

## THE EFFECTS OF THE ABUSE EXPERIENCED BY DAVID CHARACTER'S IN DAVID PELZER'S *A CHILD CALLED AND THE LOST BOY*

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**Abstract.** The study discusses the effects of the abuse experienced by David's character in David Pelzer's *A Child Called It* and *The Lost Boy*. The theory applied is psychological theory about child abuse and the research method applied is qualitative research by Blaxter. Based on the research, it is found that the effects of the above abuse that David experienced were flashback through nightmares, the feeling of insecure and frightened, low self esteem and inferior feeling, difficulties to trust others and develop friendliness, and deteriorating school performance. Besides, David had deviant actions (stealing), obstacles to understand and receive love and/or properness, and emotional control disorder.

**Keywords:** *child abuse, effects of abuse, psychological theory*

### INTRODUCTION

The act of abuse can be considered as a big social issue for the modern society. Among the kinds of abuse is *child abuse* that often happens in the society without being realized by the people living in that society, for example, the little children who work on the streets, beaches, factory and other dangerous places. In fact, so many children still live with their rights unfulfilled; among them are victims of child abuse, neglect, exploitation, maltreatment, discrimination, and unhumane acts. All kinds of violent acts against children are recorded in their subconscious mind and remain to their adolescent age, and as long as their life span. These acts are categorized as child abuse or evil acts against children. *Child abuse* itself ranges from child neglect to rape and murder. So, it can be concluded that child abuse has been a social issue in the community.

The thesis will analyze two novels with the story of child abuse: *A Child Called It* which

was published in 2001 (the first book), and the second, *The Lost Boy*, published in 2003. The main character of both novels experience child abuse for years at the very early years of their lives, 4-12 years old.

The study has its starting point at the relationship between literature and psychology. These two studies have a functional relationship since both discuss the psychological condition of human beings. What differs them is that in psychology, the phenomenon is real, while in literature it is imaginative. Endraswara (2003: 96) states that a literary work that is considered to have a psychological phenomenon, will reveal the psychological aspects through its characters and their acts.

Dave Pelzer, author of both novels which are discussed in the thesis, is an American author. Dave Pelzer's third book-which will not be discussed in the thesis-*A Man Named Dave*, was published in 2002, and became an international bestseller. Recently,

Dave wrote a short summary of his life story in a book entitled *Help Yourself*. Dave Pelzer's biography became popular since it was included as one of the most horrible child abuse in California. The books that he wrote, in fact, are autobiographies of Dave himself. He experienced *child abuse* that was committed by his own mother. Reports of *child abuse* or violence against children might often be made. However, not many know about what and how those children actually experience and suffer. These books open up the victims' nightmare to the readers, educate and add their knowledge about child abuse. David invites the readers to fear what he feared, felt his loss, loneliness, pain, anger, and also his last hope.

An autobiography, as being discussed here, can be considered as a literary work (novel), since both autobiographies have the elements of fictionality, especially those of a novel. In both novels—*A Child Called It* and *The Lost Boy*—one can find the elements of a novel: plot, setting, theme, character and characterization, and also internal and external conflicts among the characters. In addition, both novels have a moral for the readers. These elements become the reason why an autobiography can be considered as a literary work.

*A Child Called It* tells about David that became a victim of child abuse committed by his own mother—where he was beaten, not given proper food and clothes, charged to sleep in the garage, and forced to swallow ammonia, soap and *chlorox*. Getting into the plot, it is described to the readers how painful the darkness that was suffered by the children who became the victims of *child abuse*. It can even be experienced in details through David Pelzer's eyes, body and ears how those children cry. It is also found in the book how David's perseverance led him to victory and leave the everlasting torture behind.

*The Lost Boy* is the sequel of *A Child Called "It"*. It is also Dave Pelzer's true life story as a *foster child* which is told in the book. Leaving his mother, David continued his life as a kid who never had a place called home. He longed for the love of a family. In *The Lost Boy*, one can find a psychological condition of a teen named David who had to struggle hard to find his happiness, which was to find the love of a family. After being freed from the horrible condition of his own family where he was often maltreated and brutally tortured by the sadistic and mentally unstable mother, David still had to struggle to be accepted and by the society that had stereotype against his status as a foster child. At his teenage, David also had to work hard to fight his own suggestions against himself that he was unworthy, anxious about his future and worried that he would end up like his mother.

The adventure told in both novels can be said as full of irony, touching the meaning of life: to smile in sadness, to have a hope in affliction, to own something in a loss, and power in the midst of powerlessness. Child abuse cases have lately been reported more and more, but not many are aware of the similar things taking place around them. Therefore, one purpose of the writing is to make the society more aware of child abuse.

