



## Lean On Me:

A caregiver's guide to safeguarding children and supporting healing from sexual abuse.

Trauma-informed, survivor-centered, and DEIB-aligned



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# Introduction

## Making the world a safer place for children

From the time they are born, children depend on their parents and caregivers for love and guidance as they develop. As parents and caregivers, we do all that we can to nurture, teach, and protect our children. As much as we may try, we can't protect our children from everything.

The reality is that child sexual abuse and exploitation are genuine and growing threats to children. According to the CDC, approximately 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys in the United States experiences sexual abuse, and these statistics are likely low due to underreporting. Many of these children are doubly victimized by the documentation of their abuse in images and videos. This documentation, known as child sexual abuse material (CSAM), is often circulated on the Internet.

The U.S. Sentencing Commissioner's October 2021 report, Federal Sentencing of Child Pornography Production Offenses (USSC, 2021), found that "the expansion of digital and mobile technology has contributed to a 422% increase in the number of [CSAM] production offenders sentenced over 15 years." Additionally, in 2020, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline received reports of 65.4 million images and videos of CSAM, an increase of 28% from the year prior. In 2021, the CyberTipline received reports about over 84.9 million images, videos, and other content, an increase of almost 30% (Earn it Act, 2022).

Children with high numbers of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as child sexual abuse and exploitation, are significantly more likely to suffer from mental and physical health issues and struggle in their personal and professional lives.

Few resources are available to equip caregivers with the knowledge and tools to effectively communicate with their children about sexual abuse and exploitation. This guidebook and video series are designed to provide caregivers tools that will help safeguard children and support child survivors of sexual abuse.

## Safeguarding and healing are possible

Caregivers can take steps to monitor children's online behavior and to limit what content reaches them. Both adults and children can learn the signs of a potentially dangerous encounter.

When abuse does occur, creating an environment of open communication, love, and support is critical for both the child and the caregiver. Through cultural- and trauma-informed responses that support emotion regulation and the building of safe networks, survivors can begin the healing process.

## What can we do?

As adults, we can impact the trajectory of a child's life by learning how to safeguard children from sexual abuse and nurture those who have experienced abuse. This guidebook and video series are designed for all types of caregivers. This could be parents or guardians, but also includes extended family, neighbors, mentors, educators, coaches, or anyone else who provides care and support for a child. What matters is the depth of the relationship with the child, not the definition.

By learning about the warning signs of sexual abuse and how to respond to sexual abuse that has occurred, we can work to ensure that children have the childhood they deserve: a childhood free from fear and trauma, where they can thrive.

## How this will help

This guide is designed to

- Help you recognize the online risks to children, how to reduce those risks by implementing safety measures on devices and platforms, and how to maintain open lines of communication about children's online activity.
- Illustrate how children and families are "groomed" online and offline by sexual predators, and how to recognize and respond to signs of grooming.
- Educate you on the signs of sexual abuse, and what to do when a child discloses abuse.
- Provide strategies to care for children who have been sexually abused that will support their overall healing.
- Suggest ways for caregivers to practice self-care.



## **RAINN and No Limit Generation: A Partnership to Protect Children**

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800.656.HOPE, [online.rainn.org](https://online.rainn.org) y [rainn.org/es](https://rainn.org/es)) in partnership with more than 1,000 local sexual assault service providers across the country. RAINN also carries out programs to prevent sexual violence, help survivors, and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

### No Limit Generation

No Limit Generation is on a mission to bring mental health and child well-being into every classroom and home and to create a world where every adult is equipped with the guidance to be an effective role model. In partnership with leading child well-being professionals, NLG develops practical guidance that's designed to engage, inspire, and create sustainable impact. NLG provides human-centered training experiences that help build a community of care and support.

### **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB)**

The incorporation of a DEIB-framework improves the effectiveness of the project objectives. Independent oversight was provided to ensure this training series initiative is grounded in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, survivor-centered, and culturally competent. Together these components informed and shaped each step of the design and development.

### **Warning**

The content of this guidebook may be triggering. We encourage you to take a break from the content as needed and talk to people you trust about your reactions. The video series contains scenes that may be disturbing to some viewers. Please consult with a trauma-informed therapist, or get additional mental health support before viewing. If you are triggered by the content please consult with a confidential specialist at one of these hotlines found on the [American Psychological Association](#) crisis hotline resource page, the [RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline](#), or reach out to your trusted safety network.

# CONTRIBUTORS

We gathered a variety of leading experts to support this learning experience and we would like you to meet them!



## **Martin Andrews**

At 13 years of age, Martin Andrews was abducted from the streets of Portsmouth, Virginia, by a serial sexual predator. He spent the next eight days in an underground bunker enduring physical, sexual, and mental abuse before being chained, abandoned and left to die. Following his rescue, Martin spent the next 30 years of his life unable to speak about the experience, facing the demons of his past alone and in silence. In 2002, learning that his assailant was to be mandatorily paroled in 9 months compelled Martin to speak out about his past. He began a one-man campaign to prevent the release of that dangerous predator. The result of his efforts is the Commonwealth of Virginia's Civil Commitment for Sexually Violent Predators and the Virginia Center for Behavioral Rehabilitation (VCBR), along with much of Virginia's current sexual predator legislation.

Martin Andrews remains an activist for civil commitment programs and regularly speaks to victims advocates, law enforcement, and probation and parole personnel about his personal experiences, civil commitment laws, and working with victims and the media. He regularly speaks with victims' groups, delivering his message of survival, hope, and healing through grace and advocacy.



## **Dr. Devjani (Juni) Banerjee-Stevens**

Dr. Devjani (Juni) Banerjee-Stevens is a licensed psychologist and owner of Deer Park Counseling & Consulting. She is committed to helping individuals, organizations, and communities heal from trauma, one relationship at a time.



## L'Tomay Douglas

L. Tomay Douglas is a daughter, mom, sister, grandmother, wife and survivor who overcame the impact of abusive experiences and is committed to transforming trauma and helping persons to honor the power of their voice.

She is a Restorative Justice Equity Educator, Social Worker, a Racial Justice Advocate, Substance Abuse Counselor, Consultant, and Christian Abundant Life Coach. Her work centers on healing, equity, and justice through education. Tomay is a facilitator with Restorative Justice Education (RJ Ed) and is a Restorative Roots Collaborative member facilitating Participatory Action Research.

Tomay is the co-founder of Worth Justice Inc, a nonprofit to affirm worth, and change lives. She is also the founder of Brand Me Beautiful working with professional men and women of faith impacted by trauma and Responding Restoratively, to assist with Critical Conversations to Build Community, Deepen Relationships, Heal Conflict & Return to Love. She is an international speaker and has presented in Haiti, led roundtable discussions with NGOs addressing violence against women, and facilitated restorative circles with adolescents impacted by HIV in Romania. Her commitment to social and transformative justice deepens her practice and restorative lifestyle. Her guiding principles are love, liberation, truth, justice, healing, and being the mom of two college graduates.



## **Somiari Fubara**

Somiari Fubara CCTP, CCATP, CMHIMP is a certified clinical adolescent and trauma professional, a certified integrative medicine provider, and a certified breath, body, and mind teacher. She is also the Regional Director for Mental Health Services for KIPP NYC schools. Her areas of concentration include trauma, mindfulness, holistic medicine, and spirituality. Somiari is a passionate scholar-practitioner in the field of clinical psychology who divides her time between clinical practice, training, workshops and consulting. As a mental health provider, she uses mindfulness cognitive behavioral therapy (MCBT) and other evidence-based practices to help her clients with a wide range of issues.

Somiari has received extensive training in the treatment of addiction, mental illnesses, emotion/affect regulation, and trauma. In her consulting work, she has provided bullying, violence, and trauma training for elementary, middle, and residential schools. In addition to clinical practice, for 7 years she worked as a consultant counseling Chibok girls that escaped Boko Haram. Somiari has been interviewed by 60 Minutes, CNN, The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Reuters, BBC, and Al Jazeera. As a trauma thriver, her life experiences have fostered her love of, and dedication to the healing of humanity.

Somiari believes she is here to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, and with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. Through her work, she is enriching the world through love, healing, and peace.



## Richard Guerry Biography

Richard Guerry is the founder and Executive Director of the non-profit organization [The Institute for Responsible Online and Cell-Phone Communication \(IROC2\)](#). Throughout the 1990s, Richard worked as an executive in the information technology field. During his tenure, he encountered the darkest areas of the internet and discovered countless individuals unknowingly being manipulated and their content being stolen and exploited. In 2009, Richard left corporate America, and applied his vast experience and knowledge of digital safety to found IROC2.org.

He now speaks to students, educators, parents, child advocates, and law enforcement personnel across the country on the importance of maintaining a Digital Consciousness™ to prevent and avoid current – and future – digital issues. This program has received multiple School Safety Advocacy Councils awards. Since June, 2009, Richard has spoken to well over 3,000 audiences across the United States, Canada and the West Indies ranging from avid to novice digital users, providing his audiences with an entertaining and eye-opening live event that offers a solution-oriented concept of how to avoid any self-inflicted digital problem, which is critical to anyone that uses a digital device.



## Raven Jenerson

A BIPOC, Holistic Trauma Psychotherapist, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Intergenerational Trauma Subject Matter Expert, and International Psychology PhD Student.

In addition to Raven's expertise in intergenerational trauma and clinical social work, Raven centers authenticity, cultural humility, racial equity, social justice and advocacy, trauma-informed, holistic and creative perspectives in her approach to leadership and operational development.



## **Titania Jordan**

Titania Jordan is the CMO and Chief Parent Officer of Bark.us, an internet safety solution that helps parents and schools keep children safer across social media, text messaging, and email. As the current host of Tech Connect, and former host of NBC Atlanta affiliate WXIA's weekly television show Atlanta Tech Edge, Titania has the honor of covering the latest in tech news and talent across both the city and the globe.

In her early career, Titania started her own marketing consulting firm after gaining experience as an account executive with Lincoln Financial Media, working with clients like Whole Foods, Nikon, and Samsung to create campaigns targeting women in the Atlanta market.

Past roles also include serving as the CMO of KidsLink, co-founder and CMO of PRIVET, and Executive Director of Band of Coders Girls Academy.

Titania is the co-author of "Parenting in a Tech World" - offering practical tips, real-world advice from fellow parents, and helpful exercises to walk caregivers through how to nurture a healthy relationship between kids and technology.



## Jann Simmons

Jann began speaking at treatment facilities, followed by university classrooms upon her daughter's urging. The overwhelming response she received when telling her personal story prompted the idea of writing her memoir, [Which Way?](#). Along with her podcast on the Mental Health News Radio, Jann speaks to parents, clinicians, teachers and first responders across the United States. She is frequently interviewed for articles on the topic of trauma, abuse and how to redefine yourself. Sharing her journey has brought her internal peace and hope for others.



## Shari Simmons

Shari has a 30-year career as a Licenced Clinical Social Worker. She has been the Executive Director of several mental health facilities, is currently an adjunct professor, has a private practice, and is a consultant for treatment providers looking to implement evidence-based practices and trauma ingrained care. She is grateful for the opportunity to share expertise on mental health, epigenetics and trauma alongside her mother.



## Jerome Whitehead

Jerome Whitehead is an author, activist, speaker, writer, husband, and survivor of multiple childhood sexual assaults. Jerome has written extensively about the events of his life, including a book titled Groomed.

# Meet the Guidebook Authors



## Jenny Morgan

Jenny Morgan is an educator, nonprofit leader, and content designer who consults with organizations committed to improving the lives and educational experiences of children and adults. Jenny served on California's State SEL Work Group, and in her national work with school and district leaders, Jenny provides tools and training to nurture social, emotional, and academic development and affirming relationships. Jenny also consults with educational and nonprofit agencies to support organizational learning, content and training design, and team development.



## Wendy Baron

Wendy Baron is a teacher, author, researcher, and co-founder and Chief Officer, of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Emeritus, New Teacher Center. Wendy develops tools and professional learning for educators to support an integrated approach of social-emotional-academic development. Wendy recently served on the CA Department of Education SEL Taskforce and has co-led the CA statewide SEL Community of Practice since 2018. Wendy currently collaborates with district and school leaders to design and implement SEL within a system of support for educators, students, and families.

# Meet The Co-Authors



## **Erin Earp, J.D., Senior Legislative Policy Counsel**

Erin is senior legislative policy counsel at RAINN.

Erin works at the federal and state levels to advance anti-sexual violence policies and programs. She is passionate about transforming society's response to sexual violence.

Prior to joining RAINN, Erin was a prosecutor in the Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney for Alexandria, Virginia. She served as a member of the Special Victims' Unit, where she handled sexual assault and exploitation crimes.



## **Somiari Fubara - International Mental Health Consultant and Regional Director of Mental Health Services for KIPP NYC**

Somiari Fubara CCTP, CCATP, CMHIMP is a certified clinical adolescent and trauma professional, a certified integrative medicine provider, and a certified breath, body, and mind teacher. She is also the Regional Director for Mental Health Services for KIPP NYC schools. Her areas of concentration include trauma, mindfulness, holistic medicine, and spirituality. Somiari is a passionate scholar-practitioner in the field of clinical psychology who divides her time between clinical practice, training, workshops and consulting. As a mental health provider, she uses mindfulness cognitive behavioral therapy (MCBT) and other evidence-based practices to help her clients with a wide range of issues. Somiari has received extensive training in the treatment of addiction, mental illnesses, emotion/affect regulation, and trauma. In her consulting work, she has provided bullying, violence, and trauma training for elementary, middle, and residential schools. In addition to clinical practice, for 7 years she worked as a consultant counseling Chibok girls that escaped Boko Haram. Somiari has been interviewed by 60 Minutes, CNN, The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Reuters, BBC, and Al Jazeera.



## **Daphne Pellegrino - Policy and Grassroots Manager at RAINN**

Daphne Pellegrino is the policy and grassroots manager at RAINN. In this position, Daphne leads RAINN's grassroots advocacy efforts and assists with all aspects of the organization's lobbying at the federal and state levels. She is passionate about centering survivors' perspectives and empowering survivors to participate in RAINN's legislative advocacy work. Prior to joining RAINN, Daphne was the U.S. Advocacy Manager for the international press freedom NGO Reporters Without Borders, where she promoted the organization's advocacy in the United States on behalf of imprisoned, at-risk and killed journalists throughout the world.



## **James Harvin**

James Harvin is an Afro-Indigenous DEIB consultant from Harlem, New York. He is passionate about cultivating genuine diversity and equity in organizations by editing curriculums, research, trainings, and speaking at conferences.

# Acknowledgments

We'd like to acknowledge in appreciation the following, for their contributions in making this project possible.



## **OAK Foundation**

Oak Foundation commits its resources to address issues of global, social, and environmental concern, particularly those that have a major impact on the lives of the disadvantaged. Through their grant-making, Oak supports others to make the world a safer, fairer, and more sustainable place to live. With offices in Europe, India, and North America, they make grants to organizations in approximately 40 countries worldwide.



## **Camille Cooper**

Camille Cooper serves as Vice President of Anti Human Trafficking & Child Exploitation for the Tim Tebow Foundation. Camille is an experienced and highly regarded leader specializing in implementing public, regulatory, and government relations strategies. Cooper is also adept in overseeing high-impact initiatives associated with legal, political, and international environments. She brings over 20 years of experience in federal and state legislative drafting, strategizing, and lobbying on topics related to child protection, child exploitation, and anti-child trafficking – as well as gender and media.

