"We Don't Care (That Much) About You": How *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* Limits Minors to Minor Character Status

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Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (hereafter *SVU*; 1999–present) is a crime drama known for stories about sexual assault and related crimes. Part of the broader *Law & Order* franchise, it is the second-longest-running scripted series on U.S. television after *The Simpsons* (1989–present). Its longevity on free-to-air television highlights both its popular appeal and its cultural significance. Although the original *Law & Order* returned after a 2010–2022 hiatus, *SVU* has remained the franchise's most enduring program.

In *SVU*, children are frequently depicted as victims of trafficking and other forms of exploitation, experiencing some of the most serious adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Several scholarly studies have examined these child characters. For example, Kathryn Hampshire highlights the prevalence of the "white savior trope" within the drama (49). Similarly, research on the portrayal of social workers found that children are often used as "plot devices" in episodes involving child protective services (CPS) (Anderson-Lopez et al. 155). As the authors argue:

> The role of children in CPS plotlines could be characterized as absent in terms of power dynamics, dialogue, and consequential actions. Although these children are the individuals experiencing the often criminal adverse childhood experiences at the center of the narrative, their characters are rarely developed in sufficient depth to communicate a child's perspective to viewers. (155)

At the same time, *SVU* has had significant social value. The series has educated audiences about such topics as rape kits, consent, and other aspects of sexual violence that were once considered taboo in mainstream public discourse. One notable example is an 11-year-old girl who credited the show, and its protagonist Olivia Benson, with helping her recognize and respond appropriately when someone attempted to kidnap her (Andone). However, the program has also faced criticism for inaccurate portrayals. For instance, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) publicly criticized an episode that centered on pesticides, citing factual inaccuracies (Pearl). This study contributes to existing research by likewise focusing on minors, but specifically examines the children of three principal members of the *SVU* squad. Although these children are related to the program's protagonists rather than its villains, the findings align with previous scholarship: they function primarily as secondary characters whose purpose is to support adult storylines and reinforce the image of their parents as protectors of innocent childhood.

In *The Children's Cultural Reader*, Henry Jenkins argues that in Western culture, "[t]he child is often a figment of adult imagination, a figure of adult desire, a focus of adult anxiety" (457). More broadly, he argues that late twentieth-century understandings of childhood were shaped by an ideology of innocence (1). As Jenkins writes, "The innocent child wants nothing, desires nothing and demands nothing" (1-2). *SVU* both draws upon and reinforces this conception of childhood. The children of the main characters function as narrative devices who, in effect, "want nothing, desire nothing and demand nothing"

(Jenkins 1-2). Instead, their parents project their own ideals and anxieties onto them while exploring questions of what it means to be a good parent. Throughout the series, the adults repeatedly debate what children should know and experience, what they should be protected from, and how parents should guide them. Positioned primarily as supporting characters within the stories of law-enforcement officers, these children encounter a range of unusual and often traumatic circumstances that could arguably cast them as victims. Yet, unlike the clearly designated child victims who fall into the hands of the villains, their narratives generally resolve in ways that sustain the moral authority and protective capacity of their parents.

Because *SVU* has remained on air for more than two decades, and because several principal characters have been part of the series for many years, it is not possible to examine all the children connected to the show's central figures within a single article. This analysis, therefore, focuses on selected children of three main law-enforcement characters: Elliot Stabler, Odafin Tutuola and Olivia Benson. This approach allows the study to span the program's entire run, from season 1 to the present, with the most recent example drawn from season 24. The first principal character constructed by the producers as a parent was Detective Elliot Stabler. From the outset of the series, Stabler was presented as the experienced law-enforcement officer, partnered with Olivia Benson, his younger and less experienced colleague.

Detective Stabler and His Children

In the first episode, season 1, episode 1, "Payback," Detective Elliot Stabler is introduced as a family man with a wife and four children, three daughters and one son, ranging in age from young child to teenager (their exact ages are not specified).[1] Stabler's oldest daughter, Maureen, and his son, Dickie, are prominently featured in the show's early episodes. This narrative strategy serves an important function: providing audiences with personal background information that helps build sympathy and trust for a central character, in this case a detective.

In season 1, episode 2, "A Single Life," Stabler is shown fixing a clogged kitchen sink while several of his children move in and out of the scene. One daughter talks on the telephone, while Dickie briefly enters the kitchen. The sequence presents a familiar domestic setting and suggests that Stabler and his wife have built a loving home while navigating the everyday responsibilities of raising children.

