

# CASE STUDIES OF PRIVATION

Privation occurs when children never have the opportunity to form an attachment to a primary carer, or when their treatment by carers is such that they are unable to form an attachment bond with the carer (e.g. cases of abuse and severe neglect). This means that children who experience privation do not experience the close relationship most of us enjoy in childhood, and it seems that this lack of an early close relationship can have serious effects on children.

## Case Studies of Privation

Case histories of children who have been raised in isolation and deprived circumstances demonstrate two things:

- Some children never recover from early privation
- Other children show a remarkable recovery.

If we examine two cases with very different outcomes we may be able to tease out some of the factors that affect how serious and permanent the effects of privation are. What can the findings from the study of these children tell us?

### The Czech Twins (Koluchova, 1976)

Koluchova (1972, 1976, 1991) described the case of two identical twin boys, P.M. and J.M. (generally known in Britain as the 'Czech twins'). This study is one of the longest and most detailed records of one of the most severe cases of privation on record. The identical twins were born in 1960, lost their mother shortly after birth and were cared for in an institution for 11 months before being fostered by an aunt for a further six months. Their father (a man of very low intelligence) then remarried and the twins lived in a house with their stepmother and four other children, two of whom were their natural siblings. The stepmother was an exceptionally cruel woman. They were "reared from the age of 18 months to 7 years in social isolation by a psychopathic mother and an inadequate father" (Koluchova, 1972). The boys were never allowed out of the house. The stepmother kept them locked in a dark, bare, unheated closet or were beaten and put in the cellar as a punishment. She did not show them any affection, and the other children in the house were not allowed to interact with them. The stepmother would beat them severely. They were kept apart from the rest of the family and were deprived of proper food, exercise and stimulation.

**Rescue and Progress:** The authorities became involved in 1967 when the father had taken the twins to a local paediatrician to get a certificate to exempt them from primary school and it became obvious that this was a case of 'criminal neglect'. When rescued at the age of 7, after 5½ years of neglect and abuse, the boys were physically under-developed and looked like three year olds. They could hardly walk and had rickets, their speech was severely limited and their IQs were very low - in the range of imbecility (40 - but not possible to assess formally). They were terrified of adults.

After two years of intensive institutional care including physiotherapy, speech therapy and psychotherapy, a pair of exceptionally caring and attentive sisters fostered the boys and gave them emotional security and intellectual stimulation, and as a result their mental age increased by 3 years in only 15 months. The twins made remarkable gains: after a year they were placed in a school for mentally retarded children, and the following year they entered the second class of a normal infant school. By the age of 10 their IQs were around average, with particular gains made on the verbal components of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children. By the age of 14 they showed no social-emotional or intellectual deficits. By 20 they both showed above average intelligence, and were working and experiencing successful romantic relationships. They both did National Service in their 20s, and later married and had children. Both are reported (Clarke and Clarke, 1998) to have successful relationships and careers. They seem to be well adjusted and cognitively able.

## The Case of Genie (Curtiss, 1977)

This case demonstrates a less successful outcome to early privation. Genie's history is one of isolation, severe neglect, and physical restraint. Genie's father, Clark, had never wanted children (two older children had died, in somewhat suspicious circumstances). From the age of 20 months her father had locked her away in the attic of their home in Los Angeles because he thought she was retarded and vulnerable. He committed suicide after Genie was discovered possibly because of his own guilt.

By day, Genie was kept strapped to a child's potty so that she could only move her hands and feet. At night she was put in a cot covered with wire mesh and tied to a sleeping bag. She had very little contact with other members of her family. She did not receive adequate nutrition - she was fed baby food, in a hurry, and if she choked she had her face rubbed in it. Her father punished her if she made any sound or tried to attract attention. She was occasionally given a few items to play with, but generally lacked any visual, tactile or auditory stimulation.

**Discovery and outcome:** Genie was 13 when her partially blind mother sought help for her. She looked like a child half her age, and she was physically, emotionally and cognitively underdeveloped. When first seen by the social services they thought she was only 6 or 7, because she weighed just over four stone and was 4½ feet tall. She was incontinent, could not focus beyond 12 feet, salivated constantly and spat indiscriminately. She could not hop, skip, climb or fully extend her limbs, showed no perception of heat or cold, and could not talk. She made virtually no sounds, and was hardly able to walk. Curtiss described her as 'unsocialised, primitive and hardly human'. Genie may have been retarded and this would explain her subsequent difficulties in acquiring language and making a full recovery.

Genie's recovery was hampered by an unsettled time with a variety of carers including one spell with foster parents who further abused her (at which point the language she had developed disappeared altogether). When rescued Genie was fostered for a time by a teacher, then by one of the psychologists studying her. She showed consistent progress and developed limited language and attachments to her carers. However, when funding for the research was withdrawn she was returned to Social Services and cared for by a succession of foster-parents. In one foster-home she was severely beaten for vomiting, and this traumatised her greatly, causing her to lose the language skills and emotional stability she had developed. She was briefly reunited at this point with the psychologists, to whom she expressed considerable anger. Genie was eventually settled with an adult foster-carer, who understandably did not wish her to have anything to do with psychologists again. We thus have no recent information on her condition.

One notable and autistic feature of her behaviour was that she showed a disinterest in other people - she didn't reject them but simply treated them in the same way as she treated inanimate objects. Initial tests indicated that she was functioning at the level of a one year old. In spite of her severe privation, Genie did respond to treatment. She soon learned to walk, and her level of intellectual functioning improved. Genie made quite rapid progress on tasks that did not involve language, and she achieved normal level in several perceptual tasks. Genie never achieved good social adjustment or language despite intervention. She developed a fairly large vocabulary, but generally spoke in short, ungrammatical sentences. Her language did develop sufficiently to describe some of her experiences ("Father hit arm. Big wood. Genie cry"). However, she never asked questions, she never learned to use pronouns, and her speech did not develop from telegraphic to more complex sentences. She generally preferred to use gestures to convey her meaning. She did not generally understand sentences that were grammatically complex. Her social skills remained poor, partly because of her limited language ability, but largely because she remained uninterested in people. Research into Genie stopped in 1978 when a court allowed her mother to become her legal guardian, and the mother filed a lawsuit against Susan Curtiss and others, claiming that they had used her for their personal gain. Genie now lives in an institution for retarded adults.

## Considering the case studies

We can see that at the time of their rescue, both the Czech twins and Genie displayed considerable emotional disturbance and intellectual deficits. However they went on to have very different outcomes. Why did Genie fail to recover while the other children seemed to be more resilient?

## Case Studies of Privation: Analysis and Evaluation

1. Although the cases of Genie and the Czech twins are in some ways very similar, they had very different outcomes. The twins are believed to have suffered few if any long-term effects, whereas Genie is believed to have remained severely affected. What are the differences between these cases of privation which might have contributed to the different outcomes? Consider:
  - Early experiences
  - Amount of early social contact/isolation
  - Quality of environment
  - Age at time of rescue
  - Type of deprivation experienced (social, emotional, cognitive)
  - Quality of treatment after discovery
  - Presence of mental retardation
  - Any other factors that you think might be important
2. Explain how some of these factors could have affected the outcome of the case study.
3. What do these case studies tell us about the usefulness and limitations of case studies?
4. How might these case studies be reported in ways that are biased?
5. These case studies were recorded retrospectively. Why should this make us cautious about drawing firm conclusions?
6. Why should we be cautious about drawing general conclusions from such case studies?
7. What conclusions can be drawn from these case studies about the effects of privation and the reversibility of these effects?
8. What ethical issues do these case studies raise?