

Jane's Middle Childhood (Ages 7–12): Trauma and Coping

Sexual Abuse by a Stepparent: Effects and Dynamics

- Children sexually abused by a parent or stepparent often suffer severe, long-term trauma. Studies link such abuse to chronic PTSD symptoms, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and later substance problems ¹. Abuse by a family member (incest) typically produces worse outcomes than abuse by outsiders ². For example, victims of father-daughter or stepfather-stepdaughter incest report feeling deeply “damaged,” with persistent guilt, shame, worthlessness and interpersonal problems ³ ¹.
- Intrafamilial abuse is marked by secrecy and betrayal. Courtois and Kluft note that incest survivors almost always experience secrecy, conflicted loyalty, powerlessness and fear of reprisal ⁴. The average incestuous abuse in families lasts years; prolonged abuse (especially beginning in early childhood) typically leads to avoidant coping and dissociative defenses ⁵. In Jane’s case, a hidden, long-term sexual betrayal by a trusted stepfather would likely induce severe trauma bonding and avoidance – the child may unconsciously dissociate or “freeze” during abuse ⁵ ⁶.
- The family’s response often compounds the harm. Research reports that mothers sometimes disbelieve children who accuse a stepfather ⁷, and communities in that era were often reluctant to discuss child sex abuse. Betrayal trauma theory predicts a child will stay silent if disclosure could jeopardize the family or if authorities are dismissive. As a result, Jane likely learned to keep the abuse secret, deepening her isolation and self-blame ⁴ ⁷.

Dissociation and Trauma in Children

- **Dissociation as a defense:** Traumatized children frequently use dissociation to cope. When an event becomes overwhelming, a child may mentally detach – feeling as though onlookers, “on the ceiling,” or in a dream rather than fully present ⁶. This protects them from unbearable fear or pain. In complex or repeated abuse, dissociation can become an automatic stress response ⁸ ⁵.
- **Manifestations:** In everyday life, Jane might seem to “space out” or stare off, disconnected from class or play. Clinicians note that abused children may later have gaps in memory or sense time loss, as if experiences “happened to someone else” ⁶. Once established, dissociation can impair concentration and classroom learning, and can make the child appear distant or “in her own world” ⁸ ⁹.

Precocious or Adult-Like Behavior as Coping

- **Hypervocal coping:** Some gifted or highly sensitive abused children cope by seeming unusually mature. Jane may have used advanced vocabulary or adult topics as a shield. Psychologically, this can be seen as intellectualization or a “false self.” Alice Miller observed that trauma survivors often over-attune to adult expectations and suppress their own feelings ¹⁰. In practice, Jane’s precocious

manner might have been a survival strategy – appearing capable and compliant to avoid further conflict (akin to a “little adult” persona).

- **Parentification:** A related pattern is parentification – taking on adult roles prematurely. Gifted children (especially in stressed families) often step in to help parents with tasks or emotions ¹¹. Miller and others note that a sensitive child may become caregiver to an adult, concealing her own needs. This matches reports that Jane could have seemed unusually responsible or eager to please, masking the trauma at home ¹¹ ¹⁰.

Giftedness and Masking Inner Turmoil

- Gifted children sometimes develop their intellectual abilities in response to emotional neglect or trauma. Miller argued that a highly intelligent child in a dysfunctional family might learn that academic or verbal skill is what the parents value, thus a way to gain approval ¹⁰. In effect, Jane’s intellect could serve as camouflage for her pain. For instance, her academic precocity or “adult” demeanor might have impressed teachers and neighbors, causing them to overlook her distress. Research on “gifted trauma” suggests these children can appear well-adjusted externally while hiding a “false self” of achievement ¹⁰.
- Gifted kids can also be “invisible victims.” One writer notes that parents sometimes feel threatened by a gifted child’s insight or honesty ¹², reacting with subtle rejection. To cope, the child shrinks her true self. In Jane’s case, her high verbal ability might have effectively masked her emotional suffering; observers would see a smart, talkative child, not realizing that these traits help her endure abuse ¹⁰ ¹².

