

THE
GUIDE
FOR
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RESOURCES

ON AWARENESS
AND PREPAREDNESS



MARK TOOROCK

FOUNDER AND CEO OF AMERICAN PARKOUR

PREPARED THROUGH PLAY

WHY REAL-WORLD CHALLENGE BEATS VIRTUAL VICTORIES

By Mark Toorock

Swipes vs. Strides. A child swipes through 99 levels of a mobile game. There are puzzles, timing challenges, dopamine dings, and shiny “rewards” - colorful coins and gems every few seconds. Without too much stretch, you could compare the cacophony to the sound of the slot machine area of a casino. It’s fun, engaging, and even difficult at times. The child is locked in, but what are they actually earning?

Meanwhile, another child approaches an angled, downed tree trunk. She tries to vault over it, but stumbles, not making it all the way over. On the next try, she almost makes it, getting fully on top of the log, but not clearing it completely. On the third try, she succeeds - clearing the log and landing in a choppy, staccato jog. She tries again, this time it's smooth, almost graceful. She's engaged, committed.

This is serious play; it's difficult, but the feedback is immediate, tactile, and unmistakable - she knows instantly what's working and what isn't. Because the tree trunk is angled, she self-selects a difficulty that gives her “just enough” success to keep pulling her further into the challenge. An hour passes as she tries different footing combinations, varied heights, and approach angles. Is it the leg of a fallen giant? The tail of a gold-hoarding dragon?

While she flies through the air, time flies as well, and the light fades to dusk. She's hardly noticed as she's in a self-induced flow state: the perfect level of challenge for growth and adaptation. She wipes the sweat from her brow and decides that for today, the dragon is defeated.

This is what the video games try so hard to emulate, and while they have the “dopamine drip” dialed in, the success is never real; there's just another level to swipe through. For the girl in the woods, there is something gained, something earned; the confidence is tangible, and it carries over to other challenges in life. She has become more resilient.

Real-World Problem-Solving is Fading.

Kids today are growing up with less confidence and more anxiety; they are not inherently weaker or more frail, but they are getting fewer opportunities to test themselves in real-world environments.

“We say we want kids to learn risk management, but we protect them and make decisions for them - depriving them of both the ‘risk’ and the ‘management.’” - Mark Toorock.

When a child engages in physical problem solving, like climbing a tree, planning a route to jump across rocks in a stream, or climbing a rock wall, they're not just moving and doing physical activity. They are actually making assessments and solving for variables, including risk vs reward, assessing their own capabilities, and processing a staggering amount of data: texture, grip, momentum, structural integrity, balance, coordination, timing, and the list goes on.

This kind of problem-solving builds adaptive expertise- the ability to flexibly apply knowledge and skills to novel challenges. According to an article in [Frontiers in Psychology](#), “physical activity promotes the improvement of cognitive benefits such as attention, memory, thinking, and executive function”.

The article goes on to say that “moderate physical activity lasting at least 3 days a week, at least 60 min a day are most conducive to improving the brain function of children and adolescents.”