Camille has led efforts on over a dozen of the largest reforms on Capitol Hill and she has written and passed over fifty laws to protect children in twenty-four different states. She has expertise in federal and state appropriations where her efforts have directed billions of dollars in federal and state spending to states, organizations and groups who combat gender based violence.

# References

1. Federal Sentencing of Child Pornography: Production Offenses. United States Sentencing Commission. (2021, October 13). Retrieved October 25, 2022, from <https://www.ussc.gov/research/research-reports/federal-sentencing-child-pornography-production-offenses>.
2. *EARN It Act of 2022*. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (2022, January 31). Retrieved October 26, 2022, from <https://www.missingkids.org/blog/2022/earn-it-act-2022>.

## Additional Resources

### General Websites

American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/topics/crisis-hotlines>

RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline

<https://hotline.rainn.org/online>

### Contributors Websites

The Institute for Responsible Online and Cell-Phone Communication (IROC2)

<https://www.iroc2.org/>

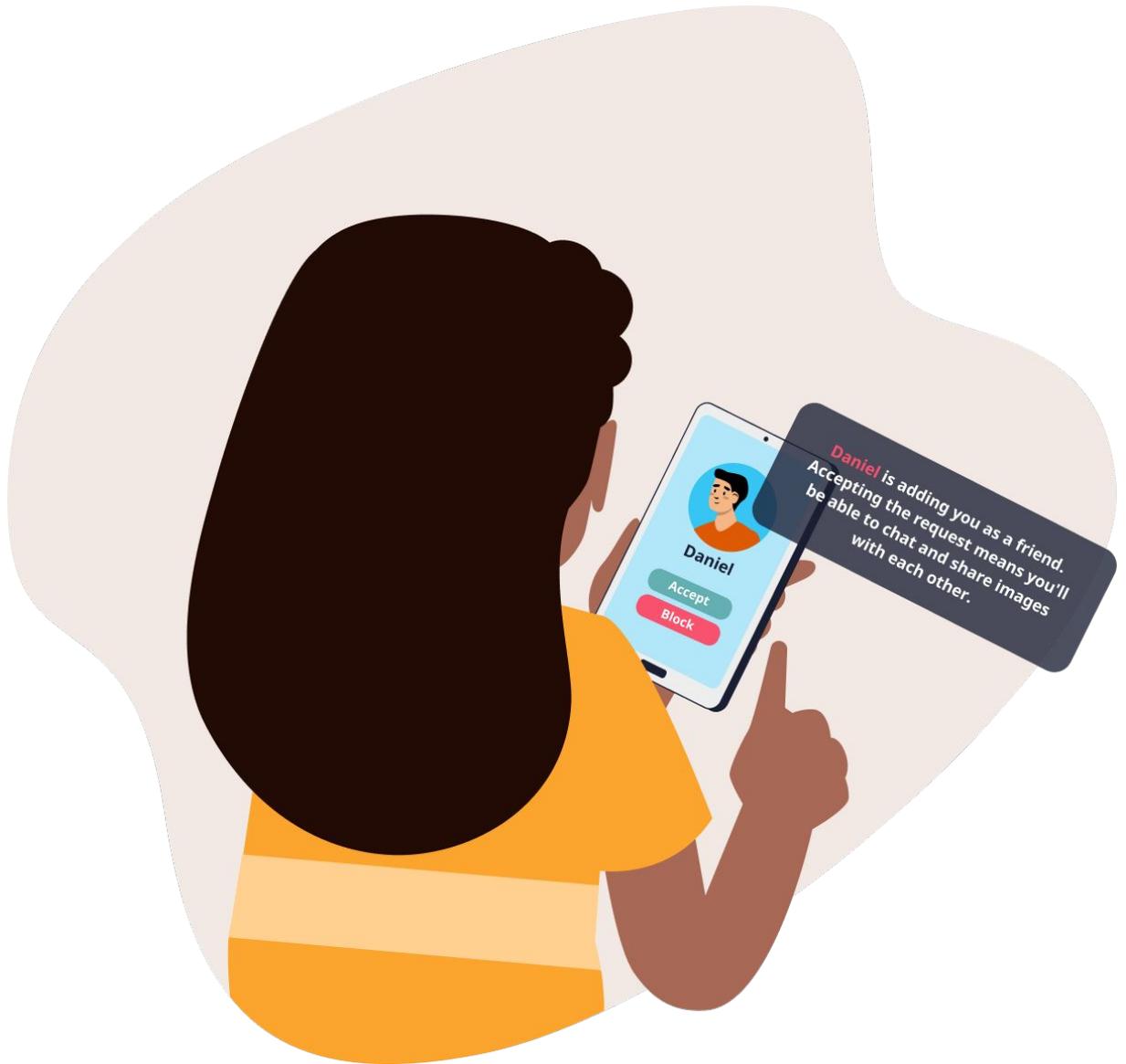
Jerome Whitehead's Publications

<https://www.fourbrotherspublications.com/>

Jann & Shari Simmons' Book

<https://sharisimmons.com/book/>

# Episode 1: What You Should Know to Safeguard Children from Dangerous People Online



## Guiding Questions

1. *How are online platforms used to target children?*
2. *How can we talk to children about online risks?*
3. *How do we protect children's online privacy?*
4. *What tools and resources can we use to ensure children's physical and emotional safety?*

## The Changing Role of Technology in the Lives of Young People

The digital age has provided people of all ages a wealth of opportunities to access information, education, and even friendships in ways that have made technology integral to our everyday lives. Unfortunately, technological advances have also increased the risk and danger of young people becoming targets of sexual abuse and exploitation. Expanded access through unprotected social media profiles, online gaming forums, and even online learning platforms, provide predators a path to “grooming,” and developing a relationship with a child they intend to exploit or abuse. Approximately 40% of sex trafficking survivors are recruited online, making the internet the most common place for child recruitment (United Nations, 2021).

### Who is at Risk?

Recent research indicates that approximately 69% of tweens and 91% of teens have encountered nudity or content of a sexual nature, and nearly one in five youth will be sexually solicited by an online predator (Bark, 2022). These numbers have increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has increased online screen time, limited children's access to support structures, and decreased safe spaces to disclose abuse. Children from historically marginalized groups are at even greater risk of becoming targets of sex trafficking, which often starts with online recruitment. Every child, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, is at risk of being a target of an online predator. It is essential to understand how children are targeted and what parents and caregivers can do to safeguard the children in their lives.

# Access and Grooming are Key Drivers of Online Abuse and Exploitation

## Access

Many of us use a variety of social media apps that connect us to people we know (i.e. Facebook friends), and to people we don't know (i.e. Instagram or Tik Tok influencers). Online abusers use technology to access, profile, recruit, groom, and exploit in ways that can be challenging for both adults and children to recognize. Some examples include:

- Using live chat scams, which provide immediate contact and the opportunity to obtain personal information
- Clickjacking/ratting, which works by tricking people into clicking links that give abusers control of their computer, including a computer's webcam
- Using fake or simulated webcams, which can be used to hide the perpetrator's true identity, including gender and age
- Using gaming platforms to access and interact with children (we will go more into gaming later in this episode)



## Online Grooming

Sexual exploitation and abuse happen through a variety of online platforms. Regardless of the access point, the common behavior of the predator is that of "grooming" or actively seeking out, befriending, and manipulating children with the intent of sexually exploiting them. Online groomers use a variety of tactics to build credibility and trust with a child.

### Stages of Online Grooming

#### ▶ Targeting the child.

Often, a predator uses fake profiles and online personas on social media that match a child's interest. A predator may use information posted by parents to learn more about a child's interests, gain location information, or find out more about other members of the household.

#### ▶ Developing the bond

Predators create a sense of shared interests and understanding with the child by talking about the child's family, friends, and school life. They continue to learn more about the child's hobbies and interests, and may even connect with some of the child's friends on social media. The abuser may also ask the child to share any problems or struggles they're experiencing as a way to deepen the bond and develop a "relationship."

## Access and separation.

During this phase, predators try to determine how much parents and caregivers are monitoring the child's online activities. They may ask questions like, "Are your parents around?" or "Do your parents monitor what you do online?" They might introduce innocent pictures at this stage, and increase their use of compliments to further cement the "bond" with the child.

## Abuse begins

Once the abuser has cemented power over the child (i.e. bond), they begin to normalize sexualized behavior such as describing their body, or saying things like "You're cute" or "You're sexy." Predators will begin showing nude pictures of themselves or requesting pictures from the child. Once the perpetrator determines how a child reacts, they usually continue to push boundaries while making more explicit and frequent demands.

## Maintaining control

Once the sexual abuse occurs, offenders often use secrecy, guilt, and shame to maintain the child's continued participation and silence. If the child attempts to withdraw from the relationship, offenders may threaten the child to maintain control. At this stage predators also try to set up in-person meetings.

(Child Advocacy Centres of Alberta, 2020)



Take a minute and read through the above example. From a young person's perspective, nothing on the screen screams "Predator!" which is exactly what online abusers intend.

## What Can We Do? Suggestions for Protecting Against Online Grooming



*“Much like your job is to help your child become just a responsible, good kind, caring, human. Your job now is also to help them become a responsible digital native. And with that comes helping to instill their ability to decide what's good for them online and what's not so good for them online. And as they grow, you can, peel back those layers of, of control and filtering. But initially, don't hand them a device that can access the entire world.”*

- Titania Jordan  
Chief Parenting Officer, Bark



As parents and caregivers, it can feel overwhelming to try and safeguard children from online groomers. As much as we'd all like to think that we'd know if something were happening, the reality is that many children don't even realize they're being groomed. They often lack the developmental tools to determine appropriate versus inappropriate content and contact; and, as much as we may want to “ban the Internet,” that certainly isn't realistic, or constructive. There are several concrete steps caregivers can take to safeguard children from online grooming. Creating open lines of communication can help promote children's physical and emotional safety online.

**Model safe online behavior.** We know that our actions speak louder than words. Modeling safe behavior provides children with concrete ways to interact online.

- If you are not a child's parent, avoid posting pictures or identifying information about a child, even if you have consent.
- If you are a parent, be cautious of how much identifying information you post online, even on platforms that only consist of your “friends.” If you decide to post pictures, model how to ask for consent by asking your child if you can share images of them online. Explain your rationale (in age-appropriate ways) to your child.
- If you're an educator, leverage lessons that require using the internet, or specific apps to reiterate safe online behaviors. For example, you could explain to students that they should never share personal information, pictures, or respond to any message that makes them feel uncomfortable.

**Talk and be honest about online dangers.** It is important to talk with children of all ages in age-appropriate ways about online risks. Predators rely on children not recognizing their tactics. The goal of talking with children is not to create fear, but to create a safe place for open discussions. Communicating will generate awareness, increase the likelihood of children following your advice, and coming to you if they are approached, or have questions.

- All adults can talk to children of varying ages about the differences between in-person friends, online friends, and strangers. Use conversation starters such as
  - What are ways to determine if you can trust someone you don't know online?
  - Who might you go to for help if something worries, or upsets you online?
- Explain “red flag” behaviors, which include asking for personal information, pictures (of any type), wanting to meet offline, or being asked to keep secrets.
- Teach children of all ages that people online can and do use fake pictures and videos. Explain that there is no way of knowing if online “friends” are who they say they are, and that’s why they need to be cautious about sharing and interacting.

Talking openly about online dangers, creating a shared understanding of predatory behaviors, and creating a safe space for communication is the single most effective way to protect children from the dangers of online grooming. Open communication can also help prevent subsequent acts, including sextortion, meeting the predator in person, or even sex trafficking.

## Enticement and Sextortion

Once an online predator establishes a solid “relationship” built on a high level of trust with a child, the predator engages in more extensive grooming behavior that aims to solidify feelings of comfort, attachment, and safety to introduce sexualized behavior. This behavior may start with the predator sharing more risky pictures, or requests, and encouraging the child to do the same. Predators use the child’s response to these requests to determine how compliant the child will be, and how much adult monitoring is present.

If the child shows discomfort or does not comply with the requests, the predator may intensify their grooming tactics, or resort to threats of harm and exposure. Offenders may show the child satellite images of their home to gain control of the child. If the child gives in and shares explicit pictures or videos, the predator will often increase the frequency of requests for additional content, or shift to requesting in-person contact.

These are all highly manipulative and frightening tactics. Children may be reluctant to disclose abuse because they are ashamed, feel guilty that they complied, or fear the consequences of not complying. According to a 2022 report by Thorn, nearly one-quarter of children stayed in contact with someone online who made them uncomfortable, and LGBTQIA+ youth were more than twice as likely to be in that position (Bouche, 2018).

## What Can We Do? Suggestions for Safeguarding Children from Sextortion

“It's important for caregivers and parents to know the risks associated with online connectivity and technology for kids. The most important thing is to know how to communicate openly with children around what those risks might be, and how to communicate when they feel like they're unsafe.”

- Raven Jenerson  
Intergenerational Trauma Expert

Know the warning signs. Knowing the changes in typical behaviors of a child will help adults understand when to investigate or monitor a child's online interactions more intensively. Signs may be different for every child, but the [Social Media Victims Law Center](#) has identified the following warning signs to pay attention to:



Suddenly becomes secretive about their activities online



Spends more time online than usual



Receives unusual gifts or messages from someone they don't know



Is asked to keep secrets from their parents or other adults



Is asked to meet up with someone they've met only online



Shows a preoccupation with or knowledge of sex that is inappropriate for their age



**Openly discuss possible scenarios.** Keeping open, honest lines of communication with a child is essential to helping them avoid being a target of online grooming, or sextortion. Parents and caregivers can engage a child in age-appropriate examples of behavior that could lead to sextortion. For instance, with middle school or high school children, it might sound something like:

*"I've been reading in the news about a young boy who received a nude picture from a girl he'd never met before...what do you think about this?"*

A child may respond with "I don't know," or they may tell you what they think. In either case, follow their lead. Try not force the conversation. Stay curious, listen, and validate when necessary. If they are willing to talk about it, you could ask, "do you care to share more about your experience, or that of your friend?"

*"So the boy sent a picture back, and it turns out the person sending the picture demanded money, and threatened the boy with sharing the pictures with his family if he didn't send the money. Unfortunately, he was so embarrassed and ashamed that he took his own life."*

At this point, pause to see if your child asks questions, has a physical reaction, or adds another example.

*"I know this kind of thing doesn't happen all the time, but I think it does happen more than we realize. It's impossible to know who is on the other end of a request, or their intent, so I want you to understand why it's so important not to share information, or pictures with someone online. What's even more important to understand is that if you ever find yourself in a situation online where someone is making you uncomfortable, or if you've shared something and then realized it was a mistake, you can and need to tell me about it. Nothing is too big or embarrassing that we can't handle together. If someone is threatening you, they're the ones doing something wrong, not you."*

Unless the child wants to talk more, wrap up the conversation. Be mindful that communication with young people is a balance of validation and empathy. Therefore, it is vital to normalize difficult dialogues by inviting young people to communicate without judgment, shame, or criticism that may silence their voices.

## Gaming

Now more than ever, children live in a gaming culture. It's estimated that half of the children in the U.S. use some type of gaming platform, which means millions of children are, or will be exposed to sexual predators while gaming. A staggering 97% of teenage boys in the U.S. play video games (Clement, 2022).

