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**Women's Recollections of Childhood Peer Rejection in School**

**Catherine Derry**

**A Thesis**

**In**

**The Department**

**Of**

**Education**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**for the Degree Master of Arts at**

**Concordia University**

**Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**March 2001**

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## ABSTRACT

### Women's Recollections of Childhood Peer Rejection in School

Catherine Derry

Most of the research literature on peer rejection either blames the victim or concentrates on finding patterns in the process of rejection. The perspectives of the children being rejected have been given surprisingly little attention, while the perspectives of adults thinking back on their experience has yet to be investigated. This study examines the memories of four women (one of who is myself) who were rejected as children in school, and is written from a phenomenological standpoint. In addition to conducting a self-study, the research involved interviewing participants about their memories of childhood experiences, and incorporated the use of memory prompts, such as photographs and drawings. Through analyzing and reflecting on the images, memory accounts, and interviews, I explore and describe what it can feel like to be excluded or bullied by others in school. The data analysis was conducted by looking for and testing common themes that describe the essential nature of each participant's experience. This was followed by the writing and rewriting of phenomenological descriptions of the experiences. The findings highlight both differences and commonalities in coping strategies used by the participants to deal with their situations, and provide an in-depth look at the traces that childhood experiences can leave on adult memory. In the concluding chapter, the participants themselves offer advice to parents and educators dealing with peer rejection.

## **Dedication**

**This work is dedicated to the memory of my father Robert Derry whose faith in me and unconditional love are with me always.**

## **Acknowledgements**

The first people I would like to thank are Kyla, Taylor and Linda. The participants who had the courage to share their painful memories so others could learn from them.

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Sandra Weber many times over, for seeing the scholar in me that I could not always see. She encouraged me to research new territory and provided the intellectual and emotional support necessary to do that. I would also like to thank the members of my committee: Dr. Claudia Mitchell for her very good advice, unwavering support and sense of humor and Dr. Miranda D'Amico for support and interest in this project.

I would like to thank my Mom, Joan Derry, and Mary Svats (Aunt Lena) for being my official cheerleading section. I would like to thank my partner Karen Clendinneng for her love, encouragement and patience with me during this time.

I also acknowledge the support and love of my best friend Leslie Belyea whose two am phone calls provided some of the data for my self-study. Thanks for being the kind of unconditional friend I always needed. I would like to further thank a number of friends and colleagues who have provided encouragement during this project: Katherine Vanka, David Gormley, Katherine Belyea, Kerry Withrow, Anne Withrow, Effie Karelak, Mike Melanson, Sophie Cloutier, Jo Visser, Katharine Childs, Kim Hershorn and Rocci Luppicini.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### EXAMINING MEMORIES OF PEER REJECTION

‘Well... first thing she says is, Why do you always pick on me? So I tell her, I don’t pick on you and she goes, You do too. You and all your friends. And I never did anything to you. So I tell her, You’re full of it and she goes, Some day you’ll be sorry. I’ll get you for this. So I tell her, I’m really scared and she goes, You should be. So I say, Yeah ... I’m shaking all over and then she goes, I hate you!’ (Blume, 1974, p.75).

#### Introduction

What is it like to have nobody to play with at recess? Do you remember the children who no one wanted on their team in gym class? How did they feel about it? What was their experience? What is it like to be rejected by other children? What do adults remember of these experiences? How do these memories effect their adult life? Are they happy and well adjusted? I asked research questions like these to women who had experienced peer rejection as children. In this thesis, I explore their childhood experience of peer rejection through listening to them recount their memories and reflecting on the meaning they derive from them.

I start this endeavor by inviting you to read the memory written by a woman who was peer rejected as a child. The story is of a fifth grade girl who gets picked on at recess, a situation familiar to almost everyone. In the speaker’s own words, here’s what happened:

#### **Picked on at recess**

*An incident I can remember happened in grade five during recess. I guess it happened because I was deemed the geekiest girl in the school. Some grade six girls told*

*me I should kiss Artie because they heard he liked me. Not only was Artie the geekiest boy in school, he also had a reputation for disliking girls. I refused to kiss him, I felt humiliated knowing that it was a trick. I was going to stand my ground and not let them have another laugh at my expense. Suddenly, the girls grabbed me and put my hands behind my back and walked me towards Artie. His hands were being held behind his back, too, and he was being walked towards me by the grade six boys. As we were forced face to face, the boys said, "C'mon Artie kiss your girlfriend!" We both refused. They pushed our faces together, our lips touched, but we did not actually kiss. After this, people start singing "Cathy and Artie up a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, than comes marriage, than comes Cathy pushing a baby carriage." For the next few weeks I was teased about him constantly. This is the kind of harassment I endured from the older kids. I wonder, now, where was my best friend, who was a well-liked sixth-grader, during these incidents? I honestly don't remember. It seemed to me that this is what I had to endure in order to hang out with her and the older kids at school.*

This memory brings to light the all too familiar dynamics of what recess is like for many children. This is the kind of memory account that can help readers vicariously share another person's experience.

Why did I choose the topic of school-based peer rejection for my research? I chose it because it has special significance in my own life. I was rejected repeatedly by other children in school for many years. As you might already have guessed, that fifth grade Cathy is me. Van Manen (1984) says that the topic a researcher chooses to investigate usually reflects something personal or professional about the person researching it. This topic is also important to society, since friendship is an important part

of childhood. Friendship in childhood teaches us a lot of important lessons and promotes good self-esteem (Erwin, 1998). Unfortunately, many children are "left out in the cold" by their peers, something that can leave a lasting effect on their lives.

The phenomenon of peer rejection has been occurring for years and seems to be fairly widespread. When I tell people of my interest in this topic, they spontaneously tell me their own stories. For example, I was at a party recently talking with a group of people about university. Someone asked me what my thesis topic is. When I told them my topic is peer rejection, three people waved their hands and said "That's me." My friend Ivy (not her real name) told me she didn't have many friends in elementary school. Another friend said that she dropped out of school in junior high because people made fun of her appearance (she was "heavy metal" and overweight). My friend Kitty (not her real name) told me she never had problems fitting in but, for some reason, had always made friends with the kids who did not fit in. I have heard theirs and many other stories. It seems that almost every adult I know has either been rejected or remembers someone at school who was rejected.

This kind of rejection is still being experienced by children in school today. Children frequently appear on talk shows to ask for help fitting in at school. A recent story in the media told of a British boy who was so severely picked on at school that he ran away to Buckingham palace to seek help, thinking that the Queen was the only person powerful enough to help him (Weaver, 2001). Stones (1993) tells of a sixteen-year-old girl who committed suicide because she was being picked on in school. In another extreme case, two boys in Columbine, Ohio who apparently were peer rejected went on a shooting spree, killing 15 students in their school before killing themselves (Vaughan &

Clark, 1999). Most cases of peer rejection do not make the news headlines, but the ones that do highlight the devastating effect that peer rejection is having on children's lives today.

In my personal life I have also heard recent sad tales of peer rejection in schools. For example, when my cousin Adam (not his real name) was in kindergarten last year, some of the other children would steal his lunch. He was too scared to stand up for himself and the teacher did not know how to stop it. My friend's daughter, who is seven, recounted another story of how all the kids in first grade made fun of her, including her best friend, when she had a splint on her finger. As she put it, "My bestest friend made fun of me and that hurt my feelings." Peer rejection is a phenomenon that has been occurring for a long time and shows no signs of ending. We need to understand what this experience feels like from the victim's perspective if we want to understand it. It is also important to understand how some people manage to get through this experience and live functional adult lives. I want to explore what traces the childhood experience leaves on adult life.

### **What Is Peer Rejection?**

What exactly is "peer rejection?" Who is a rejected child? A peer rejected child is usually described as somebody who is overtly disliked by their peers (Asher, 1990). "Rejected children are those whom most classmates dislike to play with and whose bids for social interaction are often rebuffed" (Roopnarine and Honing, 1985, p.60). However, this definition does not take the rejected child's perspective into account. For the

purposes of this study, I define a peer-rejected child as someone who is disliked or who *feels* disliked by most of his or her classmates.

It is important not to lose sight of rejected children as thinking, feeling beings who are aware of their situation. Social rejection may not be as powerful a phenomenon when the person being rejected does not perceive the situation as such. Perhaps the rejected child's feelings and thoughts are more important a consideration than the attitudes or behaviors of rejecters. For example, if only half the class dislikes a child who feels this dislike and feels rejected, than that is just as important a situation as one where the entire class dislikes the child. In other words, the lived experience of the person being rejected needs to be taken more into account. I hope this study will add to the professional knowledge base on peer rejection.

## **The Literature on Peer Rejection**

Van Manen (1984) says that sometimes when we investigate a topic, we know too much about it already. "The problem is that our 'common sense' pre-understandings, our suppositions, assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we have even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question" (p.46). It is important, therefore, not only to explore one's own experience, but also to search elsewhere.

There have been a lot of things said about peer rejection on television, in the media, in movies, books and in the literature of social science research. I fully explored the research literature on peer rejection, and also sampled various movies and novels that address the topic. This is an important part of phenomenological research.

What does the research literature have to say about peer rejection? Peer rejected children face almost consistent rejection throughout childhood. This rejection can cause problems with loneliness, self-esteem, depression and learning (Asher, 1990). Peer rejection is thought to stem from many places. Some theorists say it is the result of the child's behavior and personality defects (Asher, 1990). Others maintain it is based on reputation (Hymel, Wagner & Butler, 1990). Some researchers claim teachers can effect a child's status (White & Kisner, 1992). Whatever the reason for the rejection, it makes childhood difficult, although having one good friend is said to make a difference (Vaughn, McIntosh, Schumm, Hager, & Callwood, 1993).

The media has grabbed onto the topic of peer rejection and there have been many interviews from victims of rejection in the papers, magazines and television. However, although the media and popular culture highlight its importance, few, if any, social scientific studies have examined rejection from the perspective of how the rejected person remembers feeling and what the actual experiences were like. Most studies focus instead on defining who is peer rejected, and whether or not they have low self-esteem, or any friends. Many studies try to figure out the "so-called" flaws in children's behavior, personality or cognition that *caused* them to become rejected (Ladd, Price, & Hart, 1990). Some studies examine how to stop peer exclusion (see for example, Matthews, 1996, Salisbury & Palombaro, 1998, & Vaughn et al., 1993). The majority of these studies examine narrowly defined qualities of peer rejection rather than the "essence" of what the experience means or is like. The few studies that do question how it feels to be excluded are studies conducted with children. To my knowledge, no one has examined the memories of adults who were peer rejected as children, how it made them feel, and how



the experience affects the quality of their adult life. This study will serve as a starting point to fill that gap.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

To explore the phenomenon of peer rejection, I designed a multi-pronged inquiry from a phenomenological standpoint. I explored my own and other women's memories of childhood peer rejection using interviews, old photographs as memory prompts, and artistic expression through drawing. I analyzed and re-analyzed the resulting data using the phenomenological method of theme analysis and rewriting. I examined my own and other's "lived experience" to understand the "essence" of peer rejection.

## **About Phenomenology and Memory Work**

A phenomenological question asks what a human phenomenon or life experience *is like* (van Manen, 1984). This kind of research basically asks what is it like to *be*? Although this may sound like an impossible and overly philosophical task, it really boils down to understanding what it is like walk a mile in another person's shoes, understanding how they felt during their experience and how it affected their lives. Thus the guiding question for this study is "What is it like to be peer rejected as a child in school?"

Van Manen (1984) suggests that our own experience is a good starting point for research since it is immediately accessible to us in a way that no one else's experiences are (p.51.). This helped me realize that my own memories of peer rejection would be a good starting point for this investigation. To quote Yeats, "all knowledge is biography" (cited in Swindells, 1995). Van Manen (1984) believes that we should study the way we experience the world to gain insight about it. "It is always a project of someone: a real

person, who in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence” (p.40).

By studying a topic relevant to one's life, one may discover information that had not been previously detected by traditional research done in that area. This is what Lepage-Lees (1997) concluded when she studied women who, like herself, came from a disadvantaged background. She found that traditional so-called “objective” research in that area had missed some important aspects. She feels her experience as an insider enhanced her research. “I believe my experiences have provided me with the empathy needed to reflect on disadvantaged women’s lives in ways that outsiders cannot” (Lepage-Lees, 1997, pg.3).

Swindells (1995) discusses how autobiography gives a voice to the minority speakers’ experience that is so often ignored in society. It can in some way challenge what “society” has put forth as “fact”. Lepage-Lees (1997) argues that academics may have shut out certain minorities from researching areas in which they have experience. “I now believe that certain groups have been shut out of the academic process because people from the traditional majority subtly communicate that it is inappropriate for people from marginalized groups to reflect on their own experiences” (Lepage-Lees, 1997, p.3). Griffiths (1995) further argues that the study of personal experience is crucial to development of a feminist perspective.

According to Kuhn (1995), memory work is a good method for exploring the perspective of those whose experiences are often ignored by society.

Memory work is a method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories, stories of ‘lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of culture don’t quite work’. These are the lives of those

whose ways of knowing and ways of seeing the world are rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated, in expressions of hegemonic culture. (Kuhn, 1995, p.8).

I like to think that as a woman and a former peer-rejected child, I am contributing to a knowledge base that challenges some of the societal assumptions about peer-rejected children.

Telling our own stories often helps us understand ourselves (Linde, cited in Fulford, 1999). Linde says that "Life stories express our sense of self- who we are and how we became that person" (p.14). Mitchell & Weber (1999) write about how the past can help us understand who we are today both personally and professionally, and they stress the importance of making the past useable in the present. As an example, they discuss an early childhood educator whose memories of being an outsider helped inform her teaching of children who might be outsiders.

Like Mitchell & Weber (1999), my use of memory work does not mean dwelling on the past in and of itself. I am referring to a commitment to make the past useable, in our present lives toward future action. Mitchell & Weber (1999) demonstrate that memory work helps us understand not only ourselves but also how we relate to others. Like them, I do not assume that memories are accurate. Instead, I am interested in the feelings childhood memories evoke and the mark they have left on that adult life. How does one remember the experience feeling and how does it affect ones life today?

The past is gone forever. We cannot return to it, nor can we reclaim it now as it was. But that does not mean it is lost to us. The past is like the scene of the crime: if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces still remain. From these traces, markers that point towards a past presence, to something that has happened in this place a (re)construction, if not a simulacrum, of the event can be pieced together (Kuhn, 1995, p.3-4).

Because my research question emerged from my “lived experience,” I began my research by conducting a self-study of my own memories. But I realize that my experience is not necessarily universal, and that I do not represent every excluded child. Accordingly, to access a broader range of experience, I also interviewed three other women whose age is similar to my own (between the ages of 28 and 33). I limited the age range in order to get a specific look at how one generation of women remember experiencing peer rejection in Canada. The experience of childhood exclusion has many faces and many varied experiences. I can only present a small glimpse into the phenomenon of peer rejection: my own and my participants' memories of it.

### **Self-Study**

**This detour through the world of childhood, with my own childhood self as guide, heals and teaches. It heals because it allows the child and the adult to speak to one another, lets the adult recapture the child's spirit of bravery and sense of possibility. It teaches because it shows that understanding may be gained by routes other than that of intellectual detachment. (Kuhn, 1995, p.38)**

Once I had found my question and explored the literature, it was time to explore my own experience, time to start my self-study. But first, perhaps, I should tell you a little bit about myself. I was the only adopted child of two loving parents. I grew up in a mid-size city in the Maritimes where I was consistently picked on in school from kindergarten to grade eleven. Today I am a thirty-year-old graduate student in education. An outgoing person, I have a loving family, am in a happy love relationship, and have good friends.

The following are the steps I followed in exploring my memories of peer rejection.

### **Generating the data**

To begin my self-study, I wanted to use as much material as possible to make sure I thoroughly investigated my memories. Van Manen (1984) says that generating data usually consists of a thorough exploration of the scope of lived experience, of the kinds of material that can be found and which might eventually have a bearing on the possibility of developing a deeper understanding of the nature of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1984, p.50). Accordingly, I explored my memories in many different ways. I used objects as memory prompts. I used others stories real and fictional to aid my memory. I used writing to reflect on my memories. I used art to express what could not be expressed verbally.

**Material that may eventually yield significant interpretive understanding can be sought in a variety of places: one's personal experiences, the etymology of relevant terms, idiomatic phrases and expressions, other people's experiences, biographies or reconstructed life stories, experiential descriptions contained in artistic and literary sources and so forth (van Manen, 1984, p.50)**

As I proceeded through the study, I found that each path of inquiry would lead into another; for example, drawing a picture would give me something to write about. Sometimes, somebody else's story, real or fictional, would trigger a memory or would make me think of a new way of exploring my story. Sometimes, I would find data after interpretation had already begun. So the steps I will describe later for proceeding through a self-study are by no means a sequential order. The process was more of a spiral.

### **Aiding memory**

I used objects that document my childhood to aid my memory. These objects or prompts included my yearbooks, my baby book, my school treasure book (a book of

photos and memories my mother kept for me), various photos, and a videotape of some of the schools I attended.

Mitchell & Weber (1999) talk about how objects can aid memory work, "... using objects as prompts to remember is itself a strategy which can enhance memory work around childhood" (p.17). Aids such as photographs can be helpful when doing memory work, providing lots of information. Weiser (1993) believes that photographs can help uncover memories that had been lost or not consciously remembered.

Photographs can help verbalize feelings we would not have been able to express without visual clues, and allow us to examine ourselves and how others view us. As Weiser (1993) says,

Personal snapshots and albums can assist us in remembering, confronting, imaging, and exploring complex parts of ourselves and our lives... as a means of assisting people to reconnect with thoughts and feelings of the past as if they were presently being experienced (49).

Because photographs can elicit such powerful emotions, they are a good tool to use in memory work.

As mentioned earlier, I also looked to popular culture to assist my memory. I read children's novels that deal with peer rejection, such as *Blubber* (Blume, 1974) and *The Cat ate my Gymsuit* (Danziger, 1974). Similarly, I watched movies such as *Carrie* and *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. Van Manen (1984) writes that we gain insight by examining how an artist interprets experience:

The phenomenologists know the value of having read widely and deeply and having an insatiable interest in the ways in which sensitive artists are providing us vicariously with expressive examples of fundamental truth experiences. There exists a hermeneutic dialectic between lived life and art: art interprets life and life interprets art (p.51).

## **Collecting artifacts**

Collecting the objects I needed meant a trip home to my mother to borrow photographs and other artifacts. I also went to some of the schools I attended and did some videotaping there. I interviewed my mother about my baby and pre-school days because I can not remember being a baby and only remember a little about my pre-school years. It wasn't necessary to ask my mother many questions because she was more than happy to talk endlessly on this subject (for a list of questions used see Appendix A). Van Manen (1990) noted that when interviewing, sometimes asking few questions is better. "Often it is not necessary to ask so many questions. Patience or silence may be a more tactful way of prompting the other to gather recollections and proceed with a story" (p.68). This proved to be true and the information I received gave me a rich background from which to start my exploration.

## **Procedure for self-study**

*The photo captured how I looked on the outside and the art represented how I felt on the inside (Catherine's notes).*

As mentioned earlier, it is hard to describe this process in a linear fashion, because so often steps would overlap. Nevertheless, I have decided to describe the research procedure in four steps as follows:

***I. Examining the artifacts:*** I examined the photos, my mother's interview, and memorabilia. My baby book and "School Treasure Book" were very good sources of information. My mother turned out to have been a very good recorder of my life, writing every little detail, saving hair clippings and report cards. This attention to detail helped

me clarify many memories. After examining this data I would sit down and record the thoughts, feeling and memories they brought up.

These artifacts became useful again later on. For example, if I was writing and was having trouble remembering the details of a certain experience, I would sift through the artifacts until one or two would jog my memory. Also, later on when doing a drawing about a memory, I would use a photo of my self as reference point. *The photo captured how I looked on the outside and the art represented how I felt on the inside.* The photos are useful even as I am writing this chapter. When I feel I am losing sight of my question, I just pick up a photo of ten-year-old Cathy and look into her face and I remember clearly what this project is all about.

After I had already done a lot of writing, I still felt there was something missing. So I visited some of my old schools and videotaped them. Taping and viewing these videos brought a new dimension to my memories, making them go from two-dimensional to three-dimensional.

**2. *Writing my memories:*** This happened in many stages. It started out as writing down a memory as I remembered it. This was usually triggered by a conversation or interaction with someone or something. I wrote down memories after examining my artifacts. Next I asked myself a list of questions, the same ones I used for my participants (see Appendix B). I reflected on the questions and answered the ones that were most helpful to my story.

Some times, I would have new memories to write, for example, after doing artwork or listening to someone else's stories. This will be discussed in the next few steps. All the steps in my procedure caused me to write reflectively about my memories of my experience.



**3. Art:** While writing, I drew many pictures of my memories. I noticed sometimes that my writing in some places seemed flat, as if something was missing. One day while having a very hard time describing an experience that happened to me in third grade, I stopped writing and left my desk. I went into the kitchen armed with some colored pencils, some paper, and a photo of myself that had been taken that year. I sat down and did something suggested to me by therapists, professors and books. I drew. What resulted was a drawing that conveyed emotions I could not express with words. The fact that I have not drawn since I was school-aged (when I was peer rejected) means that the vocabulary and process of my drawing is more like that of the young girl I was back then. It brought me in contact with myself as a child and helped me to see what was missing from my writing. I was then able to finish writing that memory.

According to van Manen (1990), phenomenologists often use art as a source of lived experience,

Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts – texts consisting of not a verbal language but a language nevertheless, and a language with its own grammar. Because artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations (p.74).

I discussed earlier why photographs are a useful tool in memory work, but drawings, too, can be helpful, especially to express memories. According to Weiser (1993) when discussing art therapy, “All art-therapy is based on the idea that visual-symbolic representations is far less interruptive and distortive than verbal translations of sensory based experience” (p.10). Gamin (1999) talks about how some clients in traditional therapy have been astounded by the emotions they learn to express when using art-therapy. Gamin (1999) says, “Using art to express what your body-mind is saying will

enable you to connect, perhaps for the first time, with your deepest feelings and emotions” (p.21).

While writing my self-study, I did many drawings, all of which were useful in aiding my writing and describing my memories. I have placed them through out Chapter Two, in the hopes that they paint a fuller picture of my experience for the reader.

**4. *Other people's stories:*** Whether they be actual true stories or fictional accounts, other people's experience of peer rejection have helped me remember my own experiences. Fictional accounts such as those in children's novels and movies can help to create a three dimensional look at what it's like to be peer rejected. They let you experience it through the eyes of the rejected, something the research literature does not often do. Van Manen (1984) notes that we gain insight from such sources, “Indeed, from a phenomenological point of view we may gain more interpretive understanding and more profound insights into human life from a great novel or a great poem than from more reputable behavioral social science text” (p.51). Watching or reading these fictional accounts would often trigger a memory for me to record. Other stories that triggered memories were those of the other women who participated in this study. Often while listening to the tape of an interview, something in their story would remind me of my own. When that happened, I would stop the tape and jot down my memory.

#### **Problems encountered during self-study**

The most difficult part of doing this study was writing my own stories in Chapter Two. My self-study seemed like a never-ending journey. After my artifacts were examined, my art was finished, and my questions had been answered, new questions would arise, new ways of memory retrieval would occur to me, and I found new forms

for expressing these memories. It seemed like where ever I went, there was no escaping this research - a movie, a conversation or a novel would provoke a new memory. One night, for example, I watched an episode of *The Simpsons* that showed Homer watching TV. The content of the program he was viewing was similar to situations in his life. Soon, he imagined that the characters on the TV shows were talking to him. I felt a knowing sympathy for him because I found that while writing this thesis, I could not watch a film or TV show without seeing how it tied to this research and my experience.

During this endless search I found many ghosts of myself. The problem with these ghosts is that they are not pesky strangers beckoning me to expose their secrets; these ghosts are my own. It is not always easy to be searching for painful memories. Sometimes I didn't *feel like remembering* how bad things were. I coped with that by turning to a good memory. When recounting a painful memory became too much, I would stop writing and look at a photo of a happy memory or something nice my mother had written in my baby book, to remind myself it wasn't all bad, just certain aspects were. For the most part my self-study was healing. But, sometimes it is difficult to put your work away when the subject is yourself.

### **Self-study analysis**

After taking part in all these reflective activities, I wrote the first draft of my story, looking for themes. What themes stand out in my story? How are my themes the same and different from those in the other stories I had been told?

What exactly are themes? According to van Manen (1990), 'Theme Analysis' refers to the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work (p.78). Phenomenological themes may

be understood as the structures of experience. When we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine the themes, the experiential structures that make up the experience (van Manen, 1990, p.79). Themes are the common threads that run through each story. They are the feelings and incidents that happen repeatedly. They help describe the experience in a form that makes sense.

In reading and re-reading the memory accounts, or simply in thinking about them at odd moments of the day, I began to draw up a list of themes that seem to best represent my experience of peer rejection. Then I matched each memory the best I could with a theme, which is difficult because some memories represent more than one theme. If the matching was "forced", then I knew I was on the wrong track and would re-think it. Van Manen (1990) says that themes are the "structures of experience" but they are also a way of putting order in this kind of multifaceted, complicated research. "Themes give control and order to our research and writing"(p.79).

After isolating what I thought were the most important themes, I wrote my story around them. But this is not the end of the analysis. An important part of phenomenological analysis is *rewriting* (van Manen, 1990). "The method of phenomenology requires a dialectical going back and forth among these various levels of questioning. To be able to do justice to the fullness and ambiguity of the experience of the lifeworld, writing may turn into a complex process of rewriting (re-thinking, re-lecting, re-cognizing)" (van Manen, 1999, p.131).

Writing and rewriting my story was sometimes a difficult process. Giving shape to these stories was an arduous task. Having to recount a few stories over an hour, as the participants did, is difficult enough, but having to write and rewrite your most

embarrassing and painful moments can be emotionally taxing. It can play havoc with your self-esteem. Sometimes I felt like a geek or a loser, and at other times, a protective mother of a sad child. Subjectivity can give us an insightful perspective missed by traditional objective research, but there are also dangers. "Subjectivity means we are *strong* in our orientation to the object of study *in a unique and personal way* – while avoiding the danger of becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away by unreflected preconceptions" (van Manen, 1990, p.20).

To avoid being self-indulgent or to avoid glossing over important details out of embarrassment, I chose to write my initial drafts in the third person, something suggested as a tool in aiding memory work by Mitchell & Weber (1999). They were influenced by Crawford et al.(cited in Mitchell & Weber, 1999) who among other things said that writing in the third person helps one not to worry about the audiences reaction, not to judge oneself, and to make the story seem important enough to tell. I began by writing my memories in the third person (as Cathy's story) which I found to be helpful. I didn't worry about people judging me or being bored with my silly life and so I was able to write the full details of "her" memories. Later, I rewrote them all in the first person, so that they would retain that "personal voice" that the stories I have written about the other participants have.

### **Participant Study: Other People's Memories**

The participants are three women between the ages of 28 and 33. I recruited them in two ways: I asked a friend who I knew had experienced childhood rejection to participate. Secondly, I advertised in a student newspaper and website for additional participants. The women readily agreed to share their memories of being peer rejected as

children and were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time (see consent form Appendix C). The outcome was that three women shared with me and now share with readers of this report some of the most private and painful moments of their lives. For reasons of privacy and confidentiality, I have not used their real names, nor the real names of those they discuss, although it is interesting to note that one of them really hoped I would use her real name. She wants to go public to end the shame of peer rejection and to show people there is no reason to hide.

### **Generating data**

So that my story isn't seen as an isolated incident and to give a fuller picture of peer rejection, I needed others to share their stories with me, something van Manen (1984) deems important. But why do we need to collect the 'data' of other people's experiences? We gather other people's experiences because it allows us in a vicarious sort of way to become more experienced ourselves (van Manen, 1984, p.56). Griffiths (1995) too points out that we can learn from others whose experience may come from a different standpoint than our own. And so I deliberately sought out women in my age group to show how women of one generation experienced peer rejection.

The first participant, Kyla, is an only child who was brought up in a single parent home. She grew up in a small town in the Maritimes where she was picked on from grade two to grade twelve. Today she is twenty-nine-years-old and in a career transition. She would like to go back to school. She is a very beautiful woman who is insecure, but comes across as outgoing. She is in a happy four-year relationship and is close with her family. She does not have as many friends as she would like, but that could be because she has just recently moved backed to the city.

The second participant, Taylor, grew up in a small family and was very close to her sibling who was also peer rejected. She grew up in a small town on the West coast. She was picked on from second grade until about grade eleven. Today, she is a twenty-eight-year-old graduate student. She is an artist, activist, and leader who is close with her family and has many friends. She is very outgoing and comes across as having great self-esteem, although she told me she sometimes still feels ugly, something she never was judging from the photos I have seen.

The third participant, Linda, was the youngest child of a large family. She also grew up in a midsize Maritime city. She was picked on from the age of seven until about grade eleven. Today she is a thirty-three-year-old successful graduate student and a very dedicated teacher. Linda is a very cautious and guarded person who lets few people get close to her. She does have a few close friends, people she knows she can really trust.

### **Collecting the data**

... listening to others is possible only if the attempt is made to be open to particular others. This means making the effort to understand the context in which they speak. It takes times and trouble. It needs to be undertaken in the knowledge that understanding will be imperfect. It also needs to be taken in the knowledge that the listener may find herself deeply changed by the encounter (Griffiths, 1995, p.44)

To encourage the participants to share their stories with me, I designed a list of questions that were open-ended and would encourage them to reflect on their experience. I did not ask every participant all the questions. They were a list that I thought would aid each participant's memory and help them keep oriented to the guiding question. Van Manen (1984) says it is important to keep your question in mind, because it is through that question you will get the answer of what something is like.

I decided I would also ask the participants to share photos and draw a picture if they were willing. Most participants did not share photos with me because their childhood photos remained with their families out of town. They did, however, choose to do drawings for me. I decided to ask the participants as few questions as possible, so as to let them interpret their own drawings. Their drawings are included in each of their chapters.