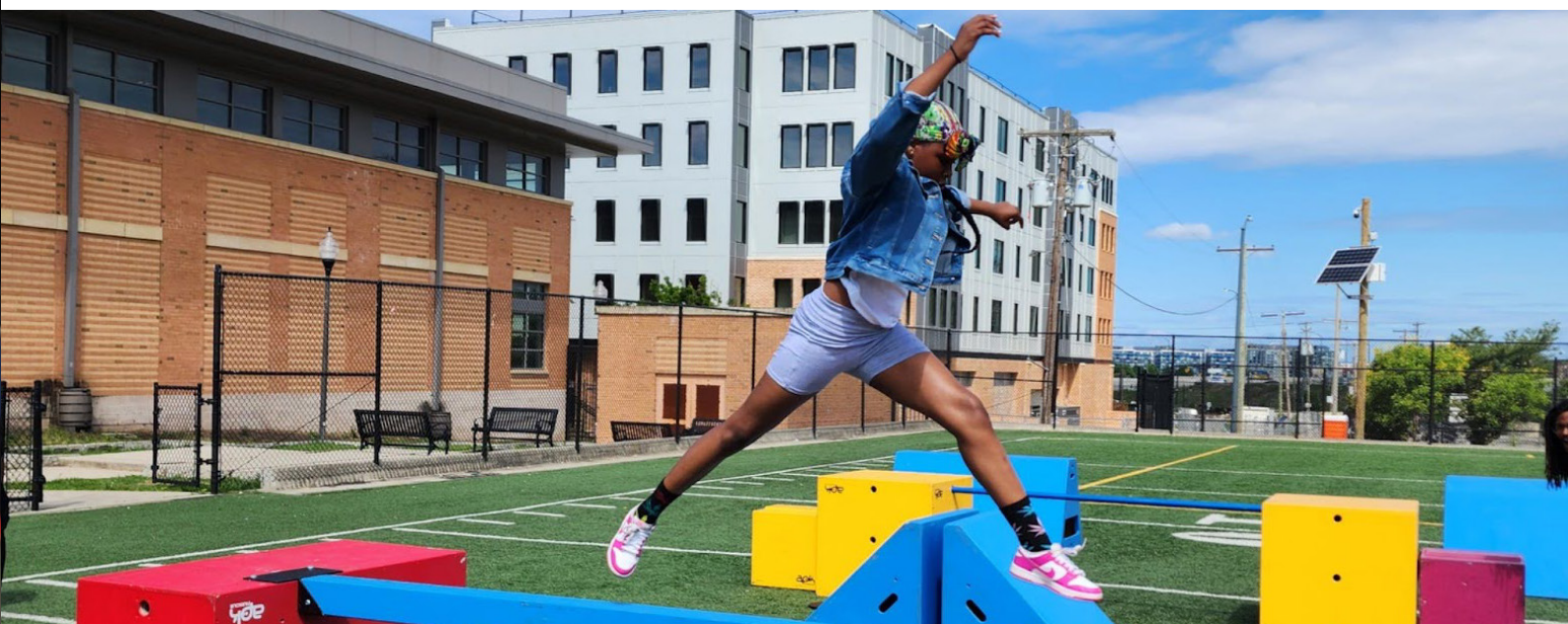
Screen Games offer challenge and stimulation, but it's all behind a piece of glass. Unlike real life, the risks are simulated, and the rewards are virtual. There's no grit, no true adaptation. Real life, in contrast, is visceral and full of variables, real consequences, and no “undo” button. Progress is rarely linear, and almost always consists of failed attempts, iterations, and adaptations to changing circumstances.

“What we earn through trial and error is indelible. It cannot be given, and it cannot be taken; it becomes part of our very fabric” - Mark Toorock.

Compliance Vs Ownership

Being told what to do sets a child into “compliance mode”. This often results in a minimum effort scenario, just enough to “get you off their back”.

Instead, we want to activate “ownership mode.” Once a child accepts





a challenge as their own, they strive to do their best, not just complete the task, but to improve themselves and the outcome. The shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation gives them agency to own both the outcome and the process. But that only happens when they have room to try, fail, adapt, and even succeed in a different way—not just chase one single, rote objective.

Many adults will recognize this same dynamic in their own lives. When we're handed a task with no stake in it, the goal is only to "get it done". However, when we care about the outcome- because we have a role and determination in the project- we bring our best ideas and energy. Kids are no different; they just live in a world where most of their time is spent doing "what they're told" or "what they have to". Let's raise engaged kids by giving them ownership of the challenge or project, the opportunity to learn and contribute their best, and the freedom to find their own way through it.

Exploratory Play: The Engine of Readiness.

"The exploratory mindset creates engaging environments, inspiring kids to challenge themselves, experiment, and push their own limits through movement and self-discovery."

The best kind of play isn't just chaotic or unstructured; it's exploratory. It has purpose, challenge, and room for discovery.

A. Curiosity-Driven Design.

Kids engage deeply when they're solving, not just following. Instead of giving them instructions, give them invitations. These challenges spark intrinsic motivation, creative problem-solving, and ownership of success.

B. Structured Freedom.

A good play environment offers boundaries, not answers. For younger children, define their play space, but let them figure out how to move through it. For older children, set safety guidelines and neighborhood boundaries, but make them as broad as possible. Allow your child the opportunity to earn your trust. Otherwise, they are "just doing as they're told" and won't develop decision-making skills needed to navigate the real world.

It's tempting to set tight guardrails, but too much safety deprives kids of the chance to learn how to recover.

"True readiness doesn't come from always getting it right; it comes from trying again after it goes wrong."

C. Markers of Progress.

Growth is most powerful when kids can see it themselves. Offer repeatable challenges with early success and increasing difficulty: balance lines, jumps, crawling paths, and help them assess and reflect on their progress.

Trust is developed when we encourage effort, but don't reward failure. When a child knows they haven't succeeded and still hears you say "good job," your feedback loses value. Instead, give specific actionable feedback:

"Try again, and this time remember to..."