Online gaming allows children to play with in-person friends, online "friends," and gamers from around the globe. The interactive nature of online gaming is part of its appeal, and also why it can be dangerous. Features such as chat rooms and instant messaging are intended for developing gaming strategies and making friends. These features also open the door to online attackers who may also hack into webcams and audio devices.

## What Can We Do? Suggestions for Safeguarding Children from Online Gaming Predators



*"If you're about to give your child access to a device that connects them to the world, number one, establish trust. It's really important that they feel like they can come to you with a mistake. And it's really important that they understand that if they do make a mistake, we're gonna learn from it and we're gonna move on from it."*

- Richard Guerry  
Executive Director, Institute for Responsible Online and  
Cellphone Communication (IROC2.ORG)



### Safe & Secure Gaming



Know what kinds of games your kids are playing.



Set their profile to private & choose a fun username.



Understand the games' ratings and suggested age range.



Set their profile to private & choose a fun username.



Adjust the parental controls & privacy settings accordingly.



Keep an ear and eye open for changes in speech and behavior.

(Perunicic, 2022)

## Privacy Controls, Monitoring, and Reporting

Fortunately, there are ways to minimize a child's exposure to online exploitation. Electronic devices and online platforms have settings that can limit a child's communication with and from people.

### Suggestions for Creating a Safe Online Environment

- Know the age rating for all platforms, games, and media, and only allow your child to access age-appropriate platforms.
- Monitor your child's time spent browsing and chatting.
- Block location access on all social media apps.
- Adjust settings to make their account as private as possible.
- Keep the child's computer in a public location, and don't allow devices in bedrooms at night.
- Activate parental controls on all devices.
- Install and use the apps your child has so you understand what they are, how they're used, and features that may be dangerous (e.g., chat or instant messaging).

### Suggestions for Parental Controls

At home, parents can limit the website and services children access from any device on their home network by using a parental control router. [Parental control routers](#) offer an easy way to block sensitive content without installing parental control software on every device (Hollingworth, 2022). Parents can install parental control apps on individual devices to limit access to content outside the home. These apps let parents monitor what children are doing on their devices no matter where they are. A comprehensive guide to parental controls can be found at [Common Sense Media](#). Additionally, examples of parental control apps suggested by [Very Well Family](#) can be found below:

- [Qustodio](#)
- [Google Family Link](#)
- [Bark](#)
- [Canopy](#)
- [NetNanny](#)
- [Family Time](#)
- [Life 360](#)

While it may feel like a breach of privacy or “helicopter parenting,” researching and monitoring apps helps protect young people in online environments. In reality, nearly 1 in 5 children will be a target of online sexual abuse, and the risk is even higher for children who have experienced prior sexual or physical abuse.

The other reality is children are not always developmentally ready to recognize potential dangers, or to know what to do if they encounter them. Combining technology safety nets with open conversations will provide multiple layers of safety, support, and trust.

## Key Takeaways

- As society navigates the realities of a digital world, online child exploitation emerges as a significant area of concern as young people have more opportunities for engagement via technology than ever before.
- A wide range of online sites and apps are potentially dangerous; from email to TikTok, to gaming sites, apps, and even homework sites.
- Sexual predators use a tactic called “online grooming,” which follows a predictable path of creating a sense of trust and safety with children before making sexualized requests and threats.
- Fortunately, many safeguards help caregivers monitor a child’s online activity.
- Creating an emotionally safe environment with open lines of communication is a vital lever for protecting children.

## Reflective Questions

- *In your specific role in a child’s life, how can you empower children to set online boundaries without inciting fear or blame?*
- *What are some conversation starters that will build open lines of communication about online dangers?*
- *What is the next step for creating a safe online environment for children in your care?*

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# Additional Resources

## Who Is at Risk?

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10538712.2020.1801938?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=wcsa20>  
<https://www.bark.us/annual-report-2021/>

## Suggestions for Parental Controls

<https://www.lifewire.com/best-parental-control-routers-4160776>  
<https://www.common sense media.org/articles/parents-ultimate-guide-to-parental-controls>  
<https://www.verywellfamily.com/best-parental-control-apps-4779963>  
<https://www.qustodio.com/en/>  
<https://families.google.com/familylink/u%20%5B2%5D>  
<https://www.bark.us/>  
<https://canopy.us/parental-control-app-technology/>  
<https://www.netnanny.com/>  
<https://familytime.io/>  
<https://www.life360.com/>

# Episode 2: Keeping Children Safe in Your Home and Community



## Guiding Questions:

1. *Who is most vulnerable to sexual abuse and why?*
2. *What is the “classic profile” of an abuser?*
3. *What are the “Stages of Grooming?” How does an abuser groom an individual, a family, or the community?*
4. *What are the warning signs that a child is being groomed?*
5. *What can we do to prevent grooming and sexual abuse?*

## Offline Dangers

In Episode 1, we learned about online dangers, and how predators use the internet to identify and groom children. We also learned some key strategies for keeping children safe on the internet. In this episode, we shift to learning how we can keep children safe from predators within their homes, and communities. While it is important to be aware of and teach children about “stranger danger,” the reality is that the vast majority (approximately 90%) of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child knows. About 60% are abused by someone the child knows and trusts, such as a caretaker, coach, clergy person, other family members, family friend, or another child. Approximately 30% of sexually abused children are abused by family members such as parents, or guardians (Darkness to Light, 2021). The trust, acceptance, and familiarity between a child and a predator make it easier for the predator to abuse the child, and more difficult for the child to process and disclose the abuse. Whereas online predators use fake pictures or profiles to hide their identity, predators in the community often develop double lives where they become pillars of the community to establish credibility if a child discloses abuse.

Similar to an online predator’s fake profile, in-person predators do not look like abusers, but like “everyday people.” Just as there is no single “classic profile” of an abuser, there is no single profile of who is at risk of abuse. In this episode, we will explore the risk factors for sexual abuse, what offline grooming looks like, the complex challenges of sexual abuse within the family, and what we can do to empower and protect children.

## Who is at Risk?

According to the Children’s Assessment Center, located in Houston, TX, it is impossible to know the prevalence of child sexual abuse because so many children do not report it. Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men are sexually abused before 18. This number translates to more than 42 million adult survivors of sexual abuse in the United States (Child Assessment Center).

Children of every gender, gender expression, race, age, ethnicity, background, socioeconomic status, and family structure are at risk of sexual abuse. The Child Assessment Center identifies the following factors that make a child even more vulnerable to abuse (*Child Sexual Abuse Facts & Resources – Children’s Assessment Center, 2022*):

### **Gender**

Gender is a major factor in sexual abuse. Females are five times more likely to be abused than males (Sedlack et al., 2010). The age of the abused male also plays a part. 8% of survivors age 12-17 are male. 26% of survivors under 12 are male (Snyder, 2000).

### **Age**

Age is a significant factor in sexual abuse. While there is a risk for children of all ages, children are most vulnerable to abuse between the ages of 7 and 13 (Finkelhor, 1994). The median age for reported abuse is nine years old (Putnam, 2003). However, more than 20% of children are sexually abused before age 8 (Snyder, 2000).

### **Race and ethnicity**

Race and ethnicity are important factors in identified sexual abuse. Black children have almost twice at risk of sexual abuse than white children. Hispanic or Latino children have a slightly greater risk than white children (Sedlack et al., 2010).

### **Communities of color typically don't talk about these topics due to the following:**

- Cultural and/or religious beliefs
- Strong loyalty binds to race, culture, and family
- Distrust of law enforcement, criminal justice system, and social services
- Lack of service providers who look like the survivor or share common experiences
- Lack of trust based on a history of racism and classism in the United States
- Fear that their experience will reflect on or confirm stereotypes based on their ethnicity

## Children from Historically Marginalized and Oppressed Groups

Children who live within systems of oppression that include racism, ableism, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, and transphobia are at greater risk of sexual abuse than white children.

## Children with disabilities

Most studies have reported that children with disabilities are at greater risk for sexual abuse. According to Saprea, a nonprofit seeking to liberate individuals and society from child sexual abuse, children with disabilities are at least three times more likely to be sexually abused. (Saprea, 2021)

## Socioeconomic status

Children in low socioeconomic status households are three times as likely to be identified as survivors of child abuse (Sedlack et al., 2010), and African American girls of low socio-economic status are at particularly high risk of commercial sexual exploitation (Kruger, et. al., 2013; Self-Brown, et. al., 2013).

## Location

Children who live in rural areas are almost two times more likely to be survivors of child sexual abuse (Sedlack et al., 2010).

## Prior abuse

Children who witness, or are survivors of other crimes are significantly more likely to be sexually abused (Finkelhor, 2010).

## Additional Risk Factors

In addition to the above data on what increases the risk of sexual abuse for children, Saprea (2021) identifies the following additional risk factors:

- For example, a **stressful home environment** makes an adult who promises stability and security appealing, even if that stability comes with unwanted behaviors.
- Children with **low self-esteem**, or who feel **lonely** are at increased risk because they may be drawn to an adult who offers flattery, gifts, or special attention.
- Children who **identify as LGBTQIA+** often feel socially isolated and alienated as they seek to understand their sexual and gender identity, and perpetrators may take advantage of the child's vulnerability.
- Finally, as noted in Episode 1, **unmonitored access to technology** increases the risk of a child being a target of sexual abuse.

## Offline Grooming

Unlike online grooming, offline grooming is often perpetrated by adults children know and trust because they can begin grooming a child without raising suspicion. For instance, it may not seem unusual for someone to see a little league coach paying attention to a child on the team. Some abusers also “groom” young people’s families or communities, which provides even easier access to a child by gaining the trust of parents, caregivers, and community members. Like online grooming, offline grooming follows a predictable path designed to manipulate, and maintain power and control over the child.

“I realized that’s how he gained access to a lot of the boys. He went to homes where fathers were not present and availed himself under the guise of being a father figure...that’s just how he gained access to children.”

- Jerome Whitehead  
Author, activist, speaker

### THE STAGES OF GROOMING

Stage	Description	Example
<b>Targeting the Child</b> 	Perpetrators may target and exploit a child’s perceived vulnerabilities including emotional neediness, isolation, neglect, a chaotic home life, or lack of parental oversight, etc.	The offender will pay special attention to or give preference to a child.
<b>Gaining the Child's &amp; Caregiver's Trust</b> 	Perpetrators work to gain the trust of parents/caregivers to lower suspicion and gain access to the child by providing seemingly warm yet calculated attention/support. The perpetrator gains the child’s trust by gathering information about the child, getting to know their needs, and finding ways to fill those needs.	"I saw you reading the new Superman comic. I'm planning to go see the new movie, I can take you if you want to go."

<p><b>Filling a Need</b></p> 	<p>Once the perpetrator begins to fill the child's needs, they may assume noticeably more importance in the child's life. Perpetrators utilize tactics such as gift-giving, flattery, gifting money, and meeting other basic needs. Tactics may also include increased attention and affection towards the targeted child.</p>	<p>"I know you love jewelry so I got you this watch."</p>
<p><b>Isolating the Child</b></p> 	<p>The perpetrator uses isolation tactics to reinforce their relationship with the child by creating situations in which they are alone together (babysitting, one-on-one coaching, "special" trips). The perpetrator may reinforce the relationship with the child by cultivating a sense that they love and understand the child in a way that others, even their parents, cannot. The adult can start to tell the child that no one cares for them the way they do, not even their parents.</p>	<p>"You can trust me because no one understands you the way I do."</p>
<p><b>Sexualizing the Relationship</b></p> 	<p>Once emotional dependence and trust have been built, the perpetrator progressively sexualizes the relationship. This occurs through talking, pictures, and creating situations in which both are naked (swimming). The adult exploits the child's natural curiosity and trust by using stimulation to advance the sexual nature of the relationship.</p>	<p>"Have you ever masturbated? I can show you how, it feels really good."</p>
<p><b>Maintaining Control</b></p> 	<p>Once sexual abuse is occurring, perpetrators commonly use secrecy, blame, and threats to maintain the child's participation and continued silence. To maintain control, perpetrators use emotional manipulation; they make the child believe they are the only person who can meet their emotional and material needs. The child may feel that the loss of the relationship, or the consequences of exposing it, will be more damaging and humiliating than continuing the unhealthy relationship.</p>	<p>"If you tell anyone, we both could go to jail, We won't be able to be together." Or "If you tell anyone, something bad could happen to your family."</p>

(Darkness to Light, 2021)

“If someone had taken the time to notice my behavior of being extremely withdrawn...I was always very terrified; I didn't speak much[,] I didn't interact much. I think those are telltale signs that a caregiver or a parent can watch for in a child because that's not child behavior. They're playful, they're energetic, and I wasn't; I was extremely withdrawn because I was terrified of being hurt.”

- Jan Simmons  
Speaker, Author

”

## The Role of Power and Privilege in Grooming

It is critical to name the roles of power, position, and privilege in abusers maintaining control over their targets. Historically in the United States, white men have been in positions of power and have maintained control over communities of color. As with other forms of abuse and oppression, BIPOC children, children with disabilities, children in poverty, and LGBTQIA+ youth are often disproportionately targets of sexual abuse, and trafficking.

## What Can We Do? Suggestions for Protecting Against Grooming

“Kids need to understand grooming and how it can happen to anyone.”

- Jerome Whitehead  
Author, activist, speaker

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Experts in child sexual abuse and grooming agree that the most effective way to protect children is to create an environment of trust, and open communication. Children are more comfortable talking about dangers, warning signs, and action steps when they can do so in a safe space. RAINN suggests the following ways to help protect children against grooming and sexual abuse:

## Be involved in the child's life.

Being actively involved in a child's life can make warning signs of child sexual abuse more obvious, and help the child feel more comfortable coming to their caregiver if something is not right. Below are some protective actions to take:

### For caregivers:

- **Get to know the people in your child's life.** Know whom your child is spending time with, including other children and adults. Ask your child about the kids they go to school with, the parents of their friends, and other people they may encounter, such as teammates, or coaches. Talk about these people openly, and ask questions so your child can feel comfortable doing the same (RAINN, 2022).
- **Choose caregivers carefully.** Be diligent about screening caregivers for your child, whether it is a babysitter, a new school, or an after school activity.
- **Talk about the media.** Incidents of sexual abuse are frequently covered by the news, and portrayed in television shows. Ask your child questions about this coverage to start a conversation. Questions like, "Have you ever heard of this happening before?" or "What would you do if you were in this situation?" can signal to your child that these are important issues they can discuss with you. [Learn more](#) about talking to your kids about sexual abuse (RAINN, 2022).

### For all adults who interact with children:

- **Show interest in their day-to-day lives.** Ask them what they did during the day, and with whom they spent time. Who did they sit with at lunchtime? What games did they play after school? Did they enjoy themselves (RAINN, 2022)?
- **Know the warning signs.** Become familiar with the [warning signs of child sexual abuse](#), and notice any changes with a child, no matter how small. Whether it is happening to your child, or a child you know, you have the potential to make a big difference in that person's life by paying attention (RAINN, 2022).

