

PARENTS WITH PREPAREDNESS

PWPORG.ORG

Powered by  

Dan Florent FRIEND OR FOE?

*Societal Factors
that Can Impact a
Child's View of Law
Enforcement Officers*

KRISTINA TANASICHUK AND MUBIN SHAIKH

A PRIMER FOR PARENTS
SIMILARITIES IN RECRUITMENT
AND GROOMING BY PEDOPHILES
AND EXTREMISTS

Dan O'Connor RAISING CHILDREN IN AN AGE OF CONFLICT

NINA BROOKS

3RD ANNUAL MISSING PERSONS DAY

PARENTS WITH PREPAREDNESS

COPYRIGHT PWPORG.ORG



SUBSCRIBE FOR FREE!

Get the next issue of *Parents With Preparedness Magazine* absolutely free!
Just visit PWPORG.org

[PRIVACY AND DISCLAIMER POLICY](#)

Welcome to Parents with Preparedness Magazine



Kathleen Kiernan, EdD
FOUNDER PWPORG.ORG

ing and extremism — an education no family can afford to skip.

We also turn toward the deeply personal: how parents find their footing when navigating a traumatic and unexpected pediatric oncology diagnosis alongside their child's care team, and the extraordinary beauty that emerges when mothers and daughters join forces to change the world. As always, we hope this edition informs, inspires, and empowers.

Enjoy — and please, share widely.

Hello, Spring 2026!

Spring brings with it a spirit of change and growth — and PWP is no exception. We are thrilled to announce a marvelous new partnership with Homeland Security Today, one that meaningfully broadens and deepens our reach and impact.

In this edition, we stay true to our commitment to family values while tackling some of today's most pressing topics. We explore how to teach children to interact confidently and safely with law enforcement, navigate the challenges of an ever-evolving digital world, and address the difficult but critical conversation around the parallels between grooming youth at risk for human traffick-



Heather Hollingsworth
CHAIR PWPORG.ORG



SPECIAL PREPAREDNESS MONTH PWP MAGAZINE CONTENTS

ARTICLE LIST

PAGE 3 WELCOME LETTER - BY KATHLEEN KIERNAN, ED.D AND HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH

PAGE 5 FRIEND OR FOE? SOCIETAL FACTORS THAT CAN IMPACT A CHILD'S VIEW OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS — BY DAN FLORENT.

PAGE 7 AN EPIDEMIC OF SLEEP DEPRIVATION — BY BY LTC (RET) DAVID GROSSMAN

PAGE 10 MEAN GIRLS AREN'T ALWAYS SOMEONE ELSE'S CHILD — BY LAUREN ANDERSON

PAGE 13 THE ROAD CONTINUES- WOMEN HELPING WOMEN — BY TAMARA COFFEY, DBA

PAGE 15 DIGITAL STREET SMARTS: RAISING SCAM-AWARE KIDS IN AN ONLINE WORLD — BY BRAD THORNE

PAGE 17 FIRST JOB, BIG OPPORTUNITY — BY TALI STEPP

PAGE 18 STAYING SAFE TOGETHER: AN INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY AND HOME SECURITY — BY STEVEN SUND AND ERIC YOUNG

PAGE 20 HOW THE INVICTUS PROJECT: SUPPORTS INVESTIGATORS AND EQUIPS COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT CHILDREN— BY WHITNEY MILLER

PAGE 22 ENGINEERING FOR SUCCESS! HOW TO PREPARE YOUNG WOMEN FOR A CAREER IN ENGINEERING — BY ROSHNI SHERBONDY

PAGE 24 AN UNLIKELY NEW BEST FRIEND AND ADVOCATE — BY MATTEO TRUCCO, M.D

PAGE 26 RAISING CHILDREN IN AN AGE OF CONFLICT - BY DAN O'CONNOR

PAGE 28 HOW AN ILLICIT GLOBAL SYSTEM IS FUELING A YOUTH CRISIS - BY RAY GU-

DETTI

PAGE 30 BUILDING A STABLE FUTURE: WHY SKILLED TRADES ARE BACK IN FOCUS: - BY RAY GUDETTI

PAGE 32 AI CALLER SCAMS - BY DOUG PALMER

PAGE 34 IF YOUR CHILD GOES MISSING - BY NINA BROOKS

PAGE 36 A PRIMER FOR PARENTS: SIMILARITIES IN RECRUITMENT AND GROOMING BY PEDOPHILES AND EXTREMISTS- KRISTINA TANASICHUK

RESOURCE GUIDE

PAGE 41 SUMMER SAFETY TIPS

PAGE 42 THE PERILS OF NEGLECTING ESTATE PLANNING - BY SANDY RAO

PAGE 46 CROCHETING FOR A CAUSE: A MOTHER & DAUGHTER TURNING PURPOSE INTO ACTION— BY JACKIE GIUNTA



Friend or Foe?

Societal Factors that Can Impact a Child's View of Law Enforcement Officers

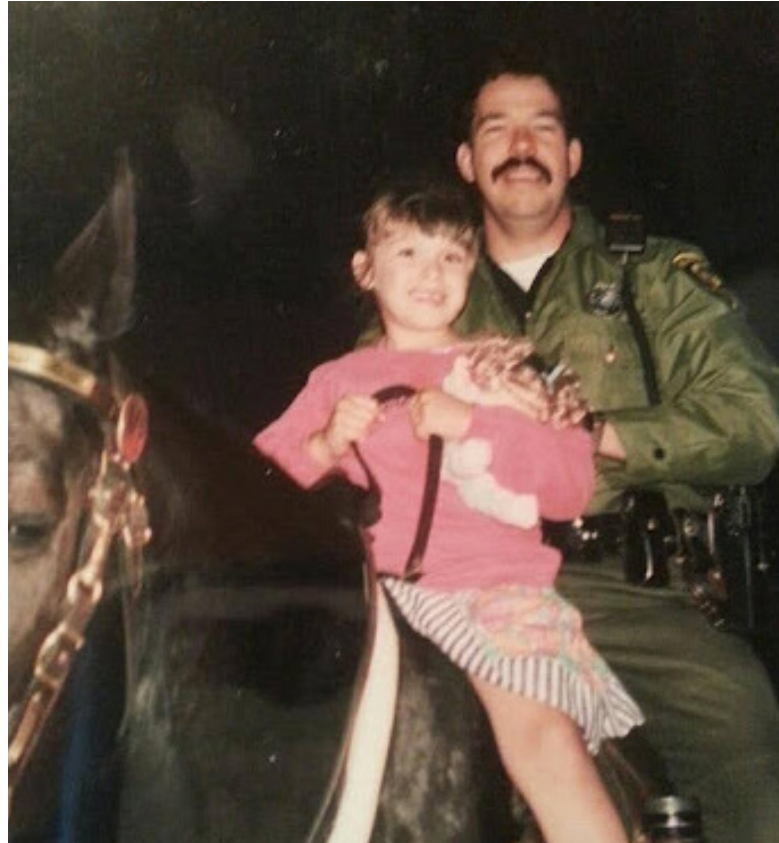
By Dan Florent

Your child's perception of law enforcement requires a partnership. At its basic level, it is an agreement between the officer and your child based on agency policies and your imparted personal values and insight. We live in a difficult time with environmental sources all competing for the interest of your child's attention. Opinions and outlook are shaped through numerous mediums such as television, news media, social platforms, family, and friends. Caregivers bear the primary responsibility of shaping what type of person their child will become.

I recently had the opportunity to address a group of high school students visiting my law enforcement training center on a field trip. I asked the group, "Raise your hand if you have ever experienced a negative encounter with the police." Out of the 22 students present, 14 raised their hands. I immediately thought 14 out of 22 was an exceptionally high ratio. The same amount raised their hands when asked about negative perceptions of law enforcement in general. What is going on? How is this happening? Can this adverse reaction point us toward an answer? Knowing that the teachers and chaperones were on a timetable and would likely balk at a more in-depth discussion without parental permission, I decided to conduct some research and attempt to ascertain a reason for this general negativity. I am not a research scientist, juvenile expert, psychologist, or social worker. I wanted to look at this phenomenon through the eyes of a police officer.

I was raised in a multi-generational law enforcement family. As a child, I would see my father, brother-in-law, uncles, and cousins in their uniforms, driving police cruisers almost every day. It was the family business for a very long time. It really wasn't a big deal. It was simply what we did. When I became an adult, I entered the fold and also became a police officer.

In 1983, I remember my first day and my first motor vehicle traffic stop. As I approached the car, the driver said to me, "Good morning, sir". The driver was 68 years old, I was 21. I had never been called "sir" in my life. That's when I felt the weight of representing a profession and a community. This driver was just being courteous and respectful of the profession and uniform. I thought that it was likely how he was raised, or perhaps influenced by military or prior positive experiences with police officers. I quickly told my father, a World War II veteran) about the experience. He chuckled and reminded me that I was held to a high standard. He said, "People will see your uniform. What you do and say matters." I carried that advice with



me throughout my career.

Watching news footage of the beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the subsequent riots in Los Angeles caused my heart to sink. The ripple effects were felt worldwide. I saw and felt an immediate change in my local community. People were quieter, more reserved. A negative shift in the perception of police had occurred.

After the events of 9/11, perception rebounded and took a dramatic shift to the positive. Concerts for first responders, honor guards at sporting events and standing ovations were the norm. However, negative perception resurfaced following incidents such as the police shooting of Michael Brown in 2014 and the death of George Floyd in 2020. Public anger toward police often seemed to be perpetually stoked by social media, where attempts at defense could worsen and prolong the situation. How did these perceptions initially form?

A 2025 study done by Johns Hopkins University and the Bloomberg School of Public Health found that the largest percentage of youth reported learning about how to interact with police came from caregivers, followed by teachers.

If our perceptions of police are learned from our "nurture" environment, is police negativity a generational construct? Did adverse events involving law enforcement in the lives of our caregivers shape their attitudes, which were then passed onto their children? These responses from the field trip group seem to support this theory, but many other factors shape perception.

Numerous studies cite correlation between bias and race, culture, and socioeconomic status. Negative interactions with police lead youth feeling helpless and dehumanized. These feelings are even more prevalent in communities of color. If police sentiment is cyclical, what tools are available to shift the curve? How can we change the environment to better coexist and support nurturing?





Police agencies must conduct a self-assessment. Developing a foundation of sound policies and procedures is the first step. This should be followed by training focused on juvenile engagement and appropriate interaction. Additional areas to strengthen include de-escalation training, community involvement, active listening, and patience with young people. School Resource Officers can be a fantastic way to bridge by providing not only law enforcement, but also education and mentorship.

These actions can help reshape agency culture, attitudes, and interactions, but requires the support of caregivers to succeed and endure for future generations.

As a parent, it can become increasingly difficult to discuss sensitive, high-profile news with your children. We live in a politically charged environment where the nightly news can polarize families and surface strong emotion. Social media can further perpetuate these emotions. Our children are exposed to videos of violent arrests, officer involved shootings, and police clashes with protestors. No form of media should replace a caregiver's thoughtful, informed, and insightful conversation. You know your child better than anyone else.

My father was a wise man when he said, "What you do and say matters." As a parent, this rings so true, though it can be challenging in today's environment. Nurturing is inherently human behavior, but shaping perception requires intention. The caregiver plays a central role.

Be that caregiver who engages in constructive conversations. Encourage critical thinking. Discuss differing viewpoints and practice active listening. Help build the partnership. Your child just may become a thoughtful adult who nurtures the next generation and promotes a positive balance in the perception of law enforcement. It's never too late to start. ❤️

About The Author



Daniel Florent is currently a Division Chief at Kiernan Group Holdings and has specialized in training worldwide organizations and educational institutions in Active Threat Mitigation, Workplace Violence Prevention, and the consequent execution of tabletop exercises. Active in training and investigations, he is also a research writer and author of numerous classified intelligence pieces.

Dan just passed 34 years in local, state and federal law enforcement and continues to strongly support New Hampshire's police community. Dan holds a Master's Degree from the United States Naval Postgraduate School and is a member and executive officer of numerous public safety benevolent organizations.

Resources

Fix, Rebecca; Pan, Annie; Hong, Kathy; Johns Hopkins University USA and Bloomberg School of Public Health. "<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilgyouth.2025.108143>." 1 February 2025. sciencedirect.com. 23 March 2026.

Freitag, Charles, Ph.D. "<https://www.police1.com/police-training/a-patrol-officers-guide-for-positive-interactions-with-juveniles>." 27 September 2024. Police1.com. 22 March 2026.

St. John, V., A. Headley and K. Harper. "Child Trends." 14 June 2022. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/reducing-adverse-police-contact-would-heal-wounds-for-children-and-their-communities>. 22 March 2026.



An Epidemic of Sleep Deprivation

By LTC (ret) David Grossman



I believe that a "global epidemic of sleep deprivation" is the greatest challenge facing our children, our families, and our civilization today. As I will demonstrate here, this is an existential crisis, with *sleep deprivation being a major factor in mental illness, traffic deaths, suicide, opiate overdoses, and obesity. These are among the major threats to and the leading killers of our children.*

Two things must be understood up front. First, we must recognize that sleep is a "biological blind spot." Throughout most of human history, every night without fail, it got dark, and there was not much to do. Some conversation, maybe other quiet activities, and then we slept. Even in recent centuries, candles and lanterns were rare and precious. Then we invented electric lighting, television, and now a vast array of modern entertainment, all of which serve to "hit us in our blind spot."

Our bodies compel us to seek air, water, and food. But they are not nearly as effective at ensuring we get enough sleep. Any 10-year-old at a slumber party can willingly go a day and a night without sleep. (They will not, however, be pleasant the next day!). It is virtually impossible to make that same child go as long without food. If there are interesting or exciting things to do, like playing video games, using social media, or binge-watching a worthy TV show, it is easy to choose that over sleep. Our electronic media industries share a common objective: capture our attention! In doing so, they have fought tooth and nail to sell their products to minors and *steal our children's sleep!*

The second is this: sleep deprivation *impairs your mind and body in ways comparable to alcohol.* A study by the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) tells us that "Impairments due to sleep deprivation are similar to impairments due to alcohol intoxication!" This NIOSH report says, "Being awake for 24 hours is similar to having a BAC [blood alcohol concentration] of 0.10%." The legal standard for drunk driving is 0.08. After 24 hours without sleep, your judgement is impaired at a level above legally drunk.

Mental Illness. Sleep deprivation is a major contributor to mental illness. For all practical purposes, *sleep deprivation will make you mentally ill.* After 24 hours without sleep cognitive and emotional impairment mirror intoxication. After two days without sleep, individuals are irrefutably demonstrating signs of mental illness: aggressive, irrational, and often paranoid. (If it seems to you that the world is increasingly irrational and aggressive, you

are right. This is because we are in the middle of a "global epidemic of sleep deprivation.")

Any graduate of US Army Ranger School or SERE School will tell you, on the third day without sleep, you are psychotic: you will see things and hear things that are not there. In other words, sleep deprivation can cause an individual to have symptoms indistinguishable from schizophrenia. Yet many people, including young people, routinely approach or reach these thresholds through repeated all-night engagement with digital media.

Traffic Deaths. Sleep deprivation is a huge factor in traffic accidents, alongside alcohol impairment. *Traffic deaths remain a leading cause of death among American teens* - followed closely, possibly to soon be overtaken, by suicide and drug overdoses.)

Suicide. Sleep deprivation is a factor in suicide. I tell my audiences, "Right now, it is physically impossible for you to take your life. The drive to self-preservation is too powerful. But *alcohol inhibits the drive to self-preservation!* Alcohol is very often a factor in suicide: you have all these problems, you add alcohol, and suddenly it becomes possible to kill yourself. *And sleep deprivation works the same way.* Except that you are only drunk for a brief window, and children are not habitually drunk.

Some research suggests sleep deprivation is not only a key factor in suicide, but it is also *the most remediable factors.* While we can't immediately fix someone's relationship or financial stress, we can intervene to improve sleep.

Parents and teachers should continue to be deeply concerned about the possibility of suicide. I have lost a brother and two nephews to suicide, and it is one of the most devastating events a family can face. It is a growing, global threat, and one that demands practical, immediate intervention.

One such intervention that is straightforward: When you send your children to bed, remove access to electronic devices. cell phones away. No cell phones, no laptops, tablets or TVs. They must go to bed and sleep.

During a break in one of my presentations, a police officer shared his story. He had an 'A' student daughter who said, Dad, it's embarrassing. You don't have to take my cell phone every night. You can trust me."

"So," this officer said, "I trusted her. A little while later, my little girl took her life. And I never knew the hell she was living in until we read the text

messages on her cell phone. She was enduring ceaseless, merciless, relentless bullying. And she stayed up every night, trying to defend herself. Trying to find someone who would stand up for her. My little girl was bullied to death in front of my eyes, and I let it happen.”

He said, “I can’t ignore that text message in the middle of the night. How in the world could I expect my little girl to ignore those text messages? The one thing on earth I could have done for her was to take her cell phone every night, to let her turn off all the bad stuff in this world and get a good night’s sleep.”

Opiate Overdoses. Sleep deprivation is also a key issue in chronic pain, which is a major factor in the opiate epidemic. Also, there may be cause to believe that if you are sleep deprived, the addictive impact of opiates is increased.

Fentanyl is an opiate responsible for 40,000 to 80,000 deaths a year in the US. It is a major form of an illegal opiate, and you can add to that all the problems and deaths involving prescription opiates. Year after year, more Americans are killed by fentanyl than in the entire 20 years of the Vietnam War. In 2024, for the first time, the number of fentanyl deaths dropped below the total of Vietnam, possibly because of the wide availability of opiate antidotes such as Narcan.

Obesity. Finally, as we examine the threats to the lives and health of our children, the research is overwhelming that sleep deprivation is a huge factor in obesity.

Sleep deprivation is also a major factor in Alzheimer’s and dementia (and that should scare the daylights out of everyone). Recent research also indicates that sleep deprivation shortens life expectancy, with only smoking having a greater negative impact on lifespan.

I tell all my audiences, “Do your own research.” Search online:

- Global epidemic of sleep deprivation
- Sleep deprivation + mental illness
- Sleep deprivation + traffic deaths
- Sleep deprivation + suicide
- Sleep deprivation + chronic pain
- Sleep deprivation + obesity
- Sleep deprivation + Alzheimer’s / dementia
- Sleep deprivation + heart disease

It is all there. It is absolutely undeniable, and every one of these health issues is exploding worldwide.

The New Factor, Worldwide. Now, think like a detective. Think like a scientist. What is the *new* factor, the common root cause worldwide, that is responsible for this explosion of suicides, traffic deaths, dementia, and all the other pathologies outlined above?

It is not “psychotropic drugs” because many of the nations with these health issues are relatively impoverished, and that is not a factor for them. (Not saying that this is absolutely not an issue, just that it is not the new factor worldwide.) It is not guns, because many nations with the strictest and most successful gun laws are seeing this



tragic epidemic of issues mentioned above. It is not poverty, because many wealthy nations have seen this explosion of health maladies. No.

