

BREAKING THE CYCLE



**Adolescent Violence:
Women's Stories of Courage and Hope**

Six women tell their stories of finding ways to deal with adolescent violence with courage and hope

1800 809 722 | anglicarevic.org.au

**BETTER
TOMORROWS**

THE HISTORY OF ANGLICARE VICTORIA



Anglicare Victoria was formed in July 1997 following the merging of three long-established and highly respected Anglican child and family welfare agencies.

The three agencies were The Mission to the Streets and Lanes, The Mission of St James and St John and St John's Homes for Boys and Girls. Anglicare provides an extensive range of support services throughout metropolitan Melbourne and Gippsland for children, young people, families and the broader community.

Anglicare Eastern Youth Services provide a range of accommodation and support services for young people and their families who live in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne.

Meridian Youth and Family Counselling Team's services include centre based and outreach youth and family counselling, groups for young people/parents and secondary consultation.

Breaking the Cycle is a group program for mothers whose adolescents are behaving in violent or abusive ways.

Rosemary Paterson and Helen Luntz from the Meridian Youth and Family Counselling Team at Anglicare Victoria – Box Hill developed this program in response to the increasing number of referrals from mothers whose sons and/or daughters were behaving violently or abusively in the home. Mothers described behaviour such as spitting, kicking, pushing against walls, breaking windows and furniture. Threats and intimidation were common, as well as verbal abuse and stealing.

Based on the positive outcome of group programs to assist women who had survived domestic violence from their partners, it was thought that groupwork would be a powerful way to break the silence and the isolation that surrounds this aspect of family violence. The groupwork program is one of a range of responses offered which includes both family and individual counselling. The women were able to share their ideas, and reflections, and offer each other support and encouragement. They could look at their beliefs and assumptions about adolescence, family interaction and violence, and gather information on practical matters such as housing and legal options.

As part of our research into the area of young people's violence at home, we interviewed six women, who had participated in three different groups. They come from different backgrounds and family situations so their stories are rich and varied, and too valuable to be hidden away. These women very generously agreed to share their ideas, experiences, insights, struggles and successes in the hope that it would assist other women and their families find ways to help their sons or daughters become responsible for their behaviour.

Thank you, *Marg, Janet, Anna, Sue, Sally and Lynne for the significant contribution of commitment, good will, time and energy that you have put into sharing your stories.

Your determination to ensure that violence is stopped inspires and strengthens us all.

*All identifying data has been changed to ensure confidentiality.



Introduction

Some young people develop the idea that they are entitled to get what they want even when this means using violence and/or abuse to intimidate or control members of their families. The violence or abuse is most frequently targeted at mothers although younger siblings may be victimised too.

Often it is the mother who recognises that there is a serious problem and seeks help to find solutions. It is common that both the adolescent and other family members blame the mother and they are not interested in seeking assistance for themselves. The mother may feel guilty, shamed and isolated and find it difficult to talk about the problem with anyone. She can feel, as Janet describes, that 'she is walking on eggshells' as she considers how to handle the situation.

For many women the dilemma they face is that as parents they have a responsibility to continue caring for their adolescent. They are aware that their son or daughter may have experienced illness or disability, witnessed or be survivors of violence or abuse, have low self esteem or have suffered significant loss or grief. However they also recognise that

Violence creates more problems. It can be difficult and frightening to take a stand and hold the young person responsible for their behaviour. The women have concerns that the violence will escalate or that their relationship with their son or daughter will be severed. Calling the police or asking the young person to leave prematurely are last resorts that mothers hope they will never have to consider.

The book also implicitly raises difficult questions from which we should not hide. Can we understand the complexity of such family situations only through hearing the voices of mothers? Will telling these stories, albeit in a disguised form, assist in affirming the women or will it hurt still fragile relationships. No doubt the women who chose to participate in the creation of this book, struggled with this question, as did those who chose not to participate. Both deserve recognition for their courage.

Associate Professor Dorothy Scott, OAM, PhD
School of Social Work
University of Melbourne

Acknowledgements

- All the women who took part in the research, particularly the ones who agreed to share their stories.
- Helen Luntz and Rosemary Paterson for the development of the group work program.
- The Precision Foundation for their financial support of this publication.
- The University of Melbourne - Anita Morawetz Scholarship which assisted with the original research project.
- CEBS (Church of England Boys Society) for their on going financial support of the Meridian Program.
- Dorothy Scott for her willingness to write a foreword.
- Rosemary Paterson and Sue Sealey (Anglicare Box Hill) for their commitment to making this publication happen.
- Helen Landau for her theoretical contribution and ongoing support.
- The Meridian Team for their achievement of continuous service excellence.

Contents

Janet's Story.....	8
Anna's Story.....	14
Sally's Story.....	18
Sue's Story.....	24
Lynne's Story.....	29
Marg's Story	33

The following stories, by Janet, Anna, Sally, Sue, Lynne and Marg are deeply moving and courageous accounts of their journeys through violence. As you will read, they continue to work towards non-violent relationships and have found various ways to achieve their goals. We thank them very much for their generosity and commitment.

JANET'S STORY...

My son Jack is 15 years old. After a long time I finally admitted to myself that his problem was quite serious and that it wasn't going away unless I changed something. It wasn't that the problem had deteriorated it was just I had come to a point where I realised that something had to be done. I finally admitted to myself that there was a problem there. At first I hadn't thought of my son as violent. I had thought that violence was holding a knife to someone's throat and Jack wasn't doing that. He was threatening to hit me and bashing holes in walls.

It was very hard to admit what was happening because I felt I was dobbing on my son. I was worried that if I told people they would get the wrong impression and his self esteem would be damaged. He likes to present well and I didn't want to destroy that facade, because my role as his mother is to look after him, to protect him. I was always trying to change things, but whatever I did was ineffective. He brought me to the point where I was literally speechless. I would walk off shaking my head thinking 'I have no control here at all. Nothing.'

I think I felt confused by what was happening. That was the uppermost feeling but once I had spent time with the group I realised I was actually afraid. I was afraid to discipline him

because I was afraid of what he would do. I was concerned about my husband and my older daughter, both of whom had had major accidents and needed care. My husband had a head injury and had trouble with comprehension and on one level he was aware but he wasn't really able to support me. I think I tried to protect my daughter from it as well because she needed love and support and care following a severe car accident and I didn't want to rock the boat for her. I was walking on eggshells trying to keep everything as comfortable as possible for everyone.

When I did decide to do something and try some strategies – I withdrew from my son a lot and I set some limits – things did get worse. He actually became very violent. He threw things and destroyed things in the house. He was very threatening and then ran away. I had been told that sometimes things can get worse when you try to change. I continued and now there is a decrease in his violent behaviour, he doesn't step over the lines quite so heavily any more. I can see him controlling himself sometimes.

I had joined the Breaking the Cycle group for mothers who have an adolescent who is violent or abusive. I had seen an advertisement in the local paper and at first

I wasn't sure that it was for me because I didn't really think of him as violent, but when I spoke to the leaders they asked what he was doing and said that it was violent and unacceptable. I didn't tell my son what the group was for. I thought he wouldn't like me talking about him and he might get angry. I felt that it would just be another thing for him to deal with.

The group helped me make sense out of what was happening, and helped me to keep holding the line. It also helped me get back my self confidence. I didn't realise just how much self confidence had gone out the window, just disappeared, without me really realising. I got back my self confidence that I

“ The group helped me make sense out of what was happening... ”

wasn't a bad parent and that helped me take a stand. In hindsight it's crazy but I needed permission to believe that I could take a stand and even ring the police if necessary. If it had been a stranger I wouldn't have any hesitation in calling the police, so it wasn't really a lack of confidence but I was wanting to protect my son, protect his image. I think if I didn't have the support I wouldn't have had the change of thinking. So I don't think it would have happened.

He had been through a lot: his father had a permanent head injury and his sister had needed constant care for two years so he'd really missed out. But my son had to realise

that there are borders. He has to learn self control or his relationships in the future will be really difficult.

I had to let go of a lot of things and realise that the violence needs to be dealt with now. I had to change my focus from things like my son doing V.C.E. and thinking he needs to get through that so I won't rock this violence boat because he needs his energy to study. I hadn't really known what I could do. At one stage I spoke to the school counsellor because my son was wagging school. He had told me he was doing it on a regular basis, meeting particular people at a particular time and place. I went to the school after six months, because they weren't picking it up and asked them if they could deal with it quietly so that my son wouldn't know it came from me and the counsellor turned around and said 'you know we don't get too many parents dobbing their children in.' So she reinforced the whole thing that I shouldn't tell anyone about the problems.

