

Interview with Irene about the Who's in Charge? group

[all names and some details changed]

How many children do you have?

I've got 3 children. I've been married twice. My older two are from my first marriage and my youngest child is from my second marriage. The oldest, Kevin, he has a diagnosis of Aspergers syndrome [a form of high functioning autism].

What age was he diagnosed?

Not until 9, and that was really a major problem because he wasn't diagnosed till we moved here and that was because he was displaying very aggressive and bizarre behaviour at school and we were sort of referred on.

Was he aggressive towards you?

Yeah, I remember when he was 2 or 3, him already hitting me and I remember being shocked by that and I didn't understand why he was doing that. In hindsight I would have reacted differently to the way I did.

How did you react?

I probably didn't react at all, because I just found it so shocking that a child would hit their mother

Actually it happens quite often with kids of that age

The strange thing is, I remember, I breast fed him until he was 14 months old and I remember he bit me on one occasion, and I took him off the breast and put him on the floor and he never did it again. But when he was hitting me... well the other problem was, his father had been violent to me and I had left when Kevin was 2 years old so he had gone through a lot of upheavals and I had to go from one shelter to another, so this was all happening at this stage so I was going through a traumatic time at the time, I didn't have any family support so it wasn't long after that at 3 that I self referred to the psychological service. You know we all tried the best that we could.

So there was some violence from when he was 2 years old, right up into his teens?

Oh yes!

How did it change as he got older?

Well he got bigger, and unfortunately for him and for me and the rest of us, he grew very rapidly much earlier on, I'm trying to think if he was taller than me in grade 6, pretty sure it was grade 5 or 6 that he became taller than me. I'm no giant and if you're faced with a child who can be suddenly aggressive it's dead-

set frightening, I remember taking him to the supermarket at ten and he was still having temper tantrums. I mean he would chuck himself along the floor fling his arms around, and punch me if he wasn't happy with something or other.

And he looked normal, he didn't look disabled presumably?

He looks pretty normal.

So how did other people react?

Oh you could see people thinking... the way they'd look... and I've had people tell me that I was a bad mother.

Did they actually say that?

Oh yeah! I've had people actually say that to me because this child looks so normal, so what could be the problem here? Ha, it must be the parenting. It must be the parent.

So what kind of mix of emotions would you have when your child was being violent?

Oh, I just felt like a complete failure, I mean fancy that, you have this child here who is supposed to love you and instead they go and hit you. I mean, that's terrible! He would give me a kiss and a cuddle, but the way he would kiss and cuddle me was just suffocating, it was painful and I have neck problems from where he used to grab me around the neck all the time, he would just grab me and hang from my neck.

So he was affectionate, he was close to you, even though he was being violent?

In his way, but then if you said, this is too much, this is too hard, he would then turn around and punch me. Like - here I am being affectionate to you and you reject me so - whack. It was horrendous!

You mentioned that you were afraid?

Very afraid.

And you felt like a failure, what else, there must have been quite a mix of feelings?

Well they were the strongest ones, I can't think of any other words to describe it.

Embarrassment?

Oh yes, especially at the supermarket, I remember he was there lying on the ground, and sometimes I'd be trying to pin him down so that he was not able to attack someone. Some people would be nice and try and help, but he would then become frightened because this stranger was heading towards him and he would

want to attack them. I had principals threatening me with charges of assault.

Charging you?

Not charging me, well the threat was against me because my child was threatening others, therefore I was responsible. Yet he was in their care. The stuff that I would get from schools was horrendous, I had to be constantly on call, they would ring me up and say "look, come and get him, he's gone off again."

So it was incredibly stressful?

Incredibly! I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. There was no social life because parents wouldn't want to have anything to do with you because you had that kid. There was no time to go anywhere because I had to be on call all the time. At one point he went to a school that was for kids with behavioural difficulties but that was over an hours drive away from home with a small child in the back, she had to go everywhere I went, I mean if he was having another spell where he was just completely off the planet, she was always there, she saw her mother getting hit all the time

How do you think that affected her?

Well, she was this quiet little thing who would hardly say boo. If her brother was going off she would hide under the table or in the cupboard. She's a great kid but she had to deal with a lot, more than any child should have to.

Has she recovered from that?

Since he's left the home, she's made major changes; it's hard to believe that it's the same child. She's full of confidence... the older one as well, she's gone on to the high achievers program at school, she's a bright young girl.

How do you think it's affected the older girl?

She actually wants to become either a solicitor or a psychologist. She feels very close to her brother in some ways, but in other ways she's very happy he's gone. We talked about this just the other day, about all the problems with him in the household. Having him more at a distance, they seem to have become closer. He feels that she is someone who understands him, and she does, but at the moment he's a bit too demanding. We need to put things in place so that he gives us a bit of space.

Can I ask you Irene, you've been in the situation where you were an abused wife and you've been an abused mother, how are they similar or different?

Well, the trouble was because I'd been an abused wife, it affected how I dealt with my son. I remember having flash-backs when I was trying to deal with my

son and it meant that I couldn't really take control of the situation because it scared the living daylights out of me; the moment he would become aggressive I just wanted to back off and get away, I couldn't really take control, as much as I should have done. And the other problem was that if we had understood what we were dealing with earlier [i.e. the Aspergers] that would have made a lot of difference. But going back to your question of how is it similar or different - oh, you give me some challenging questions (Laughs) - well they are similar in that they are both people who should be loving towards you and affectionate and yet they're hitting you; it's still very controlling; both were controlling, but between mother and child there should be this unconditional love that should always be there; that's what's shown in our society, everywhere.

That's what you expect?

That's' what everybody expects, and people just don't understand it; it's very isolating, I mean, I suppose it's more understandable in our society when a husband is violent, but when it's a child who's violent they don't really understand that at all.