As the episode progresses, viewers learn that the central investigation concerns a woman who suicides after being unable to overcome the trauma of sexually abuse by her father. The victim was approximately the same age as Maureen when the abuse occurred. This prompts Stabler to reflect on his own daughter and the responsibilities of fatherhood. The earlier kitchen scene thus acquires additional significance. The audience needed to see Maureen so they could later visualize her when Stabler draws parallels between his daughter and the victim. In this context, Maureen functions as a narrative device that

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positions Stabler as a caring father who is deeply disturbed by violence against children. This example is not especially troubling in its treatment of childhood. Maureen remains unaware of the case and appears to live untouched by the troubles that occupy her father's professional world.

Because the children of the *SVU* squad are side characters used primarily to flesh out the main adult characters, the parents often become models through which the program demonstrates contemporary ideas about parenting. Stabler's season 1 characterization, which aired in 1999–2000, arguably reflects the model of "new fatherhood," identified by Robert L. Griswold (Jenkins 10). Emerging in the post-war period, this ideal retained the father's role as economic provider while also expecting him to educate and nurture his children. Through ordinary domestic interactions, the show signals that Stabler cares deeply for his son and daughters. Without these scenes, he would likely be less sympathetic and less convincing as a good father. Indeed, concerns about fatherhood become even more central in the following episode.

Episode 3, "…Or Just Like One," employs a similar strategy by connecting the criminal investigation to Stabler's relationship with his daughter. In this case, a father allows his teenage daughter to travel unaccompanied to a modeling gig, after which she is murdered. The case causes Stabler to question his own parenting. Because the investigation takes the squad into the modeling industry, issues of body image and dieting become important themes. Consequently, Maureen suddenly emerges in the family subplot as someone preoccupied with healthy eating. During a family meal she refuses bacon, telling her father that it is "all saturated fat, and I'm not gonna eat it." Concerned, Stabler consults a colleague with expertise in eating disorders to better understand the difference between dieting and anorexia.

Once again, the child primarily serves to strengthen Stabler's characterization as an attentive and caring father. The audience learns very little, however, about Maureen herself. Her perspective remains unexplored. Viewers never discover whether she experiences social pressure regarding her appearance, whether she worries about her weight, or how she understands food and dieting. Unlike her father, she is not developed as a fully realized character. Instead, her role is to facilitate his character development.

Beyond framing children as narrative devices, this writing strategy also exposes them to potential ACEs. The CDC defines adverse childhood experiences as "potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years)" (2). Examples include exposure to violence, suicide, substance abuse within the household, and parental separation. More broadly, however, "there is no single agreed-upon list of experiences that encompass what we refer to as adverse childhood experiences" (Sacks et al. 13). Reflecting this ambiguity, Timmins and colleagues include conditions such as eyesight problems and migraines among factors that may negatively influence children's development (1). These examples suggest that ACEs encompass a wide range of experiences and circumstances, not all of which stem directly from harmful actions by adults.

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Given this broad definition, ACEs are remarkably common. According to the CDC, "three in four high school students reported experiencing one or more ACEs, and one in five experiencing four or more ACEs" (5). While it remains unclear which specific events respondents classified as ACEs, the prevalence of these experiences suggests they occur across all social groups, including the families of law-enforcement officers.

Viewed through this lens, Maureen's storyline raises interesting questions. Her attention to calories and food ingredients may indicate social pressures regarding appearance among her peers. Viewers may reasonably wonder whether she experiences teasing, bullying or other negative forms of pressure at school. Yet her life is ultimately of little concern to the writers. The episode does not meaningfully engage with body image, dieting or potential eating disorders. As a crime drama, *SVU* dedicates most of its running time to solving the central criminal case. Consequently, when child characters are assigned adversities through minor subplots, those experiences are rarely explored in depth. The implicit message is that these children's lives do not warrant sustained attention.

Episode 4, "Hysteria," illustrates this dynamic. Suddenly, concerns about food and dieting disappear, replaced by Maureen's desire for a tattoo, an issue that conveniently aligns with the episode's primary investigation. The abrupt shift raises obvious questions. Did concerns about dieting vanish entirely within a week? Did Maureen simply forget what appeared important in the previous episode? Of course, the tattoo storyline exists because it supports the criminal investigation. Maureen is not unique in receiving this treatment.

Dickie, Maureen's cousin, becomes the central child figure in season 1, episode 7, "Uncivilized." Once again, his prominence arises because he parallels the episode's main victim. The investigation centers on the assault and murder of an eight-year-old child in a public park. Dickie appears to be approximately the same age. Early in the episode, one officer argues that children of that age should not be allowed to play unsupervised, implicitly assigning some responsibility to the parents. Another counters that constant supervision would produce "neurotic" children. From the outset, therefore, the narrative frames the issue through adult concerns about parenting rather than through a child's perspective. The central question becomes what constitutes responsible parenting in relation to childhood independence.