At this stage I feel reasonably confident that I can continue to take a stand. When Jack was using really foul language recently, and it was really foul even for him, I said 'Jack I won't have you talking to me like that' and that was rare thing for me to say because I'm still afraid. He said 'there's nothing you can do about it' and I said 'yes there is' and he said 'what' and I said 'I can have an intervention order taken out against you' and that floored him, it absolutely floored him, the thought of judges and courts and things. So I know that's up my sleeve and he knows that's up my sleeve.

I think in the future if I find that I'm wavering between wanting to protect my son and standing up to his behaviour I would try and visualise what I would do if he was a stranger. I think I would try and challenge him, like I did when he was much younger. I think he was about ten when he and his two cousins vandalised a house that was empty. The police weren't called but all the parents supervised the kids who had to sand and scrape for days to fix it up. Another time

“ Society doesn't talk about this problem... ”

we had the situation where he put through a fraudulent credit card transaction and I found out about it just by accident. I had the transaction removed and I made him go to the company where he had bought the goods and apologise. I told him the bank manager was not going to prosecute, but that it was an option. I think perhaps I could, if it was a really serious thing, I think perhaps I could follow through. What I realise is that if a parent doesn't do the right thing at the time her son wouldn't have much future.

However it is very difficult to make your child understand that you're being supportive. I don't think my son understands why I'm doing what I'm doing. I don't think he has a good hold on it. I think he might have felt rejected initially when I took a stand. He did actually tell a friend that he wanted her family to adopt him, so I think there was this sense of 'my family don't love me anymore', but he's come around fairly quickly to see that that's not the case. He didn't think I had a life and I think, I'm hoping, that it is slowly dawning on him that I do.

He's now much more reasonable.

I think he feels less pressured. He was complaining to his school counsellor that I pressured him, that I was going into his room and asking too many questions, so I've taken a few steps back. It's more relaxed now. That feeling of being afraid when you come in the door and of being careful what you say has gone. I don't have to track his moods and I don't have the feeling of walking on eggshells.

Before I came to the group I really didn't even admit to myself what I was feeling and that's what I find so horrifying now. I think the turning point is that separation that you see when you think 'would I accept this from someone in the street or someone boarding in my house.

Society doesn't talk about this problem.

It's usually the father who's being violent, or the mother or perhaps an adolescent being violent on the streets. You don't ever see it depicted or written about or spoken about an adolescent being violent towards the parents in the home. Since doing the group I've been brave enough to mention it to a few people and they say 'oh, we have that problem all the time – the bedroom door, we no sooner get it back on its hinges than it's off again.' You think perhaps a good parent wouldn't let that happen. Good parenting doesn't allow that.

For me personally I believe that my son missed out on a lot of parenting because his father was so ill for such a long time and that is still continuing. I think it's a fairly devastating thing for a child to see this happening. I think extenuating circumstances make it hard for a mother to confront. Mothers want to try and see their child through. Make it better. I think I was trying to be both parents, trying to make up for what his dad can't do. Yes, I was trying very hard, and I was making excuses for him

because even though it was a devastating experience, these things do happen and you have to cope with them. I think it is really difficult for a mother to have an understanding about why these things are happening and still hold him responsible. I can't do them both at once. I can do one. I can deal with one part and then I need space. We both need space away from each other. I'm usually the one to initiate that. Then later, not necessarily the same day I will try to sort it out. I try very hard to get him to understand. I used to get to the point where I would say 'now Jack, we have to sort this out' but now I'm capable of saying 'well if he doesn't want it sorted there is nothing I can do.'

You know I had already reared an adolescent. My daughter is six years older than my son and she had really tested things out, so I knew I had strategies but somehow I had lost them. It wasn't that I was unable to use them. They'd gone. It's a strange thing. It didn't really dawn on me until the group. I was horrified. I still am, that it just went away and why it went or why I didn't continue to use those strategies with our son, I just don't know.

I heard a radio program about battered wives and I thought 'that's me, this is how I'm behaving' and it was a bit scary. It's one thing to listen to a radio show and think that's interesting but it's nothing to do with me but then you think 'oh oh, whoops'.

I think I can take a stand on the violence. I hope that my stand is firmly planted in the middle, that the borders are there and I must not allow him to step over them again, for his sake as much as mine. There is still a tiny part of me that wavers, it's still very small, it's a protective thing. It's just being a mother. You remember that little infant and think if I was a good mother it wouldn't be happening. If I could just find the right words or do the right thing, it wouldn't happen.

The hardest thing I've had to do with my son in the last couple of years is when he ran away from home and I asked a social worker to come and talk to him, but he refused to see her so I had to ask her to write a note explaining that she would help him find a place to sleep rather than being on the street. He didn't like this. He saw it as a rejection, so it was really difficult for me to stand my ground and say 'If you're unhappy here you really have to make a decision. Although he saw it as a rejection initially I think he realised the practicalities of the situation. But there is still a little part of me that sort of thinks 'oh, isn't that an awful thing to do', to tell your son that, 'if you're not happy here move on.' It's a very difficult thing to do.

“ Actually, confronting the violence has been positive... ”

He also saw me ring the community police one day and he ran off. I feel a lot clearer about what is happening so my knickers aren't in such a twist. Recently he agreed to be assessed for ADD. Until my behaviour changed he had refused to believe that there was the potential for him to have a problem.

The idea of a 16 year old with ADD and not too much common sense being out of home is very hard. We don't like to give them a sense of rejection. We want them to feel loved and accepted like they do on 'Home and Away.' I think that I'm afraid I'll lose him, I think I'm afraid that he will up stakes and go. I think that's what I'm afraid of. Actually, confronting the violence has been positive. I think he is more relaxed. I'm more relaxed. Everyone else is more relaxed. It's been a positive.

Postscript, May 2001

Reading the above brought back a lot of the incidents that had happened into my mind so it was a little emotional reading and being reminded of them.

Although Jack is much more settled and mature in his behaviour now, the feelings and emotions that went along with our past experiences during our 'time of turmoil' are still quite close to the surface.

The negative emotion that I identify most is fear, i.e. if Jack appears a little moody I wonder if it will escalate into violence. I am still confident though that I have learnt not to let Jack step over my boundaries of what is acceptable despite feeling fearful.

In retrospect I feel that the most useful change I made (along with attending the group) to help alter the relationship with Jack was 'letting go', while trying to keep the lines of communication open with him.

- He left school without finishing his V.C.E.
- He took a casual job cooking fast food.
- He sometimes only worked 6 hours a week.
- He often didn't wash or change his clothes.
- His clothes looked like rags because he couldn't afford to buy new ones.
- He stayed out all night or longer and didn't ring to let us know that he was O.K.
- He sometimes appeared depressed and would sleep for almost 24 hours.
- He stopped going to Scouts which had always been important to him.
- He smoked tobacco.
- He smoked marijuana.

Accepting that I couldn't change any of these things was difficult to say the least. I sense (rather than know) that 'letting go', combined with maintaining those boundaries about how he behaved

towards me, along with the difficult task of maintaining **communication** was in the long term the key to change for the better (**communication** usually meant - I listened, he talked).

During all this time Jack has been living at home with his family. We have seen dramatic changes in Jack's behaviour and attitude since his 18th birthday in February 2000.

He spent his 18th birthday away from home with friends. At midnight on his birthday he rang me to say that he was sorry for the hurt he had caused me, broke down and cried (I suspected that alcohol may have had a part to play in this!).

There is no doubt that his regret was and is sincere though, as his behaviour since that time has been changing quite dramatically.

Almost 12 months ago he enrolled himself in a Traineeship in Information Technology. He has been steaming ahead with enthusiasm and is a valued member of the company he works for.

He occasionally talks of difficult things that happened in the past and expresses his feelings in mature way.

He can explain why something we had done had made him angry or has said, 'I don't know why I did half the things I did, but I know parents are people too'.

Our life is not a rose covered cottage existence by any stretch of the imagination but it now feels more 'normal'.

ANNA'S STORY ...

I migrated here because I wanted a better life for my children. I wanted them to have a better future. I came from Malta and sometimes it has been very hard. I could ask my cousin to pay for a ticket to take me back but I won't leave because I made a choice and nothing comes easy. I want to give my children a good education.