Psychological abuse cannot be generalized with a mere verbal mistreatment. Psychological abuse is an attack toward the child's social and emotional development, and a threat for the healthy human psychological development. John N. Briere classifies psychological abuse into eight categories: rejecting, humiliating, terrorizing, isolation, corrupting, exploitation, denying essential stimulation, emotional responsiveness, or availability, unreliable and inconsistent parenting.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research is a qualitative research, which according to Blaxter (1996: 60), is concerned with collecting and analyzing information in as many forms, chiefly non numeric, as possible. The method applied in the research is descriptive method, which is aimed to describe objectively the subjects with which the science is concerned by collecting the basic descriptive information needed to understand the nature of our subject (Borg, 1987: 10).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Finally David's teachers could no longer believe or accept the explanations which his mother had given them before. Some of them risked their careers to get involved, notify the police and save his life.

On that day, David was taken to a hospital, bathed and cleaned up. Then he was put in the temporary foster home while waiting for the court session that would influence the rest of his life. Carrying nothing from home as his possessions, David started a new phase of his life as a foster child.

In the new chapter of his life, David did not only encounter the change of status as a foster child, but he also faced the shadows of his dark past. Though he had physically been free from the mother, the effects of all the tortures that he had had for years could not be easily wiped away.

### Flashback Through Nightmares

For David, his rescue was a long-awaited answer to his prayers. He knew that from now on everything would change. Somehow he knew that he might never see his family, school, teachers and friends again. All he knew was that he was now free. He did not have to wear the torn and smelly clothes anymore. Neither did he need to do a lot of

household chores nor sleep in the garage. Now he could spend all his time playing with the other foster children who had been the replacement of his brothers, without being afraid to face sudden rage or horrible punishments anymore.

The citation showed how he could not just feel secure after being rescued. Even though his body he was free from his mother, his mind and emotion stayed with his mother, who ruled over him for years. Mentally, David was still his mother's toy.

The thing that triggered his flashback inside his mind was the memory about his mental and physical torture he had endured before. The memory and the thought kept on bothering him and refused to be put aside. Even though in the real world his mother could no longer disturb him, in his dream every terror and torture he had had before kept on coming.

### The Feeling of Insecure and Frightened

In his life, David had been very familiar with the feeling of anxiety. It had become part of him that he could not just let it go, though he no longer lived with his mother, the subject of his horrible past. Wherever he was, he could not put aside the fear that his mother could come to him anytime and bring him back.

The shadow of his mother was still following him. Though the reality told him that his mother would never be able to hurt him anymore, his mind found it difficult to accept it, left alone to believe it. It was hard for him to believe that he would no longer go through the same terrible experience with his mother, and that his mother would have no right over him forever.

The citation showed how the terror and threat lingered in his mind for years could not be erased in one night and just passed by,

though he had heard it with his own ears in the court that he was a hundred percent free from his mother. David knew his mother well, and he knew that his mother would never let something go easily. Also, this knowledge beat his belief over any other things.

### **Low Self Esteem and Inferior Feeling**

In his first weeks after his freedom, many things confused David. At that time David did not even know what he was feeling: horror, exciting, anxious and joy—all mixed up. He felt so grateful that he could not believe that he was finally free from his mother. He also still could not keep away the eerie feeling about his mother, thinking that she still could come and take him at anytime.

At the same time, he also felt excited and anxious about what would happen to his life next. Having been rescued and left his home, it was a new path for a very young boy like David and it was difficult for him to imagine or guess what would follow the horrible years of tremendous torture.

In his confusion came the thought inside him that his mother did everything on purpose to expel him from his family. In his mind, came the idea that he did not deserve the affection from his mother. His low esteem was also caused by the bad things his mother told him before; that he was naughty, he made his mother unhappy, etc. His mother tried to make him feel like he was the cause of every thing his mother did, that he deserved every bad thing his mother did to him

David's low esteem had a big influence toward his behavior outside his foster home, especially at school. Every time he had to do something before many people, even the simplest one, he will do it nervously and awkwardly.

His low esteem was worsening every time his friends teased him. When he was not comparing him self with other

children, David could not find anything less from him. However, when he used another child as a model to see himself, he suddenly felt ashamed with no reason and think that any other children—somehow—are better than him.

David's inferiority had bad effect in his academic skills. At school, he was unable to give his best shoot because he did not have the confident and belief in him self. He was always worried that he would look ridicules in front of others, and was afraid to make mistake.

The fact that he stuttered was also the effect of his mother capricious and rude behaviors; in which she always blamed David for everything and each time made him depressed. His always being the one to blame and his depression were the cause of his condition right now.

