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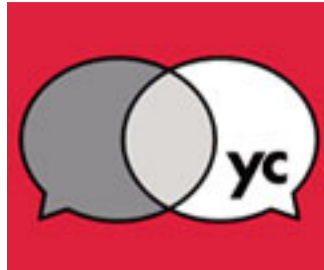
Her Hitting Taught Me Violence, Not Discipline

Lesson Plan

E.F. *Names have been changed.*

Growing up, it was just my mom, my little sister Shania, and me in an apartment in Flatbush, Brooklyn. Watching my sister was my job. While my mom was cooking, at the store, or on the phone, I was supposed to keep Shania quiet and still. My mother often complained about our noise.

I tried my best not to upset my mom, but a lot set her off. She disliked when I called her “Mom,” “Mommy,” or “Mother.” She’d say, “Can you stop? That sh-t is annoying,” or, “Stop calling me that sh-t.” When I wanted to speak to her I tapped her or went in front of her to get her attention. I started my sentences with “So,” or, “Excuse me.”



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I wanted her to hug me, kiss me on the cheek, and tell me to have a good day at school like the other mothers did. I longed for a normal mother-daughter relationship.

Instead, she hit me with whatever was within reach—a shampoo bottle, hair brush, or a toy. She’d hit me if school called her about my misbehaving, if I couldn’t keep my head straight while she was doing my hair, or if I dropped a new shirt on the floor. She hit my sister, too, but not as much. She hit me more perhaps because I was the oldest, so she considered me responsible for whatever my little sister had done.

I often went to school with bruises and marks on my body. My mother told me, “If anybody at school asks what happened tell them that Shania hit you with a toy. That’s it.” I did as I was told.

My gym teacher was the only one who noticed and she often asked me if I was OK. I told her what my mom told me to say, and she always asked, “Are you sure?”

I know now that I was not OK at all. I was in constant fear at home, and at school, I did what I was taught at home. In the 2nd grade I was suspended twice for violence against others. I thought I did it because I wanted to, but looking back, it was because of the effect my mother had on me. I learned to hit or cause pain to people who upset me. I didn’t know how else to express my discomfort.

My dad was unstable—he couldn’t keep a job or an apartment, but I still loved him. He would come by once in a while and that’s when we’d spend time together. I spent weekends at his mother’s (my grandma’s) place.

Marked

I loved when my grandma picked me up on Fridays. She would hug and kiss me on the cheek. She also worried about me: My grandmother, aunt, uncles, cousin, and dad all saw the marks and bruises on my body. Even when I defended my mom and told them the story about Shania hitting me, my family knew it was her.

My grandma said once, “Nina, you need to stop hitting the poor girl. This has been going on for too long. You need to find another way to discipline her.” But no one threatened to do anything because they thought my mother would stop.

The beating that changed all our lives came because my little sister spilled juice on our new bedroom curtains. I was 11 and Shania was 5. I didn’t see her spill it, and I couldn’t even see it on the curtain, but my mother could spot anything that wasn’t right.

When she saw the stain on the curtains she backhanded me in the face, grabbed me by my hair and threw me into the radiator. I scraped my knee. She also threw a sneaker hard at my face. I cried myself to sleep. When I woke up the next day I saw my banged up knee and thought, “Not so bad. No heavy marks.”

I brushed my teeth and did my hair without looking in the mirror. As I left for school, my mother grimaced looking at my face and reminded me of the Shania excuse. I wondered why she looked so worried. Then I got to my elementary school, and everyone there looked at me like they’d seen an alien.

I ran into the school bathroom and looked in the mirror. I was mortified: On my face was a vivid red outline of the bottom of the sneaker, as if stamped on me. It looked horrible.

I went to a couple of classes trying to be calm. Then I was called to the assistant principal’s (AP) office. I sat down with my heart thumping.

The AP stared at me intently.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine. ”

“How is it at home?”

“Life at home is pretty OK.”

“Can I ask you what happened to your face?”

“Oh yeah. Well, I was playing with my little sister and she threw a toy at me.”

The AP smiled. “Are you sure that’s all that happened? You can tell me anything you want. It’s going to be OK.”

The Van

I wanted to believe her, but I didn’t. I knew my mom would get in trouble and I was scared she was going to take it out on me. I stuck to my excuse, and she sent me back to class. I went home and 30 minutes later, there was a banging on the door. My mother and I were in the kitchen, my sister in our bedroom. My mom looked angry about the loud knocks.

She opened the door, and two men dressed like agents asked if she was Nina C_____. She glanced at me before saying “Yes,” and they said, “Come with us.” Panicked, I called my sister out of the room wondering if this had to do with my meeting with the AP. The three of us went outside and got into a van parked in front. The entire mysterious ride, my mother glared at me. That glare was frightening.