I was having trouble with my son. He is a teenager, 15 years old and I was worried because he was beginning to act like his father who was never a good example, he has a hot temper. I thought this was a good time to help my son because he's getting stronger and his temper becomes worse. I thought I could handle my son, could correct him, but the older he grows the stronger his temper becomes. He is not a bad boy, but he has his moments. I try to speak to him nicely, gently, to reason with him but in the heat of the moment he can't control himself.

My son gets aggressive. He uses language to defend, to attack, to humiliate, even towards me. He's always causing trouble with his two sisters, he pinches or pushes. I never leave him and my little one alone. When he is angry, I don't know, he could hurt my little daughter. He's a big boy and I want to avoid that occasion. I wanted the violence to stop. I wanted to get a message to him that violence

is not for my house. I was desperate to help my son and I thought to myself 'I didn't want aggression or violence'. I don't think my son would reach the stage of physical violence because he knows that my husband has a restraining order against him. With violence there is always a price to pay and it is no good. It has to change. I want him to grow up a little bit gentle and considerate of family life and family needs.

My husband has many problems. He has lately developed a psychiatric disorder. We had to separate but I still try to give him a little time to understand him and to help him. I had to take out a Restraining Order because he couldn't accept the separation and he was sleeping outside my house in the car. He was watching who came and went from the house.

I was under so much pressure that I lost 8 kilo in 2 months. I was on my own, crying all day and night, and in the middle of the night I had to go around the house, around the windows to see if he was still there. I had to call the police. My husband didn't think he had a problem. He was worse than a baby. I can never leave the children alone with him. He only sees the children with me.

When I came to the group it helped because it made me realise that there were some

people worse off than me, and also that I had to change my attitude sometimes. I am a compassionate person. I am not sarcastic or ironic but the group helped me see that when you give an answer you can sometimes give the wrong impression, so I learnt how to answer differently sometimes. For example if my son is nasty I don't tell him off immediately at that bad moment, I wait and call and talk to him later. This is better because he tells me more. He tells me why he behaves. He communicates more when we are calm and relaxed. He used to say 'You never listen, you don't listen, you don't listen'. And I say to him 'how can I listen if you push everyone around or you yell?'

Now I stay quiet, calm, then go back and talk again. Sometimes I can give some answers. He hasn't changed a lot. He responds positively and then he forgets because on another occasion he behaves exactly the same. I keep on speaking calmly. In the end the decision is mine about what to do. Here the group respects your freedom, respects your choice. They say you don't have to put up with this.

“ He uses language to defend, attack, to humiliate... ”

In my culture love is important. When you create a family you have to face all the challenges and struggle to keep the family unit. We try to keep the family united despite problems, sometimes we keep the family even though there is violence or abuse, but

you do change. You emigrate, you integrate with people and customs from other countries and other ideas so in a way we are lucky because we can consider the best of both cultures.

Also in my culture you do not tell outsiders the problem in the family. Only the mother of one of my son's friends knew my son had some problems. Sometimes she would talk to him and I could see a difference. It was very hard to come to the group but I was desperate to help my son and I thought to myself, I don't want aggression or violence to continue.

Some mothers talked about getting a restraining order for their children or sending them away but for me I could never do that. It changes the family if a child leaves. Maybe if there is physical violence or if the child has a weapon and it is very dangerous for other members of the family then that's okay, but I think it is better if you can stop the violence problem in other ways. It doesn't matter if the mother and father separate because if they don't get on that's their business, but it's different with the children because that is a blood relation. I think that the separation of the mother and the child should be avoided. You're the mother, you've given birth to the child so it's very important to preserve that relationship. If the child is out of the home we all miss important days of his life and our life together. It is better to stop the violence. The child needs to learn to change his attitude, not because he's going to be restrained but because he has been helped to understand. My son knew that I had a restraining order on his father so he knew that could happen with violence, but I think he has to learn to change his attitude. For me the problem is

the mother's. Mothers should receive more help in dealing with the child, help to talk to the child and they should get help together, not separately. You see childhood doesn't last long, five, six years. If you give support to both of them, it's more beneficial and more constructive. But if you separate them the children will learn that to solve a problem they have to separate.

I thought maybe I was doing something wrong, I thought I don't have my family here, maybe it is something that I do. I had to make all the decisions even when my husband was home. My son keeps on telling me that it is my fault. I think it is my job to communicate better so that he learns to communicate. If I can solve the problem with communication, he will learn and when he's older he will solve a problem the way we did.

My son understands that it is his problem too. He knows I am going to the group and every time I purposefully leave things out for him to read. When my son was with a group of friends over the holidays, a boy got bashed. My son hadn't taken any part in the beating but he had been there so I took him to meet

the boy and his father and I wanted him to apologise and show remorse. He has learned a lesson.

I want him to understand that despite the difficulty, despite sometimes the violence, there is a way out, to solve a problem, there is a way to compromise. My daughter hates this word compromise. She thinks there is nothing wrong with me. She thinks I've been a hero. She told me she wouldn't be as patient or considerate as I have been. She tells me that she will never do what I do, but we'll wait and see when she is a mother.

Postscript, May 2001

Today it is the year 2001. My son is eighteen and a half years old.

My separated husband died suddenly at 52 years. I do not have regret or remorse. I helped him until his last day. I do miss him despite all. He was a very tormented man.

My son has completed his Year 12. He just passed. During his Year 12 he lost his father and we had to sell the family home. My son moved out but he came back after 2 months. For him it was too much, but today he is a

“ My son understands that it is his problem too... ”

young man who is working and one day he may go back to study. He needed to grow, he needed his independence, his freedom. He's enjoying his father's car and his cellular phone. He has his days but he is still at home. I see him growing day by day and if he was out there who knows what the outcome could have been?

He's not paying for his living at home, but I don't mind. He is not helping at home but I'm patient and waiting until he gets older and more understanding. He hates to be told things but as his mother I will wait, hope and pray. One day he will judge himself and see how life is in reality.

He is not on drugs. He is not a gambler. He is not a 'women hunter'. He does drink moderately but he is only eighteen and a half!

He is working 6 days a week. His boss loves and respects him.

I hope to have a good man one day around my life when he has completed his maturity. I have another teenager coming up (my youngest daughter) and I do hope that my son's experience has been a learning process for her and for myself so that we get a positive balance in our lives.

A woman can divorce a partner but can't divorce a child unless a life is in danger! To be a mother is the most difficult job and we do not learn at school to become one. We learn the hard way.

SALLY'S STORY...

My son, Bill is eighteen, nearly nineteen. Until a short time ago he was living with me and his father and my older son. We'd been going through a lot of drama with Bill and I'd got to the stage where I was very frightened. I got to the stage that if I knew he was going to be home, my stomach turned and churned. If I drove into our driveway and his car was there and I knew he was there, I felt like turning round and driving out again. Initially I guess I'd let him get away with a few things, to a certain extent because I really didn't know how to handle it and I felt that he got the upper hand on me.

It all happened, I suppose in the space of six months when it went from just small things. He did Year 12 last year and didn't do as well as what he wanted. He socialised and of course we were down on him a bit for doing that and he started reacting a bit during the year and then as the year got on towards the end it got worse.

The start of it was one day on a Saturday. His main thing was that he would throw things around the kitchen if I was cooking a meal and he was in one of his moods. One time he emptied a salt container, he emptied a spaghetti container. He just made a mess of my kitchen. He took all the crockery out of the cupboard and stacked it all on top of each other on top of the stove and of course it fell on the floor. 'Oh oops', he said, 'it broke'.

This one particular Saturday morning I called him to go to work, he was working part time at a petrol station and he'd been out late the night before, he didn't start until 1 o'clock in the afternoon. He said, 'my back's too sore, will you ring them up and tell them'. I said, 'No, Bill. It's your responsibility. If you don't want to go in that's fine but I'm not ringing up.' Because I know he suffers from a bad back but it was more that he was tired from the night before and I wasn't ringing up for that sort of thing. I had rung up for him before when I knew he was ill but I told him that if he didn't want to go that was up to him, but I wasn't going to make excuses.