Appropriately, the Stabler family appears in a picnic scene that reinforces their image as a loving family. When Stabler joins them during a break from work, his wife and daughters are visibly nearby but Dickie is missing. Because Stabler is actively investigating a murder of a child, he immediately panics and rushes to find his son. He eventually discovers Dickie playing ball with other children and instinctively grabs and hugs him. Dickie responds with confusion: "What's the matter, daddy? Are you mad at me?" His reaction suggests that he interprets his father's behavior as unusual and worries that he has somehow done something wrong. This moment may itself constitute a potential ACE. Stabler attempts to separate work from family life, but his fear intrudes into an ordinary family outing. Dickie lacks the context necessary to understand his father's reaction. Instead, he assumes responsibility for the situation, wondering whether he deserves

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punishment. Such interactions could encourage a child to second-guess his own behavior and undermine his confidence in interpreting the responses of parents and peers alike.

Later in the episode, Dickie and his father are at a playground when Dickie notices Stabler watching an unfamiliar man nearby. Casually, he asks, "Looking for pedophiles, dad?" Stabler immediately asks where he learned the word and Dickie replies that another child taught it to him at school. This brief exchange communicates several important ideas. First, it reinforces the notion that Stabler attempts to maintain his children's innocence by shielding them from the realities he encounters at work. Second, it acknowledges the limits of parental control. Even when parents wish to protect their children from troubling subjects, children often encounter such information through peers and schools.

Later still, Stabler visits Dickie's classroom for a show-and-tell session. He discusses police badges and child safety while carefully avoiding explicit terminology such as pedophile. Rather than focusing on offenders, he teaches the children how to distinguish genuine police officers from imposters and how to respond to suspicious adults. Although the classroom contains many children, the scene ultimately focuses on Stabler. It demonstrates the way he balances child protection against preserving innocence and positions him as a model of responsible fatherhood.

Yet this well-intentioned lesson may create additional burdens for his son. During the visit, another student asks a question suggesting possible abuse at home. Stabler responds that the child should tell Dickie, who can then tell him. In doing so, Stabler effectively transforms his son into an informal intermediary. He never considers how this responsibility might affect Dickie's experiences at school or his emotional well-being. How will his peers treat him? How will he cope with disclosures of abuse? The episode never addresses these questions, even though they could have lasting consequences for Dickie's development.

Research consistently demonstrates the importance of childhood experiences for healthy development. As Webster explains:

> The first critical period of development is in early childhood where the brain development is rapidly occurring, and children are in a state of neural plasticity. Any exposure to adversity, or ACEs, during this period of development may hinder healthy development (3).

Even these three episodes suggest that children of law-enforcement officers may encounter troubling circumstances that shape their development. Realistically, Dickie may become hyperaware of adults who show an unusual interest in children, or he may begin scrutinizing the home lives of his classmates.

Existing research indicates that ACEs can have long-term consequences. Adverse experiences "negatively impact people's physical and mental health and social functioning" (Tzouvara et al. 1). Felitti and colleagues found a strong relationship between exposure to abuse and household dysfunction during childhood and later adult health risks and

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premature mortality (245, 254). Similarly Sacks and Murphey argue that the accumulation of multiple adversities can be particularly harmful ('The Prevalence…' 1).

At the same time, more recent scholarship highlights the complexity of these relationships. Reviewing fifty-eight studies, Vasiliki Tzouvara and colleagues identified that methodological inconsistencies limit our understanding of the relationships between ACEs, mental health, and social functioning (1). They also note a shift away from merely counting ACEs toward examining how different forms of adversity interact (50). This observation is especially relevant for *SVU*, where the children analyzed are not typical victims of abuse or neglect. Instead, they experience intermittent exposure to adversity because of their parents' careers and personal circumstances. Although the limitations of existing ACE research must be acknowledged, the program's treatment of these children nonetheless raises important questions about realism and representation.

As Jenkins argues, "in reality, almost every major political battle of the twentieth century has been fought on the backs of our children" (2). Contemporary debates over children's access to social media provide one modern example. According to Jenkins, "The innocent child carries the rhetorical force of such arguments; we are constantly urged to take action to protect our children" (2). In "Uncivilized," concerns about pedophilia and child safety drive the narrative. Through these storylines, the show's producers not only identify issues they consider socially significant but also model appropriate responses. In doing so, they indirectly instruct audiences on how adults might discuss sensitive subjects with children.

As *SVU* matured, the series also revisited earlier family storylines. One example involves Kathleen Stabler, who is caught driving under the influence in season 6, episode 21, "Blood." Stabler uses his law-enforcement connections to shield her from consequences. At the time, he believes he is protecting his daughter. Two years later, however, in season 8, episode 22, "Screwed," Kathleen is finally held accountable. The narrative retrospectively suggests that Stabler's earlier intervention was misguided. By preventing his daughter from facing consequences, he abused his authority and modelled poor parenting.