The problems outlined here are largely due to one new ingredient worldwide: video games, social media, cell phones/texting, streaming movies and videos, and FOMO (fear of missing out). All this technology is intentionally and systematically designed to be as irresistible, compelling, attractive, desirable, and addictive as humanly possible - and thus, to *steal our sleep*. (The head of Netflix has stated, “Our competitor is sleep.” Search that online; it will come right up.) *These industries will never willingly tell you about the harmful impact of their products on you or your children.*

Much of the medical research on this subject uses the term “insufficient sleep syndrome” (ISS). An NIH study, entitled “Insufficient Sleep Syndrome: Is it time to classify it as a major noncommunicable disease?” tells us that “insufficient sleep has been linked to seven of the fifteen leading causes of death.”

Additionally, current evidence suggests that sleep plays a significant role in determining cognitive performance and workplace productivity. This study concludes that, “*Sleep insufficiency has been declared to be a ‘public health epidemic’; therefore, we propose ISS as a potential noncommunicable disease.*”

Imagine our entire civilization, in which large portions of our citizens are chronically sleep-deprived. Employees, bosses, students, teachers, and first responders are all staggering out the door, interacting with others, making critical decisions, while chronically sleep-deprived. Most especially and most tragically, *are parents and their children.*

Around the world, every time one person interacts with another, there is a “friction point” adding up to billions and trillions of friction points every day. Think of our civilization like a huge engine. An amazing array of social, physical, psychological, and physiological factors provides lubricant for each of these friction points, allowing this engine to continue chugging along and provide a healthy and prosperous world.

Sleep deprivation is like a bucket full of sand dumped into that engine, increasing the “friction” at... Every. Single. One of these billions of daily contact points. A civilization of chronically sleep-deprived people is doomed to despair, disintegration, and destruction.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Depression & Suicide. As I train military and first responders across the US, I tell them about a National Institute of Health report on “The Association of Sleep Duration, Mental Health, and Health Risk Behaviors among US Afghanistan/Iraq Era Veterans” tells us that “Poor sleep quality was dramatically associated with PTSD (five times the rate), MDD [major depressive disorder] (nine times the rate), and suicidal ideation (almost six times the rate), and is consistent with other disorders.” This is not a causal relationship. It is not even a correlational relationship. It is a toxic, interactive relationship and the one place where we can interrupt this toxic cycle is sleep.

Then I tell my audiences:

If someone came to work drunk, you would fire them. We must understand that coming to work sleep deprived is... Just. Like. Being. Drunk!

If you’re drunk, you will “sober up” fairly quickly, but if you are sleep-deprived, it just gets worse and worse.

If you come to work and say, “I played the new video game all night! It was awesome!” That. Is. Not. Acceptable!

If you have a sick baby and you stayed up all night? Hey, we got you covered.

You played stinking games or binge-watched shows all night? That is *not* acceptable.

Right about now, a lot of you are looking at me like a deer in the headlights,

saying, "Dude! You got my number!" And that's okay.

You didn't know. But now you know, and you know I'm right! We can't keep doing business like that.

I believe this is the single most important aspect of the harm caused by modern technology. It is the single greatest challenge to the survival of our world today.

A Better Team and a Better Life. The coach of a major athletic team (he asked me to never say who) told me that sleep management was his "secret weapon." The US Air Force is using the "Oura Ring" sleep-tracking device to monitor its pilots' sleep. "You're flying a quarter-of-a-billion-dollar aircraft tomorrow. Be sure you get a good night's sleep tonight!"

All of our armed forces have established "crew rest" requirements for pilots and flight crew, but they have never been able to tell whether that time is actually being used to sleep, to play video games or watch shows. Now they can truly make their pilots get that sleep. Similarly, this coach told me he uses the Oura Ring to ensure sleep discipline among his team. He told me, "I don't know how many coaches out there are doing this. But if my team plays against a team that doesn't enforce sleep discipline, I will kick their butts every time." (The coach also told me that every year his players will have one guy wear ten rings and go to bed, while his buddies go party. But, the coach said, "We figure that one out real fast!")

You, your family, and your children can all have a *better team and a better life* if you address sleep deprivation and improve sleep hygiene.

To Save a Child's Life. I speak at many school safety conferences. I always tell them:

We will talk about protecting your school from violence. But odds are your school hasn't had any murders. Unfortunately, I bet you've had problems with mental illness. And you've probably had suicides, traffic deaths, drug overdoses, and obesity. The solution is to educate our kids about sleep hygiene from their youngest ages.

People say, "We need to do something about mental illness!" Sleep! "We need to do something about suicides!" Sleep! Or "opiate overdoses!" Sleep! Or "traffic deaths!" Sleep!

When my second-grade teacher told us that cigarettes kill people, I went home and hid my dad's cigarettes. Teachers can tell their students how much sleep they need at their age (and how to calculate that on a clock), that they need to sleep in complete darkness (or with a sleep mask), and that they need to cut off caffeine after lunch. There are many other important aspects of sleep, but just these three things can be a revolution in wellness.

I told this audience of school safety specialists, "*If you want to walk out that door and save a child's life, sleep is the place to begin.*"

How Much Sleep? First, I gave them the information from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine on how much sleep we need:

- Babies (4 to 12 months) -12 to 16 hours (incl naps)
- Toddlers (12 to 24 months) -11 to 14 hours (incl naps)
- Preschool (3 to 5 years) -10 to 13 hours (may include a nap)
- School Age (6 to 12 years) -9 to 12 hours
- Teens (13 to 18 years) -8 to 10 hours
- Adults -at least 7 hours

(This can actually be a good chance to teach kids, using math to set a bedtime. Start with wake up time and count backwards to determine "bedtime." This really is something teachers can teach. Because the one thing teachers can do is teach!)

Sleep in the Dark. Next, teach children to sleep in total darkness, or at least as dark as possible. In one sleep lab study, with a totally dark room, the bathroom light on, and the door shut, *the light coming through the crack in the bathroom door was enough to prevent individuals from get-*

ting quality sleep. Learning to sleep with a sleep mask is one of the best life skills that anyone can develop, and it is best to do that while we are young.

Cut Off Caffeine After Lunch. Finally, we must teach our children to stop consuming caffeine shortly after lunch. The global abuse of caffeine is another subject entirely, but shutting down after lunch can dodge the majority of the problems associated with this powerful and addictive drug.

There is so much more involved with healthy sleep, and I encourage everyone to study this subject. But for now, these three "life hacks" can make a huge difference and raise a generation of healthy children. And if we raise a generation of healthy children, that will lead the way to a truly better world. 🍀

About The Author



Lt. Col. Dave Grossman is an award-winning author and nationally recognized as a powerful, dynamic speaker. He has authored sixteen books, including his "perennial bestsellers" *On Killing*, *On Combat*, and *On Spiritual Combat*; a New York Times bestseller co-authored with Glenn Beck; and many other successful books and scholarly papers. His books are "required" or "recommended" reading in all four branches of the US Armed Forces, and in federal and local law enforcement academies nationwide.

His most recent book, *On Hunting: The Definitive Study of the Mind, Body, and Ecology of the Hunter in the Modern World*, has already established itself as the authoritative resource in this field.

Col. Grossman is a US Army Ranger, a paratrooper, a prior service sergeant, and a former West Point Psychology Professor. He has five patents to his name, has earned a Black Belt in Hojutsu (the martial art of the firearm), and has been inducted into the USA Martial Arts Hall of Fame.

His research was cited by the President of the United States in a national address; he has testified before the U.S. Senate, the U.S. Congress, and numerous state legislatures; and he has been invited to the White House on two occasions to brief the President and the Vice President in his areas of expertise.

In recent years, Col. Grossman's work has focused on the "global epidemic of sleep deprivation" and the tragic role of sleep deprivation in suicide, traffic deaths, and PTSD. He has been called upon, on many occasions, to present "psychiatric grand rounds" on PTSD and combat trauma, and he presented Department of Defense-wide (DoD-wide) psychiatric grand rounds, simulcast to over 100 locations worldwide.

Since his retirement from the US Army in 1997, he has been on the road for over 200 days a year for over 26 years, serving as one of our nation's leading trainers for military, law enforcement, mental health providers, and school safety organizations. He was inducted as a "Life Diplomat" by the American Board for Certification in Homeland Security and a "Life Member" of the American College of Forensic Examiners Institute.

MEAN GIRLS AREN'T ALWAYS SOMEONE ELSE'S CHILD

By Lauren Anderson

She's Not a Mean Girl. She's Climbing a Staircase

If you are the parent of a middle school girl, you likely know the feeling: The quiet car ride home after school, the buzzing phone late at night, the sudden shift in a friendship that seemed perfectly fine just days earlier.

By any measure, the middle school years can feel like emotional whiplash. One day your daughter is laughing with friends; the next, she is quiet in the car, staring out the window, unsure where she stands in a social group that seemed perfectly stable just hours earlier.

Adolescence is a time of enormous growth, but it is also a time when friendships can feel intense, complicated, and sometimes painful. For girls in particular, relationships sit at the center of their world. When those relationships are healthy, they are a powerful source of joy, belonging, and confidence. When they fracture, the impact can feel overwhelming.

For parents and educators, these moments can feel mysterious or even trivial. But to the girls living through them, friendship dynamics are central to their sense of identity, belonging, and emotional safety. Understanding what is happening beneath the surface of adolescent friendships, especially in an era of group chats and social media, can make the difference between simply enduring these years and helping girls emerge from them stronger.

Friendships — They Matter

In my role as a Middle School Division Head at an all-girls school, I witness daily just how powerful peer relationships are during adolescence. For many students, friendships are among the most influential relationships in their lives. They help shape identity, build - or sometimes challenge - confidence, and deeply affect a young person's sense of belonging and emotional well-being. These relationships also influence how students experience school, including how connected they feel to the community and how engaged they are in their learning.

What adults sometimes dismiss as “middle school drama” or even “cattiness” is actually an important part of adolescence. These moments, messy as they can be, are where girls begin to learn some of the most important social skills of their lives: how to navigate conflict, repair mistakes, build trust, and negotiate relationships.

In middle school, friendships sit at the center of a girl's world. They influence how she sees herself, how confident she feels, and whether she experiences a true sense of belonging. I see every day just how powerful these peer relationships can be.

One might assume that the girl surrounded by friends at the lunch table, the one who seems to be in the middle of everything, is the happiest, most connected, and most socially secure. But that assumption is not always true. A girl can be widely known, involved in co-curricular activities, and constantly surrounded by peers, yet still feel profoundly lonely. What protects young people is not popularity. It is an authentic connection and a genuine sense of belonging.

I was recently listening to a podcast featuring Dr. Mary Kaspar, a clinical psychiatrist. She spoke about something that resonated deeply with what I see every day in a middle school setting: adolescence is actually a high-risk period for loneliness. Girls can be surrounded by peers and still feel disconnected.

After listening, I began reflecting on the students in our own middle school community. I thought about the girls who might be labeled “popular” and those who would not hold that title. I thought about who seemed genuinely happy and who quietly expressed feelings of loneliness. And I began asking myself a simple question: What actually makes a girl popular?

Often the answer is a combination of things: appearance, involvement in visible activities (frequently athletics), and perhaps most importantly, social influence. The “popular” girl often has tremendous power within her social group. She may decide where everyone is sitting and what order everyone is sitting in,



what game they play at break, or even set the emotional tone for the day. But here is the question that stayed with me: Is she truly well-liked?

I'm not always so sure.

This is where things get tricky. Girls who engage in subtle social manipulation are often incredibly socially intelligent. They understand exactly how far they can go without getting into trouble. They know that no teacher or administrator is likely to call home because they rolled their eyes at someone, whispered behind a classmate's back, or quietly removed an extra chair from a table so that “the weird one” has nowhere to sit.

Imagine that phone call.

“Hello Mrs. Smith, I'm calling to let you know your daughter gave another student a mean look today.”

Or perhaps:

“Your daughter moved a chair during group work so another student couldn't sit down.”

The response would likely be understandable:

“You interrupted my work day to tell me my daughter looked at someone funny?”

Or perhaps:

“How do you know she wasn't just making more room for the group?” And the honest answer is that, technically, I cannot prove it with absolute certainty. Even if I could, I am not entirely sure it would rise to the level of something that is formally reportable. That remains unclear.

But when you work with middle school girls long enough, you learn to read the room. You see the subtle glances, the quiet shifts in body language, the moments when a student suddenly finds herself standing alone while the rest of the group closes ranks. And in those moments, you realize that the most powerful forms of exclusion are often the ones adults almost never see.

Mean Girls Aren't Always Someone Else's Child

This is the harder question - the one most parents understandably hope they never have to ask, but should. The first place to start is by listening. Really listening. Pay attention to the stories your daughter tells about school,

sports, camp, or any place where groups of kids gather. Often the clues are hidden in the language she uses.

You might hear phrases like, “We don’t like her” or “We don’t sit with her.” These statements are usually followed by a justification: “She likes sitting by herself.”

“We would let her sit with us, but there isn’t enough room.”

Listen carefully to the collective language, we. It can be a subtle signal of exclusion happening within a group.

A wise person once told me that a joke is only a joke if both people are genuinely laughing. That simple idea can be a powerful way to help your daughter reflect on her behavior. When she tells you she was “just joking,” try asking a gentle follow-up question:

“Did the other student laugh too?”

Often, the answer reveals far more than the original story. If the response is something like, “Not really...she didn’t think it was as funny as I did,” it may be important to pay attention to that signal.

Some additional questions or conversation starters might include: “Tell me about someone at school who might be having a hard time,” or “Have you ever felt left out at school?” The responses to these questions can offer meaningful insight. If your daughter cannot identify a single peer who is struggling or shares that she has never experienced being left out herself, it may be worth paying closer attention.

During adolescence, moments of exclusion, insecurity, or social difficulty are a nearly universal part of the middle school experience. A lack of awareness of those realities can sometimes reveal just as much as the stories she chooses to share.

The reality is that most girls are not going to openly tell their parents that they are behaving in ways that might hurt others. Instead, parents often have to take on the role of a quiet observer, almost like a detective, listening carefully, asking thoughtful questions, and paying attention to the small clues hidden in everyday stories. Those clues can tell us a great deal about what is really happening beneath the surface of adolescent friendships.

Another powerful step is simply to ask. But as I’ve mentioned in other articles, if you ask the question, you must be prepared to genuinely listen to the answer. Instead of asking casually, “My daughter isn’t one of the mean girls...right?” try asking something more thoughtful and specific: “Does my daughter ever show relational aggression toward other students?”

This question often invites a more honest response and opens the

door for a real conversation. But first it might be helpful to define what relational aggression is and what it might look like.

Pioneering researcher Dr. Nicki Crick of the University of Minnesota was among the first scholars to formally identify and name relational aggression as a distinct category of behavior in the 1990s. She defined relational aggression as a form of aggression in which an individual intentionally harms another through manipulation of, or damage to, their relationships, social status, or sense of belonging rather than through physical force.

As an educator, I will also say something that may surprise people: I do not actually believe most girls see themselves or even truly are “mean girls.” What I see instead are young adolescents who are deeply invested in social status. Many are trying to climb what feels like a very real social ladder.

Some girls do this quite successfully. They may hold tremendous influence within their peer group. They decide where everyone sits at lunch, what game is played during break, and often set the social tone for the day. These are often the girls people describe as “popular.” But popularity does not necessarily mean kindness, happiness, or belonging.

In that same podcast, Dr. Mary Kaspar describes a powerful metaphor that perfectly captures what many adolescents experience: the staircase. In this model, social life is viewed as a competition. There are only a few spots at the top, and the only way to move up is to push someone else down. This image feels remarkably accurate.

When people imagine “mean girls,” they often picture dramatic moments, public humiliation, obvious teasing, or cruel social media posts. But that is not what I most often see. Instead, it is far more subtle: the eye roll when someone speaks, the quiet snicker that spreads across the table, the turning of a back that signals someone is no longer welcome in the conversation.

These moments are easy to miss, but their impact can be profound. Just because a girl is not openly cruel does not mean she is not participating in behaviors that hurt others. Relational aggression is quiet, sophisticated, and often invisible to adults but it can deeply affect another student’s sense of belonging. Which is exactly why it deserves our attention.

The Lesson You Don’t Know You’re Teaching

When we whisper about a neighbor, gossip about a colleague, or roll our eyes at someone on television, our daughters are watching. They notice far more than we realize, and the way we speak about others quietly teaches them how to move through the world.





I had the gift of attending an all-girls school growing up, an experience that not only resulted in being a bridesmaid more times than I can count, but also surrounded me with a lifetime of strong, thoughtful, and deeply kind women. Those friendships and role models shaped how I think about community, loyalty, and the responsibility we have to lift one another up.

Of course, we all share stories in private spaces. That is part of being human. But it is important to remember that younger girls are watching how we handle those moments. They are learning from us, how we speak, how we respond, and how we treat other women.

As the grown women in their lives, it is our responsibility to set the tone. Instead of tearing down someone's reputation or commenting on a new haircut with a raised eyebrow, we have the opportunity to choose something better. We can choose kindness. We can choose generosity. And sometimes, we can simply choose not to say anything at all.

Questions for parents to consider:

- Do I speak kindly about people I disagree with?
- Do I model how to repair a conflict rather than avoid or punish it?
- Am I inadvertently rewarding social status over kindness?

Another approach I have found effective with parents, and one my own mother modeled beautifully, was simply not giving space to drama. My mom never allowed school drama to take center stage in our home, especially when it revolved around unkind or unproductive behavior. If the story involved gossip, exclusion, or mean-spirited dynamics, it simply was not something she entertained.

While there are now well-researched parenting strategies that echo this approach, I am not sure my mom was following any particular framework. She simply chose not to give it oxygen. She did not indulge the play-by-play of who said what to whom, and without that audience, the drama lost its power.

As a result, the noise of middle school social dynamics stayed where it belonged, in the background. My focus shifted instead to the friendships that were real and meaningful. I did not have a revolving door of friends, because my energy was invested in the people who truly mattered. For that reason, I often remind parents that repeatedly asking their daughters for updates on "seventh-grade drama" can unintentionally keep that drama alive. Sometimes the most powerful response is simply refusing to give it the stage.

Redefining Success in Friendship

Ultimately, the goal for young people is not to climb a social ladder, but to build meaningful relationships grounded in trust, kindness, and mutual respect. That shift - from competition to connection - can change the entire landscape of adolescence.

When girls learn that belonging does not require pushing others down, when they understand the difference between status and genuine respect,

and when they know they have a safe place to land at home, the turbulence of adolescence becomes something different. It becomes a training ground for empathy, resilience, and character. And those lessons will last far longer than any middle school popularity contest ever could. ♡

Resources:

<https://momssoftweensandteens.com/the-popular-girls-how-to-help-your-daughter-seek-healthy-friendships/>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/7789197/>

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 and 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, as well as 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.

The Road Continues- Women Helping Women

By Tamara Coffey, DBA

The Road Continues is a non-profit I founded, named from my initials, TRC. My name is Tamara Raye Coffey, Founder. The Road Continues is on a mission for Women Helping Women. Some may think, what a generic statement, right? But The Road Continues is a 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to empowering women through confidence, dignity, and opportunity by providing donations of professional business and business casual clothing among other things.

We provide women who are preparing for job interviews, applying for an apartment, court appearances, starting a new job, all the activities that make up for life transition. However we can help, we want to support women who are rebuilding, starting fresh, or stepping into a new chapter – including those overcoming hardship, displacement, or personal challenges.