All of the interviews were tape-recorded. The interviews went well, each relating a story that was familiar, yet somewhat different. Everyone freely gave very personal and enlightening information. Each participant spoke at length about how they remembered peer rejection, and, when given draw materials and time alone, drew spontaneous images of rejection.

### **Analysis**

After each interview I listened to the tape and made notes on what each person remembered about their experience of peer rejection. After all the interviews were completed, I listened to the tapes again, adding to the notes things I had missed the first time. For example, one participant's voice changed into a childlike voice when telling a childhood memory, something I hadn't originally noted.

Next, I took each set of notes and looked for themes that stood out. I noted what each story had in common with the others and what was different. Once I found potential main themes for each participant's story, I listened to each tape again with those themes in mind and noted important parts of the interview. This is what van Manen (1990) calls the selective reading approach, "In the selective reading approach we listen to or read a text several times and ask, what statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or



revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described? These statements we then circle, underline, or highlight.” (p.93) I then wrote each of my participant’s stories. After writing my first drafts, I did extensive rewriting. As mentioned previously, rewriting is an important tool of analysis in phenomenological writing. Chapters three, four and five tell the participants' stories.

## **The Social Context**

I would like to establish a social historical context of the era the participants and I were born into. We were all born in the late sixties or early seventies, a time of social upheaval and social change. Women and minorities were fighting for their rights. Pedagogists were coming up with new ideas for educational change that sprang from the changes happening in North America at this time. There was a generational struggle going on between those that wanted these changes and the established older folks who didn’t. We all lived in small conservative places. My city was the largest with a population of over a hundred thousand. None of our communities were places that were big on change. This may have had an important impact on our experience.

On the street where I grew up, for example, everybody lived in a house, and our moms stayed at home, while most of our dads went to blue collar jobs. The one mother in the neighborhood who did work was the subject of gossip. The school system was making curriculum changes that most teachers were not trained to implement properly, and in my opinion, didn’t really want to. In the middle of all this chaos and power struggle, the participants and I were born.

## Biases

We all have personal biases that affect how we do research. In fact not only do I the researcher have biases, but my participants do as well. I do not know the participants' biases, although some are alluded to during interviews. My own bias is that peer rejected people are good people who through no fault of their own were unfairly picked upon. This can not help but affect how I see myself and others. But this is not a point I am trying to prove. I am not trying to prove or disapprove anything. Phenomenology is not an empirical science trying to prove a state of affairs (van Manen, 1990). I am trying to show what we remember it felt like to be peer rejected, not what kind of children we were. As van Manen (1984) would say, mine is only one interpretation, "A phenomenological description is always *one* interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially richer description" (p. 40).

Now that I have discussed how I conducted my study and introduced myself and the participants, it is time to hear our stories. I invite the reader to sit back and read the accounts of four *insiders'* memories of how we remember what it was like to be *outsiders*.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **CATHY OR CATHERINE? THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY**

#### **IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY**

Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of ourselves. (Kuhn, 1995, p.2)

School was where my journey with peer rejection started. By the time I was eight, I dreaded getting up in the morning because I knew the day ahead would result in rejection of some sort. The dread would form itself into a small ball in the pit of my stomach. I remember walking to the bus stop with a stomachache every morning, wondering what the day would hold. Would I be left out of other children's games? Would I be laughed at? Would I be beat up? This was my reality once I started school.

This chapter will examine my memories of rejection. According to van Manen (1990), "The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something" (p.77). But how does one make sense of years of memories? What does all this pain mean? As discussed earlier, these memories were analyzed thematically. To put it simply, I looked for important themes underlying each memory. It wasn't always that simple - some memories are made up of more than one *experiential structure*, and I uncovered more themes than it was possible to explore here. But after much thought and analysis, I narrowed the focus to four themes that stand out in my story: 1) It wasn't always that way, 2) Helplessness, 3) Identity, 4) Rebellion or rejecting the rejecter. These will be explored individually in the following sections.

## **It Wasn't Always That Way**

Living with her extended family afforded Janis extra love and attention (Joplin, 1994, p.24).

Some of you know Mrs. Wilson, who teaches with me. Her building shares a backyard with two other buildings. All the children in all the buildings play in that one yard and they follow a simple rule: Everyone Can Play (Paley, 1992, p.36).

*If I think back to my early childhood one statement comes to mind. "I was perfectly happy until I was five. (Cathy, see figure 2.1).*

During the first five years of my life, I experienced a period of overwhelming unconditional love from my new family. On November 9, 1970, I was adopted by Bob and Joan, a couple who had hoped for a child throughout their thirteen years of marriage, but had been unable to conceive. I was adopted into a very small family, an only child, and the last of the cousins born. My maternal grandmother, who I lovingly referred to as Baba, lived with my parents. Also, my mother's sister, Aunt Lena, doted on me and considered herself to be my second mother. I had other relatives who also doted on "the baby", as I was called until I was well into my teens! The story of how I came home as a newly adopted baby was recounted to me many times by my mother. I will let her words, as she told them to me, tell the story, as this memory is hers not mine, but is a part of my story.

### **The baby arrives**

*You arrived a day later than we expected. Daddy couldn't get the day off work but he telephoned me every half-hour from work to see if the baby had arrived. Finally, the social worker brought you over. You were all pink cheeked, with orange peach fuzz on the top of your head, dressed in a pretty blue dress that matched your eyes. The*



**Figure 2.1 I was perfectly happy until I was five.**

*minute they laid you in my arms a big smile broke out on your face. It was love at first sight for both of us. As soon as Daddy found out you had arrived, he rushed home from work to see his new baby. He was very happy, as he had wanted a baby for years and a baby girl was what he had specifically requested. Your Daddy had your new name all picked out- Catherine Elizabeth Derry. As soon as Aunt Lena got off work, she, too, hurried over to see her new niece. In that very first moment she saw you, you became Aunt Lena's favorite family member.*

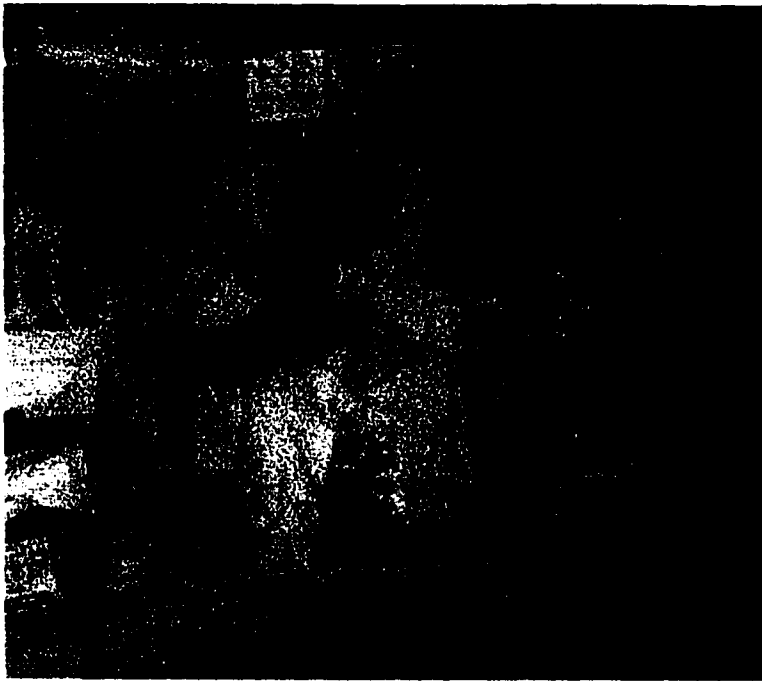
There is a picture taken of me that first Christmas (see figure 2.2). I am sitting in my baby seat holding a doll, underneath the Christmas tree, surrounded by all the opened Christmas presents. My mother said that they had put their new baby under the tree because they considered me the best Christmas present they ever received!

These early memories, although they are not mine, show a child who was very much wanted and showered with much affection. Before reflecting on this, let's turn to some of my own memories of this time period. I try to remember what I can of those early years, when I felt happy, safe and unconditionally loved, my world defined by my close-knit family.

#### **Band leader**

*It was shortly before my beloved BaBa died, when I was about five. I remember it was night because I had my pajamas on. I went into the kitchen where the adults were talking. Aunt Lena was visiting. The four of them were sitting around the kitchen table, smoking and discussing whatever boring things adults discussed. I told them I was bored and wanted to play. BaBa asked me what I wanted to play. "Band," I said. With a smile I went into my room and found five toy instruments. I distributed them to the adults, keeping the tambourine for myself. Then the adult proceeded around the living room led by me, singing, laughing, and making lots of noise.*

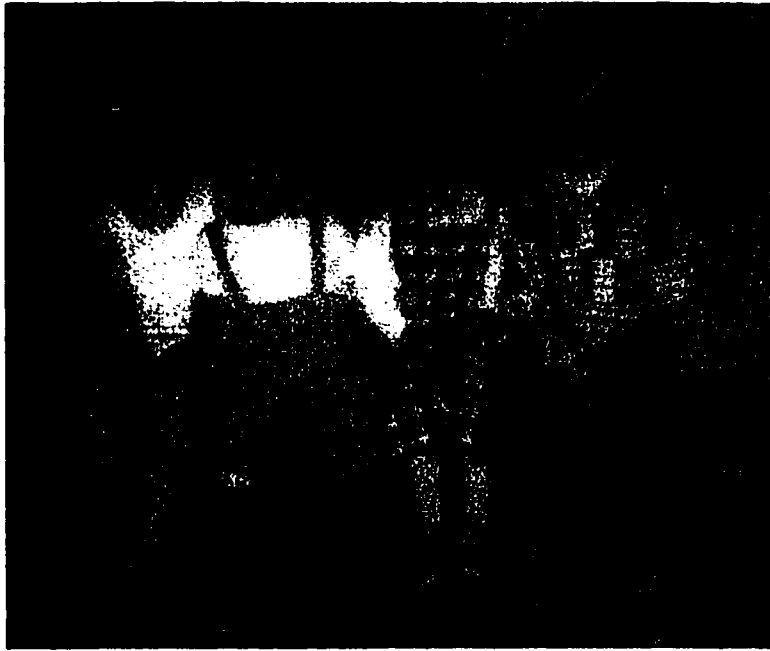
This is one of my earliest childhood memories. Other episodes I recollect include picnics, vacations and sitting on everyone's lap and being read to. What does this memory say to me now? What is its essence? This memory makes me feel loved and important. How could one not feel important being the band leader and having the adults follow your lead! This was the spirit of my early childhood. I was loved and was at the



**Figure 2.2** Me under the Christmas tree.

center of four adults' worlds. I did not know then that this was not the way the real world was going to be. This was a protective, inclusive world in which I was the queen and the adults were my court. As I reflect back on this, I realize that it must have somehow been a shock to my five-year-old self to go out in the world and find out that I wasn't the queen.

I remember only a little bit about my early friendships. I had plenty of friends when I was little (see figure 2.3). I lived in a neighborhood full of children, and aside from a few of the usual childish squabbles, we all played well together. I had two best friends, Paula and Kendra (not their real names). I have no memory of meeting Paula, because our mothers sat us in front of each other when I was about nine months old and Paula was about eleven months old. Paula and her family lived down the street from us. According to my mother, when we met, we all became instant best friends. In fact, our



**Figure 2.3** Me (far right) and my first playmates.

mothers are still best friends to this day. Before we started school, Paula and I used to play everyday while our mothers had coffee. Sometimes we would fight, but it would be forgotten by the next day. We did everything together and would enter each other's houses without knocking. My first memory of Paula involves our separation in a department store

#### **A trip to Woolco**

*Our mothers did their shopping together, going in the morning after our fathers had gone to work. It was always Woolco, because at that time it was the new place to shop in our neighborhood. Our mothers would always put us in the front of their carts where Paula and I would babble to each other or play little games with our hands. On this particular day, our mothers proceeded to drive their carts in different directions, agreeing to meet at the "Red Grill" later. I remember feeling surprised and upset that*



*Paula and I were going to be separated. We reached for each other's hands in unison and held on tight, in hopes that our mothers would not separate us. It was to no avail - our mothers went in their separate directions. I remember stretching my hand out in the air to Paula, crying.*

When I reflect on this memory I recognize the feeling I felt as panic. I felt panicked at the loss of a playmate, even though it was temporary. To my two-year-old self, it seemed like the end of the world. Perhaps this was my first realization that you can't always have a friend around when you want one, a thought that had not entered my world yet

Kendra was my other childhood best friend, although I don't think we became best friends until I was in grade two or three. I can remember meeting her for the first time at a young age.

### **Meeting Kendra**

*I clearly remember meeting Kendra even though I was only two at the time. It was a cool crisp fall day. I remember the leaves blowing around. My father was going up the street to meet the new neighbor, and he brought me with him because the new neighbors had a little girl. As we walked up the street, I noticed a pretty girl with a shiny red tricycle. I knew instantly she would be my friend. Kendra's dad was working under the hood of the car as my father went over to "talk cars" with this new neighbor. He told me to go and talk to the little girl, who was peddling up and down the walkway on the pretty red tricycle, pretending to be oblivious to my presence. I walked over to her and said, "My name is Cathy. What's yours?" She told me her name was Kendra. As she said this, she kept on riding. I was frustrated that she would not stop peddling and pay attention to*

*me, after all was I was the center of the world! So, I walked in front of Kendra's bike and grabbed the handlebars to ask her a question. Kendra acted like she hadn't heard the question and she rode over my toes and said "mine" (referring to her tricycle). I don't remember what happened after this, but I do recall that Paula and I started playing with our new neighbor soon after. Although, Paula remained my best friend, I really looked up to Kendra who was a year older, pretty and very smart.*

As I reflect on meeting Kendra, I realize that she may have, even then, set in motion some of the circumstances that led to my peer rejection. In my early childhood, Kendra was just another playmate, but as we got older we became best friends. As this early story illustrates, Kendra was a child with a dominant, take charge personality. She was willing to play with me, but only after she had firmly established that the tricycle was hers. Although strong, our friendship was unequal with me taking the submissive role for the first time in my life. Kendra riding over my toes was symbolic of the friendship that was to unfold. I would do anything to please the glamorous Kendra. This submissive role may later have made me an easy target for bullies at school. Bullies like to be seen as having power and holding a dominant role. They tend to prey on weak and submissive children, to compensate for what they see as their inadequacies (Hazler, 1996).

Thus, for the most part, my preschool years were filled with love and acceptance. As the much longed for child, I was the center of my family's life where I was nurtured and accepted. In my neighborhood, there were plenty of playmates who liked me and I even had a best friend. This happy childhood might have left me unprepared for the world of school where you are not the center of attention and not everyone likes you. "Anyone

who has to move out of a group where she belongs in order to join in some other group will be losing self-esteem unless she is easily accepted in the group” (Griffiths, 1995, p.116). It was a damaging blow to my self-esteem when I entered school, where I was not accepted.

## **Helplessness**

*Oprah: you never told?*

*Peter: No because I mean the thing is if I told anybody, if I told like my mom, she couldn't do anything really except, except, tell the teachers and they can't really do anything either” (Atkinson Hudson, 2000).*

Above are the words of a junior high school student telling of the helplessness he felt when he was picked on in school. What is helplessness? The Oxford Dictionary defines helpless this way: *lacking help, defenseless; having or showing inability to act without help; unable to help oneself (Allen, 1984, p.342).* Helplessness is something that is learned (Harris & Liebert, 1992). After many negative experiences, one learns that no matter what he or she does, the bad situation will not change, so why bother trying to change it? This was how it was for me during my peer rejection. I learned that no matter what I did, it would not stop the other children from picking on me. I was helpless.

The first incidence of rejection in my life that led to helplessness is one I can't remember, but one which may have sowed the seeds for my future peer rejection. In a sense, I was rejected as soon as I was born. This story is put together with information given to me by my biological mother and government records.

### **Adoption story**

*I was born Katherine Joyce Miller in Saint John, New Brunswick July 8, 1970.*

*My biological parents Lucy and Brad, gave me up for adoption after much pressure from*

*Lucy's mother, who was embarrassed to have such a scandal in their upper middle class Catholic home.*

*The pregnancy was a shock to my biological grandmother who was a staunch Catholic, and thus believed premarital sex was a sin. She told Lucy that the only way she would let her keep her baby were if she married Brad and he quit his band and got a job. Both Lucy and Brad claimed they wanted to keep the baby, but Brad was not willing to get married and was especially not ready to quit the band. Lucy claims her mother kept her locked in the house for the next eight months of the pregnancy, so that no one would find out. Nonetheless, Lucy points out that her mother made sure to feed her good nutritional meals. At the end of the eight months, Lucy gave birth to me and gave me up for adoption. This was the beginning of my rejection.*

As far back as I can remember, my mother always told me I was adopted and that I was "special" because they chose me. Although my adopted family made me very happy, part of me felt rejected. I wondered for years why my biological mother didn't want me. Was there something wrong with me? It plays havoc with one's self-esteem to know you were unwanted by your creators before you were even born. I needed answers, but it wasn't until age seventeen that I got any. It turns out that it wasn't my biological mother who didn't want me, it was *her* mother who didn't.

### **Meeting Lucy**

*When I was seventeen I set out in search of my biological mother. I had recently found papers in my parents' room that had my birth name on it. After a bit of a search, I found a phone number, not for my birth mother, Lucy, but for her mother. I phoned and asked the woman who answered if she had a daughter named Lucy. She said she did, but*

*when I asked her if this woman could be my biological mother, she would not answer. She just said that she would pass my name and number onto Lucy and hung up. Lucy called me back, confirmed she was my biological mother and arranged a meeting.*

*When we met, Lucy told me her story of a girl who wanted her baby, but had no means of caring for her, and who caved into the pressure from her mother, out of guilt and shame. After talking with Lucy for many hours, I was feeling both angry and rejected by the woman who was my biological grandmother. She deemed my conception a crisis that must be taken care of. I was not about to become the beloved grandchild that, Sean, born to Lucy's brother and his wife around the same time I was born, would be. After all, Sean was conceived in the confines of a good Catholic marriage. This woman, my biological grandmother, had no interest in meeting me.*

*Nine years later, I attended Lucy's mother's funeral. I slipped into the back row, so not to disturb the other mourners. I sat dumbfounded during the service, where I listened to the priest praise this "saintly woman" who did so much for the church and her family. I listened intently as he named the children and grandchildren. It was no surprise that I was not named among them. Even in death this woman had kept the family's dirty secret preserved. I burned inside during the funeral because it made me feel like a dirty secret. I looked at the front of the church, where the family sat. I saw people who looked like me, but to whom I did not belong. I felt bitter. Here I sat twenty-six years later, feeling the sting of rejection I was born with. I felt left out by this woman who the priest was practically canonizing, and helpless to do anything about it. Even now, I still feel disdain for this woman who made me feel I didn't belong and that my existence was a sin and a protected secret.*

I had always known that there was a family out there somewhere who didn't want me, but I didn't know why. Even when I did receive answers, it just gave me more detailed reasons to feel rejected. Being given up for adoption was my first rejection, the one I was the most helpless to change, the one that taught me to feel ashamed. From a very young age, it may have made me vulnerable to peer rejection, for as Hazler (1996) notes, bullies seek out those who are vulnerable. Until I started school however, this vulnerability was not put to the test.

Kindergarten is where I remember first experiencing peer rejection and the feelings of helplessness that accompanied it. At first, I was very excited about starting kindergarten. Paula and I were attending the same kindergarten that Kendra had attended the previous year. Kendra had made it sound like a fun place. I was excited about meeting the other students, reading books, and playing games. But kindergarten was not all fun and games as I thought it would be. Indeed, it is where I first clearly remember rejection (see figure 2.4).

#### **Having know one to be partners with**

*This incident happened in the Fall or Spring. I say this because it was very windy out. The teachers announced we were going for a nature walk and that we should pick a partner and hold their hand. I quickly turned to Paula, but she was already paired up with her new friend, Erin. I started to turn around and look for another child alone, but everywhere I looked, people were pairing up. I felt a panic that I would feel for many years to come. "Maybe nobody will pick me", I worried, and that's exactly what happened. The class was an odd number and I was the only child without a partner. I had*



**Figure 2.4** I had to be partners with the teacher.

*to hold hands with the teacher. I felt very embarrassed about this. I remember I was grateful that the teacher and I were at the end of the line, so maybe the other children wouldn't notice who my partner was.*

**This was the first feeling of exclusion and helplessness that I remember. I realized there was nothing I could do that would get me a partner. I started to worry that it would always be like this. From that day on I dreaded “partnering up”. This is something that tinges my adult life. When in a class or group and asked to pair up, I still feel panicked and helpless. I am sure no one will pick me. It is always a nice surprise when someone**

asks me to be their partner. This incident is not the only time I was left out in kindergarten. Often, I would ask to join other children playing and they would say, “no”. My most vivid memory of this was the day the class was to make face masks.

### **Sharing doesn't help**

*I remember the day before we made the masks, our teacher told us we should bring paper grocery bags to make them from. My mother gave me two bags to bring, in case I made a mistake. When I got to school, one little girl, Fiona, had forgotten her paper bag, so I gave her my extra bag. I felt like I was very generous and hoped that maybe I had forged a new friendship. After the class made the masks, everyone started playing. I ran over to Fiona and her friends and asked to play and Fiona flat out refused me. I recall feeling really shocked. I was not expecting this! After all, I had helped her out. After the shock wore off, I felt deeply hurt because I was realizing that no matter how nice I was, nobody would play with me. I felt there was nothing I could do to change this.*

Not being allowed to play may not sound like the end of the world to an adult. But in kindergarten, that is the most important thing. In her book, *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, Vivian Paley (1992) describes being told you can't play in kindergarten as a harsh and overbearing prospect. Paley (1992) states that this is where the game of exclusion is played for the first time, and this game continues throughout school with the same children being excluded over and over again. What hope is there for a child beginning this cycle of exclusion? After you are left out so many times, you stop hoping, you become resigned, and realize you are helpless to change things. Kindergarten was the beginning of the sad little girl growing inside me.



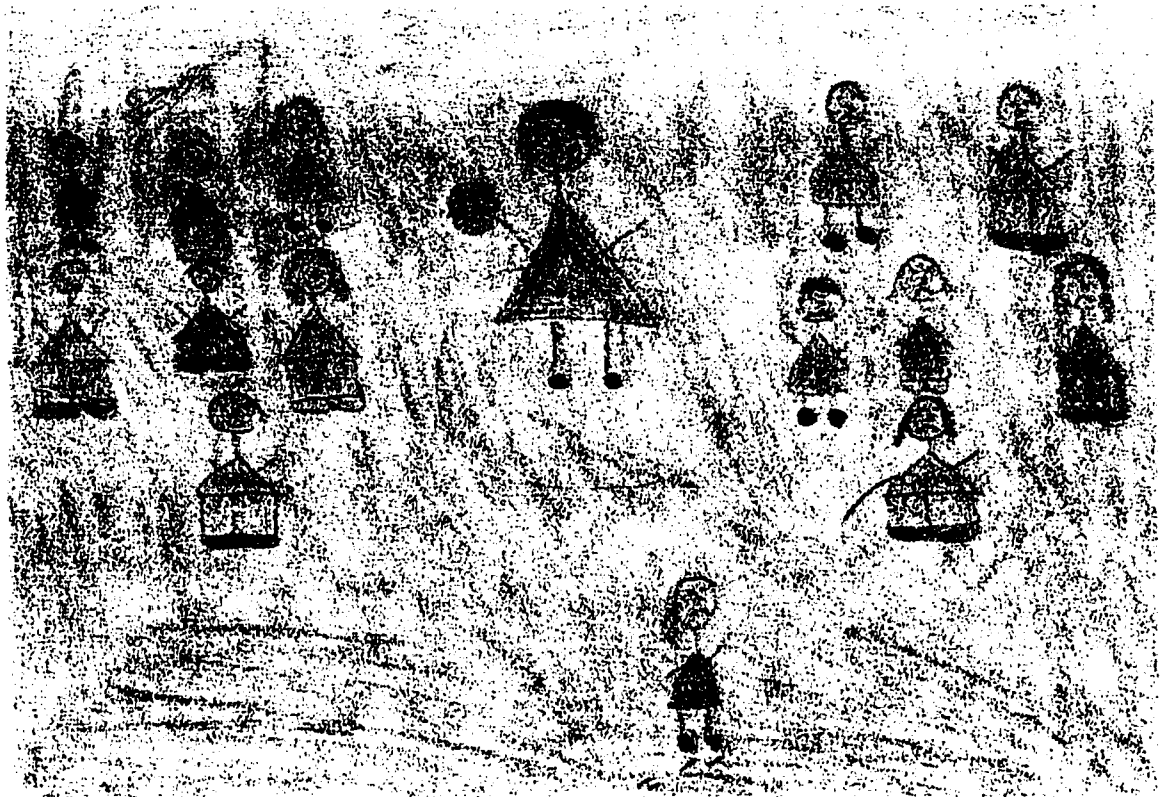
When I started first grade, I had a shred of hope that things might be different. After all, this was a new school and an opportunity for a fresh start. Kendra would be there and perhaps she would introduce me to her friends and we would all play together at recess. Grade one is where my last shred of hope was destroyed and all because I started gym class (see figure 2.5).

### **Gym sucks or I sucked at gym**

*I had a coordination problem. I wasn't very good at large or fine motor tasks. This made grade one very difficult for me. I was bad at printing, cutting and pasting, drawing, and all the games played on the playground at recess. The worst of it was gym class. I can remember always being the last child picked for teams. Children would moan and groan if they had me on their team. I felt no motivation to try once I was on a team because I knew I wasn't wanted. I remember playing baseball, and how my team members would position me in far left field so that I was out of the way of the game. It felt very isolating to be on the outside of things. It seemed that, in or out of the classroom, I wasn't good at anything and no one wanted to play with me at school. I started to hate school.*

Looking back, I note how important it is in elementary school to be good at physical tasks, whether it be in gym or on the playground. Because of my problem I was never going to be good at these important social activities. There was nothing I could do. I stopped trying at these activities. There was no point. I had learned "helplessness".

By the time I was in third grade, things were going down hill fast. I still had nobody to play with at school, and I was starting to experience physical abuse for the first time. Although I was lonely at school in the first three years, as least I still had all the



**Figure 2.5** I was picked last for teams in Gym class.

neighborhood kids to play with after school. But something happened in grade three that changed all that. What happened was a bully named Marvin.

### **My first bully**

*Marvin, who was older than me, moved to my neighborhood about a year before I started third grade. Over this year he established himself as the neighborhood tough guy. He would steal toys and punch little boys many years younger than him.*

*By the summer, just before third grade, I became his specific target for abuse. The trouble started when Marvin noticed I had two small warts on my nose. From that moment on he called me "Wart Woman". Eventually most of the kids in the neighborhood started calling me that, except for my friends Paula, Kendra and Ruby. Marvin used to ride his bike up and down the street past my home, repeatedly singing*

*"da na na na na, Wart Woman!" If I dared to go outside, he would try to run me over with his bike while singing this tune.*

*When school resumed that fall, the harassment escalated. He would sing his little tune on the school bus. At some point during the year he started to beat me up. I remember that as soon as I got off the bus he would jump on me and start punching me. I wasn't even safe at school because sometimes he would wait for me at recess. It was around this time that I went from hating school to dreading it. School was the one place I couldn't avoid Marvin. I remember I would walk to the bus stop every morning and my stomach would be so upset because I never knew what the day would hold. This is when I first remember associating physical symptoms with my feelings. For the next few years, I went to school every day with a stomach ache. The worst of it was that nobody ever tried to stop him. The other children would just watch. I remember one time Kendra picked me up and help me straighten up after. I think every one was terrified of Marvin and they were glad that I was his target instead of them.*

*After weeks of this torment, I told my parents and my Dad went to talk to Marvin's Dad. Nothing changed. He still beat me up, only worse now that I was a tattler. I was learning that even adults couldn't help. I felt physically ill and terrified, helpless in the face of Marvin's bullying.*

*The abuse continued for a year until I asked my older cousin Warren to intervene. Warren threatened to beat up Marvin if he ever touched me again. This stopped the abuse. Marvin was scared of Warren who was several years older than him, and so he never hit me again. But the damage to my reputation was done. I went from being a child*

*with few friends at school to a child who was actively shunned and picked on at school. I was the neighborhood joke.*

Why did Marvin pick on me? Marvin was living in my neighborhood for a full year before he started his harassment. This year gave him time to assess the situation and figure out who was the most vulnerable. I guess I was the obvious choice. I was openly rejected by my peers at school and because of my “learned helplessness”, I rarely did anything about it. I was the perfect target. Other children probably wouldn’t intervene because I was not popular. I probably wouldn’t fight back.

Why didn’t anybody help me? These people who witnessed Marvin abusing me, but didn’t say anything, are called bystanders (Hazler, 1996). According to Hazler (1996) bystanders do not intervene for two reasons. First, it is painful to see someone get beat up and not know how to stop it, and second, they may fear that the bully may turn his or her aggression on them. For the bystander, avoidance seems the safest route.

And so, by grade three I was deeply entrenched in a cycle of peer rejection. There seemed to be nothing I could do to stop it and my friends and parents could not help me. My experience with Marvin had taught me I was on my own. This was the treatment I could expect and I was helpless to stop it. My only way out was if my parents moved us far away where nobody knew me. I fantasized about this a lot. My rejection was like a prison: All I could do was serve my time (until graduation), and try to befriend those higher ranking students who might make my stay more tolerable.

It was around this time that I started to feel closer to Kendra. Even though a lot of her school friends didn’t like me, Kendra made sure, in some way, they included me in

their games. Many times I would only be allowed to watch and when I was included, I was only allowed partial participation (see figure 2.6).

### **Steady Ender**

*One day in the late spring of fourth grade, Kendra and I arrived at school and we approached some of Kendra's friends who were playing skipping. Kendra asked if she could play, and the children said, "yes". When I asked if could play too, a resounding "no" was my answer. Kendra told the children she would skip with them only if I was invited to join. The others told her it was no fun to play with me because I wasn't very good at skipping. Finally, they agreed to let me play if I was steady ender (I just swung the rope, not being allowed a turn to skip). I agreed to their terms, as it seemed better than not playing at all. I also hoped my fourth-grade classmates would see me playing with the fifth-grade children and would be impressed.*

And so it was that I learned to settle for shabby treatment from children in order to be included. I think this is something a lot of rejected children go through. It seems better to take a little humiliation than to be alone.