### Physical signs

- Bleeding, bruises, or swelling in genital area
- Bloody, torn, or stained underclothes
- Difficulty walking, or sitting

- Frequent urinary or yeast infections
- Pain, itching, or burning in genital area

### **Behavioral signs**

- Changes in hygiene, such as refusing to bathe, or bathing excessively
- Develops phobias
- Exhibits signs of depression, anxiety, complex post traumatic stress disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other mental health issues
- Expresses suicidal thoughts or ideations, especially in adolescence
- Has trouble in school, such as absences, or drops in grades
- Inappropriate sexual knowledge or behaviors
- Nightmares, or bed-wetting
- Being secretive about how they're spending time, including online
- Having money, or new things like clothes they can't, or won't explain
- Overly protective and concerned for siblings, or assumes a caretaker role
- Returns to regressive behaviors, such as thumb sucking
- Runs away from home, or school
- Self-harm
- Shrinks away, or seems threatened by physical contact

### **Encourage children to speak up.**

When someone knows that their voice matters, it gives them the courage to speak up no matter what.. Caregivers can start having these conversations with their children as soon as they begin identifying feelings or emotions (RAINN, 2022).

- **Teach your child about boundaries.** Let your child know that no one has the right to touch them, or make them feel uncomfortable — this includes hugs from grandparents, or even tickling from mom or dad. It is important to let your child know their body is their own, and equally important that they know they do not have the right to touch someone else if that person does not want to be touched.

- **Teach your child how to talk about their bodies.** From an early age, teach your child the names of their body parts. Teaching a child these words gives them the ability to come to you whenever Learn more about [talking to children about sexual abuse](#) (RAINN, 2022)
- **Be available.** Set aside time for undivided interaction. Let your child know they can come to you if they have questions, or if someone is talking to them in a way that makes them uncomfortable. If they do come to you with questions or concerns, give them space, and time to talk.
- **Let the child know they won't get in trouble.** Many perpetrators use secret-keeping, or threats to silence children. e. Remind the child frequently that they will not get in trouble for talking to you about difficult, or comfortable things. When they come to you, avoid punishment.
- **Give children the chance to raise new topics.** Sometimes asking questions like, "Did you have fun?" and "Was it a good time?" will not give you the answers you need. Give children a chance to bring up their concerns, or ideas by asking open-ended questions like "Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

Finally, be vigilant and take heart, knowing that proactively educating yourself, informing other people in the child's life, and creating open lines of dialogue, will help prevent abuse and empower youth to know how to speak up for themselves.

## Challenges When the Perpetrator Is a Family Member

When a family member is the perpetrator, the process of grooming a child follows a similar path as that of online grooming, and they may treat the child differently than other children in the family. This type of grooming behavior may look like additional "affection", favoritism, or harsher treatments, such as punishments, or threats. Abusers often take advantage of family systems issues. For example, if they sense a "weak" relationship within the family system, abusers will exploit that weakness to create separation, and gain trust.

Children abused by a family member face additional hurdles to disclosing, and healing from the abuse. They are more likely to blame themselves for the abuse, which is particularly true of older children who may also be aware of the impact on other family members if they disclose the abuse (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2009). The child may be worried about the family's safety, financial security, among other things. The child may not want to disrupt the family, or take the abuser away from other relatives.

If the child does disclose, they may feel responsible for any hardships the family suffers following disclosure. Sometimes, in the aftermath of the stress of disclosing, children will recant or “take back” the disclosure (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2009). Additionally, sexual abuse perpetrated by a family member may cause different types of toxic stress, trauma, mental health issues, and emotional reactions for the protective caregivers.

## What Can We Do? Suggestions for Protecting Children from Abuse By a Family Member



*“If trauma is not transformed, it's transmitted.”*

- L'Tomay Douglas  
Restorative Equity Educator



### **Listen to and believe the child.**

In addition to the strategies and suggestions named earlier for protecting children against grooming and abuse, the most important thing to do as a trusted adult in a child's life is to empathize, validate, and offer support. Episode 3 will address how to support children who disclose abuse in more detail.

### **Pay attention to your feelings and reactions.**

Parents and caregivers may experience a range of emotions. Some people may be very reactive, while others may be responsive. All feelings and experiences are valid. Caregivers should be aware that some reactions may lead to further harm for everyone within the family. As caregivers tend to their feelings, it will be essential for them to continue expressions of love, support, and validation for the child, preferably with the help of a trauma-informed, culturally competent therapist, or with people within their safety network.

## How to “TALK” with a loved one about sexual violence

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When someone you love discloses that they have experienced sexual violence, you may not know what to say. RAINN's TALK' method can help you remember how to respond with empathy.



## Accessing Support and Resources

When a child has been sexually abused, everyone involved will need frequent and consistent validation that the abuse was not their fault. Every year there are thousands of reports of child sexual abuse, and resources are available to help these children and their families.

### What Can We Do? Suggestions for Accessing Support and Resources

“Therapy was my path to getting to a better place. I had to stop the messages my past was giving me – that I was not worthy, not lovable, and not wanted. One of my therapeutic exercises was to write positive messages on my mirror. For a long time, I didn't believe those words. Then, one day, I did! We can redo the messages that we were given while growing up. This exercise changed the direction of my life. I also needed to accept my inner child. We have all got that little child within us. It's the bravest part of us.”

- Jan Simmons  
Speaker, Author

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## Support yourself, then support the child

While the child's health and well-being are paramount, it can be challenging to help the child heal without supporting yourself. Support for your child and yourself may look different from the paths others choose. It is important to consider what feels safe and familiar within your culture, and community. Support may be in the form of a trusted family member, friend, or community support group. It may also be helpful to set aside time for positive experiences. If accessible, consider talking to a trauma-informed, culturally competent therapist. Individual counseling allows you to focus entirely on yourself and your concerns without worrying about how the child or others close to you will react to those thoughts.

## Resources to help.

*If you or a child are in immediate danger, call 911.*

- National Sexual Assault Hotline connects you to a trained staff member from your local sexual assault service provider. 1.800.656.HOPE (4673).
- Online Hotline: visit [online.rainn.org](https://online.rainn.org) to chat one-on-one with a trained RAINN support specialist, 24/7. This support is confidential and provided by a diverse group of specialists.
- **Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence:** A national resource center on domestic violence, sexual violence, trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence in Asian and Pacific Islander communities. This organization provides local referrals to survivors in Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Also, it works to create systemic change by providing training to professionals and advocating for research-based policy changes.
- **Black Survivors:** [Ujima](#), the National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community works to respond to and end domestic, sexual, and community violence in the Black community through research, public awareness, community engagement, and resource development.
- **National Child Abuse Hotline:** They can provide local referrals for services. A centralized call center allows the caller to talk with or text a counselor. They are also connected to a language line that can provide service in over 140 languages. Call or text hotline: 800.422.4453.

## Key Takeaways

- Although no child is immune from the dangers of grooming and sexual abuse, there are known characteristics that increase a child's risk, and make them more vulnerable to sexual predators.
- Sexual predators can be pillars of the community, and hold positions of power and privilege.
- Sexual predators use a tactic called "grooming," which follows a predictable path of creating a sense of trust and safety with children before making sexualized requests and threats. Unlike online groomers, in-person groomers often simultaneously groom a family and community to build credibility.
- Being involved and aware of the adults in a child's life is a key step in preventing grooming, and sexual abuse.
- Recognizing the signs of grooming can help prevent potential abuse.
- There is no single "profile" of a sexual predator, and they may be family members, or other youth.
- Children from historically marginalized communities may lack power, and agency due to intersecting identities, and historical systems of oppression.
- **Listening to, validating, and supporting children through culturally sensitive approaches, is a good path to healing.**

## Reflective Questions

- *In your specific role, how can you empower children to set boundaries to support their overall safety and privacy without inciting fear, or placing blame?*
- *What are some things you should pay attention to in determining whether a child in your care is vulnerable to a sexual predator?*
- *If you are an educator, or community member, what do you know about the cultural norms of the children in your care (if they differ from yours)? What do you want to commit to learning more about?*

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## Additional Resources

### Who is at Risk?

<https://cachouston.org/prevention/child-sexual-abuse-facts/>

### Children with Disabilities

<https://defendinnocence.org/child-sexual-abuse-risk-reduction/proactive-parenting/reduce-risk/11-factors-that-increase-the-risk-of-child-sexual-abuse/>

### What Can We Do? Suggestions for Protecting Against Grooming

<https://www.rainn.org/articles/how-can-i-protect-my-child-sexual-assault>

### Behavioral Signs

<https://www.rainn.org/articles/depression>

<https://cptsdfoundation.org/2021/04/05/childhood-sexual-abuse-and-complex-post-traumatic-stress-disorder/>

<https://www.rainn.org/articles/post-traumatic-stress-disorder>

<https://www.rainn.org/articles/self-harm>

### Encourage Children to Speak Up

<https://rainn.org/get-information/sexual-assault-prevention/talking-to-your-kids-about-sexual-assault>

### Resources to Help

<https://ujimacommunity.org/who-we-are/>

# Episode 3: What to Do When a Child Tells You They Were Abused



**Children often try to disclose abuse in non-verbal ways.** This drawing was made by a 3rd grade sexual abuse survivor. (Malchiodi, 1998) Lack of doors on this house and dark smoke or clouds may indicate all is not well in the child's world.

## Guiding Questions

1. *What are the signs of sexual abuse?*
2. *What might disclosure of sexual abuse look and sound like?*
3. *What responses can best support a child who has disclosed sexual abuse?*
4. *In what ways do culture and context influence decisions about services and support?*
5. *Why is self-care important for caregivers, and what are some self-care strategies?*

In Episode 1, we learned about online dangers and how predators use the internet to identify and groom children. We also learned some critical strategies for keeping children safe on the internet. In Episode 2, we explored ways to help keep kids safe from predators they may encounter in their homes and communities.

In this episode, we will examine how to identify potential abuse and some ways to best support children who share that they have been or are currently being sexually abused. An adult's response to a child's disclosure and subsequent actions play a critical role in the ongoing journey toward healing.

## Signs of Abuse

A verbal disclosure from a child experiencing sexual abuse is rare, so recognizing the warning signs can be crucial to support and protect the child. While physical evidence of sexual abuse is often scarce, sexually transmitted infections, or signs of trauma to the genital area are warnings that abuse may be occurring. Behavioral and emotional signs are more common and may surface at home, school, or in other situations.



## What Signs of Abuse Should I Watch for in Children?

Behavioral	Psychological
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Excessive crying, vomiting, feeding or bowel problems (children under 3)</li><li>• Failure to thrive (children under 3)</li><li>• Changes in sleeping habits</li><li>• Self harm or suicidal gestures</li><li>• New fear of people or places</li><li>• Regressing to younger behaviors like bedwetting and thumb sucking</li><li>• New words for private body parts and no obvious source or explanation for those words</li><li>• Resists removing clothes for bathing or changing clothes</li><li>• Acting out in a sexualized way with toys or objects; playing sexual games</li><li>• Excessive masturbation</li><li>• Nightmares or other changes in sleeping habits</li><li>• Changes in eating habits or eating disturbances</li><li>• Running away from home</li><li>• Frequent school absences</li><li>• Changes in school performance</li><li>• Risky behaviors such as using drugs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anxiety</li><li>• Depression and irritability</li><li>• Suicidal thoughts and feelings of hopelessness</li><li>• Physical pain that cannot be medically explained</li><li>• Disconnecting, or “zoning out”</li></ul>
Emotional	Physical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shame</li><li>• Fear</li><li>• Confusion</li><li>• Self-blame</li><li>• Guilt</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unexplained bruises, cuts, or scrapes</li><li>• Vaginal or anal injuries</li><li>• Urinary tract infection</li><li>• Yeast infections</li><li>• Sexually transmitted infection</li><li>• Pregnancy</li></ul>

Signs of abuse tend to occur in clusters, and any one sign doesn't necessarily mean that a child was, or is being sexually abused. Several warning signs indicate the need to find out more information, and consider seeking help.

## What Can We Do? Recognizing and Preventing Suspected Abuse

### Educate yourself and your community.

- If you are an educator, lean on school or district mental health professionals, counselors, and school psychologists to educate staff and parents about the signs of abuse, AND age-appropriate, healthy sexual development.
- If you are an educator or other professional who works with children, establish policies and practices that reduce the risk of sexual abuse, such as limits on when and if adults may be alone with children.
- If you are a community member, coach, or clergy member, enlist county and city mental health professionals to educate your staff and community about the signs of abuse, AND age-appropriate, healthy sexual development.
- For all adults, pay attention when another adult, or older child disregards boundaries when it comes to:
  - **Personal space** (excessive hugging, tickling, or wrestling, even when the child does not want this type of contact; walking in on children, or teens in the bathroom)
  - **Relationships with children** (turns to a child for emotional or physical comfort by sharing private information; insists on uninterrupted time alone with a child)
  - **Sexual conversations, or behavior** (points out sexual images, or tells suggestive jokes; is overly interested in the sexual interactions of a particular child)
  - **For a complete list of tips, see [Stop It Now!](#)**

## Disclosing Sexual Abuse

### How Do I Recognize Disclosure?

Disclosure refers to when an individual tells someone they have been sexually abused, or feel at risk of being sexually abused. Disclosing abuse can be a terrifying and challenging process, especially for children.

Nearly 90% of childhood sexual abuse is never reported, and when it is, the disclosure is often delayed until well into adulthood. In a study of over 1,000 survivors, the average age of reporting child sex abuse was about 52 years. (Durbin, 2022) If children do disclose, it is rarely done directly. Disclosure is a process, not an event, and disclosure may be:

- Purposeful, or accidental
- Spontaneous, or prompted
- Explicit, or vague



This variation is also impacted by the child's age, developmental factors, and the relationship with the abuser. Most children will indirectly share information, meaning they will often omit details, or will share only limited information unless they are prompted to share more. For example, a child may say, "Sometimes my step-mom keeps me up at night" (Childhelp, 2022). Disclosures are usually made in a language that is developmentally appropriate for the child's age. Younger children tend to "tip-toe" when they disclose, and it can be easy to dismiss or redirect them.

For example, a child might start with, "Mr. Murphy is not a nice man." In this case, responding with an open-ended, neutral question like, "What do you mean?" will open the door for the child to share more as opposed to a corrective statement like, "Oh, don't say that. He is very nice."

In other cases, a child may “disguise” their disclosure by saying something like, “I have a friend who is being abused.” Or, they may hint by saying, “My friend told me...” (ChildHelp, 2022). In other cases, a child may no longer want to see someone they have spent time with in the past. As previously mentioned, not all disclosures are direct, and requires an attentive and attuned adult to “hear” the message.

### **What Impedes, or Facilitates a Child’s Disclosure?**

Many factors can impact whether a child discloses sexual abuse. Knowing these factors can help facilitate disclosures, and ensure children get the support they need. Research shows that younger children, specifically boys, are less likely to disclose due to proximity to the perpetrator, type of abuse, and rigid notions of masculinity defined by society. Studies focused on how race, ethnicity, and culture impact disclosure provide mixed results, and have primarily been done in the United States, or other Western cultures. However, there are many indicators that cultural concepts of shame, embarrassment, honor, modesty, and differences in collectivist and individualistic societies, impact children’s disclosure of sexual abuse.