### **Difficulties to Trust Others and Develop Friendliness**

The abuse that David had also affected on David's ability to socialize. After experiencing tremendous cruelty that caused heartache, it was not easy for David to develop attachment to others, especially those he just knew. His thought always tried to anticipate every negative possibility; like what he experienced in his house with his mother. As the result, he frequently had difficulties to trust the people around him, though that person had tried to show good intentions to him, like when he had to share his life story with Ms. Gold, the angelic social worker.

The same thing went for David at school. He did not easily make friends; this time, not due to his physical appearance. Now he found great difference between him and his friends at school since he did not live with his family. It was even more difficult for him, when his friends delivered a lot of questions. David was unable to explain the situation that

he underwent to his schoolmates.

Differences of background became a thick wall for David between him and his peers. The dark past made him feel that he was not a 'normal' kid like the others and could be accepted by them just the way he was. Besides, David found it difficult to elaborate the reason how he got to be in the position and condition he was now. So, all that made him feel inferior; and resulted in his withdrawing himself from the friendship with those kids he considered to be 'normal.' His past made a certain burden for David, a barrier in socializing. He had an idea that his dark background was such an incorrigible weakness.

#### **Deteriotation in School Performance**

As the result of David's difficulty to make friends at school, he also lost his interest in things dealing with school. It was before—when he was still suffering from the mistreatment at home—that school made such a safe escape for him; but now everything was different. It was not easy for David to be able to concentrate like other students at school.

Based on the citation above, David's interest of school faded due to the great attraction of his new place of living—Aunt Mary's resident—with his new friends there. When he was still under the mother's 'oppression,' school was such a place for him to escape. Now, there was not such thing for David. His foster home made such a safe and pleasant place for him; where he could spend all his time playing as much as he wanted. Besides, David did not have parents as motivators in learning, not like other kids.

#### **Delinquency**

For years before, David was under the mother's rule; such a terrible prison-like atmosphere for him. Then all at a sudden,

miracle appeared in form of a totally unexpected rescue. All at a second, things changed drastically for David. There was no more fear, mockings, beatings, or threat. Now he was totally free to do anything he wanted. He got too happy to find all that he needed and wanted in the other foster children that he did anything he could do to entertain them, though he realized that what he did was not always right.

It was not that David did not realize or was not aware that he had done wrong. What he did was fully such an expression of excitement about his being accepted in a group; after such a long term rejection by the family members and various mockings at the former school for his weird appearance. Finally, there was a group in which he could spend the whole time with his peers and have fun with them without feeling inferior or worried about the possibility of getting a rejection. David even realized that some older foster children only used him for their own sake. However, he did not care. At least, in this group he could be accepted just the way he was.

Other reason for David's delinquent behaviour was his experience in stealing when he was often starving due to the neglect the mother did to him. The experience made it easy for him to steal, as if it were his expertise. This skill made it something he could be 'proud of' when he was among the group in which that talent was needed. David knew that he did not do the right thing, but it was not a big deal for him. His only concern was an acceptance. After years searching for attention and confession, he found it by showing off his skill in stealing. He, therefore, did not care about the risk.

#### **Obstacles to Understand and Receive Love and/or Properness**

Other effect of David's receiving such a

long-term maltreatment was that it became difficult for him to understand and receive love and/or proper treatment from the people around.

This happened because for a long time, David had been in a condition without any positiveness; like praise, present, or expression of attention and love. Every good thing made a strange thing for him. It was hard for David to accept the fact that there was indeed a sincere attention for him. He tended to judge everything negatively.

David's thought always tried to anticipate bad things behind every good things he found. This dealt with with the games his mother had used to play—where the mother sometimes pretended to behave well to David when having certain intentions or planning something cruel for David.

#### **Emotional Control Disorder**

The oppression and hopelessness that David experienced for such a very long time had another impact for him. When he was still under the mother's hegemony, he had to show obedience and submission, whether he liked it or not, and though his heart actually could not accept the mistreatment. He could only expressed his emotion passively. For such a long time, all kinds of emotion was burried deeply in his heart. Now, when there was none threatening him physically and nothing made him have to hold his emotion, David often found it difficult to control his emotion.

Besides Larry's underestimating behaviour, David also got oversensitive over several nicknames that Larry used to adress him. David's anger burst all at a sudden because Larry uttered something bad about him. Such mocking like the word 'moron' might arise his anger. For him, such words worsen his condition; remind him of every bad

thing the mother used to adress him, when the mother always tried to ensure David that he was indeed a bad boy and unworthy of love. Besides, the word 'moron' from Larry made him worried more that he was really going to suffer a psychological disorder like his mother.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the research, it is found that the effects of the above abuse that David experienced were flashback through nightmares, the feeling of insecure and frightened, low self esteem and inferior feeling, difficulties to trust others and develop friendliness, and deteriorating school performance. Besides, David had deviant actions (stealing), obstacles to understand and receive love and/or properness, and emotional control disorder.

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