Definitions of protection are themselves shaped by wider social and political contexts. Public attitudes toward law enforcement vary significantly across racial and political groups (Ekins). Consequently, some viewers may have objected to Stabler's actions. In a Reddit discussion, one viewer described him as a "hypocrite" (Lilanniem73). Other participants, many of whom identified themselves as parents, expressed more mixed responses. One mother argues that allowing Kathleen to evade punishment made Stabler a "bad parent" because genuine concern requires children to face the consequences of dangerous behavior such as drunk driving. Significantly, these discussions focus almost entirely on Stabler. Few viewers ask how Kathleen experienced these events or how they may have affected her relationship with her father, her trust in law enforcement or her sense of personal responsibility. Like the series itself, audience conversations often remain centered on the adult perspective.

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Overall, Stabler's children never develop into fully realized characters. Although they experience challenges and hardships, they remain peripheral figures who appear only when their presence advances their father's storyline. In Kathleen's case, her father's attempt to protect her ultimately exposes her delayed legal consequences, including arrest, handcuffing, transportation in a police vehicle, and six months of community service. Ironically, Stabler's protective actions may themselves have generated adverse experiences.

Because Kathleen remains a secondary character, the series never meaningfully explores these consequences. Viewers are left to wonder how such events affect her mental health. In this way, the program misses an opportunity to explore resilience, recovery from adversity and the complexities of good parenting. Given the prevalence of issues such as teenage drunk driving, audiences might well benefit from seeing these situations examined from multiple perspectives. Indeed, the Reddit discussion suggests that viewers naturally compare such fictional dilemmas to their own life experiences.

Stabler departs the series at the end of season 12.[2] As a result, his children largely disappear from *SVU* as well, leaving audiences unable to assess the long-term impact of these experiences on their lives.[3] The program does, however, introduce a child connected to another main character, one whose experiences with ACEs remain central well into the series' later seasons.

Detective Tutuola and His Son

The second main character for whom the writers created a child is Detective Odafin Tutuola. Introduced in season 2, Tutuola is presented as a divorced father who is estranged from his son. His son, Ken, does not appear until season 6, five years after Tutuola joins the main cast. Unlike Stabler's children, who are introduced as minors, Ken enters the series as a young man on the threshold of adulthood, although his exact age is never specified. The family's basic history already suggests the presence of ACEs, including parental separation and being raised primarily by a single parent. Later storylines provide additional insight into the adversities that shaped Ken's childhood.

Ken is introduced during a particularly dramatic storyline. In season 6, episode 10, "Haunted," Tutuola is shot while shielding an "innocent child" during a robbery at a bodega. The incident immediately positions him as heroic and sympathetic, while leaving his survival uncertain. This narrative circumstance creates a reason to contact his estranged son. Benson visits Ken and informs him of his father's condition. At approximately eighteen to twenty years old, Ken has nearly reached adulthood. His first reaction is telling: "Did he ask for me?"

Rather than hurrying to the hospital, Ken's immediate question signals emotional distance. Benson responds, "[h]e's unconscious," placing the decision entirely in Ken's hands. The writers choose to burden the young man with a difficult choice rather than allowing the conscious father to express his wishes. Ken explains:" [i]t's been a long time since I've seen him. We are not exactly close."

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From the perspective of ACEs, the situation is noteworthy. A young adult is confronted with the possibility that he may be seeing his father for the final time. Moreover, he must make this decision alone. No close friend or family member is present to provide support or guidance. The writers could easily have placed another trusted figure in the scene, but instead Ken is left to process the situation with only a colleague of his father's available for assistance. He must navigate an emotionally significant and time-sensitive decision independently.

The next scene reveals that Ken has chosen to visit the hospital. Upon finding his father conscious, however, his first question is not about Tutuola's recovery: "Why should I stay when you are not dying?" The blunt confrontation immediately signals that Tutuola has failed his son in important ways. There is no discussion of injuries or prognosis, only the unresolved pain of abandonment. Long-time viewers may sympathize with Ken's response. Unlike Stabler, whose identity as a father was established from the series' beginning, Tutuola spent several seasons appearing disconnected from family life. For viewers, Ken's resentment feels justified.

Tutuola acknowledges his failure: "I put my work ahead of my family."

Ken replies: "Don't worry. I turned out okay. Take care, dad."

He then leaves.

Importantly, the writers do not follow Ken after this encounter. His emotional state is irrelevant to the narrative. The focus remains on Tutuola's recovery and future. Yet the scene strongly implies that Ken's childhood was shaped by adversity. Viewers are left with unanswered questions. How does Ken feel after this unexpected meeting? Who does he turn to for comfort and care? *Who* is Ken's home?

While the scene provides little support for Ken as a character, it creates an opportunity for Tutuola's growth. The storyline allows the detective to acknowledge his shortcomings and express remorse. The result is a supportive narrative environment for the adult character while leaving the child's perspective largely unexplored.