When asked to draft this article about my nonprofit, I was baffled. Write about what? I thought to myself. What is it? What do we do? What do I see for it? Then I was told to simply write why I started it. A simple word – why? That makes you think and look at your inner self.

There was not just one reason I started the nonprofit; there were many. The combination of why the nonprofit came to be and what I want to achieve, I can only hope at the end of the day, The Road Continues helps one woman at a time.

At 22 years old, a single mother of a 2-year-old son, I decided to make my getaway from a “not so healthy and safe” environment. That consisted of leaving Washington State without anyone knowing, driving five days across the country in the middle of winter all the way to Northern Virginia just outside of DC. It so happened a high school friend of mine lived there with her mother, and they were kind enough to open their home to my son and I for one month.

Upon arrival on Thursday afternoon, I was locked in a daycare by noon Friday. I bought the Sunday paper and, on Monday morning, I faxed my resume to any company that was hiring and had a fax number listed. I was called on Tuesday for a Wednesday interview, and offered the job by the end of the week, and started on Monday.

I did not take into consideration during this time that I had no clothes. I had 2 small suitcases of what I tossed in there when I left – but nothing to wear in an office environment in Washington DC.

I was grateful that my friend and I were the same size, and she opened her closet to me. For an entire month I wore her clothes. It is with acceptance, humility, and grace that I held my head up every day knowing I wore someone else’s clothes to work. Of course, as I was moving into my small apartment, she set some clothes aside and gifted them to me. From there on if at any time I looked for something new, that new item would be used and bought from a thrift store.

As young woman, having to work, find a job, find an apartment, attend interviews, and show up to momentous events, it is understandable that not all women have extra money to purchase new clothes. You either have friends that may give you clothes, you borrow them, or you buy them from a thrift store. If you do not have the appropriate clothing to wear for your job, for an interview, for an event, women will either choose not to go because they believe they are not worthy of attending, or they are embarrassed by their clothes or lack of newer and nicer clothing.

Either way, The Road Continues ensures what is collected as donations are in good condition and decent quality. A nice outfit that looks good will go a long way in making a woman feel good about herself, if only for a moment. Now, fast forward a couple of decades later. I had gotten married and my ca-





reer was on its way up, and life was good. My mother-in-law cleaned her closet out over Thanksgiving Holiday and had about 20-business suits in the trunk of her car. She came over and said, “Pick out what you want and do with the rest what you think is best.”

These were nice business suits, and I knew something good could come out of it. I knew of three women’s recovery homes, plus I knew a couple of young single mothers in the neighborhood. That was the day I knew I wanted to help, give back, and pay it forward. I was blessed to have my friend from high school who let me wear her clothes and even gave me clothes for some time when she was no longer wearing them.

So, with the first set of business suits from my mother-in-law cleaning out her closet, I reached out to a professional woman I knew and worked with and asked them to clean out their closets and bring it to me to hand out. From there it went from three recovery homes to two transitional housing homes, to ladies calling me and asking if I had something in their sizes, to helping with resumes and filling out applications. I had even built relationships with owners of three thrift stores, and every Friday would make the rounds for the pickups.

This went on for several years and had helped many women, it warmed my heart.

There came a time when due to the loss of my grandparents, I had to make the decision to relocate from Northern Virginia to California and manage their affairs. There were days and years in my life something was missing, then it dawned on me, I missed helping women. I missed paying it forward.

Present day: The nonprofit is in Camarillo CA. The word has spread quite rapidly since revamping and it is amazing how many women genuinely want to go through their closets and give. By giving clothing items, purses, shoes, coats, and accessories we have brought joy to many. The smile on a woman’s face in a domestic violence shelter, being able to pick clothes that will be hers, that are for her, and meant to help her, is beyond measure.

Helping a young person that is in transitional housing only because they happened to age out of Foster Care. Providing them with guidance on resume building, a little mentoring, and a stack of clothes to get them set for that new job they landed, the look in their eyes is amazing. There are so many we have helped, and look to help so many more. I work with agencies throughout several counties, as well as private centers and organizations, and we are all here doing our small part to do good and help others.

My vision for The Road Continues is to keep building it up, get the word out, spread the word and the mission. Reach out to agencies out of state. We

recently shipped coats and sweaters and winter wear to a tribal reservation in South Dakota, and shipped to both a homeless shelter and rehab center in southern Arizona). So, in a way the word is getting out little by little. I want to see nonprofit commercials on TV, holding annual events, and people wanting to sponsor and/or give gifts by way of funding because there is so much more to do. But just for today, I am thankful and grateful and my desire for this work is beyond words, here is to another day with light and love. ❤️

About The Author



Dr. Tamara R. Coffey, Founder/CEO

Besides a successful career that started out in Washington DC and expanded across the United States within the public safety and security technology industry, Tamara has owned and operated several small businesses and today operates the nonprofit in addition to her management consulting company.

The Road Continues

www.roadcontinues.com

Donate button is found on the webpage, thank you.

PUBLISHED BY PWPORG.ORG

DIGITAL STREET SMARTS: RAISING SCAM-AWARE KIDS IN AN ONLINE WORLD

By: Brad Thorne



“I felt like my soul was being ripped out of my body,” Brandon Guffey said when describing the death of his son. No parent should ever have to say those words. Families like the Guffeys, the DeMays, and the Woods know the unimaginable pain of losing a child to online scams, sextortion, and cyber-enabled exploitation. Online scams, harassment, sextortion, and fraud are growing every year. Statistics are high, but they don’t tell the full story. Every story represents a real child, a real family, and a lesson we must learn. That lesson is clear: **teaching digital street smarts is as important as teaching children to look both ways before they cross the street.**

Research from the Pew Research Center shows that 95 percent of teenagers in the United States have access to a smartphone, and nearly half say they are online almost constantly. Social media, by design, is so embedded in daily life that parents cannot simply take it away without further isolating their children. When usage is unavoidable, safeguards and restrictions become essential. Yet, on most social media platforms, such safeguards are nonexistent or inconsistent at best. Annie McGrath, mother of Griffin McGrath, said: “Not a single social media regulation has been passed in 25 years. It is inexcusable and unconscionable, period.”

The volume of lawsuits against social media companies reflects the harm these platforms can cause younger users. Social media uses addictive algorithms and targeted advertising designed to maximize engagement, while wielding significant lobbying power to avoid accountability. This is not a new tactic, as industries from slot machines to tobacco to opioids have used similar strategies. Society often underestimates harm due to misleading information from the industries themselves.

Currently, Washington debates competing online safety proposals.

Many parents who have lost children believe Big Tech is pushing the Kids Act, legislation that benefits the companies while weakening accountability. This mirrors historical patterns: tobacco companies spent decades lobbying lawmakers and casting doubt on the harms of smoking, while millions were harmed before meaningful accountability arrived. The question is: how many more families will suffer before lawmakers finally act?

The most targeted demographic for cybercrime and cyber-enabled fraud is teens and young adults. Social media is the primary contact point for cybercriminals. Younger users spend far more time online, making them prime targets.

I have witnessed firsthand how quickly an online conversation can turn into fraud, extortion, or exploitation. A college-aged young man I spoke with became a victim of sextortion. He felt hopeless and completely alone, too afraid to tell his parents or friends, dangerously close to taking his own life. I was the only person he had spoken to because I reached out. Thankfully, he is doing well now. This highlights the very real link between online exploitation and teen and young adult suicide. Dr. Scott Hadland, chief of adolescent medicine at Mass General Hospital, explains: “Teen brains are still developing. When something catastrophic happens, such as a personal picture being released or threatened, it is hard for them to see that they can get through it.” We cannot treat kids like adults.

Parents who have lost children speak with heartbreaking clarity.

John DeMay, father of Jordan DeMay, stated: “Our son was murdered through Instagram while we were all sleeping at night. We had zero chance to stop it.”

“He died terrified, scared, and ashamed,” said Morgan Moore



about her son Caleb's sextortion situation.

Mary Rodee, mother of Riley, said: "As a mom, I do not want a single other parent in this world to experience what I do every day."

Their point is clear and urgent: talk to your children about digital risks before they encounter them.

You do not need to be a cybersecurity expert. Start with honesty. It is ok to admit you do not know everything about the digital world, but acknowledge that online threats are real and will eventually target your family.

Familiarize yourself with common scams, including fake profiles, employment scams, sextortion, romance scams, and financial fraud. Then, begin an ongoing, open conversation with your family.

In that conversation, red flag warning signs include: unsolicited contact from someone unknown, pressure to act quickly, offers that seem too good to be true, requests for unusual payment methods such as gift cards or cryptocurrency, and subtle grammar or phrasing issues.

Explain emotional manipulation. Scammers target emotions that override critical thinking, including fear, panic, guilt, shame, love, lust, greed, excitement, embarrassment, humiliation, and isolation.

Develop a family password to defeat AI that would pose as a family member. AI can imitate a dad's voice, but would not know the answer to the family password.

Avoid ultimatum language. While well-intentioned, statements like "Don't you ever!" without follow-up can leave children feeling isolated when they make a mistake. Mistakes and impulsive behavior are common in younger people. Timothy Woods, father of James Woods, urges youth not to suffer in silence: "No matter how embarrassing things are, you can always go to someone." Use language that conveys seriousness while reassuring your children that they can always come to you. With open communication, parents can check in regularly, keeping the conversation ongoing.

A practical tactic to teach children is **Stop-Question-Confirm**:

- **Stop** — pause and think, taking a moment to remove emotion and regain clarity.
- **Question** — evaluate the situation and the information, not the criminal. Verify profiles, run reverse image searches, check phone numbers, use AI, Google, or ask trusted friends, family, or authorities.
- **Confirm** — verify independently through trusted sources, not through information provided by the scammer. Contact the bank, family member, or law enforcement directly.

A parent's role is to protect their children and equip them with the skills to navigate life safely. In today's digital world, that means ensuring they are prepared for the risks they will inevitably face online. Teaching digital street smarts is as vital as teaching children to look both ways before crossing the street. Honest, ongoing conversations equip your kids with the awareness and life skills to recognize scams, manipulation, and exploitation. Don't leave their safety to chance. Talk to your children about online risks before they encounter them. 🍀

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brad Thorne has more than 25 years of law enforcement experience at the Boise Police Department, where he has served in roles including patrol officer, crime scene investigator, critical incident task force investigator, training officer, acting field commander, and academy instructor. For the past 18 years, he has specialized as a Financial Crimes Detective, leading investigations into cyber-enabled fraud schemes, cryptocurrency crimes, organized retail theft, and transnational criminal networks, resulting in multiple arrests and the recovery of millions of dollars for victims. Through this work, he has become a nationally recognized expert in scams and cyber-enabled financial fraud.

Thorne is a deputized task force officer with the United States Secret Service Mountain West Cyber Fraud Task Force, focusing on domestic and international scam operations, digital payment abuse, and cryptocurrency-based fraud. He has participated in numerous multi-agency investigations, including pig butchering scams, romance fraud, business email compromise, and identity-based crimes.

In addition to investigative work, Thorne is committed to prevention and education. He regularly provides training to law enforcement, financial institutions, and community groups, appears in the media as a subject matter expert, and is a published author. He holds numerous professional certifications, including an Advanced Certificate in Cryptocurrency Investigations, and recently completed a fellowship with TRM Labs. Thorne is an active member of organizations focused on fraud prevention, including the Idaho Scam Jam Alliance, Idaho Financial Investigator Network, the Organized Retail Crime Association of Idaho, the Global Anti-Scam Alliance, a Sextortion Working Group, and the CA Crypto-Coalition.

FIRST JOB, BIG OPPORTUNITY

By Tali Stepp



This is an exciting time for you and your family. Your child is about to embark on their first job, a major milestone in their lives. So congratulations are in order to you and your child. So begins the process of moving from dependence to independence. This is their first introduction to the world of work with its associated responsibilities, expectations, and growth opportunities.

Your child will probably feel some anxiety and nervousness since they do not know what to expect. At the same time, they are excited about this opportunity as it is their first step to independence and the beginning of their work career. These conflicting feelings are very normal.

They will look to you for guidance and support. Drawing from your life and work experiences, you will provide them with valuable input as to what they need to do and what to expect. Most often your advice will revolve around your child being responsible and reliable, demonstrating a positive attitude, forming positive interpersonal relationships, and maintaining a long-term view.

Showing up on time and completing work assignments within the required time frames are a must. It demonstrates responsibility and reliability. Encourage your child to ask questions about workplace rules and policies, as well as those involving particular assignments when they are unclear as to what is expected. By doing so, they will ensure that they abide by the workplace rules and have the necessary information to succeed. Another aspect of demonstrating responsibility is dressing appropriately and keeping non-work related social interactions to a minimum. They should put their phone away during work hours.

On their first day or two on the job they can expect to be given an orientation outlining what is expected of them, as well as the workplace rules and policies that they will need to follow. They will

also be introduced to their co-workers who can be most helpful as they navigate the duties of their job. They can share valuable information about how the workplace functions and the various aspects of their responsibilities.

It is important to encourage your child to maintain a positive attitude. Their first job may not be glamorous or exciting, but it can still provide valuable experience. An open and positive attitude will make them more approachable and will lead to better workplace relationships. It will attract positive attention from their supervisor and colleagues. A positive attitude can also be seen when they show enthusiasm by volunteering for tasks that are beyond their normal duties.

They should be told to always be willing to learn. It demonstrates initiative and will help them succeed in their job. Mistakes happen and when they occur, they should be encouraged to take accountability and seek guidance to ensure that it doesn't happen again.

In the event they encounter a workplace issue, they should be encouraged to seek out their supervisor and communicate their concern. If the issue/concern is not resolved, or the supervisor is the source of the problem, they should be encouraged to seek the guidance of a human resource professional. In the absence of a human resource professional, respected fellow employees may be able to provide sage advice on how to handle the situation.

This may also be a good opportunity to teach them about budgeting. Their first impulse may be to splurge and spend their paychecks, but it is important to instill in them the importance of starting to save a portion of their paycheck. Good financial management skills will serve them well throughout their lives.

Your child should be reminded that their first job may not be the most exciting and not their ultimate career choice. However, it (along with subsequent jobs) will provide them with many valuable life

lessons which will be of benefit for many years to come. It will also give them a better sense as to their interests and strengths which will help guide them as to their future career choices.

If the position is temporary in nature, it is important to remember to find a way (perhaps just a simple e-mail) to thank your supervisor, as well as any other individuals who may have helped provide this experience to your child. A simple thank you will be much appreciated and may open the door to future job opportunities. Of utmost importance, tell them to take advantage of this opportunity and enjoy! 🍀

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tali Stepp spent the majority of her career at the United States Department of Labor serving in various positions related to Human Resources. When she retired, she was serving as the Human Resource Director for the Department's over 18,000 employees nationwide. Following her retirement from the Department of Labor she served as a consultant for the Partnership of Public Service, a non-profit organization committed to attracting the best and brightest individuals to the Federal Government.

Ms. Stepp attended the University of Maryland graduating with a major in Business Administration with an emphasis in Personnel and Labor Relations. She received her law degree from the University of Baltimore.

She is now retired and splits her time between Florida and West Virginia. Ms. Stepp is a Board member of Just for Kids, Inc. in West Virginia and serves as Vice President of her condominium association.

STAYING SAFE TOGETHER: AN INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY AND HOME SECURITY

By Steven Sund and Eric Young



In every discussion we have regarding security awareness and preparedness advice for high-profile individuals and their families, we regularly find that everyone, and not just high-profile individuals, can benefit from the same practical security awareness habits to make their home, family, and daily routines safer.

When family and home security come up, the first question we ask is: Why do you feel increased security is necessary? Nearly every answer points to regular news coverage of security and safety incidents impacting families and homes. The people we speak with want to feel safe, but figuring out how to get there can sometimes feel overwhelming, especially for families, young adults, and children. Through thoughtful planning, simple habits, and shared commitment, families can significantly enhance their security with little or no disruption to their daily lives.

In this article, we offer practical, easy-to-understand steps for families focused on three areas: awareness, preparedness, and communication. These three principles work best when everyone, regardless of age, understands their role, contributes to the security environment, and feels confident, informed, and supported.

Awareness

Being aware of your surroundings is one of the easiest and most effective ways for families to stay safe. Awareness does not mean being anxious, on edge, or hypervigilant. Rather, awareness simply means paying attention to your environment and those around you. Being

aware helps you identify when something does not look or feel right for the situation you are in.

Whether at home, at work, while attending school events, or at public gatherings, implementing small, easily repeatable habits can help you develop your security awareness, including:

- Being mindful of who and what is around you.
- Noticing entrances and exits when you arrive at a new location.
- Avoiding distractions like constant phone use in busy places.

Consistently following awareness habits helps people understand their surroundings and recognize when something feels out of place, enabling them to respond more deliberately and calmly when necessary. When families implement and practice awareness habits together, they become second nature and help build family confidence.

Preparedness

Preparing your family and home for potential safety concerns takes some thoughtful planning, helping you focus your time and energy while encouraging open communication with your family. Otherwise, you may end up doing things without really knowing how they help keep your family safe.

A good place to begin is by assessing your surroundings and identifying potential threats, both natural and man-made, as well as any security gaps or hazards, such as poor exterior lighting or a broken door lock. This mirrors the first step taken by businesses and government

agencies when developing risk mitigation strategies. Defining these risks allows you to prioritize and align your efforts to create a layered security environment that includes good habits, clear routines, and basic tools.

While there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to home security, the goal is to figure out what works best for you and your family. Although professional assessments are an option, you can start by taking a careful look at your own home. A simple, structured review can help you see what’s in good shape, identify any gaps, and decide where improvements may be needed, including:

- Are all doors and windows secure, and how are they secured?
- Is exterior lighting sufficient to deter and detect activity?
- Are there clear and accessible exit routes in an emergency?
- Designating a family “safe room” or exterior meeting location if evacuation is necessary.

Communication

Finally, communication is key! Talking openly about safety and security helps everyone, especially children and teens, feel more prepared and less anxious, especially if they have been involved in the planning process. You might have a great home security plan, but if everyone doesn’t understand it, putting it into action can be difficult. Calmly talking through and practicing simple “what if” scenarios, like using a safe room or leaving the house safely, helps everyone feel confident and prepared, so no one feels alone in a

stressful situation.

When children and teens are included in age-appropriate discussions, they are far more likely to follow, support, and even help reinforce your layered security plan. Such conversations include:

- Why security awareness matters at home and when out in public
- How cybersecurity and limiting information sharing can help protect the family
- What to do if someone enters the home uninvited
- Where to go and who to contact in an emergency

Putting Planning into Practice – and Do I Need a Security System?

Involving everyone in the family in home security is essential. Different perspectives can reveal vulnerabilities that might otherwise be missed. Even more importantly, working together builds awareness, accountability, and a shared commitment to keeping the family safe.

Many families choose to add electronic security features to their home, like 24-hour monitored alarms, video doorbells, motion-activated cameras, and exterior lighting that turns on at dusk. These tools can be helpful, but they should supplement, not replace, basic security practices.

Simple, reliable habits, like locking doors and windows, staying aware of your surroundings, and making sure everyone knows what to do in an emergency, remain the most effective. Combining these habits with security tools, such as an alarm system or a designated “safe room,” can strengthen your home’s protection, but only if everyone understands and uses them consistently.