This was really the first bad outrage that he had and he just got angry - I was home on my own at that stage, and he got angrier and angrier. He put his fist through a wall, tried to do it through another one, we only got the

“

He put his fist through a wall... ”

imprint, he didn't get right through and he was virtually going to go into each room and destroy the house – smash the windows, do everything. He threw one of our chairs – we had an empty block of land next door,

threw it over the fence there and I was very frightened. I told him I was going to call the police and he said, 'huh, call the police on your own son.' I sort of said to him 'If that's what it takes'. Anyway, he said then that he was leaving and he got into his car and drove off down the driveway and I was just sort of left shattered. I mean I was a shaking wreck at that stage by his violence. I really didn't think that he was capable of such behaviour, that something that I just wouldn't do for him triggered all this off. And then he was back a few minutes later. He came back to get his licence so that when the police found him they'd know who he was. So there was the threat there that you know 'I'm going to do away with myself now'.

And of course that just tore me apart. He did go then and – I didn't know where he was for a few days but I found out that a family at school had taken him in and he stayed there for quite a few weeks.

And then he came back again, we had a talk, a family conference about it, he aired a few things. It wasn't just me not ringing up for him, there was a build up of things. He doesn't have a very good relationship with his father and I think that he couldn't take it out on his father and he was taking it out on me. I can cope with that to a certain extent but when it got to the violence part – that was just the end of me. Just after that we went away for a few days and he and his brother stayed at home. The day that I came back, I asked him could he could help get something out of the car and he said 'I've been doing what I like when I like'. He wouldn't do anything to help. He didn't put his dirty clothes out. He came and went as he pleased, so I sort of made up a list of 'if you're going to live in this house,

this is what I expect of you'. He had got a job at this stage and we told him that he had three months and then we expected him to pay some board and he said 'well, how do you think you're going to get that out of me?' He wasn't willing to do any of the things which were things which really didn't even need to be written down, I mean most families you just do it.

His violence wasn't so bad again at that stage until one Friday night he did exactly the same thing again for some reason. I was making a cheesecake because we were going out on Saturday night and he walked in the middle of me making it and wanted me to stop. You really can't stop making a cheesecake so I explained to him that yes I would sit down and speak with him after I had finished but that wasn't for him, he wanted me to sit there and then. So the violence started again. I had things streaked from one end of the kitchen to the other. This time he left with a knife out of the drawer so again it was a threat to hurt himself.

Anyway he ended up going then. That's when he went and he stayed with another family for about 3 weeks. He virtually hasn't been home to live since. He's now living in a flat, not very far from us, and things are a lot better between us. I am a bit surprised about that but because he is away from the situation I guess it's easier. He just didn't like being told to do things.

Bill never did these things when my other son or my husband was home, only when I was there. He never did it when his father was there because he knew his father would have probably smacked him down – which is what he told me to do, but I couldn't deal

with it in that way. For one thing he was bigger than me, and I've never taken that approach any way.

I think I was an easy target for him to take his frustrations out on. I was probably trying to make things easy for him in the family, I guess, because of how it's been with the family situation over the years, I've always thought my husband has been too hard on the children. Only because he did it hard himself and that's what he expected his boys to do. I've never taken that. I did it hard myself, and therefore I didn't want my boys to do it. So there's been conflict about that over the years and I guess I tried to compensate to a certain extent. I've ended up the meat in the sandwich and I think everybody in my family has taken advantage of me to some extent. I think Bill grew over the years to understand how I feel about his father with him and I just felt that perhaps he thought I was an easy target. I think he believed that I should let him do whatever he wanted. I mean that never came out in so many words but I think he always felt let down in a situation if I went against him and stood by his father and not him. Now, on occasions, I might have but that was when I felt he had done the wrong thing.

I think there was an expectation that I should hand over money when he wanted it. It's just part of being a mum. You know all kids ask for money for this that and the other.

I think probably I let him get away with a little bit too much without paying it back. I mean I'm not saying that I gave him everything that he wanted. He had a car which he couldn't afford to keep. This is why he had to have this part-time job but you know trying to talk to

kids these days is just like talking to a brick wall sometimes, and he expected us to just keep handing money out to him all the time.

The most useful bit of coming to the group was to be with people where you could say what you'd been going through and they didn't doubt you. I didn't tell a lot of people about what was happening but I did tell a number of my friends and there were a couple who were quite close and I heard from word of mouth that 'she must be exaggerating,

“ **She must be exaggerating...** ”

he can't be' because they've known him since he was a baby. I found that very hard to take. They felt that I was exaggerating about how my son had been carrying on because he never behaved like that anywhere else. I was the only one he behaved like that towards. Coming to the group, nobody doubted what you said and, well I heard worse cases, I thought mine was bad but there were people there that were in worse situations than what I was and, not that that was a feeling of relief for me, but at least you knew that there wasn't anybody doubting you. None of my group of friends had that sort of problem. To me that was one of the main things. My friends just couldn't comprehend. Even when he was doing the things that he was doing at home, I was quite confident that he could walk into somebody else's home and be his normal self.

I got a feeling of strength from the group. I think just the mere fact that other people were there gave me strength. I've got a couple

of friends that are very supportive of me, but it's not something that you go and tell anyone. I came away from that group each time feeling a little bit stronger. I think that by talking about it there made me see that perhaps I was allowing it to happen to a degree and just by picking up on the way we did things, different things during the night, it just gave me a different perspective on how to handle it.

The big thing that we ended up doing was to stop him coming into the house because he was coming back into the home when we weren't there and taking things which was against what we wanted. I packed all the things in his room and stored them out in our back shed. Now that was the hardest thing I have ever done. I was sick in the stomach but I knew that something had to be done for him to realise that I wasn't going to stand for this sort of thing any longer. I wondered whether I was doing the right thing and what his reaction was going to be. I was warned about his violence and because he'd threatened two or three times to take his life. Although it never came to anything, I knew what he could say it again and he could do it. He was very angry because I'd done that. I'd called round to his work to give him a letter and I told him what I was trying to do and then when he came around he found that it had actually happened. Now to make things worse his brother had been in to get something and had left the shed open and he was very angry to find that anybody could have taken his things. He was very angry and he was never going to see us again. In the end he rang up the next week and asked me to do something for him which I did.

The group gave me a lot of support, I think

only one person when I told them what I had done with his things, didn't agree with it. Everybody else did. A couple of people said 'I wish I could take that stance.' I think it made me feel stronger every time I came away from that group. I mean it didn't always last for

“ **It made me feel stronger...** ”

that long. I didn't feel as good say two days later as I did on that initial night but it gave me enough fortitude. My husband's way was helpful too. I guess he wasn't as emotional about it as I was and he felt that he was better out of the house. I guess he gave me support in that way – tried to make me realise that I couldn't go on being like I was with him around. Deep down in my heart, I knew that I'd got to the stage that yes I could come out and say it, but before that I hadn't, I didn't want that to happen. I was sort of putting up with it hoping that it would go away, but I knew really deep down in my heart that it wasn't going to.

Now if there was anything in the way of destruction round the house, I'd have no hesitation in calling the police. I did tell him that. I don't know whether he believed or not. I think he knows that I won't tolerate that behaviour again. I would hope that he does. I don't really want to think about it. I don't want it to happen.

We have never really sat down and discussed his behaviour since he has been gone and he has been coming back visiting the home. I just think it's a little bit too early for that yet. I'd like him to initiate it as well. Now whether

he's prepared to do that I don't know as time goes on and he hasn't said anything, but I'd like to think that we could sit down and talk about it.

I was really upset about him leaving but I knew something had to happen. I couldn't really believe that I'd done it but I had to do something. I had to take some space for myself but he was only eighteen and he's out on his own and that's not what I wanted for my son, or myself, or for the family situation.

I never thought my son would do the things he did. I never thought I would have the need to do anything like this. Who wants to do their kids into the police? I am just not that type of person. I would try and go the other way and keep the peace and perhaps that's been my problem.

Maybe I should have been stronger all the way through but I've done what I felt at the time was the right thing. I can look back and say now, as I just did, 'hey maybe I should have been...,' but that's in hindsight. At the time, right through their lives I've always felt that anything that I've done has been for them. I suppose I've wondered if I was responsible for my son's behaviour. Perhaps to a degree I should have been a little bit stronger. I guess even with my husband, I think he's a bit overpowering and maybe the boys could see that towards the end. Maybe Bill was seeing that well dad can say these things. I don't like to cause arguments. I would rather say nothing and step out of it.

I don't intend to put myself back into that situation of feeling how I did. I'm just not going back to that again. I guess I want to try and find an inner strength to step away from the situation and to be able to stand up to

him to a degree without violence, without - I'd like to say without confrontation but I don't know that that is possible. People told me just to walk away from him when I didn't want confrontation and I did try to step away from it, until he calmed down, not to wipe it away, but wait until he calmed down, but that's when he went and sat in front of my car and when I went to drive out of the driveway he wouldn't move.

