



DO JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES PHYSICALLY ABUSE THEIR CHILDREN?

My nephews were clearly physically abused by their father, an Elder (leader) in the Watchtower Jehovah Witness organization. What follows is an excerpt from my book, "Out of the Cocoon," in Chapter 4, entitled "Keep Paddling":

When I was twelve years old, my nineteen-year-old sister married a Jehovah's Witness, and one year later she delivered a beautiful baby boy. From the time Jon was old enough to walk, he adoringly followed me everywhere. I called him my shadow, and when I did, he giggled hysterically and repeated back to me in his gleeful innocence, "I'm Brenna's shadow!" A simple task such as going to the bathroom proved to be no small feat; Jon moaned and pleaded for me outside the door until I emerged. Jon gave my dreary teenage life purpose. I adored him.

During summer break I sometimes spent a week visiting my sister. She lived about sixty miles away, and although she was a JW, she didn't seem to live and breathe the religion as stringently as my mother. With her, I could have a conversation that didn't include scripture. We'd talk about "normal" stuff, and I'd help her clean house and make supper, giving her the rare break she needed from running after a toddler.

Sadly, Jon would come to know at a tender age of one the frustration I experienced sitting on that anthill during those long sermons in the Kingdom Hall. Since there wasn't a Sunday school atmosphere at these meetings; young children weren't allowed to amuse themselves with toys or coloring books. When Jon started fidgeting, I did everything in my power to try to keep him still, e.g., allowing him to forage through the makeup in my purse, digging trenches into it with his fingernails to amuse himself. I sacrificed my necklaces as a distraction. When I ran out of tricks and could no longer contain his energy, his father grabbed him by the arm and literally dragged him to the restroom to beat him. Jon's beating became such a ritual that when his daddy reached for him during a meeting, he knew it meant a beating. He cried and pleaded "No, Daddy" as he buckled his legs, refusing to walk willingly to meet his fate.

Everyone in the Kingdom Hall could hear his screams. The sound that echoed from the blow varied; sometimes Jon's father used his hand, sometimes a belt. After ten or fifteen minutes, they would return with Jon hyperventilating, desperately trying to catch his breath. Beaten into composure, he would sit still for a while longer. Usually he stared motionless into space, his eyes bloodshot from crying. If fate smiled on him, Jon fell asleep in my arms for the duration of the meeting. If not, then back again to the restroom he would go for another beating and the cycle continued, until the closing prayer.

It broke my heart. I wanted desperately to stop the abuse, but I was a child myself and didn't know what to do to save him, or me. His was not an isolated incident. Sometimes there was literally a line to the restrooms so that children could receive their punishment for displaying natural restlessness during these incredibly tedious meetings.

One heart-wrenching day in particular is forever seared into my memory. My sister confided in my mother, father, and me that Jon, then two years old, had asked his father to hit him on his hands with the belt instead of his buttocks. When asked why he wanted to be punished that way, he replied, "Because my butt is too sore." It sickened all of us. But none of the adults—my sister, my mother nor my father—did anything about it. And the Witnesses seemed to condone it with the "spare the rod and spoil the child" scripture. Within a year, my sister had another child and his fate, sadly, was no



different than Jon's. Meanwhile, my sister's husband was rewarded for his devotion to the faith. He was made an Elder.

As an adult much later, I learned that Jon and I weren't alone. (See www.silentlambs.org, a website dedicated to the thousands of (sexual) abuse survivors within this organization.)

One of the questions I'm asked when I speak to various groups about my nephews being forced to sit stoically in Kingdom Halls is, "Well, you don't think it's that way in *every* Jehovah Witness church, do you?" I acknowledge that it may not occur in *every* family, in *every* congregation around the world, but based on my own eye-witness experience, it was pretty prevalent while I was growing up. I don't remember a meeting or an assembly (where thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses gather) where I didn't see kids being "disciplined" (i.e., beaten, slapped, whipped with belts, pinched, pushed up against the wall, yelled at, hair pulled, faces squeezed) in the restrooms for being naturally restless during a loooooong meeting geared for adults.