The Joshua Center on Child Sexual Abuse Prevention describes the following barriers that make disclosure difficult. Barriers are when the child:

- Anticipates negative social reactions, including perceived limited support, and lack of understanding from adults
- Fears negative consequences for themselves and others, such as losing familial support, ruined reputation, social shame, violating family honor, or being killed
- Fears negative consequences for the offender (such as imprisonment), or for their family (such as breaking up the family)
- Feels guilt, shame, and responsibility for the perpetrator’s actions.
- Fears the abusers threats will happen

The following conditions **facilitate** disclosure, or make it more likely:

- The child has developmentally appropriate information about sexual abuse
- Adults are regulated and avoid projecting their emotions
- Adults provide positive emotional support
- The abuse was extra-familial (not perpetrated by someone within the family)

## How to Handle a Disclosure

Revealing a “secret” can be hard, even for adults. A response to a child’s disclosure is critical because it sets the tone and trajectory for continuous disclosure over time, and begins the path towards healing.

### The importance of first responses to disclosure.

When disclosing, a child will often minimize, or hint at the abuse to get a sense of the reaction or response they will get. According to recent research that analyzed data collected from RAINN’s National Sexual Assault Online Hotline,

**73%** of children described receiving a negative reaction to their disclosure of sexual abuse.

These reactions included distracting or dismissing the child (33%), not believing the child (29%), retaliating, or responding violently following the disclosure (10%) (S.A. Elliot et al., 2022).

These findings have stark implications since research has shown that the first response to a child’s disclosure of sexual abuse can impact their healing journey. “When met with a validating response, disclosure itself can be therapeutic and ameliorate the profound isolation caused by abuse (Easton, 2019; Easton & Parchment, 2021).” According to research, supportive responses from parents have been associated with emotional and behavioral adjustment (Elliott & Carnes, 2001).

“The way a parent, or someone a child trusts reacts to disclosure can have a lasting impact on them. My own experience when I informed my mother about the abuse I was experiencing was devastating. She punished me rather than listening to me, or understanding the situation I was experiencing.”

- Jerome Whitehead  
Author, activist, speaker

”

As a child, RAINN Speakers Bureau member Jerome Whitehead was sexually abused. One night, his abuser kept Jerome out all night against his will. When Jerome returned home, his mother did not ask him questions about where he had been, or why he had been out all night, even though this was not typical behavior. Instead, Jerome describes her response as “act, react, and punish.” In other words, she punished Jerome for being out without asking why. This response—which led to the caregiver disciplining a sexually abuse child—contributed to additional trauma at the hands of the caregiver. This is also an example of a missed opportunity to create an environment where a child feels safe enough to disclose a traumatic event. After many years, Jerome told his mother what happened that night, and she was finally able to apologize for her role in his trauma.

### What Can We Do? Supporting a Child Who Discloses Abuse

Below are steps all parents and caregivers can take to support a child who is disclosing—or attempting to disclose—sexual abuse:

- 1. Remain calm.** It can be shocking to hear about abuse, especially as a caregiver; And if that caregiver is an abuse survivor, it can be re-traumatizing. Disclosure is also traumatizing, and it is critical to prioritize the child’s needs and experience over your own.
- 2. Explain your emotional reaction if you are unable to remain calm.** If your first response is a negative reactions, please take the time to explain, and name your feelings (sadness, anger, shock). Also take the time to reassure the child that you are not upset with them, and that they are not in trouble.
- 3. Listen more, talk less.** Active listening supports and empowers the child (Childhelp, 2022).
  - Getting down to the child’s level (e.g., sit, kneel) when speaking with them
  - Nod and use verbal cues (ie. “mm hmm”)
  - Let the child set the pace, and avoid interrupting with advice, or unnecessary questions. Use phrases like, “Thank you for telling me.” and “I believe you.”
  - Avoid advice, and let the child speak in ways that are comfortable for them.
  - Be reflective in your conversation with the child. Use their words verbatim even if the words are negative. If the abuser is a family member, or friend, the child may have conflicting, or confusing feelings about them that are hard to process in the moment.

4. **Question carefully.** Rapid-fire questions will only increase the child's anxiety, and asking for details can make it harder for them to talk about the abuse.
  - Limit questioning to only the following four questions: What happened? When did it happen? Where did it happen? And who did it and how do you know them? (ChildHelp, 2022)
  - Do not ask questions that imply the child was at fault, such as "Why didn't you tell me before? What were you doing there? Are you telling the truth?" (ChildHelp, 2022)
5. **Look for and respond to signs that the child is reliving the trauma.** The child may become flooded with emotions, and relive the experience. Support the child by:
  - Encouraging them to take slow, deep breaths; sitting on the floor; and holding onto their knees may help.
  - Ask them to keep their eyes open to help bring them back to the present.
  - Ask them to look around the room and name some ordinary objects they see. Do this until they feel calmer.
  - Respect the child's personal space, and do not touch them unless given permission. Always follow their lead.
6. **Believe the child.** It is critical for children to feel safe and believed. Validate their feelings, reactions, responses, and experiences, they are all valid.

**90%** of children will never tell anyone about the abuse they suffer



Adapted from [Childsafehouse.org](https://www.childsafehouse.org)

## Believing and Protecting Survivors of Abuse

Once a child discloses that they have been sexually abused, we must prioritize their safety and protection. Protection will look different depending on the child and where the child lives. Different cultures handle sexual abuse and its consequences in different ways, and understanding those differences will help the child and caregivers navigate support and services. Although support and services may be different depending on the child and circumstances, one thing does not change: the importance of keeping the child away from the individual(s) who abused them. Further on in this episode, we will explore what protection could mean for survivors, steps caregivers can take to report child sexual abuse to the authorities, and how caregivers can provide support, protection, and validation for the child throughout the experience.

Systemic oppression through racism, sexism, and homophobia creates additional barriers to reporting and seeking help after sexual abuse. After a child discloses, it can be overwhelming for a caregiver to prioritize physical safety for the child. Some caregivers may seek legal protection by reporting the abuse to the authorities, but not all families, communities, or cultures experience 911, or child protective service organizations, as safe for a variety of reasons:

- Fear of formal systems
- Concerns about accessibility, including language
- Discomfort from intentional or unintentional inappropriate comments, or approaches from service representatives
- Prior negative experiences with legal, medical, and social service systems

Longstanding racial and socioeconomic biases as well as religious, sexual orientation, and gender identity biases have led to demonstrated disparities in how children and families can access and experience the legal and child protective systems.

## What Can We Do? Steps to Protect Children from Further Abuse



*"It's OK to find support in a way that best reflects the personal values of the survivor. This is not a one-solution-fits-all process. And, in fact, curating the healing process is an important part of making it work."*

- Raven Jenerson  
Intergenerational Trauma Expert



The physical safety of the child is the priority. Caregivers can report abuse to law enforcement, a medical professional, a therapist, a children’s advocacy center, or a child abuse hotline. In instances where 911 may be triggering, reporting to a hotline, or children’s advocacy center can be a good starting point.

### **Seek Support.**

- If you are not the caregiver, inquire about, and acknowledge the child’s and caregiver’s comfort with different services.
- The following resources provide emotional support and connections to resources:
  - **RAINN’s National Sexual Assault Hotline** provides confidential support 24/7. Chat online at [online.rainn.org](https://online.rainn.org) or call 800-656-HOPE (800-656-4673)
  - **Childhelp’s National Child Abuse Hotline** 800-4-ACHILD (800-422-4453)
  - **Darkness to Light**, 866-FOR-LIGHT (866-367-5444)
  - **National Parent Helpline** 855-4-A-PARENT (855-427-2736)

### **Report.**

- Many states have mandated reporting requirements for all adults, and every state has mandated reporting requirements for professionals who work with children. More and more states are now including clergy as mandated reporters. Learn about your legally mandated reporter role, and ensure that adults you work with know their roles and responsibilities. [The Child Welfare Information Gateway](#) provides a comprehensive resource for reporting in all 50 states.

## **Supporting the Child and the Caregiver**

Coping with the reality of a child’s sexual abuse can be incredibly challenging for a parent or caregiver, especially as they navigate unfamiliar systems to find protection for their child. Caregivers may experience guilt, shame, and several other negative emotions. Reporting child sexual abuse can be overwhelming, and potentially traumatizing for the child and caregiver. Disclosure, and reporting are the beginning of the child’s healing journey. It is important for caregivers to support them in the immediate aftermath, and for as long as is necessary.

It is common for children to be retraumatized by disclosing, especially if the abuse is reported to authorities, and the child is involved in legal proceedings. Include your child in determining the most appropriate support systems, especially after disclosure.

Caregivers and other family members may experience emotions such as grief, guilt, and depression while processing the disclosure of abuse. It is important for caregivers to take care of themselves, and process all emotions. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but there are strategies, resources, and supports that may be helpful and healing, which we will explore further in episode 5.

## Key Takeaways

- Children disclose their experiences of abuse in different ways based on various factors: age, level of trauma, family relationships, community influences, and cultural and social attitudes. These factors influence children's memory, language abilities, comprehension, safety, and motivation to share.
- Signs of sexual abuse often come in "clusters," and may vary according to the child's age. Evidence of sexual abuse is rare.
- Children often disclose using "hints" or "disguises" that require additional attention and prompting.
- The way someone reacts, or responds to disclosure can have a lasting impact on the healing process. The empathetic focus should always be: I see you. I hear you. I believe you. You matter.
- There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting children who have experienced sexual abuse. Finding support and services that reflect the personal and cultural values of the survivor is key.
- Healing is a life journey.

## Reflective Questions

- *In your role, how can you support others in your family, organization, or community to learn more about the signs of sexual abuse, and the characteristics of healthy sexual development?*
- *Think through how you would respond if a child were to disclose sexual abuse to you. What feelings would you want to instill? How would you do that?*
- *If you interact with children and families whose race, culture, language, gender, etc. are different from your own, what will be important for you to know about how others experience legal, social and medical services?*

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## Additional Resources

### **What Can We Do? Recognizing and Preventing Suspected Abuse**

<https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/adult-behaviors-to-watch>

### **What Impedes, or Facilitates a Child's Disclosure?**

<https://uwjoshuacenter.org/how-and-when-do-youth-disclose-abuse>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213422000874>

### **What Can We Do? Steps to Protect Children from Further Abuse**

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/responding/reporting/how/>

# Episode 4: Strategies to Care for Children Who Have Experienced Sexual Abuse



## Guiding Questions

1. *How does trauma impact brain development?*
2. *What is the impact of sexual abuse on a child's development?*
3. *How can we identify and respond to trauma triggers in ways that support healing?*
4. *What are steps to take when building a support system for children and caregivers?*

**Trauma** is a single event, or series of events that are physically, or emotionally harmful. Trauma can negatively impact a person's ability to function, and their physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Children who experience sexual abuse may show the impact of that trauma in various ways throughout their lives. This module will explore how such trauma impacts a child's brain, development, and overall well-being. It will also describe ways to support a child's healing. While traumatic stress (sexual abuse) can significantly impact a child's development, a holistic, trauma-informed approach to care can mitigate those effects, and support the child's healing.

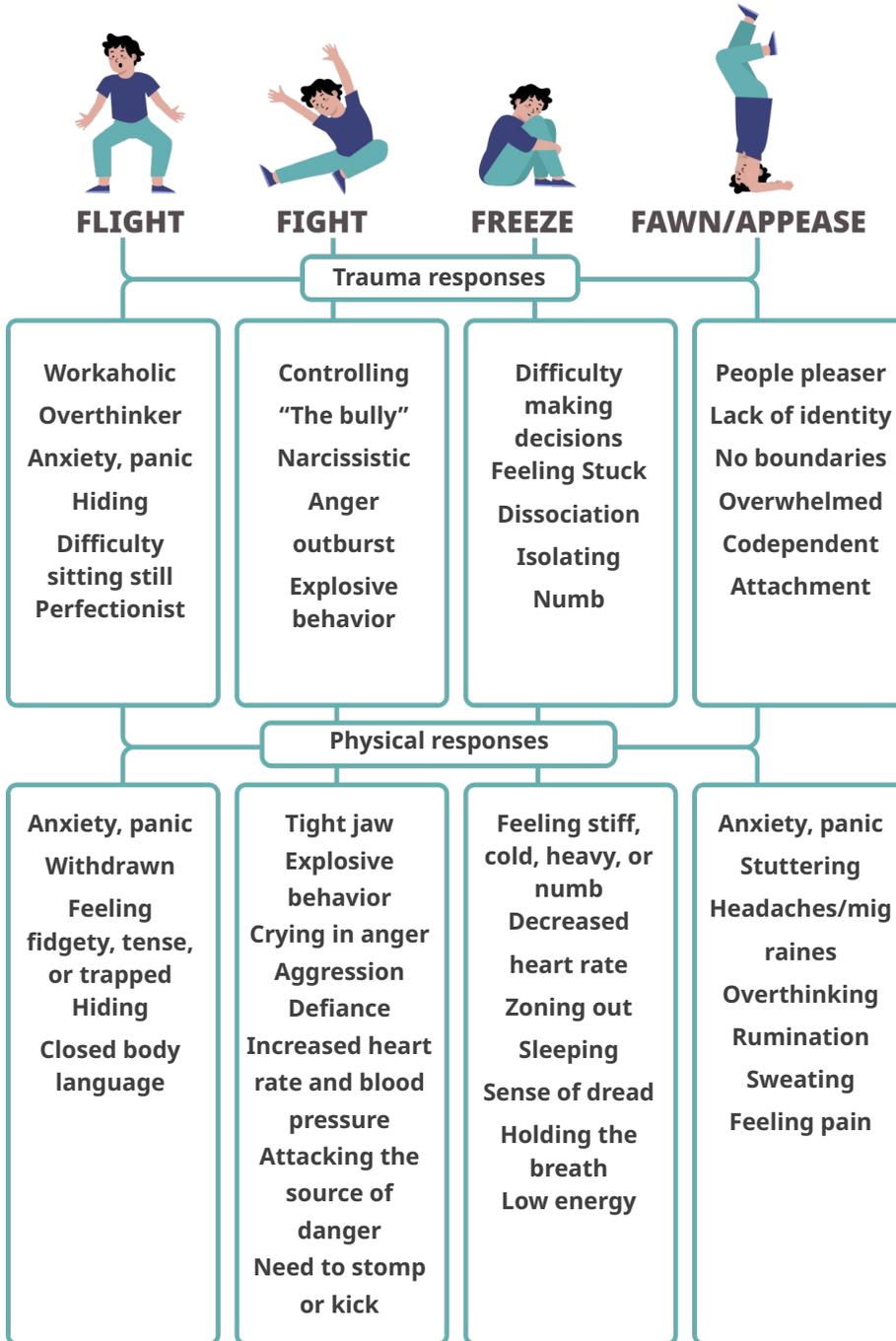
## The Impact of Trauma and the Importance of a Nurturing Environment

Depending on the traumatic event, and the child, the impact of trauma on the brain varies. Still, we know that trauma changes brain structure, and functioning. These changes to the brain can result in varying degrees of cognitive impairment, emotional dysregulation, somatic disturbances, and illness. These changes to the brain often show up as issues with thinking, concentration, impulse control, and organization. They can also appear through the child's communication, and expression of emotions. The impacts can also be physical, including sleep issues, stomach and immune problems, and frequent illnesses.

When children feel unsafe, or threatened, their brains shift into survival mode, making overall functioning difficult.