It is important to note that home security systems can also include your neighbors. Neighbors often notice unusual activity, especially when you are away, and can serve as an extra set of eyes and awareness for your home.

Security in an Increasingly Digital World

A layered security plan is effective only when applied consistently in daily routines, which includes online behaviors. In today’s digital environment, where information is widely accessible, digital practices must be considered an integral part of your overall security strategy. Limiting what others know about your family’s activities adds an important layer of protection. Oversharing personal details online, like photos of your children, your home, or your daily routines, can unintentionally create vulnerabilities and signal when your home may be unoccupied or who might be perceived as an “easy” target.

For example, consider:

- Limiting the amount of information shared publicly, keeping home details private
- Regularly review and update social media privacy settings and change passwords
- Avoiding real-time posts about travel or events
- Securing home internet access and updating security software regularly

It is especially important to be thoughtful when sharing photos, schedules, school information, and travel plans. One of the simplest and most effective ways to reduce risk is to wait to post until after returning home.

In addition, use caution with location sharing and geotagging. The information generated through these features can allow others to develop insight into your routines, movements, and potential vulnerabilities over time.

Ultimately, the guiding principle is simple: be selective about what

you share, and when you share it. Individuals with malicious intent routinely use publicly available information to build detailed profiles and carry out targeted social engineering or spear-phishing attacks.

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to home security. The goal is to create a plan that fits your family’s unique situation. At its heart, an effective home safety strategy is a team effort, layering good habits, clear routines, and practical tools to build a safer, more resilient environment. As we’ve outlined, awareness, preparedness, and open communication form the foundation of effective home and family security. Whether you’re just starting to think about protecting your family or have been doing so for years, these principles remain constant. ♥

If you have questions or would like more information and resources, we invite you to visit us at www.soterient.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Steven Sund

Steven Sund brings over 35 years of law enforcement and executive security leadership, specializing in crisis response, executive protection, and large-scale security operations, including National Special Security Events in Washington, D.C. A best-selling author, lecturer, and regular media contributor on national security.



Eric Young

Eric is a retired Army officer and attorney with over thirty years of leadership, national security, and risk management experience, including serving as a senior advisor supporting diverse conflict, post-conflict, and humanitarian operations and activities worldwide.

Together, Steven and Eric lead [SOTERIENT](http://www.soterient.com), a trusted security advisory and risk management firm with deep experience operating in the complex security environment of the nation’s capital.

How The Invictus Project

Supports Investigators and Equips Communities to Protect Children

By Whitney Miller

The message appeared like thousands of other investigators see every year. A simple greeting sent through a gaming platform. Friendly. Casual. Unremarkable. Except the person sending it wasn't another kid.

Behind the screen was an adult man posing as a teenager, slowly building a conversation with someone he believed was a child. Conversations like this are the starting point for many of the cases Internet Crimes Against Children investigators handle every day. Most parents never see these messages. But investigators do. And the number of them keeps growing.

Across the country, Law Enforcement personnel investigating Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) cases are confronting a growing reality: the sheer number of individuals attempting to exploit children online continues to rise. Many of them show up in the very places children spend their time, such as on gaming platforms, social media apps, and messaging services that often feel safe to both kids and parents.

These digital spaces were built for connection and creativity. But predators know children gather there, often unsupervised and eager to engage. For investigators working these cases, the volume of reports and digital leads are absolutely staggering.

Each report can represent dozens of potential victims. Each conversation may involve weeks or months of grooming behavior designed to gain a child's trust. And every investigation carries the weight of knowing a real child is on the other end of that interaction.

Yet the officers tasked with protecting children from these crimes are often doing so with limited manpower and resources. The scale of the problem has grown faster than many investigative units were built to handle.

That gap between the number of predators operating online and the resources investigators have to pursue them is what led to the creation of The Invictus Project.

Born from the needs of investigators

The Invictus Project began with a simple realization: the investigators already fighting these crimes needed support.

Law enforcement officers working child exploitation cases consistently described the same challenge. They were seeing more predators, more reports, and more digital evidence than their units were equipped



to manage. Cases require time, technology, and personnel - all of which are often in short supply. The mission of The Invictus Project grew directly from that need: to partner with law enforcement to combat the trafficking and exploitation of children through educating the community, advocating for the victim, and equipping Local, State, and Federal Law Enforcement partners.

Rather than replacing the work of law enforcement, the organization exists to strengthen it; helping investigators access the resources and support needed to pursue these cases effectively.

Out of this partnership grew the Invictus Task Force, a collaborative effort that brings together investigators from the Randolph, Alamance, Davidson, and Forsyth County sheriff's offices alongside Homeland Security Investigations and the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation.

Through this coordinated effort, investigators focus their work on identifying predators, locating victims, and building cases against those targeting children online.

From investigations to education

Investigators working these crimes see patterns long before the public hears about them. They see

how predators initiate contact. They see the platforms where those conversations begin. They see the grooming tactics used to slowly gain a child's trust. The Invictus Project helps translate those frontline observations into community education.

Instead of waiting for national reports or federal statistics to filter down years later, the organization shares what investigators are seeing now with parents, schools, and communities through presentations and events. Families learn how predators build trust with children. Teens learn how manipulation often begins with attention and conversation. Parents learn the warning signs that often appear long before exploitation escalates. Education becomes proactive rather than reactive.

Listening to teens

One of the most important tools shaping this work is something surprisingly simple: listening. Through anonymous teen surveys conducted during school presentations and community events, The Invictus Project provides students with a safe, confidential space to speak honestly. And they are doing exactly that.

Students describe the pressures they feel online.



They talk about strangers initiating conversations through gaming platforms. Some share that they have encountered sexualized content far earlier than adults might expect. What teens are reporting frequently mirrors what investigators are seeing in active cases.

In many ways, their voices are confirming what law enforcement has been warning about for years: exploitation is reaching children earlier and more frequently than most adults realize. These insights help shape the conversations we have with parents and communities. Instead of speaking from assumption, we can address the digital environment teens are actually navigating.

We are encouraged by the students' response and look forward to sharing more insights from these surveys in future articles. Their voices are helping shape a clearer understanding of the challenges young people face online. Those insights also remind us of something important: before we send our children out into the digital world on their own, we have a responsibility to prepare them for the road ahead.

Giving Our Kids the Tools Before the Keys

As a mom and someone who works closely with investigators in this field, I am often asked the same question by parents after they hear about the realities of online exploitation: Should we be afraid of the digital world our children are growing up in? The way I think about it is a little different.

When I was learning to drive, my dad insisted that before I could get behind the wheel on my own, I needed to know a few things first. Not just how to steer or stop, but how to change a tire, how to check the oil, how to handle a few basic problems that might happen on the road. At the time, it felt unnecessary. If something went wrong, I could always just call him. But that wasn't the point.

My dad knew there might be a moment when he couldn't get there fast enough. He wanted me to have the knowledge and confidence to handle a situation on my own if I needed to. He was preparing me for the road long before he ever handed me the keys. And in many ways, raising children in a digital world is not all that different.

There will come a time when our children are navigating online spaces without us sitting beside them. The goal isn't to keep them from ever stepping onto that road. The goal is to make sure we have prepared them for it.

That preparation means telling them the truth about the world they are entering. It means talking through real-life scenarios. It means helping them recognize manipulation, understand boundaries, and know when something isn't right. It also means building relationships strong enough that when something does happen, they know exactly who to call.

Because just like I did when I was learning to drive, our kids will still call home. Preparedness isn't about assuming the worst. It's about making sure our children are equipped before they head out on their own. When parents stay engaged, when communities stand beside investigators, and when honest conversations replace silence, the balance begins to shift.

And somewhere tonight, another simple greeting will appear on a child's screen. The question is whether we have given our children the tools before handing them the keys to the digital road they're about to travel. 🍷

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Whitney Miller serves as Vice President of Development for The Invictus Project, where she works to equip communities and support law enforcement in protecting children from exploitation and trafficking. Her work focuses on education, prevention, and building strategic partnerships that strengthen proactive efforts to combat child exploitation.

Before joining The Invictus Project, Whitney served as Chief Engagement Officer for an international counter-trafficking organization. Today she regularly speaks to parents, churches, schools, and community leaders about online safety, grooming tactics, and the realities of exploitation in the digital age.

Through her work, Whitney advocates for a balanced approach to child safety — one that replaces fear with awareness, equips families with practical tools, and strengthens the partnership between communities and the investigators working to protect the most vulnerable.

Engineering for Success!

How to prepare young women for a career in Engineering

By Roshni Sherbondy

Looking back, I realize I walked into this field knowing almost nothing about its reality. While there are tools to prepare women engineers, I still see young women making similar missteps I made 30 years ago. To keep this grounded, my daughter—a recent engineering graduate—helped me edit this article for modern relevancy.

In high school, I was one of the top in my class, took AP courses, and had supportive parents. To be honest, I was cocky. I thought I had all the tools. If your high school teachers are "hard" because they're prepping you for university, believe them—and know those classes are only half as hard as in university. When I thought it couldn't get any tougher than studying for the degree, the professional world proved more demanding. In both spaces, you will face:

The Ratio Shock: The lopsided male-to-female ratio starts in the classroom and continues at work. In my entire career, only one company I worked for had a healthy balance. While percentages are improving, women still only earn 20% of engineering bachelor's degrees, dropping to 15-17%^[1] in electrical and mechanical engineering disciplines.

Unwanted Attention: You may face everything from being teased for being "different" to toxic masculinity and harassment.

The Learning Curve: Most of us enter the field focused on cool outcomes—rockets, bridges, buildings—but we don't know what an engineer does all day. They sell, test, do quality control, build, install, and support the installed product and troubleshoot. They decide what products should and shouldn't do. They price the product and know their competition. Some of us work on part of the lifecycle and some of us work on the entire lifecycle.

And we face this all while learning how to "adult" and figuring out your technical identity.

What I found is that preparedness is key to managing my success through any quagmire. Here are some tools that I still find helpful.

- **Accept the Ratio Early:** I didn't notice the gap in high school because my social circle was diverse. And today many teenagers take AP classes so the ratio is not as it once was. However, it was immediately clear to me in college; I was often one or two women out of 50 in an engineering class, and it didn't significantly change when I made it to the workplace. Don't let the "shock factor" of being the only woman in the room rattle you. Get used to it in college because it's a preview of the office.
- **Fake It 'til You Make It:** I'm sure you've heard

this "trick" before. Imposter syndrome is incredibly real. Even with the confidence my teachers and parents instilled in me, I had to "fake it" many times. It feels uncomfortable at first, but push through and eventually the confidence becomes real. Know that successful people use this tool often.

- **Control the Chaos with Planning:** Plan your classes for the entire year – I planned my entire 4 years. If you have to drop a difficult course, you need to know exactly how it impacts your timeline and how to fit it back in. Often your university will give you a set plan with classes outlined by semester; however, you also need to plan your engineering and general electives. And if you decide to drop a prerequisite course, this will impact the timeline of taking other courses. Advisors are helpful, but making yourself the architect of your own academic plan will give you confidence in making adjustments.
- **Find Your Outlets:** Your brain will be starved for social interaction. Join a gaming club, go out with friends, and do something that has nothing to do with "work work."
- **Research the Full Lifecycle:** Engineering isn't just design or sales. It's supply chain, testing, requirements analysis, and return on investment



(ROI). Understanding the whole lifecycle makes you a better collaborator in the workplace. And as a successful and confident woman you will have options, and understanding the lifecycle and associated roles will help you better understand yourself which will help you navigate your career path. You can research the lifecycle of a product and associated roles on-line, and your Economics and engineering electives will have these practical nuggets of information that you can apply in the workplace.

- **Be comfortable saying no:** If you grew up in a culture where saying "no" was discouraged, you have to fight that instinct. If something doesn't feel right—whether it's a technical decision or the way you're being treated—say something. There are rules in place now to protect those who speak up, largely because companies realize that if you're uncomfortable, you won't produce your best work. It is always better to seek coaching or resolution than to suffer in silence.
- **Get a mentor, preferably a woman:** These relationships are similar to friendships; they thrive on shared personality, common interests and goals. At college you may find a mentor in your TA or advisor or professor – we all have a favorite that helped us learn a topic that much easier. In your career it will be a boss or boss's boss or a peer. You don't need to ask "will you be my mentor"; just asking questions and keeping in touch establishes the bond. And over time you'll have a group of folks who support you, and you will support them as well.
- If you grind it out and reach the other side, the work is incredibly rewarding.

Engineers create and improve lives. Whether you are in manufacturing, service, or testing, you are part of a lifecycle that builds solutions that make the world safer, more productive and/or enjoyable. Beyond the professional satisfaction, I haven't met an engineer yet whose lifestyle wasn't significantly improved by their career choice. Preparing for the hard times doesn't make them vanish, but it gives you solace. When you know what's coming, you can count on your strength, address the challenges more efficiently, and feel a deep, earned confidence in yourself. ♥

[1] <https://swe.org/research/2026/us-degree-attainment/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Roshni Sherbondy

Roshni Sherbondy is a results-driven technology executive with expertise in propelling growth for enterprise and government technology portfolios. Drawing on foundational experience from the Department of Homeland Security, Roshni specializes in driving digital transformation, from launching integrated AI-ready platforms to establishing new market revenue streams for emerging technologies.

Roshni is recognized for translating complex technical roadmaps into sustainable business outcomes, advising executive leadership on investment strategies, and scaling global, high-stakes initiatives.



Tara Sherbondy

Tara Sherbondy is a Penn State University Chemical Engineering graduate.

Her experience includes research internships with the U.S. Army Research Laboratory and research at Penn State.

AN UNLIKELY NEW BEST FRIEND AND ADVOCATE

by Matteo Trucco, M.D



I am arguably one of the last people you want to meet in a hospital. I am a Pediatric Oncologist; I take care of children with cancer. If I'm walking into your room, someone is at least concerned that a cancer might be a cause for any symptoms your child is experiencing. How do you even begin to prepare for that kind of shock?

The severity of a diagnosis of cancer in children overshadows its frequency. The reality is that there are about 15,000 to 16,000 children (0-18 years old) diagnosed with cancer every year in the United States. Considering there are over 70 million children in the United States, cancer in children is, fortunately, extremely rare. For context, there are over 360,000 cases of breast cancer, 320,000 of prostate cancer, and 200,000 of lung cancer diagnosed in adults every year in the United States. While a list of unpleasant diagnoses flashes in my mind every time my kids say "My belly hurts!" it's exponentially more likely that they just need to poop than have cancer.

It is also worth noting that the term "childhood cancer" is misleading. There is not one childhood cancer but over 100 different cancers that children can get. No matter how rare, though, these diagnoses are devastating to both the child and the family, and cancer remains the leading medical cause of death in children. Each cancer is unique, so it is unlikely that there will be a single cure for childhood cancer. Support for research into the various cancers that can affect children is sorely needed, as only 4% of all federal funding for cancer research goes towards childhood cancers. Thanks to research, however, there have been significant advances in the treatment of all cancers and while some are considered universally curable and others have no effective treatments, we cure over 85% of children diagnosed with cancer.

So how can parents prepare for something this rare and life-altering? While I will leave it to the readers to determine how much time and attention to dedicate to something this rare, the truth is, I am not really sure one can prepare for something like this. In contrast to many adult cancers that may be influenced by "healthy choices", we don't have a great understanding of what causes the cancers we see in children. Use sunscreen to avoid skin cancer; don't smoke to avoid lung cancer, etc.

With kids though, essentially, they haven't been around long enough or done enough damage to their bodies to cause any particular type of cancer in these common ways. For lack of a better explanation, childhood cancer is bad luck. Mind you, healthy choices help reduce the chances of a host of maladies and several adult cancers, but we don't really know why some kids get cancer.

The early symptoms of most cancers are quite vague and very common: pain, fever, feeling tired, bruises, a lump. Can you remember the last time your children didn't have one of these? Usually, the cause of these symptoms is just "a virus", "growing pains" or "kids being kids." Keeping track of these symptoms, seeing a pediatrician, following their recommendations and following up with the pediatrician — ideally the





same one, if things don't get better in a couple weeks, is key to sorting through the common, "no big deal" self-resolving things that all children get and something more serious that warrants being referred to a specialist like a Pediatric Oncologist.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of having a medical team you trust, that knows your child, and with whom you can partner to do what is best for your children. One that doesn't overreact or under-react. As with every profession, there are ranges of skills and styles among physicians, and finding the right fit for you and your family is key. Try as best as possible to avoid using "Doctor Google" or "Doctor ChatGP." It will drive you nuts and is potentially dangerous. Medicine is starting to integrate artificial intelligence, but we simply aren't at a point where AI can reliably navigate itself without physician involvement. The exact same condition and symptoms, worded just slightly differently in an AI engine, can yield polar-opposite recommendations that can be extremely dangerous, whether inappropriately reassuring you or needlessly terrifying.

This gets to, perhaps, the best we can do to try to "prepare" mentally for any such major medical event as a child being diagnosed with cancer.

As parents and individuals, we need to figure out how to work within the medical system. The medical system is absolutely flawed, but it is what we have. A diagnosis like cancer will shake even the most resourceful and resolute among us. It feels like stepping into another dimension. Your entire world gets flipped upside-down. You learn about things you had no clue existed, and you become inundated with information of varying quality from the medical team, well-meaning family and friends, and your own attempts to make sense of it all. Clear and honest communication with and from your medical team will be essential.

When to stay close to home versus seeking second opinions or go with standard therapy versus a clinical trial are all things that are unique to each patient and can't be determined ahead of time but are the sorts of things your medical team will help guide you through.

Children's cancer is the kind of thing nobody wants to think about, and realistically, it is rare and there isn't much that we know can be done to prevent or prepare for it, but know that there are people out there that have dedicated their lives to helping children and families navigate this journey nobody wants to take. 🍀

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Matteo Trucco is Pediatric Oncologist at the Cleveland Clinic where he focuses on the care of children with sarcomas and other rare tumors and directs the Children's Cancer Innovative Therapy Program seeking to develop better and less toxic treatments for children with cancer.

Dr. Trucco completed his undergraduate training at the University of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in Biology and Philosophy of Science. He graduated from Temple University School of Medicine, completed his Pediatrics Internship and Residency at Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital and completed his Pediatric Hematology/Oncology fellowship at Johns Hopkins Hospital and the National Cancer Institute.

RAISING CHILDREN IN AN AGE OF CONFLICT

By: Daniel O'Connor

Every generation of parents faces the same quiet dilemma: how much of the world's harshness should children see, and when?

In the early years of the twenty-first century, that question has become more complicated. Children born since 2001 have lived their entire lives with the background noise of conflict. They have grown up hearing about terrorism, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, conflict in the Middle East, cyber warfare, and rising geopolitical competition between major powers. War is never far from the headlines, and images of violence travel instantly across screens that sit in our pockets and living rooms.

Many parents instinctively want to shield children from those realities. It is an understandable impulse. But complete avoidance is neither possible nor healthy. Children see fragments of the world whether adults explain it or not. They overhear conversations. They encounter political anger and commentary online. Without those parental guardrails and guidance, they can self-assemble their own incomplete explanations from incomplete information.