I polled some former Jehovah's Witnesses and here are their replies to my question: **Have you ever been an eye witness to a Jehovah's Witness child being spanked, pinched, etc. for not sitting still during services at the Kingdom Hall or an assembly?**

- That was common for the 1970's era! I remember those days! And nope, you were not the only one that noticed this sort of behavior, and it was done per of course the request of the Watchtower Society! They always encouraged the parents to take the children outside and let them meet Dr. Green (switch). Them suckers burned like nothing I've ever felt before. Blood sometimes would pour out!
- Well I used to see it all the time when I became a JW. I lived in Arizona and it was very common to see mothers, fathers, take their BABIES outside and give them a whipping! Kids used to cry up a storm, but I did find out that neighbors started complaining about it. And I was a JW from 1972-1980.
- All children in the UK are expected to be smacked if they don't keep still. I saw a woman taking her 9 months old out to smack it because it was making cooing noises. I reported her to the elders and told them if I saw her doing it again I'd report her to the authorities. I never saw her do it again, well until the kid reached about 2 then she started it again. What did make me sick was the "show" that was put on for all to see that they were taking the kid out to be smacked with the approving smiles of everyone else. What humiliation. The smacking of kids is still encouraged today.

What about children being forced to sit in the summer sun with no shade during all-day religious assemblies that lasted 3-5 days in succession? Was that humane? I remember seeing many Jehovah's Witnesses pass out from heat stroke at every summer event and there were many times I felt on the verge myself.

Ken Raines shared his story which he titled, "My Life in the Demon Haunted World of Jehovah's Witnesses" <http://www.premier1.net/~raines/story.html>. He recalls:

In the meetings JWs hold, children of all ages are expected to behave as adults. They are expected to sit still and be quiet, attentively listening to the adult lectures...At least when I was going to these meetings (1960s to early 1970s), playing with toys in your seats, reading, talking or otherwise amusing yourself was discouraged or disallowed. Even getting up to go to the bathroom during the meetings was discouraged as this would distract others. This led to much child discipline many consider abuse. Kids were routinely slapped, hit or whatever it took to keep them silent during these meetings. I remember



sitting there in meetings while time screeched to a halt trying my best to imitate a zombie. A zombie I slowly became.

I wrote about the torture, and relief, that I experienced as a 10- to 12-year-old child at Kingdom Hall in my book, “**Out of the Cocoon.**” Here’s a brief passage:

It was about this time that outward symptoms of my profound distress began to show. The invisible restraints that held me in my seat at meetings for hours upon end were chaffing away at my flesh. I reacted much like a captive animal chewing its leg off to free itself; I began biting my nails until they bled. The bloody stumps at the tips of my fingers kept me focused on something else besides the sermon and helped me escape. My parents encouraged me to stop gnawing away on myself, never understanding that I was manifesting a psychological trauma, not a physical one. I knew I was injuring myself, but I couldn’t stop. When the nail became infected, I’d... (can you guess what happened next?)

If you are the relative of a Jehovah’s Witness, please consider whether “church-time abuse” may be occurring with your own niece, nephew, or cousin. Ask your Jehovah Witness family member if this ever happens at their Kingdom Hall. If they minimize it citing it’s simply discipline and that they (JWs) believe in the scripture, “Spare the rod, spoil the child,” or try to justify it by saying “Well, little Johnnie acts up and needs to learn how to behave,” then tell them how you feel about children being beaten for showing natural restlessness during a long adult sermon. It would be no different than taking the *child* to a college classroom. Ask the parent if he/she would condone any teacher at Harvard beating their child after displaying natural restlessness during a class.

Remember, children of Jehovah’s Witnesses don’t have voices. It is up to us as adults to protect them from their abuser, even when their abuser feels that the “discipline” is ordained by God.

©Brenda Lee, 2006, author “Out of the Cocoon: A Young Woman’s Courageous Flight from the Grip of a Religious Cult,”
www.outofthecocoon.net