Kendra always had time for me wherever we were. Paula virtually ignored me at school, but always played with me outside of school. This is why I chose to be closer with Kendra, because at least she didn't leave me out. She wanted to play with me all the time, in school and out, but at a cost. She would only play the games she excelled at and she had to have the final say in everything. This was clearly exemplified when we played games one-on-one.

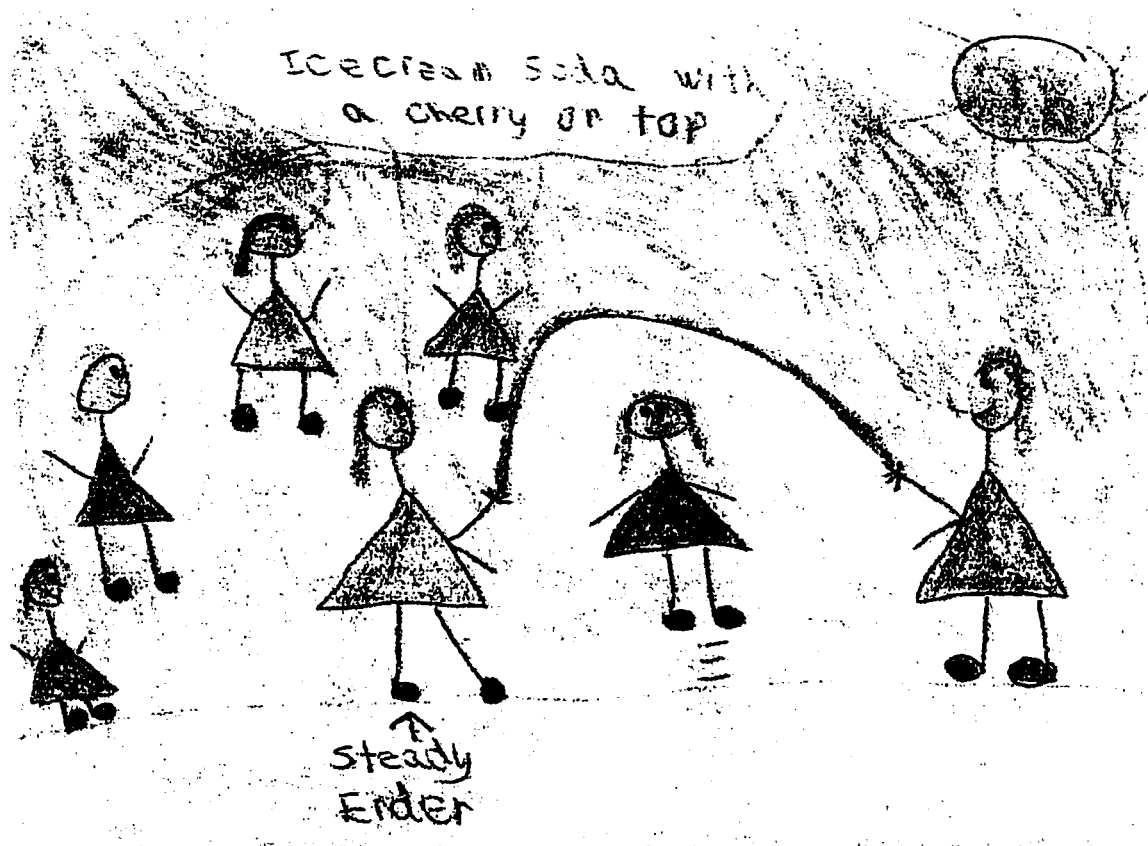


Figure 2.6 I had to be steady ender.

### That damn egg game

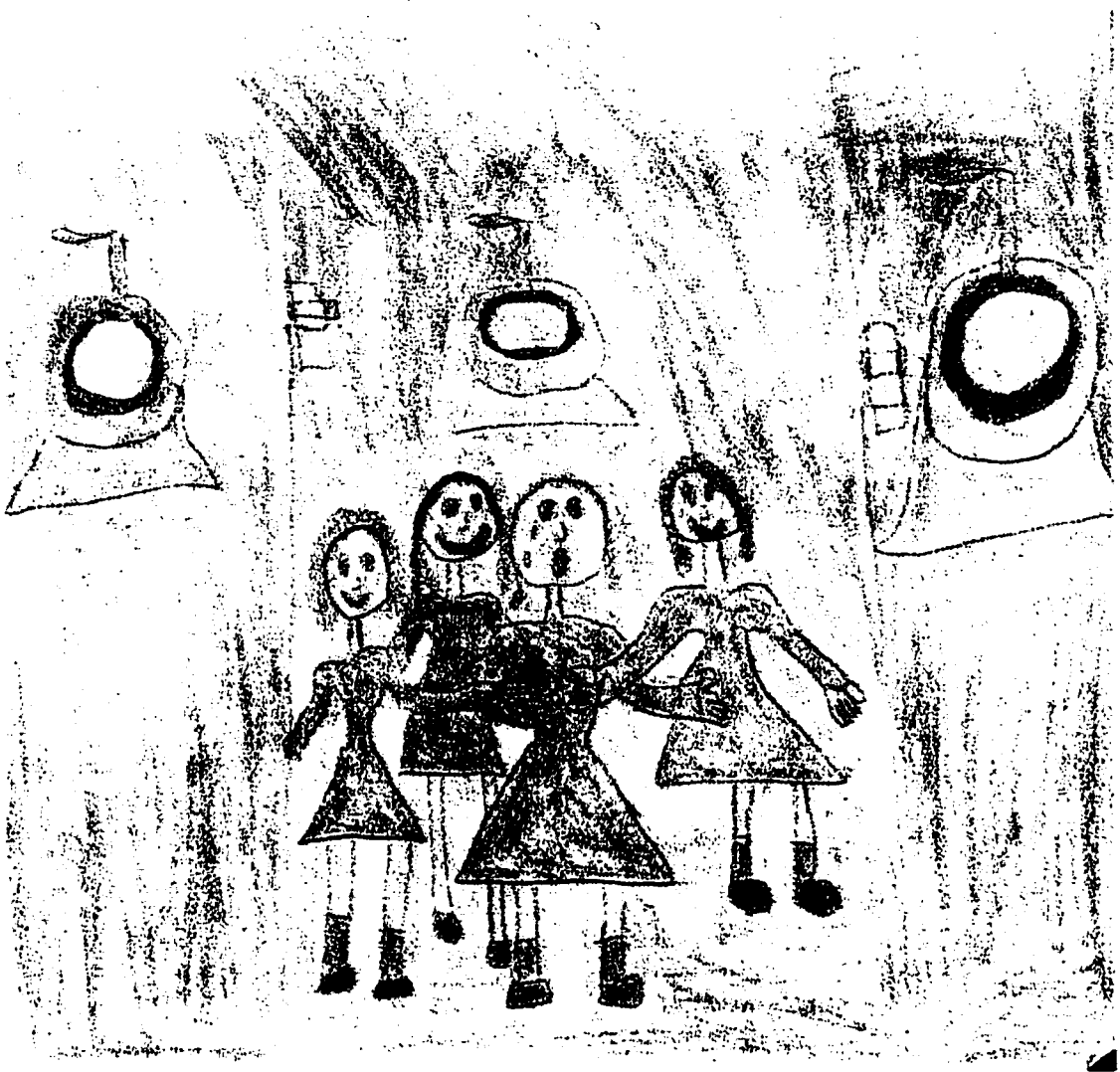
*Kendra always wanted to play a game of mine called "Lay an Egg". In this electronic game, a hen with eggs inside it would circle around the board. When the hen passed the player, the player would hit their button. If your button hitting was precise, you would be rewarded with an egg. The player with the most eggs would win. Since I had a co-ordination problem, this game was quite difficult for me. I'm sure my parents bought this game to help me work on my hand-eye co-ordination, but instead of being a helpful tool, it ended up being an instrument of emotional frustration. I still feel agitated to this day remembering that wretched game. When I played, I would never get more than*

*a couple of eggs. Kendra would always win and demand to play again. Halfway through these games I would be crying in frustration, but still Kendra would press on. The game would go on until Kendra was tired of it or I was crying too hard to play any longer.*

Looking back, I reflect I hated playing that game because it made me feel like a loser. We think of ourselves as losers when we internally compare ourselves to another's ability even if they are more skilled in this area (Morrison, 1998). I dreaded playing the game, but felt helpless to get out of it. I guess I could have refused to play those games with Kendra, but then I risked losing her as a friend. I felt it was better to be a loser than to be alone. To this day I can not emotionally handle playing competitive games with those I am close to. I feel deeply frustrated if I lose a game. I still feel like that eight-year old who never won a single game of "Lay an Egg".

During this period of my life, most of the kids who picked on me were in Kendra's grade, probably because I spent most of my time with Kendra and her friends. A lot of her friends didn't like me. My reputation for being a "misfit" spread around our small school fast. According to Paley (1992), a child's reputation usually follows them from kindergarten through all their school years.

It was mostly the girls who harassed me in late elementary school. Most of the harassment centered around the fact that I went through puberty early. According to Hazler (1996), the worst time for children to get victimized by their peers is during puberty. Although peers can be a support to each other as they go through these changes, those who are not going through these changes at the same rate as others are often targeted for abuse. Girls who mature early really stand out as different from the rest. The fact that I developed early made me one of those easy targets (see figure 2.7).



**Figure 2.7** They grabbed my breasts.

### **They grabbed my tits**

*By the beginning of grade five, I had been wearing a bra for a year. My breasts were bigger than those of most of the girls in the school. Not believing my breasts were real, the other girls called me "Tissue Tits". I used to try to explain to the girls that my breast were real, but they wouldn't listen to me. One day, the girls who teased me went too far, they sexually assaulted me.*



*It happened after lunch when I went to the washroom. Some grade six girls were in there fixing their hair, and they started calling me "Tissue Tits". But they didn't stop there. I told them adamantly that my breasts were real and I did not stuff myself. They asked me to prove it, a request I strongly refused. Not accepting my refusal, they grabbed me and pulled me into the stall and two of them put their hands inside my bra and squeezed and pinched my breasts hard. They were silent for a moment, realizing that they were real. But after a moment they decided the truth was unimportant. One girl grabbed a handful of toilet paper and put it in my shirt and yelled "Tissue Tits, Tissue Tits!" The other girls apparently thought this was a great idea. They started yelling the name and throwing toilet paper at me. The bell rang and they went back to class. I stayed in the washroom for a few minutes to pull myself together and to make sure they were gone.*

*I was upset for two reasons: I felt shame and shock that people had touched my breasts, and anger that after they assaulted me and found out my breasts were real, they kept the truth to themselves and continued to call me "Tissue Tits". This name would follow me for the next three years. Its effects were so long lasting that a girl I met in my twenties, who was friends with some former students of that school, asked me if I stuffed my bra when I was young. Names called in school can cling forever.*

**I had felt helpless before, helpless to make friends, to stop people from laughing at me, to stop from getting beat up. But this was the first time I was helpless over an intimate part of my body. My budding private parts had become public, my sexuality was not my own. People touched my breasts without permission and made their own judgements and there was nothing I felt I could do about it. This feeling of powerlessness became deeply ingrained. As I grew older, I gave up even trying to stop people from**

fondling me. I let people touch me because I had learned I was helpless over my body, my protests meant nothing.

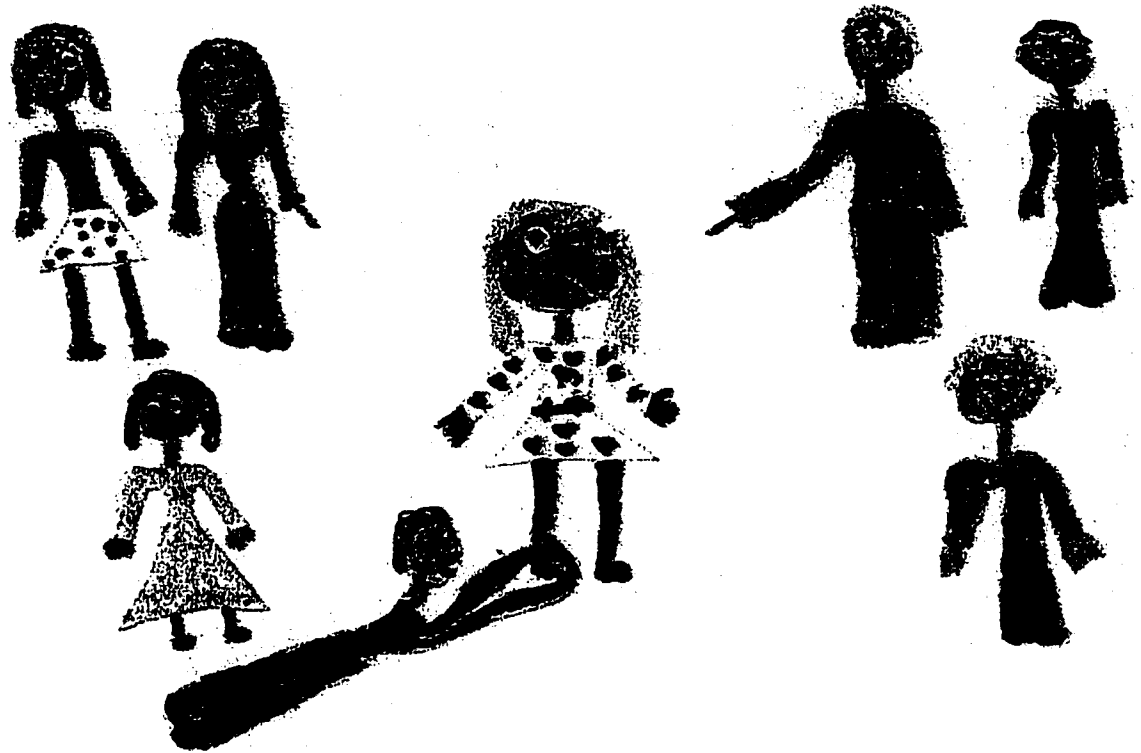
When I entered junior high (grades seven to nine), peers continued to pick on me. Some of Kendra's friends made fun of me and harassed me consistently. Increasingly though, the most embarrassing harassment came from the boys. Whereas the other girls in junior high were starting to get noticed by boys, I became the butt of their jokes (see figure 2.8).

### **Barney's big joke**

*I remember hanging out with Kendra and her friends and being approached by Barney the grade eight class clown. He walked up to me and professed his love on his knees. I told him to go away. I was embarrassed because everyone was laughing at me. Barney grabbed my leg and wouldn't let go. If I moved I would drag him along with me. Everyone thought this was hilarious. Things like this happened on a regular basis in junior high.*

By the end of grade seven I was begging my mother to let me transfer to a new school, where no one knew me and I could start over, but she would not listen. She thought I was exaggerating because she couldn't comprehend that people would not love her beautiful baby as much as she did. I kept most of the severe abuse happening at school to myself as I was very embarrassed about it.

During my stay at junior high I wasn't just helpless, I was fearful and embarrassed. According to Hazler (1996), fear is something a lot of victims of bullying experience because they feel powerless to stop the abuse. It seemed to me there was no where safe in school from these attacks and ridicules. These situations made me feel very



**Figure 2.8** Barney's big joke

embarrassed that there was an audience seeing me in this situation. Transferring to a new school was the only way I could see out of this mess, but that wasn't about to happen until senior high (grades ten to twelve).

Unfortunately, some of my most vulnerable feelings of helplessness occurred during my first year of senior high, when I was forced to attend a small all-girl school. The girls at this school were very intolerant of difference and I dressed purposely in an unconventional style. I do remember being happy that a girl named "Jill" befriended me or so I thought.

### **Back-stabbing bitch**

*I met a girl named Jill when I started senior high, who pretended to be a great friend. She was popular and she actually seemed to like me! I was surprised and happy. We sat together in English class everyday for weeks. Finally, I decided Jill was such a good friend I could trust her with a secret that was bothering me. I confided in her the painful details of being sexually abused by a friend that summer. The day after I told Jill this secret, it spread like wildfire around the school. The girls at school made little jokes up about it and used to yell them at me in the hall. The abuse that I had wanted to forget had made me, yet again, become the butt of everyone's joke. What's worse, by confiding in Jill, I had been unknowingly instrumental in my own undoing.*

As I reflect on this memory I still remember the betrayal I felt. My good friend Jill had betrayed my confidence. I felt stupid because I had learned in the past that I shouldn't trust kids in school, that they will always pick on me and there was nothing I could do about it. I had hoped now that I was older that things had changed. But Jill's actions made me feel as helpless as I had been in kindergarten. Jill wasn't the only girl giving me a hard time. A group of senior girls used to enjoy making jokes at my expense. I particularly remember trying out for the school play.

### **A fledgling actresses dies**

*I had always wanted to be an actress as far back as I can remember. I tried out for several plays in junior high, but never got a part. This had not quelled my thirst for the stage. When I reached senior high I was even more excited about it, because senior high plays were performed on stage in the auditorium, and members of the general public, not just parents attended. With a giddy enthusiasm I tried out for the school*

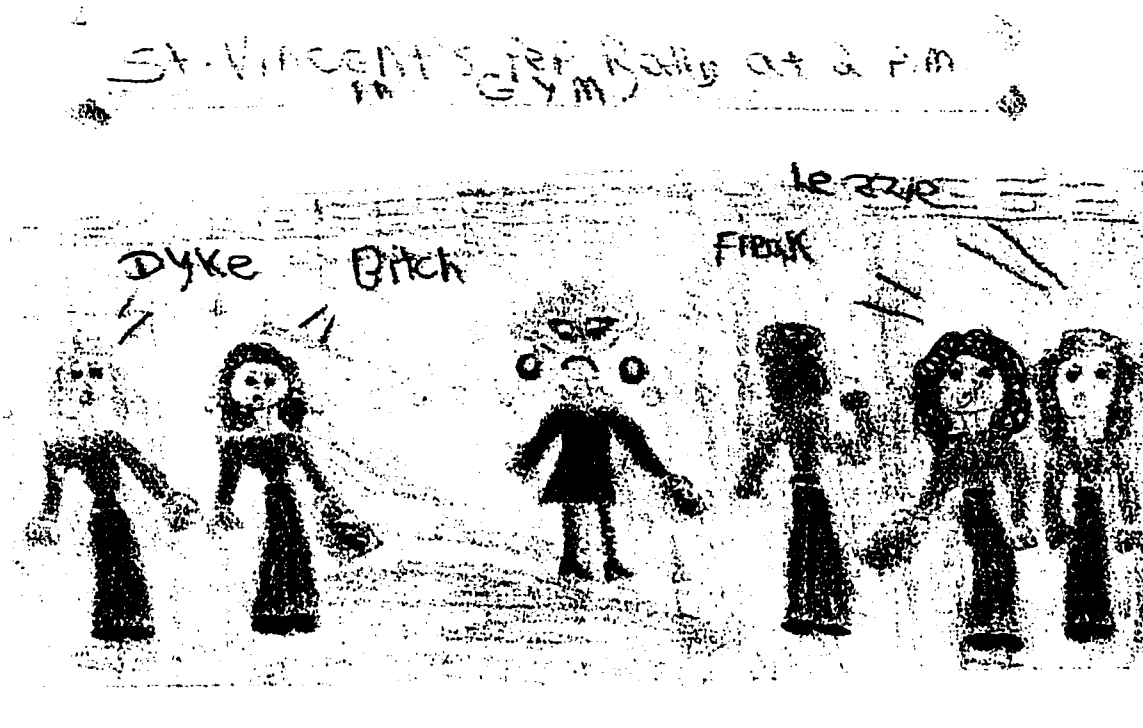
*Christmas play. When my name was called I jumped up on stage. As soon as I walked across the stage, the other girls waiting for their turn started laughing and calling me names. I turned around and left the stage without finishing my audition.*

This is just a small sample of the things I had to face at that school (see figure 2.9). Every time, I walked down the hall I would be called a name or tripped. There were girls who threatened to beat me up if I didn't stop spiking my hair. Again, there was no where at school to escape rejection. By this point I was so fed up with rejection that I skipped school whenever I could so I wouldn't have to face this treatment. A lot of victims of bullying, fearing maltreatment will try to avoid school (Hazler, 1996).

This year of senior high was very painful. It seemed teasing was harder to take as I got older. I think at fifteen, I was starting to feel like an adult. I had friends outside of school and I was even dating, so it was humiliating to go to school and be treated the same way I had been treated as a small child. But again, I was helpless to change my situation. Some of the girls in the small senior high I attended had gone to junior high with me, and had brought my old reputation with them. It doesn't take long for the stories to circulate around a small school. Researchers have differing opinions on why children are rejected, but most agree that reputation can keep the cycle going. As I started my second year of senior high, things got even worse. The name calling escalated to dramatic proportions.

### **Bullied out of school**

*That first day of school, I was pushed down the stairs and my locker was sprayed with shaving cream. Worst of all, Peggy, a girl who had been tormenting me since grade nine, escalated her bullying. Peggy, sat behind me in homeroom, thanks to the teachers*



**Figure 2.9** My first year of senior high was “Hell”

*alphabetical order of seating. It seemed like everywhere I turned that first day, there was Peggy yelling, pushing or shoving me. I went back to school, the next day, full of dread. Every time I saw Peggy my heart would start to race with fear.*

*Peggy was just as mean the second day of school. At the end of the day, I was walking out the door of the school to catch the bus when Peggy jumped me from behind. She pushed me face first to the ground and rubbed shaving cream in my hair. I was scared, angry, and embarrassed. I got on the bus, sat by myself, and wouldn't talk to anyone. As I walked home from the bus I started crying. By the time I got home, I was sobbing. When my mother saw the state I was in, she asked me what had happened and I poured out the whole story. My very angry mother phoned the principal and got me transferred to a different senior high.*

As I reflect on that fall day in grade eleven, I think it was one of the worst school experiences I ever had. Yet, it was a catalyst for change. After that day I never felt I was peer rejected again. It was like something changed inside me. When Peggy was on top off me I felt very helpless, I couldn't do anything to stop her, she was bigger than I was. This was the most physical my harassment had been since Marvin beat me up in elementary school. It was like it was the straw that broke the camel's back. I had finally had enough. Up to then, I had thought I had put up a wall, that I didn't let my peers' rejection bother me that much, and that I didn't let anyone else know it bothered me so much. But when this incident happened, it was like the walls weren't high enough to protect me. I broke down and it hurt. But I knew I was never going to let it happen again. I was never going back to that school. Luckily, I got through to my mom and she supported me in this decision. My life changed after that and I stopped continually thinking of myself as the one they pick on.

## **Identity**

Amy is bold. And brassy, and strong-willed. Like any teenager, she tries on and discards different selves as if they were so many pairs of Girbaud jeans, searching ruthlessly for a perfect fit (Orenstein, 1994).

What is this thing we call identity? Scholars have defined identity in many ways, and as being a unitary 'I' or fragmented selves (Griffiths, 1995). Feminist theory has favored a view of identity as fragmented selves or or as multiple selves (Griffiths, 1995; Mitchell & Weber, 1999). Griffith (1995) sees one's identity as a complicated web with many parts.

Self-identity is to be understood, as a kind of web, the construction of which is partly under guidance from the self, though not in its control. Thus it is marked by

competing constraints and influences which overlap and fuse... Each individual creates her own identity, although she is constrained by circumstances in doing so (Griffiths, 1995, p.93).

Identity construction is influenced by material and social conditions (Griffiths, 1995). According to Griffith (1995) the most important social conditions that affect identity formation is our relationships with others. This is affected by how we experience love, resistance, acceptance and rejection with society. "Being loved or rejected or being in a position to love or reject others affects how loveable a person seems to herself" (Griffith, 1995, 116).

Peer rejection made me define myself as undesirable. It made me hate who I was. It made me search for an identity that others would like. I was trying to find a way to make the kids at school like me. To do this I adopted many identities. According to Griffith (1995), people often try on different selves when negotiating identity. Sometimes these changes would work and I would achieve partial acceptance and sometimes they would fail miserably. After not fitting in, during my first two years of school, I decided to take part in an extracurricular activity to boost my popularity, I joined Brownies (see figure 2.10).

### **I was a Brownie leader**

*In Brownies I really excelled. I got almost every Brownie badge available. I became the sixer of my group. For those unfamiliar with Brownies, I will explain further. The Brownie troupe is divided up into groups of six. Each group has a name such as sprite,s pixies, elves. Their leader is the Sixer, which was the position I held my last two years of Brownies This made me highly respected by the other girls in Brownies. I eventually went on to Girl Guides where I achieved a similar rank.*





**Figure 2.10** Me in my Brownie uniform.

*I remember I was very excited to join Brownies, It felt very important to put on that brown uniform. Once I started achieving in Brownies, I thought it would spill over to my relationship with girls at school. It didn't. The same girls who accepted my leadership in Brownies would not play with me and even made fun of me at school. I found this very confusing. I remember wearing my uniform to school on International*

*Girl Guide Day. I thought people would see the badges and see how important I was. This did not happen. Finally, I accepted that I would only be accepted at Brownies, which at least gave me something to look forward to every week and a way to feel proud of myself. I continued attending Girl Guides until about grade seven, when it was deemed geeky to be a Girl Guide and I had enough problems being called a geek without adding to it.*

According to Griffiths (1995), whether or not a person is accepted or rejected by a group can affect one's self-worth. As a child grows older, the situation becomes more complicated because they start belonging to more than one group. "The individual can belong easily to some of them, and is rejected by others" (Griffiths, 1995, p. 116). Achieving in Brownies made me feel good about myself. According to George & Hartman (1996), unpopular children tend to find relationships outside the classroom. These supports can help the peer-rejected child, but can not make up for the damage peer rejection does to one's self-esteem.

A central way I identified myself during my childhood was by my relationships with others. Social relationships are the way one forms self-identity and evaluates ones self-worth (Griffiths, 1995). In my elementary years, this was characterized by being best friends with Kendra, which I thought this was definitely the key to popularity. After all Kendra, was pretty, smart, artistic, athletic, older and popular.

#### **Kendra's best friend**

*By the time I was eight, Kendra and I were inseparable. We went everywhere together. We dressed our dolls alike and sometimes we would dress alike. I particularly remember a card I received from Kendra on my tenth birthday. On the outside she wrote*

*"You're my very best friend! Happy Birthday!" On the inside she wrote, "Happy birthday to the BEST FRIEND anyone could have!" I remember feeling so happy when this was read aloud at my birthday party. In my life it seemed that rejection was everywhere- at school and from some of the kids in the neighborhood .This made Kendra's declaration of friendship blissful. It was worth any price. It seemed like no one had ever liked me that much. I was under Kendra's spell.*

*But having the identity of Kendra's best friend came at a price. I quickly found out everything was done Kendra's way or this wonderful affection was not given. Her friendship was conditional. Kendra only played games she was good at. In make believe games I was always assigned the less desirable role. At school I was Kendra's friend, but I was not often invited to join in games. I could watch or take secondary role. But as soon as we were back home, Kendra would turn into the most affectionate best friend.*

Being Kendra's "best friend" did not make me feel better about myself, perhaps because it wasn't really a healthy friendship, even though at the time I thought of it as such. Vaughn et al. (1993) found that having one close friend can make the difference in the life of an unpopular child. Yes, it was a secure feeling to have a friend, but with Kendra, I felt I wasn't as good as her. It was evident in her actions she didn't think I was good enough to be included in all activities. It was not an equal friendship. In fact, I realize now that it was a form of bullying. From that first time that she ran over my toes with her tricycle, Kendra exerted power over me and made me feel weak and controlled. Her relationship with me differed, however, from traditional bullying in that we had genuine affection for each other.

School was a place of many terrors, somewhere I dreaded going to each day. But in fourth grade something happened that made school a little bearable. I discovered I was good at it. My grades had been rising steadily. By fourth grade I was one of the top students in the class. This was something that made me feel good about myself. But by fifth grade, it had become another reason for the children to pick on me. I decided it was time to change my identity, so I would be more like the others.

### **Playing dumb**

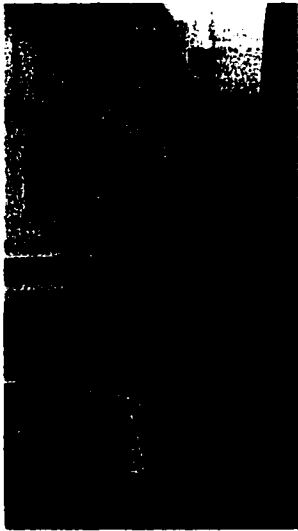
*Before fifth grade, most of my classmates had ignored me or refused to play with me. It was lonely, but not unbearable for me. In grade five I remember the name calling started. This was probably because I started wearing glasses and I got very good grades. I was the perfect portrait of the nerd. I remember getting called the typical names, such as "Four Eyes". That wasn't too bad-my Dad had told me what to expect, because he had gotten glasses at a young age too.*

*I knew that getting good grades in school and being the teachers' favorite made me much more unpopular with my classmates. I can remember one incident where the class had done rather poorly on a spelling test and I had one hundred percent. The teacher kept the whole class in at recess, except, that is, for me. At lunch the kids blamed me for getting a good mark. This was the first time I realized that doing well in school can make you unpopular with your peers. I was firmly established as the class geek. The kids use to call me geek, goody-goody two shoes, ugly. People would touch me and touch someone else and say, "Ew! You've got Cathy germs", and no one would be my partner in gym class. I knew there was nothing I could do about my glasses, I needed them to see and my mother had told me contacts were out of the question. The only thing I could do*

*was change my academic status. And so I stopped trying in school, in fact I tried to act like the ditzy girl, a behavior I retained well into senior high. The kids still picked on me, being a ditz had not made me popular, but at least now I had one less bad quality for others to hold against me.*

According to Griffith (1995) sometimes people have to do something called 'passing', adjusting their actions to be part of a group. "Having to 'pass' means at least playing down aspects of oneself" (Griffiths, 1995, p.117). Orenstein (1994) noted in her study of junior high girls that girls feel it is more important to be nice and sweet than smart. Like most girls, I gave up something I was good at in the hopes of gaining popularity. "Passing in one group may affect membership of other groups" (Griffiths, 1995, p. 117). I feel that I lost doubly, because not only did I not become popular, I gave up my identity of "smart girl" something that made myself and my parents proud of me. I wonder, as I write this, if this is what drives me so hard at school now? Am I trying to reclaim the identity I freely gave up in fifth grade?