The responsibility of parenting today is not to hide reality from children. It is to build children capable of inhabiting it. That requires, first, perspective. The last twenty-five years have certainly been turbulent. Terrorism reshaped security policy around the world. Regional wars have persisted. Political divisions have intensified in many democracies. Rapid technological change has created new forms of conflict, from cyber operations to information warfare. But compared to the first half of the twentieth century, the modern era has been remarkably stable.

Between 1914 and 1945 the world experienced two catastrophic world wars, the collapse of empires, the Great Depression, the rise of fascist and totalitarian regimes, and the systematic destruction of entire cities. Tens of millions of people died. Civilian populations endured bombing campaigns, rationing, occupation, and displacement. Children across Europe and Asia grew up with air-raid sirens, food shortages, and uncertainty about whether their families would survive the next year.

Even in the decades that followed, the Cold War carried the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. American schoolchildren practiced duck-and-cover drills beneath their desks. Families built



fallout shelters. Entire generations lived with the knowledge that global war could erupt in minutes. The difference is not that conflict has disappeared. It is that most Americans now experience it as information rather than survival.

By comparison, most children growing up in the United States today live within a far more secure environment. They have access to education, health care, stable institutions, and unprecedented levels of safety and opportunity. Recognizing that reality does not dismiss modern challenges. It simply restores historical proportion.

Children are capable of understanding that the world is complicated without believing it is collapsing.

Children tolerate difficult truths better than unexplained fear. Remember, children's first heroes and role models are their parents. When adults avoid difficult subjects entirely, children interpret the signals on their own. A quiet conversation about global events is often far more reassuring than silence. The goal is not to burden children with the full weight of geopolitical complexity. The goal is to give them enough reality to build against.

That building should be deliberate and staged. Young children do not need graphic descriptions of war, but they can understand that disagreements between countries sometimes escalate into conflict, just as disagreements between people sometimes do. They can learn that societies work to prevent those conflicts through diplomacy, laws, and cooperation.

Pre-adolescents can begin learning about nations, borders, alliances, and the basic structure of government. Teenagers are capable of far more sophisticated conversations about the economic,

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.

political, and cultural forces that drive conflict, and about propaganda, misinformation, and competing national interests. At this stage the conversation becomes less about explanation and more about deliberation. Teenagers benefit from being encouraged to test ideas, not simply receive them. That developmental arc has a destination: civic literacy.

War and politics are not distant abstractions. They are the result of human decisions made within institutions. Democracies function only when citizens understand those institutions and participate in them responsibly. Children should grow up knowing how governments function, why laws exist, and why civic participation matters. They should understand that military service and public service carry real sacrifices. They should learn that freedom and stability do not maintain themselves automatically.

This is not political indoctrination. It is the foundational knowledge of self-governance.

It belongs in the classroom as much as in the home. Teachers occupy a distinct position in this work. Parents provide love and context. Schools provide deliberation. The classroom is where children first encounter people who do not share their assumptions. A teacher who trains students to interrogate sources, examine competing perspectives, and reach reasoned conclusions provides a form of civic preparation that no algorithm can replicate.

That responsibility matters because the modern information environment has raised the stakes considerably. Previous generations encountered global events primarily through newspapers and evening broadcasts, filtered through whatever editorial judgment those institutions applied. Today children encounter them through algorithms designed to maximize emotional engagement.

Teaching children to "see" that landscape, question it, and trying to make sense of it may be one of the most important responsibilities parents and teachers now carry. Critical thinking begins with simple habits. Asking where information comes from, what evidence supports it, and whether other perspectives exist turns passive consumption into active evaluation.

There is also a harder truth that deserves direct acknowledgment. Modern prosperity has produced remarkable benefits, but it has also systematically removed the low-grade friction through which resilience develops.

Children who grow up without encountering manageable difficulty, setback, boredom, failure, or sustained effort with uncertain outcomes do not develop the cognitive and emotional architecture required to handle serious difficulty.

Comfort is not neutral.

When it becomes the dominant condition of childhood, it quietly narrows the range of what a child believes they can endure. Preparing children for adulthood therefore requires more than protection from serious harm. It requires deliberate exposure to the minor stresses through which character develops: responsibility that can fail, effort that is not guaranteed to succeed, and consequences that are real.

The world they will inherit is not going to simplify. Equipping them for friction is not optional. The goal is not to raise children who fear the world. It is to raise children who are adequate to it. Human history has always included conflict, competition, and uncertainty. What has allowed societies to endure through those cycles is the development of citizens capable of thinking clearly, participating responsibly, and maintaining judgment under pressure.

That capacity is not inherited. It is built through conversation, through practice, and through being trusted with enough reality to grow against. The next generation faces similar and at the same time unprecedented external overload. Parents cannot control the geopolitical conditions their children will inherit. But they can ensure those children arrive at adulthood with the tools to navigate them. That is not a quiet responsibility; it is the central one. 🍀

HOW AN ILLICIT GLOBAL SYSTEM IS FUELING A YOUTH CRISIS

By Ray Gudetti



If you have ever watched *Breaking Bad*, you know the moment that Walter White realizes he's no longer operating on the margins. What began as a desperate, contained decision has expanded into something much more industrial, an enterprise with supply chains, distribution networks, and consequences far beyond his control.

For many American parents, that same realization is happening now.

In 2024, it was reported that more than 1.6 million U.S. youth vaped.[1] What was once dismissed as a "school hallway problem," a few kids sneaking into bathrooms between classes to vape, has widened into something far more complex.

Behind the lockers and disciplinary reports sits a multi-billion-dollar global system, one that produces, distributes, and markets addictive products with remarkable efficiency.

This is no longer just about teenage risk-taking. It is about infrastructure.

The shift becomes undeniable in moments that feel almost surreal. In one widely reported case from Wisconsin, a special-needs five-year-old in a dinosaur T-shirt was forced by older students to inhale from a vape device.[2] It is the kind of moment that reframes everything. A sudden recognition that what seemed isolated is anything but.

The Global Engine Behind the Devices

At the center of this system is a manufacturing hub thousands of miles away in Shenzhen, China, often referred to as "Vape Valley." [3] The vast majority of the world's illicit disposable vaping devices originate here, produced at extraordinary speed and scale.

What makes this dynamic striking is the contrast in domestic versus export policy. Within China, flavored and high nicotine vape products face strict limits. Yet those same categories are produced for export in massive quantities, flowing into markets like the United States through a mix of legal gray areas and outright illicit channels.

The result is a steady stream of devices entering the U.S., often mislabeled, rerouted through intermediaries, and distributed

through networks that are difficult to track and even harder to shut down. Enforcement agencies seize millions of units each year, but the volume continues to grow.

Designed for Efficiency and Dependence

While vape technology was intended as an off-ramp for those addicted to cigarette smoking it has evolved far beyond its early iterations. One of the most significant developments is nicotine salt formulation, which allows high concentrations of nicotine to be delivered rapidly and smoothly.

Unlike traditional cigarettes, which produce a harsh throat sensation that can act as a natural limiter, these newer devices reduce that friction. The experience becomes easier, faster, and, for inexperienced youth users, deceptively manageable.

But the numbers tell a different story.

Vape devices contain nicotine levels comparable to multiple packs of cigarettes. However, the larger, illicit high-capacity devices can deliver dramatically more. For adolescents, whose brains are still developing and are particularly sensitive to dopamine stimulation, this creates a powerful feedback loop. The product is no longer just an alternative to smoking; it has become an illicit optimized delivery system to kids.

Disguised in Plain Sight

While the chemistry has advanced, so has the secretive designs. Today's illicit vape devices are often engineered to evade detection as much as they are to deliver nicotine. They are built to resemble everyday objects that kids possess, such as highlighters, USB drives, hoodie drawstrings, even smartwatch accessories. Some incorporate screens, games, and Bluetooth connectivity, blending seamlessly into the digital environments young users already inhabit.

Parents have to recognize; this is not accidental. It is strategic on behalf of those that benefit from kids being addicted to illicit vapes.

By transforming a nicotine device into something that looks and feels like a toy or gadget, and even mirrors sweet shop imagery, the barrier be-

tween experimentation and regular use is lowered. What might once have been hidden behavior becomes drastically normalized, even gamified.

In this environment, parent and teacher supervision becomes harder, and early exposure becomes easier.

Real-World Consequences

The risks are no longer theoretical. Across the country, cases continue to emerge that highlight the physical toll of these illicit products born from unregulated markets. Some involve long-term respiratory damage linked to chemical exposure. Others involve device malfunctions, including battery explosions that cause severe injuries.

These incidents underscore a critical distinction: while vaping itself carries risks, the most severe outcomes are frequently associated with products that exist outside regulatory oversight. In other words, the danger is not just the habit, it is the system supplying it.

The Final Link: Organized Distribution

At the far end of the pipeline, distribution networks take over. Law enforcement agencies have documented connections between illicit vape trafficking and broader criminal operations. In some cases, the same routes used to move narcotics are also used to transport large quantities of unauthorized vaping devices.

A recent seizure along the southern U.S. border revealed shipments containing both drugs and millions of vape units, stacked together and moved through sophisticated smuggling infrastructure. [4]

What begins as a consumer product ends as part of a larger ecosystem, one that blurs the line between public health issues and criminal enterprise. The numbers reflect the scale of the shift. While the Federal Drug Administration has only authorized 41 vaping products in the United States for legal sale,[5] the overwhelming majority of vape devices being sold on shelves fall outside that legal framework.[6]

This is no longer a fringe issue. It is the dominant market.

And yet, much of the conversation remains focused on individual behavior, why kids are vaping, how schools can respond, what parents should watch for. Those questions matter. But they are incomplete. Because behind every device is a supply chain, and behind that supply chain is a system designed to persist.

What We Choose to Confront

What began as an off-ramp tool for adult smokers — thanks to China and criminal cartels — has now evolved into something far more complicated, and, in many ways, more concerning.[7]

A global manufacturing base. A resilient illicit distribution network. Products engineered for ease, concealment, and appeal. And a user base that increasingly includes those a regulated system was never meant to serve.

The question now is not simply how to respond at the margins. It is whether to continue treating the visible symptoms, or to confront the structure that produces them. The pipeline is no longer hidden. The only question is what we do now to ensure that parents and teachers can see it. 🍷

RESOURCES

[1] Park-Lee, E., Jamal, A., Cowan, H., et al. (2024). Notes from the Field: E-Cigarette and nicotine pouch use among middle and high school students — United States, 2024. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 73, 774–778. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7335a3>

[2] TMJ4 News. (2025) A video taken earlier this month showing a K5 student being forced to vape in a school bathroom has been circling throughout Wisconsin...Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=676105871552066>.goog

[3] Ng, Michelle (2026) 'Vape valley': Double standards in China's powering of world's e-cigarette boom, *The Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/vape-valley-double-standards-in-chinas-powering-of-worlds-e-cigarette-boom>.

[ards-in-chinas-powering-of-worlds-e-cigarette-boom](https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/vape-valley-double-standards-in-chinas-powering-of-worlds-e-cigarette-boom).

[4] Mack, Jason. (2025) DEA operations target Laredo vape shops; drugs and deep tunnel found on site, *LMT Online*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/vape-valley-double-standards-in-chinas-powering-of-worlds-e-cigarette-boom>.

[5] U.S. Food & Drug Administration (2025). E-Cigarettes, "Vapes" and Other Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS) Authorized by the FDA. <https://www.fda.gov/tobacco-products/market-and-distribute-tobacco-product/e-cigarettes-vapes-and-other-electronic-nicotine-delivery-systems-ends-authorized-fda>

[6] Truth Initiative (2024) U.S. Retail sales data show 86% of e-cigarette sales are for illegal products. https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/tobacco-industry-marketing/us-retail-sales-data-show-86-e-cigarette-sales-are?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[7] Rumney, E., Kang, K., and Polansek, T. (2025) How middlemen funnel illegal Chinese vapes into the United States, *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/how-middlemen-funnel-illegal-chinese-vapes-into-united-states-2025-06-23>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ray is an internationally recognized investigative leader, public safety strategist, and co-founder of The RF Factor™, a consulting firm specializing in leadership, risk, training, and investigations. He is a former Police Director and Deputy Superintendent of Investigations for the New Jersey State Police, where he led major criminal investigations, intelligence operations, and statewide public safety initiatives.

He is widely recognized for delivering practical, experience-driven keynotes and executive training that combine operational credibility with compelling storytelling.

Ray is a recipient of the United States Attorney General's Award for Excellence in Furthering National Security and the New Jersey State Police Trooper of the Year Award for his investigative work related to United States v. Zacharias Moussaoui, a landmark terrorism case in which the "20th hijacker" pled guilty to conspiracy in the attacks of September 11, 2001. He was instrumental in developing the New Jersey Regional Operations Intelligence Center and the nationally recognized New Jersey Crime Gun Intelligence Model, and he served on the national Crime Gun Intelligence Governance Board.

With decades of operational experience across local, state, and federal environments, Ray has advised law enforcement agencies, technology companies, and senior public safety executives on topics ranging from crime gun intelligence and investigative leadership to emerging technologies and organizational performance. He has worked closely with partners such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Motorola Solutions, and leading public safety technology firms, contributing to the development of national best practices in investigative operations.

Ray is a former member of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Counter Terrorism Committee and a current member of the IACP Firearms Committee.

Ray is a graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School and holds an additional master's degree from Seton Hall University. He is a former Senior Fellow at Long Island University's Homeland Security Program, a current Fellow at the Center on Shadow Economics, and serves as an Adjunct Professor for Forensic Firearms Investigation at the University of the West Indies.

BUILDING A STABLE FUTURE: WHY SKILLED TRADES ARE BACK IN FOCUS:

AS TECHNOLOGY RESHAPES TRADITIONAL CAREERS, MORE FAMILIES ARE RECONSIDERING WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE AND HOW IT'S BUILT.

By Jackie Giunta

The Path We Thought We Could Trust

TAs a parent, I once believed I understood the safest path forward. Like many families, my instinct was to place my child firmly on track for a four-year college: earn the degree, explore along the way, and emerge with a credential that would open doors. That pathway felt not only familiar, but responsible—an investment in long-term stability and opportunity. For decades, that assumption held. A bachelor's degree reliably signaled access to higher earnings, lower unemployment, and a clearer entry into professional life.

And to be clear, that path still holds real value. Workers with bachelor's degrees continue to earn more on average and experience lower unemployment than those with less education.¹ That reality is part of why so many of us still see college as the safest bet, and why it remains such a powerful default in how we guide our children.

But the closer I analyze the evolving nature of the current job market and considered the type of future my children are stepping into, the more I've realized that the assumptions guiding that decision have not kept pace with the world as it is today.

This is not an argument against college, but an argument against treating it as the default, particularly amid a technological revolution redefining how economies function and how power is distributed globally. In that context, the question shifts. It is no longer simply whether higher education has value, but whether we are aligning our expectations with the kind of workforce the future increasingly demands.

A Narrowing Entry Point

What's shifting isn't always obvious at first glance. It shows up at the very beginning of a career, the moment when young adults are trying to gain traction and direction. Recent data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York suggests that recent college graduates are encountering a more uncertain entry point. As of 2025, unemployment among recent graduates stood at 5.7%, while underemployment reached 42.5%.²

This challenges a long-held assumption: that college provides a clear and reliable runway into meaningful work. Part of that change is technological. Artificial intelligence is not eliminating entire professions overnight, but it is reshaping the nature of early-career work in ways that are easy to overlook. Tasks that once defined entry-level positions—basic analysis, drafting, research, and coordination—are increasingly supported or accelerated by AI systems.³

The impact is subtle but significant. The first rung of the career ladder, where many young adults once learned, made mistakes, and gradually developed expertise, is becoming thinner and more compressed. Opportunities still exist, but they are less forgiving and less clearly structured.

A Workforce Shift Hiding in Plain Sight

Concurrently, an equally important transformation is underway, one that isn't always understood as directly tied to these shifts. Across party lines, the United States has begun reinvesting in domestic manufacturing, infrastructure, and energy systems through legislation such as the CHIPS



and Science Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. These efforts reflect a broader strategic priority: rebuilding domestic capacity and strengthening the workforce required to sustain it.

The scale of this shift is significant. Semiconductor-related investments alone are expected to support more than 115,000 manufacturing and construction jobs.⁴ Infrastructure projects are expanding nationwide, spanning transportation, energy, and critical systems. And importantly, many of these roles do not require a traditional four-year degree.⁵

At the same time, the workforce needed to support these efforts is aging out. Brookings estimates that nearly 17 million workers in infrastructure-related roles may exit the labor force over the next decade due to retirements and occupational shifts.⁶

Taken together, these trends point to something deeper than a changing job market. They reflect a reordering of national priorities around human capital—what skills are needed, where talent is concentrated, and how the workforce is developed, sustained, and replaced over time. The country is rebuilding critical systems while the workforce required to operate them is thinning. This gap is already shaping hiring demand, training pipelines, and the types of careers that are becoming increasingly stable and essential.

Where Opportunity Is Growing

This convergence—technological disruption on one side, workforce demand on the other—creates an opportunity landscape different than one many of us were prepared to navigate. The roles growing in importance don't always look like the careers we were encouraged to pursue. They are found in the systems that keep the country running: energy grids, infrastructure networks, manufacturing floors, and digital-physical environments.

Electricians, engineering technicians, advanced manufacturing operators, cybersecurity specialists, and network professionals sit at the center of this shift. Employment projections reflect this demand. Electricians are expected to grow by 9% over the next decade, with approximately 81,000 openings annually. Information security roles are projected to grow by nearly 30%, reflecting the increasing importance of digital infrastructure and system protection.⁷

Such jobs are evolving alongside technology, often requiring fluency in both digital systems and real-world environments. What distinguishes many of these roles is not that they avoid technology, but that they integrate it in ways that are harder to fully automate.

Research supports this distinction. Brookings has found that a significant majority of infrastructure-related occupations face lower exposure to AI-driven displacement compared to many office-based roles.⁸ In a labor market increasingly shaped by automation, that kind of durability carries real weight, and is a factor that parents must carefully consider.

Rethinking Education Pathways

For years, I viewed trade and technical pathways as alternatives to college, options for students who chose not to pursue a traditional degree. But that framing no longer reflects reality. Today, technical and trade-focused institutions offer associate and bachelor's degrees, stackable credentials, and programs that integrate classroom instruction with hands-on experience. These pathways often allow students to gain real-world exposure earlier, enter the workforce sooner, and in many cases, take on less debt in the process.

More directly aligned with industries facing workforce shortages, trade and technical pathways offer an education model designed to signal knowledge and build capability.

The Cultural Shift Starts at Home

For many parents, adjusting perception is where the hardest shift occurs. For decades, skilled trades and technical careers have been framed as secondary options rather than deliberate choices. That message, even when unintentional, carries weight. Kids pick up on how we talk about success, what we emphasize, what we celebrate, and what we quietly deprioritize.

Those signals shape how they see themselves and their future.

If we continue to present these paths as "less than," our kids will internalize that hierarchy. If we begin to present them as viable, respected, and not just increasingly important, but truly critical to national priorities, that changes the

calculus not just for individual families, but for how the workforce develops over time.