Early Journaling and Symbolic Writing as Coping

- **Therapeutic writing:** Psychologists have long studied expressive writing about trauma. James Pennebaker’s experiments showed that writing repeatedly about one’s deepest fears and feelings leads to improved mental and physical health ¹³ ¹⁴. Those who put their traumatic experiences into words later reported less depression, anxiety, stress and higher self-esteem ¹⁵ ¹³.
- **Emotional processing:** Pennebaker’s theory is that journaling organizes “chaotic thoughts” and releases pent-up emotions ¹⁶. For a child like Jane, a secret diary or symbolic stories could serve a similar function: a private outlet to express what she could not say aloud. Contemporary guides to trauma emphasize that writing can help children modulate arousal and integrate memories. Thus, Jane’s possible early journals or fantasy writing may have been an unconscious self-therapy, a way to process her abuse and calm her anxiety ¹³ ¹⁵.

Historical Context (1970s–1980s Midwest)

- **CSA awareness:** In Jane’s era, national awareness of child sexual abuse was only just emerging. Until the 1974 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), there was no uniform reporting requirement in the U.S. ¹⁷. Even after CAPTA, many adults in the late 1970s still assumed “good” families weren’t affected or that children would “bounce back,” often minimizing abuse ¹⁸. In the Midwest, a quiet, religious region, discussions of sex and abuse were especially taboo. A girl acting adult or journaling privately would likely be labeled “bright” or “shy,” not recognized as signaling trauma.
- **Psychology of the time:** Professional child psychiatry in the 1970s focused on overt symptoms and crisis intervention ¹⁹. The concept of dissociation in children was known academically (descended

from 19th-century psychiatry) but not part of common vernacular; spacey or withdrawn kids were often thought slow or dreamy rather than traumatized ⁶ . Likewise, the idea that writing could heal was not mainstream: private diaries were seen as normal childhood creativity or kept secrets, not as therapeutic tools. Overall, Jane's precocious self-therapy (journaling, acting grown-up) would have been largely invisible to observers, and her abuse grievously under-recognized by society and even many professionals ²⁰ ¹⁹ .

Sources: Studies of child sexual abuse and trauma in psychology and counseling (summarized above) ⁷ ¹ ⁵ ⁴ ⁶ ⁸ ⁹ ¹⁰ ¹² ¹¹ ¹³ ¹⁴ ¹⁵ ¹⁶ ¹⁷ ¹⁸ ¹⁹ provide empirical support.

¹ ² ⁷ Violence against children by stepparents_Chapter_FINAL.pdf

https://pure.hud.ac.uk/files/20139792/Violence_against_children_by_stepparents_Chapter_FINAL.pdf

³ ⁴ ⁵ Understanding and treating survivors of incest

<https://www.counseling.org/publications/counseling-today-magazine/article-archive/article/legacy/understanding-treating-survivors-incest>

⁶ ⁸ ⁹ Effects | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma/effects>

¹⁰ The Drama of the Gifted Child: Part 2 | Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/suffer-the-children/201802/the-drama-of-the-gifted-child-part-2>

¹¹ ¹² Gifted People Can Be Wounded, Too | Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/living-emotional-intensity/202201/gifted-people-can-be-wounded-too>

¹³ Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing | Advances in Psychiatric Treatment | Cambridge Core

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-psychiatric-treatment/article/emotional-and-physical-health-benefits-of-expressive-writing/ED2976A61F5DE56B46F07A1CE9EA9F9F>

¹⁴ ¹⁵ Can Journaling Help to Heal Childhood Trauma? | Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hidden-wounds/202502/can-journaling-help-to-heal-childhood-trauma>

¹⁶ The Power of Journaling: What Science Says About the Benefits for Mental Health and Well-Being - Child Mind Institute

<https://childmind.org/blog/the-power-of-journaling/>

¹⁷ ¹⁸ ²⁰ Placing childhood sexual abuse in historical perspective – The Immanent Frame

<https://tif.ssrc.org/2012/07/13/placing-childhood-sexual-abuse-in-historical-perspective/>

¹⁹ ojp.gov

<https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/105545NCJRS.pdf>