

Changing Perceptions Of Child Abuse

In August 2008, London *Metro* newspaper ran a story *Slapping my naughty child wrecked my life*. The headline is a bit of an exaggeration, but probably only a bit. The story related is that of youth worker Jim McCullough who slapped his thirteen year old daughter after she had shrugged off a dressing down for “terrorising” a neighbour. So what did she do? Phoned the police, as any child would, of course. And what did they do? Arrested him, and threw him into a cell. He was “let off” with a caution, but being a youth worker, in the current and ongoing hysterical climate, he felt he could not continue with his vocation.

Okay, in one respect, the guy has only himself to blame. When the police turned up and asked him if he had assaulted (read slapped) his pride and joy, he was foolish enough to answer yes. He should have refused to comment, or even told them to fuck off, it was no business of theirs how he disciplined his daughter. He may have been arrested, but in the event of these muppet plod bringing charges, if he’d had the good sense to opt for the Crown Court there is no way even in the politically correct madhouse that is Twenty-First Century Britain a jury would have convicted. More than likely if he’d just sat in a cell with his feet up, his daughter would soon have realised the error of her ways, withdrawn the allegation, and begged the police to let her Dad come home.

Be that as it may, twenty or even ten years ago, such nonsense would never have got this far. Forty years ago it would most certainly not have, as I know from personal experience.

I was born in 1956, and started school late, aged five and a half. Most of my memories of both primary and especially secondary school are ones I would rather excise, mostly because of the way I was treated by other pupils. Kids can be evil at times, and there is always a joker in the pack. If the joker is you, it’s no laughing matter, but at times my teachers were even worse.

In my first year at school I was assaulted quite viciously by a teacher. Although it was a lifetime away I remember it as though it were yesterday. I don’t think we had art lessons as such, not at this age, but one lesson when we were painting with water colours, I hit upon a novel idea, I would decorate the ceiling, and did so by flicking copious amounts of paint at it with my brush. The ceilings at the Carlyon Road primary school were very high, so it was quite a feat for a mere six year old, and not a little ingenious, or so I thought at the time. Obviously the teacher disagreed, and when either she noticed or her attention was drawn to, my handiwork, she seized me by the arm, whacked me several times around my bare legs, and thrust me under the table where I remained for the rest of the lesson. I remember crying rather loudly, as a six year old might when struck with such vigour, but the rest of this incident is vague. I do know though that I didn’t report it, and with good reason.

If I’d told my old man I’d been smacked by a teacher - the word assault was not yet in my vocabulary (though the word fuck was) - he would have replied “Why, what did you do?” Or words to that effect. If I had denied any wrongdoing, he would have prompted “You must have done something”. And with or without this initial protestation of innocence, my subsequent admission that I had painted the ceiling in such fashion would have brought a retort to the effect that “If you do that to my ceiling, you’ll get this” - gesturing to his belt.

Let’s suppose though that my adoptive parents had taken a radically different view, and protested to Headmistress Miss Bonica. What would she have done? The teacher would of

course have been questioned, but I can't imagine the police becoming involved at any stage, certainly not in the absence of severe bruising. Nowadays, any teacher who treated a young child in that manner would not only be immediately suspended (and later dismissed) but arrested and charged with assault, quite likely assault occasioning actual bodily harm. Not to mention making the front page of the *Sun*.

When I was at boarding school I received the proverbial six of the best on one occasion; this was not for any sort of disruptive behaviour, but simply for falling behind with my school work - in particular mathematics - and concealing it. Without wishing to condone this legalised brutality, I have to say that after that pasting I not only cleared the backlog but shot to the top of the class in a remarkably short time. The bat - or in some cases the cane - was used not indiscriminately but certainly fairly regularly in British schools at this time, and as with the treatment meted out to Yours Truly in year one, the suggestion that quite serious violence used by teachers against very young boys - and undoubtedly girls - the mere suggestion that this constituted a criminal assault, or even that it was wrong, was simply never entertained. The police would not have become involved in any allegation of mere assault against a teacher, and it is very doubtful if they would have responded to a 999 call by an aggrieved thirteen year old girl either. More likely they would have asked to speak to her father, and if they had been told he was not available, she would have been given a severe warning about wasting police time, not to mention challenging parental authority.

This sounds rather a harsh judgment, but it was the way things were at the time, as any person of my generation will attest. And as you go back further, things get immeasurably worse, and not just on the punishment front. Less than two centuries ago, even shoving young boys up chimneys was not regarded as child abuse; according to *THE CLIMBING BOYS' ADVOCATE* in May 1856, between 1800 and 1840, twenty-three boys were suffocated while cleaning chimneys, seven were burnt to death in flues, and fourteen others died by falling from the tops of chimneys. The last such recorded fatality was as recent as 1875.

In his *Sentimental History Of Chimney Sweepers*, published in 1785, Jonas Hanway wrote of one twelve year old boy who had began climbing before the age of five, "The same treatment of the colt would be deemed a transgression against all the rules of the rustic economy towards the beast that perishes." Hanway was a humanitarian, whose appeal asked that no boy under the age of eight should be so apprenticed, and that the boys should be given proper climbing dress and "also a Sunday's suit". A cynic might say God save us from humanitarians who ask only that young boys reach the age of eight before they are shoved up chimneys, but this was probably as far as Hanway could have gone at the time.

All this takes us a long way from thirteen year old Jess McCullough, who is pictured in the *Metro* article with her father. In view of the way I suffered at the hands of both my peers and adults for my entire boyhood, I would be the last person to condone or belittle genuine abuse or humiliation of any child, but for the luv of Mike, let's all of us keep things in perspective before we go running to the legal authorities, and possibly starting yet another witch hunt about child abuse, paedophile rings and even worse.

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