"You almost made it, I think you've got it next time if you ..."

This integrity develops and maintains their trust in you as a guide and coach.

These moments create an environment that builds confidence rooted in action, effort, and outcome- not praise. They teach kids how to track their progress and take pride in it.

Compliments are extrinsic. Confidence from success is intrinsic.

Remember, your reactions teach them how to react. If you're nervous, anxious, or overprotective, they will absorb that. But if you can allow yourself to become more "hands off," they will act with the responsibility you've given them, making their own discoveries and judgments, not just mimicking yours.

What This Kind of Play Builds.

Exploratory play builds more than strong bodies; it builds resilient minds. It teaches kids to:

- Assess and manage risk
- Problem-solve with incomplete information
- Adapt when plans fail
- Recover from mistakes
- Stay calm under pressure

These are the foundations of real-world competence, skills needed not just in emergency situations, but in daily life.

Two Hidden Superpowers Built Through Play.

Anti-Fragility: Kids don't get tougher by being protected. They grow through struggle and recovery.

"Kids can't become resilient if they're never allowed to face resistance. Too much cushioning keeps them comfortable, but it also keeps them untested. They will be unsure of themselves when it comes to decisive actions." Letting kids fall (safely), fail (repeatedly), and find their own way through builds



strength from the inside out.

Executive Function: When kids play with purpose, they're also building high-level thinking skills:

- Planning movement sequences
- Testing solutions and adapting in real-time
- Setting goals and adjusting strategies

Play like this rewires their brain to think more clearly and act more decisively, now and later. These are the same cognitive tools they'll use in school, relationships, and work.

What Adults Can Do - The Growth is in the Gap.

Your role isn't to control the play, it's to open the space for it.

The most potent and impactful growth happens not at the edges of instruction, but just beyond. This is The Gap - the moment when kids step into uncertainty, attempt something new, develop creativity, and discover what they are capable of.

This doesn't mean letting go or sending them off to fight wolves in the forest unarmed. It means setting clear boundaries that are wide enough to allow for growth, and then stepping back far enough to let the learning unfold.

Try inviting challenges that allow for multiple paths to success: On the playground- "Can you get from the slide to the swing without touching the ground?" or "Make a loop where you climb on three different things, then try it in reverse."

At the beach - "Can you make a sandcastle with a moat with water in it?" In the snow: "Make a path around three trees without crossing your own footsteps."

Try to create challenges that set a boundary, offer a goal, allow for multiple solutions, encourage creativity, ownership of the process, and adaptive thinking.

"When I coach coaches, the most common thing I teach is not to over-correct. Allow the child to try several times before giving input, and then, only give the minimum necessary to point them in the right direction and earn the solution themselves." -Mark Toorock

Be close enough to observe, and far enough to let them try. If it doesn't feel like they did it "on their own," then the growth isn't theirs.

Swap "Be careful" for "Be aware."

Swap "Let me help you" for "Try your way first."

The best growth doesn't come from being told what to do; it comes from figuring out what works.

Closing Reflection.

Preparedness doesn't come from perfection; it comes from exposure and experience. It's earned through movement, through mistakes, through doing. Protection is not preparation. The best safety net is experience, the kind built through falls, resets, and real triumphs.

Let's raise kids who don't just scroll through challenges and tick boxes, but instead face challenges with enthusiasm and strive for excellence.

The best preparation isn't perfect practice — it's discovering what works through action, experimentation, and ownership. Your calm presence, your trust, and your willingness to let them explore are some of the most powerful tools in their development. ♥

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Toorock is the founder of American Parkour. His programs are now taught in every Washington, DC middle school, where over 40,000 kids have done parkour as part of their physical education classes. Currently, APK's programs are expanding into several states across the country. American Parkour also makes parkour equipment for home use.

Mark has had over 40 jobs, from professional concert lighting to technology management for an investment bank. He has held certifications in Martial Arts, CrossFit, MovNat, Mobility, and Parkour. Mark has produced two parkour-based television shows and does public speaking for corporate and technology events.



Keeping the Spark Alive

Raising Curious, Thoughtful Kids

By Maria Sund



I remember lying in the back of my parents' station wagon, staring at the cityscapes of San Francisco whizzing by, bombarding my father with my endless questions. "But why?" I'd ask. And just as he'd finish answering, another "but why?" would follow. He still ribs me about it to this day, even mimicking the voice and tone I used while pestering him on those drives. That relentless curiosity, annoying as it was, shaped the way I see the world, and it's the same spark I try to nurture in my students.

