

# PARENTS WITH PREPAREDNESS

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**HOLIDAY SAFETY WITHOUT  
THE FEAR FACTOR:  
A TRAUMA-INFORMED  
GUIDE FOR PARENTS**

*Dr. Stacy Phillips, DSW, LMSW*

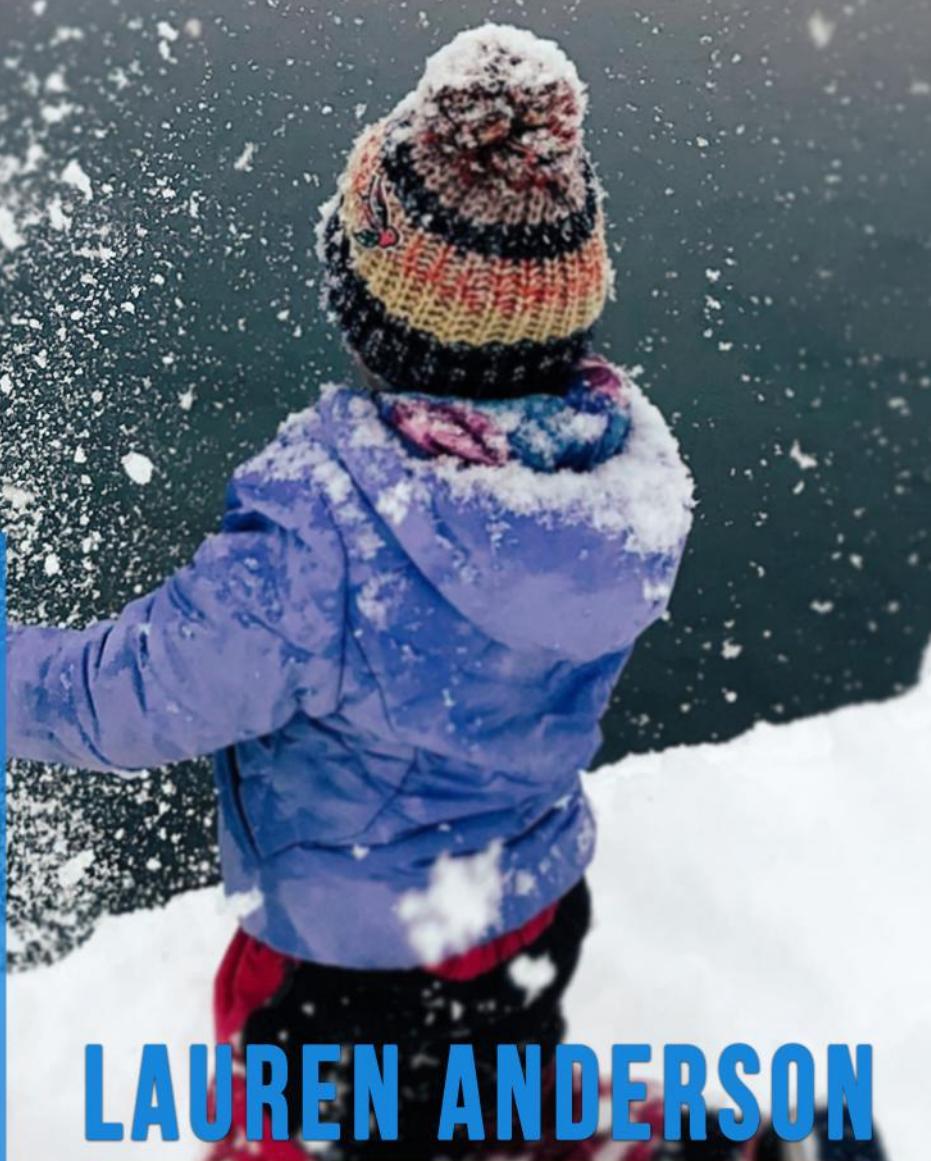
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**Managing Holiday  
Stress**

PATRICE CUNNIFF LINEHAN, ED.D

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*It's The Most Wonderful  
Time of The Year*  
**IF YOU ARE PREPARED**  
**DAN O'CONNOR**



**LAUREN ANDERSON**

**FEEDBACK AS A GIFT**  
*Unwrapping Growth  
Together*

PARENTS WITH PREPAREDNESS MAGAZINE

EDITION #17

# PARENTS WITH PREPAREDNESS

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# Welcome to Parents with Preparedness Magazine



**I**t is soon time to bid farewell to 2025 and welcome 2026 with open arms and an open heart, filled with joy. The world is full of complexity but also full of opportunity. I am personally thankful for having the privilege to work with so many talented practitioners who contribute their earned life experience to this magazine with the only anticipated return being the opportunity to help families that they may never meet, truly selfless.

I smiled at Katherine Schweit's article on sleuthing—an avocation of mine from an early age which shaped my life and my career. I am thankful for the articles full of practical advice for parents and caregivers on managing holiday stress but also those on the dangers hidden in plain sight related to human trafficking and vulnerabilities in childcare centers.

Our Resource Guide as always focuses on key issues of everlasting value to include building and expanding curiosity, and the benefits of physical play as well as the raising of thoughtful kids. The article on the potential for manipulation and misuse of images and access is an absolute must read and will help drive safer decisions in the purchase of gifts which once given, are often not monitored.

For the holiday season—and every season, I am joyful for the opportunity to raise funding and awareness to end the disease of breast cancer which impacts 1 in 8 women globally—and their families literally for generations.

There have been tremendous strides made in healthcare, early screening and diagnosis but there remains far too many empty chairs at family celebrations. I marvel at the strength of survivors and I walk with them, and their family members who honor them, to contribute to a world without breast cancer—the best gift for so many, no batteries or wrapping paper are required.

Hug everyone you love a little tighter and take the extra time to listen and to love. Happy Holidays to all—however you celebrate them.

With a holiday nod to Lee Ann Womack, if You Have The Chance To Sit It Out or Dance—Always Dance!

**Kathleen Kiernan, EdD**  
FOUNDER [PWPORG.ORG](http://PWPORG.ORG)



# SPECIAL PREPAREDNESS MONTH PWP MAGAZINE CONTENTS

## ARTICLE LIST

PAGE 3 WELCOME LETTER - BY KATHLEEN KIERNAN

PAGE 5 THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN ENGAGEMENT IN AN INCREASINGLY DIGITAL WORLD — BY JAN EDWARDS AND ALYONA LOGUNTSOVA.

PAGE 7 FEEDBACK AS A GIFT: UNWRAPPING GROWTH TOGETHER — BY LAUREN ANDERSON

PAGE 10 PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ERRANT VEHICLES: DANGERS FOR DAYCARE — BY RODNEY ANDREASEN, MS, MA, CEM, FCP, CPD

PAGE 12 HOLIDAY SPARKLE: STAYING AWARE WHEN EXPOSURE EXPANDS — BY OLIVIA ARNAUTS

PAGE 13 IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR—IF YOU ARE PREPARED — BY DANIEL O'CONNOR

PAGE 16 HOLIDAY SAFETY WITHOUT THE FEAR FACTOR: A TRAUMA-INFORMED GUIDE FOR PARENTS — BY DR. STACY PHILIPS, DSW, LMSW

PAGE 18 HUMAN TRAFFICKING AFFECTS BOYS TOO: WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ONLINE SAFETY — BY JOE RAMOS

PAGE 20 THE GIFT OF SLEUTHING: SENSATIONAL SAUNDRA — BY KATHERINE SCHWEIT, JD

PAGE 22 MANAGING HOLIDAY STRESS — BY PATRICE LINEHAN, ED. D

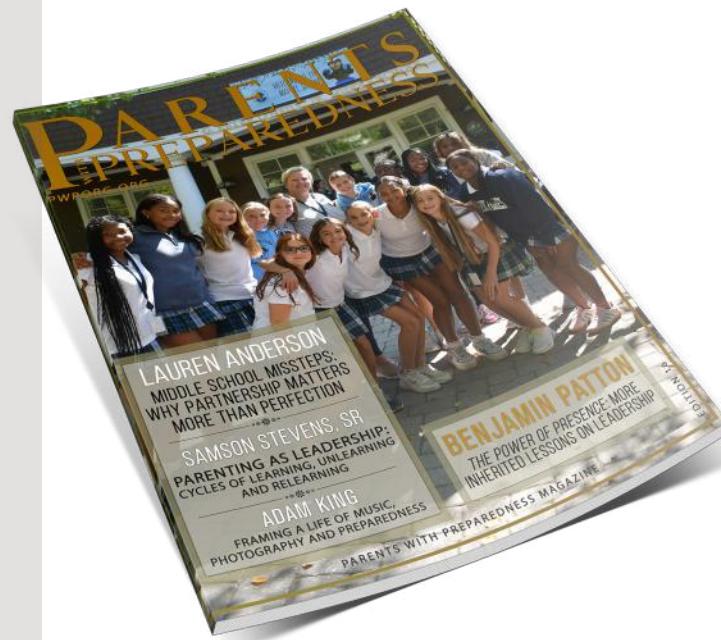
PAGE 25 RAISING CAREER-READY KIDS: WHAT PARENTS CAN LEARN FROM SWITZERLAND'S YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP MODEL — BY MELANIE UPRIGHT, NATALIE BRANOSKY, AND DEBORAH STARK

## RESOURCE GUIDE

PAGE 29 REPARED THROUGH PLAY: WHY REAL-WORLD CHALLENGE BEATS VIRTUAL VICTORIES - BY MARK TOOROCK

PAGE 31 KEEPING THE SPARK ALIVE: RAISING CURIOUS, THOUGHTFUL KIDS - BY MARIA SUND

PAGE 33 TAKE THE GAMBLE OUT OF GIFTING — BY DEANEE JOHNSON, PH.D, RIA MITCHELL



# THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN ENGAGEMENT IN AN INCREASINGLY DIGITAL WORLD

By: Jan Edwards/Alyona Loguntsova



**A**s technology becomes a larger part of our everyday lives, and the line between what is real and what is digital continues to blur, it is crucial that we remain aware of its societal impacts and find ways to mitigate its risks. While the term “digital readiness” or “digital preparedness” is often used to refer to the level that nations and organizations are equipped to utilize technology, we want to talk about the digital readiness of our society and culture. We have welcomed the upgrades and advances of technology into every facet of our lives but have rarely stopped to educate ourselves on how to use it to our advantage, instead of becoming dependent upon it.

Technological improvements have contributed massively to medical advancements, accessibility of information, ease of communication, increased career opportunities, and much more. However, these benefits do not exist without harm, especially when technology is not approached with proper awareness. While the internet and social media grant us the ability to connect with likeminded strangers, it leaves many feeling lonely and has led to mental health struggles such as anxiety and depression. Additionally, studies have shown that over exposure to screens can have negative impacts on adolescents’ cognitive and behavioral development, as well as impairing memory and retention of information.

While these effects can be studied and measured, they are mere symptoms of a deeper issue that cannot be so easily observed and quantified. As we move more of our social lives and interaction onto digital spaces, we create a lack of connection out in the world. When the majority of our social lives take place online, we are left comparing our real life with the polished and edited highlights of others’ profiles. The more time we spend with our screens, the less connected we feel to reality and those around us.

It has become common in our society to use technology to perform human tasks. We hire a moving company instead of asking our friends for help because we fear inconveniencing them. We buy cheap jewelry and art from Amazon instead of visiting local shops and vendors to find homemade pieces and support small businesses. We watch lectures, seminars, and sermons over Zoom instead of

attending them in person and opening ourselves up to the opportunity to connect with others and build community. Individually, each of these choices may save us time, when compounded, they erase our connection to reality, and we end up handing our interpretation of life over to technology. When we outsource mundane tasks to technology in the name of efficiency and convenience, we miss out on the opportunity to interact with our surroundings, learn real tasks, experience the ups and downs of life, that failing at something isn’t fatal, limiting our exposure in confronting what it means to be human.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is created to replicate human behavior, and at times, take its place. In the last few years alone, advancements in AI have created art, produced documents, and given psychological advice, all in a fraction of the time that it would take a human to complete the same task. Although this saves time and money while increasing productivity, it drains humanity out of its most valuable experiences, the struggle to create and the joy of creating the finished product. We begin to rely more on machines over our own intuition and capacity to learn, diminishing the importance of our lived experiences.