Bill seems a lot happier. When he comes home now he has a whole different approach. When he came back after the first time he left just after Christmas I think the main thing was that things between us really weren't sorted out. He sort of slipped back into the house and we did sit down and have a chat and he sort of seemed all right but really there were no guidelines put down for him and he just slipped back into 'I'll do what I like, when I like.'

It's made it a whole lot easier for me because I've had this time, this space with him being away from the situation and having gone to the group. I mean it was happening day to day at one stage and I just had no time to pull myself back together again because as I said if I drove into the drive and his car was there...

“ **When he comes home now he has a whole different approach...** ”

It's really difficult where you draw the line. I'm still finding that very hard to deal with. I still find it very hard to deal with going back into

his room, so completely empty - gone. A lot of people say to me 'he'll probably come back again' but I don't think he will. I think that he's probably established himself. I just don't feel that I've finished being a mother to him and he's gone. And I'm finding that very difficult to deal with. I mean I know he's turned 19 years of age now and he's working, but I still just feel that it was cut off too soon. I feel that I still should be making sure that he's eating, making sure that he's doing all these things. Most of the time I cope with it and I know it had to happen but I still have this real empty feel, and I don't think that'll ever go.

You know he said he'd come around on Mothers Day. I was expecting him early but he didn't come until really late and I wasn't home. He rang and said he was sorry but I was really hurt. Sure he had a late night but it was one day. He came round. He left me some roses. He rang me later on. Am I expecting too much of him? I don't know.

I mean it is a whole new ballgame now. I hope that I would take a stand in the future. Depending on what was actually happening, he probably would still show anger but I think, from seeing how he lives now I really don't think that he would go so far again. When he was staying with the school friend, I was talking to his mother and she was having trouble with her son and she said that Bill had done her son a big favour by being there. Now isn't that very contradictory? It was good to know that he could behave like that. At least I knew then that I had done something right in his upbringing.

There have been a couple of times when I've had to tell him I wasn't prepared to go along with what he wanted. He wanted us to go

guarantor on his flat and we said no, because we didn't know his flat mate and we didn't want him to feel that if he didn't pay the rent we would do it for him. He was very angry but he rang back later and apologised. I grabbed the side of the bath, I was actually sitting on the side of the bath and I held on to it and I thought, 'Is this my son speaking?' He said "I know I've been living at Matt's and having everything done for me just like I did at home and I have to take more responsibility.' I was overwhelmed, I really was. I feel a lot more positive about the whole situation. I just don't know whether it would have all happened the same if we had have been able to stay together as a family. I think that he would have had a few too many hassles as a family unit.

Postscript

My son is now doing really well. He has returned home and he is doing an apprenticeship. I think being clear that violence was not acceptable helped.

Things have really turned around for him and us. He is not violent. He seems a lot more settled in his life. He's still got things to learn like saving money but I suppose he will come to that. Occasionally he even goes out on jobs with his dad which would never have happened before. It's hard to look back and think about what it was like. It seems so far away and things are so different now.

SUE'S STORY...

I have two daughters. Susan, my older daughter is 13 and my younger one, Tilly is 10. My husband, Alan, and I have been struggling to find ways to deal with Susan's problems for a very long time. She'd been hyperactive since she was two. My father said I deserved her, that she was a payback for me being such an awful child. It wasn't until much later that I stopped and thought about all the things that had been said and realised that I came from an abusive household. My father was violent and my mother used to set me up with him. I finally realised that I was doing the same thing to my children. I set them up too and then I'd get angry and smack them. What I was doing was reliving my parents' patterns and it didn't help, but when I became aware of that I realised that I could do things differently with my children. I don't blame my parents, although I did for many years, because my parents did what their parents did, and then I did what my parents did. You only do what you know. I had to realise for myself what I was doing and change it.

For years I've tried to work out what was wrong with Susan. She's gone to doctors and others because we kept asking 'Why does she do all these things?' All that did was put all the blame on her. We were told she had Tourettes Syndrome. I'd actually channelled

all of the blame onto her, so now I'm taking that blame off, throwing it out the door and working on her as a person instead of focussing on all her problems because that only isolates her even more. I've done a lot of work to change myself and so has my husband. We don't fight as much any more, because we sit down and talk about things. Because we're not fighting anymore the children are much more at ease.

“ I actually left home for a few days... ”

With Susan it is still really hard. If she is riled I can't calm her down, as I can't communicate with her. When you're in an aggressive situation, you can't just say, 'let's stop'. It doesn't work. I can't just mellow her out and talk to her sensibly for a few minutes. If I walked away she would just chase me and kick and punch me. I try to keep myself calm but it is so difficult, really hard. I talk to my husband about what is happening and we stay calm and keep communicating and eventually, maybe after a couple of days Susan will be able to talk about it without screaming.

Susan has been very violent. She has just had a stage where it has got worse because she has been coming off some medication. Luckily it has been directed at the wall, punching it and putting holes in it. That's better than it being a person. I was the last person she's kicked and punched. She is very strong. She's picked me up and thrown me even though she isn't as tall as me. I was scared she would push me down the stairs. She also threatened her sister and held a pair of scissors over her head.

I've tried to get help when that happened. I wanted her out of the house. I rang every doctor who had worked with her. I couldn't get her into hospital. Couldn't get her into foster care. So even though it was a safety issue there was actually nowhere for her to go. The police can't help because she was too young, so apart from pushing her out on the street, there was nothing there for her. After six months of coaxing we got her into foster care. She hates it. We pay badly when she returns - our punishment I presume. She won't go to foster care now so we don't get any relief from her and because she is off her medication she is up really late at night. We can't go to bed until she goes to bed because we don't know what she is doing. She would get on the phone and ring everyone so it's really hard at the moment.

I actually left home that day for a few days. We've all got to take time out. Alan is on time out at the moment. Not getting a break is the hardest thing. So every now and then my husband or I or Tilly might leave home for a couple of days for a break when we feel we desperately need it, but it's never possible together.

I feel that Susan has got some control over what she does, even though she says she doesn't know what she is doing. If she wants to she can sit and talk quietly to someone but then walk out the door and abuse all of us, so she's got to be able to control it when she wants. It's probably harder thinking she knows what she's doing. It's easier to blame the Tourettes or the other problems she's got. What I'm trying to do is to have more compassion for her, rather than just blaming her but I think it is easier to blame her. You know when she is really at her worst and you just want to pick her up and shake her - you lose the compassion. You have to find it again, because it's through compassion that you find the way back in to try a different way. I have put signs all over the house to remind me about vicious cycles and compassion. Even though I've called her a monster I do think she is just a little girl and I have to remember that.

It is difficult and you don't always achieve the result you want because when I lower my voice she keeps pushing and I start yelling again, or she keeps niggling at me until I lose it. It's very rare for me to come in with compassion at the beginning because I'm so

“ They weren't born that way— so they have learnt it... ”

used to yelling and screaming which is what she is used to and quite comfortable with. So I have to keep trying to realise what I'm doing. When Susan and I are in a one on one confrontation there's no calming her. I try. I

really try to stay calm myself but then you think, 'okay, I've had enough' and then it is so difficult, really hard. I think it's just a matter of persevering and hanging onto hope.

Meeting with other women at the group was a relief because I wasn't the only one. It's not easy to talk about this because you are breaking a family secret, but it felt safe and comfortable. People didn't judge me so it was easy to talk. I didn't expect a lot of stuff to come out in a group like this because you still want to keep the family secret so I was surprised that I could feel so comfortable and people could talk or not as they chose. I liked being able to sit down and talk quietly and listen. It was easier than family counselling where you were always worrying about Susan's behaviour.

Just getting to the group was difficult. Susan didn't want me to go, there were hassles getting out of the house sometimes. Every time I went out she would say 'you're going to talk about me aren't you?' and of course that's exactly what I was going to do. I didn't want to tell her exactly what the group was for. She is violent but I didn't want her to be told that. I didn't want her described in that way, because I hope this is a stage and I don't want her to think that that's just her and that's the way she's going to be forever.

