MY STORY

real life

The recent cases of young children being starved and maltreated by their parents have shocked us all. Chris Tuck, 43, talks about how she suffered abuse as a child... but survived

IF MY OWN MOTHER WOULDN'T PROTECT ME, WHO WOULD?

Chris (top, far right) with her starving siblings. Above: Now she's made a happy family with Andy

How could anyone abuse a child? That's the question I've asked myself a million times since I became a mother 15 years ago.

When I was a child, it never crossed my mind to query how I was treated by the people who were supposed to love me. But my mum and dad made me suffer in ways an straight-thinking parent could understand. I was starved, convulsed, beaten black and blue. Worse, over years of cruelty I learnt to believe that was what I deserved. It takes me over four decades to realise how wrong I was and to understand one basic truth: every child deserves love, but not every adult deserves to be a parent.

Ironically, my earliest memory is one fraught with love for my mother. I was seven as I watched her walk out the door with her suitcase. I chased her into the street, begging her not to leave, or to take me with her. She barely looked back as she muttered she needed to get away.

I was the second of four kids – two boys and two girls – growing up on a rough estate in Penge, South London. Up until that day I barely remember a thing. But from the moment Mum left, my life became a living hell etched on my memory forever.

Forget about her, she's not coming back,' Dad snarled when I went to him. But there were no hugs, no comfort. It was our fault that'd gone – we were naughty. And three weeks later, it was clear Dad had no desire for her home... 'Vivian's with me now,' he said, putting his arm around his new lover. She was a neighbour from a few doors down who had seven girls of her own.

STARVED AND BEATEN

From then on, my siblings and I were another four unwashed faces in a crowd of kids that were an inconvenience. There were two bosses: one for the adults and one for the kids. Dad moved in with Vivian down the road and we stayed with her girls.

My youngest brother Michael had barely started school when we were left to fend for ourselves. The cupboards were empty and the heating didn't work, so we clung together at night to stop us shivering. I remember the shame of scavenging in bins on the way to school and gnawing on discarded apple cores or a bid to stop my belly grumbling. And the shame of never having a clean uniform. Of never being clean myself. My matted hair and greying cheeks made me look like an old woman. We were alone, living like feral animals, just wishing someone would come to save us, but no one ever did.

And Dad and Vivian had no effective way of dealing with us if we had any complaints. He would beat my step-sisters and Vivian would beat us. Some times it was a belt, other days a slipper. The bruises would last for days on our scrawny bodies.

Then one day, before my tenth birthday, I came home from school to find the house empty except for Dad. He was lying on the sofa, calm as anything. 'Where have they gone?' I asked, confused by the eerie silence filled with pokies. I watched in horror as they coffed his wrists and led him away. I didn't know what was worse – Mum choosing to leave or Dad being forced to go.

Dad no idea what he'd done until the next day when school bullies chanted, 'Your dad's a paedo!' at us. It turned out he'd been sexually abusing other children. I didn't struggle to believe it. I'm glad he was locked up. Maybe it saved me from another horrific kind of abuse.

> 'THE CUPBOARDS WERE EMPTY. I REMEMBER THE SHAME OF HAVING TO SCAVENGE IN BINS FOR FOOD'

But seen reality hit and the perfect world where we lived on hot meals and cuddles remained a figment of my imagination. Mum's new husband was as hateful towards us as Vivian and once again, our parent chose a lover over their children. One night screams of pain drifted upstairs. I recognised that sound from when Vivian used to beat David. But this time as I ran to his aid I saw my own mother holding him down while her husband took swipes at him. Something inside me died. If our own mother wouldn't protect us, who would? From then on it was just survival. I was counting the days until I could get away, working in a shop to save the money I needed.

REBUILDING HER LIFE

Then when I was 15, I had my first boyfriend, Andy, over after school. We were in the kitchen when my stepfather made a grab for my breast. I yelled at him to never touch me again, but when Mum came in, she told me to stop making a fuss. She was supposed to love and protect me and she didn't even care. It was at that moment that I knew I had to get out.

So at 15, without a penny, I packed my things, left, and never looked back. My boss at the shop helped me rent a bedsit and at last I had a safe home – a home that was mine. It was the most incredible feeling. Gradually, I got back on my feet. I worked hard and put myself through college then trained to be an accountant. I broke away from the past and saw a future.

Almost 30 years on, Andy and I are still together. On our wedding day when I was 28, I felt loved in a way I never did by my parents. And when I gave birth to our son, Ben, now 15, and daughter, Charlie, 10, I felt something I'd never imagined could exist – an urge so strong to protect my children I could kill and I would die for them.

That was when I realised the problems of my childhood wasn't me, it was the people who brought me into this world. If they'd felt a fraction of what I felt for my children they'd have walked over hot coals to feed, clothe, and protect me.

Now, I've written my story because I want every child being abused to know it's not their fault and every parent to reassure their girls. If we can't look after our children, there is something very wrong with the world.

Child abuse facts

- Children under the age of one are most at risk of death at the hands of an adult as a result of abuse.
- Approx **50,100** children in the UK are at risk of abuse right now.
- In A young adult (**25.3%**) have been severely maltreated in childhood.
- One in 14 children aged 11-17 (**6.9%**) have experienced physical violence at the hands of a parent or guardian.
- In the past two years, Childline have received over **670,000** calls from children.

How to move on

Chris says: 'Change is scary. It can feel easier to stay with what you know even if you are abused. Some people even feel their abuse is "normal" or they deserve it. Here's how I moved on from my abuse.

1. **First you need a deep rooted 'why' or reason to make the change** – this is the thing that will see you through the dark times and force you commit to change.
2. **Speak Up/Speak Out.** Find someone you trust to talk to, to confide in, whether it's a friend or the NSPCC. Do not think you are alone. Do not suffer in silence. Tell kid by your abuser and tell someone.
3. **Be prepared for rejection** or that things may not go to plan, but believe in yourself.
4. **Unburden yourself** by taking the action necessary for you to lead a happy and healthy life. This is your right as a human being.
5. **To help me understand** my abuse I read many books, listened to other stories, had therapy and wrote my book. I took small positive steps in the right direction, built up the confidence and went after what I wanted.
6. **You can move forwards with your life** You just need to take the first step.

NB Chris lost all contact of her sister Michelle (Chris's 2 Million Pounds Reward Appeal) and her brother Michael (Michael's Appeal) in 2003/04.

Chris Tuck, Through The Eyes Of A Child, available now £9.99

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Abuse Survivor: Victims Forgotten

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New Abuse Watchdog Needed, Says Campaigner

10:28, UK, Thursday 28 August 2014

Abuse Survivor: Victims Forgotten

A leading child abuse campaigner has called for the creation of an independent body to coordinate efforts to tackle what she believes is a widespread problem in the UK.

ristine Tuck issued the call after an

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