None of this is to say that the digital environment is without benefit and should never be used. Services such as Zoom, Amazon, Instacart, and others can be great options for those who are sick, lack means of transportation, or are simply too busy to cross off their entire to-do list. However, the issue arises when we defer to technological and digital alternatives to real life experiences simply because they are easier and require less effort from us. This makes us increasingly dependent on tech and less connected with the real world around us.

Much of this can be boiled down to the fact that, while the expansion of technology has become inevitable and necessary, it’s time to roll the dependence on technology back, using it as a tool rather than a crutch. As our lives continue to shift into digital spaces, it becomes crucial to create avenues that give us opportunities to have in person experiences.

The key is being mindful and intentional in our use of technology:

- Take note of when you are doing something in the digital world that you could be doing in real life.
- Whenever possible, reach out to a friend instead of Uber for a ride to the airport.
- Go out to lunch alone and start up a conversation with the person sitting next to you instead of having a meal delivered to your door.
- Check out a local farmers' market to find unique, hand-crafted goods instead of buying mass produced items online.
- Call a friend and ask if they want to meet to go for a walk.

Embrace the seemingly boring and mundane tasks. Live your own life instead of letting technology live it for you. The more you frequent shared public spaces, the more likely you are to meet like-minded individuals to build a community with. Waste a little time, say hi to strangers, and take the scenic route, you might be surprised by what you find. ♡

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alyona Loguntsova, a graduate of the University of Central Florida, is a writer and editor that focuses on relevant local and national topics.

Alyona is passionate about her community and volunteers her writing talent with Paving the Way Foundation, an organization committed to raising awareness and prevention of child exploitation and human trafficking.

Over the last four years, she has written numerous blogs and articles successfully supporting the organization's mission. Alyona lives and works in Central Florida.

Jan Edwards is the founder and President of Paving the Way Foundation, an organization that empowers communities to be a fierce disruption in the cycle of child exploitation around the globe.

This is accomplished through engaging educational programs to that empowers youth to take bold new actions online and in person. Paving the Way has delivered their programs to 37,000 youth and adults in the past 8 years in Central Florida and around the nation.

Ms. Edwards has been featured on local and national television, podcasts and radio shows, was chosen as one Orlando Family Magazine SuperWomen of The Year and United Abolitionists Award for NGO Leader of the Year for her organization's work.

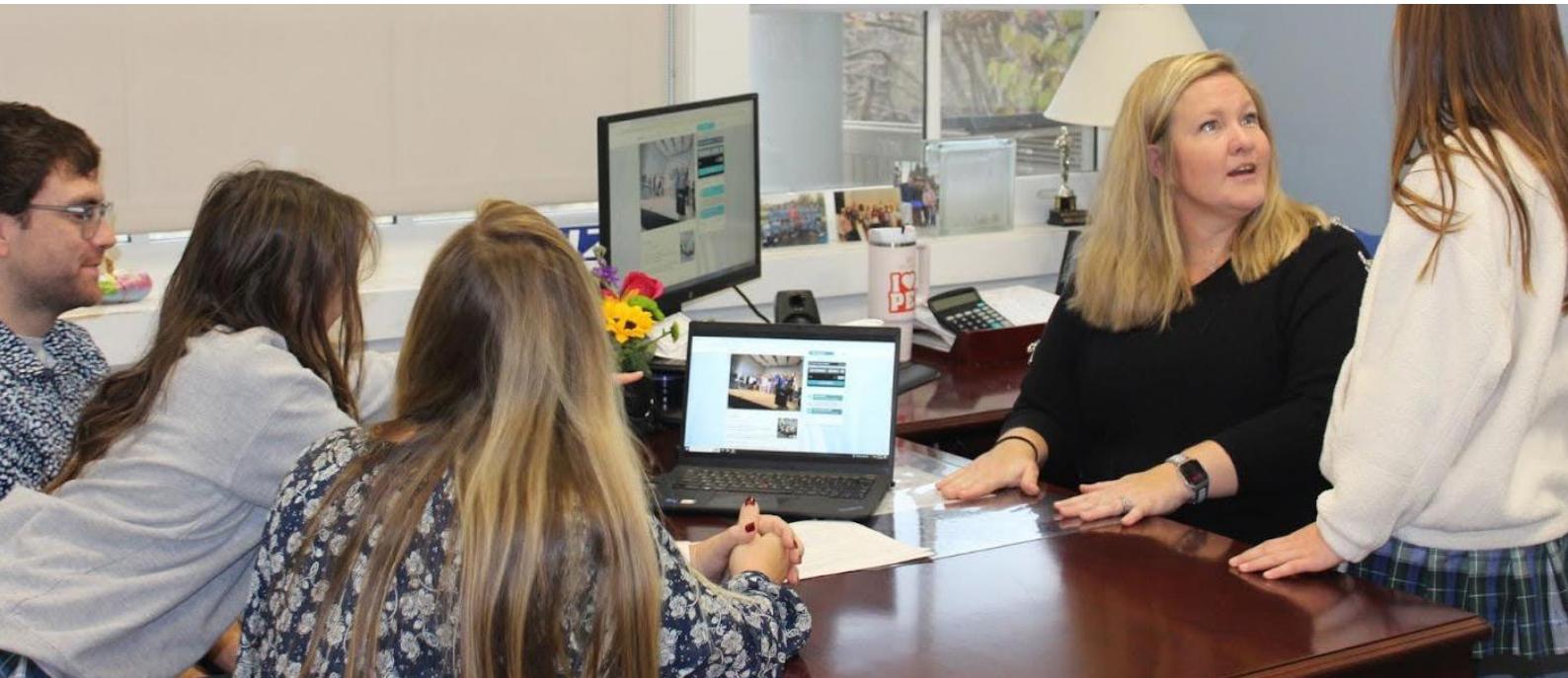
She is the writer and co-director of the award-winning film, *Trapped in the Trade*, which was featured on CNN.



# Feedback as a Gift

## Unwrapping Growth Together

By Lauren Anderson



**A**s the holiday season approaches, most of us turn our attention to wrapping paper, cookie exchanges, and that mysteriously disappearing roll of Scotch tape. But in schools, this time of year brings a different kind of giving and receiving: the exchange of feedback. Report cards, conference conversations, quick emails, notes home... chances are, by December, you've received some form of feedback about your child. And, if we're being honest, you may also have offered a bit of your own—solicited or not—to teachers and administrators.

Feedback in schools is essential. It shapes learning, guides development, and strengthens the partnership between home and school. But here's the part we don't always talk about: how a parent receives feedback is the true determinant of how successful that partnership and ultimately the child, can be.

And yes, I learned this the hard way.

### A Humbling Lesson

Not long ago, my son climbed into the car after school and launched into a tale so dramatic it could have earned him a daytime Emmy. According to him, another child had tripped him on purpose and then, for added flair, told him, "Go to the nurse, you idiot." My heart dropped into my shoes. Why had no one called me? Why wasn't anyone addressing this? Why hadn't the school seen this incident?

Concerned (okay, outraged), I shared the story with family members, worked myself into a righteous lather, and finally emailed the school. My message was calm, professional, and polished, right up until the subtext saying: "Do you even know what's going on over there?"

The school responded immediately. They investigated. They followed up with a phone call. I answered, fully prepared to collaborate... after giving them a quick lesson on how to do their jobs.

And then came the twist.

Turns out, my son had, how shall we put this, taken some artistic liberties. Significant artistic liberties. Parts of the story were exaggerated; other parts, entirely fictional. Over the course of the call, I moved through all five stages of parental embarrassment: disbelief, indignation, defensiveness, reluctant acceptance, and finally... deep, humbling gratitude.

What struck me most was how professionally and directly the school responded. I asked them to act and they did. Just not in the way I predicted. They told me the truth, even though it wasn't the truth I thought I was calling to hear.

This experience reminded me, vividly, what it feels like to be on the receiving end of feedback. As an educator, I give it constantly. As a parent, well... that's a different sort of holiday gift to unwrap.

### Designing Feedback with the End in Mind

In teaching, we often talk about *backward design*: start with the goal, then plan backwards. So let's apply that here. The desired learning outcome is to build a respectful, honest, and effective feedback relationship between school and home and one that supports student growth above all else.

To get there, both giving and receiving feedback matter. And while teachers work hard to deliver feedback clearly and thoughtfully, parents play an equally important role: their response shapes what future feedback looks like.

If a parent responds with openness, curiosity, and partnership, teachers feel safe continuing to share honest, direct information. If a parent responds with defensiveness, argument, or distrust, feedback inevitably becomes more cautious, less specific, and less helpful. Simply put: how you unwrap the gift affects how often and how well it will be given.

Continued on next page.



## Tips for Navigating the Feedback Season

Whether you're reaching out for clarity or responding to new information, here are a few ways to keep communication productive and grounded:

### 1. Ask Clear, Specific Questions

Instead of a general "How is she doing?", try naming what you want to understand:

- Has homework been submitted on time?
- Does the work she turns in reflect strong understanding?
- Is the amount of time she's spending on homework typical

The more specific the question, the more helpful—and meaningful—the answer will be. In fact, this may be the most impactful step a parent can take when partnering with a school. Before asking a question, it is worth pausing to consider: What am I truly trying to understand? Am I seeking clarity, or is this question rooted in mistrust or uncertainty about the feedback my child received?

Recently, a parent came to me with a question about a report card. Their daughter had earned a B in Geography, a grade that did not seem to align with her abilities in their view. Rather than expressing frustration or asking a vague question, they approached the conversation with remarkable clarity. They said, "We are not questioning the B," immediately naming what they didn't need answered. Instead, they asked:

*"Where did this grade come from? Is she missing something? Did she perform consistently, or did one assessment weigh more heavily? We simply want to understand how Candace is doing in Geography so we can support her at home."*

Their honesty and specificity opened the door to an incredibly productive conversation about grading transparency. When I looked into the gradebook, we discovered that Candace performed well overall but struggled on one summative assessment that impacted her average. The parents were not upset, they simply wanted to know how best to help their daughter.

When a parent clearly names what they hope to understand, the entire conversation becomes more focused, supportive, and beneficial for the child.

It is also immensely helpful to share your questions before the conference or conversation. When teachers know what you hope to discuss, they can gather relevant information, talking points, student work samples, assessment data that will allow for a thoughtful, informed conversation. Without this communication, teachers often enter the meeting unsure of what will be addressed, which can unintentionally signal mistrust or frustration. Preparing teachers in advance ensures that the conversation begins from a place of partnership and shared purpose.

Asking specific questions in a school conversation is a lot like asking for a present: the clearer you are about what you want, the more likely you are to receive something that truly meets your needs. When you simply say, "I want a gift," you

might end up with socks, useful, sure, but not exactly what you had in mind. But when you say, "I would love a hardcover mystery novel by my favorite author," suddenly the giver knows exactly how to meet your needs. The same holds true when speaking with a teacher. Vague questions lead to vague answers, but specific, thoughtful questions allow teachers to provide meaningful insights, tailored information, and the clarity you're genuinely seeking. In the end, everyone feels more understood and the "gift" is far more satisfying.

### 2. Share Your Worries and Fears Up Front

If you're nervous, confused, or concerned, say so. Teachers are human. They respond with greater sensitivity when they understand the emotions behind the inquiry. Transparency creates trust.