Sometimes the group would trigger off things in me that were upsetting. I went into a lot of turmoil with the group. As well as getting things out of it I also felt a bit dazed and really bad about things. I think some days it actually triggered things off for me, like my own patterns and that upset me. The way I see the violence in the child is that they

weren't born that way so they have learned it. Now the mother and the father are the two people that are around, for our child anyway, so most of it has come from us. When my child was upset and going through stuff, it was like holding a mirror to my face and I didn't like it. I've lived through it once and I don't need to live through it again. I had mixed feelings in the group and sometimes I felt angry. The anger made me achieve a lot. I'd come home and wake Alan up and I'd tell him about it and we could get it sorted out so it didn't sit there for days. I didn't want to take my anger back to the group because that wouldn't have helped. I've realised that I'm the only person responsible for me. I can't blame anyone anymore.

I felt disappointed that a lot of the women couldn't see that their children were actually replaying things that they've lived and seen. I also got a lot of help from an intensive one week course I went to. That was good because you need time to become aware of what you were doing. I realise you need time to sort things out.

After the group was finished I sat down and looked over my paperwork and went back over the things I'd actually learnt out of the group. On the last night everyone got to pick stickers marked with different emotional qualities like brave and caring and I was really surprised what people chose for me. I remember thinking 'well I don't feel that' but now I look back at them and think 'wow, yes I am O.K.' One of the stickers was 'courageous' and that gave me a really nice feeling. You know we were just a bunch of women who were pretty helpless at the beginning and still

helpless at the end because there weren't any great answers. To work with these children is extremely long term and my husband and I have to do our own work. It is going to take years to change what we pass down to our children. What I've realised now is that I have to let go of the past and I've got to get Susan to let go of her past. I'm nearly 40 and I've had to work really hard so I'm hoping that as Susan's only 13 that she will have less to deal with.

It is different now. I used to think I've got a rat of a kid and then I realised my kid's got a rat of a parent. So I'm working on the bits I can and I keep picking myself up and remembering that I'm the only person responsible for myself. I can't blame anyone any more. What I realise now is that what I can work on is me. It's no good blaming the kids or anyone else. I've always thought Susan was responsible for her behaviour and now the challenge for me is to see her as a 13 year old rather than a monster. Now I want to give a positive message. I think it is beginning to change. We certainly have better days. Susan still doesn't talk to me but she does talk to other people, to family members and she says life is a lot happier at home which is a very positive message.

Postscript

Many things have changed dramatically over the past three years. Things have really mellowed. We tried foster care to give us all a break. Susan needed this as much as us so we continued for twelve months. She hated being away and was so much worse when she returned home, so we cancelled it. Then there was no relief at all. Alan, Tilly and I would all have time away individually for our own time out. We also tried the Big Sister program and it worked to a degree. It got us through some of the worst times.

We can now look back and see that the side effects. It made her frustrated, upset and sooooo... angry. She stopped her medication voluntarily over a year ago now and life has been very different. To this day Susan is still in counselling for one thing or another.

With the assistance of a masseuse, Susan has regular massage, aromatherapy and reiki. This has continued now for twelve months. She is more positive about life and we have found an inner strength in her that is refreshing. She has gained self awareness and more self control. She is very much happier within herself now. Sure we still have our moments but she is nearly sixteen and boy crazy. She still lives with the Tourettes but is coping more with that too.

The more we understand of ourselves the more we can help our kids. We realised that blaming others is a pattern that can be

changed. We can make choices about what we do. I can see many many of my own patterns now and I realise that I can change

“ **She is much happier within herself now...** ”

these patterns. I'm the only one who can change me. I can see that I've got the choice to change. It's my choice to change or to stay in the patterns. I can't change Susan but she sees me change and learns from that that she can change too.

I think it took a couple of years from the time I began to change my patterns until I saw a change in Susan. Susan says she saw a change in me from the time I came home from the first course, so she was really tuned into me. Some of it she was happy with and some of it she wasn't but that didn't really matter, she knew the changes were there.

Talking to different people has been the key. To realise you are not alone and that not everyone will judge you. Everyone has their own journey - we just might need a little bit of guidance to work out what it is we need to do. There are no overnight solutions - we have worked at this for years and will continue to do so.

LYNNE'S STORY...

Kerry my youngest daughter is nineteen, nearly twenty. She can be very violent. It has always been directed at me. I'd try to handle it on my own to begin with but when it just sort of continued to get out of control my husband or my other daughter would step in, but then it would be directed at them. I never really kept track of how often it happened, but it wasn't every week or every fortnight. It could go six months or perhaps three months. It just depended on how much I was willing to be trodden on I suppose. I was always trying to keep the peace until I would reach the point of 'I can't be manipulated like this any longer' and then I would take a stand. I was always frightened to do anything because I knew what it would result in. I knew that once that sort of anger was triggered it would end up with things being broken, thrown on the ground, telephones being pulled out of the wall, smashed and then personal attacks. She would abuse me, swear, call me names. It would go on for ten or twenty minutes. When my other daughter or my husband realised that things were being thrown or she was attacking me they would come and try to pull her off. She would be hitting me and I'd be trying to push her away. They'd pull her off and then she would continue to struggle and hit and kick for ten or twenty minutes.

After that it seemed like her anger would drain away. All that was left was silence, just silence between us. Recently she would just go out the door and go somewhere. Earlier on she'd go to her room, slam the door and put stuff against it so we couldn't go in there.

“ She only behaved like this at home - never at school... ”

I'd say she started acting like this when she was eighteen months old. She fell over and hit her head on the side of the door, just like any child would. She started crying and then held her breath and the eyes rolled back. I picked her up and she passed out and I raced out into the car down to the doctor's. It happened two or three times and she was checked out but I was told there was nothing wrong with her. Then it went on from there into two year old temper tantrums and I suppose she never really grew out of them. We kept thinking 'oh surely this won't happen again' but it went on. When she was six or seven, if something didn't go her way she'd go into these tantrums, kicking and screaming

and then be terribly sorry, sobbing and upset wanting cuddles which I'd give her. And then when she was twelve or thirteen it was still happening but at this stage she wasn't remorseful anymore. When she was fifteen we had the bathroom wall kicked in because the hair wasn't going right or the mascara for the Year 9 Social wasn't right and from there it was all downhill. At that point I realised that something was drastically wrong and I got her to go to a counsellor. She only went twice and wouldn't go back.

She only behaved like this at home, never at school. She has always told me that I make her like that. It's all my fault. She's not like it with anyone else, only me. She doesn't see that there is a problem with her behaviour. All the time she says she hasn't got a problem.

She doesn't live at home anymore. We reached the point of saying 'we don't have to live like this anymore' and we demanded that she find somewhere else to live. It happened recently after the last scene. She'd left the house after she'd attacked me and when she just sort of wandered in a couple of days later we said 'this isn't on any longer, this behaviour is totally unacceptable and we think you had better find somewhere else to live.' So she left.

She rings whenever she needs anything. Sometimes the phone calls escalate and she gets angry and abusive and slams the phone down. She doesn't do that as often now. I've learnt reflective listening and now I don't get drawn into what's going wrong in her life. I can keep myself more separate and sometimes I can keep it from escalating. I can listen more reflectively over the phone

but I'm not sure I could do it in the house. I think she could still manipulate me and tie me up in knots. She'd confuse me and I'd get right off the track. I think it is very hard to retrain yourself to have different conversations. I know it is better not to point the finger and blame and to express your own feelings but it is easy to get stuck.

My daughters see me as the one who makes the rules in the family, the one who enforces the rules. Their father is silent. He backs me up but he's not the one to see that this or that needs to happen. Both of us were pretty placid but that had to change with raising children and I guess it was me that changed.

If I'd known that all of this was ahead of us I wouldn't have gone for it. We had never had violence before and so it left a feeling of being totally let down. I told one of my daughters recently who was struggling with a relationship -'Look this is life. Nothing ever turns out how you plan it. I think you make decisions and you don't look back, you go forward. Our lives haven't turned out how we thought they would'.

There was a period where I did think the cause of the problem was my behaviour as a mother, and probably it is my personality to a degree. If I didn't react the way I do I suppose I might be better, I don't know. You can go on blaming yourself for things the same. The only thing that keeps me sane is that my other daughters don't react like that so I think it can't all be my fault because they would all be like that. I think all mothers wonder if they had done things differently would everything be fine. Probably fathers think the same. I do wonder if father dominated families have the

same experiences. Whether the kids really like the idea of the father being the dominant person and if the father says 'no you're not doing this' they sort of respect that more. But then I expect they have their own problems.

I read about the group in the local paper. It was very beneficial just to realise that there were a whole lot of other people out there. I hadn't thought it was all that common.