# Types of Trauma Responses

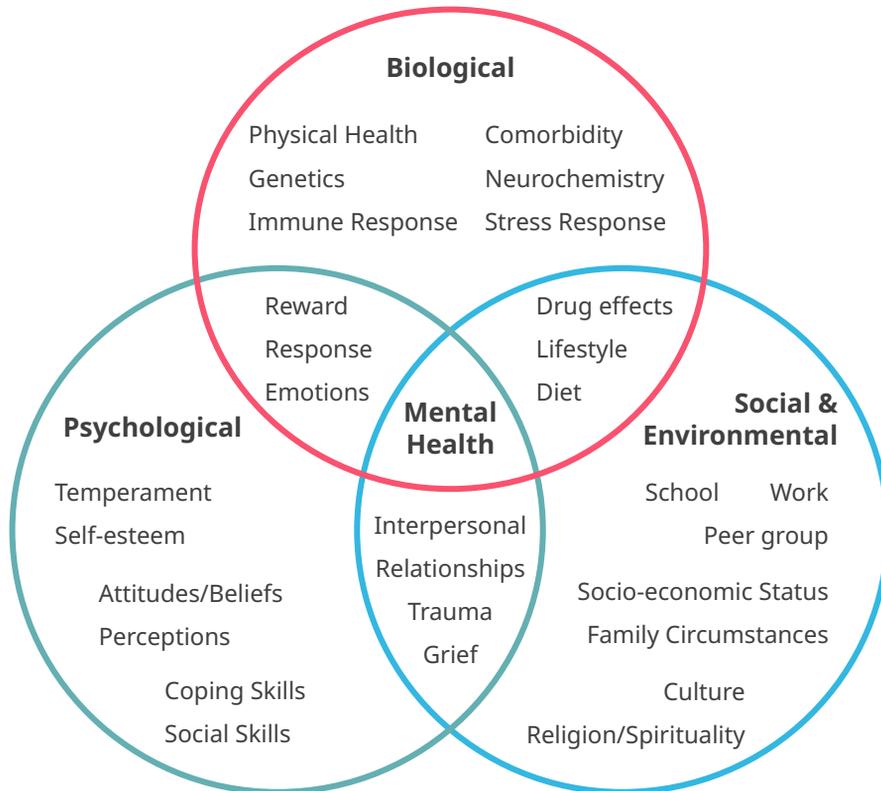
Most of us have heard of the “fight, flight, or freeze response,” which refers to our automatic reaction when we face a threat. Most mental health professionals agree that we respond to trauma in at least 4 ways: fight, flight, freeze, appease/ fawn. As the field evolves, it is shifting to agreement on a fifth response, flop. In a moment of real or perceived threat, these trauma responses are automatically activated. It is our brain and body's attempt to keep us safe.



Adapted from (Calm, 2022)

Trauma has lifelong consequences — even if the traumatic experiences took place in childhood. Biological, psychological, and/or social and environmental issues may arise, and can affect various aspects of a survivor’s life.

### BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL MODEL



Fortunately, our brains are capable of changing structure and function. Neuroscientists call this neuroplasticity, which means that throughout our lifetimes—especially in childhood— the connections among cells in our brains reorganize in response to our changing needs as a result of interactions with our environment. What this means for a child survivor of sexual abuse is that the brain can heal from the trauma with the right support.

### The Importance of a Nurturing Environment to Prevent and Heal From the Impacts of Trauma

When children are nurtured and able to develop strong bonds with caring caregivers, their well-being is positively impacted. However, it is important to note that even a child raised by healthy, nurturing parents can still experience sexual abuse from a community member.

Research shows that even in the presence of sexual abuse, a child's relationship with a consistent, caring adult in the early years is associated with better academic grades, healthier behaviors, more positive peer interactions, and an increased ability to cope with stress later in life (Resilience, 2022).

## Identifying and Responding to Trauma Triggers

As we've learned when an individual has experienced trauma, their system—mind and body—is conditioned to scan for danger. In a situation or environment that is triggering, their system may respond by relaying to the brain that they are not safe. This experience is commonly known as a **trauma response**. How an individual reacts to something that “triggers” a trauma response can vary widely from person to person, and it looks different in children than in adults. The word “triggered” is often used to describe anything that causes emotional discomfort, but for trauma survivors, triggers can be terrifying, all-consuming, and unexpected.

Triggers can come from reminders of the trauma, such as when a family member mentions the abuse, the presence of the person who abused the child, or news reports of sexual abuse. However, triggers can also stem from reminders of the abuse that may be less obvious, such as sounds, smells, thoughts, or sensations. According to [Empower Survivors](#), triggers are highly personal and can be broken down into any number of categories. Common categories of triggers may include:

- **Sound triggers:** Such as sounds of anger, sounds similar to those made by an abuser, or sounds related to the incident of abuse, such as a song that was playing at the time.
- **Visual triggers:** Seeing someone who looks like the abuser, seeing or being in a location that looks like where the trauma occurred, or an incidence of violence or abuse on a television program.
- **Smell triggers:** Smells that remind an individual of their abuser or the location of abuse, including smelling alcohol, tobacco, or an abuser's perfume or cologne.
- **Taste triggers:** Tastes reminiscent of an abuser, such as the food they used to eat or a specific drink.
- **Touch triggers:** Individuals may feel triggered when a specific body part is touched or someone is physically too close to them.

## EXAMPLES OF TRIGGER REMINDERS

1. I felt excluded.
2. I felt powerless.
3. I felt unheard.
4. I felt scolded.
- 5. I felt judged.**
- 6. I felt blamed.**
- 7. I felt disrespected.**
8. I felt a lack of affection.
9. I felt I couldn't speak up.
10. I felt uncared for.
- 11. I felt lonely.**
- 12. I felt ignored.**
13. I felt forgotten.
- 14. I felt unsafe.**
- 15. I felt unloved.**
16. I felt like it was unfair.
17. I felt frustrated.
- 18. I felt trapped.**
- 19. I felt manipulated.**
20. I felt disconnected.

Adapted from <https://www.selfloverainbow.com/>

Caregivers can play a role in helping the child become aware of these triggers. To appropriately respond when a child is triggered, it's important to spot when that child is experiencing a trigger, which can be challenging. A child's response to triggers can present as temper tantrums, reclusiveness, developmental regression, and other changes in typical functioning. Observing a child's behaviors, and the contexts in which a child is triggered, helps the caregiver recognize when the behavior is a trauma response. For example, does the child have a tantrum only when they don't get their favorite toy or snack, or does it also happen when they have it? Knowing how the child behaves when triggered is particularly important if they have not, or cannot yet explain the triggers. A caregiver can then look through the child's lens, and help identify those triggers.

### What Can We Do? Trauma Responses

“There is a difference between a response and a reaction. One comes with consideration, and the other comes with immediacy. On both sides, finding a way to convey and connect with what is causing these reactions is imperative.”

- Martin Andrews  
Advocate

A child's sense of well-being is impacted when triggered. They may feel violated, and unsafe, and may react in various ways to achieve emotional and physical safety. . A trusted adult's role is to model regulation (co-regulation), which eventually leads to self-regulation. Triggers will likely arise throughout a trauma survivor's lifespan, which is why co-regulation and self-regulation are important.

## Strategies for Establishing Routines and Regulating Emotions

There are several ways caregivers can use routines to ensure that children's systems are not overloaded with the stress hormone, cortisol. The first would be to limit the amount of negative stress in the child's environment. Although we cannot control all external pressures, we can ensure the child's internal stress is minimal through **co-regulation**, which uses a calm, regulated state to help a child achieve calm and safety in their body. Co-regulation can happen when a caregiver remains calm and breathes deeply. Through that modeling, the child is invited to join in that calm.

### Focus on the 3 Rs: Routines, Relationships, and Regulation.

- Help a child be seen, and feel safe. Establish predictable routines and schedules. Be present and connect with your eyes, ears, and heart.
- Ask the child what they need, and ask for consent to provide it.
- Check-in often. Inquire gently. Respond with encouragement, such as, "I see" and "Is there more?" Ask open-ended, reflective questions, and give space for a response. Listen with empathy, compassion, and non-judgment. "I hear you saying you feel..." "I am here for you."
- Model, teach, and practice emotion regulation and stress reduction strategies. Some examples include:
  - Pausing to take three (3) deep breaths
  - Coming back to your senses [5-4-3-2-1 Calming Technique](#)
  - Going for a walk, run, bike ride, etc.
  - Doing something creative—an art project, playing an instrument
  - Listening to music
  - Journaling
  - Practicing [Mindfulness Activities for Children and Teens](#)

- Movement and body breaks [Go Noodle](#)
- Dancing
- Storytelling
- Talking about feelings [Name it To Tame It](#)
- Doing a progressive relaxation or body scan; [Body Scan Meditation by GoZen](#)

Caregivers can also minimize stress by helping to create a child’s **“anatomy of happiness.”** There are four happy chemicals in the feeling brain (the limbic system), and there are things that can be done as part of a daily routine to release these happy chemicals. The chemicals are dopamine, serotonin, endorphin, and oxytocin. If all caregivers can provide opportunities for these chemicals to be released daily for the child, we can help create less stressful environments (Gaskill & Perry, 2019). Some everyday things that can be done are:

	<p><b>Play</b> brings joy, and is critical for prefrontal cortex brain development, which is responsible for regulating emotions, and problem-solving.</p>
	<p><b>Movement</b>, including dancing, exercising, or playing sports.</p>
	<p><b>Music</b>, whether one is listening or performing, can increase dopamine and endorphin production.</p>
	<p><b>Creating</b> something – a drawing, a meal, or taking pictures – can quiet the “fight or flight” response, and reduce stress.</p>
	<p><b>Laughter</b>, watching a funny video or movie, or , can relieve feelings of stress, and anxiety.</p>
	<p><b>Sunlight</b> stimulates the parts of the retina that cue the brain to produce serotonin.</p>

	<p><b>Time</b> in nature It has been shown to decrease repetitive thoughts focused on negative emotions.</p>
	<p><b>Healthy diet</b> Choosing foods low in sugars, sugar substitutes, and trans-fats can increase the production of new neurons, and the levels of molecules in the brain that improve learning, memory, mood, attention, and mental health.</p>
	<p><b>Healthy, positive touch</b>, such as nonsexual hugging, releases oxytocin, making you feel more generous, empathetic, collaborative, and grateful.</p>
	<p><b>Healthy socialization</b> and interactions release dopamine and oxytocin that helps improve cognitive function.</p>
	<p><b>Take in vitamins and nutrients</b> such as B6 and B12 can help with the metabolism, and support healthy functioning of the nervous system.</p>

**Here are some suggestions that can help establish routines, stronger relationships, and regulation with the child.**

- Establish a daily routine that sets the rhythm for each day. Wake, have breakfast, and go to bed at the same time. This helps minimize chaos, and sets the brain into a rhythm for the day.
- Read a favorite book together each night.
- Listen to the child’s favorite music while cooking dinner together.
- Make a list of people that make the child feel loved and safe, and include them in routines, and activities.
- Spend as much time outdoors when possible

## **Things to Remember When Children Have Emotional or Behavioral Problems**

Healing the brain through connection, empathy, and routines takes time and patience. The Center for Educational Improvement and the work of Dr. Bruce D. Perry and Maia Szalavitz (2019) describe the following factors to keep in mind when a child in your care is struggling:

1. Emotional and behavioral problems are often due to abnormalities in the brain, and the stress response system.
2. Early experiences have a far greater impact than later ones. Because the brain tries to make sense of things by seeking patterns, it will normalize repeated behavior.
3. Loving attention outside of the family helps children who have been neglected realize that nurturing relationships exist.
4. Many young children of abuse and neglect need physical stimulation. Patterned repeated nurturing can help regulate their stress response system.
5. Developmental trauma happens in the body and impacts the primitive brain stem; hence, patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activities such as walking, running, drumming, singing, dancing, and yoga are helpful.
6. To heal, children need predictable environments where they feel safe and comfortable. Their sensitized, overactive stress response systems can gradually become calmer and more regulated.

## **Ways to Help a Child Regulate their Emotions in Times of Stress (Mullane, 2021)**

- Teach children how to self-regulate by using co-regulation techniques, such as presenting a calm and kind demeanor even when the child is emotionally charged.
- Use a “calming space,” or time-in. When you see the child exhibiting a trauma response, calmly connect with the child, or suggest a calming space. Listening to soothing music, sensory balls, or engaging in the 4 in 8 out breathing are “calming space” activities that can reduce stress.
- Provide coloring books, and rocking chairs, which can have a calming effect on a child’s brain through rhythmic patterned movement.
- Engaging the child physically and safely, after receiving consent with a hug, light touch, putting your arm around them, or massaging their neck hands can also be helpful. Safe touch should only be done by trusted adults within the child’s comfort level.

In addition to these strategies, child abuse expert Camille Cooper suggests the following guiding practice for caregivers to help their child self-regulate:

1. Get down to your child's eye level.
2. Let them know in a calm voice that they are safe.
3. Practice deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth.
4. Ask them to wiggle their toes and feel the ground under their feet. Ask them what it feels like. This will "ground them" and pull them back into their frontal lobe.

The right kind of social support can have a calming, regulating effect on the child whose brain has become dysregulated due to the trauma of sexual abuse. Strong, supportive, trusting, and consistent relationships can have the most impact on children in their healing from sexual abuse. For caregivers, this means assessing the people in your child's life and ensuring that other caregivers who interact daily with your child understand how to provide kind, trusting support to your child as they navigate their healing.

Focus on the 3 Rs: routines, relationships, and regulation to decrease the overload of cortisol. Create and incorporate a child's **"anatomy of happiness"** into their daily routine to ensure the frequent release of the happy chemicals dopamine, serotonin, endorphin, and oxytocin. Remember, less stress, less triggers, and more regulation. However, we must be prepared for the instances of emotional and behavioral problems, and attune the child's needs. Attunement is the ability to approach the child with empathy and compassion and requires attention, flexibility, and patience. Children can't usually choose their reaction to a trigger, but with attunement from adults, they will learn to recognize their triggers, and self-regulate over time.

#### **Four Key Reminders**

1. Focus on the 3 Rs: routines, relationships, and regulation. This helps to decrease toxic stress.
2. Create, and incorporate an "anatomy of happiness." Collaborate with the child in including enjoying activities that release all 4 happy chemicals.
3. Healing takes time, and modeling co-regulation is vital to the healing process.

## Building a Support System

For traumatized children to heal, learn, and develop, and for caregivers to remain fully present for that child, both parties need to have a healthy support network. Ideally, and depending on the child's age and ability, this support network is developed in collaboration with the child. A support network may include immediate or extended family, community members, therapists, and service providers. It's important to factor in the child's safety, the context of their community, culture, and experiences.

## What Can We Do? Strategies for Building a Support System

“Treatment of the whole person, taking into account all factors of the individual (social, emotional, physical, spiritual, etc.), rather than just the symptoms, better known as holistic healing, stands among the most important overall approaches to healing, and a critical part of developing a support system a caregiver can offer a child.”

- Raven Jenerson  
Intergenerational Trauma Expert

### Give the child choices.

When appropriate, let the child take an active role in determining what support looks like for them. Child sexual abuse survivor Martin Andrews emphasizes the importance of listening to a child's wants and needs with the goal of helping them achieve them. Provide consistent support when the child decides to disclose, and give your child a choice in who they speak to, including therapists and law enforcement.

### Find a culturally competent and humble therapist.

If a child is going to therapy as part of their healing, they must have a trauma-informed, culturally and racially competent therapist. While this doesn't necessarily have to be someone of the same background, race, or culture, the therapist does need to be racially and culturally sensitive. Amy Morin, LCSW (2020), offers the following advice for selecting a therapist:

- Ask questions such as
  - How familiar are you with my culture, or background?
  - Do you have training and experience working with diverse populations?
- Change therapists if necessary. If your child is with a therapist who doesn't seem to be working well with them, it is OK to transition to a new one.