When I started junior high (grades seven to nine) I thought maybe if I changed the way I dressed, if I adopted a more mature fashionable look, I would fit in. I poured over fashion magazines all summer trying to find the right look. I told my mother I would not wear clothes in the children's section anymore and I wanted my clothes from the trendy stores such as "*Smart Set and Suzy Shier*". On the first day of school I decked myself out in what I thought a fashion plate, destined to be popular and admired by all, would wear. The following is my analysis of a photo taken on the first day of junior high (see figure 2.11).



**Figure 2.11** My first day of grade seven.

### **Fashion disaster**

*I am looking at a picture of myself taken on the first day of junior high. In the picture I am in my living room, standing beside the organ. One hand is resting on the organ and the other is clutching my first purse, which is beige with multi colored zippers. My new Adidas school bag is in the background behind me. I have long blonde hair, with big glasses (that take over most of my face,) under which I am wearing pink eyeshadow (my first time being aloud to wearing make-up). I am wearing a red checked blouse with white frills at the collar, breasts and cuffs. Around the collar of this shirt I have placed a bow tie. I am wearing a long denim skirt with frills on the bottom, white knee socks and black loafers. The western look, the men's look, and the preppy look were all popular that year. I seemed to have mixed all those looks together.*

*When I see this photo, I think two things. I remember how excited and grown-up I felt leaving for school that day. But the adult me looks at it and thinks , 'Oh. My God! That poor child, I was such a geek!' The adult in me sees the awkward child who, back*

*than, I could not see looking in the mirror. I had high hopes for that year that were not fulfilled. I did not make friends in my class and I was still picked on.. This memory makes me think of a song called "Grade 9" by the Barenaked Ladies. The lyrics express the awkwardness of not fitting in:*

*I found my locker and I found my classes.*

*Lost my lunch and I broke my glasses,*

*That guy is huge! That girl is wailin!*

*First day of School and I'm already failing.*

***Chorus***

*This is me in grade nine, baby, this is me in grade nine.*

*This is me in grade nine, baby, this is me in grade nine.*

*I've got a blue-and-red Adidas bag and a humongous binder,*

*I'm trying my best not to look like a minor niner.*

*I went out for the football team to prove that I'm a man;*

*I guess I shouldn't tell them that I like Duran Duran.*

***Chorus***

*Well, half my friends are crazy and the others are depressed*

*And none of them can help me study for my math test.*

*I got into the classroom and my knowledge was gone;*

*I guess I should've studied instead of watching Wrath of Khan.*

***Chorus***

*They called me chicken legs, they called me four-eyes,*

*They called me fatso, they called me buckwheat,*

*They called me Eddie.*

***Chorus***

*I've got a red leather tie and a pair of rugger pants,*

*I put them on and I went to the high school dance.*

*Dad said I have to be home by eleven –*

*Aw, man, I'm gone miss Stairway to Heaven*

*(Barnaked Ladies, 1992)*

This piece brings to the forefront the hopes of popularity a lot of us have when entering a new school. If we just obtain the right look or join the right groups, we imagine we will achieve the popularity never possible before. But of course this doesn't always work; in fact, it usually fails. The rejected students stay rejected. This song speaks to the experience of entering junior high, negotiating a place to fit in, and not succeeding.

In shopping for that first day of school outfit, I chose a physical transformation, which is a common strategy for adolescent girls. According to Weber & Mitchell (1995), our identity and ideas about identity are influenced by pop culture images. Further, the clothes we wear play an important part in the social construction of the self (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Teen-age girls are told by magazines that all it takes is a good makeover and you will be popular and adored by boys. Unfortunately, for most girls, this is false hope.

I think this experience is common for many girls, not just those of us who are peer rejected. What's the same is that this physical transformation does not make girls



popular. What's different for peer rejected girls is having the added burden of still being peer rejected; in other words, it's a double disappointment.

After this failure I was depressed but not defeated. I was just becoming a teenager and was determined I would be well-liked. I went back to my teen magazines and novels to look for answers. They all seemed to point in one direction, "get a boyfriend". According to what I was reading, if you had a boyfriend you would be happy and people would like you. In fact the more popular the boy was, the more popular you would be. So I set my sights on getting myself a boyfriend. I had my first boyfriend the summer I turned thirteen.

### **Paul's girlfriend**

*All of seventh grade I had tried and failed miserably at finding a boyfriend. But that summer a strange and surprising thing happened, I found a boyfriend, a neighborhood boy, named Paul, who was two years my senior and fairly popular at school. Paul was tall and tan with short dark wavy hair. He was an absolute dreamboat in his blue Adidas shorts.*

*Paul and I passed the summer spending time with two other couples from the neighborhood. Paula and her beau were one of those couples. Paul and I used to hold hands and kiss when there were no adults around. Once or twice that summer he abandoned me for a visiting girl named Tara, but for the most part, he was my boyfriend all summer.*

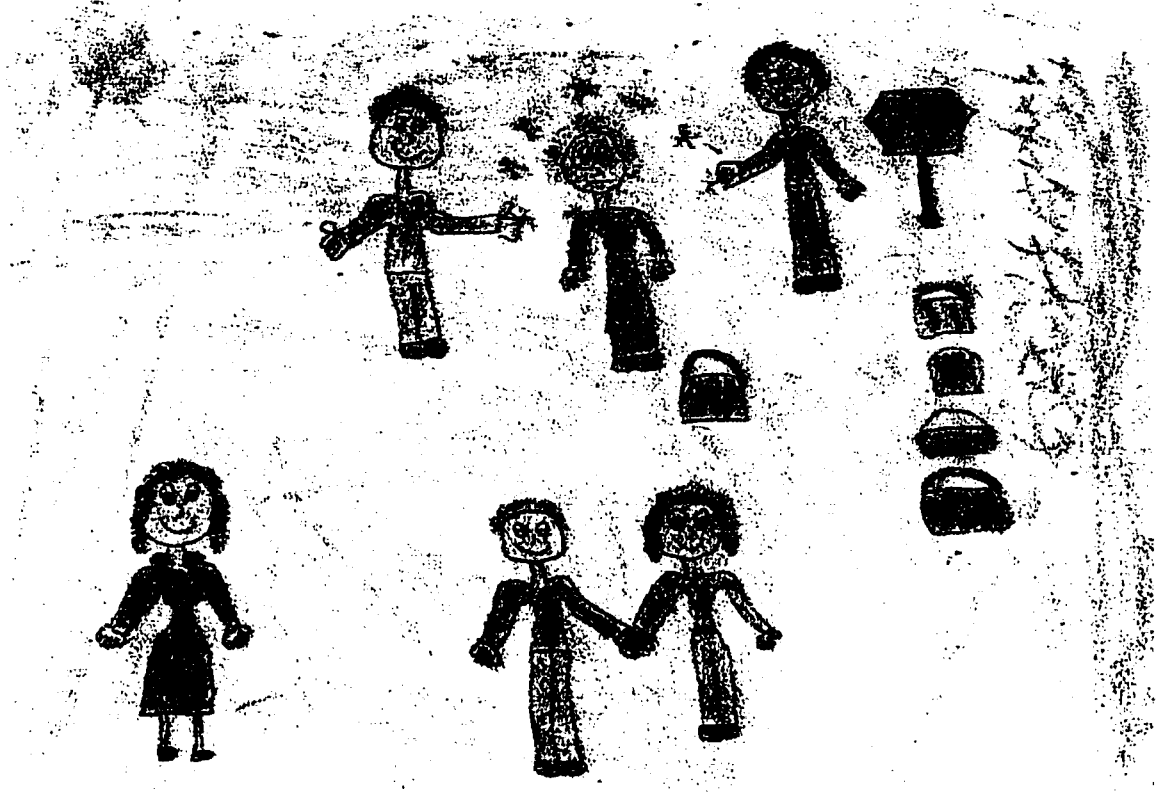
*I was ecstatic. I felt like I was living in one of those teen romance novels. I finally felt like I was somebody and I was sure other girls at school would look up to me, considering who my boyfriend was. I was excited for school to start because I would start*

*grade eight with a handsome ninth-grade boyfriend. Little did I know that Paul had other ideas. I started grade eight thinking this was the year I was going to fit in. Why shouldn't I? I had a popular boyfriend! Before school even started, I had picked out all my new clothes for the year. I had adopted the preppy look, shirts with alligators, rugby pants, Adidas sneakers, loafers, and so on. How else would a girl with a popular boyfriend dress?! Little did the world and my poor parents know that this was the last time they would ever see that look on me.*

*I remember that first day of school, I told everyone about my summer and my great new boyfriend. The first break of the day I looked for Paul. I found him in his homeroom sharpening his pencil. I walked up to him and tried to kiss him. He moved his head away. He looked at me and said, "Look we are over. At school I don't know you. Go away!" I ran away in tears. In my head, I fantasized that maybe he would come to his senses, like Danny in the movie "Grease". After all Paul was a bit of a bad boy and I was a goody-goody. Maybe, he would miss me and when he did I would be all sexily made over like Sandy in "Grease". This moment never happened.*

*Paul never talked to me in school, except to make fun of me. In fact he started to pick on me (see figure 2.12). When I walked to the bus stop in the morning, Paul and his friends would throw burrs at me and they would stick in my hair. On the bus ride home, he would spit at me. Sadly I accepted that there would be no magical "Grease-like" reunion. I nursed a broken heart. It was hard to forget because Paul was always in my face being mean. I couldn't understand his behavior, when all I did was like him.*

*Well this was definitely is not the year I learned to fit in. This final heart-break made me stop caring about fitting in altogether. This is the year I learned to not fit in and*



**Figure 2.12** Paul and his friend threw burrs at me.

*make a statement about it. My mother refers to this year as the year I completely changed, the year she lost her little girl. In grade eight I started to form my own identity.*

I reflect on the absurdity of losing one's identity, being known as someone's girlfriend to obtain the identity of being popular. According to Griffith (1995), when we leave parts of ourselves behind to belong this leads to feeling of being inauthentic. When I chose to identify as an extension of someone else, I left Cathy behind. All these changes were my attempts at fitting in, at being like everybody else. I hated who I was and wanted to be anyone but me.

**If part of oneself is left outside the circle when one joins a group, that part has been de-valued by the group. Further, if the person has to behave as if ashamed of**

parts of themselves, or to actively campaign against them, then the person is acting as though she agrees with the group's evaluations. This is dangerous for self-esteem. (Griffiths, 1995, p.118).

As I grew older and was no longer peer rejected, I built a new and stronger image of myself. When I met new friends, I tried to hide my past from them. The new me seemed so different that I felt unconnected to my childhood self; in fact, I want to bury my childhood identity. Eventually I tried to hide the past even from myself. In the following essay I try to explain and resolve the conflict between the confident adult me and the rejected child I was.

### **What's in a Name?**

*What does a name mean? It can mean who you legally are. I was born Katherine Joyce Miller. When my parent's adopted me, I became Catherine Elizabeth Derry. When I was married I was Catherine Elizabeth Lynch. I divorced and became Catherine Elizabeth Derry once again. These are all very formal version of my name as it has changed over the years. When I hear someone's full name it is always for a very formal reason. Signing legal papers, graduation, or when you're in trouble with your Mom. This is not the use of one's name that I am pondering.*

*What I am interested in is the name that those who know us well call us by: friends, family, teachers, coworkers and even enemies. What people call us can shape our identity, how we act, how we see ourselves, how we feel about ourselves Our everyday name holds behind it a lot of identity-forming and meaning-making. I have two names and might I say two identities or personas. There is Cathy and Catherine.*

*Catherine is my legal first name and the name I choose to go by now. Cathy is a shortened version of my name that my parents choose to give me the day I was put into*

*their arms. A name that my family, old friends, former classmates and old acquaintances still call me. A name I have been trying to run away from for the last twelve years.*

*Why do I hate the name Cathy? It is not as simple as just not caring for the name. I feel like there are two of me (no I do not have a split personality). Cathy and Catherine are two basically different personas shaped by life experience. Cathy was shaped during all those awful years of schooling and Catherine is the adult I chose to be, unconnected to Cathy's pain.*

*I should backtrack and start at the beginning. When my parents called me Cathy it was with love. My dad always dreamed of having a baby girl and calling her Cathy. My Mom wanted to call me Judy. My Dad won out. Judy did survive as the name of one of my first dolls. Of course my parents gave me the full name of Catherine Elizabeth, as all good Catholics had the habit of naming their children after saints. Before I entered the school system Cathy was the name I was affectionately called by my parents and my early playmates. To this day I let my family still call me Cathy because the love still rings true in their voice when they say it, just as my cousins still let family call them by ridiculous childhood nicknames.*

*I did not really find offense in hearing my name called until I started to school. Once I started school, my name started to get used in childhood taunts like "Ew you have Cathy germs". It got used in negative ways on report cards such as this excerpt from my grade one report card "... Cathy still needs to take her time and take some pride in her work." As I got older, it was some times heard in the laughing voice of a bully.*

*In junior high my named got used in a new taunt. "Cathy Lizzy Derry", implying that I was a lesbian. Barely grasping what the term meant, the adolescent Cathy started*

*to chase boys like mad. I also figured out that the key to popularity was getting a boy to like you. Cathy tried this and failed. I remember hearing boys saying "Gross, Cathy likes you". How did Cathy feel? She felt ugly and unattractive and pined for a real boyfriend.*

*When Cathy was fourteen, Cathy changed her look in hopes of acceptance. She became a New Wave, alternative girl. This just made the kids at school make fun of her with taunts like "Cathy is a freak. Is it Halloween already Cathy?" But Cathy discovered in the next few years that this look made her attractive to some boys, older boys, most of whom were not in school. I found that these boys would be really nice to you if you did what they said. But not for long. Pretty soon these boys and their friends start calling Cathy a slut and "easy" and many other horrible names. How did Cathy feel about herself? She felt she was too easy, unloved, and ugly. Maybe if she was nicer, prettier, a boy would actually fall in love with her. She felt she was no good and didn't deserve love. She knew the only way she would find some acceptance was by pleasing whatever guy she liked at the time.*

*Not liking who I was at eighteen, I tried to make people call me Catherine. This worked when I lived in a different city. I remember the year I was nineteen, going to college in Ontario, and newly single. I had asked my friends, classmates and teachers to call me Catherine. How do I remember that year? I remember Catherine did well at school, had a lot of friends, had a few boyfriends (even one who claimed to love her) and went to lots of great parties. I remember at the end of that year being sad I had to go back to Saint John and be Cathy again. In the years I lived in Saint John after that, I would live in fear that new friends would find out who Cathy really was from people who had known me in school. Sometimes new friends would hear stories, but it never deterred*

*them from liking me as I feared it would. In the Fall of 1996 I moved to Halifax, determined once again to start my life over as Catherine. This time the name stuck. I was very happy with my social life there. The same was true when I moved to Montreal as Catherine, not Cathy.*

*How would I describe these two personas? Cathy is ugly, careless, and stupid. She doesn't have many friends. It is probably because she's a crybaby. She is too sensitive for her own good. This is what makes her a target for ridicule. She tries too hard to make people like her. Everyone laughs at her. Boys think she's ugly and do not want to go out with her, but she sleeps with boys in hope of achieving validation and acceptance. It never works. She does what people want so people will like her. This only makes them think less of her. She is a coward and never stands up for herself or others. She is everyone's doormat. She has no friends and never will. She will never amount to anything. Nobody will ever fall in love with her. She will become a crazy old cat lady, and die sad and lonely.*

*Catherine is fairly attractive and has a great sense of fashion. She has many friends, new and old, that find her amusing, supportive and loyal. She is very intelligent and excels at school. She will make an excellent therapist or professor someday. Catherine likes herself and does not need to sexually please men. She is a proud confident lesbian. She is capable of love and has been loved by men and women. She will probably make a great partner and will someday make a great parent. She will spend her life surrounded by friends and family, very much loved.*

*This is why I chose to be Catherine. She is who I strive to be and am proud to be every day. Even though I choose to be Catherine, there are times when I feel like Cathy. I*

*have started to accept this. I can't be this idealized Catherine all the time. I am starting to love the Cathy in me because she needs love and acceptance. It's time I give her what she needs to heal. I can't heal Cathy until I accept that she's a part of me. But I still prefer to be Catherine, unless I know you really care about me unconditionally. Then calling me Cathy is fine because she needs unconditional acceptance.*

My essay illustrates the power a name can hold and its relationship to identity and self-image. After hearing your name used in so many negative ways, it becomes another enemy for you to escape from. Before I started school, I did not hate my name of Cathy. It was only once I associated it with the negative traits bestowed on me by my peers that I began to hate it. Each slur they labeled me, like ugly, gross, stupid, slut, was layered on me like too many winter clothes until I couldn't breathe. I had to escape and recreate my identity. Today I realize my identity is multiple and complex and includes all of the parts of Catherine and Cathy, from the sensitive little girl to the take charge-of-her-life woman (see figure 2.13).

This brings back the question of whether the self is a unified 'I' or fragmented selves. To me it depends on where one is in one's life. As a child, I saw my identity as a unified 'I' and I kept trying on different identities, hoping one would make me like myself. As a young adult, I saw my identity as fragmented: the Cathy I despised and the Catherine I was trying to be. Today, I see myself as an 'I', but not an unified 'I'. It is a multiple 'I' in which all my selves are allowed to exist together as a whole. I think that just as identity changes over ones life, so does ones conception of identity and self.



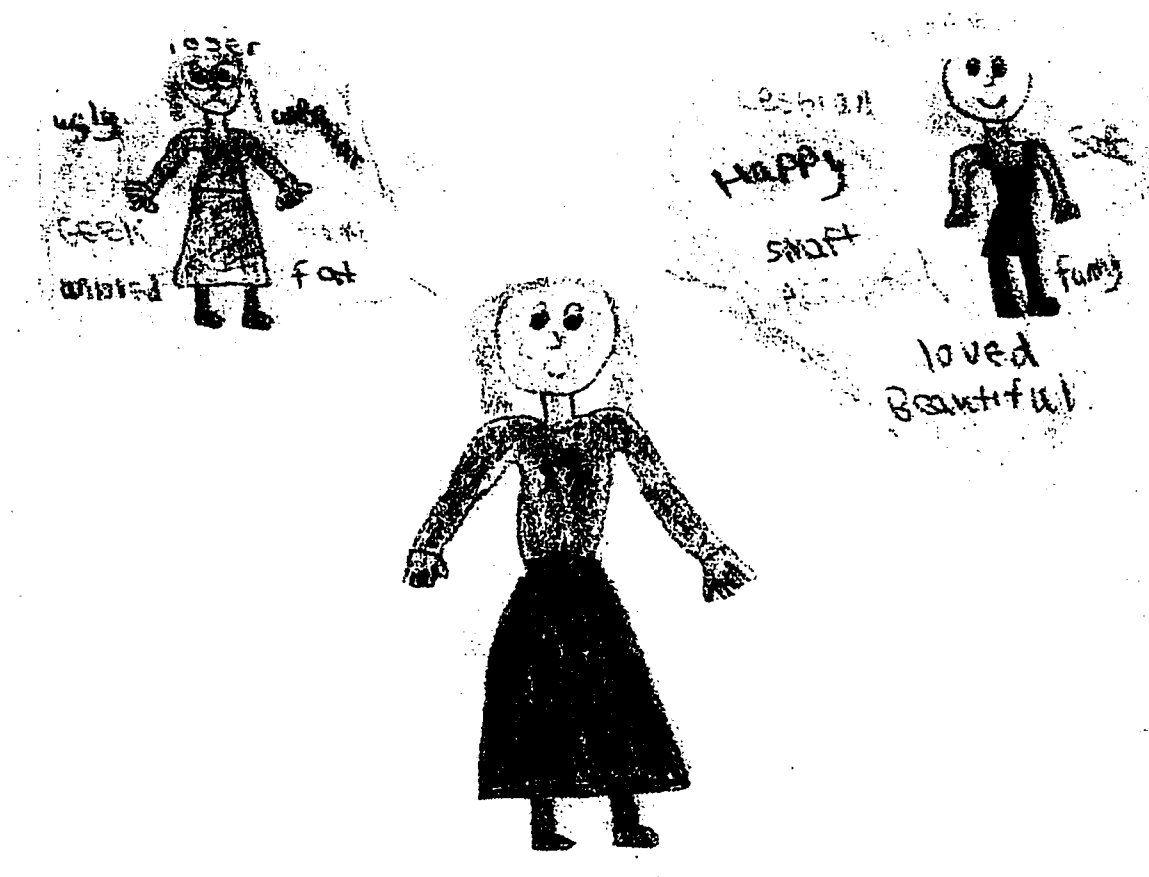


Figure 2.3 My two persona's.

### Rejecting the Rejecters

I do not fit in. The lament of every high school student. The difference with me through, is that I thrive on not fitting in. With me it is not about wearing the right lip liner or foundation. I do not want to be one of those girls who listen to top 40 radio stations. I do not want to be one of those girls who plays the flute in the school band because their best friends do, and they have to stick together. I want to make stupid mistakes and look back at myself and laugh. I refuse to conform and be around 'those' girls (McGee, 1999, p.19).

When I was thirteen, I once again changed my look. This time it was not about being popular at school, in fact it was for the opposite reason. Slowly, over the next few years I did a hundred and eighty degree change: I went from a sad little girl who wanted

to fit in to an angry adolescent who thrived on being different and not fitting in. I became part of the New Wave/ Punk Rock subculture. According to Griffiths (1995), when girls are rejected, they sometimes stop wanting to be part of that in-group, and create a new identity within a new group. "This is a process born of rejection and not to be confused with freely choosing such a group because she feels at home in it, however happy she feels later with the new group" (Griffiths, 1995, p.91). I gave up on being a popular kid and became a teen-age rebel and joined with others like me who rejected the values of the dominant culture. How did all this start for me?

### **Duran Duran fever**

*After Paul broke up with me I gave up on fitting in. It finally had sunk into my head that nothing I did would make me fit in the mainstream. To take my mind off my failed attempt at love and popularity, I started spending more time with Kendra. I hadn't seen her much that summer because she said she didn't like boys yet. Well, that had changed. Kendra and her friends had discovered something better than junior high boys, they had discovered pop stars! Kendra showed me pictures of their new favorite band "Duran Duran". I thought they were gorgeous, much better than the boys who picked on me at school and their music was great too.*

*I started spending time with Kendra and her grade nine friends who were much friendlier than they had been in the past. Her friends accepted me, as I was now a member of their new religion, the cult of "Duran Duran". Yes, I still got picked on, but as part of a group. The whole school was in the midst of Michael Jackson fever. So, my friends and I got made fun of for liking those so-called "British fag boys". But the five of us stuck together and yelled back at them. Me and my fellow Duran Duranies, as fans*

*called themselves, definitely thought we were more cool and cutting edge than the rest of the student population.*

*Our love of Duran Duran sent us out of the suburbs on Saturdays and downtown in search of others like us. It wasn't hard to find others since we all stuck out in a crowd, with our short dyed hair and trench coats. My friends and I were slowly adopting the New Wave style of dress, similar to Duran Duran and other British bands of that era. We started to meet other girls who dressed like us, and even boys who dressed like this too. These boys were much older than us, usually in their late teens and early twenties. These boys were different from other boys I had met: they liked other boys; they were gay. My clique at school was inseparable that year. We went downtown every Saturday. Sadly, things changed for me that fall. Kendra and her friends entered senior high, leaving me back in junior high. They stopped coming downtown with me. I was left alone at junior high.*

*When I started grade nine I was a bit lonely at school without my clique to back me up, but in spite of this, I had a good year. Yes, I was picked on at school. People would make fun of my clothes and call me a freak. But these things didn't bother me as much as they used to because I felt I was much cooler and style conscious than the rest of my classmates. I had my new cool friends downtown. My new best friend Ivy went through some of the same difficulties I did at school. Finally I had someone who understood me. My new guy friends were always complementing me on my clothes and hugging me. Finally I had found a place where I fit in (see figure 2.14).*

*My attitude toward being rejected and teased was changing. Whereas before I felt they were laughing at me in school because I wanted to be a part of their group and was*



**Figure 2.14** I finally made good friends.

*denied access, now, I felt like they were mad because I wasn't trying to be like them or be a part of their group. I felt like I was rejected THEM.! In fact, I made friends that year at school. There were a small group of girls at school who thought I was cool. They liked the same music I did and liked my clothes and hair, but they were too scared to take the bold fashion risks I took. They were scared that their parents would be mad if they dyed their hair or that the kids would laugh if they wore different clothes. I faced those consequences and found it was worth it. These girls looked up to me for it. My friends and I spent our lunch hours talking about music, clothes, and the people I met downtown. For the first time since I started school, I started to feel good about myself.*

I reflect on how something as simple as liking some British pop stars affected such a change in my life. The first thing it did was make me a part of a group, an accepted full member. This was a group that saw it self as unique and did not need the acceptance of the so-called popular people. As I became a member of this New Wave subculture, I achieved something I never had before, a kind of popularity. It was not a mainstream popularity, but it was based on being different, hipper and thinking my self too cool for the mainstream. I was rejecting them the way they had rejected me. People started looking up to me because I was taking fashion risks that they were too scared to take. But then, some of those who were scared had more to lose than me; they risked not fitting in and being rejected by the mainstream. This was not a risk for me as I already didn't fit in. I accepted this and found a new place to belong.

When I entered senior high (grades ten to twelve), I became disenchanted with New Wave, perhaps because it didn't have a message beyond "be different". I looked for something harder and darker that would express the anger I had accumulated over years of rejection. It was around this time that Ivy's new boyfriend introduced us to Punk Rock. Ivy and I really identified with Punk's message, songs about being an outsider and being proud of it. This message is typified in an early Punk movie called *Suburbia*. The Punks in this movie had themselves branded with the initials TR, meaning "The Rejected". They identified with being society's rejected people, and wore it like a badge of honor. In fact they used it as a catalyst to start their own group, where to be accepted you had to be rejected.

### **Finally finding a place to fit in**

*I was deeply entrenched in the Punk Rock movement when at sixteen I entered Saint John High, the biggest senior high in the city. The kids there belonged to many subcultures from preppy, to heavy metal, to Punk. The school had a pretty good-sized Punk Rock subculture. Once I was full-fledged member of this community, I enjoyed the rest of my senior high career. I even started dating. I was happy I had found a place to fit both inside and outside of school (see figure 2.15).*

I reflect on embracing the label of Punk, a movement that thrives on difference, being an outsider, and that prides itself on not fitting in, a group that laughs in the face in conformity. According to Leblanc (1999), joining the Punk Rock subculture, which is considered by society to be deviant, is an act of resistance. For Leblanc (1999), resistance “requires three distinct moments: a subjective account of oppression (real or imagined), an express desire to counter that oppression, and an action (broadly defined a word, thought, or deed) intended specifically to counter that oppression”(p.18) This accurately represents my journey to the Punk subculture; After year of oppression by peer rejection, I decided I was no longer going to let people pick on me. I thus joined a subculture that rejected the values of those who rejected me. I was doing what many subcultures in the last few years have been doing: I was embracing a negative label that others had given me and made it my own, thereby empowering myself. Suddenly being a misfit meant you were a non-conformist, politically conscious, intellectually superior, and a hell of a lot cooler. The people who had picking on me for years were seen as conformist, shallow, sheep following the herd.



**Figure 2.15** I finally found a place to fit in

The Punk Rock subculture, like any other group, had its contradictions. The rejected would some time reject one of their own for being friends with people from the popular crowd. Adopting any mainstream cultural habits was seen as a reason for expulsion from the Punk subculture. It seemed we had formed a group that was exclusive for the excluded, that rejected conformity but had an unspoken dress code and list of cultural rules to conform to. Were we that different than the people that excluded us? Yes and No. No, we weren't different in that we too had unspoken rules and only certain people were welcome. But we were different in that inclusion in this group was under the condition that you had been rejected. This requirement differs from the rules for belonging to most mainstream social groups. The Punk Rock subculture gave those who didn't fit in a place to belong, a place that didn't hide how our peers treated us. We celebrated our differences and used it do feel good about ourselves.

I think that finding a subculture where I was welcomed was the most important thing that occurred during senior high. When I became a Punk, my self-esteem improved. The focus shifted from what was wrong with me to what was right with me. I could rebuild my identity and learn to feel good about myself again.

## **After School**

What happened after I graduated? How did these experiences affect the adult I became? Do the themes identified in this chapter reflect my adult experience? How do they shape my everyday life?

The first theme “It wasn’t always that way” is important. Through that theme we see the supportive loving home environment and early friendships I had before starting school. I see these supports as armor I put on to protect me from my negative experiences at school. It didn’t completely protect me, but it kept me from crumbling and collapsing under the weight of the abuse I suffered. I think that I had supports that not every peer-rejected child has. Having a good support system outside of school helps peer-rejected children stay strong during a very trying time. My early memories of love and acceptance stayed with me through my rejection, and gave me a sense that things could be like that again someday. Today, when things are tough, I still use these early memories as a source of strength.

Do I still feel that sense of “helplessness” I felt as a young girl in school? Not in the same way, although sometimes I feel “temporarily helpless”. I feel this way when someone doesn’t like me, when I have to find a partner for an activity, waiting for an invitation to a party, when a friend forgets to call or when someone makes a joke about



me. When this happens I feel the familiar panic climb up my throat and I think, "What happens if no one picks me, likes me or calls me?" Then after I wallow in my negative feelings for awhile, I remember, I am an adult and people usually like me. It doesn't matter if everyone likes me. My friends would never exclude me on purpose and sometimes a joke is just a joke. Understanding this is something that has just happened in the last few years and isn't always a simple straight-forward process. That sense of helplessness I felt as child still clutches stubbornly onto the edges of my being.