“ It was good to know that we weren't the only ones... ”

It was good to know that we weren't the only ones. I have told my friends about the problem and they have been very supportive. They know what we have been like as parents so it has been very reassuring to know that they think we've done a good job. We had tried to get help in the past but it always finished up against a brick wall. Everyone said they needed to see the adolescent and the adolescent wasn't prepared to go. So that left us with nowhere to go. I didn't tell my daughter I was going to the group because it would justify to her that I had the problem. She would have said 'well that's good, you're going to try and sort yourself out'.

It was helpful to hear what other people were saying and being able to identify with others and you can empathise with their experience. I wasn't expecting to meet so many people from two parent, middle class families I thought it might just have been parents who were struggling on their own, with no support.

So I got a great sense of not being alone and a feeling that there were people like us in exactly the same situation. My husband probably would have come if it had been possible. Not that he said 'I want to go' but he has always been willing to try and sort it out. I think it would have been helpful if I could have got this help when she was younger. It is a lot harder now that she is nearly twenty.

Postscript

My daughter is now twenty-two and a half and has never moved back home to live since we asked her to leave. For the past two and a half years we have kept our distance from her, phoning her each week to check that she is O.K. We have been there for her if she has needed us, and has called on us for various reasons, e.g to move house, medical advice, and when she is in trouble. She has had three awful experiences, as well as four car accidents, (two cars written off whilst still under loan repayments).

The most violence we have experienced during this time has been the phone slammed down, or the crash of the front door as she has left our house in a temper. There have been times when we have noticed improvement with her anger control, sometimes when I have said "No" to something she has requested.

Since leaving school at 18 she has bumbled around with Jobs, Uni, TAFE and Unemployment. Nine months ago she applied for a job with the Government. Out of 1200 applicants she was selected for one of forty temporary positions. After eight weeks, 32 were put off and she was one of eight kept on. She now has a permanent position, earning a very good salary. With this has come a big improvement in her self esteem. We feel very fortunate knowing she is financially secure, even though she is still learning to manage her finances. We hope that she continues to curb her anger, and if unable to gain that control, recognises the need for help.

We wish we had a more loving relationship with her but realise life just isn't always what we plan it to be. I like the words spoken in the movie *Bridge Over Maddison County*... 'The dreams I had were good dreams. They didn't eventuate, but I'm glad I had them.'

MARG'S STORY...

My two younger daughters Julie 15 years and Dianne 16 years were living with me. They are less than a year apart and very, very close to each other. My older two children had moved out because it was too much for them. What had happened was that one of the girls, Julie, disclosed that she had been abused in respite several years ago. Her sister, Dianne reacted with violent mood swings which became more like tempers and then what I would call rages, fighting physically with people and breaking things. She can be verbally very abusive and physically violent. She would break windows and break things, just anything in her path. I've had a lot of physical damage to the house and I found it extremely difficult to cope with. She would fight terribly and provoke Julie. I thought it was a reaction to finding out about her sister, because she had an array of feelings including guilt and all that kind of stuff. I also found out that they were both addicted to marijuana and were into alcohol binges, so I think all of those kind of things were contributing factors. Dianne has even more difficulty than Julie even identifying her feelings, let alone expressing them to people. She cannot talk about things and when I tried to broach it with her she said just forget about it, forget I ever said it'. So now I'm scared to broach it because I feel like it could be followed by an abusive and violent sort of session.

Things had got really bad. There were holes in the walls, lots of things were broken and I kept a set of crockery and cutlery in my bedroom so that I would have something to use when I couldn't get into the kitchen. I started living in my bedroom because I was frightened of the violence. I couldn't really talk to them about it because I was frightened that it could be followed by more abuse and violence. They stole from me to buy drugs.

“ It was hard to get the right sort of help... ”

It was hard to get the right sort of help. The student counsellor was great but although I tried other counselling it didn't help because either the girls wouldn't go or others didn't understand the problem. When I heard of the group for mothers who had an adolescent who was violent and/or abusive I was relieved because it was the first time I had heard anyone actually talk about the problem. I'd always believed that this was something that mothers just had to put up with.

I found that actually talking to other people in similar positions was good because it was so valuable to know that I was not the only one out there and there are people who are

as badly off and worse off than me. Also I came to realise that I don't have to put up with this. So one day when there was a whole lot of stuff going on and I had been hit and physically threatened I rang the police. It was a relief but it was also shrouded in devastation because she tackled the police. Dianne met the police with a knife and it was pretty terrible. I was scared for her because they had to restrain her, and I was scared for her welfare because of the way they had her pinned. It took about half an hour to restrain her and they had to call a back up car and they had her on the floor and it was just so frightening seeing her go purple in the face at the way they were pushing and sitting on her, and I was scared for her. I was also scared about what was going to happen when this was all over, because I knew they would be removed. I had been to talk to the police so I knew that the girls would be removed because I'd rehearsed that with the police and they had told me what to do. The only thing I didn't do is to ask for the CAT team, but I'd tried to get the CAT team before and failed as many people have, and I didn't think about it at the time. I wish now I had. I think there would have been differences had the CAT team been called and arrived quickly, which

“ I had to go down and take out an intervention order... ”

as you know is like winning the lottery. I think that a lot of the subsequent abuse that the police received from her and therefore the terrible stress on me of seeing my own daughter – she's only 42 kilos – this tiny little thing fighting the police wouldn't have happened if the CAT team had arrived. It was

devastating. I was a blubbering mess the whole time the police were there. They were there for about two to three hours and each of the police had a talk to me and they were very, very good and supportive. They just kept saying to me 'you don't have to put up with this'. The police said to just dial 000 in the future and I'm sure they would come pretty quickly because the whole police station knows what went on, so I feel they would be prompt. One policeman said he'd never seen any thing like it and that amazed me because they've seen everything.

I had to go down and take out an intervention order but the next day was a public holiday so I had to wait. I had a long time to think about it and to get cold feet and to think 'oh no I can't do this' but I knew I had to do it whether I wanted to do it or not. I just knew.

The girls came back three times that afternoon. On the second time, I rang the police but the girls were hiding under the house and the police couldn't find them and I didn't know where they had gone. The third time I negotiated with them and drove them to the station. They were back three days later because there was no other accommodation available for them together and they wouldn't be separated. It was difficult when I saw the judge at court when I went to get the intervention order. He said 'well we usually have husbands and wives, not adolescents' and it made me feel that I was doing something totally irregular, even though I know they are taken out on adolescents. I felt like I was having my hand slapped.

I think the police intervention has helped because it pulled Julie up and made her think about what was going on and she was actually mostly very good from then on. It also made Dianne think and she has been trying not to lose her cool, not to rage, but

there is a point at which she switches, she's like two different people.

It helped me because now I know there is something I can do. Before I felt that mothers should be able to fix things up but I couldn't. I wasn't well so that interfered and it was just so overwhelming and I felt there was something wrong with me. It was so overwhelming just thinking that I'm supposed to fix it and if I can't then at least I'm supposed to put up with it.

Now I realise I don't have to put up with it. I think the fact of actually having the police

“ Now – I realise I don't have to put up with it... ”

come in an emergency situation and having my rights reinforced by the police and the group was important. Nobody made me feel that I'd done a terrible thing against my kids. Having support from people in the group who had been in similar situations was important. There's a slightly different flavour to the empathy from people who have been there. It helped me feel that I hadn't done the wrong thing. I may not have ever rung the police if I hadn't felt that support. I had seen a psychiatrist and I talked to him about it but it's not the same. I told my ex-husband and my eldest daughter and they were very supportive. My ex-husband has been away interstate for many years and it was most unusual to get his support. I'd rung him after I rang the police and on this occasion he was supportive. Also the group has helped because I know that I am not the only one and that other people have survived.

Now I feel that it is OK for me to take action. I can call the police. I don't think I will get that

suicidal reaction again because I know that I can call 000 and get help. I'd tried to get help before from the police and failed. I'd tried the CAT team and also my psychiatrist in a crisis and that didn't work, at least not in the way I wanted it to. I had wanted to ring the police lots of times before but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. We'd had the occasion once before, the first time I rang the police I didn't ring 000 and they took about two and a half hours to come and I didn't hear the end of it for about four months. I thought it was an option that I would never use again because I was just abused day and night about getting the police, but this time it was different.

