

Are middle class parents getting away with child abuse?



Nicola Barry tells the story of how her mother's alcoholism blighted her childhood. She believes that her middle class background insulated her family from the scrutiny of social services – and believes this is still happening today.



My Story

For most children, strangers in the world outside represent the most danger. For my family, the danger was right there under our feet, just waiting to trip us up.

For all that we were middle class, when we ventured out of our house people soon realised how deeply dysfunctional we were. We lived in Murrayfield, one of Edinburgh's leafy suburbs, close to the rugby ground, in a three-storey Georgian house. Our street's houses had Jaguars at the front

and sprinklers at the back. We kept dogs, cats, the odd stray, rabbits, chinchillas and pigeons.

But we stuck out like sore thumbs - mainly because our house was falling to bits. Slates fell from the roof and lay in the back garden, never to be replaced. Taps dripped and paint peeled.

We were well off. My mother's father had been the psychiatrist to the Royal Family. My mother and her sisters came out as debutantes and were presented to the Queen. He left money for the sisters in trust when he died, and my

mother drank away every penny.

Our neighbours didn't say anything when my mother staggered out in the mornings, her black leather shopping bag full of rattling empties. Nor when she hurried home, a look of fixed concentration on her face, clutching the same shopping bag, this time containing full bottles. That was our life. As long as nobody knew what was going on, or at least pretended they didn't, she could drink herself to death. That was the penalty of being so-called respectable, of being middle class.

We lived in a bubble, cut off from the world by our own strangeness and unpredictability. Our white net curtains were now so filthy nobody could see in. It wasn't long before we children stopped trying to see out. We were too ashamed to ask for help. I soon learned from my three older brothers that I had to grow up quickly. But it was OK for them. They disappeared to a posh boarding school, in Yorkshire, leaving me to cope with the chaos at home.

I often stayed off school to collect my mother's prescriptions, do the shopping, buy her drink, shop, cook and clean the house. I stole money from her, ostensibly to buy food, but also as recompense for her lack of care and affection. I turned into a child detective, hunting down her vodka and pouring it down the sink, hoping to curb her drinking. I was in charge - a parent at ten.

My mother and father never spoke, other than to fight, usually over her drinking. To say it ruined my life would be a cop-out. Ruled my life is more like it. I was born drunk. My parents used to argue about whether her drinking during pregnancy had caused the condition in my hips - bilateral slipped epiphyses. I was confined to a wheelchair for several years as a child. Whenever she leaned over me, to give me a bedpan or help me wash, I could smell drink. Occasionally, she'd swig from a bottle in the pantry, saying she couldn't face any nursing tasks without her 'wee cocktail'.

My father, a consultant anaesthetist and a cold, ill-tempered man, saw my disability as a reflection on his professional ability. His wife's drinking caused him shame enough without me being abnormal as well. He'd go out to his car, slamming the front door until the glass cracked, shouting to himself "bloody this", "bloody that", "bloody crippled fool" and "bloody drunken imbecile". My father was downright scary.

I watched my mother drink from the bottle until, one day, the bottle began to drink her - all of her. She went from being a strikingly beautiful woman into a pickled old prune, her youth sucked utterly dry. The familiar mother had died and a new one - older, more uncertain - had taken her place. The neglect started almost as soon as I was born.

When I was six months old, my mother lost me after one of her many benders.

My father returned from an overnight trip to news of my disappearance. My mother told him she'd been helping my three brothers prepare for a camping holiday with the Scouts, had a few vodkas, probably a bottle, and everything after that was a blank. When she woke up, I was gone.

My father phoned the Scoutmaster's wife, who confirmed that her husband had collected the boys from our back garden. He also said my mother had "looked tired" - an Edinburgh-ism for being out of one's face. My parents ran out to the garden and found me, crying. I'd been out there all night.

The police came to the house that time, summoned by a vigilant neighbour. My father, for whom the police were servants, not authorities, explained that they were both doctors, that everything was fine, and that no, we didn't need social workers, for God's sake. Some of their best friends were social workers.