The way I shape my own identity has changed radically. As a child I used to change my identity in hopes of belonging. This usually involved seeing myself as an extension of someone else's identity, as Kendra's friend, Paul's girlfriend, and so forth. Now my identity involves understanding the different parts of myself: student, friend, daughter, lover, former peer-rejected child.... I realize my identity involves my relationship with others, but that my whole identity does not hinge on any one relationship. My identity changes as I grow and understand the many parts of myself. I grew up being young Cathy who wanted to fit in, then I was teen Cathy who didn't care what others thought, then I became Catherine respected, but oblivious to my past. Now, I feel there are aspects of all of them inside me defining different parts of my personality. Young Cathy is sensitive and can share her pain and listen empathetically to others. Teen Cathy rallies against social injustices of any kind. Catherine is efficient. She can stay up all night and write a paper, unpack her house in one day and find time for the many people in her life. This new understanding has made it easier to deal with myself, and accept myself, flaws and all.

Do I still “reject the rejecter”? Am I still a rebel? Yes and No. I move freely and comfortably in the dominant culture, but in many ways I still have the soul of a rebel. I still find time to take chances that might not be socially acceptable, for example, being an “out” lesbian, dying my hair blue, becoming friends with those who don’t fit in, being a vocal animal rights activist, and so forth. These are things that may make others not accept me. But I learned as a teenager that belonging to meaningful groups is much more important than struggling to live up to mainstream’s impossible standards of what is acceptable. The difference is that now these groups do not overly define who I am. My own identity is set much more by me. Another difference is I do not reject people for being part of the mainstream or looking preppy. I realize through experience that it is dangerous to judge people too quickly, especially by their appearance. If I get to know them, they might not be as black and white as I portrayed them, they might not be as conformist as I imagined, they may be multi-layered, like myself. After all, I wasn’t what everyone in school portrayed me to be. What I have learned from being a rebel is to be proud of who I am and stand up for what I believe in, especially myself.

Being peer rejected was a mixed bag. It has in some ways made me more sensitive to other people’s problems. For a long time I have known I have has a desire to help others with their problems. This I feel comes from my experiences with peer rejection. But peer rejection has made me an adult who sometimes still feels helpless, inadequate and unattractive. I am not glad for my experiences, but am glad for what I have learned. There are better ways to learn these lessons than through rejection. Even though I am a happy adult with good relationships, I can not erase from my head “ew,

you had to sit with Cathy,” “she’s on our team, aaw,” “Tissue Tits,” and “Cathy Lizzy Derry,” The sounds of these names will echo in my mind forever.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Kyla's Story: Learning not to Trust**

Kyla is a tall beautiful 29 year-old woman. She looks like she could be a model. She has recently moved back to the city with her boyfriend of four years. From all outward appearances, one would assume that Kyla had a normal childhood, and think that with her good looks, maybe she was popular. Inside Kyla still lives a little girl who was picked on throughout most of her school career. During our long conversations, Kyla's experience emerged around three themes: 1) They don't like you if you are different, 2) Rejection by friends, and 3) Gendered/sexual harassment. Using these three themes I will present Kyla's story of childhood peer rejection.

#### **They Don't Like You If You Are Different**

At school everyone makes fun of his skinny legs and funny glasses (Snihura, 1998).

A lot of children are picked on because there is something different about them, something that makes them not quite fit in. Reisman (1985) says that some children do not fit in through no fault of their own, but because of the bigotry or exclusivity of their peers. This could be because one has a disability, one is from a different culture, or it could be as simple as not wearing the right clothes or having the right hairstyle. Kyla was picked on for being different. The first time she remembers this happening is in grade two when she was reading in front of the class.

### **Reading in front of the class**

*My very first (memory of rejection) was reading in front of the class. The teacher had left the room while I was reading. I got to the word vacant ( it was about a vacant lot, a little boy who played in a vacant lot) and I said "vasant, vassant". I was stuck. And the kids started pointing at me and saying things. I got embarrassed and flustered. They said, "You don't know that word, you don't know what you're saying, you can't read." I opened up the page of the book and spelled "v-a-c-a-n-t". Nobody else knew how to say it either. That was the most embarrassing or flustering kind of moment that I remember, the first one that was grade two.*

Kyla was too embarrassed and flustered to really know how to respond to this situation. According to Hazler (1996), "One common denominator for people in any victimization situation is that they run out of words or ways to relate when they are being victimized" (p.52). Being in front of the class reading put Kyla in a vulnerable situation, leaving her open for attack. When they attack came, she could not find strong enough words or actions to stop her classmates. Unfortunately for Kyla, this event was the catalyst for peer rejection. The children continued to tease her about it all year. They teased her because she now stood out as different, the girl who couldn't read the word, even though most of them probably could not either.

The next incident Kyla can remember is being picked on for wearing glasses, which she wore at a young age. Kyla tell us in her own words the problems this caused for her:

### **I got glasses**

*Within a week (of the reading incident) some of the kids started picking on me about it, which led to them picking on me for other reasons too. They started to call me Four Eyes because I wore glasses. I didn't really understand it at first. I thought, "No big deal. What does four eyes mean?" I hadn't even heard it before. They're like, "Four eyes, you know glasses." I was like, "I don't have four eyes, I have glasses." I really didn't understand. Then the teacher grabbed this kid and said, "That's a really bad thing to say. Don't ever say that to anyone. That's really mean." Suddenly I realized they were being mean to me. I wouldn't have even realized this if the teacher hadn't stepped in and made such a big deal about it. So, that's kind of interesting, the way she dealt with it, (the teachers reaction ) affected me more than the children's taunting.*

Kyla's story brings up three points. First, once children have targeted a child as someone to pick on, they will target that child again and again. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the same children are picked on from kindergarten all the way through elementary school (Paley, 1993). In Kyla's case, it seemed that once the other children had picked on her during her reading, they decided she would make a nice target and continued to pick on things about Kyla that made her different from other children. Secondly, a child's appearance is often what children's ridicule is aimed at. Hazler (1996) points out that children who differ in appearance are often picked on. Just like me, Kyla's, glasses provided another reason for the children to target her.

An important point this story raises is that child may not be as bothered by teasing if they don't realize it's harmful intent. Coie (1990) points out that some rejected children do not realize they are being rejected and thus are not affected by it. Kyla didn't realize

what four eyes meant, so it didn't bother her too much. For all she knew, it was no different than calling someone silly. It was not until someone let it be known that this was a hurtful thing that the insult began to hurt.

As Kyla progressed through elementary school the teasing got worse, especially in the latter part of elementary school when the competitive aspect of gym class becomes important. Like me, Kyla did not excel at this. She had what she thought was a co-ordination problem, which was later diagnosed as scoliosis. Not surprisingly, this did not make Kyla popular. Instead it made her feel like, again, she stuck out as different.

### **Gym is hell**

*The gym teacher told me I had poor co-ordination right in front of the class. She was a really bad teacher that way. For example, instead of dividing the class into teams by counting and pointing "one, two, one, two" to the kids, which I think every gym teacher should do, she said " Okay, everybody, you're the captain and you're the captain and you pick teams." ... I was always picked second to last to the drooling kid. That affected me. I wondered, "what's wrong with me. I can play baseball". ... that was grade five, six, seven. ...I hated gym! I ended up trying to get notes from the doctor. I had a muscle spasm in my back that happened once or twice. The doctor said I had scoliosis. So, I tried to use that to get out of gym. It was hell (gym) why bother. ...It made me realize that I was not accepted, so I was different.*

Once again, Kyla had a teacher point out to her what made her different. White & Kisner (1992) report that a teacher's reaction to a child can affect the other students' perceptions of that child. Whether or not this affected the way the kids in Kyla's gym

class treated her, we can not know for sure. We do know that children who are seen as physically weak in some way are target for abuse from other children (Hazler, 1996).

Children's self-esteem is lowered when they are one of the last children picked for gym. As children who were always picked last for teams, both Kyla and I can attest to this. You feel your self worth is reflected in the order in which you are picked. If you are picked first you are popular, if it's somewhere in the middle you are just a regular kid, if you are one the last one picked you are a loser. This picking order seems to spill out into the playground. No one wants to play with the kid picked last for baseball. Because of her problem, Kyla tried to avoid participating in gym class. I, too, would beg my mother to write a note saying I had a stomach ache, or I would conveniently forget my gym clothes. If you don't participate in gym you don't give the other children an opportunity to pick you last, or laugh at your abilities. You get a chance to not be different.

As Kyla progressed through school she continued to be picked on for her differences, so much so that she started to believe she really *was* different. Labels given to rejected children serve to isolate attention on one trait or characteristic and this concentration on negative aspects tends to lower self-esteem (Hazler, 1996).

By the time Kyla reached senior high (grades ten to twelve) however, she was ready to stand up to those who picked on her. She rebelled against those who saw her as different by embracing her difference and becoming Punk, just as I had. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Punk is a subculture that thrives on not fitting in and rejects the dominant culture's values. It is an act of resistance against those who oppress us (Leblanc, 1999). After years of being picked on for being different against her will, Kyla chose to be different as a political statement against her peers who had rejected her



### **I felt like a freak**

*I really didn't feel like a total freak until late senior high. Then I was proud to be a freak and I attracted other so-called freaks. I think that was like a rebellious, angry kind of way to be. Because the thing is you can't be frail and timid when you're using anger. I used that (Punk rebellion) up until I was about twenty-five. I think a lot of people do that too.*

Kyla's identification with Punk did get her picked on in senior high. But it was different now that she had her angry Punk armor to hide behind. Punks perceive themselves as strong people who say what they believe in and use anger and rebellion to do this. The Punk identity allowed Kyla to stand up for her self and get angry back at those who had rejected her. It allowed Kyla to change her self-image to one that was strong, that didn't get walked on. It didn't matter if she got picked on, she told her self she was too tough to hurt. She was no longer a victim. Punk also gave her a new group of friends to identify with, in her words, other so-called "freaks".

Kyla's experience of being different is something a lot of peer-rejected children feel, whether the difference is something you can see like wearing glasses or something less visible like having scoliosis. Other children use these differences to make fun of a child. In the end, it doesn't really matter what your differences are. Anything will get picked on under the right circumstances. "It is probably not the 'physical difference' itself that causes the person to be bullied but instead the vulnerability that the difference suggests" (Hazler, 1996, p.56). Like Kyla and I, you eventually believe that these differences mean there is something wrong with you, that you are flawed.

## Rejection By Friends

Things are not going the greatest in school either. I am having this special problem. It doesn't have to do with reading or math or anything like that. It's much worse. A lot of people don't like me anymore. And for no good reason. I'm trying hard to pretend it doesn't matter, but the truth is, it does. Sometimes I feel like crying but I hold it in. (Blume, 1974, p.139).

Not all of Kyla's bad treatment and childhood rejection came from school yard bullies and mean- spirited classmates. Some rejection came from her own friends. One day they would be the little girls she would play with, and the next day, they would be perpetrating an abuse upon her. Kyla first experience of rejection by a friend happened when she was in second grade and got "uninvited" from a friend's birthday party.

### My best friend's birthday party

*In second grade, my best friend Cindy had a birthday party in May. She was pretty weird with me. Sometimes we would play marbles and I would win and she would run off and say "I don't want to be your friend anymore." She had an older sister who was witchy and liked to pick on people and was tough. Her older sister, Penelope, told her I was a loser and she should dump me. I had been invited to her birthday party. ... but then the Friday before the party she said, "I don't think I want to be your friend anymore. Penelope told me not to play with you and you're a big loser." I said "Come on Cindy." I didn't understand what was wrong with her. I told my Mom about it. She said, "Oh, she'll get over it by the weekend."*

*The weekend came and I went to her birthday party and there was a whole bunch of kids in her living room. She came to the door and took the present right out of my hand and slammed the door in my face. My mom was waiting in the car. ... I just stood there, empty handed, staring at her. She was looking at me kind of strange and she rolled down*

*the window and said, "What's going on?" ... I got back in the car and went back home. That was very upsetting. Parties are a big thing. You get to meet all the girls, hang out, dress up. It was very disappointing.*

How sad it is to be rejected by your best friend, and worst of all, not being able to go to a birthday party. In early elementary school close friendships are formed, but these friendships can be rather fragile (Ramsey, 1991). These friendships often shift and change during this time period (Roffey, Tarrant, & Majors, 1994). These shifts may be easy for children who are fairly popular, but for unpopular children like Kyla, regrouping and finding a new friend isn't easy. Kyla had experienced rejection before, but never from a friend. She was feeling the force of reputation. As I mentioned in the last chapter, once a child is labeled as rejected, they can be spurned for this reason alone. Kyla's best friend found out from her sister, Peneolope, that Kyla was not the kind of girl you wanted to be associated with. This information was enough to make Cindy want to end her friendship with Kyla and exclude her from the party in a humiliating way, slamming the door in her face.

After the birthday party incident, Kyla became friends with Cindy again, assuming that maybe the whole thing was just a squabble and that Cindy wouldn't reject her like the other kids at school. But Cindy excluded Kyla again, this time in favor of one of Kyla's other friends.

### **Never let your friends meet**

*Cindy and I got back together. We started hanging out with this new girl Sally, a girl I met. I had tried to keep Cindy away from Sally because I figured they would become friends and they did. One day at a theater, a Saturday afternoon matinee, the*

*three of us went. Everyone wanted to sit in the middle. There was a big argument about that but we tried to ignore it. Cindy sat in the middle and we watched the movie. After, we were all going to play or do something. We were walking through this park when they ran ahead and whispered and stuff. I guess they wanted to get away from me. I said, "What are you doing?" They said they wanted to play alone today and get to know each other. "Why can't I come too?" I asked. They replied, "Well you always hang out and we don't really know each other. We just became friends and we want to hang out." That was kind of disappointing too. That was kind of the beginning of their friendship and I moved onto other people.*

According to Hazler (1996), those who are victims suffer from low self-esteem and see themselves in a negative way. Kyla's lack of self-esteem would make her worry about her new friend liking her old friend who was more popular than she was. Her earlier experience with Cindy had left her mistrustful. This fear was well-founded, and that was in fact what happened, ending Kyla's friendship with both girls. When children's close friendships end, they often lose trust in that person (Ramsey, 1991). Kyla's bad experience with early friendships combined with her low-self esteem was making her wonder if any friendship would last.

Kyla moved on and tried to make new friends. If one group of friends rejected her, she moved on to a new group, always hoping to find a place of acceptance, but each time a little more wary. The next group of friends showed her that friendships in the neighborhood are different than friendships at school.

### **They weren't my friends at school**

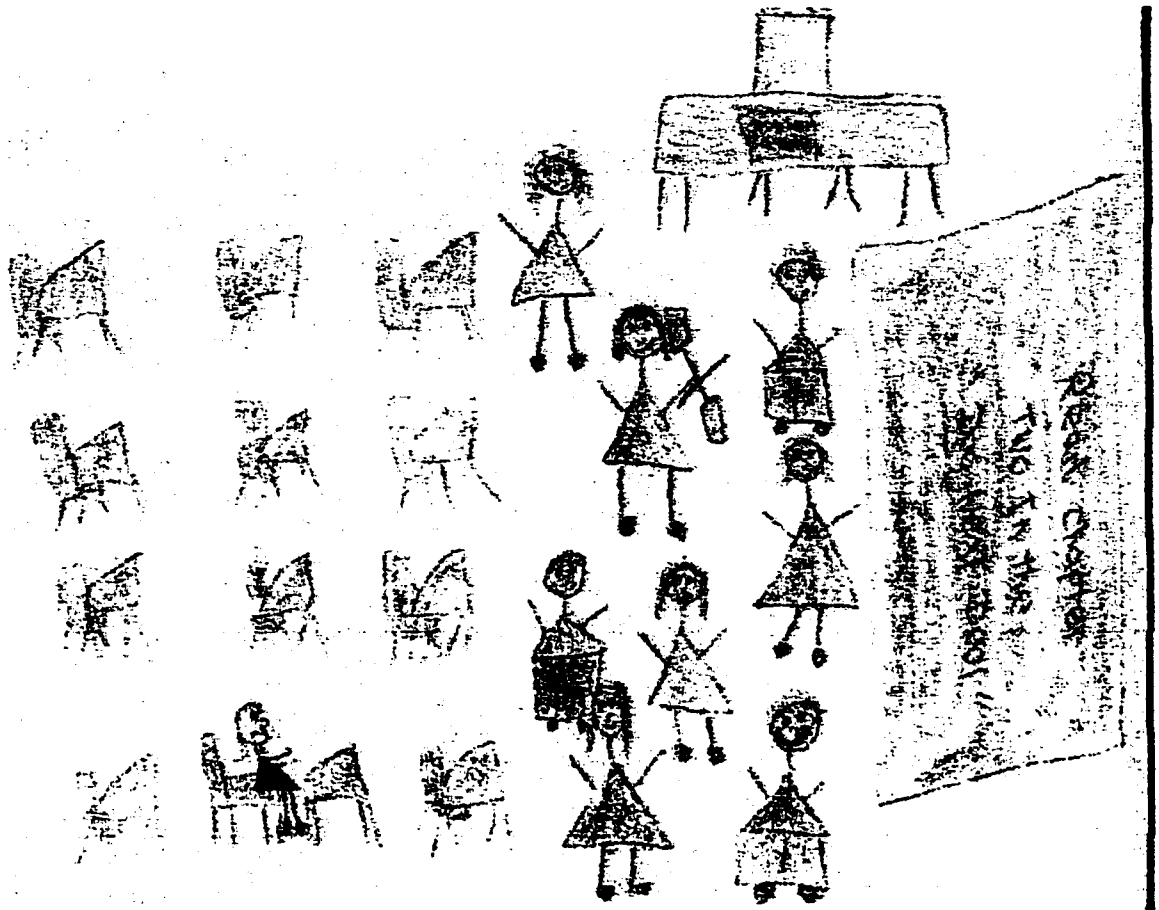
*There were a couple of girls who ended up being so-called "preps" later. They hung out with me outside of school. They acted a bit different in school. They didn't associate with me at school. I thought, "What's up with that? What's their problem?" Why did they like me outside of school but not in school? I figured out later it was for popularity, which I didn't really understand at the time because they didn't have more money than I did or nicer clothes than I did or anything. It was just how it went. So, they went their way.*

Kyla was learning that the phenomenon of peer rejection sometimes had nothing to do with whether people liked you a lot. It had a lot to do with popularity and social pressures. Sure these girls like Kyla outside of school, they probably still felt the same about her in school, but social pressures dictated they not be seen with the outcast. This is something that happened to me, too. I will interrupt Kyla's story here with one of my own to further illustrate this point (see figure 3.1).

### **Paula wouldn't let me play**

*Until third grade, Paula and I used to play after school and occasionally at school. Paula and I usually didn't play much at school, but she had never outright rejected me. It was usually one of her friends who said I couldn't play with them.*

*I remember the day she publicly rejected me. Our teacher had kept us in at lunch because it was raining. Paula had brought a new toy to school that day. It was two sticks. One stick had two big foam circles on either end. The other stick was somehow used to twirl that stick. Paula and I were sitting together and she was playing with it. The other children noticed and came over to have a try at it. I wanted to try it too. So I asked if I*



**Figure 3.1** I was rejected by my friend Paula.

*could try. Some of the other kids said stuff about "Cathy germs" and Paula looked at me and said, no, I couldn't try and I couldn't play with her and the other children. I went back to my desk and I watched Paula and the other children parade around the classroom with the toy. I remember feeling very sad because one of my best friends had rejected me. This incident made me question my friendship with Paula. I started to avoid her in the neighborhood.*

By the time children are in the middle years of elementary school, they are aware of the social status of others (Hymel, Wagner & Butler, 1990). Students who are in higher status groups are viewed positively and low status groups are viewed negatively (Hymel

et al., 1990). It is easy to see how Kyla's friends and my friend may have been reacting to the political climate of the school. These friends may have liked us, but association with us at school would have been detrimental to their social status at school, being that we were of very low social status. But to the child experiencing the shunning, it is a humiliating and painful thing. Suddenly you are good enough to play with in the neighborhood, but not in school in front of everyone's gaze. It feels like your friends are accepting and approving of your outcast status. Like Kyla, I too moved on to new friends.

As Kyla entered junior high (grades seven to nine), she made friends who talked about normal adolescent things such as boys and clothes. But, as Kyla was to find out, these friends would turn on her and reject her just as some of her elementary school friends had. This time they were crueler.

#### **The first hate letter (grade eight)**

*I got two letters, one in grade eight and one in grade nine. The first one was from four of my so-called best friends. I had a crush on a guy named Frederick and they knew about it. They were in the lunchroom sitting with Frederick. They told him "Kyla Wood likes you" He was like, "ew". So they wrote me up this letter that said, " Kyla Witch, We hate you. And Fredrick says you have shit brown hair and you're ugly. We don't want to be your friend any more". It was all written by this one girl, because I recognized her handwriting... and, like, it isn't like she was anything special either. She was kind of a quiet nice girl. ... She was usually really friendly but she just turned on me. Three other people signed it, besides herself.*

*I took it to my Mom. She was just appalled that the kids could write this. ... She said "My god! This is grade two stuff!" So one of the friends apologized and another*

*one of the four ended up apologizing much later. As for the ring leader, I never spoke to her again. I felt really bad, really upset.*

*Those were the only girls I hung out with besides one other girl, who said she was confronted with the letter and she wouldn't sign it ... She (one of the letter writers who apologized) said that she was talked into it and she really didn't look it over. But she felt bullied and all that stuff. I kept her as a friend, but I kept a distance from her after that.*

**This hate letter hurt Kyla deeply. She decided to toughen up and find a new group of friend that wouldn't put her through this immature stuff. But this new group did the same thing.**

### **The second hate letter (grade nine)**

*There were some girls I used to just chat with and pass notes back and forth to. They were from the tougher end of the city, so I thought maybe I'd click with them more. At first we did. I don't know what happened there either. They started acting snooty and cool and I was trying to keep up with that. They said, "Please don't be silly. You can't be tough". So I just withdrew and they wrote this letter. It was kind of like a "tell off" letter. It said, "We don't need you. We don't want to hang out with you. You're a big goof." It was signed by those three girls.*

*...I took that one to the counselor's office. As soon as I got it, I walked out of class and straight down to the counselors office. I said "This is crap! I got a letter like this last year, do something." So, he did. That was pretty bad.... That was the end of grade nine. I didn't really have any close friends at that point.*

**According to Roffey et al. (1994), trust and loyalty are important components of adolescent friendship, a time where self-disclosure between friends is very important and**



breaks in trust and friendship can be devastating to young teens. We saw in the previous chapter the devastating effect that Jill had on me by telling my secret, thus breaking my trust. The behaviour of Kyla's "so-called friends" was not just upsetting to her. It was making her more distrustful of others. When she got her first hate letter, it was from girls she described as nice, girls nice enough to confide in. What did these nice girls do but take her trust and use it against her.

After the first letter incident, we saw how Kyla decided to harden up and be more cautious with her friends, leading to her efforts in grade nine to become friends with "so-called" tough girls. She hoped that tough girls would not be as "girly and gossipy". In LeBlanc's (1999) study of Punk girls, she found that many of them were critical of anything feminine, especially "gossip" which they considered the feminine mode of communication. Kyla didn't bother sharing her secrets with her new friends. She had learned from her previous experience. But even these tough girls openly rejected her. Kyla was learning that any one she let close would eventually spurn her. For teens who have many such experiences with loss of trust, these incidents will affect their ability to form close friendships with others (Roffey et al. 1994).

Kyla's abuse by her friends continued into senior high, a time she was starting to feel more in control of her life, because she had friends and was dating. But even during this period, two of her friends turned and started picking on her.

### **They barked at me**

*I was pretty nice to people in high school, but people were nasty to me. I remember two girls, they were pretty good friends of mine and I don't know why, but they just turned on me. It seemed like a lot of people just turned on me for no reason. They*

*started barking at me in the hallways, calling me "dog" and a bitch. That was grade eleven. It was pretty shocking because one was in grade ten and one was in grade eleven. They were following me around going "WUF, WUF". It was just weird, but it was intimidating too. If I could have been more tough, which I was a couple of years later, I would have been able to say "screw you", but at the time, all I could say was, "Get away from me, you're embarrassing me".*

Even though Kyla had changed her image and become a tough Punk girl, she could not escape the ridicule and intimidation of her so-called friends. This kind of teasing and intimidation has been linked to the way girls bully (Hazler, 1996). I can not say why Kyla's friends were barking at her. We can guess that these friends may have been bullies, or that they were effected by her prior reputation. We can't really be sure.

From second grade until senior high, Kyla was rejected by the people she thought were her friends. Some may have abandoned her because they wanted to be associated with higher status groups that Kyla was not a part of. Some may have picked on her because they were bullies. It may also be that these were not equal friendships. Roffey et al. (1994) said in unequal friendships, when the more powerful member in some way hurts the other, they may feel no need to make up for it. Whatever the reason, these attacks and rejection from friends made Kyla become an angry and more detached teen.

### **Gendered/Sexual Harassment**

The boys began to walk by Jeanie, their hands cupped a few inches away from their chests, smirking, saying, ' You've got competition Jeanie. Connie is bigger than you are, but we'll always remember that your second!' A few days later, one of the boys reached out and grabbed Jeanie's breast. (Orenstein, 1994)

As Kyla grew into adolescence, the kind of rejection and harassment she received at school changed. She was no longer just the little girl no one wanted to play with or her classmates wanted to tease for being different. Her rejection was now based on her gender. Girls who had previously not invited her to parties, decided to tease her about not living up to some female ideal, an ideal that most of them didn't measure up to either. What were the barking and hate letters mentioned earlier, other than reminders that she was not pretty enough for a boy to like. An American Association of University Women's Report AAUW, (cited in Orenstein, 1994) found that many adolescent girls are very critical of their bodies and have a low sense of self-worth, and that they measure themselves by their desirability to boys. For Kyla who was insecure from years of teasing, this just did more damage to her self-esteem.

The boys started to engage in similar activities, although some of their activities were in the form of sexual harassment. Sexual Harassment can be defined as "... unwanted, uninvited sexual attention. It may involve remarks, or actions of a sexual nature that make a person feel unsafe or uncomfortable." (Huron Public Education System, 2001). In an Ontario survey, 80% of female students said that they had been sexually harassed (Huron Public Education System, 2001). Kyla who was already a victim of peer rejection was a vulnerable target for this kind of abuse.

Painful memories surfaced when Kyla did a drawing (see figure 3.2). I asked her to draw how she remembers her own peer rejection. What resulted was a drawing of Kyla, in junior high (grades seven to nine), with big glasses and curly hair standing by her lockers alone. On the left hand side of the pages are various heads making faces, with



Figure 3.2 Kyla's drawing of junior high

numerous arrows pointing at Kyla, indicating they were making fun of her. I asked her to tell me about this drawing.

**You can't get any uglier**

*This was a perm I had in grade eight. It was too curly, it was my first perm. I had glasses and a perm that was too tight. I walked into class, and this guy who sat in front of me said, "Well look at it this way, at least you can't get any uglier." I kind of thought of him when I drew the curls. Anyways, this represents everybody's black energy coming at me.*

When Kyla is asked to draw what her memory of peer rejection is, she draws junior high, a time when her rejection was based very much on her physical appearance. The AAUW survey (cited in Orenstein, 1994) found that for white junior high girls, appearance was the most important determinant of self-worth. When asked to describe her drawing, the most important thing that emerges is a story about a boy making fun of Kyla's looks. In Orenstein's (1994) study, she found that boys have the power to define girl's reputation. No wonder Kyla feels so much pain at this memory-she probably feels that this boy defined how others at school saw her.

I can relate to what Kyla went through in junior high. In junior high, boys and girls alike commented on my appearance, calling me ugly, gross and so on. When a boy did say he liked me, it always just to make a joke at my expense. These comments made me feel like I was not growing into what a pretty teenage girl should look like. It caused me to change my look many times, without success. If I think about how I felt about myself in junior high, two words come up: ugly and geek. Being made fun of at this age, a time when appearance is important and others opinions can define you, made me dislike myself. This I think is the kind of peer rejection that happens to many girls during their early teens, altering how they see themselves.

Kyla remembers an incidence of sexual harassment that happened to her in grade eleven. It all started at a party.

#### **Nothing happened with him**

*In grade eleven I went to a party and I got shoved into a room by these big jocks. There was this drunk jock in there and he was half passed out, and they were all laughing and giggling. They pushed me in (the room). He was said, " Hey come here", and he*

*grabbed me and tried to pull me onto his lap. Nothing serious ever happened. He tried to kiss me, but then I pushed him away and tried to get out. I pushed the door and they (the other jocks) were leaning against the door. Finally I got out. At school they teased me saying "That's the one Roy slept with". Everybody thought I had sex with this guy and they were whispering, the popular girls were pointing at me, everybody seemed to know something that I didn't know.*

*When I think about it, I knew he was really drunk and I could get away. But, at the same time, he was a really popular cute boy. I guess I was pretty foolish myself. I liked the attention, so at first, I didn't try too hard. to get away. I said, "You can't grab at me". When I got out of the room, he came out after me, but then he went into the bathroom and passed out. I followed him in and took my red lipstick and made an X on the back of his neck. I don't know why, but I felt he was such an asshole that I did that.*

*When I was talked about at school, that was rough. I knew I wasn't sleazy and didn't deserve to have any kind of reputation at all. ... I just kind of shrunk up a bit and get through it. I stuck with my friends and hid a little.*

Kyla went through something a lot of girls go through. A boy made unwanted overtures and tried to force them on her. This was more than mere flirting. Sexual harassment is demeaning and one-sided. It makes the victim feel powerless (Walls, 2001).

When Kyla pushed her aggressor away and he paid her back by exaggerating and saying he slept with her, he was exerting power in defining her reputation. According to Orenstein (1994), sexual harassment is not about desire, it's about power over another. Kyla's perpetrator achieved his goal by holding her against her will and ruining her

reputation. His bad behavior was rewarded and positively reinforced by his peers. Kyla was made fun of and made to feel ashamed for something she didn't do.

Kyla's situation is different than what many other girls go through in similar circumstances because, unlike many girls, she was unpopular and picked on. This wasn't simply a date "gone wrong", nor was it only sexual harassment. It also had elements of peer rejection though bullying. Kyla was probably the target of the harassment because of her social status. This episode of sexual abuse gave her schoolmates yet another reason to pick on and ridicule her. Kyla talks about the fact she didn't try to get away too hard because the boy was popular and cute, even though she clearly did not want to be in this situation. Hers is a reaction typical of a peer-rejected girl (Orenstein, 1994).