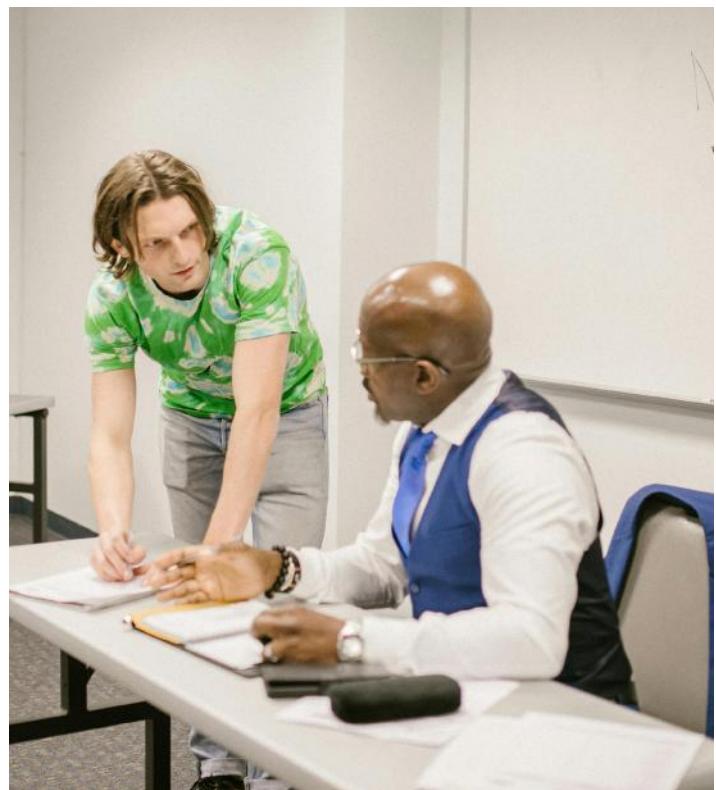
I was interviewing a parent the other day for a mid-year entry and I asked her, "what is your greatest worry for your daughter?" She paused, the tears welled up in her eyes, and responded "I have never been asked that before." She then shared what her specific worries were about her daughter. What it helped me understand is where the priorities land for this family and this child. Some families want rigor, some want support, some what a competitive athletic program, and others just want their daughter to be seen and known. They were very clear about what the teachers needed to do in order to meet their daughter's needs and meet her where she was.

Here is the reality: in any conversation involving a child, there is very little space for anger or frustration. Those emotions rarely move the work forward. What does create meaningful progress is transparency, honesty, curiosity, and vulnerability. These qualities allow parents and educators to engage not as critics or defenders, but as true partners committed to supporting a child's growth.

You do not need to be the hero in every interaction, nor do you need to enter a conference feeling defensive. Instead, clearly share how you are feeling so that teachers can respond in a way that supports understanding, strengthens the partnership, and ultimately enhances the child's experience.

### 3. Give Yourself Time to Process

It's okay if feedback doesn't land perfectly the first time. Parenting can be emotional, and hearing hard news, even delivered kindly, can be jarring. If I had a dime for every time I heard, "We have NEVER been told that before by





other teachers" or "How has she gone her entire life without anyone pointing this out to us?" I never know if this question is rhetorical or if they truly want me to speak for the dozens of educators that they feel have "missed" something. Either way, these statements are often just a reflection of being surprised, shocked, or unexpected. When my youngest son was in preschool, I hadn't heard much feedback about him, good or bad, so naturally, I assumed everything was wonderful. I floated into that conference convinced I'd be back at work in fifteen minutes, proudly reporting that my child was basically a model citizen in miniature form. The second I saw both the teacher and the Preschool Director sitting together, my confidence deflated on the spot. They went on to share that my son had been something of a tiny tornado in the classroom, creating a little more chaos than the average little guy. My jaw dropped open and I said the thing that I hate the most... "We do NOT have these problems at home and I have never heard about it before!" Again, this statement deserves a response that sounds a little like this, "Well, you're hearing it now! Go ahead and take a moment, do a mental lap, get into problem-solving mode, and let me know when you're ready to rejoin the conversation." If you are asking questions that the person in front of you cannot possibly answer, please take a moment or a day, and then respond.

After you gently escort yourself out of the "calm corner" (that's what we call it in our house and trust me, we all visit), if you still don't agree with the teacher's assessment or observations, simply ask for examples. Remember, you are not at war with the teacher. She does not get paid nearly enough nor does she have the time, energy, or caffeine supply to invent stories or stage a classroom coup.

Take a breath, my friends, truly. Your child will benefit far more from your moment to pause, reset, and enter the conversation with curiosity rather than combat mode. Think of it this way: remember how you looked tearing into the gift you had been waiting months for when you were eight years old? The wide eyes, the flailing arms, the unrestrained enthusiasm?

Let's not bring that energy into a parent-teacher conversation. Instead, open the "gift" of feedback with poise, thoughtfulness, and maturity. It sets the tone, strengthens the partnership, and ensures your child receives the calm, steady support they deserve.

### Unwrapping Growth Together

Feedback, at its heart, is a gift. Sometimes it's wrapped neatly with a

bow. Sometimes it comes in a box you didn't ask for. But when opened with openness and partnership, it is one of the most powerful tools we have to support children's growth.

As families and educators, we share the same goal: raising confident, curious, capable children. That takes conversation, honesty, vulnerability, and occasionally a humbling moment.

This season, may we all give generously, receive gracefully, and continue unwrapping growth together. ♡

### About The Author



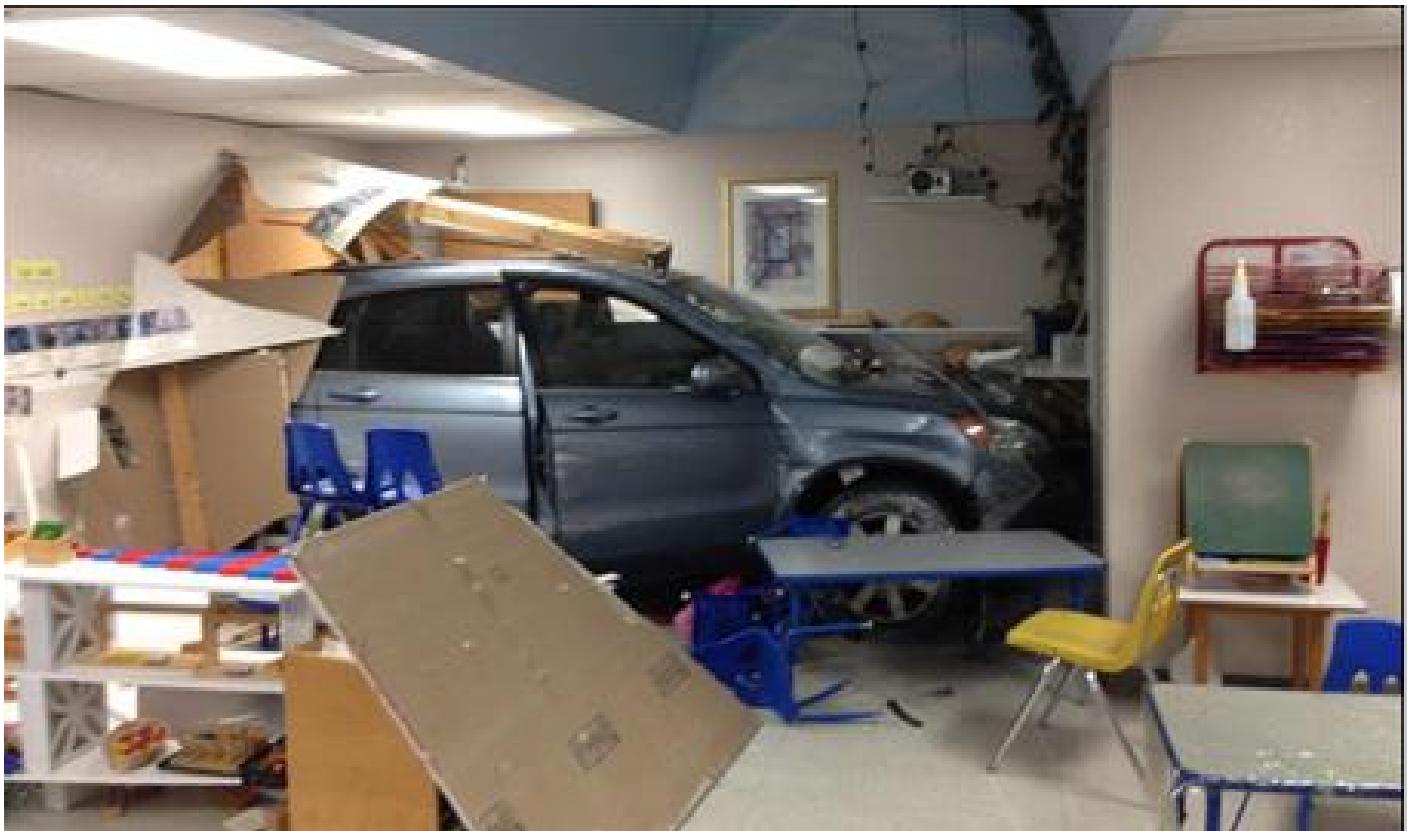
Lauren Anderson is proud to serve as Head of Middle School at Garrison Forest School, a role she stepped into in 2024 after nearly a decade of dedicated service to the Middle School community. Her leadership journey at Garrison Forest started in 2009 has included roles as Assistant Head of Middle School, Middle School Dean of Students for Grades 6-8, and Associate Director of Admission. She holds a Graduate Certificate in Independent School Leadership from Johns Hopkins University, along with both a Master of Arts in Health Education and Promotion and a Bachelor of Science in Health Education from East Carolina University. Throughout her career, she has been deeply committed to creating an inclusive,

supportive, and empowering environment where students are known, challenged, and inspired to grow.

# Protecting Children from Errant Vehicles

## *Dangers for Daycare*

By Rodney Andreasen EN, MS, MA, CEM, FCP, CPD



In December 2020, two young children were killed when a vehicle veered onto a miniature golf course in Panama City Beach, Florida. The children, a 4-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl were playing miniature golf with their family when the accident occurred; no protective barriers were in place.

Unfortunately, just four years later another troubling incident occurred in the same city that could have resulted in loss of life. WJHG Staff (2024) reported that a vehicle drove into a daycare center just 15 minutes away from the previous incident site, with 7 children and 3 teachers in the building at the time of the crash; luckily no one was injured inside the daycare.

In both cases, tragedy could have been avoided if protective barriers, or other protective applications, were in place. The danger is evident, and the lack of applied protection methods left people and property unprotected.

With an ever-increasing need for daycare services, more facilities will be required to meet the demand for childcare. With greater need, the danger increases as many of these centers lack such protective applications (or funding) to prevent these types of incidents. With many of the facilities constructed next to congested roadways, that danger increases. The loss of one life should be the call for

better protection of children and workers in daycare facilities and efforts increased to provide guidance for protection inclusion.

Some of the most common causes of vehicles crashing into buildings or playgrounds include:

- **Parking Lot Traffic Flow and Drop-Offs:** Daycares often have parking lots or drop-off zones close to the entrance. Poorly designed parking lot traffic flows and drop-off areas increase the risk of a driver accidentally accelerating into the building, backing over a child or otherwise injuring a child they may not see.
- **Driver Error:** Mistakenly pressing the accelerator instead of the brake, distracted driving, or medical emergencies can cause drivers to lose control.
- **Lack of Protective Barriers:** Many daycare centers lack physical barriers such as bollards or reinforced fences that can stop a vehicle before it reaches the building or playground.
- **High Traffic Areas:** Facilities located near busy roads or intersections are at higher risk of being struck by vehicles leaving the roadway.

Of these, most facilities only have control over two issues, that being:

- **Parking Lot Traffic Flow and Drop-Offs**
- **Lack of Protective Barriers**

**Parking Lot Traffic Flow and Drop Offs:** By redesigning the flow of the parking area or setting up the location and traffic flow of drop-off areas, an investment in safety for children and staff can be established. By following a structured approach and considering the needs of all stakeholders, you can create a parking environment that meets modern standards and enhances the overall experience for everyone who uses it; safety for the children is increased.