### **Seek out holistic approaches to healing from trauma.**

Holistic healing approaches that access the brain, mind, and physical body can be particularly beneficial for trauma survivors. Processes such as narrative therapy, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), BSP (Brainspotting), neurofeedback, and expressive arts, among other ways, can help a survivor heal from the trauma.

### **Create a support network with roles and responsibilities.**

Supporting a child as they heal can present challenges that may require additional support. Caregivers should not shy away from building a support network that supports them and the child. Raven Jenerson (LICSW Intergenerational Trauma Expert), says caregivers should trust their instincts to determine who is “safe” to bring in, which may require some vetting. For example, a caregiver may consider involving a family member with whom they do not share a strong relationship if that person is supportive of their child (i.e., a grandparent with whom the caregiver does not have a strong relationship, but is incredibly caring toward the child). It is important that the child's support network is safe, and not triggering.

Involve the child in creating their safety network, and trust your instinct in the vetting process. This can be family, friends, or others in the community. Each member of your support network can have a unique role that speaks to their strengths, and the child's needs.

As the caregiver, you have the agency to set the rules for the sake of yourself and the child in your care. The criteria for involvement with the child are unique to each situation. If the caregiver is within the family, it is important to note that cultural and familial dynamics sometimes make it difficult to have these conversations within the family. It's OK—and sometimes safer—to create a network outside of the family. For some, this could include teachers, community support workers, or religious community members.

## Trauma Over Time

Early and quality intervention is critical for sexual abuse survivors since trauma can impact a child's development throughout their lives. When the trauma occurred, how long it persisted, and the child's developmental stage determines how the trauma impacts overall functioning.

Young Children (Birth-5)	Elementary Age Children (6-12)	Adolescent Children (13-28)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Irritability, fussiness</li><li>• Startling easily, difficulty in calming back down</li><li>• Frequent tantrums</li><li>• Clinginess</li><li>• Activity levels much higher or lower than peers</li><li>• Repeating traumatic events in dramatic play or conversation</li><li>• Excessive thumb sucking, bed-wetting</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Difficulty paying attention</li><li>• Being quiet or withdrawn</li><li>• Frequent tears or sadness</li><li>• Talking often about scary feelings, ideas, traumatic event</li><li>• Fighting with peers and/or adults</li><li>• Getting into trouble at home and/or school</li><li>• Changes in school performance</li><li>• Eating more or less than usual</li><li>• Headaches and/or stomachaches</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Talking about trauma incidents repeatedly or denying it happened</li><li>• Refusal to follow rules, talking back, resisting</li><li>• Frequently tired, sleeping more or less than peers, nightmares</li><li>• Risky behaviors (e.g., using drugs, alcohol, running away from home, getting in trouble with the law)</li><li>• Fighting</li><li>• Not wanting to spend time w/friends</li></ul>

Adapted from SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

If sexual abuse is left unaddressed, or is compounded by other adverse childhood experiences, the risks for future trauma and serious health issues continue over the lifespan of a survivor.

The long-term effects of child sexual abuse vary from child to child. In addition to the immediate psychological effects (such as anxiety and guilt), childhood sexual abuse can lead to long-term psychological and social adjustment problems (such as depression, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, post traumatic stress disorder or complex post-traumatic stress disorder), disruptions to developmental processes, and adverse effects on sexual and physical health, and relationships. ([INSPQ, 2022](#))

**LIFELONG IMPACT OF UNADDRESSED STRESS  
OR ACCUMULATION OF ACES**



**Impact as Child**

- Chronic illnesses**
- Brain dev. challenges**
- ADHD/ADD**
- Poor decision making**
- Aggressive behaviors**
- Lowered social skills**
- Panic and Fear**



**Impact as Teen**

- Chronic illnesses**
- Mental health issues**
- Dropout or expulsion**
- Social challenges**
- Delinquent behavior**
- Victimization**
- Teen pregnancy**
- Substance abuse**



**Impact as Adult**

- Chronic health Issues**
- Mental health issues**
- Unemployment**
- Prison pipeline**
- Substance abuse**
- Victimization**
- Early Death**

**Healing Over Time**

Caregivers along with support networks, and trusted professionals, can help interrupt the progression of some of the disruptions in development and functioning. Caregivers should consistently stay attuned to the child as they age to ensure they receive timely, and appropriate care.

## Key Takeaways

- Trauma caused by sexual abuse disrupts development and overall functioning.
- When infants and children feel safe and nurtured, their developing brains can spend more time learning and building connections; when they are threatened or feel threatened, their brains shift to survival mode, which makes learning and other functions difficult.
- Trauma response is when the body is conditioned to scan for danger. The triggers and responses vary widely from person to person.
- Caregivers and trusted adults play a crucial role in guiding children through their responses to trauma
- Traumatic stress resulting from sexual abuse can significantly impact a child's development and overall well-being throughout life.
- Healing requires a support network, and plan for the caregiver and the child.

## Reflective Questions

- *What are some insights related to the biopsychosocial model of mental health?*
- *In your specific role, how can you use what you know about trauma and the brain to support children in your care?*
- *What are 2-3 specific things you can do (at home, in a classroom, or in a youth group setting) to promote relationships, routines, and regulation among children?*

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# Additional Resources

## Trauma

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207192/>

### Identifying and Responding to Triggers

<https://www.empowersurvivors.net/survivor-blog/childhood-sexual-abuse-triggers>

## Focus on the 3 Rs: Routines, Relationships, and Regulation.

### 5-4-3-2-1 Technique

<https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/behavioral-health-partners/bhp-blog/april-2018/5-4-3-2-1-coping-technique-for-anxiety.aspx>

### Practicing Mindfulness Activities

<https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-for-children-kids-activities/>

### Movement and body breaks <https://www.gonoodle.com/>

Talking about feelings <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcDLzppD4Jc>

### Doing a body scan

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=54&v=aIC-lo441v4&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=54&v=aIC-lo441v4&feature=emb_logo)

## Things to Remember When Children Have Emotional or Behavioral Problems

<https://www.edimprovement.org/post/intergenerational-cycle-of-trauma>

# Episode 5: Practical Ways to Support Continuous Healing and Caregiver Self-Care



## Guiding Questions

1. *How does creating safe spaces, fostering community connections, and implementing predictable routines support continuous healing?*
2. *What are the three levels of stress, and how do the different levels impact our overall well-being?*
3. *What are examples of positive childhood experiences, and how do they support healing?*
4. *What is intergenerational trauma, and how can we interrupt it?*
5. *What is secondary trauma, and how might that impact parents and caregivers?*

Trauma resulting from sexual abuse can have life-long negative impacts on a child's development and well-being. Creating physically and emotionally safe spaces with consistent, positive experiences can support children through their healing process. In this episode, we will explore additional ways to help children by fostering community connections, and help caregivers recognize and address the effects of intergenerational and secondary trauma.

## Healing and the Brain: The Role of Community in the Healing Process

Positive relationship experiences help children learn to deal with stress at different levels of intensity throughout their lives. Inconsistent, abusive, or neglectful experiences alter the normal development of a child's neural systems involved in developing relationships and managing stress. Stress that occurs as a result of trauma and abuse is considered "toxic stress."

### Types of Stress

**Tolerable stress** is associated with events or situations that may cause unpleasant emotions such as grief, sadness, discouragement, anxiety, and fear.

**Toxic stress**, which survivors of sexual abuse often experience, produces feelings of anxiety, worry, anger, and depression. Toxic stress releases the stress hormone, cortisol, and adrenaline, as the body prepares for a fight, flight, freeze, and appease/fawn. Toxic stress can negatively impact attention, working memory, decision-making, and emotion regulation. If we're in a harmful situation for too long, our physical and emotional health will decline. However, with supportive and protective relationships, recovery occurs, and one can return to a natural state of health and well-being.

## Positive Childhood Experiences as a Protective Factor

Children with higher rates of Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) have higher rates on cognition, language, social skills, math, and reading tests. They have lower rates of mental health diagnoses, behavioral problems, sleep problems, problems with nutrition, or drug use (Bethel, 2019).

### What are considered Positive Childhood Experiences?

	1. Ability to talk with family about feelings
	2. Felt experience that family is supportive in difficult times
	3. Enjoyment and participation in community traditions
	4. Feeling of belonging in school
	5. Feeling of being supported by friends
	6. Having at least two non-parent adults who genuinely care
	7. Feeling safe and protected by an adult at home

(Bethel, et.al. 2019)

### Positive Childhood Experiences support healing.

We can support children, families, and communities by fostering Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs). Surrounding children with supportive adults, and increasing the number of positive interactions can provide a stable foundation to begin healing from the trauma of sexual abuse.

According to Working with Children to Heal from Interpersonal Trauma: The Power of Play, it is “the presence of familiar people projecting the social-emotional cues of acceptance, understanding, compassion, and empathy who calmed the stress response of the individual. We feel safest in the presence of familiar and nurturing members of our family and community” (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010).

Furthermore, healing doesn’t always happen in the form of therapy sessions. It can flourish within a safe community of trusted and supportive relationships. Children with few positive relational interactions, and without a healthy family or community during or after trauma, have difficulty self-regulating. Healthy relationships and interactions with safe and familiar individuals can buffer and heal the trauma of sexual abuse.

### **What Can We Do? Strategies for Creating a Safe Community and Increasing Positive Childhood Experiences**

“Children with higher rates of positive childhood experiences (PCEs) had higher rates on tests of cognition, language, social skills, math, and reading, and a decrease in mental health diagnoses, behavioral problems, sleep problems, and problems with nutrition and drug use.”

- Dr. Christina Bethel  
Professor, Director, Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative

**For all adults:** Maximize opportunities to provide children with positive experiences by:

- Encouraging children to share their feelings in a variety of ways, such as:
  - Describe how you’re feeling as the weather (cloudy, rainy, stormy, sunny)
  - If your feelings were a color, what color would they be?
  - If your feelings were an animal, what animal would they be?
  - After sharing, ask what might be some reasons for those feelings. Respond with encouragement, such as “That’s interesting” or “Thank you for sharing. I really like to hear what you’re thinking.”

- Establishing routines and rituals which create a sense of predictability and safety. Perhaps there is a particular greeting ritual you create together, such as a high five, or fist bump.
- Integrating healthy living routines, check-ins about feelings, and positive social interactions.
- Building positive, trusting relationships, getting to know children's interests, motivations, and strengths (particularly for educators and others who work with children)

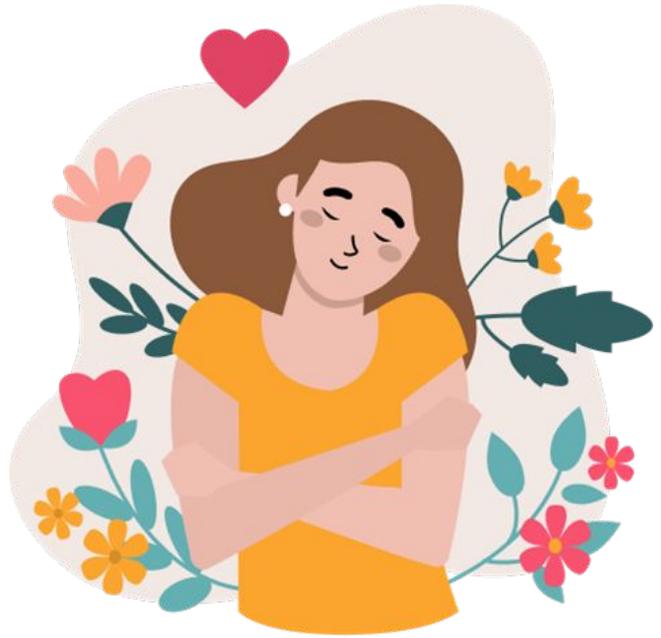
### **For caregivers:**

- Take extra care to build a solid and healthy attachment with your child. Consistent care and responsiveness helps lay the foundation for healthy development.
- Empower the child—give voice, and choice. Ask what activities are fun and interesting, and then engage in activities they enjoy, are confident about, and are competent in doing. Laugh and have fun together.
- Take care of your well-being. If you struggle to manage your stress, you'll have a harder time supporting your child.

Supporting a child who has survived sexual abuse requires consistent love and empathy from the caregiver, and the entire community. A supportive community promotes healing, which allows the brain to heal over time, and develop the capacity for handling stress associated with the trauma of abuse. It's also important to remember that children from historically marginalized communities may present with complex trauma. Such trauma can present on an individual level, the result of social and environmental circumstances, and systemic issues like racism. Evaluate interventions and supports intended to be in the child's best interest to determine if they are healing and protective factors, keeping in mind that connection to the community can sometimes be a healing and protective factor.

## Supporting the Caregiver

Navigating the reality of a child's sexual abuse can be incredibly challenging for caregivers, and they may experience a series of overwhelming emotions. We know that sexual abuse can have long-term consequences for the child, and the same applies to the caregiver. This is called intergenerational and secondary trauma.



### Intergenerational Trauma

The trauma that prior generations experienced can affect future generations' health and emotional well-being. This phenomenon is known as intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma is trauma, or prolonged stress that extends from one generation to the next.

According to Gayani DeSilva, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, "trauma affects genetic processes, leading to reactivity being heightened in populations who experience a great deal of trauma" (Trefflich, 2022) In an article for [MindSupport](#), author Gena Benavides Jimenez explains that "this means that certain populations are more vulnerable due to their histories of being systematically exploited, or repeatedly enduring abuse, racism, and poverty. Domestic violence, sexual assault and abuse, and hate crimes are...all acts that are traumatic enough to cause genetic changes...African Americans in the U.S. and around the world are particularly vulnerable." (Jimenez, 2021).

Psychological and environmental stressors, and generational cycles of abuse are traumas that may further impact a child who has experienced sexual abuse. They may also impede the caregiver's ability to care for their child. For example, if the child's caregiver experienced abuse by the same person as the child, or a similar figure, it can be difficult for the caregiver to respond to their child's needs appropriately.

## What Can We Do? Ways to Interrupt Intergenerational Trauma

“Just as traumatic experiences can be passed down from one generation to the next, so can the capacity for overcoming the trauma and building resilience.”

- Elizabeth Dixon,  
Clinical Social Worker Supporting Child, Family, and Community  
Resilience and Well-Being

### Develop open and caring communication styles between generations.

Research shows that caregivers can help protect children from intergenerational trauma by engaging in protective behaviors such as nurturing close and loving relationships. Braga et al. (2012) believe that open and loving communication can foster healing and connectivity. Elizabeth Dixon, in Psychology Today, recommends the following:

- **For parents, caregivers, and trusted family members:**
  - Share, in age-appropriate ways, your own trauma story, and whatever you may know of trauma that occurred to your parents and grandparents. Children may receive this as a relief, especially if they have been carrying feelings they can connect to past trauma.
  - Seek out support to process your trauma; this will support you, and model the ability to create a new story, and path.
  - Notice any patterns, attitudes, or narratives from your family that you continue to portray, and talk it through with your safety network, or therapist.
  - Cultivate a sense of empathy and compassion for your family and the struggles they endured.
  - Help the child choose and create a new narrative for themselves.

Breaking the code of silence and secrecy of intergenerational trauma will support children in healing, and help to break the cycles of trauma.

