

Growing Up Under Koresh: Cult Children Tell of Abuses

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For sins as small as spilling milk, the children said, they were struck with a wooden paddle known as "the helper." To train for the final battle, they were instructed to fight each other, and if they did not fight hard enough, they were paddled for that, too.

David Koresh told them to call their parents "dogs"; only he was to be referred to as their

father. Girls as young as 11 were given a plastic Star of David, signifying that they had "the light" and were ready to have sex with the cult leader. A team of therapists said these were some of the things that 19 of the 21 surviving children of the Branch Davidian cult had told them about their lives inside the compound.

The team, headed by Dr. Bruce D. Perry, the chief of psychiatry at Texas Children's Hospital and vice chairman for research of the department of psychiatry at the Baylor College of Medicine here, spent two months working with the children, ages 4 to 11, who left the cult's compound near Waco in the first five days after the Feb. 28 shootout that killed four Federal agents and at least six cult members. Two children, ages 7 months and 3 years, were too young to be interviewed. Earlier Charges Bolstered

While President Clinton and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have maintained for weeks that children inside the compound were physically and sexually abused, the only known evidence for those assertions were allegations by former cult members two years ago. Many current cult members and their lawyers have insisted such charges are baseless.

Now, a report by Dr. Perry, an expert on traumatized children, and interviews with several counselors who worked with the children provide the first details from the young Branch Davidians themselves about their lives in the compound until they left in early March.

The report, which Dr. Perry wrote for the families of the children and any therapists who work with them in the future, characterizes the world described by the children as "a misguided paramilitary community" in which sex, violence, fear, love and religion were all intertwined.

The report depicts an insular religious community of many contradictions. Although men and women were strictly segregated, Dr. Perry writes that the children told him Mr. Koresh had "wives" as young as 11 and routinely discussed sex openly with even the youngest girls in Bible lessons.

Dr. Perry said that though the children seemed highly protective of the cult's secrets, "Over the course of two months, the kids became increasingly open about 11- and 12-year-old girls being David's wives." He said it was also clear in these conversations that the status of "wife" included having sex with Mr. Koresh. Under Texas law, sex by an adult with girls under the age of 17 is statutory rape, a felony.

Gerry Williams, a lawyer with the agency that oversees Child Protective Services, said that even Mr. Koresh's attempts to prepare young girls for sex appears to have been

illegal in Texas.

While Mr. Koresh was reported to have an assortment of electronic equipment and high-power weapons, the compound lacked running water and plumbing. "The children described using a pot for urinating and defecating, which they would empty every day," Dr. Perry wrote.

In addition to being paddled with "the helper," the children were disciplined by being deprived of food, sometimes for as long as a day, the report said. Dr. Perry added that the children "had a difficult time making the adjustment to a nonphysical form of discipline" after leaving the compound.

While the report notes that the children seemed to be reading at appropriate grade levels, there was no discussion of formal schooling outside of Bible classes. Girls were allowed to sleep as late as they wanted, while boys were forced to wake up as early as 5:30 A.M. for what the children called "gym," which the report describes as "marching, drilling (possibly with firearms). A 'Normal' World

Yet to the children, Dr. Perry said, the world inside the compound was normal. Even after their release, and as they described their treatment by Mr. Koresh, nearly all the children have talked about their love for him. During therapy sessions, several drew pictures with hearts, under which they wrote, "I Love David."

But Dr. Perry sees their feelings about Mr. Koresh as something else. "Fear is what it was," he said in an interview here last week. "They learned to substitute the word 'love' for fear."

The cult leader controlled everything -- sex, school, play and even diet. "There were a number of unusual ideas about combining fruit and vegetables in the same meal," Dr. Perry wrote. He added that when the children were first placed in the custody of state Child Protective Services, they "frequently talked about how odd it was to have warm food."

What emerged in the children's portrayal of their world, Dr. Perry wrote on March 11, was "the sense that there is going to be an absolute explosive end to these children's families." Asked to draw the compound, they drew pictures of fires and explosions and castles in heaven, he said.

"We'd ask them, 'What do you think is going to happen?' " Dr. Perry said in an interview. "They'd say, 'Everyone is going to die,' or, 'We're going to blow you all up.' " Looking
Toward Heaven

Dr. Perry said all the children had told him that as they left the compound, their parents promised they would see them in heaven.

During the siege, Dr. Perry said, he met periodically with negotiators from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, sharing with them what he was learning from the children about Mr. Koresh.

In a memorandum he dictated to the F.B.I. on March 11, Dr. Perry described the children's "many, many, many allusions to explosions" and raised questions about whether the compound had booby traps or was wired to explode. He added, "All of the children that I have interviewed speak about the fact that both of their parents are dead."

"This sense that all the parents are dead leads me to believe there has been some group consensus about a final end to this confrontation," the doctor said. 'An Abstract Suicide'?

