

Submission by Peter John Smith for The Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care.

Dalmar Children's Home Carlingford, Sydney, N.S.W.

I entered my first children's home in 1972, at the age of five. Dalmar Children's Home, in Carlingford, gave me my first experience of being in institutional care. While I found this experience to be understandably dislocating and traumatic, the care was adequate and I have no negative recollections of my time there.

Burnside Presbyterian Children's Home (Reid) North Parramatta, Sydney, N.S.W.

In 1973 I was taken out of Dalmar to be later placed by my father in the Burnside Presbyterian Home for Children (Reid Home). I stayed there from February 1973 to June 1973. During this time I was subjected to gross mental and physical abuse.

One of my regular punishments was to polish the floorboards on my hands and knees. I would spend so much time polishing that I got blisters on my knees, which would bleed so I put rags under them to ease the pain. There were times when polishing floorboards that I would listen and hear other children playing outside. I would ask myself why my parents had put me in here, wondering how they could do this to me, what had I done? I remember it would take so long that I would often fall asleep on the floor through exhaustion, only to be woken with a kick from one of the house parents.

There were constant thrashings for any real or imagined misdemeanors. Falling asleep while polishing the floors would be enough to warrant a thrashing. I remember walking back into my dorm after being hit with straps and putting on a brave face as if I didn't care, but underneath I felt deeply hurt and insecure.

We were also punished if we didn't finish our meals. If we didn't eat our dinner it would be put in the fridge to be served up in the morning cold for breakfast. This would continue until we had finished it.

In these ways, and others, the house parents wore us down, breaking our once boisterous spirits and rendering us shadows of our former selves. Constantly put-down and verbally abused, we crept around wishing for invisibility so that we could escape the incessant torture. I, and the other children there, would always be looking around and listening in fear. I hated the people who looked after me. I was a child and powerless. There was no one to turn to for help. Abandoned by my parents and exceedingly vulnerable, these

'caregivers' broke any trust I had held in authority. I would try to make myself appear sick (feverish, flushed) so I could get out of there for the night and go to the hospital. I desperately wanted to escape and found school a welcome reprieve.

I was frequently punished for things I hadn't done. The house parent's daughter, Vicky, would tell lies about me, and my denials weren't believed. In fact it made it worse if I denied things and I soon learnt to keep my mouth shut. My words were no good. I learnt to shut my feelings inside and to distrust authority.

I felt my powerlessness keenly. People, particularly adults in positions of authority, were not to be trusted. I felt a lot of anger that I was not allowed to show, and a lot of resentment and disillusionment. These experiences had a profound impact on my sense of self. During this time I learned to shut out feelings, to build walls around myself in order to self-protect. It is now somewhat of a defense mechanism. Whenever things go wrong in my life I block other people out. I call it 'going into my hole'. I felt that no matter what I did I couldn't do anything right. My sister Jodie said that when our father left us at the home I didn't cry. I remember thinking I had to stay strong for my sister. Even at the age of six I knew I couldn't let anything break me. I learnt to hide my emotions.

**Burwood Church of England Children's Home (now The Weldon Centre)
Burwood, Sydney, N.S.W.**

I entered Burwood Children's Home in late 1974 to mid-75.¹ During this time care in the homes was great and there was no abuse from the caregivers. There was, however, serious sexual abuse suffered by me at the hands of the holiday host's husband. Sadly, I also saw their son being abused.

This holiday lasted for approximately two weeks over Christmas, during which time we traveled up the East Coast to Queensland.

This is how it happened. The holiday host's husband would take his son and I into the male showers at the caravan park. He would take us into a shower cubicle and shut the door. We would get undressed and proceed to clean ourselves under the shower, all three of us together. He would start to soap us up, me and his son, paying particular attention to the genital areas on both him and ourselves. He asked me to stand on a wooden bench so that he could perform fallatio on me. He also did this to his son. He would then get his son and I to take turns performing fallatio on him. I remember him ejaculating in my mouth. At other times he would rub up against me and rub his penis between my buttocks. This all occurred in the shower, I assume, because his wife was around us the rest of the time. I don't think she knew the abuse was taking place.