**Lack of Protective Barriers:** By placing protective bollards that meet the ASTM International standards, the threat of a vehicle penetrating a building or playground could be reduced significantly. However, the design of the bollards is just as important as their placement. Bollards that are not constructed of materials that meet the above-mentioned standards may create an additional danger and a false sense of security. Bollards that look strong may fail and only add to liability issues of a failure to protect. As Robert Reiter, Co-Founder of the Storefront Safety Council and Principal at Reiter and Reiter Consulting Inc., has stated, "The most expensive bollard made is the one that fails." That failure is not only measured in financial loss, but more importantly, the loss in life and long-term trauma for a family or child.

The potential dangers and consequences of an incident vary; however, these include:

- Severe Injuries or Fatalities: Children are particularly vulnerable due to their size and inability to react quickly. Collisions can lead to serious injuries or even loss of life among children and staff.
- Psychological Trauma: Witnessing or being involved in a car crash can cause long-term emotional and psychological distress for children, teachers, and families.
- Structural Damage: Vehicles crashing into daycare buildings can compromise the structural integrity of the facility, requiring the closing down of the operation.
- Disruption of Routines of Family and Workers: After an incident, a daycare may have to close temporarily or permanently, disrupting the routines of families who rely on the service for childcare.

Sadly, many organizations wait until something happens to make the changes necessary to prevent these incidents from happening. The key is looking ahead to what could happen, discussing the dangers and threats, and following positive actions that can make a difference in protecting children and staff. Decisions need to be made and acted upon, not delayed. Simple applications could be made such as:

- Adding bollards, reinforced fences, or concrete planters, based on the ASTM International standards, between parking areas and buildings to prevent vehicles from entering the facility.
- Designing traffic flows and safe drop-off procedures: with adequate space, clear signage, and restricted vehicle access near entrances.
- Posting speed limits, using traffic calming (speed bumps) as well as advising parents and facility staff about safe driving practices in daycare zones.
- Establishing a process to conduct periodic reviews of the facility's layout and surrounding traffic patterns to identify, and address, potential hazards before they become evident in an incident.

While fatalities are rare, the incidents are not, and the consequences of such an event could be severe and long-lasting when they occur. By understanding the risks and implementing preventive measures, daycare operators and communities can significantly reduce the chances of such tragedies and, more importantly, create a safer environment for children and staff. ☀

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(A special thank you to Mr. Robert Reiter, Co-Founder of the Storefront Safety Council and Principal at Reiter and Reiter Consulting Inc., for his expertise and assistance in the development of the article. <https://www.storefrontsafetyexperts.com/robert-reiter>)

WJHG Staff. (2024, September 18). Car crashes into daycare in Panama City. WJHG. <https://www.wjhg.com/2024/09/18/car-crashes-into-daycare-panama-city/>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rodney Andreasen is currently the owner of Xspct, LLC located in Marianna, Fl. He was born and raised in Marianna, located in Jackson County, Florida, graduating from Marianna High School in 1976. He joined the United States Air Force (USAF) in 1978 serving 21 years in a variety of assignments in the United States and overseas. He served as a Security Specialist and later as a Professional Military Education (PME) instructor and curriculum developer. He retired from active duty in 1999 with the rank of Master Sergeant.

In 1999 he was selected to develop trainers and training programs for the Florida Department of Revenue and in 2001 he was selected for the position of Emergency Management Director for Jackson County. In Sept 2004, he led the response to the tornadoes that were spawned by Hurricane Ivan and in October 2018, he led the response to Hurricane Michael that entered Jackson County as a Category 4 hurricane. He retired from that position in December of 2020 after serving 21 years in local and state government.

In Jan 2021 he formed Xspct, LLC, conducting Physical Risk and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) Assessments as well as Active Shooter Prevention Training for governmental and non-governmental organizations.

# HOLIDAY SPARKLE

## STAYING AWARE WHEN EXPOSURE EXPANDS

by Olivia Arnauts



**T**he holidays have a funny way of turning ordinary family life into a social circus - doors swinging open, unfamiliar faces drifting in, relatives materializing from thin air, and your kids suddenly orbiting a much larger universe than usual. And while the season is stuffed with glitter and good intentions, it's also a time when a parent's awareness needs to be sharper than the tree topper that mysteriously tries to impale you every year. Because expanded exposure means expanded opportunity - for connection, yes, but unfortunately also for boundary-crossers who blend in with the festive crowd a little too easily.

This is the season to lean into your intuition, that quiet internal alarm that whispers, "Something's off," even while someone is complimenting your casserole. If a person is too clingy with your child, too eager to whisk them away to another room, or just giving you the kind of vibe that makes your spine do a polite shiver - trust that. You don't owe anyone access to your child simply because they share DNA or showed up with a pie. The holidays may run on nostalgia, but your protective instincts aren't up for negotiation.

And then there's the digital side of things - phones snapping photos, group chats lighting up, relatives livestreaming Christmas morning like they're hosting a talk show. This is prime time to guard your child's privacy with the ferocity of a mother whose kid is one candy cane away from a meltdown. You're allowed to say, "No photos," "No posting," or "Please don't tag my child to your 2,000 closest acquaintances." Keeping things contained isn't being difficult - it's being diligent.

Travel only turns the dial up further. Airports, malls, holiday events - they're buzzing with distraction, which makes it the perfect time for children to slip out of sight or for opportunistic people to slip into it. Keeping eyes up, staying physically close, knowing exits, and resisting the urge to multitask yourself into oblivion are small habits that make a massive difference. You are your child's ultimate security system - beautifully intuitive, ridiculously overqualified, and wonderfully alert when it matters most.

So, enjoy the magic - yes, even the chaos, even the casseroles of mysterious origin - but keep that awareness switched on. Holiday safety isn't about fear; it's about embracing your role as the quiet, steady guardian of

your child's world while everything else twirls in festive overdrive. The season may sparkle, but you are the one keeping the shadows at bay. ♡

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Olivia Arnauts is a U.S. Army veteran turned entrepreneur. From decoding enemy communications to decoding the future of security, this former US Army Signals Intelligence Analyst now co-leads a cutting-edge protective intelligence firm. With an eagle-eye for data and a knack for spotting threats before they appear, Olivia Arnauts is all about turning raw intel into real-world

# IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR: IF YOU ARE PREPARED

By Daniel O'Connor

Winter is a season of contrasts: a time when the world slows down under a blanket of snow, yet life bustles with holidays, family gatherings, and road trips. Preparedness, at its best, isn't about fear or pessimism. It's about peace of mind. It's about making sure the small things are in place so that the big stuff — joy, laughter, and warmth — can take center stage.

## Preparation isn't about reaction. Preparation is about thinking.

It's what separates the frantic from the calm, the stranded from the steady, and the worried from the ready. Travel can be a stressful time. A little planning and preparation can lessen the holiday travel stress. The holidays shine brightest for those who take a few simple steps ahead of time. After all, it's the most wonderful time of the year — if you're prepared.

## The Spirit of Preparedness

Preparedness is not paranoia; it's thoughtfulness in motion. It's the quiet confidence that comes from knowing you've already solved tomorrow's minor problems today. You don't need a bunker or a bugout bag to be ready for winter. You need foresight — the ability to imagine a cold morning, a slippery road, or a power outage — and to know you've got it covered.

Think of preparedness as self-care for the prac-

tical mind. The same instinct that makes us wrap gifts and bake cookies should make us wrap pipes and check flashlights.

## Preparation isn't about reaction. Preparation is about thinking.

We become what we think about. And we can also become better thinkers. In previous writing, I've explored gamification, the idea that "games" and scenarios are not mere entertainment but rehearsals for reality. Games are cognitive exercises. They invite us to imagine, test, and adapt. Making up simple "what if" scenarios, whether a dead battery on a frozen morning, a delayed flight with children, or a power outage during dinner, is a form of discovery learning. When we mentally play through these situations, we turn uncertainty into curiosity. Every rehearsal sharpens instinct; every scenario builds calm. Gamified thinking transforms preparedness from anxiety into awareness. When we rehearse, we learn. When we know, we adapt. And when we adapt, we thrive.

According to the American Automobile Association (AAA), about one-third of drivers admit to skipping or delaying recommended maintenance. This is a habit directly linked to the most common roadside breakdowns. Regular maintenance isn't optional; it's what keeps cars safe and predictable. AAA's data show that vehicles kept on a consistent schedule routinely exceed 150,000 to 200,000 miles of reliable

service, while poorly maintained ones often fall well below their expected lifespan. Cars don't fail suddenly. They whisper for attention long before they shout for help.

## The Winter Vehicle Check

Before the mercury dips or the first flake falls, treat your vehicle to a bit of preseason attention. Cold weather magnifies neglect.

- Check your tires. Cold air reduces pressure, so fill them to the recommended pounds per square inch (PSI) and inspect tread depth. Consider snow tires if you live where ice is a constant companion. If you live in an area where tire chains are required, inspect and oil them to make installation easier.
- Fluids matter. Antifreeze, oil, and windshield washer fluid all thicken or deplete faster in the cold. Replace or top them up before the deep freeze hits. Many automobile service centers offer a "winterization" package. Whether you use that service or you're a "do it yourself" person, be sure to check all your fluids.
- The most critical component — your battery. A car can have new tires, a full tank, and perfect fluids, but without a healthy battery, it goes nowhere. Cold weather is brutal on batteries; their cranking power can drop by nearly half





when temperatures fall to zero. Most people don't realize that batteries have a defined lifespan — usually three to five years — and that a little preventive testing can save a big headache later. Before winter settles in, have a mechanic check your battery's cold-cranking amperage (CCA) to ensure it can handle subfreezing starts. Replace it if it's nearing the end of its life. A small investment now can prevent a frozen morning, a stranded family, or a call for help that didn't need to happen.

- The trunk kit. Stash an extra coat, a pair of gloves, a blanket, bottled water, and a few snacks. Add jumper cables, a flashlight with fresh batteries, and a small shovel. You'll rarely need them, but the day you do, you'll thank your past self.

While you're at it, throw in a spare phone charger or a backup power bank. In our twenty-first-century lives, we take connectivity for granted until we lose it. A fully charged phone battery doesn't last long in freezing temperatures, and without a wire or a backup battery, you don't just lose convenience; you lose connection. Whether it's navigation, weather updates, or reaching help in an emergency, power equals communication.

And sometimes, the old-school ways still win. Toss a road atlas or printed map into the glove box. In the world of GPS and cell towers, we forget that batteries die, signals drop, and screens freeze. Knowing how to read a map gives you something most technology can't: a grounded perspective. It helps you orient yourself, explain where you are, and understand where you're headed. Most fear begins with the unknown. If you know where you are, you can tell others where to find you. When you can read a map, you're not just prepared; you're empowered. And many states' welcome centers offer free maps, so pit stops can add value in more ways than one.

Remember: if most people followed their manufacturer's maintenance plan and understood a few basics about car care, they'd maximize their vehicle's utility, drive more safely, and avoid most roadside mishaps. The last thing anyone wants is to have a Christmas tree tied to the roof while sitting motionless on I-95 South, watching the taillights fade and wishing they'd taken fifteen minutes to winterize.

**Preparedness behind the wheel isn't just smart — it's peace of mind in motion.**

#### The Winter Trip Jar: Fiscal Reverse Engineering

According to the Federal Reserve, about 37 percent of Americans can't cover a \$400 emergency expense without borrowing or selling something, and LendingTree reports that one in four drivers can't afford a \$500 car repair without going into debt. Those numbers don't come from bad luck but from failing to plan for the predictable.

That's where a simple habit, what we'll call the Winter TripJar, comes in. Americans are literally sitting on a travel fund without realizing it. Bank surveys and coin-counting services estimate that the average U.S. household has about \$60 to \$100 in spare change tucked away in jars, drawers, and car cupholders. Multiply that by roughly 128 million households, and you get between \$8 and \$13 billion in idle coins—money that could patch tires, cover hotel nights, or turn roadside trouble into a minor inconvenience. The U.S. Coin Task Force says there's \$48 billion in circulating coins nationwide, much of it sitting dormant in homes. Start skimming that quiet currency into a "winter trip jar," and you'll have an emergency fund built from what you barely notice losing.

Start in the summer. Toss in your loose change, spare singles, or the few dollars you save by skipping a daily coffee or soda. It's fiscal reverse engineering: you're not saving what's left over, you're reclaiming what you'd otherwise spend.