Redefining the Path Forward

I still want the same things for my children that I always have: stability, purpose, and the ability to build a meaningful life with lasting success. What's changed is how I think they might get there. For some, that path will still run through a traditional four-year colleges and universities. Increasingly for others, it may look different—a technical program, an apprenticeship, or a hybrid model that blends education with real-world experience from the start.

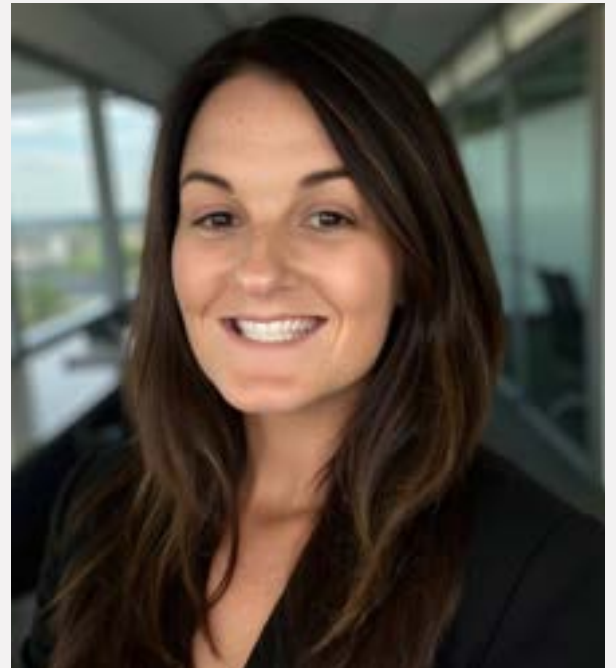
The goal isn't to replace one path with another. It's to recognize that the landscape has changed, and to make sure we're not guiding our children based on assumptions that no longer fully apply.

At a moment when the country is rebuilding its industrial and technological foundations, the future isn't just being shaped in classrooms or offices, it's being built by those prepared to do the work. As parents, we have a role in helping our children see where that work is and what it's worth. 🍀

References:

- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rates and Earnings by Educational Attainment, 2024.
- Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Labor Market for Recent College Graduates, 2025.
- Anthropic, Labor Market Impacts of AI, 2025.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, CHIPS and Science Act Investment Summary, 2024.
- U.S. Department of Transportation, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Workforce Fact Sheet, 2023.
- Brookings Institution, Building a Stronger Infrastructure Workforce, 2024.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2024–2034 projections.
- Brookings Institution, AI Exposure and the Built Environment Workforce, 2024.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jackie Giunta is the founder and CEO of Arcana Innovations and a mom of four based in Massachusetts.

With a background spanning military intelligence, federal law enforcement, and the private sector, she now focuses on building and integrating technology for national security and public safety missions.

AI Caller Scams

By Doug Palmer



The rise of AI voice cloning has given a new twist to an old con: the “grandparent scam” (and it can target anyone). Imagine your phone rings late at night. The voice on the other end sounds exactly like your grandson, your daughter, or even your spouse, panicked and pleading. “Grandma, I’ve been in a car accident. I’m okay, but I need money right now or they’ll arrest me. Please don’t tell Mom. I’m so embarrassed.” Your heart races. You wire funds or buy gift cards before you’ve had a moment to think. Only later do you learn it was fake. The voice was an AI clone, built from a short public clip on social media, or even a voicemail greeting.

This isn’t hypothetical. Cheap, widely available tools make these impersonations convincing enough to fool careful people. Scammers that used to rely on vague accents or a shaky story now lean on something most of us trust by default: the familiar voice of a loved one. As technology gets easier to use, criminals can run this con at scale, making simple verification habits matter more than ever.

How AI voice cloning works

AI voice cloning can be trained using speech from public recordings to synthesize realistic audio. These models analyze patterns in pitch, tone, cadence, accent, and even emotional inflection. Once trained, they generate new, wholly fabricated speech from text scripts, mimicking the original speaker.

Where scammers get the audio

Modern tools require surprisingly little source material, sometimes just a few seconds to a minute of clear audio, to produce a believable clone delivering an urgent message. More samples improve quality, which makes public posts a gold mine for scammers: a quick upload can generate a custom distress call in minutes. Social media videos (TikTok, Instagram, Facebook), YouTube vlogs, podcasts,

interviews, and even voicemail greetings can provide enough raw material. As technology improves, clones increasingly capture natural pauses and urgency, reducing older giveaways like flat intonation or awkward timing.

How the scam unfolds

These scams follow a predictable yet devastating pattern. Scammers harvest audio from online sources—perhaps a grandchild’s Instagram Reel or a family member’s podcast appearance—then use AI tools to generate a cloned voice for a script. Then comes the call, often at odd hours when victims are vulnerable.

The script exploits crisis scenarios: a fake arrest (“I need bail money”), accident (“I’m hurt and the hospital won’t release me without payment”), kidnapping threat, or border/customs issue. Urgency is key. “Don’t tell anyone, they’ll make it worse,” or “I need it now or I’m in danger” all indicate inauthenticity. Emotional levers hit hard: fear for a loved one’s safety, parental/protective instincts, love, and shame. Victims are directed to untraceable payments like gift cards (easy to cash out), cryptocurrencies, or wire transfers.

Caller ID spoofing adds credibility. The number can appear local or familiar, sometimes paired with a known name that matches the voice. Combined with an authentic-sounding clone, the “emergency” can make resistance crumble.

Why it works

These scams succeed because they target core psychology. Familiar voices bypass skepticism, and urgency short-circuits rational thought. Many people still do not realize how convincing cloning can be with minimal source audio, and scammers can scale the tactic cheaply through automation. Improved AI also erases old giveaways such as metallic tone, missing background noise, or unnatural phrasing.

Real-world examples

Real cases highlight the danger. In one Florida incident, a mother sent \$15,000 after hearing her daughter's cloned voice claim distress, only to find her safe all along[1]. An 86-year-old in South Philadelphia lost \$6,000 when scammers impersonated her granddaughter using AI[2]. A man in Los Angeles was swindled out of \$25,000 after fraudsters cloned his son's voice for an "emergency." [3] Similar stories emerge nationwide and internationally, across the US and from overseas, often involving seniors but not exclusively. Even tech-savvy victims fall prey. The emotional pull can override logic and even common sense. There is more at risk than financial loss. The feelings of betrayal and fear can linger and leave lasting trauma.

Red flags to watch for

Watch for red flags. A caller who insists on secrecy ("Don't call police or tell family") is a big one. Details also tend to be vague. There is no specific hospital, agency, or location included. The voice may sound perfect but still feel slightly off, or the audio may be distorted in a way that makes it hard to pin down. Payment requests are another giveaway, especially gift cards, cryptocurrency, or wiring funds. Scammers often resist verification with lines like "I can't talk long" or "I'm being watched," and even caller ID can be spoofed to look familiar.

What to do if you get a call

Protection starts with preparation. Families should establish a secret code word or question only they know for true emergencies. If a call comes claiming a crisis, hang up and call the person back using a number you already have. Do not use the number that called you. Contact another relative to confirm. Call any claimed authorities (hospital, police, court, etc.) using independently verified contact information. Slow everything down; scammers thrive on haste. Never send money based solely on a voice call, email, or text message.

Reduce your exposure

Limit exposure to the extent possible. Tighten social media privacy, avoid posting clear voice clips, and review public videos, podcasts, reels, and similar content. Reducing source material helps, and general awareness makes it easier to slow down and verify a real emergency.

What institutions are doing

Responses to this problem from banks, telecoms, and regulators differ. Detection tools for AI-generated audio have started to emerge that look for AI markers and help as a first line of defense.[1] Caller ID spoofing flags have improved, with some providers blocking suspicious patterns. There are efforts to create stricter voice-cloning regulations and harsher penalties for misuse. [2] Public campaigns target seniors and families, promoting verification habits. Challenges persist. Technology outpaces policy and scam networks operate globally.

Looking ahead

Expect these scams to get more convincing and harder to spot. Real-time, back-and-forth AI calls are already being used, and a familiar voice is no longer reliable proof of who is on the line. Treat every high-pressure request as suspicious until you verify it through a second channel. If someone demands secrecy, money, or immediate action, end the call and call back using a number you trust. The safest default is simple: trust your instincts, but verify.

Bottom line and Checklists

Criminals exploit something we rarely question: the sound of a loved one's voice. The good news is that a few simple habits go a long way. Slow down, verify through a second channel, and don't let secrecy or panic dictate your next step. A real emergency can wait long enough for a quick check.

Protection checklists

Two simple routines can provide significant protection.

First, limit exposure of your voice and the voices of your loved ones:

- Set social accounts to private and limit who can view or download your videos and stories.
- Audit old public posts and delete or hide clips with clear, sustained speech.
- Avoid posting long voice recordings, narrated reels, or public livestreams that capture your natural cadence.
- Ask family members not to tag you in public posts that include your voice.
- Use a generic voicemail greeting that does not include your name or other personal details.
- Be cautious with podcasts, interviews, or public talks that publish isolated, high-quality audio of you.

Second, respond to emergencies in a way that is reasonable and recognizes both the situation that your loved one may be in and the possibility of a scam.

- Set a family code word (or verification question) to use for real emergencies.
- If you get an urgent call, hang up and call the person back using a number you already have.
- Verify the story with another trusted relative before taking any action.
- Call the hospital, police, or other claimed authority directly using independently found contact information.
- Slow the situation down, because urgency and secrecy are common manipulation tactics.
- Never send money or payment codes based only on a voice call, text, or email, especially via gift cards, crypto, or wire transfers. ❤️

RESOURCES

[1] Frontiers in Signal Processing, "Detection of AI-Generated Audio: Speech, Environmental Sound, Music and Beyond", Submissions due 8/13/2026

[2] Jay Koztzer, Managing Partner and CLO Holon Law, "Synthetic Media, Voice Cloning, and the New Right of Publicity Risk Map for 2026", 12/16/2025

About The Author



Douglas Palmer is a subject matter expert on United States Courts operations at General Dynamics Information Technology. He previously served as Clerk of Court for the United States District Court, Eastern District of New York, from 2011 until his retirement in 2022. A graduate of the University of Texas at San Antonio, Douglas began his career with the federal Judiciary in 1992. With primary responsibility for information technology security throughout most of his tenure, he served as the Court's IT Security Officer for more than 20 years, overseeing critical national court systems and protecting the IT security of Judiciary systems, judicial officers and other court personnel.

IF YOUR CHILD GOES MISSING:

WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW AND DO: HAVING A PLAN IN PLACE CAN HELP YOU ACT QUICKLY IF YOUR CHILD EVER GOES MISSING.

by Nina Brooks

Every parent hopes that they will never face the moment when they cannot find their child. Those first few minutes can be confusing and scary. Many immediately run around the house searching nearby areas, calling friends, or checking locations their child frequents. In the midst of panic, it can be hard to know what to do next.

At Search & Support San Antonio, we have worked with families from the San Antonio area who have had loved ones go missing. We have learned that preparation, communication, and early reporting are important steps you can take now to help should your child ever go missing.

Fact #1: You Do Not Have to Wait 24 Hours to Report Your Child Missing

There are many myths about what to do when your child is missing. One of the biggest is that parents should wait 24 hours before reporting their child as missing. This is not true.

If something does not feel right and you cannot locate your child, contact local law enforcement. Investigators can start a missing persons report and begin taking down information right away. Local resources, such as the San Antonio Police Department (SAPD), advise parents to not wait. You should call right away so investigators can act quickly and collect information while it is fresh.

Steps to Take If You Cannot Find Your Child

Before you contact law enforcement there are some immediate steps you should take. Search your home and nearby areas thoroughly. Check closets, under beds, cars, or anywhere a child might try to hide. If your child is on the younger side, check appliances such as ovens and refrigerators. Attempt to call or text your child.

Contact your child's friends, classmates, and their parents to see if they know your child's whereabouts. There is a chance your child intentionally left with someone they know and trust. If someone seems to know something, ask them who they were last with and where they may have gone. If you are unable to locate your child after taking these steps, you should report them missing immediately.

Information You Can Provide to Help Investigators

When you go to file a missing person report, law enforcement will ask you questions to gather information. Here are some things you can prepare ahead of time to help officials quickly file a report.

Be ready to provide:

- * When and where your child was last seen
- * Who they were last seen with
- * A physical description
- * Description of what your child was wearing
- * Medical history
- * Behavioral health concerns or recent issues

Local resources also recommend providing custody information (if applicable) and if there are any known adults that have shown an unusual interest in your child. The better information you can provide, the quicker investigators can respond and take action.

Recent Photos Are More Important Than You Think



Providing law enforcement with a recent photo of your child is crucial. Ensure the photo is:

- Clear
- Recent
- Well lit
- Not heavily filtered

Edit filters can warp facial features and make it difficult for your child to be recognized. Save recent photos on your phone and update every few months. You never know when they may come in handy.

A Tool Parents Can Use to Prepare Now

Did you know there are tools parents can use to prepare now? Child ID kits like the ones provided by Crime Stoppers San Antonio allow parents to store important information about their children in one easy location. Keep this kit at home and only provide it to law enforcement if your child ever becomes missing.

Kid's ID kits include:

- Recent photos
- Fingerprints
- Physical descriptions
- Medical information
- Emergency contacts

These kits can help you prepare now and provide law enforcement with information quickly if your child's ever missing.

The Importance of Talking To Your Children

Don't forget about the power of conversation when preparing for the unexpected.

Kids should know:

- * Their full name and basic information
- * How to reach a parent or trusted adult
- * To check in if their plans change
- * Who considered adults are

Parents should also maintain communication with their children about their online activities. Know who they are talking to and what they are doing online. Sometimes the simplest conversations can prevent small situations from becoming serious.

Support Resources Families Can Turn To

In the event your child does go missing, there are local resources that can help your family. The Bexar County Family Justice Center is a great starting point for families that have experienced a crisis. They provide services such as counseling, advocacy, and safety planning to empower families during traumatic events.

There are also dedicated teams like the SAPD Missing Persons Unit that work to locate missing people and support families during this time. Knowing these resources before you need them can help ensure you don't have to navigate them alone during a crisis.

Don't Forget About Your Community

Community members can also make a big difference if your child is missing. Here at Search & Support San Antonio, we work with families to spread the word about their missing loved ones. We create missing person flyers to help distribute around communities and raise awareness. Our team also provides emotional support to families and guidance on next steps. In some cases, our volunteers will even join in organized search efforts with families or authorities.

While your local authorities will always lead, your community can help spread accurate information and may help develop new leads. Earlier this year, February 2026, we worked with a family whose teen went missing. The teen was located safely after a community search effort narrowed down where they were last seen. Stories like this are just one example of how things can work out when families, investigators, schools, and community members come together.

Stay Prepared and Stay Ready

There is no right or wrong way to prepare for this type of situation. However, having a gameplan can help you stay focused if something happens. Search your home. Contact friends. Call the police. Give them information. It may be simple, but these steps are important.



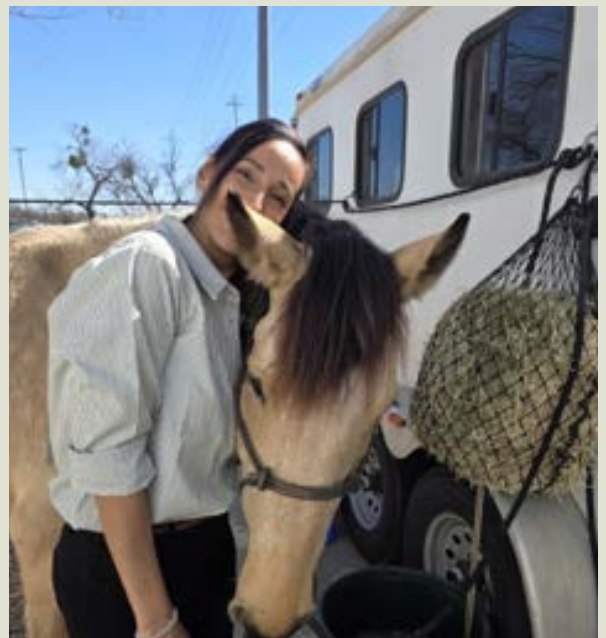
Taking action and staying calm can make a world of difference.

One Last Thing Parents Should Remember

We hope you never have to use this information. But being prepared is one of the best ways to keep your child safe. By knowing what to do and having a plan in place, you can help your local investigators should your child ever go missing. Not only that, but creating a network of people to support you and your family can prevent your situation from becoming isolated.

Here at Search & Support San Antonio, we are always here to help. If you have any questions or need help navigating your situation you can contact us or visit our website at <https://www.sassatx.org/>. Remember you are not alone. And neither are your children. 🐾

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nina Brooks is the founder and president of Search & Support San Antonio, a volunteer-run non-profit organization that serves families of missing persons. We accomplish this by creating community awareness, hosting volunteer searches for our families, and walking them through the missing person process.

We work closely with volunteers, community partners, and local resources to provide families with the tools they need to navigate their missing loved one as well as share tips on preparation and public awareness.

A Primer for Parents

Similarities in Recruitment and Grooming by Pedophiles and Extremists

By Kristina Tanasichuk, Executive Editor, Homeland Security Today and Advisory Board member, The Traverse Project and Mubin Shaikh, Director, NatSec Consulting and Interventionist, Parents for Peace

Introduction

At first glance, pedophilic offenders and radical extremist groups—including terrorist organizations—seem to operate in entirely different worlds. One is driven by sexual exploitation, the other by ideology or political violence. Yet when researchers examine how individuals are drawn in, influenced, and ultimately controlled, clear similarities begin to emerge. Both rely on subtle, psychologically sophisticated methods that exploit vulnerability and gradually reshape a person's thinking and behavior.

As the organization Parents4Peace has noted, parents are often caught unaware and end up learning the hard way in the form of law enforcement showing up at the door. Parents are met with surprise and shock at what their child has been doing. For parents, understanding these parallels is important not to sensationalize them, but to better recognize warning signs and strengthen prevention efforts. The patterns are often less about the end goal and more about the process used to get there.

Targeting Vulnerability

Neither pedophiles nor extremist recruiters typically begin with overt harmful intent. Instead, they start by identifying individuals who are struggling in some way. This might include people who feel isolated, misunderstood, or disconnected from those around them. Adolescents, in particular, can be especially susceptible as they navigate identity, belonging, and emotional development. These recruiters and groomers behave like predators, who lie in wait on social media platforms just as they do in playground areas.

What makes these individuals appealing targets is not weakness in a moral sense, but unmet needs. Recruiters and offenders alike look for emotional openings—loneliness, insecurity, or confusion—and position themselves as someone who understands and can fill that gap. They build their capabilities up through long hours of trial and error and increasingly become more confident in applying their skills.

Building Trust and Emotional Connection

Once contact is established, the next step is almost always relationship-building. In cases of grooming for abuse, this often takes the form of attention, validation, and what appears to be genuine care. The offender may present themselves as a trusted confidant, someone who listens without judgment.

Extremist recruitment follows a similar pattern. Rather than immediately introducing radical beliefs, recruiters often begin by offering a sense of belonging or purpose. They may frame themselves as mentors or guides, gradually earning credibility and emotional trust. In both cases, the relationship comes first. Harmful ideas or behaviors are introduced only after a bond has been established, making the individual more receptive and less likely to question what follows.