Yet too often, I watch that spark fade, replaced by rote answers and passive acceptance. When the "why" goes missing, so does curiosity—and with it, the very ability to think for oneself.

A few years ago, my classroom was alive with questions. When I asked, "Why does this character make that choice?" or "What can this teach us about human behavior?" students debated. They disagreed, laughed, and sometimes changed their minds mid-sentence. They wrestled with ideas, not just answers.

This year, I ask the same questions, and the room falls silent. The same school. The same curriculum. The same teacher. But not the same students. Bright, hardworking, and polite, they wait for me to tell them what to think. When I push for interpretation or cause-and-effect, they freeze. Students can recount events but struggle to ask why they happened, why they matter, and what we're meant to take from them. They can memorize dates and names but fail to see the human choices, moral dilemmas, and societal forces that shape the past. This isn't just one school or group of students; it is a systemic issue impacting teachers and classrooms across the country. Curiosity isn't just fading—it's missing.

A Culture That Discourages Wonder.

The decline of curiosity extends beyond the classroom. Students live in a world that prizes speed, certainty, and compliance. Search engines and AI offer instant answers, social media takes up way too much of their time, and standardized testing rewards memorization over critical thinking. We are seeing confirmation that too much screen time shortens attention spans. Even at home, children are overscheduled, with little time for self-reflection, imaginative exploration, or the opportunity to just be bored. Parents, too, seem less likely to meaningfully engage with and ask their children about what they learned at school—partly because the ritual of family dinner, once a space for conversation, has become the exception rather than the norm. And parents are often glued to their phones, tuning out their kids even when they don't mean to.

The Consequences of Intellectual Passivity.

When curiosity fades, thinking becomes brittle, the mind fragile. In literature, characters flatten into stereotypes; in history, events reduce to isolated facts; in science, formulas replace understanding. Students can memorize without ever questioning and pass exams without truly learning. Curiosity is dead.

This is not just an academic issue—it's a societal one. A generation that stops asking why becomes vulnerable to manipulation, politically, socially, and morally. Curiosity is the first defense against complacency, conformity, and propaganda. Without it, education risks producing citizens who can pass tests but fail to critically engage with the world.

A curious mind is not easily swayed by convenient answers or emotional rhetoric. It is a mind that questions assumptions, seeks out diverse perspectives,

tives, and challenges its own beliefs. It's a mind that understands that the world is complex and that easy answers are rarely the full truth. By nurturing curiosity, we are not just teaching students how to think critically; we are empowering them to think independently, free from the influences that seek to manipulate or control them.

Modeling the Power of Thought.

In my classroom, I strive to cultivate curiosity as a form of freedom. One of my favorite reminders is a series of posters I've hung around the room: René Descartes' "I think, therefore I am"—a reminder of the power of individual thought; an image referencing Orwell's 1984, whose work repeatedly warns against propaganda, groupthink, and intellectual passivity, emphasizing the need to think independently; and finally, a few personal additions that my students have dubbed "Sundisms": "To question is to think. To think is to be free" and "If you're not questioning, you're not learning." These aren't just decorations—they're a manifesto, a call to expand your mind. They remind both my students and me that thinking is not just something we can do—it's something we must do, and questioning boldly is the heart of true intellectual freedom.

Critical thinking, I tell my students, is not simply a skill; it is a safeguard against intellectual and moral passivity. It empowers them to evaluate what they read and hear, to form independent judgments, and to resist the temptation to let others do the thinking for them.

Reclaiming Curiosity Through Reflection and Collaboration.

In addition to reading and discussion, I make writing a cornerstone of learning. I have my students write in-class essays, then spend the remainder of the period in peer review. I remind them that it's a no-judgment zone, where their primary task is to find something positive to say about a classmate's work and learn from each other.

Afterwards, students engage in self-reflection, considering what they could do better next time. This combination of peer feedback and personal reflection has proven remarkably effective. Not only do students improve their writing skills, but they also gain confidence in their own thinking. They come to understand that critique is not a threat, but a tool for growth—and that their voice, whether it's their analysis or their interpretation, matters.

Through these exercises, curiosity becomes active rather than passive. Students aren't simply absorbing information; they are interrogating it, evaluating it, and shaping it into their own understanding. They practice the very skills that guard against intellectual complacency and foster independent thought.

Learning from History: A Lesson Beyond the Textbook.

