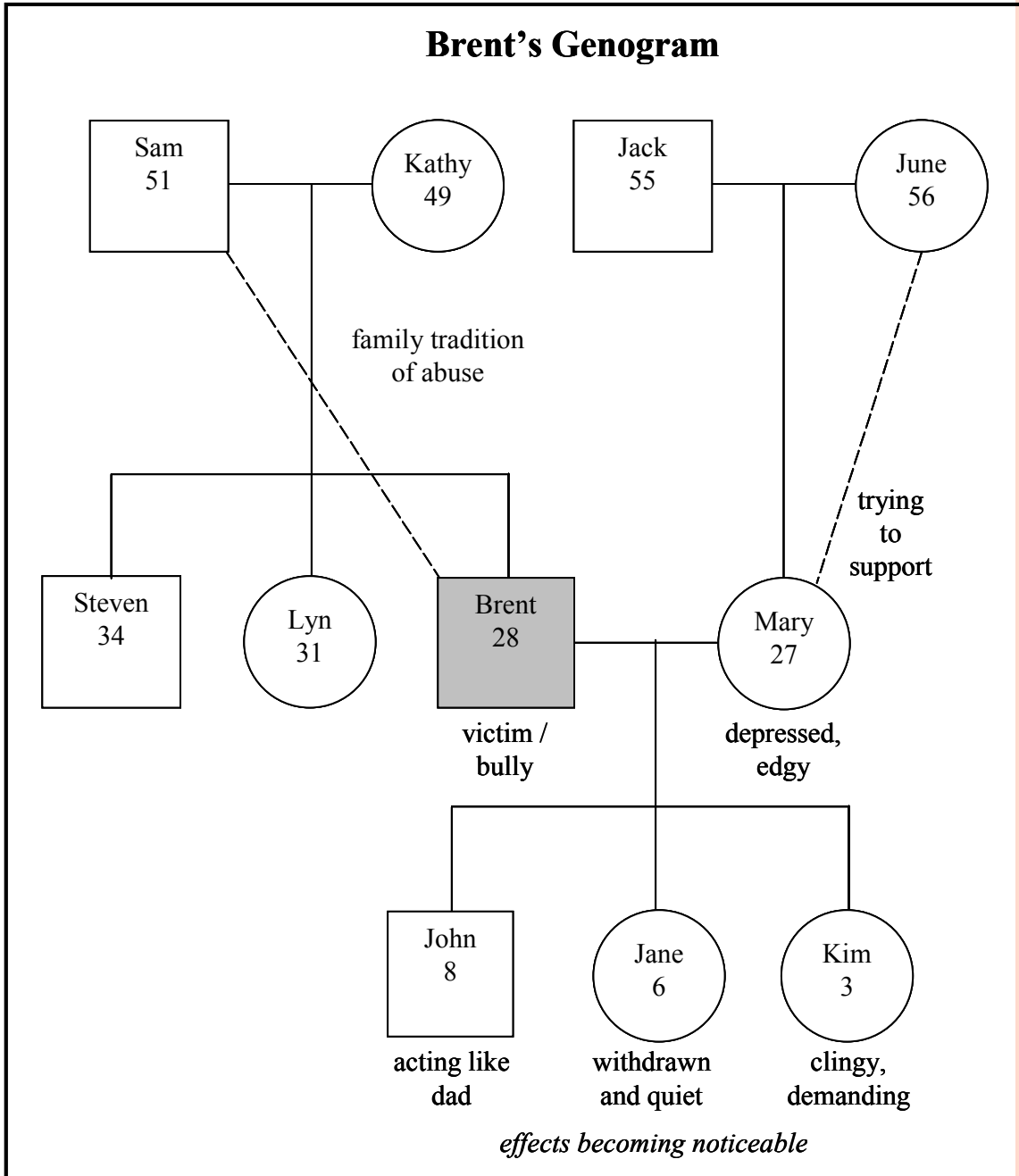


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Brent's challenge was to see this situation as stemming from abusive patterns that had been passed on to him from his own family. At the end of this exercise he was appropriately subdued.

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He stated:

*'I was surprised at how widespread the effect of my behaviour has been on others. This is an absolutely crazy way to live, going through life not seeing what is going on. How can I call myself a man when what I am is a bully? It's hard to admit it, but I now see Mary was getting help as a result of my problem. I feel sad that I have brought about Mary having to seek some help; she was once a loving and vibrant woman. As for the kids, I remember what it was like for me. I don't want that for them.'* [At this point Brent bursts into tears.]

Children learn confusing messages when they live with abuse. When they grow up observing abusive behaviour and/or are on the receiving end of such behaviour, they come to view it as normal. This demonstrates how the legacy of abuse can be carried on from generation to generation. Take time now to explore what the short-term and long-term impact of living with abuse may be.

Look at the checklist below and mark it as truthfully as you can. The section on recalling your own childhood experiences will enable you to recognise behaviours that you use yourself now.

<b>Parenting</b>	<u>Always</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Rarely</u>	<u>Never</u>
I have difficulty with my children.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
My children's behaviour reminds me of their father.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I feel inadequate as a parent.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I'm scared I'll abuse my children	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I have abused my children.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>My Family of Origin</b>	<u>Always</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Rarely</u>	<u>Never</u>
I feel judged by my family.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I can't be honest about what is going on at home.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I keep the abuse secret.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I am embarrassed to tell others.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I fear no one will believe me.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

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Relationships	<u>Always</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Rarely</u>	<u>Never</u>
I don't have many friends.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
My partner doesn't approve of my friends.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I find it hard to trust others.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I feel cheated by marriage.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I try so hard but nothing seems to change.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

## Questions to Ponder

- Do others feel safe around me or are they afraid and how would I know?
- What changes have I noticed about how others relate to me?
- Are others free to express their opinions or are they afraid to because I might lose my cool?
- What do I think it would be like to be in the other person's shoes when I am abusive?
- Would I live with others acting towards me in the way I act towards them or would I think it was unfair and unjust?
- Do I want to pass on to my children a tradition of abusiveness or a tradition of safety and respect?
- What would it feel like to be trapped in a situation as a victim where I wanted the abuse to stop but didn't know what to do?
- When will I be ready to hear from others about how they see me and my behaviour?

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