Gradual Desensitization

A key feature of both processes is how slowly they escalate. There is rarely a sudden shift from normal interaction to harmful behavior or extreme ideology. Instead, changes happen incrementally. At Parents4Peace, the observation is that this happens often with young people who did not set out to embrace extremist worldviews but arrived there through a series of seemingly minor shifts. What begins as curiosity, frustration, or identity-seeking rarely presents as a red flag at the outset. By the time families reach out, the



pathway has often been paved by dozens of small, normalized steps that, in isolation, appeared insignificant.

In grooming for abuse, boundaries are tested and pushed in small steps, each one normalized before moving further. What might initially feel uncomfortable becomes familiar over time. Similarly, extremist recruitment often begins with mild or ambiguous content—grievances, identity-based narratives, or perceived injustices—before progressing toward more rigid, polarizing, and eventually extreme viewpoints.

This gradual progression reduces resistance, and online ecosystems reinforce this progression, with algorithms and peer validation accelerating the normalization of harmful ideas. Individuals are not typically “pulled” in one decisive moment; rather, they are nudged along through repetition, affirmation, and the gradual erosion of critical thinking. By the time overtly extreme content appears, it no longer feels extreme to the individual, it feels consistent with the worldview they’ve already adopted. By the time the individual recognizes the full extent of what is happening, they may already be deeply involved.

Isolation and “Us vs. Them” Thinking

As the relationship deepens, both types of groomers often work to isolate the individual from outside influences. This does not always happen through direct prohibition; it can be more subtle. Trust in family, friends, or institutions may be undermined, and the individual may be encouraged to keep certain interactions secret.

Over time, this can create a divide between the individual and their existing support system. The groomer or recruiter becomes the primary source of validation and guidance. In extremist contexts, this often evolves into a clear “us versus them” mindset, where outsiders are portrayed as hostile, ignorant, or even dangerous.

The effect is similar in both cases: the individual becomes more dependent and less likely to seek alternative perspectives.

Reshaping Identity

Perhaps one of the most powerful elements of grooming is its impact on identity. In abusive contexts, victims may be made to feel uniquely valued or “special,” creating emotional attachment and confusion that can be difficult to untangle. In extremist recruitment, identity is often reframed more



explicitly. Individuals may be encouraged to see themselves as part of a larger cause, a movement, or a struggle that gives their life meaning.

This shift in self-perception can be profound. It changes not just what a person believes, but who they believe they are. Once identity is tied to the relationship or ideology, disengaging becomes much more difficult. It will require a deep investment in psychoeducation to reverse this process, and one that is not always guaranteed to succeed

The Role of Online Spaces

Modern technology has amplified these dynamics considerably. Online environments make it easier to find and engage with vulnerable individuals, often without geographic limitations. Social media, gaming platforms, and private messaging channels allow for sustained, direct interaction that can accelerate the grooming process.

Algorithms can also play a role, sometimes exposing individuals to increasingly extreme content based on prior engagement. While these systems are not designed with harmful intent, they can inadvertently reinforce the gradual escalation that both types of groomers rely on.

Control and Reinforcement

As involvement deepens, maintaining control becomes a priority. This can take the form of positive reinforcement, such as praise or attention, which encourages continued engagement. It can also involve negative pressure—feelings of guilt, fear, or even threats—that discourage the individual from pulling away.

At this stage, the individual may feel emotionally trapped. The relationship or group may seem like their only source of understanding or belonging, even if it is also the source of harm. Particularly relevant for youth, is how that fear of exposure to peers and parents, may accelerate the cycle of behavior.

Early Warning Signs for Parents and Caregivers

For parents, caregivers, and educators, the challenge is that grooming rarely looks dramatic at first. It often appears as subtle shifts in behavior, mood, or habits. However, there are patterns that, when viewed together, can signal that something deeper may be happening. It is imperative for parents to seek out professionals who work in this space, in order to be forewarned and ideally, be

able to start reacting in a responsible manner.

Changes in Communication

One of the earliest signs is a noticeable change in communication. A child or teenager who was previously open may become unusually secretive, especially about their online activity. They might guard their devices closely, switch screens quickly, or become defensive when asked simple questions about who they are talking to.

Emotional Changes

Emotional changes can also be telling. This might include sudden withdrawal from family or longtime friends, increased irritability, or an intense attachment to a new person or group that seems to have appeared quickly. In some cases, the young person may begin to express that others “don’t understand them,” while elevating this new connection as uniquely supportive.

Shifts in Language, Belief System

Parents may also notice shifts in language or beliefs. In cases of extremist grooming, this could show up as increasingly rigid or polarized thinking, strong “us versus them” statements, or the adoption of new phrases, symbols, or viewpoints that seem out of character. In abusive grooming contexts, the changes may be more relational—overly mature conversations, secrecy around a specific individual, or unexplained gifts, attention, or communication.

Isolating Behavior

Another important sign is isolation. If a young person begins distancing themselves from activities they once enjoyed, or if they are encouraged—directly or indirectly—to keep parts of their life hidden, it can indicate growing dependence on an outside influence.

None of these signs alone necessarily mean something harmful is happening. Adolescence naturally involves change and boundary-testing. However, when multiple signs appear together, especially alongside secrecy and sudden new influences, they warrant gentle attention and open conversation rather than confrontation.

What to Do If You Notice These Signs

If you begin to notice some of these patterns, the most important first step is to stay calm and avoid reacting with alarm or accusation. Confrontation—especially if it feels like interrogation—can push a young person further into secrecy or deeper toward the outside influence.

Keep Communication Open

Instead, focus on keeping communication open. Create space for conversation without pressure, asking questions from a place of curiosity rather than suspicion. Phrases like “I’ve noticed you seem a bit more withdrawn lately—how are you doing?” can be far more effective than direct accusations. The goal is to keep the relationship strong so that the young person still feels safe coming to you.

Re-establish Connection and Interaction

It’s also important to gently re-establish connections. Encourage involvement in trusted activities, friendships, and family interactions without forcing them. Strengthening positive support networks can help counter-balance the isolation that grooming often creates.

Address Online Activity

When it comes to online activity, a balanced approach works best. Rather than sudden surveillance or punishment, consider setting clear, age-appropriate boundaries and discussing online safety openly. In some

cases, increased supervision may be necessary, but it should be framed as protection rather than control.

Seek Outside Support

If concerns persist or escalate, seeking outside support can be an important step. School counselors, mental health professionals, or community resources can provide guidance and help assess the situation more clearly. In cases where there is a risk of exploitation or harm, reporting concerns to appropriate authorities may be necessary.

Above all, maintaining trust is key. The stronger and more supportive the relationship between caregiver and child, the more likely it is that early intervention will be effective.

Conclusion

While the goals of pedophilic offenders and extremist groups differ significantly, the methods they use to recruit and groom individuals share striking similarities. Both rely on identifying vulnerability, building trust, gradually shifting boundaries or beliefs, and reshaping identity in ways that deepen dependence. Again, this is predatory behaviour that needs to be understood before it can be countered.

Recognizing these patterns is critical for prevention. When these dynamics are understood, it becomes easier to identify early warning signs and intervene before harm escalates. Ultimately, awareness is one of the most effective tools for protecting individuals and strengthening resilience against manipulation in all its forms. 🍀

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



From terrorism to the homeland security business enterprise, for over 20 years Kristina Tanasichuk has devoted her career to educating and informing the homeland community to build avenues for collaboration, information sharing, and resilience.

She has worked in homeland security since 2002 and has founded and grown some of the most renowned organizations in the field. Prior to homeland she worked on critical infrastructure for Congress and for municipal governments in the energy sector and public works.

She has 25 years of lobbying and advocacy experience on Capitol Hill on behalf of non-profit associations, government clients, and

coalitions. In 2011, she founded the Government & Services Technology Coalition, a non-profit member organization devoted to the missions of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and all the homeland disciplines.

GTSC focuses on developing and nurturing innovative small and mid-sized companies (up to \$1 billion) working with the Federal government. GTSC’s mission is to increase collaboration, information exchange, and constructive problem solving around the most challenging homeland security issues facing the nation. She acquired Homeland Security Today (www.HSToday.us) in 2017 and has since grown readership to over one million hits per month and launched and expanded a webinar program to law enforcement across the US, Canada, and international partners. Tanasichuk is also the president and founder of Women in Homeland Security, a professional development organization for women in the field of homeland security.

As a first generation Ukrainian, she was thrilled to join the Advisory Board of LABUkraine in 2017. The non-profit initiative builds computer labs for orphanages in Ukraine and in 2018 built the first computer lab near Lviv, Ukraine. At the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, she worked with the organization to pivot and raise money for Ukrainian troop and civilian needs. She made several trips to Krakow, Poland to bring vital supplies like tourniquets and water filters to the front lines, and has since continued fundraising and purchasing drones, communications equipment, and vehicles for the war effort. Most recently she was named as the Lead Advisor to the First US-Ukraine Freedom Summit, a three-day conference and fundraiser to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of Ukrainian war veterans through sports and connection with U.S. veterans.

She served as President and Executive Vice President on the Board of Directors for the InfraGard Nations Capital chapter, a public private partnership with the FBI to protect America’s critical infrastructure for over 8 years. Additionally, she served on the U.S. Coast Guard Board of Mutual Assistance and as a trustee for the U.S. Coast Guard Enlisted Memorial Foundation. She graduated from the Drug Enforcement Agency’s and

the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Citizens' Academies, in addition to the Marine Corps Executive Forum. Prior to founding the Government Technology & Services Coalition she was Vice President of the Homeland Security & Defense Business Council (HSDBC), an organization for the largest corporations in the Federal homeland security market. She was responsible for thought leadership and programs, strategic partnerships, internal and external communications, marketing and public affairs.

She managed the Council's Executive Brief Series and strategic alliances, as well as the organization's Thought Leadership Committee and Board of Advisors. Prior to this, she also founded and served for two years as executive director of the American Security Challenge, an event that awarded monetary and contractual awards in excess of \$3.5 million to emerging security technology firms. She was also the event director for the largest homeland security conference and exposition in the country where she created and managed three Boards of Advisors representing physical and IT security, first responders, Federal, State and local law enforcement, and public health.

She crafted the conference curriculum, evolved their government relations strategy, established all of the strategic partnerships, and managed communications and media relations. Tanasichuk began her career in homeland security shortly after September 11, 2001 while at the American Public Works Association. Her responsibilities built on her deep understanding of critical infrastructure issues and included homeland security and emergency management issues before Congress and the Administration on first responder issues, water, transportation, utility and public building security.

Prior to that she worked on electric utility deregulation and domestic energy issues representing municipal governments and as professional staff for the Chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Energy & Commerce. Tanasichuk has also worked at the American Enterprise Institute, several Washington, D.C. associations representing both the public and private sectors, and the White House under President George H.W. Bush.

Tanasichuk also speaks extensively representing small and mid-sized companies and discussing innovation and work in the Federal market at the IEEE Homeland Security Conference, AFCEA's Homeland Security Conference and Homeland Security Course, ProCM.org, and the Security Industry Association's ISC East and ACT-IAC small business committee.

She has also been featured in CEO Magazine and in MorganFranklin's <http://www.VoicesonValue.com> campaign. She is a graduate of St. Olaf College and earned her Master's in Public Administration from George Mason University. She was honored by the mid-Atlantic INLETS Law Enforcement Training Board with the "Above and Beyond" award in both 2019 – for her support to the homeland security and first responder community for furthering public private partnerships, creating information sharing outlets, and facilitating platforms for strengthening communities – and 2024 – for her work supporting Ukraine in their defense against the Russian invasion.

In 2016 she was selected as AFCEA International's Industry Small Business Person of the Year, in 2015 received the U.S. Treasury, Office of Small Disadvantaged Business Utilization Excellence in Partnership award for "Moving Treasury's Small Business Program Forward," as a National Association of Woman Owned Businesses Distinguished Woman of the Year Finalist, nominated for "Friend of the Entrepreneur" by the Northern Virginia Technology Council, Military Spouse of the Year by the U.S. Coast Guard in 2011, and for a Heroines of Washington DC award in 2014. She is fluent in Ukrainian.



Mubin Shaikh was born and raised in Canada but a chance encounter with the Taliban in Quetta in 1995 would eventually push him to become a supporter of the Jihadi culture throughout his 20's. This continued until the attacks of 9/11, which forced him to re-examine his religious views. Having been raised in an actively practicing Muslim family, he would end up spending two years of directed reading in Arabic and Islamic Studies in Syria (2002-2004, with Hajj completed in 2003) and left his extremist views for a more sensible understanding of the faith.

In 2004, upon returning from Syria, Shaikh became a "walk-in" and began to work as an undercover national security operative for Canadian security intelligence (CSIS). After two years of (classified) work experience participating in the investigation of a number of extremist groups, one of those groups went on to commit terrorism offences. Mr. Shaikh traversed to the Canadian federal police (RCMP) and the Integrated National Security Enforcement Team (INSET) in what came to be known as the "Toronto 18" terrorist group. He was the primary fact witness in 5 legal hearings and gave evidence at various times over 4 years, with the final prosecution ending in 2010.

He is among an extreme few to have directly observed and participated in radicalization, disengagement, de-radicalization and counter terrorism related to Islamist extremism/terrorism in the Western context and its public prosecution in the courts. Shaikh now actively consults with various U.S., U.K. and other national security and counter terrorism agencies/functions and appears regularly on various media platforms on the listed areas of expertise.

GUIDE
FOR
PARENTS
ON
RESOURCES

PARENTS
WITH PREPAREDNESS

Helpful
RESOURCES
ON AWARENESS
AND PREPAREDNESS

SPECIALLY
CURATED
For Parents
BY PARENTS

SUMMER SAFETY TIPS



Ensure a safe 2026 US summer by staying hydrated, using sunscreen (SPF 30+), and avoiding peak sun (10 a.m.–4 p.m.) to prevent heat-related illness. Key safety measures include constant water supervision for children, using insect repellent (DEET), and never leaving pets or children in hot cars. Monitor heat alerts, check on vulnerable neighbors, and prepare for increased wildfire risks.

Extreme Heat & Hydration

With warmer-than-normal temperatures predicted, prepare for high heat to prevent heat stroke.

- Hydrate Often: Drink fluids regularly; do not wait until you are thirsty. Avoid sugary or alcoholic drinks.
- Stay Cool: Spend time in air-conditioned spaces (libraries, malls, community centers).
- Monitor Illness: Watch for symptoms of heat exhaustion, including heavy sweating, fast pulse, and dizziness.
- Worker Safety: Take rest breaks in shade or cool areas. (<https://heat.gov/>)

Water & Pool Safety

- Supervision: Actively watch children, especially near pools. Designate a "water watcher".
- Life Jackets: Use U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets while boating, regardless of swimming ability.
- Buddy System: Never swim alone.
- Swimming Skills: Enroll in American Red Cross swimming lessons. (<https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/swimming>)

Sun & Skin Protection

- Sunscreen: Apply sunscreen with at least SPF 30, reapplying every two hours or after swimming.
- Clothing: Wear wide-brimmed hats, sunglasses with UV protection, and light-colored clothing.
- [Don't Fry Day](#): Participate in National Skin Cancer Prevention awareness.

Insect & Tick Safety

- Repellent: Use EPA-registered insect repellents containing DEET.
- Clothing: Wear long-sleeved shirts and pants when hiking; tuck pants into socks.
- Tick Checks: Inspect yourself, children, and pets thoroughly after being outdoors.
- (<https://www.cdc.gov/early-care/communication-resources/outdoor-play-and-safety-for-children-in-ece.html>)

Travel & Vehicle Safety

- Never Leave Pets/Kids: Cars can reach dangerously high temperatures quickly, even with windows cracked.
- Distracted Driving: Avoid distractions; avoid driving when tired.
- Car Kits: Prepare a [vehicle emergency kit](#).

Additional 2026 Resources

[Ready.gov](#): Official summer preparedness tips.
[Red Cross](#): Comprehensive safety guides.
[Heat.gov](#): Heat Safety Week resources.
 Safe Boating Week: May 16-22, 2026.
<https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/summer-safety.html>

THE PERILS OF NEGLECTING ESTATE PLANNING

By Sandy Rao, Senior Inspector, U.S. Marshals Service

To view the original article, please [CLICK HERE](#)

Policing is a dangerous profession.¹ The mortality rate among officers is far higher than the U.S. population average, both on the job as well as outside of work and after retirement. In part, this is due to higher rates of victimization (e.g., homicide), but also due to elevated risk of vehicle accidents, heart attacks, and suicide during as well as after shifts. Stressful police duties are associated with a risk of sudden cardiac death that is markedly higher than the risk during routine/non-emergency duties. Restraints/altercations and pursuits are associated with the greatest risk. These findings have public health implications and suggest that primary and secondary cardiovascular prevention efforts are needed among police officers.² As a result, the average life expectancy of officers is 66 years, which is 22 years shorter than average in the United States (78 years). The mortality rate is even more concerning when examined within specific subgroups that are more prominent in police departments or early retirees. For example, “a male police officer in the 50–54-year age category had close to a 40% probability of death compared to a 1% probability for males in the general population in that same age category.”³

An important, if subtle, implication of this mortality fact is that police may be less likely than average to have estate planning established before death. The most recent statistics on estate planning show 34 percent of U.S. adults in 2024 had completed planning, and only 24 percent of those 34 years old and younger had done so (i.e., the population doing tactical and highest risk policing work). There is no static information on the prevalence of police-specific estate planning, but, to the degree they follow similar patterns as the general population, it is likely that many will die prior to establishing plans.

Estate Planning

Estate planning is an umbrella term referring to a vast array of legal authorities and decisions governing both the process of dying and events afterward. They include formal decisions and guidance regarding, for example, life insurance, retirement plans and benefits, custody and care of children, trusts and guardianship for special needs dependents, specific bequests (e.g., who will inherit firearms, family heirlooms, vehicles), pensions, property, and executorship.

Estate planning matters. Decisions regarding death represent the last moment of personal agency an individual experiences and is special for that reason alone. But it is important for more practical reasons as well. First, death is time-consuming and expensive absent formal planning. Beneficiary lines on a bank account will lead to control of that account within minutes, and thus the ability to pay for necessary expenses such as a funeral. Absent these lines, an individual is likely to spend weeks or months, pay for legal assistance, and appear in court in order to establish control. Death is hard enough without this burden.

Second, estate planning is also important because it embodies a series of decisions of exceptional impact. This includes the financial well-being of those receiving—or failing to receive—benefits. Inheritance is generally one of the largest wealth transfers that will occur in an individual's life, often serving as a fundamental determinant of whether a person will be able to purchase a home or not, pay for



college or not, take a job of passion or not. But an inheritance also includes a significant and devastating potential harm to family dynamics and well-being in the event of conflict. The latter includes decisions as to when to end life for an officer no longer able to make decisions for themselves, as well as financial decisions that have powerful implications for the quality of life of family members and the legacy of that officer.