As soon as we reached a place that looked like a day care, officers whisked my mother out of our sight. Shania and I were taken to a room to speak to Kevin, a detective. This was all happening too fast; I left the room to look for my mom and saw a man putting her arms behind her back. I suddenly felt numb. I went back to the room and sat next to my sister. Kevin started to ask questions.

“So your mom hits you and your sister?”

“Yes, when she felt it was necessary.”

“I see. So when was it necessary?”

“Um, when I was misbehaving in school or wore something dirty by accident?”

I was trying to minimize the abuse, but my sister said, “Yeah she hits us real bad! She does it all the time!”



IMAGE BY YC-ART DEPT

After the interview, my sister and I got back in the van and strangers gave us hot pink Tommy Hilfiger backpacks with clothes and toiletries in them. The folks in the van conversed with us and made us feel comfortable and then drove us to my grandma’s house.

Shania went back to my mother’s a few months after we were taken from her. I have been at my grandmother’s ever since, for seven years. Whenever I went to court, I would say that I wanted to stay there.

Not Easy to Change

I missed my sister, but at my grandmother’s I felt free. I didn’t have to watch what I was doing in fear of being hit. It was a real home filled with care and sincerity. If I got in trouble at school my grandma would talk to me instead of abusing me physically and verbally.

It wasn’t that easy for me to get rid of my bad ways, though. I was still getting in trouble a lot for being too talkative, disruptive, and “a nuisance.” I told my grandmother I couldn’t stop and that I wanted to kill myself. I felt as if the world hated me.

That’s when I went to therapy at my foster care agency. I explained to my therapist it would just be easier if I was dead because I was a problem child to my grandmother, who didn’t deserve that trouble.

I was grateful to live with my grandmother, so where was this behavior coming from? I wanted to be good; I just didn’t know how. The therapist and I figured out that my mother’s lack of love decreased my self-esteem.

As I got older, it got easier to control my behavior. I was more aware of why I did the things I did, and I changed. Once I got to high school, I was careful and pushed myself to make my family happy. It was still difficult transitioning into being a non-violent person. When I felt like hitting I couldn’t, so I took deep breaths and tried to be calm.

I did extracurricular activities and joined clubs. These kept me busy and made me happy; it was a fresh new start.

I stopped being afraid to stand up to my mother. After I moved out, I would visit every other weekend if I wasn’t busy. She stopped hitting me, but she hasn’t changed her ways. She had three more children after I moved out, and she beats them and Shania.

It’s hard to see my little siblings go through what I went through. My mother has a bad temper; plus, some people from her West Indian culture believe discipline must involve pain. She had to go to classes for her anger, but they didn’t work. And because she doesn’t believe hitting kids is wrong, she didn’t want to or try to stop.

Even though my mom is still abusive, I wouldn’t call Children’s Protective Services (CPS) on her because I’m afraid my siblings could be worse off in care, maybe separated. I do try to defend them when we’re all together.

Recently, we all went to the beach with some friends of my mom’s. The little kids were throwing sand at one another.

My mother yelled at my five-year-old brother, “Didn’t I tell you to stay away from the sand?!” I remembered being in his shoes, hearing the yelling, waiting for the hits to come.

My mom’s friend told her to relax. Annoyed but also a little scared, I yelled, “They’re just kids! And it’s a beach—you’re going to get sand on yourself! You always act like little things are the end of the world!”

She quietly said, “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Love, Not Fear

It felt good to stand up to my mother. I wanted to open her eyes to how insensitive she was being. Even more, I wanted to show the little kids that it wasn’t normal to be scared by Mommy. That Mommy was wrong. (She lets them call her “Mommy” because they are so young, but now Shania can’t.)

My mother hasn’t changed, but I have. Over the course of my four years in high school, I went from a problem child to a teenager slowly learning about herself and working on her issues. I just started college this fall.

I now get to do things for my siblings I couldn’t before. I stand up for them, buy them things they need, and embrace them with love. I found the love I craved and needed from my grandmother, and I’m better able to show love now.

I know my mother was hit as a child and that she considered beating normal parenting. I know others from her culture agree. The beatings did discipline me, but they messed me up inside as a child. If I never left her home, I’m not sure I would be the young woman I am today. I am lucky that I got to experience a loving home at my grandmother’s.

What turned me from a violent, scared problem child into a happy, successful, loving college student was not beatings and fear; it was kisses and hugs, therapy and self-knowledge. Finding out who you are is difficult when you suffered a loveless childhood. Abuse is hard to recover from, but it is possible.

Use This Story to Help Heal

See [this lesson](#) for an activity that staff can lead with a group of youth, using this story. It gets the group thinking about how childhood experiences affect us and how we can break bad patterns to create the life we want.