Although the audience learns little about Ken's history, his appearance suggests stability. He lives in a tidy home, dresses neatly and appears emotionally composed. As he himself states, he "turned out okay". Yet this raises another question: how and why?

Research has linked ACEs to "poor academic performance, poor health outcomes, and certain diseases" (Webster 1). However, studies also indicate that protective relationships can mitigate their effects. Research on young children exposed to ACEs found that those who experienced an "affectionate [relationship] with their parent [had] decreased risk for health and developmental problems." The CDC reaches similar conclusions ('About…'). This protection is evident in the case of the Stabler children, whose family environment consistently communicates affection and support. Viewers can only assume that Ken's mother provided a similarly nurturing environment that enabled him to overcome the damage caused by his father's absence.

As Webster explains:

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> The first critical period of development is in early childhood where the brain development is rapidly occurring, and children are in a state of neural plasticity. Any exposure to adversity, or ACEs, during this period of development may hinder healthy development. … Additionally, another critical period of development occurs in adolescents, where the brain is experiencing neural pruning and individuals are seeking a sense of identity. And finally, the transition into adulthood is a crucial period for developing self-efficacy, pursuing meaning, and exposure to opportunities for success. (3)

The children examined in *SVU* collectively span all these developmental stages. It remains unclear when Tutuola left his family, but by the time viewers meet Ken, he has already passed through childhood and most of adolescence. According to Webster, positive parent-child relationships can "promote resilience in the face of adversity" (10). The Stabler children appear to benefit from such relationships. Somehow, despite the challenges he faced, Ken does as well.

Following his introduction, Ken gradually rebuilds his relationship with Tutuola. The most significant storyline emerges through his cousin Darius, whose narrative dominates portions of seasons 7 and 8. Ken's connection to Darius reveals additional layers of family trauma. In season 8, Ken learns that Darius is his half-brother, conceived when Ken's mother was raped by her own father. Although Darius remains close to Ken, he harbors deep resentment toward other family members and eventually rapes and murders a woman and her infant son. When Ken becomes aware of his cousin's potential crime, he must decide what to do with the information. He apparently kept it a secret for many years, always wondering if it was true or if Darius had made up or embellished a story.

Within the context of ACE research, Darius represents a more conventional example of severe childhood trauma producing destructive outcomes in adulthood. Discovering the truth about his origins fundamentally destabilizes his identity and sense of trust. His trajectory aligns more closely with research linking significant childhood adversity to later criminal behavior.

For Ken, however, the revelation creates another crisis. Having heard Darius' confession years earlier, he is forced to determine how to respond. As the investigation unfolds, he learns that everything is accurate and he loses the relationship he once valued.[4] Beyond losing a cousin and close friend, he must come to terms with the knowledge that his grandfather raped his mother. Once again, the foundations of his family history collapse. Viewed cumulatively, Ken experiences repeated forms of adversity. He loses his father during childhood, reunites with him as a young adult, discovers shocking family secrets, and becomes estranged from a relative he trusted. How, then, does he remain so well-adjusted? The series never provides an answer.

Like Stabler's children, Ken functions primarily as a narrative device that supports larger *SVU* storylines. In season 8, episode 12, "Outsider," he serves as a resident advisor at

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a university dormitory where a female student is sexually assaulted. Ken connects the victim with his father, thereby facilitating the episode's investigation. Although the event may itself qualify as an adverse experience, the show does not explore its impact on him. Instead, the storyline serves to reinforce Tutuola's growing role as a present and involved father.

This pattern repeats throughout the series. In season 7, episode 5, "Strain," Ken comes out as gay in a storyline focused on a hate crime against two gay men. Tutuola ultimately accepts him. Several seasons later, when Ken plans to tell his father that he is engaged, his fiancé becomes the victim of a hate crime in season 13, episode 21, "Learning Curve." Once again, the focus falls on Tutuola rather than Ken. A key scene shows Tutuola visiting the unconscious Alejandro in hospital and welcoming him to the family. The purpose of the scene is not to develop Ken or Alejandro, but to demonstrate Tutuola's emotional growth and commitment to repairing family relationships.

By season 19, episode 17, "Send in the Clowns," Ken, Alejandro, and their son Jaydon share a scene with Tutuola that suggests a healthy, functioning family relationship. Ken remarks, "Family is family," and his father repeats the sentiment. Yet even these appearances continue to support Tutuola's narrative. The audience sees him not only as a dedicated detective but also as a father, father-in-law, and grandfather. Similarly, when Tutuola nearly marries Phoebe in season 21, episode 16, "Wolves in Sheep's Clothing," Ken and his family appear as wedding guests because their presence validates the restoration of familial bonds.

Despite appearing across nearly two decades of storytelling, Ken never develops into a fully realized character. The audience learns little about his inner life, coping mechanisms or the long-term consequences of his adversities. Instead, he remains a two-dimensional figure whose primary purpose is to support Tutuola's character arc.