¹ I was also in the Son of Rock Home for two weeks in September 1973 before being taken out by my mother. This stay was fine.

I knew what happened wasn't right and refused to go on further holiday trips with that family. At the time there was no way of contacting anyone as we were interstate and I had no knowledge of phone numbers of either my parents or house parents. Also, by this stage I had already learnt not to trust anyone and was wary of informing people of my abuse, as I was afraid it would only make things worse for myself. Because of my experiences at Reid Home I thought that no one would believe me if I told them what had happened and did not want to cause trouble or bring attention to myself and cause other's to ridicule me. Later, the family asked me to go on a trip to Foster with them in front of my mother and I adamantly refused to go. When questioned by my mother why, I said, "I just don't want to go". I think she was suspicious of this situation but did not press it further.

These events turned me into a lonely and angry child. After this abuse I began to get into fights and became very aggressive and argumentative, particularly with adults and people in authority, whom I mistrusted as I always suspected they would try to hurt me. I was very angry at the world and wanted to 'get even'. This impulse would often get me into trouble. Even though I had a strong sense of right and wrong I was stuck on survival mode. I felt like I was constantly under siege and would act recklessly and defiantly in order to keep others and myself safe from harm.

Burnside Presbyterian Children's Home (Montrose) Epping, Sydney, N.S.W.

In October 1976 my sister and brother and I were readmitted to Burnside. I went to War Memorial where I stayed until June 1977. We were then placed into care at Montrose.

Montrose, we discovered, was hell. We were constantly being put down and chastised. In fact, in the whole time that I was there I hardly remember us going outside, as we were always being punished. If we did anything wrong we would be thrashed. Other punishments included writing lines, usually for the most trivial of things. For the six months we were there we spent most afternoons writing lines. This was their way of controlling us. We were whacked round the head and constantly ridiculed. I would secretly ring up friends from Burnside and beg them to get their family to invite me to stay with them for the weekend. Staying at Montrose was emotional torture. Every minute was spent in fear, wondering when and where the axe would fall.

One time after I had been thrashed with a dog leash I told my mother what had occurred and showed her the bruising on my bottom. My brother David had bruises also. She was alarmed by what she saw and called Montrose to complain about it. By the time a social worker turned up it was 10-12 days later and most of the bruising had faded. I didn't tell them much through fear of repercussions from the house parents. Nothing came of my mother's complaint. The social worker asked the house parents what had happened and they agreed I had been strapped but explained that I had been making trouble.

Thrashings of is nature were not uncommon at Montrose. The only difference in this event is that my mother had seen the bruising.

To my dismay the social worker left me with the house parents. My prior fears and reasons for keeping silent were well grounded – nobody believed me, and the house parents were greatly displeased with my disclosures. I remember feeling intense anger at my mother for not being able to stop the situation.

My stay in Montrose was very similar to that experienced previously in the Reid home, in that there was a sense that the house parents were trying to break us so we would conform to their ways. Life was exceedingly regimented and there was no place for individuality. Looking back I see that they were megalomaniacs, if not masochists. None of us there had any respect for them and so they had to force ‘respect’. As homes children we felt that we were second-class citizens; at Reid and Montrose we were treated like it.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this submission I would like to say that I believe there were fundamental flaws in the way children’s homes were run during my time there. My main complaint is that I felt there was no recourse through which I could voice my concerns and disclose the violations I suffered. Social workers were seldom brought in and there was no sense of confidence in their power to help us. We were effectively stripped of our human rights and, at worst, treated like cattle. Our happiness depended entirely on the quality and integrity of the caregivers. When the house parents were good my life was happy and I excelled academically and personally, but when they were bad I suffered. The homes children all knew whom the bad ones were and dreaded being sent to them. This is what is so sad: the information was there but we were just too scared of the repercussions to tell anyone.

Recently I received my files from Dalmar and Burnside. While Dalmar’s files were meticulously maintained with almost daily personal entries about me, Burnside’s files were sloppy and inaccurate. There are many glaring indiscrepancies and barely a mention of anything regarding my personal care and development. Looking through my files from Burnside it is easy to see how homes children could have fallen through the cracks.