I can relate to Kyla's story. A boy I really liked force his sexual attentions upon me. Only unlike Kyla, I succumbed. Here is my memory of it.

**I didn't want to do that, I just wanted him to like me**

*Shortly before I was fifteen I met a boy named Luke downtown. As soon as I met Luke I had an instant crush on him. We got along well and did a lot of fun things. On my fifteenth birthday, Luke and two other friends arranged for us to have a friend's apartment for the night. We stayed up late playing truth or dare. The night ended with Luke tying me up and doing things to me against my will. I continued to see Luke after this. The abuse continued, often in front of a crowd of friends. He would do unwanted things to my body, and I would say no, and protest, but then I would come back the next day. Until one day, I had just had enough and stayed away. Because there were often other people around to witness this abuse, the rumors soon circled around my school.*

*Soon, the girls were making fun of my sexual abuse on a daily basis. I hated the things he did to me, but I wanted him to like me and be my boyfriend.*

Like Kyla I didn't want this boy to do anything to me, but like her, I wanted him to like me. Unlike Kyla, I didn't have the emotional strength to walk away. He took my body, my dignity and my control over my desire. I was so scared and confused and desperate for approval of any kind, that I kept coming back, hoping things would change.

It took a long time for me to see the things Luke did to me as sexual abuse. Many victims of date rape do not recognize that they have been raped because of the intimate nature of the relationship and the tendency for the victim to blame themselves (Allison & Wrightman, 1993). Like so many victims, I blamed myself for what happened, after all I incessantly flirted with Luke in the hopes he would like me. When Luke responded to me sexually, I mistakenly thought maybe I had given him the wrong message.

I didn't want Luke to do the things he did to me (some are so horrific I can't remember them to this day). What I wanted was for him to hold my hand and kiss me and be my boyfriend. I think he saw the fact that I kept coming back as a silent approval of his actions. According to Orenstein (1994), "... boys may interpret silence and passivity (perhaps even 'no') as consent. Sometimes it is; but sometimes they intuit incorrectly, and sex becomes coercion or straight-out rape" (p.58).

Why did I keep going back? According to Russell (1990), many wives who are raped by their husbands stay for two reasons "learned helplessness" and a honeymoon period. As we saw in the previous chapter, I had learned through peer rejection that I was helpless to change the way people treated me. More specifically, the sexual assault by the girls in the bathroom in grade five had taught me I was helpless over what others did



to my body. The “learned helplessness” was there before Luke ever violated me. Each assault by Luke was followed by a honeymoon period where he would be very sweet and charming. And so I would go back.

In some ways, giving in to Luke was a way of looking for acceptance in the same way I did when I gave in to Kendra’s demands, to hold on to her friendship. I accepted my nightly abuse as payment for a boyfriend, someone who I hoped would pave the road to peer acceptance, something that never happened. Instead, it gave the girls at school another reason to ridicule me. Sexual abuse is hard enough to deal without having to face it daily in your classmate’s jokes.

This was one of the most painful events that happened during my years of being peer rejected. It is so painful I can’t even name all the emotions that go with it. Although I hesitated to include it here, I feel I must in order to illustrate how peer rejection can leave a girl vulnerable to sexual victimization. Whether one gets away like Kyla or stays, it leaves permanent scars.

Girls look to boys for their validation during adolescence (Orenstein, 1994). For Kyla this meant a decreased sense of self-worth. She was not validated, in fact her appearance was rejected by some of the boys. To make things worse, a vulnerable Kyla found herself in a sexually abusive situation, one in which she was unsure how to react. Orenstein (1994) found that white middle class girls like Kyla tend to accept sexual harassment as given. To Kyla, the sexual harassment she experienced was deeply tied to her experience of peer rejection. To her it was another way people picked on her.

The final example of Kyla’s peer rejection happened in grade twelve, when her prom date stood her up.

### Stood up for the prom

*I met my intended prom date at a party my best friend Lori and I went to over Easter break. There were four or five guys there and we drank and hung out. There was one guy who was a so-called "prep", but he seemed pretty nice. We said, "Wow, Mitch is really nice, what's he doing hanging out with these guys." We had thought he was a real snob. Lori ended up leaving and I ended up staying at the party and making out with this Mitch guy. I asked him if he would go with me to the prom and he said yes.*

*... I called him once after that and he said he would still go. It felt like he was brushing me off, I wasn't sure, but I figured he was going to go. I got the dress and months passed and I was ready to go. I was all ready to go (a few days before) and I tried to call him. I called him at his parent's place (because his apartment didn't have a phone) and they said he wasn't home. They kept saying that. I called for two days straight and said, "Would you please tell him to call Kyla, we're going to the prom together. They said "Oh really." They were surprised.*

*So I went to his apartment (on prom night). ... The guy (his roommate) said, "I'm really sorry to tell you this, but he's not going to the prom with you, he's hiding out in his parents basement and they know about it. I don't know why they are not telling you. But I'll tell you he's not going." I said, "Oh great, like, the prom's in four hours. What am I going to do?" The guy said, "Oh, I'll take you, but I don't have anything to wear. If you don't mind a second-hand jacket, black jeans and coke sneakers." I said, "Fine, whatever, that's cool. I don't want to go alone. I don't want to miss it. I spent a hundred bucks on this dress." And so we went, but not before I stole a poster out of Mitch's room and burnt it. ... I had fun. ... It all worked out.*

*In retrospect as I got older I thought, that actually happened to me, I got dumped for the prom. You here these stories on TV, but, it actually happened to me.*

As Kyla says, you always here about it on TV, that the usual fate of the class outcast is to be stood up for the prom. Kyla had felt things were getting better for her. She had friends, and she had had a serious boyfriend the year before. She was feeling more like she fit in. Then she trusted this “prep” guy to be her date for the prom and he purposely stood her up. Kyla must have felt like she was taking a step backwards into her former existence of peer rejection. Why did Mitch do this? Did he want to hurt her or humiliate her? Or did he just not want to go to the prom and didn’t know how to back out? The reason it happened doesn’t matter here. It’s how it made Kyla felt that is important. She felt panicked that she might have to go alone, and angry that he stood her up. The anger was evident as she burnt his poster in an act of retaliation. On a more positive note, like TV, Kyla’s prom had a happy ending, a last minute date who showed her a good time

## **Conclusion**

*Pretty much the instant I graduated, I changed my style again and became even darker, I became Gothic and hung out with skateboarders, Punks and listened to heavy music. That’s where I felt a real sense of strength and nobody could mess with me. (Kyla)*

When Kyla left school, she still retained traces of her peer rejection. She turned to the Punk and Gothic subcultures for a place to fit in. She was no longer picked on, but the feeling from all those years of rejection and abuse were inside her, needing expression. Leblanc (1999) noted that girls who are a part of the Punk rock subculture learn to be aggressive and assertive. Being a part of these sub-cultures allowed Kyla to express her

anger and that same anger protected her from rejection. As Kyla said, “nobody could mess with me”. She stayed with this sub-culture for about six years after school. Eventually, she started to find herself and let go of her anger. She has recently moved across the country with her boyfriend and is looking for the right career. She feels the anger she carried for so long was a useful coping strategy, but she no longer needs it in her life.

How does Kyla feel the experience of peer rejection shaped her life? She feels it made her a more compassionate and understanding human being, but those qualities came at a price. It definitely made her an angry young woman for awhile. She says in her current life she feels it has made her shy, terrified of public speaking, uncomfortable with attention and worst of all, she is haunted by dreams of people chasing her. Peer rejection is definitely imprinted on the adult she has become.

Now that Kyla is grown-up and happier with who she is, she has a different perspective on her experience. She feels that her maturity is what set her apart from the other children, but it was also the thing that made her able to withstand rejection

#### **Recollections on peer rejection**

*I think I felt like because I grew up with my mom and so many adults that maybe I was more mature than the other children. I believed that I was a stronger and wiser person trapped in a little girl's body, that they (the rejecters) had to go through these things (being immature and picking on others), and that it would come around to them one day. That's just how I felt from the beginning.*

Kyla seems to have made peace with her past. She doesn't feel like she did anything wrong. But she is still left with bad feelings about the experience that probably will be with her all her life.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **TAYLOR'S STORY: THE STRUGGLE TO FIT IN**

*"Stigma follows you" (Taylor)*

On meeting her, Taylor seems to be an extrovert who exudes confidence and individuality. Her colorful clothes, matched by her colorful hair, say "stand up and notice me". Her intellect, humor and friendliness endear her to most who meet her. She is an activist, leader, artist, teacher and student. One would never think, in meeting Taylor, that during her school years, she was the target for what she calls abuse from other children, some of it too painful to recall.

In analyzing Taylor's story, three themes emerged: 1) Wanting to fit in, 2) Humiliation, and 3) Coping Strategies. These themes will be explored in this chapter.

#### **Wanting To Fit In**

Jane's class thinks that wearing the 'right' label clothing is very important, from trainers to t-shirts. Jane's mum knows how important it is to Jane to have the 'right' label so that she can be dressed like everyone else but these label clothes are just too expensive. Jane's classmates start to make fun of her. 'What a fleabag! Where did you get that coat? The Goodwill shop?' Jane wishes she didn't have to go to school; she is beginning to dread each new day (Stones, 1993, p. 7-8).

Wanting to fit in- that is what everyone wants. We all want to feel we belong somewhere. Children especially want to fit in and be included by their peers. It is important for children's psychological health to feel that they are accepted somewhere (Roffey et al., 1994). For some children, fitting in comes naturally, but for others it's a struggle. Children who do not fit in often perceive themselves as less socially competent,

have low expectations for social success, and are more depressed (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel & Williams, 1990). Rejected children feel left out and have no one to share their private thoughts with (Asher et al., 1990). Taylor was a child who struggled to fit in and did not succeed. She remembers, for example, having nobody to play with at recess when she was a little girl. In the episode that follows, Taylor recalls a day this really upset her.

### **Crying alone**

*I have one memory from my early childhood. ... I have this memory of being out on the playground and crying because nobody would play with me. This big kid came up to me and asked, "What's the matter, why are you crying?" I said, "No one will play with me." So this guy said, "I'll go find my sister, she'll play with you." He took me over to where his sister was and asked her to play with me. His sister didn't care one way or the other. I just remember this incredible embarrassment and this feeling of being completely pathetic.*

In a way, Taylor's situation above was a double-edged sword. She remembers feeling sad and crying a lot because she had nobody to play with. She remembers wishing that somebody would take pity on her and play with her. Most children who are peer rejected experience loneliness (Asher et al., 1990). This kind of loneliness in childhood can be devastating (Roffey et al., 1994). But when people like the older boy did try to help Taylor find a friend to play with, it made her feel embarrassed, not happy, because the people she was grouped with did not *choose* her friendship. "The physical existence of other people does not necessarily alleviate these feeling of loneliness if the provisions of friendship are not being met" (Roffey et al., 1994, p.12). Taylor's options were limited: She could be alone, or be part of a group where she was not accepted. Taylor's

life at this point made her feel sad or pathetic, not healthy emotions for a growing child to feel on a regular basis.

Taylor was aware that she didn't fit in and wanted desperately to be included by the other children. Thoughts about it preoccupied her young mind. She has memories about how badly she wanted to fit in.

### **I fantasized about it**

*I remember in grade three I used to have these fantasies about ways that I would make friends. The school I went to was a very old school. Grades one to four were in the old part of the school. The old part had this weird basement set up, where one half was the girls' side and the other, the boys'. It was this large play area that was totally segregated. I used to have these fantasies about having a circus down there and being a circus performer and people wanting to be my friends.*

Most children have fantasies about being someone famous like a movie star or a performer. But for Taylor, this fantasy was about more than fame and popularity; she wanted playmates, which she was lacking. It didn't have to be many, just a few would do. Friends provide us with a sense of inclusion and alliance (Roffey et al., 1994). Taylor needed to form friendships because she was missing this sense of alliance. She had not yet given up on finding it. Many peer-rejected children give up on friendship and withdraw (Roffey et al., 1994). Taylor figured if she were someone exciting like a circus performer, other children would *have* to like her.

Kyla and I can relate to Taylor's feeling about wanting to fit in. As we saw in the previous chapters, it was something that we also struggled to do. Kyla moved from group



to group hoping to find one that would accept her. I was always trying to recreate my identity so people would like me better.

When Taylor was in her last years of elementary school, she did find a few playmates, but they were the other children who didn't fit in. This did not give Taylor a sense of belonging or alleviate the feelings of being rejected.

### **Rejected together**

*My friends in elementary school were always the other misfits. It would depend from year to year on who was in the class. Sometimes, I had friends. It would always be the other girls who nobody liked, and they were not necessarily good friends, they were just the kids that nobody else played with. We just spent time together because no one else would hang out with us.*

As in Taylor's case, many unpopular children interact in small groups of other unpopular peers who are not as cliquish as the popular and average status peer groups tend to be (Hymel et al. 1990). Most children play together because of similarities they share (Roffey et al., 1994 & Ramsey, 1991). Taylor's friends were not grouped together because of common interests. What they had in common was rejection. They were spending time together because no one else wanted to play with them. They didn't particularly like each other, it was *just to not be alone*.

The reason Taylor's friends may not have liked each other could have been because popular children are seen by others in a positive light, whereas unpopular children are viewed in a negative light (Hymel et al. 1990). Most children, *even rejected children*, often see other unpopular children as undesirable playmates. Despite their rejection, they still aspire to be part of the popular group and see other people through the

same lens the popular children use (Hymel et al., 1990). When you know your friends are people you don't like or choose, it does not make you feel like you belong or are accepted. In Taylor's eyes, the fact that nobody else would play with them just reinforced her status as rejected. Even though Taylor wanted to fit in, she was aware that there were factors that set her apart from the others and caused her not to be included. Some of these factors were things she couldn't change and some were within her power to change.

### **Why I think I didn't fit in**

*There were a lot of reasons why I didn't fit in. One of them was my friend Barb (who was developmentally delayed). She was short and fat, kind of weird looking, kind of homely. There was a real stigma attached to her, so if I hadn't been friends with her, things would have been easier. She was known around the community. It's not a very big community- people know each other. It's a very conservative, very small town, agriculturally based.... It was a crazy religious right-wing sort of place. Barb was picked on, and because I hung out with her, I was picked on. There was also the fact that my parents were poor and they were kind of weird. My dad was an artist and that was a really weird thing to be in that community. And I was really smart. My brother and I were both very smart, we both did well in school. To make matters even worse, we didn't have a TV! That's like the death knell, the kiss of death... Not only did we look funny, but we didn't have a TV, so we couldn't keep up on all the pop culture stuff.*

Taylor has considerable awareness of why she didn't fit in. Her family was different from those in her conservative small town. As mentioned in the previous chapter, anything that makes a child appear different from others, often makes them a target for other children's abuse (Hazler, 1996). Not having access to TV gave Taylor

less in common with other children. So, no matter what she did, she would never have the latest fashions or know what was going on in popular television shows. She couldn't change that, she could just fantasize about fitting in.

Taylor's friendship with Barb, a girl who was actively shunned, made other children see Taylor as belonging to a lower social status group, and because of this, not a desirable friend. Taylor's choice to be friends with Barb was a conscious decision, something she could have conceivably changed. Thus, although part of Taylor desperately wanted to fit in, part of her was already a strong individual making a decision that would negatively affect her social status.

## **Humiliation**

We made Linda say, I am Blubber, the smelly whale of class 206. We made her say it before she could use the toilet in the Girls' Room, before she could get a drink at the fountain, before she ate her lunch and before she got on the bus to go home (Blume, 1974, p.89).

The Oxford Dictionary defines humiliate as to *make humble, injure the dignity and self-respect of* (Allen, 1984, p.358). The latter definition applies to the feeling that

Taylor felt when she was picked on in school. According to Morrison (1998),

"Humiliation, which tends to strike swiftly and sharply, requires a perpetrator – the humiliator – who, in one way or another, torments and degrades, or observes" (p.41).

Embarrassment would also be a term included in Taylor's definition of humiliation.

Taylor's classmates and so-called friends did things to humiliate her throughout her

childhood. The first instance of this that Taylor can recall happened in her second grade classroom. Her memories of school before that are not very clear.

### **Tripping in class**

*I remember when I was in grade two, in the classroom, having to get up from my seat to walk to the front of the class and someone tripping me. I fell flat on my face and burst into tears. I am sure it (peer rejection) was underway in grade two.*

Taylor definitely was aware that her classmate was trying to humiliate and reject her by tripping her. Bullies who pick on others do this to devalue them and to bolster their own self-esteem as well (Hazler, 1996). Taylor told me she wasn't crying from pain, as much as from embarrassment and humiliation. By letting others see her cry, she unwittingly was opening herself up to revictimization. Bullies pick on the same people because they learn that certain strategies work with certain people. Their bullying actions are thus reinforced (Hazler 1996). This was the beginning of Taylor's awareness that other children didn't like her and actively sought opportunities to embarrass her.

It is very interesting that Taylor's first memory of peer rejection is similar to Kyla's. As discussed in Chapter three, Kyla first memory of school-based peer rejection occurred in her second grade classroom, where the students made fun of her for pronouncing a word wrong. We saw that Kyla reacted differently than Taylor did. She got angry instead of sad. Neither reaction made any difference in terms of stopping the rejection.

As an aside from my own experiences, I remember experiencing the same things as Taylor did, intermixed memories of spitballs aimed at me, being tripped, and name calling. When it first happened I would get upset and cry. But, as I got older, I learned to keep those feelings in because they seemed to make my aggressors enjoy the tormenting even more.

When Taylor was about ten, she loved to roller skate. She was becoming athletic, something that made her feel good about herself. But even this beloved activity was used by her own friends as a chance to humiliate her.

### **Roller skating scam**

*In grade five or six I use to roller skate a lot. ... I was thrilled when my friend Suzie asked me to come to her house to go roller-skating in her basement. There was this other girl Krista there too. She was a real nasty peace of work. When they called me up to come over, they had said, "Bring some special clothes to skate in." We had these outfits to skate in, little skirts. I brought my stuff over and changed into my outfit. We started skating around and they started asking me questions like, "Do you feel okay? Don't your clothes feel funny?" I said, "No, I feel fine." Eventually I realized that they had put sawdust in my clothes and the whole reason they had invited me over was to do nasty things to me.*

*When I realized this I got upset and tried to leave. Krista grabbed a bottle of insect repellent, and sprayed it on the door knob so I couldn't get out, and then she sprayed in my face. I got mad and told her that the repellent was poisonous and she could blind me. I think that freaked her out a little because they let me leave.*

*I went home and cried because it had been this special invitation that they had made. They had made me feel special and privileged. But the whole reason they did it was so they could do mean things to me.*

This incident fits the definition of humiliation. Taylor's friends took her self-respect and dignity away from her. When they put the sawdust in her clothes, they degraded her. Taylor was excited about being included by these girls, only to realize her

inclusion was a pretext to humiliate her. According to Miller (1993), humiliation is a tool used to make people who felt like they were included, feel like they had never belonged in the first place. This is exactly what this incident did, reminding Taylor that she did not belong.

These girls were not just rejecting Taylor's friendship, they were bullying her. Bullying is not only or necessarily physical actions. It can include hurting others feelings through words or actions (Hazler, 1996). Taylor told me that she continued to play with these two girls even after the skating incident because it was either play with them or play alone. This reminds me of the cruel and bullying dynamic that characterized my friendship with Kendra as explored in Chapter Two. Like me, Taylor chose unhealthy friendships over being alone.

When Taylor reached junior high (grades seven to nine) she made other friends, but these friends made her feel that her appearance was not good enough. They tried to make her over into an image of what they thought was acceptable.

### **Makeovers**

*In grade seven, some of the girls were wearing make-up. They decided to make me up for school pictures. They used to make me over from time to time. Every now and then, I became the improvement project. They told me I should wear more dresses.*

When these girls offered to give Taylor makeovers, it made her feel like she hadn't lived up to society's norm of female beauty. The girls at Taylor's school thought they were doing her a favor, making over the outcast. They felt they could give her the proper "look". But these makeovers did not make Taylor feel good about herself. As mentioned in the previous chapter, teenage girls consider appearance to be one of their

most defining qualities (Orenstein, 1994). Pointing out that one has violated one of society's norms is humiliating (Miller, 1993). But how could Taylor feel humiliated if that was not the girls' intent? According to Miller (1993), one can be one's own humiliator, if one feels one is observing oneself violating a social norm, as Taylor did. Growing up is a time for learning societal norms. Children who are peer-rejected are made to feel that there is something wrong with them, that they don't quite measure up to society's standards. According to Hazler (1996), those who are picked on often blame themselves.

## **Coping Strategies**

*I was told on a regular basis that I was butt-ugly. (Taylor)*

After years of what Taylor calls abuse from her peers, she started to feel that it was her fate. Many victims of bullying see themselves as powerless to change the situation (Hazler, 1996). Taylor describes it as accepting her lot in life. According to Hazler (1996), many victims of bullying and rejection feel powerless and become passive. Taylor was indeed passive for the first few years of her rejection. But when she was about ten years old, a change came over her. Because she believed that rejection was her fate, that this was how her school years were going to be, she started to build some coping strategies to protect herself against this. According to Wills, Blechman and McNamara, (1996) when children are faced with challenges, they develop coping strategies to find a way of dealing with difficult situations. These strategies help children solve the problem or alter others' perceptions of them (Wills et al., 1996). For example, one of the ways Taylor tried to cope with name calling was to call herself a nasty name

first, before the other children could, thereby stopping them from inflicting the first wound. She talks about doing this when she went to camp.

**I called myself “Doggie”**

*A lot of teasing was directed at my looks, you know all the words people call you if you are ugly. They compare you to... like dogs and horses. We used to get a lot of dog names, me and my friend. In grade five I went to this big camp that they have for all the grade five and six kids every two years. One of the first things we had to do when we got there was choose animal names for ourselves, and make wooden pendants with our animal names. So I named myself “Doggie”. I picked Doggie because I knew that was what everybody would call me anyway. It was like a resignation. It was completely disempowering.*

Taylor would call herself names, she says, because she was resigned to her fate. Her past experience had taught her that the other children would probably have called her names. According to Hazler (1996), once people are recognized as victims, they are given labels to reinforce their powerlessness. Taylor was trying to taking away some of her bullies’ power, pre-empting their ploy by labeling herself before they could. She was stopping the others from making the first cut, which is often the most painful.

Her acceptance of the names she was called may have helped her. Often bullies get enjoyment out of the emotional reaction they get from the child they pick on, because this tells them they have succeeded and have found a potential victim they can repeatedly offend (Hazler, 1996). Thus Taylor’s acceptance may have indeed protected her from more severe bullying. Taylor’s coping strategy did not completely solve her problem, but it may have lessened the severity of it. We can't really know for sure.



Taylor remembers another similar strategy she used. She would start the teasing games before they started. She remembers doing this on the playground in elementary school.

### **Germs**

*Other things I used to do... you know those stupid games kids play where they are passing germs around? I would give them my own germs. They would say it didn't count because somebody else has to accidentally bump into you to get your germs. They said you can't deliberately give someone your germs.*

Taylor was again trying to take away some of her bullies' power by picking on herself before they could. Although this was not successful, it may have given Taylor some sense of personal control. The children would do this to her no matter what, so by initiating it, Taylor went from helpless victim to someone who had a say in her fate. This incident also showed that Taylor had a sense of humor. Her humor is something she used to hide behind her pain in later years.

As Taylor grew older, she realized that the boys were not interested in her romantically, but that they did seem to enjoy her company when she played sports with them. So Taylor became a tom-boy, as a way of finding acceptance with the boys.

### **Tom-boy Taylor**

*I became a bit of a tom-boy. I think it had to do with the fact that I realized there was no point in being a "girly girl" because boys weren't going to like me for it. I realized that's why other girls did it, and I actually developed a bit of contempt for them, for being so girly, being afraid of worms and stuff like that. I used to play soccer and stuff with the boys. It seemed I was more accepted by them when I was like a boy, than when I*

*was like a girl. I think that was a way for me to compensate for my parents being wacky!  
I would develop in other ways...*

As Taylor entered adolescence, she figured out three things: The girls at school didn't accept her. The boys were not interested in her romantically. But Taylor was good at sports. She discovered that when she played sports with the boys, she was accepted by them and felt good about her self. This was when Taylor's transformation into a tom-boy occurred. In a sense, it was a coping strategy that temporarily solved her problem of belonging. She had found a place to fit in, she was one of the boys.

As Taylor spent more time with the boys, she discovered something else about them. Even though boys were sexually attracted to the girls, they felt they were better than the girls. They put down the so-called "girly girl" behaviour that girls used to attract them. Taylor was learning from boys to despise girls. What a confusing message this must have been! To be one of the boys you have to reject your own gender. According to Griffiths (1995), when one has to pretend that parts of oneself do not exist to order to find group acceptance, this damages self-esteem. But this is what Taylor had to do. She had to turn her back on her gender. Eventually, after the elation of fitting in wore off, Taylor had to deal with the dilemma of despising her own femaleness. As a tom-boy, Taylor also had to convince herself that being attractive to boys was unimportant. This conviction did not withstand the effects of puberty.

As much as Taylor tried to convince herself differently, when she entered senior high (grades ten to twelve), being attractive to boys became more important than being their friend. Even though she had tried to convince herself that she despised the "girly girls", she was starting to employ some of their tactics to attract boys. She wanted to

become more attractive. This might seem like a contradiction, but most humans act in contradictory ways to make themselves feel comfortable in their own skin. In LePage-Lees' study of resilient women, for example, she found contradictions in some of the things participants said.

In most of the interviews, during one part of the discussion, they describe their abilities in a way that would suggest they have confidence (even to the point of arrogance), and then later they described their fears in ways that would suggest they have been unconfident, even scared, at certain times during their educational process (LePage-Lees, 1997, p.22).

And so Taylor started to wear make-up in an effort to make herself feel more attractive and to be more attractive to boys. Taylor also hoped that maybe this would stop her peers from making attacks that centered around her appearance. After all, teen magazines are full of miraculous makeovers where plain Jane's turn into glamour pusses.

#### **Wearing a lot of make-up**

*I had really poor self-esteem, mostly centered around my appearance. So, I started wearing a lot of make-up in senior high, to compensate. It made me feel more attractive. But it wasn't until five years ago that I really started to feel good about myself and my appearance. Even now, I still have a lot of fear and anxiety about my appearance and it all goes back to those years. It's certainly reinforced by pop culture images of women, but it mostly goes back to my childhood where I was told on a regular basis I was butt ugly.*

Taylor's use of make-up is an example of changing the body or one's appearance in an effort to either fit in, or at the very least, to hide a feature which attracts negative attention. Taylor felt because of peer attacks, that her face was not attractive enough. She could not physically change her face, so she created a new face with excessive use of

make-up. Taylor's make-up was like a mask to hide what she perceived was an ugly face underneath. Maybe if she painted on a new face, people would like her better. This is what television and magazines tell women is the solution to their problems. Taylor's make-up did not make her feel better about her self, but it did make her feel more protected from verbal attacks from other students. The make-up became a shield.

Taylor tried to alter appearance as a way to fit in. This kind of behaviour can also be seen in my own actions. In Chapter two, we saw how I changed my appearance for the first day of grade seven, adopting the preppy look for my boyfriend. In later years, I adopted the punk look as a way to fit in with that subculture. Looking for a way to cope with my peer-rejection, like Taylor, I thought if I changed my appearance, people would like me and stop picking on me.

Although Taylor's coping strategies helped her temporarily deal with the problems of rejection, they did not solve her problem. They did not stop people from picking on her. However, she maintains that they did lessen the degree of pain she felt and gave her some feeling of control over her situation.

## **Conclusion**

*I think that what I went through was abuse. In spite of it, I developed normally. I developed social skills and I eventually made girlfriends who I liked. (Taylor)*

Taylor does not label her experience as peer rejection. She describes the things her friends and classmates put her through as abuse. This is an interesting way to frame her experience because it takes the focus off the victim, the one who is peer-rejected and puts the blame on the rejecters or abusers. It makes one ask, "What is wrong with these

abusers, that they would be so cruel to a child?" instead of, "What's wrong with the child who's getting picked on?" This seems a healthier perspective from which to examine the problem, rather than the victim-blaming approach that is often the focus in social science research.

Taylor endured this abuse from her early school years until it ended in senior high. Why does Taylor think the rejection stopped? Taylor thinks it is because she went to senior high in a bigger city and she learned how to handle things better, over the years. *"Once I got to senior high it made a big difference because I had found my niche and I was in a different city now."*

What did Taylor take away from this experience of peer rejection? What traces has it left on her life today? She says she has problems with self-esteem. She always wonders what people are thinking about her, and she has trouble believing people really like her. In general, Taylor has problems with her perceptions of other peoples' attitudes. She also, at times, does not feel worthwhile or attractive.

During the interview, Taylor wanted to emphasize, however, that not everything that came out of this experience was negative. She says being rejected taught her to be strong and understanding. It taught her to empathize with her bullies, because she thinks they probably had problems too. She says it has helped her be a better teacher because she can easily recognize when a student is having problems with peer relations. She thinks that being picked on in school, generally leads to being a stronger more successful person.