This narrative choice reinforces a broader pattern within *SVU*. Child characters and the children of main characters remain secondary to the adults whose stories drive the series. Consequently, the audience is left wondering how Ken became a kind, loving, and seemingly well-adjusted adult despite an upbringing marked by multiple ACEs. In some respects, he appears anomalous when compared with existing research. By developing characters such as Ken in greater depth, *SVU* could provide viewers with meaningful examples of resilience and recovery from adversity. The same observation applies to the final child examined in this study: Noah.

Captain Benson and Her Son

Noah is the son of Olivia Benson, the character most closely associated with *SVU* today. Benson has been part of the series since its first episode, initially serving as a detective before rising through the ranks. At the end of season 15, she becomes the foster mother of a baby boy, Noah, and later adopts him. By the most recent episdoes dicussed here, Noah is approximately fifteen years old and has experienced significant adversity throughout his life.

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In summary, Noah spent the first two and a half months of his life living with sex traffickers, having been born to Ellie Porter, a trafficked young woman who was ultimately rescued by Benson and the *SVU* squad. Following this rescue, Noah spent approximately four months moving among four different foster families before Benson became his foster mother. Shortly thereafter, he developed a serious fever and was admitted to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), where doctors discovered old rib fractures. Viewers are informed that such injuries are not unusual among children in foster care.

Even this summary suggests that Noah experienced innumerable ACEs during infancy. Some are explicitly shown, while others can only be inferred from the instability and harm he encountered during his earliest months. Once Benson becomes his caregiver, however, Noah's environment changes dramatically and becomes largely nurturing and supportive. Nevertheless, the narrative focus remains on Benson rather than Noah. Despite his difficult beginnings, he remains an underdeveloped character whose primary narrative purpose is to support his mother's storylines.

This dynamic is evident in season 17, episode 13, "Forty-One Witnesses." Benson is shown at home monitoring Noah through a baby monitor while drinking wine and speaking on the telephone. During the conversation, she explains that she has taken mandatory leave and has begun seeing a psychiatrist. Although details are limited, the exchange suggests she is struggling with a work-related trauma while also seeking professional support.[5] In this scene, Benson models behavior that contemporary audiences are encouraged to view as responsible: recognizing the need for help and addressing mental-health concerns in order to remain a capable parent.

Four episodes later, in season 17, episode 17, "Manhattan Transfer," Noah is again incorporated into an adult-centered storyline. A volatile victim, Nina Kelly, briefly holds Noah, creating uncertainty about his safety. Benson calmly removes him from the situation, reassuring him that, "everyone wants to hug you," thereby attempting to shield him from recognizing any potential danger. Her response reflects a broader parenting philosophy found throughout the series: children should be protected not only from harm itself but also from awareness of the harm whenever possible. After removing Noah from the room, Benson becomes the target of Nina's anger. Although Noah could potentially hear the confrontation from an adjacent room, the show does not address whether he understands what is occurring. Consequently, the possible effects of the incident on him remain unexplored. Instead, the scene functions primarily to reinforce Benson's image as a responsible and protective mother.

The same emphasis on parenting appears in episode 23, "Heartfelt Passages." Much of the episode unfolds in real time, an unusual narrative structure that heightens tension during a hostage crisis. Benson successfully rescues two children from the home of the antagonist, a correctional officer, before one of her colleagues is shot and transported to hospital. There, Benson telephones Noah's babysitter, Lucy, indicating that Lucy will remain with Noah while Benson stays at the hospital to support her injured subordinate. The writers clearly frame this decision as appropriate leadership and parenting: Benson fulfils

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her professional obligations while ensuring her son is cared for. Later in the episode, Benson attends therapy, where her therapist reminds her that she saved two children and that Noah is fortunate she survived. Once again, the focus rests on the adult rather than the child. The storyline reflects contemporary expectations regarding mental health, suggesting that seeking therapeutic support is a responsibility not only for professionals in high-stress occupations but also for parents.

The contrast with Stabler is noteworthy. During the show's early years, Stabler typically coped with workplace trauma on his own. Benson, by contrast, receives professional support. The difference reflects changing social attitudes toward mental-health treatment. The Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 required insurance providers to cover treatment related to "mental health, behavioral health and substance-use disorders" ('Does Your Insurance'). The Affordable Care Act further expanded access to such care in 2010 (Smith). Benson's narrative thus reflects a period in which counselling and therapy had become increasingly normalized and legitimized. The adults are carefully situated within their historical contexts, while the children remain comparatively fragmented and underdeveloped.