This was the way my parents operated. They knew how to fend off the authorities. We hid the truth from each other as well as the world outside. We lived separately but together, sneaking around, sniffing my mother's breath for clues.

Instead of living, we existed, in a mausoleum of our own making. I remember one occasion when my mother fell downstairs and lay at the front door for hours. When I got home from school, I thought she was dead. But she was just drunk. We lived like that for years, never knowing what would happen next. I believe the real reason no one intervened was a pervading sense of shame - a far bigger disease in the world then than alcoholism itself.

We couldn't tackle my mother's drinking because society insisted we kept it hidden.

Our relatives, my parents' friends and our neighbours were ashamed of us. As a family, it was as if we were buried alive, kept out of the way like lepers. I just wanted my mother to be normal like the others, to bake scones and make us meals when we came home. I could never understand why my father didn't stop her drinking. I understood years later that nobody stops anyone drinking. Alcohol respects neither income, address nor profession.

My parents both drank. He drank beer and wine, but his drinking was the acceptable sort: a beer before dinner, a few glasses of wine with his meal, a whisky afterwards.

My mother ordered her stash from a local shop and hid it wherever there was space - in the wardrobe, in drawers, in laundry baskets, behind the cistern, in boots and shoes. Her drinking was snatched, furtive.

I almost succumbed to my mother's disease. I feel sure intervention could have prevented that as well.

I started drinking really young, heading exactly the same way as my mother. I was drinking and stealing her tranquillisers because there was so much I couldn't face.

By seventeen, I couldn't dry my hair without a glass of something in my hand. But, in a sense, I was privileged. For years I'd had the opportunity to watch as alcohol stripped my mother of everything - her looks, friends, all her self-respect. So I knew, first-hand, that drink was a horrible way to live and an even more miserable way to die. Nevertheless, I ended up in a coma with acute pancreatitis at 26. That was my wake up call.

Nothing went right when it involved home - not even my chance to get married and escape. Bringing my fiancé, Colin,

home terrified me. My mother promised if I brought Colin round, she wouldn't drink.

Stupidly, I agreed. Colin knew I carried baggage but not how much and how heavy. Shortly after the dreadful meeting, we split up.

Professionals often ask me whether I would rather have been taken into care. It is a very difficult question because the answer I'd have given as a child is different from the one I would give now.

Back then, I was desperate for the agony to end. I honestly do not think I'd have had any qualms about being taken away from home.

There was no love in our house. Everything was done either out of guilt or a sense of duty. Even at 10, I knew my efforts to make things better at home weren't working. Nothing worked.

In fact, I had a very close friend at school whose family kept asking me to stay. It would have been a very middle class, silent, solution.

But now I look back and realise that I loved my mother, and that going into care would have meant being separated from her. Perhaps being there – not abandoning her – was the right decision.



Nicola as a child

Are middle class child abusers still getting away with it?

Recently, the chief executive of Barnardo's divided opinion when he said more children need to be taken into care

at birth - to stop them being damaged beyond repair by inadequate parents.

Martin Narey called for social workers to be braver about removing children at risk. He said: "If you can take a baby very young and place them in a permanent adoptive home, we know that is where we have success. But that view is seen as heresy among social services, where the thinking is that parents deserve another chance.

"My own view is that we need to take more children into care if we really want to put the interests of the child first.

"We can't keep trying to fix families that are completely broken."

I could not agree more.

Closed doors

Ruth Stark, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) professional officer, says spotting child abuse or neglect in a family is still extremely difficult - unless it is immediately obvious from physical signs like bruising or poor dental care.

"There may be frequent absences from school," Stark said. "But so much abuse and neglect of children happens behind closed doors. I have had to take middle class children into care. I know that parents who are not coping use various methods to avoid being discovered.

"We are all supposed to be able to parent naturally. This taboo that we have created in our society means that we cannot admit to not being perfect parents.

"In some families, chocolate will be smeared over a baby's face to hide the bruising. In others a child will be under extreme pressure not to tell they are being sexually abused by a parent, uncle or brother.

"The child is told that, if they tell, one of their parents will be taken away.

"Children do not speak because they feel powerless and parents do not share their distress because it is socially unacceptable - so abuse and neglect continue."