*I think that it's the people who really suffer who end up accomplishing something later on. I looked around at the people at my high school reunion, particularly the popular people. They had done the predictable thing, gotten married, had kids, got a job that was kind of lame. They aren't do anything really interesting. It's the*

*former freaks who are all doing something interesting. They (freaks) have pushed the envelope of what is really possible. You are struggling against this adversity so much, that it really does make you see some qualities inside that enable you to do cool things. (Taylor)*

Even though Taylor feels that her peer-rejection has made her a stronger and more creative person, it came with a price. Her childhood was difficult, she does not have many happy memories, and it has left her with many scars of self-doubt. *I think about suffering. ... I really did suffer. I was lucky because I had a really good home life. But school was unrelenting hell for so many years. I really feel like I know what it is to suffer, but it has made me stronger.*

Taylor has lived through some very painful memories. She has become a very successful adult, in spite of her painful past. She has become an educator, artist, activist, student leader, and good friend. What made her so resilient, able to bounce back from a childhood of “abuse”? In her own words she formulates an opinion: *It was a good childhood at home. ... I think that's what saved me when things got shitty later.*

## Chapter Five

### Linda's Story: The Blame is on the Rejecters

*I was always the second to last girl picked for teams in gym. (Linda)*

Linda is a 33 year-old graduate student at a university, in a large city. Before this she had a favorable career as a school teacher in her home town in the Maritimes. Linda considers herself successful and has a few very close friends whom she treasures. Life wasn't always this good. As a child, Linda was severely picked on by the other children at school. This peer rejection affected her so deeply that she turned down a teaching assignment at her old school. Four themes stand out in Linda's story: 1) Nothing's wrong with me, it's them, 2) Where were the adults? 3) Quiet rebellion, and 4) How it affected my teaching. These themes will be examined in the sections that follow.

#### Nothing's Wrong With Me, It's Them

*That's their way of lashing out, and unfortunately, the only way they know to make themselves feel better is to make others feel bad. Which isn't a good way. (Linda)*

Linda offers us a perspective not often given by those who have experienced peer rejection. When people are the victims of misfortune, they need to find somewhere to put blame in order to make sense of what happened (Hazler, 1996). It is common for those who are picked on to engage in self-blame (Hazler, 1996). We saw evidence of this in the earlier chapters. Taylor, for example, blamed her looks for her peer rejection. This was not the case for Linda, at least not the way she tells it now. She feels that there was nothing wrong with her or her behavior that would cause her to be peer rejected. Linda

puts the blame on the adults and children who were a part of her childhood. In a way, she is not blaming any person in particular, but more the culture of the society she grew up in.

Linda grew up in a midsize city with a small town attitude. Most of the children in her neighborhood attended either the Catholic boys' or Catholic girls' school. The girls she grew up with would be at the same school together from grades one to twelve. The adults all knew each other and each other's business. Linda says her peers' parents put a lot of emphasis on social class. This in turn trickled down to their children and affected the peer groupings the children made, putting Linda at a disadvantage since she came from a very large poor family. Her family's social standing did not put her at the top of the other children's parents' lists as a suitable playmate for their children.

#### **It's all about money**

*As the kids I played with started to get older, social class became important. Even though we wore uniforms, you could tell who had money. By grade three, the age kids are old enough to be alone together, this social distinction became apparent. Who you hung around with was based on what was beneficial to their parents. The parents looked at who they would like to be friends with and started pushing their children together accordingly.*

*I remember going over to little girls' houses and being told by one of their parents, "Oh no, you have to go home", the parent telling me I was not wanted. If my parents had not had eight children, there would have been more money to go around for all of us. Things might have been very different. There is a chance I may have been as snobby as the worst of the children who rejected me.*



As the youngest of eight children from a poor family, Linda did not stand much of a chance of fitting in with the "in" crowd. Research by Costanzo & Dix (cited in White & Kisner, 1992) found that early elementary school children are more influenced by adults' opinions than their peers. Linda did not come from the kind of family that most parents in that community wanted their children to associate with. It did not matter that Linda was nice or smart. She did not come from the right social class. What a shock this must have been to Linda when the children she used to play with her were suddenly "not supposed" to play with her.

Linda's first memory of peer-initiated rejection is an extremely violent incident that happened to her in second grade. She was cut by a knife by two playmates. She is quick to point out that one of the girls involved was not mentally well.

#### **Cut with a knife**

*It happened with these two little girls I used to play hide and seek with. This particular day they decided it was my turn to be the hunter. They decided to play the game different- they tied me up and went and supposedly hid. But they weren't hiding. They came back with a pocket knife and said they were going to cut me. One of them actually did cut me. Then one of the girls' mothers came out and asked what was going on. And that was the end of it. I was terrified, I did not want to go to school after that. I didn't want to play with them anymore because I didn't trust them. They were cousins. One of the cousins was sick (mentally) and the other was just an ordinary kid. But she did whatever the "sick" cousin wanted her to.*

This first incidence of peer rejection is more than rejection, it's assault and bullying, the exertion of power and control through physical restraint and violence. Most

bullies use fear as a weapon (Stone, 1993). From incidents like the one just described, Linda learned you can't always trust your friends, a lesson she carried with her throughout her school career. In fact, it went beyond mistrust to fear.

Linda's point of view of this situation is a positive one in that she doesn't consider the assault to be her fault. It was the other children, especially the one who was mentally ill, whom Linda blamed. Linda escaped the path of feeling personally inadequate as many victims of bullying feel (Hazler 1996). She did not feel about herself like Kyla, Taylor and I did. In this, Linda differs from many peer-rejected children. However, even though she did not blame herself, the incident instilled fear and mistrust of others into her.

Linda could not accept the other children's "snobby" attitudes. She thinks that this may have been part of the reason she was picked on.

#### **Why I was picked on**

*Part of the reason I was peer rejected was because I chose to be different from the others. I didn't want to be looked on as one of those snooty girls. I wanted everybody to be the same, treated equal. I did not want to be part of them. This is part of the reason why I was picked on, because they knew I purposely did not want to be like them. They didn't know how to deal with that. A lot of the things that happened to me were because the other students did not know how to deal with someone who had a mind of her own. I had a perception of life that was beyond theirs.*

Linda feels she made a conscious decision to not be like the in-crowd. Like Taylor's befriending of the developmentally-delayed Barb, Linda feels she chose at a young age to embrace values different than those of the other children. Although Linda's

social class prevented her from being part of the in-crowd, she thinks it also gave her insight into the situation. She rejected the in-crowd's values as shallow. She thinks this may have made her go from being seen as an outsider to someone who was actively picked on because she was mature enough at young age to see the flaws in their system.

This is Linda's perspective, that she *chose* to be different than the others. This glosses over the likelihood that she had no real choice. She could not have chosen to be snooty because she was not in that social class or accepted by them. She stated at one point in her interview that she could have been one of those snooty girls if her parents had had more money, but in the next breath, she says would not have wanted to be like them anyway because she had better values. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, most of us make contradictory statements to make ourselves feel more comfortable with our self-perception. Linda is a proud, strong women. Seeing herself as a helpless victim would not fit with her personal view of her life. Of course Linda's experience as rejected probably *did* made her more aware of the social injustices in her community and made her more determined not to be a part of it. My point is simply just that she may not really have had as much a choice in the situation as she imagined she did. Perhaps, that is the secret of her coping strategy. Pretend you have a choice and act like you do as a way of preserving self-esteem.

Linda's insight that the values of the popular children were flawed is a sentiment shared by Kyla. As we saw in Chapter Three, from her first day of grade one, Kyla says she remembers feeling that other kids were immature. Rejection seems to make one grow up fast, and see realities not often evident to most until adulthood.

Linda's perception that there was something wrong with the people who picked on her was an insightful one. Bullies often target other children to make up for their own feeling of personal inadequacies. They have a negative attitude towards school and tend to have more family problems than others (Hazler, 1996). Linda's attitude was also an effective method of protecting herself from the feeling of personal inadequacy many peer rejected feel. But it was not enough to stop from feeling fearful and distrustful of others.

### **Where Were The Adults?**

'Well... this comes as a surprise to me, Mr. Nicholas,' Mrs. Minnish said. 'I just can't believe my class would do such a thing' (Blume, 1974, p.93).

When children are being severely picked on, we often ask, "Where are the adults, the parents, the teachers?" Adults are supposed to be responsible, protect children and make sure bad things don't happen to them. According to Barone (1997) even though bullying is not encouraged by adults, it is widely tolerated. Linda says the adults knew what was happening to her. Some chose to ignore it and others made the situation even more difficult for her.

Linda's first awareness that adults were not going to help her came during the knife incident, described in the previous section. When the little girls tried to cut her with the knife, her parents and the little girls' parents found out about it. But the issue was barely addressed and nothing was done to protect Linda from these girls.

### **No help**

*All the parents knew. My mother called one of the little girls' mothers. The little girl's mother didn't say much. My parents told me, "Stay away from them, don't play*

*with them or sit next to them and if they bother you just tell the teacher." I was made to go back to school.*

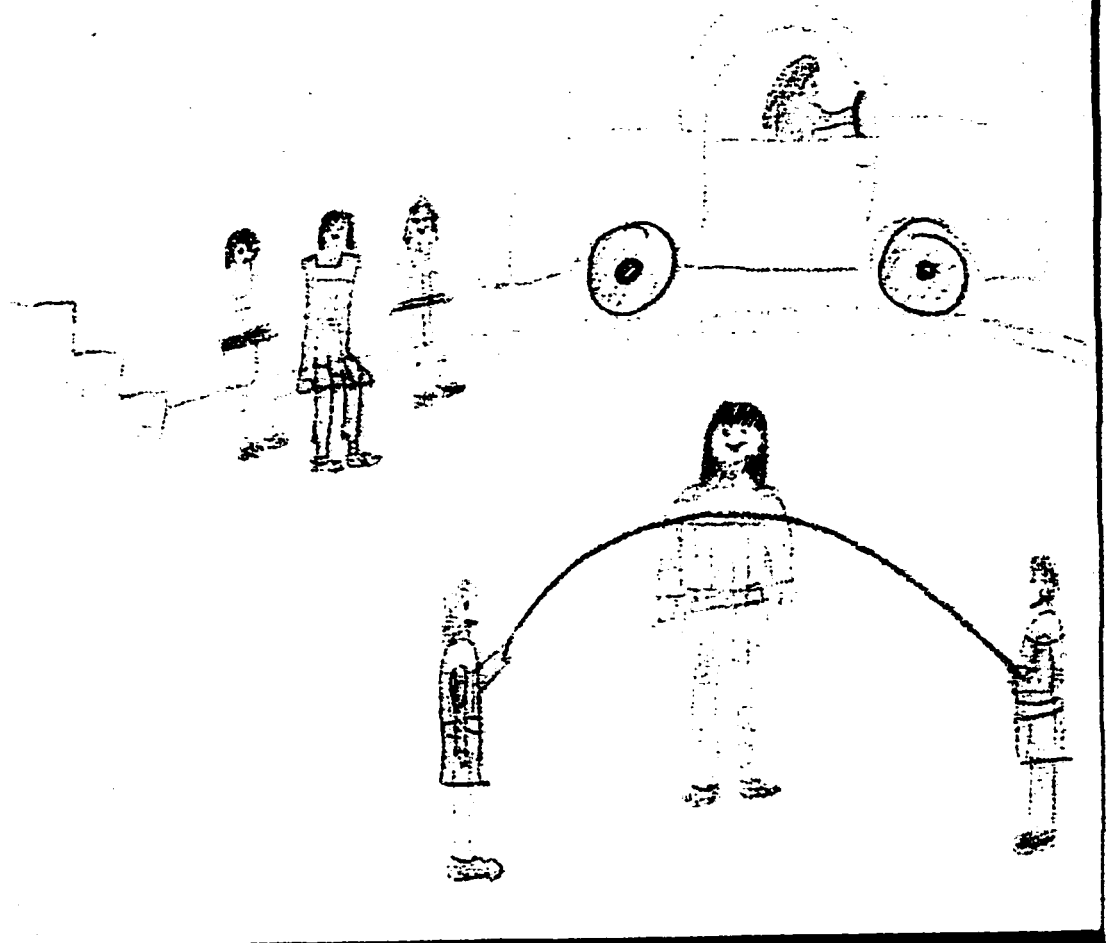
*I think more should have been done in school. It wasn't addressed there. But at the time they just didn't talk about that stuff. I'm sure there were probably other incidences. But they were hushed, they didn't want it to get out. It would tarnish their reputation as one of the best public schools in the city.*

When you're a child, you count on adults to keep you safe and protect you. Linda's safety had been jeopardized when she was cut with the knife. She thus learned that the adults in her world could not protect her, not even her parents who could only offer tips on how to avoid her perpetrators. One reason why the adults did not do anything may be explained by the common attitude that bullying is just a normal part of growing up (Barone, 1997). Linda was learning at the young age of seven that she had to keep herself safe because she couldn't expect adults to help her out in a bad situation.

Taylor, too, felt that she could not count on her teachers at school to help her out with her problems. She voiced the opinion that the teachers didn't want to hear about it:

*My elementary and junior high were so bad. I think the kid that tattled would end up facing more censure than the kid that did the wrong thing. The other kid might get punished, but I think it might make things worse for you ultimately.  
(Taylor)*

The fact that Linda could not count on teachers for protection from the other children seemed to color her experience just as much as the things children did to her. This is very evident in a drawing she did for me (see figure 5.1). In her drawing, she is a little girl on the playground at recess. In the center of the picture are some girls skipping, Linda stands off to one side watching with two



**Figure 5.1:** Linda's drawing of recess.

other girls. In the distance, a nun speeds of in a car. Here is what Linda told me about the drawing.

**Watch out for speeding nuns**

*This is recess time down in the playground, with the nuns scooting off in their car. ...Some kids are playing skip rope, and I'm sitting over to the side not being invited to play because I wasn't fast enough. I also did not want to play because they*

*thought themselves so wonderful. I felt hurt by it, but didn't give them the satisfaction of knowing. We (the girls not invited to play skipping) all huddled together because it was cold. They stuck us outside, so the teachers wouldn't have to do as much duty. Sometimes I did play skip rope. It was so unpredictable, you never knew from one day to the next whether you would be shunned or encouraged to play.*

Linda was of the opinion that her teachers were oblivious to the situation going on around them, just taking off in the car. She could be right. According to Barone (1997), bullying is so common place that teachers have become desensitized and do not even see it. She also pointed out that lack of supervision might have contributed to the problem. When Barone (1997) surveyed teachers and victims of bullying and asked them for solutions to the problem, both groups said that better supervision would help. In Linda's experience, teachers never helped you out when you were being picked on; in fact, a lot of the time they made the situation more painful and embarrassing. This was the case when some of Linda's classmates stole her desk in junior high (grades seven to nine).

### **The missing desk**

*In grade nine my desk disappeared! I came back from recess, one day, and my desk was gone. I looked around and approached the likely candidate who I thought may have moved it. She denied it, of course. I went all around the school looking for my desk and couldn't find it.*

*The teacher came in and there I was standing up against the wall. I had tried to tell her about my desk on her way in, but she wouldn't listen to me. She was teaching a good fifteen minutes before she realized I was standing. She said, "Linda what are you*

*doing standing up there? Sit down." "Where?" I asked. She wasn't very happy. She thought I was being flippant. She never realized that my annoyance and being upset was because she wouldn't listen to me. She was very mad at me. She called me up to the front of the classroom and was going to give me the trimming of my life, yet again. I looked outside and there was my desk in a tree! She said, "Where's your desk?" She started yelling and screaming at me. She was so loud the teacher from the next room came in to see what was going on. Here I was standing up at the front of the room getting freaked out at and yelled at. The kids in the class were snickering at me. I looked out the window and said to the teacher, "Oh, look there it is." The teacher said, "Why did you put it up there?" Like it was my fault! I said I didn't do it, but she just didn't want to hear it. A couple of girls got up to help me and we went out and got the desk back.*

*I felt so annoyed. Here was more of this garbage again! I was mad at both the students and the teacher. The students wanted to get a rise out of me and I didn't let them. The teacher, there she goes again freaking out over something that wasn't my fault! She would freak out if I came late for school in the morning.*

Linda was humiliated and made fun of by her classmates who hid her desk to have a joke at her expense. To add insult to injury, her teacher didn't help her, but blamed her instead, even though Linda tried to ask her for help. Often teachers are so overwhelmed by the demands and problems at school that they do not notice that a child is being picked on (Barone, 1997). At first, Linda's teacher ignored her, but then she did something far more damaging than just ignoring Linda's pleas for assistance, she blamed the victim. As mentioned in Chapter Three, White and Kisner (1992) found that a teacher's opinions and treatment of students affects peer perceptions of them. Linda's



teacher was reinforcing Linda's status as someone to pick on. This is the same thing that happened when Kyla's Gym teacher criticized her athletic abilities. Between the students and the teachers, school was becoming a very unsafe place for Linda. There was nobody there she could trust

Linda had lost all confidence in the teachers who were supposed to be there to guide and protect her. They never helped her with her peer problems. More often than not she was blamed for being the victim of abuse. This led Linda, who was smart and had been a good student, to stop trying in school. Her grades started to drop, she started to get only the marks that were needed to get by in school. The one time she did try on a test and got a good mark, she was accused of cheating.

#### **Accused of cheating**

*Most of the time I would only take so much abuse (from bullies) and then I would fight back. Often times I would get into trouble for this. The teachers were stupid. They couldn't see this child was being picked on so much that she had to lash out to protect herself and establish her right to be there.*

*Some teachers were upset because I didn't excel. I was not at the top of the class. When I looked at how the people at the top of the class behaved, I did not want to be like that. I just got the average marks that were needed. On all my reports card it said, "Linda is not working to her full potential." I thought, "What do you want? I'm consistent". My parents were happy, I had the marks I needed to get into University. I did not want to be like the others, I did not want to be snobby, I did not want to impress.*

*If I did actually get a good mark, I was accused of cheating. In grade five I did well on a project and the teacher asked me if it was really my work. In grade eleven, I*

*was taking two English classes because I liked English so much. In one class we were assigned two papers. The first one I didn't do so well on. On the second paper, I did very well. I got 25.5 out of 30, just to prove to her and myself that I could do it. I knew that things didn't have to be the way they were. But I knew I had to do it on my own, that nobody was looking out for me, so I had to look out for myself.*

The fact that Linda's grades dropped is not an unusual scenario for someone who is being picked on. Often when students who are being picked on in school, grades suffer, because they spend so much time worrying about the situation (Hazler, 1996). Linda's teachers were not there to support her, maybe because they saw her as a student who was disruptive and didn't work hard. What they didn't realize was that these behaviors were the result of being picked on. These teachers made a fragile girl who was picked on feel worse.

When Linda did do well, her teacher had the nerve to question whether it was her own work. It must be a horrible thing to have your peers constantly belittle you and then turn around to have your teacher reinforce that negative message. It seemed that every where Linda turned, someone, an adult or child, was giving her a negative message. Against all this adversity, Linda found the strength inside herself to believe in herself and take care of herself.

## **Quiet Rebellion**

*The reason I didn't go to the prom is because I didn't see the sense in shelling out that kind of money for one night of foolishness. (Linda)*

As we saw in earlier chapters, when the other participants and I reached our teen years, we rebelled. We did something that I called "rejecting the rejecter"(see Chapter

Two). We did not accept the standards our peers and society expected us to live up to; in fact, we rejected them back by not accepting them and by acting and dressing in ways that would be considered outrageous. In contrast to other participants, Linda didn't rebel against her peers by being outrageous. Instead, she rebelled by quietly rejecting their values. She did not follow their trends or participate in their activities. Linda did not need to be part of a subculture of freaks because she never felt like one. She felt the others were the ones with the problem. She felt like she was a good person who went to school with some really cruel children and teachers. She felt that she was different than them but in a good way. She decided to rebel quietly by not becoming a part of their culture.

As Linda's peers entered adolescence they began to become interested in boys. This was not an interest the young Linda shared with her peers.

#### **I wasn't interested in boys**

*When I started junior high, the other girls were starting to explore their feelings towards boys. I wasn't. Besides, I wasn't allowed to spend time alone with boys. Most of my friends in the neighborhood were boys, but they were just playmates.*

Most of Linda's classmates were starting to express interest in the opposite sex, something common for most girls at that age. Linda says she was not interested in boys and she wasn't allowed to be alone with them. Saying she wasn't allowed was an excuse she probably gave her friends as an adolescent. The teen Linda was rebelling against teen-age culture, but she was doing it quietly so she didn't stand out as that different. Saying she wasn't allowed to be around boys made her look normal to her peers and less likely to be ridiculed. Not being interested in boys proved to herself she wasn't like them. It seemed Linda was trying to prove her difference not to the world so much as to herself.

She felt she was above what she saw as their shallow attitudes. If they were going to like boys, she certainly wasn't. This could also have been a way of avoiding rejection. If you aren't interested in boys, they can't reject you. This bears some similarities to Taylor's decision to be a tom-boy and telling herself she wasn't interested in being a girly girl who had romantic or sexual interests in boys.

When Linda entered junior high (grades seven to nine), her classmates became fascinated by the latest fashions. Linda's family was poor and could not afford to buy the designer fashions that teen girls coveted in the 1980's. Instead of feeling inadequate and wishing she had those clothes, Linda decided clothes just were not important enough to worry about.

#### **I didn't need fancy jeans**

*The girls in my school started to become interested in fashion. I was not interested in that. I didn't care if I had a pair of Alfred Sung jeans. One day in class we were working on a model and we were exploring clothing for it. The group I was assigned to work with were very aware of clothing styles. Designer jeans were the big style at the time, but I hadn't even heard of the brand of jeans they were talking about. To me, jeans were just jeans. My group nominated me to read off the list of clothes. When I got to a particular brand name and read it aloud, everybody laughed at me. I didn't know why they were laughing at me. I guess I had mispronounced it. I had the distinct impression I had been set up. ... I had never been interested in those kinds of things.*

Having trendy clothing is very important to most teenage girls. As mentioned in the previous chapter, girls are very concerned about their outward appearances in their teens (Orenstein, 1994). Linda's family could not afford to buy their children designer

clothes. Those who are poor are often picked upon (Stone, 1993). Not being able to have the same clothes as everyone else would make a teen appear different and vulnerable to being picked on.

Instead of feeling sorry for her self for not having the "right" clothes, Linda decided to not take any interest in teen fashion. The other girls still made fun of her because of this, as the above incident illustrates. Linda feels she took it in stride because she considered herself to be more sensible and mature than the other girls, not interested in such frivolous things. As we have seen repeatedly, Linda was very adept at re-framing a situation in order to protect her self-esteem.

Linda's rejection of teen culture went beyond lack of interest in boys and clothes. It also extended to make-up. She did not see the point in wearing make-up, something she felt was another shallow trapping of her female classmates. Her quiet rebellion became loud the day her classmates accused her of wearing make-up.

#### **No mascara**

*In grade eight I had one of the strangest experiences I've ever had. Two girls cornered me and started to demand why I wore only mascara. I'm not sure if I even knew what mascara was at the time. I told them I wasn't wearing any. These snotty girls kept hounding me. So, finally, I ended up pulling out my eyelashes and giving them to them. I think I scared them. They looked at each other and looked at me and they were horrified. They said, "Okay" and then left me alone. From then on, they didn't bother me.*

Since many teenage girls wear several different make-up products, these girls were using the fact that they thought Linda only wore one item of make-up to pick on her. Linda did not see it this way. She was offended that they even thought she wore

make-up. When they cornered her, she felt like they were attacking the image she had built for herself, a sensible girl who does not wear make-up. When attacked, the usually quiet Linda fought back. She did so by hurting herself, pulling out her eyelashes to prove she wasn't wearing mascara. The strategy worked. The girls left her alone, and so, conveniently overlooking the self-mutilation and possible "childishness" of her lash pulling, Linda felt that she had protected her self-image as mature and not like the girls who had picked on her.

When Linda reached senior high (grades ten to twelve), things slowly started to improve for her. She started to make real friends. She made friends with a boy who may have had a crush on her. He even asked her to the prom. But the prom did not fit with the image she had built for herself as a serious young adult.

#### **The prom is foolish**

*To get to the girls' school you had to walk past the boys' school. When you walked past they would howl and grab. One of the boys I grew up with became a great friend. He would stand outside the boys school and when I walked by he would come over to me and walk me the rest of the way to my school, so no one would bother me.*

*He asked me to the prom but I had no interest in going. He ended up not going either. The reason I didn't go to the prom is because I didn't see the sense in shelling out that kind of money for one night of foolishness. It wasn't real, it was an American invasion of our culture. I celebrated my graduation with my family.*

In her last years of senior high, life seemed to be getting better for Linda. She had a knight in shining armor who would walk her to school. He had even asked her to the prom, which is the fairy tale fantasy a lot of girls have. It's the thing movie plots are

written about. But Linda had her guard up after years of rejection and was not about to let it down. Many children who are picked on and bullied isolate themselves from the rest of the student population (Hazler, 1996). Even though Linda had a warm, accepting invitation to the prom, she was not about to join in an activity with her tormentors, for whom she still had scorn. She decided that their prom was frivolous and a waste of time, something she was too mature for.

How was Linda able to maintain this stance of rejecting her rejecters? The fact that Linda's rejection made her feel more mature than the rest of her peers may have been because of her family's poverty. According to LePage-Lees (1997), most disadvantaged girls have memories of being mature from a young age because they had to grow up fast and face responsibility. One of the women LePage-Lees interviewed showed the same disdain for the prom that Linda did. "I never did the high school girly girlie stuff. I didn't go to my prom, and I think that I am half jealous of those people who did and half scornful of them...I always thought that all that giddy teenager stuff was beneath me, even when I was a giddy teenager" (p. 19). This quote could have come out of the mouth of Linda, In fact, it could have easily been the words of any of the participants. I think that like poverty, being peer rejected is also a situation that makes one grow up fast.

### **How It Affected My Teaching**

*I think I understand the underdog at least a bit more Quite often I can get them open up to me, I think I know how to listen. I know why they do some of the things that they do. (Linda)*

Being a peer-rejected child affected the kind of teacher Linda became. Not only did it affect her decision of where to teach, it affected how she teaches and how she

handles peer-rejected children in her classroom. It shaped Linda into a sensitive teacher who is aware of the problem and willing to take action.

Linda's peer rejection had such a devastating effect on her, that when she was offered a teaching position at her former school, she turned it down. She could not go back and face those ghosts, but she could try to help other children deal with this kind of pain. When she became a teacher she took a hard line against bullying. She would not let children in her class pick on others.

### **No bullying**

*My experience actually helped me in my own teaching in that I will not tolerate bullying or violence in the classroom. I absolutely will not. I will make changes in the classroom, or even call the bully's parents. I had one parent who was sick of hearing from me. She told me I was picking on her child. But I had to do it, her son was beating up or jumping children. I told his mother it just wasn't tolerated. I won't have students jumping each other in class. The parents know how it is because they have been made to come to school to pick the kids up. Violence is not acceptable.*

Linda's experience has made her take a hard line against bullying because she knows first-hand what a negative impact it can have. Linda can not help but be affected by the fact that her teachers turned a blind eye to the bullying she experienced as a child. Many teachers today are still ignoring the problem (Barone, 1997). Linda is the exception to the rule. She holds her beliefs strongly even when another parent judges her. She wants to make sure the problem is dealt with, not ignored like it was during her schooling.

During Linda's childhood, not only did teachers ignore her pleas for help but some chastised her for being the victim. Because of this, Linda makes sure that the



children she teaches know she is there to help with the problems and she seeks out those who are too shy or scared to ask for help. She recounts how her childhood experience helped her assist one of her students.

#### **I knew how she felt**

*I had one little girl in my class who was being harassed by a group of boys. She was terrified. So I spoke with her and told her that I realized what was happening. I could see that they were chasing her around the class and stuff, but I couldn't hear what they were saying because they knew there was a teacher around. I told her I would speak to them that day. She understood that I knew how scared she was. She has a right to come to school and learn in a safe environment. She shouldn't have to be afraid. I gave her some coping strategies. I told her if she felt scared to tell me and we would deal with it. I told her to stay safe, to always stay with two other little girls, not to be alone.*

Linda's experience has made her empathetic to children who are being picked on. She has developed an almost intuitive sense for who is being picked on. She handles the situation head-on because she understands how scared these children feel. By befriending them, she could also be improving their social status. As mentioned previously, children are influenced by their teacher's opinion and treatment of a child (White & Kisner, 1992).

When Linda became an adult, she decided she wanted to help kids who are picked on in school. In fact, this was part of her motivation for becoming a teacher. I asked her why she became a teacher when school was such a nightmare.

#### **Motivation for teaching**

*To give the disadvantaged kids a break, something I never got. To help any children who want to be helped. I like students who want to learn and want to be there. I*

*really like kids who want to be there, but are having a hard time for one reason or another. I am happy when I am able to make their life just that much easier, so they can concentrate on their studies. It's one of the reasons I'm there.*

*I am not sure this is a wonderful reason to get into teaching. You can only do so much, you can't fix everything. When there are good support services, it makes sense to explore the initiatives. But, when they are not there, you are taking on a huge burden to yourself and you have to be careful.*

Linda is right, you can't fix everything. Some children who have been picked on have committed suicide. A few have even murdered their tormentors (Barone, 1997). If these students had had one teacher who cared, maybe things would have been different for them. Although Linda downplays her motivation for teaching, it probably has made a difference in some children's lives. She uses her past to give her students something that she never had, an adult at school you can count on.

## **Conclusion**

Linda had a very difficult childhood. She was picked on from an early age. As she grew up, she learned that it was hard to trust and understand others. It made Linda grow up very fast. You can't be a carefree child when you are constantly being harassed:

*I often felt confused back then because you never knew when or why you were going to be treated differently from one day to the next. It was very confusing. It was hard to learn how to play the games they wanted you to play. It was tiring because you could never win. (Linda)*

Linda's memories of being peer rejected have been organized around the four themes detailed earlier: 1) Nothing's wrong with me, it's them, 2) Where were the adults?

3) Quiet rebellion, and 4) How it affected my teaching. In many ways, these themes are extensions of each other. For instance, in the first theme, Linda decided it wasn't her fault that she was picked on. Her rejection could be attributed to the shallow class values of the children and adults in her community. It is thus not so surprising that in senior high, Linda rejected the values of those who rejected her. She decided she never wanted to be like those 'snotty girls'. Linda lived an adolescence very different than most of the other girls in her school.

When we look at theme two, we see that Linda learned as a child that she could not count on her teachers or even her parents to help her with her problems. In fact, some adults exacerbated her problems. She felt alone at school with no one to count on but herself, something that ties into theme four. Perhaps in response to her childhood experience of rejection, Linda grew up to become the kind of teacher she would have liked to have in school, a teacher who cares, who tries to make school safe, and is sensitive to the problem of bullying.