The episode concludes with an idealized family scene. Benson, Noah and her then-time partner, Tucker, walk together beneath spring blossoms while discussing Tucker's future employment plans. Noah walks between the adults before Tucker playfully tickles him. Benson and Tucker kiss, lift Noah in the air, and continue down the street with the Statue of Liberty visible in the background. Through both visual composition and narrative context, the scene communicates that Benson has successfully created a stable, loving and nurturing environment for her son.

Although Noah's circumstances improve significantly after his adoption, many of his later appearances continue to position him within subplots that primarily serve Benson's development. For example, in season 21, episode 3, "Down Low in Hell's Kitchen," Noah tells his mother that he no longer wants to play baseball and instead wants to pursue dance. Viewers learn nothing about how long he has considered this decision and whether he struggled to discuss it with his mother. The purpose of the scene is not to develop Noah's character but to reinforce Benson's role as a supportive parent. She readily accommodates his wishes and enrolls him in dance classes.

The writers further emphasize this point through a scene in which Benson drops Noah off at ballet practice. Given the social stigmas sometimes attached to boys participating in dance, the sequence appears designed both to highlight Benson's acceptance and to normalize boys' participation in ballet. Once again, the story leaves important questions unexplored. If Noah experiences teasing or bullying because of his interests, the audience never learns about it. In 2025, approximately six years after the episode originally aired, viewers continued to speculate online whether Noah still participates in dance classes, highlighting how little information the series provides about his personal life (Extra_Impression_428).

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Other storylines raise similar issues. In season 23, episode 10, "Silent Night, Hateful Night,"[6] Noah and his friends Hudson and Annie engage in pretend play involving captivity and abuse. During their game, Noah is placed in a literal cage and assumes the role of a hostage. Later, Noah describes Hudson as a "bully" yet appears largely unfazed by the implications of the game. His reaction suggests either unusual maturity or emotional distance from the scenario. As with Ken Tutuola, however, the audience lacks sufficient information to understand how Noah processes such experiences or how he arrived at these seemingly sophisticated conclusions.

The same scene abruptly shifts focus once more when Noah comes out to Benson as "bi[sexual]." Benson responds by calling him "brave," and Noah explains that being bisexual is his "truth" and that nobody should be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. Benson embraces him and the pair subsequently leave for dinner together. The episode aired in 2022, at a time when "state legislatures (were) advancing bills that target transgender people, limit local protections, and allow the use of religion to discriminate" (ACLU). Audience reactions on Reddit were divided. Some viewers criticized the revelation for appearing unexpectedly, while others argued that the absence of foreshadowing reflected the personal nature of sexual identity and disclosure (HMSquared). Within the context of this study, however, Noah's sudden revelation is consistent with the treatment of other child characters throughout the series. Because these children receive minimal development, important aspects of their identities often emerge suddenly when required by the narrative. One viewer expressed concern that Noah's sexuality functioned primarily as a "plot point," suggesting that the storyline showed insufficient respect for both the character and the community he represents. Given the broader patterns identified in this analysis, that concern appears justified. Noah's disclosure primarily serves to position Benson as a model of unconditional parental acceptance while reinforcing the social and political values of the period.

The pattern continues in season 24, episode 9, "And a Trauma in a Pear Tree." Given his difficult beginnings, Noah expresses interest in learning more about his biological relatives. Benson responds by explaining that she wants to keep him safe. Her concerns are understandable, particularly since Noah's biological father was a leader within a sex-trafficking organization. To investigate further, Benson asks Tutuola to conduct background checks on Noah's entire biological family. The writers' handling of this situation is noteworthy because it involves an abuse of official authority. Ordinary citizens do not possess access to such resources. Although Benson's motivation is understandable, she uses her position as a law-enforcement officer to obtain information for personal reasons. In this respect, her actions parallel Stabler's efforts to shield Kathleen from the consequences of her DUI. Both cases suggest that the series repeatedly portrays law-enforcement officers as willing to bend rules when doing so appears consistent with protecting their children.

More broadly, Noah's role closely resembles that of Stabler's children. He possesses virtuous interest, demonstrates unusual maturity and exhibits knowledge or awareness that conveniently aligns with contemporary social concerns. Whether discussing bullying,

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sexuality, safety or personal interests, Noah frequently functions less as a realistically developed child than as a narrative tool through which Benson can demonstrate good parenting. As a result, despite the extensive adversity that shapes his life, he remains a largely symbolic figure. Like the children examined earlier in this study, Noah ultimately serves the growth and development of the adult characters around him rather than existing as a fully realized character in his own right.