At a few dimes and quarters a day, that's going to add up and will be available for the Winter Wonderland Fund by the time the holidays arrive. When the unexpected happens, whether a dead battery, a flat tire, a tow, or a night in a roadside motel, you'll have real cash on hand.

Please bring it with you on trips. Don't overthink it, don't digitize it, don't depend on connectivity or credit. Because in a crunch, cash still reigns supreme. Power can go out, cards can fail, apps can crash, but a few folded bills in your glove box can turn a crisis into an inconvenience.

Preparedness isn't just about spare batteries or snow shovels; it's about building some simple financial resilience, the same way you build mechanical readiness. The Winter Trip Jar isn't a savings account; it's a quiet act of self-reliance.

#### Traveling with Children

Winter travel can be magical — or miserable — depending on preparation. When traveling with kids, especially over the holidays, comfort equals calmness.

Pack a small "go bag" just for them:

- a few snacks that don't melt or crumble easily,
- bottled water or juice boxes,
- a coloring book or small pad,
- crayons or washable markers,
- and a favorite blanket or small stuffed toy.

A simple bag of small joys can turn hours in traffic or a weather delay into quiet contentment. It also helps the driver stay focused, because a peaceful back seat is one of the best safety features you can have. If you're traveling long distances, plan extra time for rest stops — children don't measure time by miles, but by moments of comfort.

#### The Home Front

Your home is your winter fortress. The goal is warmth without waste and safety without panic.

- Seal the leaks. Check doors and windows for drafts; weatherstrip or insulate where needed. Small gaps can steal heat and money.
- Change furnace filters. A fresh filter improves efficiency and air quality, especially when homes are well insulated and properly sealed.

- Check detectors. Test smoke and carbon monoxide alarms and replace batteries. Winter brings closed windows and heating systems — both of which make these devices essential.
- Stock simple comforts. Candles, extra batteries, matches, and a backup charging bank for phones go a long way during power interruptions. Add a few comfort items: cocoa mix, instant soup, and board games. Resilience feels better with hot chocolate and laughter.

#### The Body's Winterization Plan

Preparedness isn't just mechanical — it's physical. Cold weather challenges the body as much as it does the infrastructure.

- Dress in layers. The trick isn't heavy clothing, but clever layering — a moisture-wicking base, insulating midlayer, and windproof shell.
- Stay hydrated. People drink less water in winter, but the body still needs it to regulate temperature and energy.
- Exercise. Movement keeps circulation strong and mood elevated. Even a brisk daily walk helps fend off the winter blues.
- Light and rest. Exposure to daylight helps balance circadian rhythms. Open curtains early, use full-spectrum bulbs, and prioritize sleep.

#### Mental and Social Warmth

Preparedness also extends to the emotional landscape. The holidays can bring both joy and melancholy, especially for those far from loved ones or facing financial stress.

Make your winter preparedness plan include people:

- Check in on elderly neighbors. A quick knock can make the difference between isolation and connection.
- Build a small network of mutual aid people who can share food, rides, or warmth during outages or storms.
- Keep traditions alive, but also start new ones. A winter potluck or game night doesn't just pass the time; it weaves community resilience.

#### The Gift of Readiness

Preparedness is one of the few gifts you can give yourself that also benefits others. When you're ready, you're reliable. When you're calm, others follow suit. Imagine being the person with extra gloves, jumper cables, or cocoa during a snowstorm — a small act of readiness that multiplies warmth. In that sense, preparedness becomes a form of generosity. It says, I've thought ahead, not just for me, but for us.

#### Resilience as a Holiday Mindset

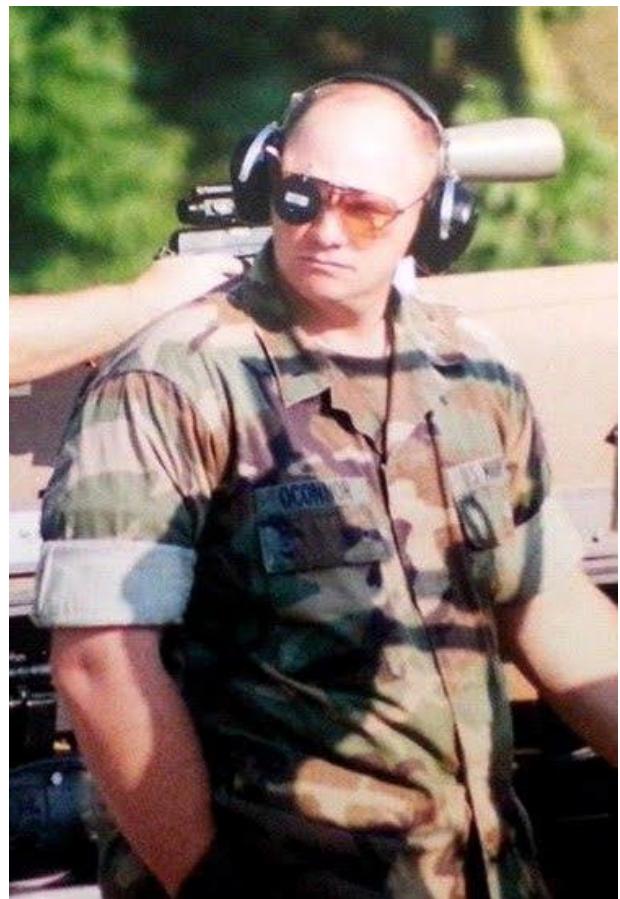
Winter teaches humility. Snow reminds us that the world doesn't revolve around our schedules. But it also offers a beautiful metaphor: life piles up, but preparation lets us keep moving.

An upbeat mindset during the season doesn't come from ignoring risk; it comes from outsmarting it. We prepare so that we can relax. We pack an extra blanket not out of fear, but because comfort should always travel with us. Because winter preparation isn't about reacting to what could go wrong, but about thinking ahead so that everything can go right.

#### Preparation isn't about reaction. Preparation is about thinking.

The quote "Chance favors the prepared mind," attributed to Louis Pasteur, emphasizes that being well-prepared increases the likelihood of seizing unexpected opportunities. When you understand that, you realize readiness is not just about surviving winter, it's about enjoying it. ♡

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dan O'Connor is an internationally recognized leader in helping organizations imagine new possibilities, manage complex change, and build durable capabilities for high performance and resilience. He served 22 years on active duty in the United States Marine Corps, participating in, supporting, and preparing Americans for operations across the country and around the world. In Washington, DC, he was the anti-terrorism officer and emergency manager during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Dan designed and led security and emergency management operations for the 1996 Summer Olympics, 2002 Winter Olympics, 2004 Summer Olympic Games, and 2016 Summer Olympics. He also served as a senior consultant and lead facilitator for security operations at four of the largest marathons in the United States, as well as the Super Bowl.

He played a pivotal role in managing the national COVID-19 response, overseeing vaccination distribution and delivery centers, and addressing the southern border crisis. His work included significant contributions to emergency management and homeland security, as well as leadership in responses to more than 1,600 federally declared disasters, underscoring his record of operational excellence under pressure.

Dan is a graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security, Harvard Kennedy School, Swedish Defense University, the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative, the FBI National Academy, the Federal Executive Institute, and the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College. He is a recognized authority in national and homeland security with extensive experience in law enforcement, crisis leadership, emergency management, continuity of operations, and security/anti-terrorism.

# Holiday Safety Without the Fear:

## A Trauma-Informed Guide for Parents

By Dr. Stacy Phillips, DSW, LMSW

**T**he holidays often come wrapped in equal parts joy and chaos. Between travel, disrupted routines, crowded gatherings, and unpredictable relatives, many families find themselves overwhelmed.

And kids who have sensitive nervous systems or trauma histories feel this stress deeply.

A trauma-informed approach doesn't take away the magic of the season. It protects it. When we understand what the brain needs to feel safe and regulated, we can create holidays that build connection rather than stress.

### Why Holidays Activate the Stress Response System

The Neurosequential Model teaches us that predictability and routine help the brain stay regulated. Holidays disrupt both. Kids experience:

- Dysregulated routines: Bedtimes, meals, school days, and daily structure all shift.
- Sensory overload: Lights, crowds, loud relatives, airports, and long dinners.
- Social pressure: Meeting unfamiliar relatives and navigating adult expectations.
- Emotional triggers: For children with trauma histories, the holidays can bring grief, divided loyalties, or reminders of instability.

When predictability decreases, the lower brain regions take over, making meltdowns, irritability, clinginess, or shutdowns much more likely. This isn't misbehavior- it's neurobiology.

### How Rhythm, Predictability & Sensory Regulation Keep Kids Grounded

To help kids stay regulated, we must support the lower parts of the brain first.

#### Rhythm

Repetitive, patterned activities soothe the stress response:

- Walking hand-in-hand
- Rocking or swaying
- Calm breathing with a rhythm ("smell the cocoa, blow the cocoa")
- Soft music with a steady beat

#### Predictability

Kids relax when expectations are clear.

- Use a visual "holiday schedule"
- Preview events ("Grandma's house may be loud and here's what we can do if it feels like too much")
- Practice new routines beforehand

#### Sensory Regulation

Identify what helps your child feel grounded:

- Hoodies, weighted blankets, fidgets
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Chewing gum or crunchy snacks
- A cozy spot where they can take breaks

These tools aren't rewards. They are supports for an overwhelmed nervous system.

#### Pre-Event Regulation Plans



Preparing in advance prevents escalation in the moment.

#### Car Rides

- Do a regulating activity before getting in (a dance break, stretching, deep breaths).
- Bring snacks, familiar music, and sensory items.
- Give time-based countdowns ("20 more minutes—two songs long").

#### Airports

- Arrive early so you're calm- Remember that kids mirror adult stress.
- Let them walk and move their bodies before boarding.
- Have a sensory-downshift plan: headphones, hoodies, a favorite show.

#### Long Dinners

- Give your child a "role" (napkin helper, cookie decorator, holiday greeter).
- Normalize taking breaks ("If it gets loud, you can go play in the den").
- Don't force sitting through multiple courses. Regulation matters more than etiquette.

#### Scripts for When Kids Are Overwhelmed

Parents often need quick, grounding phrases ready to go.

#### For sensory overload:

"There's a lot in here. Let's step outside so your brain can take a break."

#### For big feelings:

"Your feelings make sense. I'm right here. Let's breathe together first."

#### For social boundaries:

"You don't have to hug anyone you don't want to. A wave or high-five is fine."

#### For adoptive or blended families:

"It's okay if today brings up mixed feelings. You're safe, and we'll do this together."

Scripts help shift the child from fear to safety and help the parent stay regulated, too.

### Micro-Traditions That Build Safety, Not Stress

Big traditions are fun, but micro-traditions (small, repeated rituals) are what help children feel grounded.

#### Examples:

- A hot-cocoa toast before every holiday outing
- Saying a special phrase before entering a crowded house ("Team Egan—we've got this")
- A nightly December book or memory
- A nature walk or drive to look at lights after stressful gatherings

These tiny rituals build predictability and belonging.

### For Children with Trauma Histories

The holidays can be especially complex for children in foster care, adoption, or blended families. They may experience:

- Conflicting loyalties
- Anxiety about new traditions or expectations
- Grief for people they miss
- Fear of "performing" or fitting in
- Overwhelm in large, unfamiliar gatherings

#### Parents can support them by:

- Maintaining routines whenever possible
- Reviewing plans, people, and expectations ahead of time
- Creating quiet-break spaces and exit plans
- Allowing them to feel multiple emotions at once
- Incorporating rituals that honor their whole story
- Connecting with their therapist ahead of the season

These strategies help children feel anchored rather than trapped by holiday expectations.

### Small Rituals for Hope & Connection

Hope is built through action, not perfection. Simple rituals strengthen connection:

- Light a candle for someone you miss



- Share one gratitude and one "hope for tomorrow"
- Add a link to a "kindness chain" for acts of kindness
- Take a family "slow morning" during a busy week
- Snap a hopeful New Year's photo naming one intention for the year ahead

These rituals create meaning without adding more to the holiday to-do list.