How has being rejected effected Linda's personal life as an adult? We have seen that it affected her career and that she refused a teaching position at her former school. Personally, she confides that she has trouble letting people close. Those friends she does let in close are people she really values:

*I am very cautious with people, which has its benefits. I am very careful in picking my friends. The friends that I have are incredibly good friends. I know this because they tell me and they confide in me. They know that they can trust me. I know there are some that I can trust. I am more of an honest person I'm certain, than most of the people I went to school with are. Having experienced peer rejection helped me learn about people at a young age. My father said, "A least Linda will learn at a young age what people are like."(Linda)*

Linda feels she has benefited from her experience by understanding human nature. Yet she acknowledges it has come at a high cost, one she wishes she hadn't had to pay, a price she tries to help her students avoid. She has painful childhood memories that cause her to have trouble trusting people today.

One of the things that Linda is most proud of and satisfied by since she left public school is her successful career:

*One very nice thing that sometimes happens is when I run into people I went to school with, they ask me what I do. They are expecting me to say I am a cashier at Woolco or Zeller or something very nonachieving. When I tell them what I have been doing, the look on their face, is 'wow'. They are totally amazed. A couple of them are genuinely pleased and congratulate me. (Linda)*

I guess for Linda who felt her values were better than those of her rejecters, feeling that she is more successful than them is validation. For Linda, living well is the best revenge. I know that at times I entertain the fantasy of going home someday, very successful, and finding that everybody who gave me a hard time would be fawning over my accomplishments and feeling bad that they picked on me!

Like the other women in this study, Linda carries the emotional scars of rejection, but on the whole she feels her adult life is good. Linda says she has a satisfying personal life and feels proud to be a teacher who is trying to make things better for those picked on. Finally we have someone out there looking out for the rejected. But what a difficult training program she had to endure.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **WHAT MEMORIES CAN REVEAL ABOUT PEER REJECTION**

In the last four chapters, we have heard the voices of women who were rejected by their peers in school. We have read their stories, felt their pain and seen how the experience of rejection changed their lives. “The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something” (van Manen, 1990, p.77). The participants' experiences have given us a glimpse into what it can be like to be peer rejected. This final chapter takes it one step further, asking what we can do with this information? I will address this question in three ways: First I ask what do the experiences have in common? Learning what our experiences had in common may be helpful in understanding how we eventually dealt successfully with peer rejection. Second, I will summarize the advice participants offered about preventing, combating and living with peer rejection. Lastly, I will suggest topics this study raises for future research.

#### **Themes in Common**

The women described in this study survived a very difficult childhood. Our memories are of being picked on, being excluded, ridiculed, and even abused. Although the participants and I each had our own unique experiences and reactions, along the road from peer-rejected child to functional adult, we four women shared some things in common.

Themes are the process by which we give shape to and understand the experience we are investigating (van Manen, 1990). In re-analyzing all the data, four themes were found in common to most of our experience. I considered a theme to be common or fundamental only if it applied to at least three of the four women. Examining commonality across cases brings the description of peer rejection from the personal to the social. If we examine what these women's experiences have in common, maybe we can understand how they got through peer rejection. While I am not claiming that these themes are necessarily common to all those who survive childhood peer rejection, they may be a helpful starting point in examining other children's experiences.

The four themes that emerged as important are: 1) The body, 2) Shame, 3) Resiliency, and 4) Belonging.

### **First Common Theme: The Body Under Attack**

What is missing in the literature on peer rejection is the "body", and yet it is through the body that peer rejection is most acutely experienced. If it is the body that experiences the crime, why are we not interested in how it feels?

According to Merleau-Ponty (cited in Grosz, 1994) the body is defined by its relations to objects . "The body is my being-to-the-world and as such is the instrument by which all information and knowledge is received and meaning is generated. It is through the body that the world of objects appears to me; it is in virtue of having/being a body that there are objects for me" (Grosz, 1994, p.87). The participants' bodies received the brunt of the abuse they suffered when they were rejected by their peers. Whether verbally, physically and/or sexually, it was often our bodies that were under attack. Indeed, our bodies which perceive objects were *treated as objects* by our tormentors. In

the situations lived by the women in this study, the body becomes an object unto itself, instead of a feeling and perceiving agent in relation to the world. Indeed, for me and some of the others, the only way to survive rejection and assault was to share my tormentors' view of my body as an object, an object named Cathy that I could disassociate myself from in my head, waiting and hoping for a safer and better time when I could re-emerge and reclaim it.

### **Verbal attacks**

Every participant in this study was the victim of verbal attacks on her body, such as teasing, or taunting, or name-calling. This is consistent with Hazler's (1996) finding that many children who are picked on report that it is their physical characteristics that are most often the targets of attack. Many of the verbal attacks reported by the participants centered on their bodies' appearance, for example, being told you are ugly or you need a makeover. From seeing photographs of the participants, it would be hard to assert that any of us were less attractive than other children. It is more likely that we were vulnerable to bullying because of *perceived difference in appearance*, for example, needing glasses at an early age, or wearing the "wrong" clothes. Some of the participants were picked on because *their bodies could not perform as well as others*. We saw, for example, that both Kyla and I were not considered "good" at the activities in Gym class. Children who are seen to be physically weaker or less adept than others are often the target for bullying (Hazler, 1996). Since body image is partly formed by how others judge our physical being (Shires Sneddin, 1999), it is not unreasonable to speculate that these repeated verbal insults damaged the participants' body-image and self-esteem. It certainly felt that way.

### **Physical attacks: Girls on girls**

Most of us were also the victims of actual physical bullying. The participants were beat up, tripped, and, as we saw with Linda, even cut with a knife. This is a radical departure from what the research literature would predict. According to Hazler's (1996) review of studies on bullying, most female bullying is in the form of verbal or social attacks, and most physical attacks are male against male. This certainly is not the case with the participants in this study. With the exception of Kyla, we all experienced physical violence at the hand of *female bullies*. Perhaps physical bullying of girls by girls is under-reported or ignored because it goes against social expectation about female behaviour. This is an issue that certainly merits further investigation.

### **Sexual abuse**

Another way our bodies were attacked was sexually. This ran the gamut from boys making fun of our looks in a sexual way, to being held against our will, to being sexually assaulted. Those who are already suffering from some form of hardship at school are more deeply impacted by sexual harassment (Huron Public Education System, 2001). Since having an emotional problem has been found to be a risk factor for sexual abuse during adolescence (Adolescent Maltreatment, 1997), being peer rejected may have put the women in this study at greater risk of being sexually abused. These sexual attacks were another way for our peers to reinforce our rejected status. This had serious consequences for all of us, resulting, as we saw earlier, in fear, mistrust, and loss of self-esteem. These physical attacks affect how we experience our bodies and how we heal our bodies. Sexual violations are imprinted as much on the body as on the soul and mind. The pain, humiliation, and horror of it can be so intense, that many of us still are reluctant to



re-visit the way it felt in detail. The phenomenological essence of this aspect of rejection has thus been intentionally glossed over in this study out of ethical concern for the well-being of the women involved. We are all willing, even eager, to say "It happened to me" and "I am not to blame, I have nothing to be ashamed of". We are less able to remember and describe how it actually felt, perhaps because we would not want to put any one else, not even a concerned reader, through the experience.

## Second Common Theme: Shame

Shame was a feeling I grew up with. I never felt I was as good as everybody else, whether it be in terms of intelligence, body image, or physical ability. I felt I was stupid, ugly and weak. I was ashamed of who I was, ashamed that I couldn't measure up to what I thought were my peers' standards. What is this shame I speak of? Morrison (1998) defines shame as fundamentally "a feeling of loathing against ourselves, a hateful vision of ourselves through our own eye- although this vision may be determined by how we expect or believe other people are experiencing us" (p.13). Shame differs from guilt: When you experience guilt, you feel bad about *doing something wrong*. Shame, in contrast, is when you feel there is *something wrong with you* (Tangney, cited in O'Connor, Berry & Weiss, 1999). This definition of shame makes it easy to understand how a peer-rejected child would come to feel shame. If you are told by your peers on a consistent basis that something is wrong with you, you in turn come to expect that people see you that way, and you eventually believe that that is who you really are. The resulting feeling is shame.

Kyla, Taylor, and I felt ashamed of ourselves as children. We each felt there was something external or internal about us that made us unlikable to other children. Linda

however, avoided this by firmly placing the blame on others and society, not on any flaw of her own. This useful defense mechanism protected her from the pain of shame and would be an interesting phenomenon to investigate further.

According to Morrison (1998), those who feel shame fear failure and do everything to hide or conceal it. Kyla was constantly teased about her appearance and physical abilities. She deeply feared doing poorly in gym class, and so did everything she could to get out of it, hoping to hide her perceived inadequacy in that area. She did not want her peers to see her shame.

Taylor experienced a lot of shame about her appearance. According to Morrison (1998), people experiencing shame often feel there is something defective about them, and for women this is often centered around body issues. Taylor did not feel attractive, perhaps because she was told on a regular basis that she was ugly. She was called all kinds of names that focussed on her body and looks. By the time she was in junior high (grades 7-9), she truly believed she was ugly. She compensated by trying to hide her shame with make-up. She says that she wore too much make-up to hide what she believed were her defects.

Shame is a negative factor, an awful way to feel. Shame is an embodied experience that goes right through your bones. The role of the body in shame, like its fundamental presence in so many social phenomena, has been almost totally ignored by researchers. It makes us not like who we are and damages self-esteem. Kyla, Taylor and I didn't like many things about ourselves. We loathed who we were. We *felt* bad. This is not a recipe for how to grow up to be healthy.

Surprisingly, however, shame also can have a temporary protective factor for those undergoing extremely abusive situations from which they cannot escape. O'Connor et al (1999) noted that people who have been abused by their parents will often believe that they were beaten because they deserve punishment. This allows them to cling to the hope that someday their parents might treat them well, if they deserve it. Because they feel powerless to stop the abuse by their parents, by blaming themselves, they feel they have some control in an uncontrollable situation. This gives them the false hope that if they change their behaviour things will improve.

I think that some of the shame I experienced while being rejected served a similar function. Feeling ashamed helped me maintain the illusion that I had some control in the situation. It gave me temporary hope to think I was rejected because I *was* flawed, because then I could cling to the notion that *I could change myself* if I wanted to and then people would treat me well. Of course, looking back now, it is easy for me to see that this was a false hope. Changing imagined flaws would never have made me popular. Yet thinking that way made me feel temporarily in control of an uncontrollable situation. I was under the illusion that I wasn't completely helpless. People need to feel they have some sense of personal power in their lives. People who have their power taken away by others often feel depressed, become passive and give up (Hazler, 1996). For me, shame was the lesser of two evils. It seemed better to feel shame than to give up hope in a better future where I was strong enough to change myself.

As I have grown, shame has been something I have slowly shed. As an adult who has real power over my life, I don't need to feel ashamed of who I am or was, yet, as we saw earlier, until recently, I wouldn't let people call me Cathy because I was ashamed of

my childhood self. Shame has such a negative impact on one's self-image and self-esteem that it can take many years to get over it, if one ever really does. I think that Kyla, Taylor and I still hold onto small residual amounts of shame--we are still sometimes embarrassed at who we were. I think that is why there are parts left out of my story or why a participant would occasionally tell me they were embarrassed when they told me certain memories (I did not press them when this happened and offered to stop the interview or exclude anything they wished). But Kyla and Taylor do seem to have outgrown much of their shame or they would not have wanted to volunteer for the study or have had the courage to tell me their stories and insist I share them in this thesis. And as for me, thanks to the writing of this thesis and to hearing from the other participants that my experience was not unique, I no longer feel ashamed to be Cathy. I feel proud to have come through adversity well. But ...shame runs deep and can crop up when you least expect it. It's a shadow the three of us live under.

### **Third Common Theme: Resiliency**

Despite all the emotional scars that peer rejection left on the participants and I, we are, for the most part, fairly happy with our current personal and professional lives. We did not become the maladjusted adults that peer rejection research suggests we would (Kupersmidt, Coie and Dodge 1990). Why did these women succeed?

Some people bounce back from adversity while others seem to fall through the cracks. The women in this study bounced back. Why? It could be because they are resilient. Joseph (cited in Charlson, Bird & Strong, 1999) define resiliency as, "The ability of an individual to overcome rather than surrender to life's challenges" (p.226)

People who are resilient usually have the following qualities (Joseph, cited in Charison, 1999):

1. They take a *proactive approach*, rather than a reactive or passive approach, to problem solving. This approach requires the person to be self-reliant and independent while at the same time sufficiently socially adept to get appropriate help from adults and peers.
2. They are able to *construe their experiences in positive and constructive ways* even when those experiences are painful or negative.
3. They are *good-natured and easy to deal with*, and, as a result, they gain other people's positive attention.
4. They *develop a sense of "coherence"* early in life, that is, a basic belief that one has some control over what happens.

How many of these characteristics do the women in this study have? I do not think we fit the criteria of the first attribute, as we all seemed to use passive (not participating in gym) or reactive (pulling out eyelashes) approaches to problem solving. However, to some extent, all of us were able to construe our experiences in a positive light even though they were painful. Linda was the most successful of us all. She was able to re-frame the painful teasing to which she was subjected as a sad thing *for her peers* rather than for her. As adults, we have all learned to re-interpret our painful pasts in a more positive light. For example, every one of us feels that we would not be as understanding and empathetic as we are today if we had not been picked on in school. Taylor and Linda feels that this experience helped shape them into the sensitive and capable teachers they have become.

As for the third characteristic, being good-natured and so forth, I think that Taylor, Kyla and I qualify, as least now. Although we did not get on well with our peers, all three of us got on well with the adults in our lives, even when we were children. Linda had a more confrontational relationship with the adults in her life.

Concerning the fourth characteristic, Linda, Kyla, and I had a sense of coherence early in life. Linda and Kyla believed that they were more mature than the other children and that the rejection they were experiencing would end when the others caught up. I also believed that I had some control over what happens. I felt that if I changed myself, things would change, Even though this belief was false, it gave me some feeling of control over my life. Only Taylor felt that peer rejection was fated and that she was powerless to change it.

Thus each participant had a least two of the four qualities of resilient children. But possessing these qualities may not be enough. Krovetz (1999) says that these qualities have a better chance of enhancing resiliency if the child also experiences some of the following protective factors:

1. *A caring environment* - At least one adult knows the child well and cares deeply about the well-being of that child.
2. *Positive expectations* - High, clearly articulated expectations and the purposeful support necessary to meet those expectations exist for the child.
3. *Participation in group activities* - The child has responsibilities and other opportunities for meaningful involvement with others.

In examining each of our stories, one can see that we all experienced most of the protective factors that Krovetz deems important to resiliency. All of the participants had a

caring environment *outside of school*. We all had families at home who cared about our well being, even if they did not always protect us.

Similarly, we all had adults in our lives who had positive expectations for us. Both Taylor's parents and mine perceived us as bright and expected we would do well in school. Linda's parents thought she was bright and expected her to go to university. Kyla's mother was a strong independent woman who held expectations that Kyla would grow up likewise.

Linda, Taylor and I participated in extracurricular activities that gave us the opportunity to have meaningful involvement with other peers outside of school. Linda was involved in swimming and Brownies, Taylor was involved in 4H, and I was involved in Brownies and various kinds of musical activities. These activities helped us feel good about ourselves and gave us a sense of mastery that was missing in our social lives at school.

As mentioned previously, every participant in this study had a least two of the characteristics of a resilient child. Krovetz(1999) said that most people have some of these characteristics to some extent, and that it is having the protective factors along with some of the characteristics that makes someone resilient. If the participants in this study had not had these protective factors, we might not have fared as well as we did. The encouragement and support of our families, along with extracurricular activities gave us enough self-esteem and belief in ourselves to get us through the difficult and painful experiences of peer rejection.

Resiliency is thus something to foster in children who are being rejected at school. Of course, it would be preferable if we could stop school-based peer rejection before it

starts, but the reality is that for some children, it has already started before adults can be aware of it. Most teachers are at a loss as to what to do about it. If social and educational policy and practices could foster protective factors in these children, maybe they too will gain the resiliency necessary to overcome the adversity of peer rejection.

#### **Fourth Common Theme: Belonging**

“Anyone who has to move out of a group where she belongs in order to join in some other group will be losing self-esteem unless she is easily accepted in the group” (Griffiths, 1995, p.116). This quote reminds me of the beginning of my experience of peer rejection. Before I started school I belonged to a happy close-knit group of preschool age playmates in my neighborhood. When I started school I had to leave that group behind to join a new group, I was now a student. Unfortunately, I did not get along well with the other children at school, and by the end of my first year of school, I was already feeling the effects of low self-esteem. Like me, the other participants had happy relationships with peers before starting school. Once we entered the larger playground of school, however, we did not find acceptance. We did not have a peer group to which we belonged.

Asher et al (1990) reported that most peer-rejected children experience loneliness that is accompanied by a feeling of being left out and not belonging. This is indeed a feeling that was experienced acutely by all of the participants. As the earlier chapters describe in detail, we tried various strategies to belong and be accepted by the others: Making fun of ourselves, being friends with popular people, accepting bad treatment to be part of the crowd, and so on. These strategies did not work for us as young children.



At some point during senior high (grades 10-12), the participants and I found places outside the dominant culture where we did feel we could belong. According to Levine (cited in Clark 1994), a sense of belonging is crucial to a teen's identity formation. By the time we entered senior high, we had resigned ourselves to the fact that we were not accepted by the mainstream peer groups. Becoming more resourceful, we found places to fit in that were "outside the box". Taylor, Kyla and I aligned ourselves within alternative music subcultures that had disdain for those in popular peer groups. Linda chose to identify with her older family members, seeing herself as too mature for her peer group at school. Eventually, we thus all successfully found an alternative place to belong, one that helped us justify and accept not fitting in with our mainstream peers. It also helped us grow into adults who had less trouble finding acceptance and places to belong than we had experienced as students.

From grade one to grade nine, life was an endless search for a place to belong. Once I found a place I began to feel better about myself. When you feel good about yourself, it easier to find the places where you belong or at least feel more comfortable.

### **Educational Implications:**

Many studies on peer rejection end with the researcher or expert giving impersonal advice to parents, teachers and educators on how to deal with the problem. My study gives educational advice from a different kind of expert, the person who experienced the peer rejection. I consider the participants in this study as experts in the field because they all have at least ten years of hands-on experience as victims of peer

rejection. I asked the participants how they would like to see the educational system change.

As we saw in Chapters Two and Three, both my own and Kyla's experience was deeply colored by the competitive nature of gym class, where there are winners and losers. Since then, some teachers have changed their gym class to take the focus off of competition and onto cooperation. But many schools have not. Kyla thinks that the worst part of gym is where team captains are picked and left with the task of choosing teams. At this point, gym class becomes a teacher-sanctioned popularity contest, with the last child picked feeling and being treated by the others as a loser. Kyla strongly suggests that it should be the teacher who assigns children to teams so as not to add extra humiliation to those who are not popular or physically agile.

I agree with Kyla that the concept of choosing teams in gym class is flawed. I think that in elementary school, gym class teachers should teach non-competitive activities. Further, when allocating marks for gym class, teachers should concentrate on areas such as cooperation and taking direction instead of physical ability. I think that when children enter adolescence, gym class could become optional. For example, students could choose from a list of nonacademic subjects such as music, art, drama, and gym. Student should get to participate in whichever area they feel most comfortable in. Gym class was one of the biggest killers of my self-esteem because of my coordination problem.

Kyla feels that teachers need to be more involved in what goes on in their classroom. She feels that a lot of times when kids are being picked on and bullied, the teacher does not notice or, perhaps, does not want to notice. Kyla suggests that when a

teacher does notice that a child is being picked on, they should not draw attention to that child. Instead, she suggests that the teacher read a story to the class, talking about a similar situation and how it was handled successfully.

I, too, feel that teachers should pay more attention to what goes on in the classroom, especially at the elementary level, where peer rejection begins. I agree with Kyla that the teacher should not call attention to the child being picked on because that just makes you feel more embarrassed. I think the teacher should take care to point out when that child is succeeding and praise the child's abilities in that area. This takes the emphasis off the negative and puts it on the positive. Maybe teachers could also do what Linda does, let the child know privately that they are aware, that they care, and that the child does have someone he or she can run to or confide in.

Taylor feels that part of the reason nothing is done about the problem of peer rejection is that parents and teachers don't take it seriously, they relegate it to part of the normal problems of childhood. Her advice to them is to take it very seriously,

*Don't under estimate the ability of this stuff to really seriously affect a kids life. I think a lot of times parents sort of dismiss it as a normal part of childhood. It's very important to pay attention to this stuff. I think parents may pay attention more now because of things going on like the Columbine shootings. They are starting to realize that bullying is a serious problem. Pay attention! This stuff has so much power over kids. I turned out okay, but, someone else might snap like those Columbine kids and kill someone, or themselves or be killed by their bullies.  
(Taylor)*

Linda did not have many adults to turn to when she was being picked on as a child. Because of this she became an empathetic teacher with a listening ear. She recommends that teachers make sure that students with problems know that they can come to them for help. She says it is also important that children feel they belong to the school community

*Let children know they have an outlet, that they can come to you. Let the children know they are valued. Try to make them comfortable wherever they are so that they know they do belong. They don't belong to the kids that are picking on them; they don't have to. They are still a part of the community. If teachers could be more patient with the students, the children might feel they could come to them when help is needed. They need honest access to support services. This would give students who are rejected, picked on and isolated a little hope. (Linda)*

Taylor feels that junior high (grades 7-9) is the worst time for experiencing peer rejection, because that is when she had some of her most difficult experiences. Her advice goes beyond simple changes at the classroom level: She recommends sweeping changes to the whole junior high system.

*Junior High is fucked up, everything about it. The structure of it. You take a bunch of kids-- their bodies are going nuts and they don't know what they feel from one minute to the next. They are just starting to explore becoming people independent of their parents, starting to explore rebellion a little bit. You take them out of a totally nurturing environment, which is the elementary classroom, and you put them in this box that is regimented in to these time blocks by bells, than you herd them from one room to the next and you plunk them down for forty minutes and you expect them to learn something. ... One of profs who taught me thought it should be abolished. I think you should teach them something useful, like how to get along with each other, how to communicate and how to resolve conflict and all that other stuff. Then once their bodies settle down, take them back into the classroom and teach academics. (Taylor)*

I agree with Taylor that junior high is the roughest time to be rejected. My suggestion is that teachers need to address issues of sexual harassment more seriously. Many peer-rejected girls are the victims of sexual harassment. Schools need to have more than just a clear policy on sexual harassment- they have to take action and enforce it. Teachers also have to find ways of getting across the message that appearance is not the measure of self-worth.

One of the biggest problems my participants brought up was that at the time of their peer rejection, they thought they were the only one who were being picked on. They felt alone with no one else to share this problem with. When they met me in the context

of this study, they were as much interested in what happened to me as in telling their own story. They were glad to know they were not alone, that they were part of a community of people who had experienced and survived this. Kyla suggested the idea of a website for peer rejected children, so they could connect with others, make friends and learn from each others experiences, so they wouldn't be handling this alone. *Maybe with the internet we could have something, like the rejects talk lounge or something. Stuff like that would have really helped me and other people too. Because when your in it you don't think that anyone feels like that.*

The most important thing my participants voiced was that at some point the peer rejection ends and you go on to live a normal life. The problem is while you are in the middle of it, it seems like it will never end. Taylor's final piece of advice is for those that are experiencing peer rejection right at this very moment, *It gets better at some point, Remember you're above all that bullshit.*

My advice echoes Taylor's and Kyla's:

*Remember you are not alone. This is happening to many children around the world. It also happened to many adults like myself who are living good lives right now. If you hold on, even when it seems like the pain is tearing you apart, it will end. The values in the school yard are not those of the real world. Someday you will be valued for the special person you are. (Cathy)*

## **Directions for Future research**

This study has described how it feels to be a peer-rejected girl in school and how memories of this rejection affect adult lives. This topic was explored through the eyes of four women, each of who experienced peer rejection as a child in school. This study looks at only a small population of former peer rejected children, and of course, does not

examine the whole phenomenon. It leaves the door open for many new research questions.

One question left unanswered is why do bullies pick on these children? Much research has been done in this area, but again, it has mostly been objective outsiders trying to find solutions for the problem. It would be interesting to hear from adults who were bullies as children. What are their memories of bullying? How did they feel about themselves? Why do they think they did it? How has it affected their self-esteem.

Another group that would be interesting to talk to would be the bystanders and onlookers. Those were not the kids who picked on anyone, but who did not do anything to stop the bullies. Often I would ask the participants, what did your friends do, when you were picked on? More often than not the answer was “nothing”. Why did these people not do anything? What are their memories of this? How do they feel about this as adults?

It would be interesting to do a study like this with male subjects. How was the experience different for them, compared with the women in my study? Women have been socialized to be in touch with their feelings. My participants told me about a wide range of emotions they experienced. Men have traditionally been socialized not to express emotion. Does this affect the way some men react to peer rejection? When I started to design this project, I originally decided I would work with both men and women, but only one man volunteered. Why is that?

I often wondered what it would have been like to get the participants together and as a group discuss our experiences. Time did not allow me to do this. Future studies, could include group discussion after the initial interview. I have feeling a group

interviewed would have uncovered even more information. I know that the participants stories triggered memories for me. I think it would also be an empowering experience.

There are so many other elements raised by some of the stories told that merit further probing: How did Linda manage to escape the pain of shame (not that her experience as a whole was any less painful)? What is the prevalence of female on female physical bullying? How do coping strategies develop? What other themes would emerge if we had taken the time or if I were to re-analyze and re-write? Issues of sexuality and sexual orientation, for example, have been glossed over. The role of social institutions and popular culture might be other good places to probe. Why and how does our society permit or encourage a culture of rejection and bullying? So many questions are left to ask and re-ask.

## **Conclusion**

*It's ridiculous that it is still happening. I hear about it still happening a bit- that's sad. (Kyla)*

The participants and I have shared our experiences in this study so that the public can better understand what it is like to be rejected by peers in childhood. It is a very painful experience that none of us will ever forget. In some ways, it has affected the adults we have become. Some of us still have self-esteem and trust problems. It has nonetheless lead to some good things: We all feel it has made us more empathetic, understanding adults. But we do not recommend peer rejection as a training ground for empathy.

Through examination of these memories, I have discovered a group of women who are resilient, who grew up and grew past peer rejection and found a place to belong, although they still carry with them many emotional scars. I think resiliency and belonging are some of the keys to overcoming such adversity.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions Asked to My Mother**

1. **Tell me about your decision to adopt me.**
2. **Tell me about the day I came home.**
3. **Tell me about my personality as a baby.**
4. **Who were my first friends and how did I get along with them?**
5. **Are there any specific memories you have of me as a baby and small child?**

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

1. Are there any questions you want to ask me before we begin? We can stop at anytime if you don't feel comfortable.
2. What would you like your pseudonym be?
3. How old are you and what do you do?
4. Tell me a little about your self?
5. Tell me about your background and what you've been told about your baby and preschool years.
6. When do you first remember getting picked on or left out?
7. What is your first memory of this describe it?
8. How do you remember feeling?
9. How did you handle it?
10. How do you wish you wish you had handled it?
11. Was this the beginning of a cycle of exclusion?
12. How long did the rejection last?
13. Tell me your story? What was your experience of rejection like?
14. What memories stand out to you tell me about them? And how you felt about them?
15. Did you have a close friend or support system of friends? How did they deal with your situation? Did they help?
16. Did teachers or staff at school know of the problem and if so how did they deal with it?
17. Did your parent know what was going on? Why or why not? What did they do to help or hinder?
18. Did you handle your rejection differently at different points of your school career? Tell me about this?
19. How do you remember feeling about yourself during this time period?
20. Would you like to draw a picture about how this made you feel?
21. When did your rejection end and do you know why?
22. What do you wish you had told the kids that picked on you? And what would you like to tell them now?
23. As an adult, how do you feel about these experiences?
24. Do you think your experience effected your adult life in any way personally or professionally?
25. How do you think you would be different if you had not experienced this?
26. How do you feel about yourself today?
27. Do you have satisfying friendships and social relationships?
28. Do you feel competent in your work/school?
29. Looking back as an adult, how do you wish the adults in your life had handled it? Any advice for parents, educators and children going through this?



## Appendix C Consent Form

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### CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH PROJECT

#### MEMORY WORK: Adult recollections of childhood peer rejection

I invite your participation in my study. Please take the time to read this document carefully. It will help you decide whether or not you would like to participate. In addition to this general information and consent form, you will be given an oral presentation. Feel free to ask as many questions as you like (in person, by telephone, or by e-mail).

#### General Purpose of Project

What is it like to have nobody to play with at recess? What is the experience of being rejected by other children like? Do you remember the child that no one wanted on their team in gym class? How did they feel about it? What was their experience? As adults, what are their memories of these experiences? Do these memories affect their adult life?

I can answer some of these questions because they address my childhood experience. I was a peer rejected child. Do one or more of these situations reflect how you remember your childhood? If they do you can help me explore adult memories of peer rejection. I want to explore peer rejection from an insider's view, so the phenomenon can be better understood. Exploring adult memories of rejection is a new exciting way to explore peer rejection, that has yet to be explored.

#### Your participation in this research project:

I invite you to participate in one or more of the following as indicated by an x:

- An interview (using a tape recorder, for approximately half an hour to an hour)
- Draw a picture of how you remember feeling when you were a child and talk about it.
- Show me photo's from your childhood and discuss them with me.
- Follow-up interview if needed

#### For Your Protection and Ease

1. Participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate. If at any time you feel uncomfortable you are free to discontinue. I thank you for taking the time to learn about my project.
2. Your identity will be kept confidential; that is, your name will not be used in reporting and describing the research, and I will change any potentially identifying details (such as the names of anyone else you mention, specific school names, etc.).

3. I would like to make a copy of your drawing and return the original to you. However, you may request that any data you have provided be returned to you or discarded at any time during the study.
4. I will do everything I can to ensure that it is an enjoyable, worthwhile experience for you, and welcome any suggestions you may have.

**IF YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE. PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CONTACT THE RESEARCHER FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION.**

I have carefully read and understood the preceding project description and I hereby volunteer my informed consent to participate in the research as indicated above. I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any time during the study.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Tel:** \_\_\_\_\_