Protecting Children by Healing Their Caregivers

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It was a busy night in the emergency department. EMS called to give a heads up—they were on their way with a girl who was “pretty banged up.” They warned us that the story seemed a little fishy. We thought we were ready. The trauma bay was organized; supplies were at the ready and everyone had a role. Within seconds of her arrival, it was clear that no one could ever have been truly prepared. She was unresponsive and unstable. Her injuries were widespread, brutal, and long term. My seasoned attendings would describe it as no less than horrific. There was no question—someone had done this to her.

After she was stabilized, her wounds were gently tended, her body was bathed, her hair was combed. She died several days later. While distressed, many members of her team took consolation in the idea that, after years of torture, she finally got to be loved.

It’s no wonder that every person involved with her care during her hospitalization was so deeply affected by her. How could anyone do this to another person? Or even worse, to an innocent child? “What a monster,” we said. “Only a monster could have done this.”

While anyone would agree that what this abuser—the girl’s mother—did was brutal and wrong, I would also argue that the underlying danger is much more systemic. We call her the “monster,” but I sense that the real monster is still lurking in the shadows, unnamed. I can’t help but try to understand this woman; it is unfair to condemn her without first learning her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child? We preach her story. How were her actions guided by her own history of trauma, abuse, and violent discipline as a child?

Our patient and her family have since visited me in my office. She truly knew her, she has left an open void where there should have been the promise of a healthy, growing, and developing child. Within that void resides fear. I fear for other “hidden children” and the abuse they are at risk for experiencing. I fear...
that her siblings, now living without their mother, will become victims of the instability of being “in the system.” I fear that by turning to punishment as our only solution, we miss opportunities to prevent such tragedy. Despite the darkness, she also brings me hope. I hope that her siblings can rely on each other as a foundation for resilience. I hope that we as a healthcare system can continue to love our patients without question or condition. I hope that we as a society can invest in breaking the cycle of trauma and in supporting parents. I hope that we can create a system in which children can grow up free from abuse.

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References