### Final Thoughts

Holiday safety isn't about eliminating all stress. It's about creating enough rhythm, connection, and predictability so children's nervous systems and yours feel anchored and safe. When we shift from "How do I control this?" to "How do we co-regulate together?" the holidays become more joyful, less chaotic, and far more meaningful.

Kids don't remember perfect décor or flawless dinners. They remember feeling seen, soothed, and safe.

And that is the greatest holiday tradition of all! 🎉

## About The Author



Stacy Phillips develops and deploys effective solutions to challenging and systemic crime victimization issues as a Victim Justice Program Specialist with the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) at the U.S. Department of Justice. Levering her more than 20 years of experience in the victim services field, she works collaboratively across OVC's Discretionary and Human Trafficking Teams to create, implement, and monitor a broad range of programs. Dr. Phillips has spearheaded demonstration initiatives on polyvictimization, reducing child fatalities and recurring serious child injuries, and currently leads OVC's opioid/drug addiction crisis initiatives. She also oversees Project Hope, a community of practice focused on law enforcement and communities. She also manages projects on crime victims' rights enforcement and legal wraparound networks, law enforcement-based direct services, post-conviction initiatives, and human trafficking.

As a children and youth expert with a focus on trauma, polyvictimization, and brain science, Dr. Phillips represents OVC on the DOJ Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) Working Group, Federal Inter-Agency Work Group on Child Abuse and Ne-

glect, the Federal Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care. She is a sought-out speaker at national conferences and has advised research teams in their development of nationwide toolkits.

Before joining OVC, Dr. Phillips spent 15 years responding to the needs of children and families through the child welfare system. At the DC Child and Family Services Agency, she worked on child and family protective services issues, including grants, program design and management, needs assessment, resource development, and policy development. During this time, she started the DC Parent Advisory Council, served on the Districtwide Children's Justice Act Task Force, and helped develop the District's Human Trafficking Task Force. Beforehand, Dr. Phillips served as a Child Protective Services Investigations Supervisor, conducting adoption, foster care, and kinship licensing studies in Texas. She began her career as a Child Protective Services Investigator in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Dr. Phillips holds a Doctorate of Social Work (DSW) from the University of Southern California with a focus on smart decarceration of youth; a certificate in Public Policy from Harvard University Kennedy School of Government; an M.A. in Clinical Psychology from Southern Connecticut State University; and an M.S.W. from the Catholic University of America.

# HUMAN TRAFFICKING AFFECTS BOYS TOO: WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ONLINE SAFETY

By Joe Ramos

**W**hen people hear the words human trafficking, many picture girls being targeted and exploited. But boys are victims too, and far too often, their experiences go unseen and unheard. Traffickers don't care about gender; they care about vulnerability. As parents, caregivers, and educators, it's critical to help all children recognize online risks, set boundaries, and feel safe speaking up when something doesn't feel right.

Online grooming can happen to anyone. Research highlighted in *The Guardian* found that while most perpetrators are men, victims include both boys and girls in similar numbers. That's significant because many boys feel pressure not to show fear or weakness, making them less likely to recognize or report grooming behavior.

A recent study by Childlight estimates that about 830,000 young people across the globe face daily risks of exploitation through social media, messaging apps, and online gaming platforms. These digital spaces are part of their everyday lives, which makes the harm harder to recognize and even harder to escape. Offenders often use anonymity, pressure, or manipulation to isolate their victims, blurring the line between what feels normal and what is actually dangerous.

What makes the situation even more alarming is how many young people keep these experiences to themselves. They often stay silent because they feel afraid, ashamed, or confused about what's happening. Some worry they'll get in trouble. Others fear they won't be believed or don't know where to turn for help. This silence leaves them more vulnerable and gives offenders more room to operate.

## The Digital Playground Isn't Always Safe

Platforms like Roblox, TikTok, Snapchat, and even games marketed as "kid-friendly" can expose children to predators posing as peers. In some cases, researchers found strangers could contact avatars designed to look like five-year-olds and ask for personal information such as usernames or social media handles.

During the pandemic, online recruitment by traffickers increased sharply, by as much as 22%. Traffickers exploit loneliness, curiosity, and the desire for friendship or validation. The goal is always the same: gain trust, then control.

## What Parents and Guardians Can Do

### 1. Talk Early and Keep Talking

Start young, using simple terms. Instead of "strangers," introduce the idea of "tricky people"—those who may seem friendly but make children feel uncomfortable or ask for secrets. As kids get older, discuss manipulation, online relationships, and how predators use flattery or gifts to gain trust. The FBI stresses that these talks should be ongoing and include learning about the apps your kids use.

### 2. Teach Red Flags

Help your child recognize warning signs, such as someone asking too many personal questions, offering gifts, or trying to move chats to private messages. Explain that secrecy is a major red flag—anyone who says "don't tell your parents" is someone to avoid.

### 3. Set Boundaries Together

Create a simple tech agreement outlining rules for apps, chats, and online privacy. Let your child help make the rules; it builds ownership and understanding. Encourage them to block or ignore unknown contacts and check with you before sharing information.

### 4. Develop Openness

Make it clear that they can come to you with anything, no blame, no shame. Reinforce that speaking up is the rule, not the exception. The Department of Justice advises parents to remind





children to only communicate online with people they actually know and to block anyone who makes them uncomfortable.

#### 5. Build a Trusted Circle

Encourage your child to identify more than one safe adult they can go to if something feels off. As one survivor shared through the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, “Having just one person to call could have saved my life.”

#### 6. Use Education Programs

Education programs give kids practical tools to stay safe online. Resources like NetSmartz, 3Strands Global Foundation, and Love146 offer age-appropriate lessons on boundaries, manipulation, and recognizing unsafe situations. When these programs are used regularly, kids are more confident speaking up and protecting themselves.

#### 7. Learn About Sextortion

This growing form of exploitation often targets boys. Offenders pressure or trick victims into sharing images, then threaten to expose them unless they comply with more demands. This growing form of exploitation disproportionately targets boys in the U.S., criminals pressure or trick them into sharing intimate images, then threaten to expose those images unless they submit to more demands. According to a Thorn/NCMEC report, around **90 percent** of financial sextortion victims between 14 and 17 are male.

#### Tools Help, but Trust Protects

Parental controls, monitoring apps, and strong privacy settings can add helpful layers of protection. Tools like Bark let parents watch for harmful messages and block unknown contacts. Even so, the most effective safeguard is a trusting relationship, because technology can support safety, but honest conversations and steady awareness are what truly make the difference.

#### In Summary

- Boys face trafficking and grooming risks just like girls.
- The digital world evolves faster than most parents can keep up, but open dialogue bridges the gap.
- Encourage kids to speak up, even if they feel embarrassed or unsure.
- Equip them with knowledge about boundaries, privacy, and online behavior.
- Stay involved—not just digitally, but emotionally and socially.

*Children don't need perfect technology. They need consistent trust. And that starts with parents who listen, believe, and stay connected. ♡*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joe Ramos is a cross-sector executive whose work spans child protection, public safety, financial crime prevention, and nonprofit leadership. A graduate of Saint Mary's University, he previously served as a Bank Secrecy Act Officer, advising executive teams and Boards on anti-money laundering strategy, fraud prevention, and financial crime investigations. His time in the financial sector strengthened collaborations with federal and local law enforcement working to combat human trafficking, elder exploitation, and organized crime.

Joe began his career in child welfare, where he led the Sexual Abuse Unit at Child Protective Services and served as the Military Liaison for the San Antonio region. He later founded Aspire Case Management, a state-endorsed program that supports homeless pregnant women facing substance use disorders. He has since become a recognized speaker on human trafficking, elder financial exploitation, and child safety.

Joe is a former member of the Board of Directors for Child Advocates San Antonio and continues to support the organization through its Advisory Board. He now serves as the Chief Strategic Officer at Guided Reach Solutions, overseeing the Guided Safety Division. Guided Safety is a trauma-informed platform that provides secure and discreet communication for survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence, connecting them with advocates and law enforcement during critical moments. Joe's purpose is to stand with those who cannot speak for themselves and ensure their voices are heard.

# THE GIFT OF SLEUTHING:

## Sensational Saundra

By Katherine Schweit, JD



**S**aundra Washington always knew she had a knack for sleuthing. She was nine when she found mom's car keys, saving the day as they tried to get to grandmas. She figured out how to put all the class playground equipment back into the basket just right, allowing her to confidently report that two balls were missing and needed to be found before they went back into school.

Her secret? She has two. First, never give up until the mystery is solved, she said. And second, always look with your hands and your eyes.

Her mother had taught her the latter. When she was little, not big like the 11-year-old she is now, Saundra would sometimes get the mom frown for failing to find something badly needed. Like the time mom was on a tall ladder trying to get the Christmas boxes down from the attic and the dangling light bulb went out.

"Go get the flashlight by the back door, please" mom directed her. "It's on the bench." But when Saundra returned, she had no flashlight to shine to help mom from the attic. "It's there," mom yelled down. "I saw it this morning."

"I can't find it," Saundra replied. When her mom was able to wiggle through the attic in the dark and climb down the rickety wooden staircase, Saundra was embarrassed by the result. Frowning a bit at Saundra, mom trotted back to the back door only to find the flashlight on the bench where it always belongs. Saundra had hung her coat on a hook but dropped her scarf on the bench. The flashlight was right there.

"Always look with your hands and your eyes," her mother said, returning to fold down ladder and her attic task.

Saundra learned her lesson for sure.

Now, Saundra is always at the ready to solve mysteries, whether at home, school, or in the neighborhood. Everyone can solve a mystery, she knows, but not everyone has Saundra's patience. Today, she has a big mystery to solve. She wants to help her neighbor, Mr. Anderson. Mr. Anderson always tries to shovel snow off their sidewalk before mom gets home from work. But when she came home from school this afternoon, no snow had been shoveled at her house or Mr. Anderson's.

"Is Mr. Anderson away," she asked her mom. "No, Saundra," she replied. "It seems someone has stolen his new red shovel." Saundra was sad. Who would do that to a nice person like Mr. Anderson?

"I'll find it," she told her mom with great confidence. "You can try," her mom said, "but Mr. Anderson has looked, and looked. He just told me he was going to go borrow one from a neighbor."

"Hmmm," said Saundra, slipping on her coat and boots. "I'll be back before dark."

"Be home in time to wash up for dinner," her mom yelled back. Saundra pulled on her wool mittens and wrapped a scarf around her neck as she closed the door behind her. I'll never give up, she thinks, mom taught me that. Mr. Anderson was outside just beginning to use a borrowed shovel.

"Hello," she said. "Mom said your shovel is gone. What happened?"

"No idea," Mr. Anderson said. "It was on the porch where it always is. I started to shovel and put it down for just a minute to go back inside to get a scarf. The wind was blowing mighty hard. When I came back out, it was gone!"

"Where did you leave the shovel?" she asked. "Right over here," he said, stepping to the edge of a sidewalk by his driveway.

Saundra looked down. The fresh snow blanketed most of the lawn, but she could see a trail of footprints from the driveway edge



crossing between the two houses and disappearing. The snow was falling, and she could barely make out that next to the footprints, another set of footprints seemed to trail along but they were much messier.

"Did you flatten that snow," she asked him, pointing to a flattened block of snow several yards down the path of the footprints? "I didn't even notice it," Mr. Anderson replied. "There is a lot of snow out here tonight and I need to get back to cleaning my sidewalk. Tomorrow I'll need to go buy a new shovel."

"Don't go to the store yet," she said to Mr. Anderson. "I have a hunch."

Saundra walked away from Mr. Anderson and down the path of the footprints between the houses. Snow was beginning to cover her hat and get in her eyelids.

Along the way she spied something brown sticking out the snow just an inch. Look with your hands, Saundra remembered. She bent over. "A stick!" she aloud said to herself. She stretched out and wrapped her red mitten around the stick, pulling all 18 inches from the ever-thickening snow.

