

News

We're damaged inside, but we look **NORMAL OUTSIDE**



Last month, a kindergarten teacher was put on probation for physically abusing a five-year-old girl and making her strip naked in class. A part-time teacher at a childcare centre was also caught on camera dragging a three-year-old boy across the floor and pushing him to the ground. What are the effects of abuse on children? A former victim speaks up

REPORTS: RENNIE WHANG
wreene@sph.com.sg

WHEN he was younger, Mr Teo (not his real name) felt life was meaningless and struggled in his studies.

In class, he would be thinking of what was happening at home.

And if his father was beating up his mother. Again.

Until one year ago, when Mr Teo's family got a Domestic Exclusion Order (DEO) against his father, 66, these beatings happened at least once or twice a month.

Mr Teo, 30, lives with the legacy of his father's actions.

The sales executive said he has anger management problems, and while he has dated, he hasn't been able to maintain a long-term relationship.

While his father is now in a welfare home, Mr Teo said that one of his brothers has started to show similar tendencies.

"I wish we had known where to get help earlier. But it wasn't so easy, we couldn't let my father know or it would

provoke him.

"People in our position have difficulty speaking up. When violence happens, we keep quiet and everyone – employers, people at school – think we are normal."

Mr Teo said his father would drink alone almost daily at the coffee shop near their two-room flat.

This would be in the afternoon or evening, after work. His father switched jobs often, sometimes cleaning hotel rooms or washing cars at a petrol station.

After drinking, his father would get violent, Mr Teo said. He would quarrel with his mother, also 66, then beat her up.

Once, she was in the kitchen and he pushed her to the window and tried to strangle her, Mr Teo said.

Crying

"My mum shouted and we came out of the bedroom. I was crying. She managed to escape, ran out and asked for help. Someone called the police."

In another incident when Mr Teo

was seven or eight, his father pushed his mother on to the bed, slapped her, kicked her and grabbed her hair.

His father would also beat up his two older brothers and him, Mr Teo said.

"My mother would tell us about her bruises. When we were young, we would cry and shout until he stopped. When we got older, we would argue back. Physically, we'd stop him from hitting us," he said.

His father would usually start abusing his mother, but would turn on them when they tried to stop him, he said, adding that much of his school days were spent at the void deck avoiding his father.

He would only return to the flat once his father had gone to bed.

Mr Teo said that being the youngest, he was luckier than his brothers when it came to the abuse. Still, almost every time he spoke with his father, his father would shout vulgarities and insults.

"We hated him for being unreasonable...When talking about school fees, he would explode. He would say he gives us a lot of money, but actually it wasn't enough.

Victims find it hard to trust others

WHEN a child suffers from physical abuse, long-term effects can include feelings of low self-esteem, depression, and disordered personal relationships.

The person may have difficulty trusting others or have violent relationships, said Mrs Seah Kheng Yeow, head of family development and community relations for Pave, an agency that works with victims of family violence.

Victims of child sexual abuse can also have a poor body image, sexual confusion or promiscuity if emotions surrounding the abuse are not dealt with, she added.

She said Pave has seen many cases in which abuse victims face problems later in life, or turn into abusers themselves.

"One man in our men's group shared that his grandfather used violence on his grandmother, his father used violence on his mum, and though he told himself he will not want to be like his dad, he ended up using violence on his wife too, which was why he was mandated for counselling."

Studies have shown that a number of abusers have a history of being abused, said psychiatrist Lionel Lim.

"But whether a victim of abuse becomes

an abuser depends on factors like the person's circumstances – how often abuse took place or how old the victim was, for example – his personality, and whether or not he received help," he said.

Still, timely intervention is a problem as many child abuse cases go unreported as children are often too afraid to report their parents, said psychiatrist Tommy Tan.

Victims

"Usually, outsiders don't suspect it. For example, if a parent who abuses his child takes him to see a doctor for injuries, the doctor isn't likely to suspect the parent," he said.

A Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) spokesman said victims of family violence or child abuse are helped by a network of agencies, including the ministry itself, the police, hospitals and polyclinics, schools, prisons, the courts, and social service agencies such as crisis shelters and family service centres.

The ministry investigated 248 reports of child abuse last year, up from 210 in 2011.

Asked if whether employers are able to check for a history of abuse, the spokesman said records of family violence cases

are not made available to the public or to other organisations to safeguard the privacy of families.

"For organisations working with vulnerable groups, for example, young children or the elderly, we encourage the employers to put in place safe practices and policies with regard to staff recruitment and conduct," he said.

"This includes thorough interview and selection processes for all staff and volunteers and employee self-declarations on criminal and violence records.

Employers should implement good practices on appropriate child management and provide a date training and supervision to their staff."



ST FILE PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS

"He gave my mother a few hundred (dollars) a month but would end up taking the money back for his drinking."

Support

When Mr Teo turned 16, his father stopped supporting the family altogether.

"He said he didn't have to support me and that I had to take care of my own school fees," he said.

Mr Teo started working part-time as a sales promoter at a department store.

After his father retired, the abuse got worse as the senior Mr Teo received his Central Provident Fund money and could fund his alcoholic ways, Mr Teo said.

The constant abuse of his mother worried him. "My mum is quite thin, I was scared she couldn't take (the abuse). I couldn't concentrate in school."

Mr Teo said he wanted to stop school during his N Levels, but eventually finished it.

Mr Teo said he didn't tell anyone in school about his father's ways. "When anyone became concerned with our family's problems, my father would blame my mum for telling others. It would become an argument. So we couldn't talk much to people."

His father's abusive ways has affected Mr Teo and his relationships with people, he said.

He said he sometimes would get heated up over small matters: For example, shouting when service staff take too long. On the roads, he would sometimes get annoyed with reckless driving.

"I would follow (the driver), stop him

and challenge him (to fight)," said Mr Teo.

He also had problems trusting people.

In school, he had few friends and kept quiet most of the time.

And Mr Teo is single.

"This is due to my anger management (issues) and difficulty in communicating," he said.

Mr Teo added his father also had strained relations with relatives and neighbours.

"They dare not visit us."

Mr Teo said that his father's behaviour has also affected his second brother.

"He would stare at others when he thought they were looking at him. He would also quarrel with neighbours. If they were too noisy, he would bang the walls and shout vulgarities."

Seeking help

As his father grew even more violent about a year and a half ago, Mr Teo found out online about applying for a Personal Protection Order (PPO).

He approached Pave, which works with people who suffer from family violence, applied for the PPO and DEO, and, for a year, received counselling to address the impact of the violence.

Today, Mr Teo said counselling has helped him make sense of his situation. He still worries about his second brother, who struggles with low self-esteem and aggressive behaviour.

"I believe many people have their problems (like me). It's just a matter of when is the right time for them to seek help."



Congratulations to the winners of the Cheesy Bites Trio Lucky Draw

1st Prize (1 winner)

Trip for 2 to Gold Coast, Australia, with tickets to Movie World or Sea World (worth \$4,000)



Gold Coast, Australia



G'Day

Tan Wei Ling (S81XX786A)

2nd Prize (2 winners)

Trip for 2 to Hong Kong, with tickets to Disneyland (worth \$3,000 each)



Hong Kong

Sarah Chew Min (S98XX170C)
Zalimah Bte Lias (S16XX144G)