There was guilt for instance, shame?

Oh there was a lot of that, and it makes you feel not really like reaching out to people because they couldn't understand, they've got no concept of it at all. It's very much a hidden thing in our society. There are movies and T.V. programmes that show violence between a husband and wife, but is there anything that shows when a mother gets beaten by a child? I can't think of anything.

I can't think of any either.

So, yeah.

So go forward to when he was a teenager, where did you turn for help?

(Laughs) I've done every parenting course imaginable. I just felt that there must be some answer out here, what is it that I'm missing? I did every parenting course because of course the message I was getting was that "she's a bad parent". But it didn't really help; all I got was this mixed up notion and all these different ideas in my head that didn't gel. One day I remember in absolute sheer desperation - I can still feel the pain and the bruises - this particular day I was just extremely desperate and I thought there just must be somewhere that I can get some help. I rang child protection. I got this lady on the phone and she said "are you joking" and I said, "no, I'm not joking". I said, I need protection, you've got child protection but I need protecting. I said "what can you do to help me" and she took my name and address and actually said "well you're likely to loose your other children, the two younger children because you can't get this child under control". And I said, "excuse me I asked you for help,

and what are you doing”?

Did that feel like a threat?

It was a threat! It was an absolute threat. I mean, I couldn't believe it, here I was, I was really struggling, I was covered in bruises, I was in real pain, I can still remember how I was feeling. And then to be told this, it was like, you know, “you just shut up and you suffer in silence, because we're not going to help you. And if you can't work this one out then we'll take your two girls off you”. I mean, they wouldn't take the child that was causing the problem, oh no, they wanted to take the two girls who weren't a problem at all, because they were in danger. It didn't matter about me, so there you go!

That must have felt like a real kick in the teeth.

Oh, it was a kick in the guts, mate, well and truly a kick in the guts. I mean I had so little help from Human Services, I can't understand that. It just doesn't make any sense to me what so ever.

Your girls were at risk?

Well yes they were.

But not from you.

Definitely not from me. I was doing the best that I could. There's only so much one person can do. I remember once he was actually diagnosed with Aspergers I remember ringing the social worker in ... and saying 'hey, guess what, he's just been diagnosed with aspersers', and he said ' I thought so', and this was how many years later, this was 5 years later. It took all that time and it shouldn't be like that.

I think part of the problem is that they have to fit in one of the categories and the categories we've got are pretty arbitrary so in a way you're lucky he's unusual and he fits a category.

Well yeah.

Twenty years ago he didn't because we didn't have “Aspersers” and there are plenty of other really difficult kids who don't fit any of the current categories and may not get any help...

The other problem is that each Aspergers child presents differently, because there are some that are extremely passive and they can be completely overlooked in the school system because they're quiet little things that don't really say much and then there are the ones that make all the noise and are hard to handle.

They're usually the only ones that get assessed.

Exactly, because they're a problem and that's the way they have to deal with them in the Education system, well certainly in Victoria.

Can I ask you about the Who's in charge? group, what do you remember?

It was a few years ago now, but yeah, it was wonderful to suddenly be in a place where there were other parents going through pretty similar stuff; it was like "Oh wow!", I couldn't believe it. It was like "I am not so alone" after all; I mean their children presented as difficult for different reasons and they didn't necessarily have the same diagnosis as my son.

We often get about one per group

Well there you go, but they still had the same behaviours and the parents were still going through the same stuff and they still have people's reactions.

Even worse reactions because some people would give you the benefit of the doubt because your son had a label, if your kid has no label it's entirely assumed to be the parent's fault.

Well yes, that's true, I suppose I hadn't seen it from that point of view because he's had some assistance since he was three so...

What were the other parent's like?

Normal people, just like you and me, I mean some of them were very professional and capable, they were average normal people. One lady ran a business from her own home while dealing with all this stuff at the same time. Wow, this is what they've still managed to achieve. And it was wonderful to see how things changed during the group and how we were each keen to see how the others were coping. I remember that time I turned up with that black eye, because he'd broken my nose... and that was because I'd wanted to change the TV channel.

Yes, that was a pretty dramatic week, I remember it well because another woman had been attacked by her younger son with a baseball bat in the same week.

I don't remember that one so much because that was pretty dramatic for me, because there had been various episodes, where he had bruised me and whatever, that his psychiatrist knew about and had documented and he had been warned that his behaviour had to change but he wasn't able to change... so basically when the nose break happened, that was it. He was taken to a psychiatric institution and he never returned home except for visits at a later stage but basically he went into Human Services' care. That was pretty amazing,

and then eventually his father piped up and said “well I don’t have any problems with him”. So I said “you have him then”, he only lasted with his father for 6 months and now he’s with his grandmother.

That must have been pretty devastating for you – him going to his father’s?
In some ways it was, but in a lot of ways I felt, well hey, he’s now 16 and once a child reaches 16 they’re not really a child any more and I felt that I’d at least managed to look after and care for him to the best of my ability until he was 16. If it had been another age than maybe it was different but he actually left my care the day after he turned 16. I don’t know that there can be any parent more devastated than a parent who’s been subjected to this sort of behaviour; abused not only by the child but also by the community, by the school community, by everybody. I’m now working and this is something I couldn’t have even contemplated before, I’ve only been working four or five months, but it’s like wow, this is where I’ve been. Sometimes I have to remind myself where I’ve been and how far I’ve come because it’s just like – heavens above! And other people, when I tell them, they’re so shocked. It’s almost like, maybe I shouldn’t tell people because it really upsets them, and you can see the shock on their face, but for me it’s like, well it happened, you know; this is what I’ve been through; this is where I’ve come from and this is where I’m trying to go to.

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