My oldest daughter thinks that I really backed down in allowing them into the house because there was no accommodation for them. She says they know that they have got around me yet again. That maybe so, but maybe I can't do it all in one go. The time might come again and the next time they will be charged of course. The difference is that now I know I can take action at anytime, even if it's not a crisis. I was very close to ringing the police two Sundays ago but unfortunately circumstances were very difficult right at that moment. I was meant to be picking Julie up from the station, which is a most unsavoury place especially on a Sunday afternoon. I picked up the phone and then thought, 'Oh no, what can I do?' I couldn't get in touch with her and I had to make sure she was safe and pick her up, so the timing was out.

Sometimes they are easier to deal with than other times, sometimes more difficult. About three months before the group we had had a terrible day. I had been having bad anxiety attacks and Dianne grabbed a knife and was trying to stab herself. The knife wasn't really sharp and she was just cutting herself more than anything and I walked out because

there was nothing else I could do. If I'd tried to do something Julie would have become very abusive because she always backs her sister. So I walked out at that point in time, which seems a terribly, terribly cruel thing to do. I think that is one of the worst situations that you can have, to walk out on your child, because you are there to protect and preserve their lives. I felt I couldn't cope with the situation and I was at risk if I stayed, not at risk from her but at risk from myself. There didn't seem to be anything I could do to change the situation. I came back and she did it again so this time I took her down to the hospital and the CAT team actually saw her after all this time. What made the difference this time was that I eventually took some power in the situation and when she had her back to me I grabbed her in a bear hug. She is very strong and I couldn't hold her for long but I called Julie to come and help. Julie was taken by surprise because this is that first time that she had been called on to help me rather than her sister, and she stopped and was very confused. She had to think for a moment about how she would react because normally in a situation like that she would have tried to pull my arms apart and release Dianne, but she didn't because she had seen how bad things were with Dianne. I said to Dianne 'I want to take you down to the hospital, will you come willingly?'. She said she would if I bought her a gram of marijuana and I said 'no'. So then she said 'I'll go provided I can have a couple of cigarettes later' so I said 'Right let's go.' I don't know where my strength came from that day.

I'm doing some different things. I'm trying not to get involved in all the arguments. If they start to fight I don't hide away anymore. I come out and check what is happening and then I withdraw when I feel like they

will survive. I've learnt to get out really early. I don't always do it because sometimes I get involved and each situation has to be looked at on its own merits, because in a given situation I might feel that I would escalate things if I walked out. Sometimes I walk out into the front garden because even though the whole neighbourhood hears everything that goes on in our house. I think she is less inclined to rage in the front garden which is very public. Sometimes even the walking away has been difficult because I would get so anxious and feel so weak that I could hardly walk, so now I get out early.

What's been good is feeling the strength that came from realising that I could actually take action instead of becoming a rag. I think it has really helped Julie and Dianne. I think they have seen an otherwise rather wilted and totally non assertive mother suddenly do something and I think that has helped them.

I've changed how I view the girls too, especially Dianne. I don't exonerate her from the violence because she chooses that reaction, but I also have to keep in mind

“ I felt there was something wrong with me... ”

what is behind all this and to understand that she has not been in a position to control her reactions. Now I don't see her as a raging lunatic or a drug addict but as a kid who does have a lot of problems and a kid with quality traits. Dianne has counselling and that has to continue. She's had a bad time recently because she couldn't continue to see the same therapist when the Crimes Compensation money ran out.

She was very upset because that therapist had been most supportive and I think she felt that she'd lost all that and I think that's what set her off. I've realised that often the anger and rages are triggered by something distant from me and I've no idea what it's about because if I go in and ask what's going on, that usually makes things worse but if I listen first and then ask very quietly 'what's going on?', that works sometimes and sometimes it doesn't. So I have changed how I react in some small way.

I got a sense of power from the group. Just teasing it all apart, so that what was an entwined mess before became something I could look at. Things like my reactions, my kids reactions and what was going on and what was appropriate to say and what wasn't appropriate to say, what would inflame the situation and what might calm it down just a little bit. In the past I tended to speak in these situations without thinking and say things that I regret. Recently I've been involved with verbals with Dianne because she's got a bit worse in the last couple of weeks and I tend to find it hard to close my lips and not say what to me is the obvious.

I found ways to start behaving differently. It is pretty hard but I can actually hear this little voice going on in my head that wasn't there before. So while things are escalating this little voice is going on in my head saying what I should or shouldn't do. That doesn't mean that I'm going to obey the voice in my head all the time. Sometimes I jump in and then realise I've heard the voice and will withdraw, but as I say it's early days and there's still a lot of practising to do. It would be nice if I could wake up tomorrow and it would all be fixed and there would be no need to work so hard at all this stuff, but unfortunately I'm sure there will be many more occasions.

I think this problem needs to be talked about. It is very hidden in many families. I had tried so many places to get help. It isn't in the category of normal parenting groups, and we'd tried family therapy, mediation, and counselling but there was nothing that addressed this, or they just wouldn't go. The girls had just walked out of counselling and wouldn't come back. Parents often blame themselves, and when we're blaming ourselves it's very difficult to go out and get help because you feel you are a terrible person who has done some awful thing which has caused my child to do this. But it helps if it's brought out that it does happen. I also think that we've gone through an era of kids being told their rights. I'm not saying that they shouldn't know their rights, but they should also know that their parents have rights and

“ **The anger and rages are triggered by something distant from me...** ”

my two youngest just couldn't accept that kids have to learn that parents have rights. One time after some abuse I said to Dianne 'I have rights too' and she just laughed and said 'oh you reckon?' and I said 'Well if you don't believe I have rights then you know the police can tell you otherwise'. She didn't have any response to that. She just turned around and walked off and that's a sure sign that she actually heard what I said. So it actually stopped the situation. I think having the intervention order and having a plan of action in my head has helped. Recently Dianne said to me 'you know taking out that intervention order helped me.' That was very validating.

Postscript May 2001

Dianne was forced to leave home when I eventually took out an 'out of house' intervention order. She went straight into a refuge and then into supported accommodation with two absolutely wonderful lead tenants and their support agency. For several weeks I refused to have any contact with her. I walked around the house noticing all the photos of her and bursting into tears every time my eyes fell on one of them. The pain was agonising. I think it was a long awaited letting go of all the torrent of emotions that I had suppressed while she was at home raging, in order to survive. Then I wrote her a letter, and followed that by a phone call asking her if she wanted me to visit her. She was very eager to see me. I kept the visits short and relatively infrequent. I so desperately needed my own space to recover from the stress of the last few years, and I knew Dianne needed hers, even though she could not yet recognise it. Both she and Julie had clung to me all their life, as if I was an extension of them. I had always found it extremely draining.

Shortly after Dianne went, Julie left home voluntarily, but very begrudgingly, being

placed in an independent living situation in the community. I saw her about once a week. However, she rang me usually 2 or 3 times a day for the first few months. That was incredibly draining, for she was often manipulative and would find subtle ways of blaming me for everything that went wrong in her day. I hated those calls because they were so negative. When I eventually realised

“ I think this problem needs to be talked about... ”

that I didn't have to put up with that degree of intrusion into my life, I told her straight out that I would be glad to hear from her twice a week, but not 3 times a day. She managed to cut the calls down to daily, then twice a week or so.

The girls were very fortunate to get great help from their support agency and case manager. An incredible network of support seemed to fall into place around them, and they at last accepted it all because they acknowledged, for the first time, that they needed help.

They are both now drug free and working, although they each still occasionally resort to bingeing on alcohol. They have each matured a fair bit, but still have a way to go. Dianne still gets angry at times, but the violent rages have stopped, I believe. Julie visits me usually about once a week, Dianne less frequently. I usually speak to them once or twice a week on the phone.

Several weeks ago, Dianne lost her temper over a comment I made about how bad things had been the last time we were all living together, and Julie joined in, in her defence. That was pretty scary for the anxiety I had experienced when they were at home raging, revisited me. It was a sobering sign that the reconciliation I envisage taking place between us all is still some time away.

The hidden nature of adolescent violence in the community and the consequent lack of programs to address it, caused us all much pain and undue suffering. The ignorant attitudes of police, judiciary, court personnel all added to our pain.

Finding Anglicare's 'Breaking The Cycle' program and from that, gaining the courage

to call the police, to take out an intervention order, and to temporarily cut contact with Dianne, gave me the space to begin my recovery from adolescent violence. Being believed and validated was the first step in my reclaiming power.

If you are experiencing difficulties in your family such as the ones described in this publication - there is help available.

As a starting point we suggest you contact a community service organization in your local area.

Recognizing there is a problem is an important step in finding a solution.