Conclusion

Overall, this study has shown that all the children created for *SVU* primarily function as tools for developing the show's adult protagonists. From the beginning of the series, Stabler's children were constructed as supporting characters with limited agency whose primary purpose was to facilitate their father's character development. At the same time, they were framed through the lens of the myth of childhood innocence. The adults surrounding them consistently sought to provide them with carefree, protected childhoods. Jenkins identifies "the most persistent image of the innocent child" as a "white, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy … and the marks of middle-classness, whiteness and masculinity." *SVU* leaned heavily into this trope when constructing Stabler and his family. In addition to providing viewers with Dickie as the archetypal innocent child, the writers included several sisters, creating opportunities for variations on this broader depiction while maintaining the same underlying framework. Benson's son Noah likewise fits this model of the child who requires protection and guidance from responsible adults.

In contrast, Tutuola's son Ken represents a child who succeeds despite experiencing circumstances that, according to ACE research, would predict negative outcomes. Throughout both his childhood and young adulthood, Ken encounters multiple forms of adversity. Statistically, viewers might not expect him to become the caring, responsible husband, father and community member that he ultimately is. While it is encouraging that Ken develops into such a positive figure, the audience gains little understanding of how this transformation occurs. As Giroux argues, "Children's culture is a sphere where entertainment, advocacy and pleasure meet to construct conceptions of what it means to be a child occupying a combination of gender, race and class positions in society" (qtd. in Jenkins 4). The outcomes of the children examined in this study suggest that *SVU* places less emphasis on gender and race than on family environment. The series implicitly argues that children can become productive adults if they grow up within a supportive and loving home. Yet because Ken remains as underdeveloped as Stabler's children and Noah, viewers are never permitted to understand his experiences in any meaningful depth. While he appears to possess agency, such as choosing to attend college and building an adult life of his own, the audience rarely witnesses these decisions or learns how he makes them. In many ways, Ken appears to defy the expectations established by ACE research. The series could have developed his character more fully to offer audiences a meaningful example of resilience and recovery. Such a portrayal might provide a road map for viewers facing their own adversities and demonstrate practical pathways toward positive outcomes.

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With the introduction of Noah, *SVU* largely returned to the narrative model previously established through Stabler's children, albeit with some modifications. Noah occupies a more central position within adverse experiences, such as the storyline involving pretend imprisonment in a cage. Nevertheless, his role remains fundamentally similar. The way children are integrated into these narratives illustrates Jenkins' observation that "[c]hildren's culture is ... something that happens to children. Children are not participants or contributors to that culture" (25). Maureen, Kathleen, Dickie, Ken and Noah function primarily as devices through which the program explores social concerns relevant to their historical moments. While *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* has frequently been praised for educating about sexual crimes and related social issues, it simultaneously loses significant educational opportunities by confining these younger characters to underdeveloped supporting roles.

Philippe Ariès argued that the myth of childhood innocence generated two competing imperatives: first, that childhood must be protected, and second, that children must be shaped and developed into morally responsible adults (Jenkins 16). The children of the *SVU* squad members exist at the intersection of these competing perspectives. Their parents seek to shield them from the brutality of sexual violence and criminal behavior, while simultaneously teaching them how to recognize danger, respond appropriately to difficult situations, and behave responsibly. As a result, these children grow up under the constant shadow of the crimes that their parents spend their days investigating.

Borrowing from James Kincaid's observation that "what the child *is* matters less than what we *think* it is" (qtd. in Jenkins 4), this analysis argues that the writers of *SVU* consistently and problematically imagine the child as little more than an innocent bystander whose innocence it is the role of the responsible adult to preserve. The child must be protected from evil while also, without compromising their innocence, being taught to recognize evil as early as possible, and guided toward morally correct behavior when confronted with harsh realities. The contradictions at work are avoided by the series which ultimately is not interested in presenting its minor child characters as fully realized individuals with their own perspectives and developmental journeys. Rather, they function as symbolic figures through which adult anxieties, ideals and cultural expectations about childhood are expressed. In so doing, the series reinforces a conventional vision of childhood innocence while largely overlooking the opportunity to explore how children themselves experience, understand and overcome adversity.

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Notes

1. The Stabler family consists of Elliot (father and *SVU* detective), Kathy (wife), Maureen (oldest daughter), Kathleen (daughter), Richard ('Dickie', son), Elizabeth (youngest daughter), and Elliot Jr. (youngest son and youngest child). Elliot Jr. is not discussed in this paper because he had not yet been born during the episodes analyzed here.
2. Although Detective Stabler later returns as a guest character, this analysis focuses on his original tenure as a main cast member because of the significant narrative attention it received.
3. Stabler's children also appear in later guest roles and in the spin-off *Law & Order: Organized Crime* (2021–2025), but this article focuses exclusively on *SVU* and the narrative choices made by that show's producers.
4. This storyline unfolds across multiple episodes, beginning with season 7, episode 18, "Venom" and concluding with season 8, episode 21, "Screwed."
5. For regular viewers, this scene directly relates to events depicted in episode 11 of the same season.
6. On the streaming service *Peacock*, the episode is listed as episode 11, having been switched with "Burning with Rage Forever."

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