We bring this philosophy to life in concrete ways. Every year, my students read Or-

well's 1984, and upon completing the book, we visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Walking through the exhibits, seeing the tangible evidence of what happens when books are burned, ideas are suppressed, and people are dehumanized, transforms abstract warnings into something visceral and real.

Standing before personal belongings, photographs, and testimonies, students are forced to confront the human cost of unquestioning compliance and unchecked authority. The experience is sobering, unforgettable, and deeply personal—a vivid demonstration that thoughtlessness has consequences that extend far beyond the classroom. It prompts the most essential questions: How and why did this happen? And how can we prevent it from happening again?

Reclaiming Curiosity.

Reviving curiosity won't come from new textbooks or clever apps. It requires a cultural shift—one that values questions over answers, process over product, and wonder over speed. Teachers can foster this shift by creating safe spaces for uncertainty and exploration. Parents, too, can model curiosity by asking questions to which they themselves don't have the answers.

Curiosity may not boost standardized test scores, but it cultivates independent minds—minds that question, empathize, and imagine. Minds that resist surrendering their thinking to convenience, ideological manipulation, or fear.

In nurturing curiosity, we give students and children something more valuable than knowledge alone: the freedom to think for themselves. 🍀

About The Author



Maria Sund teaches high school English and World History at a private school in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. She holds a master's degree from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

In addition to being a wife and the mother of three children, she is a polyglot, pianist, and published photographer. Maria is passionate about fostering curiosity, critical thinking, and a lifelong love of learning, and firmly believes that the most valuable lesson education can offer is the ability to think for oneself.



Take The Gamble Out of Gifting

By Ria Michell and Dr. Deaneé Johnson



With the holiday season approaching, the hunt for the perfect gift is on. As parents, guardians, and caregivers, we all want to create a magical holiday for our children and teens and that often means finding the “must-have” gift. This year, tech tops the list, from our oldest to our youngest. But when it comes to technology, safety must come first.

Technology has exploded and continues to advance at lightning speed. Unfortunately, crimes facilitated by technology have grown just as fast. Many games, apps, and platforms designed for kids were built without safety as a priority. That leaves openings for predators, inside your child’s phone, games, and social media, while the systems meant to respond to these crimes often lag behind.

If you’re responsible for a child, you need clear rules for technology use in your home. Monitoring online activity isn’t optional, it’s essential. Stranger contact online is common. Current statistics show 1 in 4 children will be solicited for sexual activity online by age 18. You must know how to protect them and teach them to tell you when someone they don’t know reaches out.

Gifts with messaging, chat features, or live streaming carry risk. Right now, lawsuits are underway against gaming platforms for enabling child exploitation. For example, Roblox is being sued by multiple parents whose children were targeted by predators on the platform. Remember: phones, tablets, and gaming systems aren’t “just toys”; they’re communication devices, and communication devices can be used to groom, travel, and meet up.

Apps aimed at youth often promote features kids love, disappearing messages, anonymous accounts, and privacy. Apps that delete conversations or use end-to-end encryption make reporting difficult and erase evidence. Any app where a child can talk to strangers is inherently dangerous.

One of the fastest-growing crimes against kids is sextortion, especially targeting boys. Predators pose as peers and pressure kids for sexual images. Once they get one, they threaten to share it with parents or post it publicly unless the child pays. These schemes escalate quickly and have led to multiple teen suicides, sometimes within hours of the first threat.

And with the rise of AI, predators don’t even need a sexualized image from a child. A single photo of a child’s face can be used to create realistic deepfake child sexual abuse material. These images and videos look real and are tailored to the predator’s demands.

Private chats, group messages, and friend requests aren’t the only risks. Predators also use in-game gifting, skins, upgrades, and currency, to bribe, groom, or even launder money.

Finally, if you’re gifting old phones or tablets, remember they may still contain stored content, images, contacts, accounts, passwords, and chats. Always wipe and reset devices before handing them over.

Safe Gifting Checklist

Before Buying

- ☐ Check if the device or app allows messaging, chat, voice, or live streaming—assume strangers can access it.
- ☐ Research complaints or lawsuits involving the platform.
- ☐ Prefer devices with parental controls, age restrictions, and monitoring.
- ☐ Avoid apps with disappearing messages, anonymous accounts, or encrypted chats.

Setting Up

- ☐ Turn on all parental controls, filters, and purchase limits.
- ☐ Disable location sharing.
- ☐ Set up accounts using a parent’s email.
- ☐ Require approval for all friend requests and messages.
- ☐ Turn off in-game purchases or gifting where possible.