Estate planning is important in general, but especially in the case of divorces and remarriages, or other family dynamics that make inheritance, executor, and other aspects of estate planning less clear. Police personnel also have high odds of leaving a complicated estate. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates police officers have a similar divorce rate as the general population (around 14.5 percent).⁴ However, that statistic is misleading in the context of estate planning as it is an average of the divorce rate among first marriages (40–50 percent) and second or greater marriages, which have substantially lower rates. It is likely that many of fallen officers will have complex family situations.⁵ In addition, police officers tend to have complicated finances. They are likely to have pensions, extended health care benefits, potential federal benefits if killed in the line of duty, and other services and support available from the local and national level and nonprofit sector (e.g., Fraternal Order of Police and similar organizations). Police also are more likely than those in other professions to have also had a military career, which includes similar and additional complicated financial implications.

Research on officer mortality, as described above, imply estate planning

should be important police professionals. However, there are several gaps in existing knowledge that make it difficult to plan policy or offer guidance to agencies and officers regarding the seriousness of this problem. First, there is little direct research on estate planning by police officers; it is not known how many have made plans. Second, there is very little information about planning specifically among officers at higher risk of death, such as those who serve in roles that focus on arrest of serious violent offenders (e.g., fugitive task forces). This is important because the larger issue of estate planning may be less troubling if officers are making informed judgments about if and when to plan. More specifically, it could be that the average police officer considers themselves to face little risk in their work (and so are not at great risk of harm for delaying planning) while others tasked with exceptionally dangerous duties face death often (and so, being aware of their risk, plan appropriately). However, it's unknown if this is the case or not.

Current Study

To address these challenges, a survey was administered to all members of a large, multijurisdictional fugitive task force in the Northeast United States. The survey consisted of a battery of items on three foci: personal and professional background, critical incident exposure, and estate planning questions.

Sample

The police unit was selected in part because of the high-risk nature of their work. As noted above, this should provide a "best case scenario" of estate planning in as much as these task force members face risk more often than most officers (though this does not imply that other officers do not encounter risks). The task force focused almost exclusively on executing fugitive arrest warrants for serious and violent offenders or responding to exigent situations such as mass shootings.

The fugitive task force reported, for example, that their members are present in nearly half of all homicide arrests that occur in the states serviced by this team. Similarly, the task force was chosen in part because officers have had higher than average exposure to indirect causes of death. For example, the team comprises officers who were either present in the area or responded to the 9/11 attacks or were trained under officers who were responders to those attacks. The toxic aftermath of those attacks elevated the number of officers who would have been exposed to high mortality rates in policing.

Similar arguments can be made for their exposure during the COVID-19 epidemic as the Northeast areas served by this task force experienced waves of infection early in the crisis before protective personal equipment was considered helpful or treatments were developed. The mortality rate among officers was substantially higher than the public, and this would have been especially true among officers serving on this task force. Finally, the task force was selected because of its size and breadth, as this should alleviate some concerns that results may be specific to the peculiarities of a single department in the selection or training of personnel with respect to estate planning. The task force has partnership agreements with a large number of federal, state, or local agencies and 13 fully operational offices spread over two states.

Instrument

A wellness survey was created to address some of these specific questions on estate planning. The survey was sent to 93 operational members of the task force. Sixty-eight members responded. They included items on years of service, children, and marital status. Items were also crafted to describe exposure to death or risk of death. In the latter case, items were adapted from prior research on traumatic experiences of police officers.

This included asking whether respondents had ever seen a dead body while on the job, been shot or shot at, and injured during a critical incident (e.g., a shooting). Finally, items were crafted to reflect several components of estate planning. This includes whether a health care surrogate was established, beneficiary statements were set up for bank accounts, and a will was filed.

Questions:

- Q1: Have you ever been involved in Police Involved shooting/Critical Incident?
 Q2: Have you ever seen a dead body during a fugitive enforcement operation?
 Q3: Have you ever seen a severely injured person during a fugitive Investigation?
 Q4: Have you ever been injured during a fugitive enforcement operation?
 Q5: Have you personally been treated at a local trauma or ER for injuries sustained during a fugitive enforcement operation?
 Q6: Do you have a health care proxy listed?
 Q7: Do you have life insurance ?
 Q8: Do you have a Revocable or Irrevocable Trust?
 Q9: Do you have a Last Will & Testament or Pour Over Will?
 Q10: Do you have Beneficiaries on all your accounts?
 Q11: How many children do you have ?
 Q12: Are you divorced?
 Q13: How many years in Law Enforcement?
 Q14: How many years assigned to the NY/NJ RFTF?
 Q15: How old are you ?
 Q16: How many police/law enforcement funerals for LEOs have you attended?
 Q17: If a free consultation or service were available for estate planning/will&testament/trusts would you attend?
 Q18: Add any comments based on this subject/topic
 Q19: Have you ever been involved in Police Involved shooting/Critical Incident ?
 Q20: Have you ever seen a dead body during fugitive enforcement operation?
 Q21: Have you ever seen a severely injured person during a fugitive Investigation?
 Q22: Have you ever been injured during a fugitive enforcement operation?
 Q23: Have you personally been treated at a local trauma or ER for injuries sustained during a fugitive enforcement operation?
 Q24: Do you have a health care proxy listed?
 Q25: Do you have life insurance ?
 Q26: Do you have a Revocable or Irrevocable Trust?
 Q27: Do you have a Last Will & Testament or Pour Over Will?
 Q28: Do you have Beneficiaries on all your accounts?
 Q29: How many children do you have ?
 Q30: Are you divorced?
 Q31: How many years in Law Enforcement?
 Q32: How many years assigned to the NY/NJ RFTF?
 Q33: How old are you ?
 Q34: How many police/law enforcement funerals for LEOs have you attended?
 Q35: If a free consultation or service were available for estate planning/will&testament/trusts would you attend?
 Q36: Add any comments based on this subject/topic

Results

Most respondents, over 25 percent, had an average age of 25 years in policing. The data also confirmed that the majority had been exposed to lethal or near lethal danger on the job. Of the total respondents, 51 percent had been involved in a shooting, 53 percent had been injured or hospitalized, and 49 percent had been exposed to a dead body on the job.

(See graphs on next page)

Regarding estate planning, data showed 23 percent had a will, and 52 percent had a health care surrogate. As theorized, those with a greater level of exposure to mortality signals had more complete estate planning.



Estate Planning Benefits

Attorney Will Andersen is a member of the New York Bar and has extensive experience in the preparation of wills, in the preparation of estate documents, and with the probate process. An interview was conducted by phone with Mr. Andersen to discuss the reasons for and benefits of estate planning for officers, resulting in nine main points.

1. Increased Risk of Harm and Fatality

Police officers face a higher than average risk of injury, disability, or death due to the nature of their work. Every day on the job, they encounter potentially dangerous situations that can lead to life-threatening injuries or fatalities. Proper estate planning ensures that their loved ones are protected financially and legally in the event of an untimely death or incapacitation. This is made even more critical by the young age at which some police officers die in the line of duty. Who will be making short- and long-term medical decisions for an incapacitated officer? Who will oversee the financial well-being of the officer, their spouse, and their young children?

Line-of-duty death: Estate planning can help ensure that the officer's family has immediate access to critical benefits, such as death-in-service benefits, life insurance, and other financial resources, should the officer die while on duty. It can ensure that a spouse's finances are protected in case of a future marriage and that a minor child's financial future is not affected by any future marriage. If an officer is the sole guardian of children, it is vital that the officer is taking control of who the next parent/guardian will be.

2. Financial Security for Loved Ones

Estate planning ensures that an officer's family is financially secure if the worst happens. This includes the distribution of assets, management of bank accounts, and access to life insurance benefits. Officers who die unexpectedly may leave behind spouses, children, or other dependents who depend on their income for support.

Life Insurance: Officers often have life insurance policies through their department, but they may need additional coverage to fully protect their family's financial future.

Retirement Plans and Benefits: Police officers may have pensions, 401(k)s, or other retirement plans. Estate planning ensures that beneficiaries are properly named and can access these funds upon the officer's death.

3. Ensuring Custody and Care for Children

If the officer has children, estate planning is essential for appointing a guardian who will take care of them if the officer passes away. This decision is critical, especially for officers who are in dangerous or high-risk roles. Without clear guardianship provisions, the state or a court may intervene and make decisions that might not align with the officer's wishes.

Minors: A will allows the officer to designate a trusted guardian for their minor children, ensuring that they are cared for by someone the officer knows and trusts. It also allows the officer to designate successors in the event their first choice is unable to act. They can also ensure that the financial side is being handled by the right person and the parenting side is also being handled by the right person. These are not necessarily the same people. Proper estate planning can ensure that the right people will be doing the right job.

Special Needs: If the officer has children with special needs, a trust can be established to ensure that the child's long-term financial and care needs are met.

4. Avoiding Legal Complications

Without a clear estate plan, police officers risk leaving their loved ones with the burden of navigating a complex legal process. Probate—the legal process through which assets are distributed after death—can be time-consuming, expensive, and emotionally taxing for surviving family members. It is also a public process, which, given the sensitive nature of policing, can be problematic.

Avoiding Probate: A revocable living trust allows assets to be passed directly to beneficiaries without the need for probate, ensuring a smoother transition of assets and lessening the burden on surviving family members.

Clear Instructions: Having a will in place ensures that there are clear instructions on how the officer's assets are to be distributed. Without this, state laws will dictate who inherits the officer's estate, which may not align with their wishes.

5. Protecting Assets and Family Interests

Police officers often accumulate valuable assets over time—homes, vehicles, investments, retirement accounts, and more. Estate planning helps to protect these assets and ensure they are distributed according to the officer's wishes.

Asset Protection: Estate planning tools such as trusts can help shield assets

from creditors or lawsuits, providing extra security for the officer's family. Officers can make sure that future spouses do not have access to the wealth the officers accumulated for their families. (This can extend to the future spouses of children, as well.)

Specific Bequests: Officers can designate who will inherit specific items (e.g., firearms, family heirlooms, vehicles), helping to prevent family disputes or confusion after their death.

6. Health and Medical Decision-Making

Estate planning includes creating documents that outline health care decisions in the event the officer becomes incapacitated due to injury or illness. These documents give clarity and control to the officer and their loved ones, specifying the officer's wishes for medical care and appointing someone to make health care decisions on their behalf if they are unable to do so.

Health Care Power of Attorney (POA): A trusted individual can be given authority to make medical decisions on the officer's behalf.

Living Will: This document specifies an officer's wishes regarding life support, organ donation, and end-of-life care if they are incapacitated and unable to communicate.

7. Estate Planning for Survivors

Police officers' families may face emotional and financial challenges in the event of the officer's injury or death. Estate planning can ease these burdens by ensuring security and support for the officer's family.

Financial Security: Estate planning can designate the appropriate beneficiaries to ensure the officer's family has the financial resources needed to cover expenses such as funeral costs, medical bills, and daily living expenses.

Emotional Support: Estate planning can help alleviate some of the emotional strain on survivors by making sure there's a clear plan in place, avoiding the need for additional decision-making during an already difficult time.

8. Access to Benefits and Retirement Plans

Police officers often have access to unique benefits through their departments, including pensions, survivor benefits, and other specialized plans. However, these benefits can be complicated, and estate planning helps to ensure that the officer's family knows how to access these benefits, how to designate beneficiaries, and how to maximize available support.

Pension and Survivor Benefits: Many departments provide death benefits to the surviving spouse or children of fallen officers. Estate planning helps ensure the family understands how to access these benefits.

Line-of-Duty Death Benefits: Some officers are eligible for additional benefits if they die in the line of duty. A comprehensive estate plan will ensure that these benefits are claimed and distributed properly.

9. Peace of Mind

Last, estate planning offers peace of mind. Knowing that their financial affairs are in order and that their families will be cared for in their absence allows officers to focus on their work without worrying about what will happen to their loved ones if something were to go wrong.

Clarity and Certainty: By clearly outlining their wishes, police officers can ensure their families won't have to navigate a complex, uncertain situation in the event of their death or incapacitation.

Sense of Control: Estate planning allows officers to retain control over how their legacy is handled and ensures that their values and priorities are respected.

Conclusion

Estate planning is a critical aspect of personal financial management that ensures the effective transfer of assets and the fulfillment of an individual's wishes after death. For police officers, however, estate planning presents unique challenges and considerations due to the risks inherent in their profession, the need for tailored legal protection, and the complexities surrounding survivor benefits. Estate planning for police officers is vital to ensure that their wishes are honored, their families are cared for, and their loved ones don't face unnecessary legal or financial hurdles. Consulting with an experienced estate planning attorney familiar with the unique aspects of police work and related benefits can help create a comprehensive plan. Having a plan in place can give both the officer and their family peace of mind, knowing they are prepared for whatever the future may bring. Policing is a dangerous profession, making it a field in which estate planning is especially important. ❤️

Notes:

1 John M. Violanti et al., "Hidden Danger: A 22-Years Analysis of Law Enforcement Deaths Associated with Duty-Related Illnesses," *Policing* 43, no. 2 (2020): 330–344.

2 Vasilea Varvarigou et al., "Law Enforcement Duties and Sudden Cardiac Death Among Police Officers in United States: Case Distribution Study," *BMJ* 349 (2014): g6534.

3 John M. Violanti et al., "Life Expectancy in Police Officers: A Comparison with the US General Population," *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health* 15, no 4 (2013): 223.

4 Gretchen Livingston, "Chapter 2: The Demographics of Remarriage," in *Four-in-Ten Couples Are Saying "I Do" Again* (Pew Research Center, 2014).

5 Shawn P. McCoy and Michael G. Aamodt, "A Comparison of Law Enforcement Divorce Rates with Those of Other Occupations," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 25 (2010): 1–16.

6 Daniel S. Weiss et al., "Frequency and Severity Approaches to Indexing Exposure to Trauma: The Critical Incident History Questionnaire for Police Officers," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 23, no. 6 (2010): 734–743.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Rao is a senior inspector and deputy U.S. marshal with the U.S. Marshals Service, where he has served since 2001. Currently assigned to the NY/NJ Regional Fugitive Task Force, he leads enforcement operations targeting violent fugitives in New York City, collaborating with over 30 law enforcement agencies. The NY/NJ Task Force, established in 2002, is the first of its kind and part of a network of eight Congressionally funded Regional Fugitive Task Forces across the U.S. In addition, Inspector Rao works with the NYPD on fugitive cases and serves as an INTERPOL liaison for international fugitives in New York City. He has been assigned to U.S. Marshals foreign field offices in Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, and Haiti, and played a key role in the extradition of fugitive Troy Thomas from Guyana to the United States.

Sandy Rao is John Jay College of Criminal Justice alumni, earning a BA in criminal justice and MS in protection management. He is a current doctoral student at Nova Southeastern University and an adjunct professor at Monroe University.

CROCHETING FOR A CAUSE: A MOTHER & DAUGHTER TURNING PURPOSE INTO ACTION

By Jackie Giunta

Where It Started

As a parent, I've learned that some of the most meaningful experiences are often the ones that arise unplanned. The quiet moments that, over time, turn into something special. Knitting and crocheting with my ten-year-old daughter, Charlie, has quickly become just that.

I first learned to knit and crochet from my grandmother. The time we spent sitting in her living room while I fumbled through the basics was filled with laughter, her wonderful story-telling, and her famously unapologetic opinions. Some of my favorite childhood memories are tied to opening her handmade gifts: bright, colorful socks, cozy slippers, hats, and sweaters. At the time, I didn't fully understand what went into those gifts, but I felt it. There was something more personal in knowing that someone had taken the time to make that, just for you. That feeling stayed with me.

Passing It On

Now, years later, I find myself sitting beside my daughter, teaching her the same stitches my grandmother taught me. What started as a simple way to spend time together has become something we both look forward to. It's our way to slow down- to talk, laugh, and work through things together.

Crocheting has taught Charlie that it's not only okay to make mistakes, but that it's often part of the process, especially when trying something new. I've watched her go from complete frustration with new stitches, materials, and patterns to confidently attempting her own designs, fully expecting she may have to start over. Her ability to find value in that process, rather than frustration, has been incredible to watch. Of all the lessons I hope to teach my children,



resilience is one of the most important.

From Hobby to Something More

Charlie, a fifth grader with the drive of a border collie and a sharp entrepreneurial spirit, is always thinking about what comes next. She doesn't just want to make something for herself, she wants to know what others would enjoy. That mindset is what turned this from a simple pastime into something more.

Together, we created the name Birch Hill Creations, inspired by our family's Cape Cod beach home, where Charlie is now part of the fourth generation to spend summers and school vacations. In keeping with the idea that each item is made with care, it felt right to name our effort after something that means so much to us.

The Moment It Clicked

Earlier this year, my husband and I were invited to join a team participating in the Susan G. Komen 3-Day Walk in Boston, MA. We quickly jumped into fundraising through the usual channels—social media, texts to family and friends, and selling Super Bowl squares. But one afternoon, while Charlie and I were sitting on the couch crocheting and brainstorming, she looked up and said, "Mom! Let's sell all these things and donate the money!"

And just like that, the idea clicked.

Building Something Together

Charlie came up with the concept of crocheting scrunchies and packaging

them as surprise grab bags—like blind boxes of toys her and her sisters enjoy. You don't know which one you're going to get. Driving a "collect-them-all" sentiment while making the experience fun, exciting, and the thrill of mystery. Since then, she's been hard at work making scrunchies of all kinds, along with stuffed animals and summer items like tops and bags.

Together, we've committed to spending the winter and spring building inventory with the intent to launch at our local farmer's market this summer. Charlie and I have agreed to donate 100% of the proceeds to our fundraising efforts. Charlie, of course, is already thinking bigger, talking about building a website and expanding into online marketplaces.

Why It Matters

This summer, we'll proudly join thousands of others walking the Susan G. Komen 3-Day Walk for breast cancer research, supporting a cause that has impacted our family and so many others. Knowing that Charlie and I are contributing in our own way by crocheting for a cause makes it that much more meaningful.

What started as a fundraising idea ties directly back to something I learned years ago in my grandmother's living room: that time, effort, and intention matter. I can see Charlie beginning to understand that.

She knows why we're doing this. She knows where the money is going, and she understands that what she makes connects to something bigger than herself. That's not an easy lesson to teach and is powerful to experience firsthand.

Crocheting started as a hobby, but quickly became our time together. Now it's something we're using to give back, to build something meaningful, and to carry forward a tradition that started long before me.

Someday, I hope Charlie does the same. 🧡



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Jackie Giunta is the founder and CEO of Arcana Innovations and a mom of four based in Massachusetts. With a background spanning military intelligence, federal law enforcement, and the private sector, she now focuses on building and integrating technology for national security and public safety missions.

Her daughter Charlie is a fifth grader who loves creating, trying new things, and bringing her ideas to life. She serves as a class representative on her school's Student Council, plays soccer and basketball—her team recently won their division championship—and stays active in band and drama club. Charlie enjoys math, science, reading adventure stories, playing guitar, and spending time with her siblings and friends.



Join Us
And Make
a Difference

PARENTS WITH PREPAREDNESS

GET INVOLVED

Are you a parent, caregiver, first responder, or educator who would like to contribute to *Parents With Preparedness* magazine? Send us your thoughts, or article submissions to:

<https://www.pwporg.org/authors/>

DONATE

Don't have time to create an article and still want to make a difference which will last a lifetime? Please consider a charitable contribution at:

<https://pwporg.org/contribute>

All donors will receive a tax deductible certificate of contribution.



[PWPORG.ORG](https://pwporg.org)