Stark says different methods of penetrating those closed doors have been tried across the world. In France, Spain and Portugal, the investigation of child abuse and neglect is done by the police - then the courts intervene.

Stark said: "It is not an adversarial approach, but an investigative approach. In the UK, we use an adversarial court system and this process involves social workers undertaking investigation and intervention post court sanction.

"Scotland has a halfway model - the Children's Hearing system. The Reporter takes on the investigative role based on reports from agencies, but the parents can still face a criminal prosecution.

"Many instances of abuse and neglect are based on parents' own experiences of being poorly parented," Ruth adds.

"Breaking that cycle is the biggest challenge for social workers. There are no quick fixes and it can take years of intervention, sometimes down

two or three generations.

"The difficulty for the profession is that while we can talk about this from our experience and knowledge, there has been no real long-term research to validate that intervention."

Ruth feels that working with child abuse and neglect, in any social class, is one of the most difficult areas of social work.

"You need to know what works with parents who have abused substances, have mental health difficulties or been involved in the criminal justice system.

"Equally, you have to know how to work with parents in successful careers who may have dealt with childhood abuse and neglect by working hard to go to university and do well in their chosen careers. They still often fail to develop emotionally."

Ruth says her two most challenging cases included an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse where the perpetrator was a paediatrician and helping the emotionally neglected child of an MP.

Ruth says: "The background or social standing of the parent is something you have to look beyond in order to reach behind those closed doors and discover what people are doing to each other.

"Only then can you aim to turn their lives around, help them find a better quality of life."

Could my story still happen today?

When I was younger, the only person I confided in was my family's doctor. But he just gave me tranquillisers. He didn't tell a social worker.

It would be convenient to explain the lack of intervention by noting that the Social Work Scotland Act was not yet in place at the time. But a lot of people whose job it was to help failed us.

Had they been around, social workers might have succeeded with my mother where I failed so abysmally. But there were many missed opportunities for intervention, with all the professions.

Like the time my mother turned up at my Sussex school. I was in an English lesson when one of the nuns came in, followed by my mother. I knew immediately, by the fraught look on her face, that she was raving, paranoid drunk. As she stood in the classroom – her hair dishevelled, wild eyes darting, strain etched between the lines on her forehead - my classmates stared in horror and my heart thumped loudly.

The room went quiet. It was a study in total



Nicola with her mother

incomprehension, but everyone in the room knew something wasn't right. Some of the girls continued to scribble while others stared at the teacher for guidance.

When my mother spied me, she demanded I take off my skirt and give it to her. She said she needed it to go on holiday. I had to do it in front of the whole class.

Not one teacher, nor one nun, said or did anything.

Could that happen now? I would find that surprising. Teachers seem far more astute at spotting vulnerable children now than they were back then. People seem to understand alcoholism better now, and are braver about confronting it.

But since my book 'Mother's Ruin' was published, a lot of adults with similar stories have written to me. Many of them suffered similar neglect without help as late as the

eighties. That fills me with worry.

What happened to us?

In September 1978, I found my mother lying on her bedroom floor. The bedside lamp had fallen beside her, and had burned a hole in the carpet before it burned out.

She lay on her right side, facing the door. Her head looked as if it had been screwed on her body back to front.

She was wearing her old blue dressing gown, which gaped in the middle displaying bruised thighs and bony knees. Her arms were outstretched, her mouth was wide open and saliva was running down her chin. She had vomited on the carpet.

The moment I had always dreaded had arrived. My mother had choked to death on her own vomit at the age of 63. I was 38.

What happened to me? In my late forties I met my husband Alastair, a wonderful man who has made me very happy. Before him, I was just existing. Now I feel I have escaped the past and have become my own person.

My mother will always be with me, exerting her influence. Her voice lives on, but not her influence. I have left that behind.

Just the voice is always there in the background, like a dull but persistent echo.

Nicola Barry is the author of 'Mother's Ruin', published by Headline. She also works as a social work feature writer and columnist, currently with the Sunday Express and Press and Journal. She was editor of the Big Issue in early 2001.