Now she was excited. She started to run beyond the houses, into the back yard, and to the alley behind the houses. Should she go left or right down the alley? Her sleuthing skills told her left for sure. Was she right? Did her hunches guide her?

She ran past one garage and then another. Then, she skidded to a stop.

A dog, a big dog, was running towards her. He was brown and probably as big as she was. He was eyeing the stick in her hand and barking furiously. Then the dog skidded to a stop. A chain-link fence stood between Saundra and the brown dog.

"Hello bruiser," Saundra giggled. "Did you lose this?" She raised the stick into the air and gave it a toss, sending the dog into furious fun as he chased it down in the snow. His lost toy was found. Beyond bruiser, her neighbor, Billy Yancey, was hard at work building a snow fort. Beside him a red snow shovel was laying on the ground.

"Hi Saundra," he said, looking up. "This is perfect packing snow so I just had to make a snow fort while I could. Want to help?"

"Billy," Saundra replied, "did you take Mr. Anderson's snow shovel? He's been looking for it."

Billy stopped.

"I just need it for a little bit," he said. "Bruiser and I were going for a walk, and I got this idea to make a snow fort. Then, there it was. So, Bruiser and I borrowed it. I was going to return it. I think I just got excited."

Saundra could see the sun had set. It was time to go home.

"How about we take the shovel back to Mr. Anderson, Billy? She asked. "You should say you're sorry to him. He was going to go buy a new shovel because he has to shovel his own sidewalk."

Billy hadn't thought about how borrowing the shovel hurt Mr. Anderson. "Come on Bruiser, let's go," Billy said.

Together the three walked back to Mr. Anderson's house, Billy tossing Bruiser's stick along the way.

"I guess there's lots of ways to have fun in the snow," he said to Saundra. "But one of them shouldn't be to take someone's stuff without asking."

Mr. Anderson was so happy to get his favorite shovel back, that he didn't even yell at Billy. But Billy knew he was wrong and apologized. Mr. Anderson thanked Saundra for her sleuthing skills and told Billy he remembered building his own snow forts. "Maybe I can see how it turns out," he said. But he reminded him, always ask permission before borrowing something in the future.

For Saundra, she kept her commitment, making it home just in time for dinner.

"Time to wash up, dinner's on," her mom said.

Just another sleuthing day for sensational Saundra, she thought as the bubbles multiplied in her hands. ♡

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katherine Schweit is an attorney and retired FBI special agent who created and led the FBI's active shooter program after the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School. She is the author of the FBI's seminal research on mass shootings, *"A Study of 160 Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013,"* and was part of the crisis team responding to shooting incidents at the Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Pentagon, and the Navy Yard in the Washington, DC, area. She is the author of *Stop the Killing: How to End the Mass Shooting Crisis* and a sought-after world expert in mass shootings, incident response, and crisis communications. She shares free best practices and research through her website and regular newsletter found at [katherineschweit.com](http://katherineschweit.com). She is the author of the dual titled book, *A Simple Guide to the Second Amendment/How to Talk About Guns with Anyone*, and teaches a course on the Second Amendment for DePaul University College of law. In her latest book, *Women Who Talk to the Dead*, she marries her inside knowledge of forensics and investigations with compelling storytelling to give readers unprecedented access to the messy business of digging up cold case murder victims. This true crime narrative delves into the cost of discarding part of humanity. A former journalist and Chicago prosecutor. She lives outside Washington D.C. where she continues to write, teach, and advocate for a better tomorrow.

# HOLIDAY STRESS

## THE UNWANTED GIFT WE CAN LEARN TO LOVE

By Patrice Cunniff Linehan, Ed.D



The holidays arrive each year decorated with twinkling lights, family traditions, and the promise of joyful social connections. But tucked beneath the wrapping paper and festive ribbons is a less welcome package: Stress. For many parents, teachers, and caregivers, holiday stress can feel like an unwanted gift — one that shows up whether we've asked for it or not.

And yet, like the thoughtful sweater from Aunt Kathleen that isn't quite our style, stress sometimes becomes surprisingly useful. When we learn how to anticipate it, prepare for it, and reflect on it, we can uncover hidden benefits. In fact, when stress is handled well, it can strengthen our relationship skills and build resilience for people of all ages.

This season, instead of letting holiday stress take over, we can choose to unwrap it with curiosity and even gratitude. Here's how —

### Why Holiday Stress Happens (even when we love the holidays)

Holiday stress isn't a sign that something is wrong with us or our families. It's a natural response to a season full of mixed emotions and extra pressures: disrupted routines, financial strain, family expectations, academic or work deadlines, travel, and feelings of loneliness — all mixed with joy and anticipation.

According to the Collaborative for Academic,

Social, and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)), emotional awareness and self-management are foundational components of social-emotional wellbeing. Holidays challenge both (and often at the same time).

But stress does not have to derail us. When we anticipate it, understand it, and respond with intention, we model positive decision-making and coping strategies for children, students, and even our peers.

### Before the Holidays: Anticipate and Prepare

Preparing for the holidays doesn't mean predicting every possible problem. It means planning for flexibility and building everyday habits that help us stay steady even when things get busy. Weekly family meetings, daily mealtimes, and dedicated classroom conversations (e.g., circles, homeroom, or advisory) offer opportunities to anticipate challenges and share strategies for dealing with them.

Child development studies find that children, especially younger ones, are more influenced by **anticipatory pleasure** than by the actual experience itself. In fact, people of all ages routinely **overestimate how good something will feel**, a pattern also observed in children during holidays, birthdays, or big events.

Children's developing brains make them especially vulnerable to the gap between expectation and reality because imaginative thinking, limited

### QUICK TIPS FOR MANAGING HOLIDAY EMOTIONS

- **Name it to tame it.** Encourage kids, and adults, to label feelings. Naming emotions helps shift from reaction to regulation.
- **Shrink the moment.** Ask: "What's one small thing we can do right now to feel a little better?"
- **Create a calm corner.** Designate a cozy spot as a soothing station — for regulating emotions, not a time-out.
- **Use 'holiday scripts.'** Practice simple phrases like: "I need a break," "I'm feeling overwhelmed," or "Let's slow down a bit."

### SCRIPTS TO GUIDE SELF-MANAGEMENT AND DECISION-MAKING

- **Co-create realistic 'holiday pictures.'** Instead of saying, "You'll get so many gifts!", adults can say, "Some gifts are things we want, some are things we need, and some are surprises. I wonder what kind of surprises will come this year?" This keeps excitement alive without building false expectations.
- **Model flexible thinking.** Teach phrases such as: "Let's see what happens," "We can enjoy this even if it's different than we imagined," or "What else might make today special?"



understanding of time, and media influence can create larger-than-life mental pictures. Adults can help children manage holiday expectations, without dimming their joy, by co-creating realistic 'holiday pictures' and modeling flexible thinking.

Shared experiences - such as baking, decorating, and preparing for holidays together - produce more lasting happiness than material items. Parents and caregivers can invite children to excitedly anticipate doing, not just receiving. This shifts the child's anticipation toward experiences, with the added benefit of accomplishing a holiday task together.

#### During the Holidays: Navigate Stress and Build Connection

Once the season is underway, the key skill is self-management — using strategies that help us stay balanced and flexible. These can be built into family rituals, which already help children develop meaning, belonging, and a coherent sense of family identity. We can start with proven relaxation techniques, like deep breaths, and gradually practice ways to respond and adapt as needed.

Holidays provide a natural opportunity for identity development through conversations about shared family values. Parents can take a short breather, pausing to ask: "What's important to our family during the holidays?" and offer simple choices (e.g., kindness, generosity, togetherness, curiosity, gratitude). Adolescents especially benefit from chances to differentiate and articulate personal beliefs. The holidays can be a good time to invite children to express their own growing values by shaping family

traditions. A parent might say: "What traditions matter most to you this year? What feels most meaningful?"

*Families and educators can* build a small 'value menu' of options and let each person choose one value to bring into the season, such as:

- Helping others
- Celebrating cultural or spiritual roots
- Connecting with family
- Learning about another tradition
- Making something meaningful

These activities can support **social- and self-awareness**, as well as consensus-building and **responsible decision making**. Families can also share gentle age-appropriate stories about holidays that didn't go perfectly but still became cherished memories.

Even with preparation, children may still feel disappointed. Adults can scaffold resilience by using techniques to strengthen emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility. Caregivers can open productive conversations by helping children name a feeling (e.g., "It seems like you're feeling let down"), reassure them that the experience is normal (e.g., "It's okay to feel that way – many people do"), and support them as they generate a meaningful solution (e.g., "What else could we do right now to make this moment feel special?")

Children can deepen family and community connections through their holiday experiences. One easy way to create a 'values moment' is to pause before meals, gift exchanges, or outings. Take 30-60 seconds to reflect on how each person can show kindness or consider who

#### SMOOTH-TRAVEL STRATEGIES FOR FAMILIES ON THE MOVE

- **Travel or logistical prep:** Explain what to expect during travel to reduce anxiety.
- **Pack a regulation kit:** Include headphones, snacks, comfort items, simple games, or art supplies.
- **Movement is medicine:** Stretch and move before or after long periods of sitting.
- **Have a 'Plan B' tradition:** Create a fun backup ritual for delays, like 'gate picnic' or 'car karaoke.'

#### CREATE TRADITIONS THAT PROMOTE CONNECTION AND EMPATHY

- **The Gratitude Ornament/Holiday Stone:** Each person writes something they're grateful for and adds it to a jar or hanging ornament.
- **The 'Acts of Kindness' Countdown:** Instead of a gift-based countdown, each day includes a small act, such as writing a note, helping a neighbor, or tending to nature/wildlife.
- **Memory-Making Walk:** A simple walk where each person shares a favorite moment from the year.
- **Story Swap:** Family members take turns sharing a story (both fun and challenging) from their childhood holidays. This builds empathy across generations.
- **Blended Traditions Night:** Combine elements from different cultures, family backgrounds, or religions to honor diverse roots and reinforce 'golden rule' values of mutual respect.

might need extra care or attention to participate fully.

Rituals promote emotional bonding that can improve the quality of our relationships — across generations, families, and communities. Special traditions allow children to practice leadership roles, too. They can choose a song, lead a toast, or organize a small act of giving. These simple acts develop **self-efficacy**, a protective factor for building resilience.

#### After the Holidays: Reflect and Reframe

The natural slowdown after the holidays is a perfect time for children and adults to integrate experiences. Reflecting on expectations, emotions, and the meaning of the season helps children develop their metacognition. This is an important skill for effective learning and independence. Start with a short, nonjudgmental question or values debrief:

- **Conversation starter:** “What worked?”, “What didn’t work?”, and “What did we learn?”
- **Values debrief:** “Which values did we practice this season?”, “Which ones felt most important to you?”, “What do we want to keep next year?

On the trip home, parents can take an ‘energy inventory’, by asking each family member what brought energy, what drained it, and what could change next time to make the holidays healthier. Since children’s regulation issues often peak when routines restart, this can be a useful segue for recognizing shifts in energy and talking about the need to adjust sleep schedules.

Sending ‘thank you’ notes to teachers, relatives, or neighbors reinforces empathy and fosters family and community wellbeing. The post-holiday days -- before school and work ramp up -- may offer quiet time for creating scrapbooks together. Consider adding photos, small mementos, and notes about challenging moments that the family overcame together as ‘resilience snapshots’ that are a natural part of our life experiences.

In the end, holiday stress may still arrive on our doorstep like an unwanted gift, but it doesn’t have to stay that way. When we take time to anticipate, navigate, and reflect on the season’s challenges, stress transforms from something burdensome into something surprisingly strengthening — a reminder that with intention, connection, and compassion, we can unwrap even life’s messiest moments and find resilience inside. ♡

#### WHEN ROUTINES CHANGE—HELPING KIDS STAY GROUNDED

- **Protect a Predictable Anchor:** Keep one daily routine consistent, like evening reading.
- **Use Visual Schedules:** Picture schedules reduce anxiety and increase cooperation.
- **Transition with Upbeat Warnings:** Give 5- and 2-minute warnings using an alarm that plays a favorite song or voice recorded message before changes.
- **Honor Sensory Needs:** Offer quiet breaks and options for overstimulating environments.

