

Attachment, Deprivation, and Privation: Jarmila Koluchova

In 1972 Jarmila Koluchova began reporting the case of identical twin boys in Czechoslovakia who had suffered the most severe deprivations.

The mother died soon after the twins were born (in 1960) and their father had to place the children in care. Their father remarried a few months later and the twins returned home when they were eighteen months old. Their stepmother had no interest in bringing up young children (despite having had four of her own) and was selfish and uncaring. The father was of below average intelligence, and his job on the railways took him away from home quite a lot. The family had recently moved to a city suburb where nobody knew them, or knew that the family should have contained six children.

Their stepmother treated the twins terribly. They were kept in a small unheated room with a sheet of polythene for a bed and with very little furniture. They were poorly fed. Sometimes the mother would lock them in the cellar and beat them with a wooden kitchen spoon, covering their heads with a mattress in case anyone heard their screams. The twins suffered these conditions for five-and-a-half years. When they were finally examined, at the age of seven, they were severely physically and mentally retarded. Their bodies were covered in scar tissue from the beatings. They had severe rickets (a disease of the bones caused by lack of vitamin D). They couldn't stand up straight, walk or run, and their coordination was poor. They hadn't been taught to speak, had no knowledge, of eating habits and were very frightened of people, and of the dark. It was impossible to give them a standard intelligence test as they couldn't understand the instructions, and they weren't familiar with things like pictures, which were included in some of the tests. It was estimated that their IQ would have been in the 40s. (The average IQ is 100.) Their stage of development was equivalent to that of a child aged three years.

The twins were put in hospital until they were well enough to go to a special school for mentally disadvantaged children. There they made good progress. When they were more sociable they were fostered by a particularly kind and loving woman who lived with her sister, who had already fostered children. By the age of eleven the twins' speech was normal for their age. They enjoyed reading and playing the piano, and they were both fairly active. By the age of fifteen, the twins' IQ scores were normal, and their emotional state had improved greatly. The atmosphere at home was warm and friendly and, although the boys still remembered their early experiences, they rarely talked about them, even to their foster mother.

It appears that even these terrible early experiences could be overcome with the right kind of care. Koluchova's latest report on the twins (in 1991) showed that they had continued to make progress and they have made a full recovery from their earlier mistreatment. Ann and Alan Clarke claim that if early experiences were so important then these children would be emotionally disturbed for the rest of their lives. At the very least they would suffer severe affectionless psychopathy, they claimed - but they didn't.