## Recognizing the Symptoms of Secondary Trauma

Secondary trauma refers to a form of distress experienced indirectly by hearing details of, or witnessing the aftermath of a traumatic experience by another person. For caregivers of children who have experienced sexual abuse, this may also present like the four trauma responses to a child's disclosure of sexual abuse. For some caregivers, the emotional and psychological effects of learning about the child's abuse can last for years. In addition, caregivers are often so focused on caring for their child that they may not recognize the signs of secondary trauma, and the potential impact on their well-being, and the family unit.

### Secondary Trauma Presentations:

<b>Physical Symptoms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Headaches</li><li>• Stomach problems</li><li>• Sleep problems</li><li>• Weight gain or loss</li><li>• Lack of energy</li></ul>	<b>Emotional Symptoms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anxiety</li><li>• Frequent crying</li><li>• Irritability</li><li>• Loneliness</li><li>• Depression</li></ul>
<b>Behavioral Symptoms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased drinking or smoking</li><li>• Procrastination</li><li>• Feeling overly critical</li><li>• Avoiding other people</li></ul>	<b>Cognitive Symptoms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inability to concentrate</li><li>• Forgetfulness</li><li>• Loss of humor/fun</li><li>• Inability to make decisions</li></ul>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2014)

It is critical for caregivers to recognize and seek support for secondary trauma because unaddressed trauma may compromise one's ability to be a healthy and safe support in the child's healing process.

## What Can We Do? Creating Safe and Supportive Networks and Practicing Self-Care

“*Secondary trauma is very real, and the more you prioritize your self-care, the healthier you will be to adequately support your child.*”

- Raven Jenerson  
Intergenerational Trauma Expert

- **Connect with adults with shared experiences who can support healing.** These individuals have insights that can support the healing process and help caregivers not feel alone.
- **Acknowledge that your healing journey will look different from the child’s.** Seek out culturally competent and humble therapists, or support groups that support your unique healing process. The resources section of this guidebook provides information for connecting with therapists, and support groups.
- **Tune into responses and reactions with therapists and mental health professionals.** Therapy with a counselor who is not culturally or trauma-informed may be re-traumatizing.

### Take Care of Yourself.

Unchecked secondary trauma can harm your well-being and potentially retraumatize the child you are trying to help. If you are experiencing symptoms of secondary trauma, here are some healthy practices to incorporate into your routine:

- Be kind to yourself. Pay attention to your thoughts, and your self talk (New Haven Residential Treatment Center, 2018)
  - Are your thoughts self-deprecating?
  - Are you letting negative thoughts overpower you?
  - What would you say/think if a friend came to you and said they were having the same thoughts?

It is easy to spiral into self-criticism and negative thinking when things are hard. That’s when the “Self-Compassionate Point of View (POV)” tool may be helpful.

Mindfulness of Stress and Suffering	Common Humanity	Self Mentoring
<p>Recognizing when you are stressed or struggling, labeling your emotions, and exploring the underlying causes objectively.</p> <p><i>What am I feeling? What may be contributing to how I'm feeling?</i></p>	<p>Recognizing that you are not alone in your suffering. Others have struggled with similar situations or difficulties.</p> <p><i>How is my stress, situation, or setback universal—common to humanity?</i></p>	<p>Being supportive, kind, and understanding with yourself during a hard time. Noticing and reframing critical or negative self-talk.</p> <p><i>What would I say to someone I care about who is suffering?</i></p>

**Effective care for a child in need is only possible when you take care of your own needs first.**

Here are some healthy practices to incorporate into your routine:

- Take time and space for yourself to meet your mental, physical and spiritual needs
- Be kind and patient with yourself: you are doing your best
- Take short walks, exercise, or move to music
- Practice mindfulness, or listen to relaxing sounds of music
- Share your thoughts and feelings with people you trust
- Know your limits, don't overdo it
- Try to do at least one thing you enjoy every day
- Believe in yourself: you deserve and are worthy of healing

Self-compassion helps us to face challenges, makes us more likely to succeed, and provides enormous inner strength. Additionally, modeling self-compassion for children is important since it gives them a tool for managing difficult situations (New Haven Residential Treatment Center, 2018).

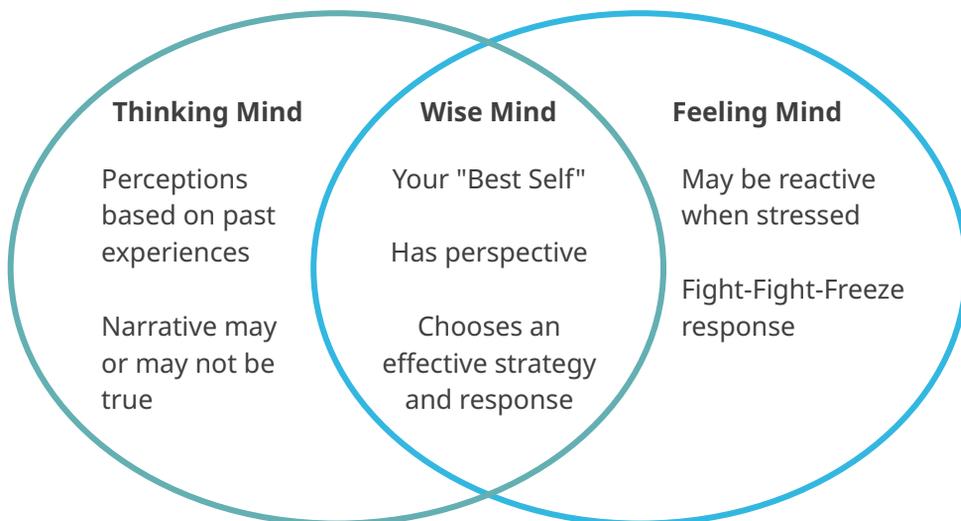
- Practice mindfulness. Be present in the moment, and try not to dwell on the past, or fixate on future concerns. Be nonjudgmental about your thoughts and feelings; recognize them, but don't judge them (New Haven Residential Treatment Center, 2018).
- Take a breath. Try one of these stress strategies:

## 4-8 Breathing

- Sit or stand up straight.
- Take a deep inhale for four seconds, breathing slowly through your nose, filling the chest and lower abdomen with air.
- Exhale slowly for eight seconds, slowly pushing the air back through your mouth.
- Repeat.

## Wise Mind: Pause, Inquire, Choose

- When in a challenging situation, take a few deep breaths and ask yourself: What am I **feeling**? What are my emotions telling me?
- Pause, take a few more deep breaths, and ask yourself: What am I **thinking**? What is my narrative, my story about this? Am I bringing any past perceptions into this moment?
- Imagine your wise self, the calm one, the one who has a broad perspective, and **chooses** the best response for the circumstance.



## The Power of Play and Self-Expression

As introduced earlier in this series, play and self-expression have significant neuro-developmental impacts on a traumatized brain. Play that is developmentally appropriate for the child will be the most beneficial.

Listening and responding to your child's unique needs is a key starting point when creating opportunities for play and self-expression. When a child experiences sexual abuse, their physical and emotional power is taken away. An abused child seeks physical and emotional safety, models for emotional regulation, and ways to feel empowered and have autonomy. Let the child guide what they need, and respond to their direction.

For survivors of child sexual abuse, creative expression through activities such as art may support healing and reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.

“*I can't even describe the relief it was to go to dance class and just take a break from everything that I had no control over. To have something you have control over, something beautiful and something you can anticipate with joy.*”

- Raven Jenerson  
Intergenerational Trauma Expert

Play as a form of healing is most effective when it is non-threatening, voluntary, pleasurable, and has no obvious “purpose” (Gaskill & Perry, 2014). Different kinds of play to engage children in include (HSE, n.d.):

- Physical play, such as dancing, ball games, or other activities that get the child to move as much as possible
- Social play at playgrounds or with groups of families with children of a similar age
- Constructive play done through art, or building things with blocks or other materials
- Fantasy play that engages the child's imagination by creating their own games or stories.
- Games with rules, such as Simon Says, or Duck, Duck, Goose.

Daily opportunities for the right kind of play can have a regulating effect on your child's brain. It is important to remember that play needs to be fun for the child, otherwise, it isn't play!

## Key Takeaways

- While caring for those who have experienced abuse, it's important to validate, validate, validate, and then accept their path to healing.
- Stable nurturing relationships foster the development of healthy brain activity.
- Safe community connectedness is a vital resource for children and caregivers to heal from sexual abuse.
- Trauma from prior generations can affect future generations' health and well-being.
- Positive Childhood Experiences support healing from sexual abuse, and contribute to multiple positive outcomes for children.
- Play and self-expression are effective ways to promote joy, emotion regulation, and healing.

## Reflective Questions

- *What would you look for in a child to differentiate between tolerable and toxic stress?*
- *Think of a child in your own life. What might you do tomorrow to cultivate Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)?*
- *What would you like to explore further or commit to as a next step for interrupting intergenerational trauma?*
- *What strategies or tools can you try to practice self-care?*
- *What routines and opportunities for play and self-expression can you incorporate to support a child healing from sexual abuse?*

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## Additional Resources

### **Positive Childhood Experiences support healing.**

[https://www.childtrauma.org/files/ugd/aa51c7\\_810aa7b06ff74efe9b9d6833ff78a7f6.pdf](https://www.childtrauma.org/files/ugd/aa51c7_810aa7b06ff74efe9b9d6833ff78a7f6.pdf)

### **Intergenerational Trauma.**

<https://mindsupport.eu/en/article/6120f30cca3d380626b36fb9>

### **Developing open and caring communication styles between generations.**

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-flourishing-family/202107/breaking-the-chains-generational-trauma>

# Resources for Support, Reporting, and Additional Information

If you or a child are in immediate danger, call 911.

## Episode 1: What You Should Know to Protect Children from Dangerous People Online

### Protecting Children Online

- How to Report Online Child Exploitation
  - To report online child exploitation, use the electronic Cyber Tip Line or call 1.800843.5678. The Cyber Tip Line is operated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in partnership with the FBI and other law enforcement agencies.
- 12 Ways to Engage, Educate, and Protect Your Children Online

### Sex Trafficking

- National Trafficking Hotline: 1.888.373.7888 or text “HELP” or “INFO” to 233733. Support is available 24/7 and in over 200 languages.
- Black and Missing Foundation is a non-profit organization whose mission is to bring awareness to missing persons of color; provide vital resources and tools to missing person’s families and friends, and educate the minority community on personal safety.
- Love146 journeys alongside children impacted by trafficking today and prevents the trafficking of children tomorrow and provides resources for youth and families.

## Episode 2: Keeping Kids Safe in Your Home and Community

- RAINN’s National Sexual Assault Hotline connects you to a trained staff member from your local sexual assault service provider. 1.800.656.HOPE (4673)
  - Online Hotline: visit online.rainn.org to chat one-on-one with a trained RAINN support specialist, 24/7. This support is confidential and provided by a diverse group of specialists.

- Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence: A national resource center on domestic violence, sexual violence, trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence in Asian and Pacific Islander communities. This organization provides local referrals to survivors in Asian and Pacific Islander communities and also works to create systemic change by providing training to professionals and advocating for research-based policy changes.
- Ujima: The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community works to respond to and end domestic, sexual, and community violence in the Black community through research, public awareness, community engagement, and resource development.
- **National Child Abuse Hotline**: A centralized call center provides the caller with the option of talking with or texting a counselor. They are also connected to a language line that can provide service in over 140 languages. Call or text hotline: 800.422.4453
- How Can I Protect My Child Against Sexual Assault
- 1 in 6: A resource center providing information and services for male survivors and those who care about them.

### Episode 3: What to Do When a Child Tells You They Were Abused

- The following resources provide emotional support and connections to resources:
  - RAINN's National Sexual Assault Hotline provides confidential support 24/7. Chat online at [online.rainn.org](https://online.rainn.org) or
  - Childhelp - CHAT Text or call 800.4ACHILD (800.422.4453)
  - Darkness to Light provides resources and connections to a trained crisis counselor. Call 866.FOR.LIGHT (866.367.5444) or text LIGHT to 741741
  - National Parent Helpline 855.4APARENT (855.427.2736)
- A Guide for Caregivers on Handling Disclosures
- Behaviors to Watch for When Adults Are With Children

## Episode 4: Strategies to Care for Children Who Have Experienced Sexual Abuse

- [National Center for Victims of Crime](#) provides supportive counseling, practical information, and referrals to local community resources and victim advocates. Toll-free helpline: 1.800.FRI.CALL (1.800.394.2255) available 8:00a.m-8:00p.m EST
- Finding a Therapist: [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's Finding Help](#)
- Many communities have local Children's Advocacy Centers that offer coordinated support and services to victims of child sexual abuse. For a state-by-state listing of accredited CAC's, visit the [National Children's Alliance](#)
- [The Physical Impact of Trauma](#)
- Learn more about [How Intergenerational Trauma Impacts Families](#)

## Episode 5: Practical Ways to Support Continuous Healing

- [Handhold](#) provides guidance and resources to support children's mental health and emotional well-being
- For more information about Black and African American communities and mental health, visit [Mental Health America](#)
- For more information about how race-based trauma and constant stress affect Black women, visit [Healthline](#)
- If you are an educator or other community member who works with children, read [Helping Children of Color Heal from Collective Trauma](#)
- **Additional resources for finding a mental health care provider:**
  - [National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network](#)
  - [Black Mental Health Alliance](#)
  - [The Association of Black Psychologists](#)
  - [Loveland Foundation](#)
  - [Latinx Therapy](#)
  - [Therapy for Latinx: Latinx Therapist Directory](#)
  - [Indian Health Service](#)
  - [Asian American Psychological Foundation](#)
  - [Asian, Pacific Islander, and South Asian American \(APISAA\) Therapist Directory](#)
  - [SouthAsianTherapists.org](#)

- [BIPOC Mental Health](#)
- [The AAKOMA Project](#)
- **Blogs and Podcasts**
  - [Couched In Color with Dr. Alfiee](#)
  - [Therapy for Black Girls](#) (Podcast focused on the mental health of Black women)
  - [The Healing Justice Podcast](#) (Podcast about social justice and collective healing)
  - [Coffee with Karim Podcast](#) (Muslim mental health, psychology, and spirituality podcast)
  - [Mindful Muslim Podcast](#) (Podcast about mental health, psychology, Islam & spirituality)
  - [Ourselves Black](#) (Blog, Resources, & Podcast about Black Mental Health)
  - [Erasing Shame](#) (Podcast about shame and mental health in the Asian American community)
  - [Stories of Stigma: South Asian Mental Health](#) (Mental health podcast)
  - [Nopal Kweenz](#) (3 Latinx Therapists discuss Mental health)
  - [Emotions In Harmony](#) (Mental Health podcast by a Latinx psychologist in English/Spanish)
  - [Latinx Therapy](#) (Mental health podcast focused on the Latinx community)
  - [Between Sessions](#) (Podcast by therapists of Color for People of Color)
  - [Celeste the Therapist](#) (Podcast by a therapist of Color focused on shifting negative thinking and empowerment)
- **Apps:**
  - [Stop, Breathe, & Think](#)
  - [Sandbox Pixel Coloring](#)
  - [The Safe Place](#) (Black Mental Health app)
  - [Liberate](#) (Meditation app by and for BIPOC)
  - [AADA Reviewed Mental Health Apps](#)
  - [The Best Meditation Apps of 2019](#)



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