Dr. Perry said that when Federal agents had asked him if he thought the cult leader would commit suicide, "I told them I thought it was unlikely that he would put a gun to his own head." On Sunday, medical investigators in Fort Worth said that they had identified the body of Mr. Koresh and that he had died of a bullet wound in the head. The authorities did not say whether they believed the wound was self-inflicted.

But Dr. Perry said he also told agents that "I thought it was highly probable that he would carry out an abstract suicide -- some way for everyone to die, like setting up a large-scale explosion." Federal officials say that is what Mr. Koresh ultimately did: instead of an explosion, he had cult members set fire to the compound on April 19. The bodies of 72 cult members have been recovered.

Jeffrey Jamar, the F.B.I. agent in charge of the operation at Waco, said last week that he had taken into account Dr. Perry's advice, along with other psychological information that experts gathered about the cult leader during the siege. He said Federal agents had taken Dr. Perry's warning about possible booby traps seriously. But he also repeated what he had said in earlier interviews, that Federal agents had believed that Mr. Koresh would stop short of suicide. No Newcomer to Pain

Dr. Perry, who went to Waco as a volunteer, has worked with children who experienced many kinds of trauma, including sexual and physical abuse at home, violence of inner-city neighborhoods, and even witnessing the murder of their parents.

To the children of the cult, Dr. Perry wrote in his report, "the outside was full of 'bad guys,' unbelievers without the 'light,' evil and hurtful people." To gain their trust, he and his team of psychologists, counselors and child-welfare workers played games with the children, went on walks with them and talked with them for hours.

Some things were impossible to hide. In his report, Dr. Perry noted that several of the girls who were released from the compound "had circular lesions on their buttocks that probably came from being paddled with 'the helper.' "

The report concludes that the children who were released "likely experienced physical punishment as very young children, the girls were likely exposed to inappropriate concepts of sexuality, parental ties were undermined by David, a whole variety of destructive emotional techniques were used including shame, coercion, fear, intimidation, humiliation, guilt, overt aggression and power." Evidence Was Scarce

Texas child-welfare workers made two visits to the compound a year ago to investigate the allegations of abuse by former cult members. But because of the highly secretive nature of the cult, workers were unable to gather enough evidence to justify further legal intervention, said Robert Boyd, program director for the state's Child Protective Services in Waco.

In interviews with Mr. Boyd's workers a year ago, the cult leader denied abusing the children, though he made a point of telling them that he had been abused as a child.

The cult leader, Dr. Perry said, undermined all relationships -- between husbands and wives, between the children and their parents and among the children themselves. This may explain why another of the assumptions held by Federal agents -- that the cult members' parental instincts would ultimately override their devotion to Mr. Koresh -- proved false. Twenty-four children are believed to have been among those who died. The Fear Lives On

In an hourlong interview with one of the mothers released from the compound in the early days of the siege, Dr. Perry said, she brought up David Koresh 24 times, but never once mentioned her husband or their three children. All later died in the fire.

Even outside the cult and the compound, many of the children's lives are still dominated by Mr. Koresh, Dr. Perry said.

"A permeating and pervasive fear of displeasing David or betraying his 'secrets' is present in all of the children -- even those as young as 4 years old," Dr. Perry wrote. "The children have a sense that he will be able to punish them if they violate his prohibitions. They even allude to the fact that he will be able to return from death and punish them or others who betray them."

Outwardly, at least, the children seemed fine to some adults, Dr. Perry said, but their heart rates were elevated to 140, compared with a normal rate of 70 to 90. "It took three weeks to get their heart rates under 100," Dr. Perry said. "These children were in a

persistent state of fear."

Five of the children are still at the group home in Waco, waiting to be placed with relatives. The others are already with family members, who have all been extensively screened by child-welfare workers.

Dr. Perry has remained in close touch with all the families and plans to monitor the children's progress. It is too early, he said, to tell how they will adjust to the world outside the compound. He said some children will probably experience serious problems later on, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, a tendency toward aggression and difficulty in forming intimate attachments.

But he also said that he felt hopeful. "These kids have many strengths," he said. "Most exhibited tenderness and caring toward siblings. The majority were very socially engaging. You liked them. They were nice kids." ----- Questions on Koresh's Corpse

WACO, Tex., May 3 (AP) -- The discovery that Mr. Koresh was shot in the head before a fire destroyed the compound raises many questions, Federal officials say.

Mr. Jamar, the F.B.I. special agent in charge during the standoff with the cult, said today: "The gunfire told us somebody was getting shot. Just who and why is the question."

On Sunday, the authorities said X-rays and dental records proved that a charred body and fragmented skull found three days after the fire were the remains of Mr. Koresh, who was 33.

Toxicology tests will determine how much carbon monoxide was in his body. The higher the level, the greater the likelihood that Mr. Koresh was alive when fire engulfed the compound. Results will take at least a week.