#### MINI LEARNING MOMENTS FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

- **The 3-Breath Reset:** Inhale, long exhale, then one gratitude breath.
- **Teach Through Transparency:** Narrate your own self-regulation strategies.
- **Shift From Perfect to Present:** Ask: “Is this about connection or perfection?”
- **Celebrate Small Wins:** Point out meaningful moments to reinforce resilience.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrice helps communities come together to support children and families. As co-author of *Leading by Convening*, she teaches practical ways to bring partners into joint problem-solving and collective action. She founded Collective Learning Consulting, offering public engagement training, leadership courses, Communities of Practice coaching, and tailored consulting grounded in her decades of experience in education and social learning.

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- American Psychological Association. Stress and Coping.
- Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Building Resilience.
- National Association of School Psychologists. Helping Children Cope During the Holidays.
- Gottman Institute. Emotion Coaching Resources.

# RAISING CAREER-READY KIDS

## WHAT PARENTS CAN LEARN FROM SWITZERLAND'S YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP MODEL

By Melanie Upright, Natalie Branosky, and Deborah Stark

**W**hen our U.S. Delegation traveled to Switzerland to study youth apprenticeships, we expected to learn about training systems, school partnerships, and labor-market strategy. What we didn't expect was how often the conversation would turn to parents.

At every site visit, Swiss colleagues emphasized their central role. From the Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research, to Zurich's Career Center and the city's Mothers and Fathers Counseling offices, parents were described as essential partners in helping young people explore their strengths, consider their options, and make early career decisions.

In Switzerland, career conversations don't start in high school, they start in childhood. And they're less about narrowing options, and more about opening and exploring them earlier. Parents, schools, and employers all share responsibility for helping young people grow into confident, skilled, and adaptable adults.

For parents in the U.S., understanding how this works offers valuable lessons and a hopeful reminder that career readiness is not a race or a test. It's a relationship.

### The Swiss Secret: A System That Starts with Families

Seventy percent of Swiss youth choose apprenticeships which are paid, career-aligned jobs that blend classroom learning with real work experiences. These pathways begin around ages 14-16, yet the process of discovering interests starts much earlier.

At Zurich's Career Center, children as young as elementary age engage in guided self-exploration. They complete interest inventories, visit interactive workstations, and even use life-size augmented-reality screens that show their own faces in professional roles such as veterinarian, chef, engineer, childcare teacher and social worker. Each child can literally see themselves in future possibilities.

What makes this system work isn't only technology or funding, it's trust. Parents trust that the system will offer options that lead to good lives. Schools trust families as partners in career development. And communities trust young people with real responsibility.

That family engagement begins before school. Through Zurich's Mothers and Fathers Counseling program, families can access pre-



natal and early-childhood guidance, home visits, and parenting classes with no stigma attached. Counselors, often nurses or social workers, help parents understand development milestones, connect to child care, and build healthy routines. It's a model of universal prevention. When families thrive, children are better prepared to learn, more self-aware and confident, and more resilient. We saw young people who took pride in their apprenticeship, recognized they were making a meaningful contribution in their place of employment, and they were genuinely supported by the adults around them – at home, in the community, and in the workplace too.

### Career Conversations as a Family Habit

Swiss parents are expected to talk early and often about careers, even if they don't know every detail. Career counseling is a cooperative model that includes the student, school, parent(s), and local businesses.

The process is simple yet profound.

1. **I get to know myself.**
2. **I explore the professional world.**
3. **I compare.**
4. **I decide.**
5. **I take action.**

There is a psychology to these five steps, used by Swiss career counselors with eighth and ninth graders, to show that readiness isn't just about grades. It's about curiosity, reflection, and agency.

Parents are part of every step, asking questions and listening.

For U.S. families, that means shifting from "What do you want to be when you grow up?" to "What kinds of problems do you like solving?" or "What environments make you feel most alive?" Families can also normalize exploration: visit workplaces, talk to neighbors about their jobs, or volunteer together. These mirror Switzerland's Sniffing Days, when youth visit employers to try out a career for a day.

### Breaking the Stigma Around Vocational Pathways

One of the most eye-opening lessons from Switzerland is that vocational education is valued. It's not a "lesser path." It's simply one of many.

In the U.S., parents often hear a single message: college is the goal. But in Switzerland, students and families can choose either an apprenticeship or an academic track, and both can lead to university later. The system is permeable and there are no dead ends. A young person who completes an apprenticeship can later pursue university studies or a new apprenticeship field with ease.

Apprenticeships provide credentials, income, and, even more important, skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. They also build resilience. Apprenticeship graduates are more adaptable when changing careers later in life.

(continued on next page)

For parents, that's an encouraging message. Supporting vocational learning in high school does not "lock" a child into a single path. It opens doors to work, to higher education, and to confidence.

#### Building Pathways Even When Apprenticeships Don't Exist Yet

Most U.S. communities don't yet have youth-apprenticeship structures like Switzerland's, but families can still prepare children for real-world learning.

##### Ask your child's school:

- How are students exposed to local careers and industries?
- Does the district partner with employers or community colleges?
- Are work-based learning or dual-enrollment options available?

##### Look beyond school walls:

- Explore local "career days," STEM fairs, and maker events.
- Encourage part-time jobs, service projects, or entrepreneurial experiments.
- Visit community colleges or technical campuses on open-house days.

Preparedness isn't only about emergency kits or finance. It includes helping our children prepare for the future of work.

#### A Parent's Role in System Change

As promising as individual actions are, real transformation requires systems that honor family and youth voices. That's where our collaborative work continues.

Parents and youth are not just stakeholders, they are co-designers. Their lived experiences shape the essential questions:

- How do we create pathways that work for all students, not only the college-bound?
- How can local employers and hospitals partner with schools to offer meaningful apprenticeships?



- How do we ensure every child regardless of zip code has a chance to explore, learn, and earn?

These conversations depend on collaboration and courage to rethink old assumptions, but also on the steady, compassionate voices of parents who believe their children deserve real options. When parents have a seat at the table, systems become smarter, more humane, and more responsive. The path ahead is not about copying Switzerland's model. It's about recognizing that success in career and life grows from an integrated system that starts at birth and includes family and student voice. As members of the U.S. Delegation, we are committed to carrying these lessons forward to strengthen how our own communities prepare young people for purposeful, connected futures. ♡

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Melanie Upright** serves as Research Program Administrator for Leadership and Educational Impact at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Technology in Education, where she leads the Dynamic Impact: Team-Directed Continuous Improvement initiative supporting high-performing teams across education systems.

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Together, the authors served on the July 2025 U.S. Delegation to Switzerland studying apprenticeship innovations in health and social care, launching the Swiss – U.S. Health Ecosystem.

# AFTERWORD

## The Gift of Presence in a Season of Change

By Heather Hollingsworth



This will be my first Christmas in a new house. After twenty years of the same walls, the same stockings hung in the same place, the same morning coffee ritual watching turkeys and deer in the backyard oaks—everything is different now. The boxes are unpacked, but the rooms don't yet hold our memories. The kitchen is larger, but I haven't learned which drawer holds the measuring spoons without thinking. And most unsettling of all: I'm reimagining what Christmas looks like when your children are grown, scattered across California, juggling career demands and new in-laws, and you get them for such a short, precious time.

If you're reading this in your own new chapter—whether it's a new house, newly empty nest, or newly blended family—you know this feeling. The old traditions that once anchored December now feel like clothes that don't quite fit. And that's okay. It has to be.

### When Everyone's Coming From Somewhere Else

My children used to wake up down the hall. Now they wake up in apartments and their own home far away, making their own arrangements and negotiating who gets Christmas Eve versus Christmas Day. They arrive exhausted from travel, carrying the weight of having disappointed someone—because when you split holidays between families, someone always wishes you'd chosen differently.

Here's what I'm learning: The goal isn't to recreate what was. It's to create what is.

### Making the Short Time Count

When you only have your adult children for a handful of days, every hour feels both precious and pressured. We want connection, but we also need to buy groceries, wrap gifts, and somehow make it all feel magical. Here's what's helping me rethink how we spend our limited time together:

**1. Release the Instagram fantasy.** Those picture-perfect holiday tables take all day to prepare—time you

could spend actually talking. This year, I'm embracing simplicity. The goal is faces around the table, not perfection on it.

**2. Create pockets, not marathons.** Instead of forcing twelve hours of family togetherness, plan for meaningful pockets—a morning coffee where everyone's encouraged to stay in pajamas, an evening game that becomes rowdy and competitive, a walk before dinner when conversation flows more naturally than across a formal table. I know they want to go see their childhood friends too so I have to tamper expectations and be flexible.

**3. Build in partner-friendly space.** Your grown children are bringing their people now. Make room for their partners to feel comfortable rather than like permanent guests. Ask them about their traditions. Let them bring something to the table—literally and figuratively.

**4. The "no phones" compromise.** A blanket ban feels controlling with adults. Instead, try "tech-free zones": one meal together without devices, or a specific activity—baking cookies, watching a movie—where phones go in a basket. Honor that they have lives that continue even during your time together.

**5. Ask better questions.** "How's work?" rarely leads anywhere interesting. Try: "What's something you're excited about right now?" or "What's been harder than you expected this year?" Give permission for real conversation, not just holiday small talk.

**6. Create one new thing together.** Since you're reimagining anyway, build one new tradition. Maybe it's a Christmas Eve bonfire. Maybe it's everyone decorating a single ornament to add to the tree. Maybe it's a family outing to cut down the tree together—something that becomes "ours" in this new chapter.

### The Preparedness We Actually Need

As someone reading Parents with Preparedness, you know about emergency kits and stored food. But here's the preparedness that matters most during the holidays: emotional preparedness for things to be different than you imagined.

Prepare for your son's girlfriend to be quieter than you'd

hoped. Prepare for your daughter to be exhausted and need more downtime than family time. Prepare for disagreements about plans, for someone to be late, for the schedule to fall apart. And prepare to let it be okay.

The preparedness that serves us now isn't about controlling outcomes—it's about being ready to adapt, to find joy in what is rather than mourning what isn't.

### What I'm Remembering

In my old house, I knew every creaky floorboard, every stubborn door hinge. I knew where the afternoon light fell in winter and which rooms stayed warmest. It was comfortable because it was known. But comfortable isn't the only way to feel at home.

This year, in this new house, with my grown children who are really just visiting now—we're all learning the floorboards together. We're figuring out new rhythms. And maybe that's the gift: not the comfort of repetition, but the adventure of discovery.

They may only be here for a few days, but those days don't have to perfectly replicate two decades of tradition to be meaningful. They just have to be present—all of us, showing up imperfectly, creating something new together.

### Your Own New Chapter

Whatever your holiday transition looks like this year—new house, newly complicated family dynamics, new realities of distance and busy schedules—give yourself permission to experiment. Not everything will work. Some new traditions will feel forced. Some old ones might need to come back.

*That's part of the process.*

Social media shows us flawless holiday gatherings, but real families are messy, scattered, tired, and trying their best. And somehow, that's where the real magic lives—not in the perfect day, but in showing up for each other anyway, building something new from what we have right now.

This Christmas, my children will wake up in unfamiliar bedrooms in a house that doesn't hold their childhood. But it will hold us—all of us, together, for whatever brief time we get. And I'm learning that's enough.

*Actually, it's more than enough. It's everything.*

Happy Holidays!

Heather Hollingsworth



IDEAS  
GUIDE  
SOURCE  
RESOURCE  
DESIGN

PARENTS  
WITH PREPAREDNESS

*Helpful*  
RESOURCES  
ON AWARENESS  
AND PREPAREDNESS



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# PREPARED THROUGH PLAY

## WHY REAL-WORLD CHALLENGE BEATS VIRTUAL VICTORIES

By Mark Toorock

**S**wipes 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 foot-steps."

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 perspec-

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.



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# PARENTS WITH PREPAREDNESS

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