Old Devices

- ☐ Factory reset before gifting.
- ☐ Check camera roll, saved files, and app history.
- ☐ Remove old passwords and accounts.

Talking With Your Child

- ☐ Explain that strangers online may lie about who they are.
- ☐ Teach them to report messages from strangers immediately.
- ☐ Never send photos or personal info to anyone they don’t know.
- ☐ Assure them they won’t be in trouble for telling you.

Ongoing Safety

- ☐ Regularly check messages, friends, apps, and photos.
- ☐ Keep devices out of bedrooms at night.
- ☐ Stay aware of new apps, AI risks, and deepfakes.
- ☐ Consider using a parental monitoring app to help track activity, set screen limits, and receive alerts for unsafe content or interactions. Popular options parents often use include Bark, Qustodio, or Net Nanny. These apps can help you monitor messaging, social media, and app usage while giving children some privacy. 📱



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr. Deaneé Johnson is a nationally recognized expert in child development, child exploitation, and trauma-informed systems. She currently serves as the Executive Director of Just For Kids Child Advocacy Center in Beckley, West Virginia, where she leads a multidisciplinary team providing critical services to children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or exploitation.

In 2025, Dr. Johnson launched **Project GRACE (Gathered Response to Address Child Exploitation)**—a pioneering initiative funded by the West Virginia First Foundation and community partners. Project GRACE has expanded the center's scope of work by coordinating with **nontraditional community partners** to deliver vital services to identified child victims of trafficking. The program also equips frontline professionals with tools to recognize and respond to signs of exploitation in high-risk environments.

Dr. Johnson's leadership in this space led to her participation in a United Nations Dialogue on Human Trafficking in Vienna, Austria, where she elevated the voices of Appalachian children and emphasized the unique challenges of rural trafficking, including familial exploitation and service deserts.

Previously, she served as a Visiting Fellow at the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime, where she founded the Child Exploitation and Polyvictimization Working Group in collaboration with the Office of the Deputy Attorney General. Her work helped shape national strategies and best practices for addressing complex victimization in children.

Dr. Johnson's career spans leadership roles at the National Center for Victims of Crime, Delaware's statewide sexual assault coalition, and CASA programs in Southern Maryland. She has advised Facebook's Safety Advisory Board on child protection and served on national advisory boards including the National Children's Alliance and the Linking Systems of Care for Children and Youth Demonstration Project.

She holds a Ph.D. in Child Development from Texas Woman's University, an M.A. in Counseling from Midwestern State University, and a B.A. in Criminal Justice from Sam Houston State University. A proud member of the Roma community, Dr. Johnson is committed to culturally responsive services and inclusive systems change.



Ria Mitchell is a recognized expert in human trafficking and child exploitation prevention. She is currently the Project GRACE (Gathered Response to Address Child Exploitation) Coordinator for Just for Kids Child Advocacy Center in Beckley, West Virginia, where she leads multidisciplinary efforts to identify and support children and families affected by exploitation. Through Project GRACE, she strengthens community safety by improving coordinated services, expanding prevention initiatives, and advancing the regional response to child trafficking across southern West Virginia.

Ria holds bachelor's degrees in psychology and sociology and a master's degree in criminal justice from Fairmont State University. Her work integrates academic insight with a trauma-informed approach to advocacy and training, strengthening public preparedness and improving outcomes for children affected by abuse. She also serves on the West Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force as the Team Leader for the Services Committee, supporting statewide prevention and response efforts.

Ria is a proud mother who enjoys writing, creating art, and spending time in nature. She is passionate about equipping families, professionals, and communities with the tools to recognize and respond to trauma with empathy and evidence-based care.

In 2025, Ria participated in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Constructive Dialogue on Trafficking in Persons in Vienna, Austria, as a civil society delegate representing the United States. She shared

her recommendations on preventing and responding to the unique ways trafficking manifests in Appalachia and rural areas, including familial and survival trafficking.

Committed to breaking the cycle of violence, Ria works to ensure children and families are supported, safe, and able to thrive.

A photograph of three people—two women and one man—collaborating in a professional setting. They are gathered around a table, looking at a laptop. The woman on the left is a Black woman with her hair in a high ponytail, wearing a light-colored blazer. The woman in the center is a white woman with blonde hair, wearing a tan blazer over a black top. The man on the right is a white man with a beard, wearing a blue button-down shirt. They are all looking intently at the laptop screen. In the background, there are white shelves with various books and documents.

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