

The Invisible Girl: Growing Up With Undiagnosed Attention Deficit Disorder by Kathleen Kelleher, Ph.D.

In school I tried my best to be a "good" little girl. I had already learned in my short life that this meant, "being seen and not heard until spoken to". It also meant listening attentively while the teacher spoke, but this did not come easily to me.

I remember well, sitting in the classroom with the teacher in front of the chalkboard. As the teacher droned on and on, I would tune in and out, and back in again. When I tuned in I caught bits and pieces of the lesson. When I tuned out, I created intricate stories in my mind. So, on I went, fabricating stories in my made up world in my head while lessons were taught, instructions were given, homework was assigned and much more.

A great part of my time in school was spent enduring reprimands; and for what, I was never entirely sure. I was routinely sent to stand in the corner of the classroom and sometimes in the hallway, desk and all. I did not understand why and how I earned these punishments, and the teachers seemed not to know this. I remember feeling embarrassed; I wondered what the other kids thought of me.

One of my most traumatic school experiences occurred in second grade. My teacher -- Mrs. Swinconick, a very tall lady with pitch-black hair -- took away my books and completely excluded me from all school activities. On the first day of this Punishment By Exclusion, I recall being left behind in the classroom with all the boys when the teacher took the girls to the grocery store as part of a project to make butter from cream.

Prior to this punishment, I had been reprimanded often for looking out the window, and for not raising my hand at the appropriate time. I remember that my desk was moved to a separate space away from the other students. I was ordered to sit there in silence every day, without my books, or pencil and paper, or anything to do. This treatment went on for what seemed like many, many days, or possibly weeks. Each day I went home to milk and cookies, but I didn't tell a soul about what was happening to me at school. I was afraid my parents would find out some other way, and side with my teacher - and against me -- for whatever it was I was supposed to have done. In this way I would be in even more trouble.

I got my books back one day. The evil Mrs. Swinconick commanded me to follow her out of the classroom and down the long corridor towards the principal's office. She stopped short of the principal's office and instructed me to enter the nurse's office. She flicked on the light, ordered me to sit down on a chair and slammed the door behind her. We were now alone in this small, medicine-smelling room.

From my chair, I looked up at Mrs. Swinconick, towering over my slender little presence while she ranted and raved. Afraid, I didn't dare respond. I sat, staring at her, and in spite of the

length of her tirade, I remember but one strange phrase she yelled at me: "Shape up, or ship out." After a time, I was instructed to return to the classroom where I received my books again; without explanation I was returned to my former status and was permitted to join the other children in all regular activities.

I buried that horrible experience in my memory for over two decades. In adulthood I finally remembered, sitting in a therapist's office. When relating the story to the therapist -- and several times later to other specialists -- I unexpectedly sobbed. This I had not done at the time, or any time in the intervening years. I carried it with me, undigested, and not remembered, until at last I had someone to tell.

Each time report cards came out, I was filled with dread; my parents would be disappointed and angry about my poor grades. Teachers regularly wrote in the Comments section, "Does not apply herself." As a second grader, I had only an inkling of what this phrase meant, but I interpreted it as laziness on my part, which surely was what my teachers believed about me. Reading this comment always upset my parents and they would encourage me to try harder.

And, each time, I thought to myself, "I will try harder and make my parents proud." But that was easier said than done, and when the next report card came out, there was little or no "improvement." I silently berated myself, again.

Kathleen Kelleher was diagnosed with ADD and associated learning disabilities six years ago, at age 33. A neuropsychologist diagnosed Kathleen based on many hours of cognitive testing and on her accounts of her own personal history. She is now pursuing her writing on a part time basis and working full time as a Manager of Communications and Marketing. Kathleen's advice to fellow ADDers is to be open-minded about using medication and educate yourself fully about ADD so you can manage yourself. Kathleen's philosophy is that self-management is as important as taking the right medication.