

Rise magazine is written by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

# Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 25, FALL 2013

BY AND FOR  
PARENTS IN THE  
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

## The Impact of Trauma on Parenting

Parents who have suffered trauma in their own childhoods want to give their children better lives, but the feelings of rage, shame, fear and hopelessness that so often come from trauma can get in the way.

In this issue, parents write about how trauma has impacted them as parents, and offer insights into child welfare policies and practices that either cause more pain or support them in healing themselves and their children.



ILLUSTRATION BY AMALRY ALPONTE

## IN THIS ISSUE

### 3 THE HEART OF THE PROBLEM

Child welfare systems are beginning to recognize—and treat—parents' trauma.

### 4 FROM EXISTING TO LIVING

I needed courage and support to face my childhood.

### 6 A FAMILY THAT HEALS TOGETHER

Child-parent therapy can help parents and children recover from trauma.

### 7 SMOKING AWAY THE PAIN

Can I face life without marijuana or will I fall apart?

### 8 TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

I was afraid to show my daughter all my love.

### 10 LEGAL RIGHTS

The pros and cons of revealing past trauma in court.

### 11 THERE IS ALWAYS A WAY FORWARD

Therapy showed me I could build a better future.

## Small Steps

*I want to give my kids the childhood I didn't have.*

BY LINDA HARVEY-PEARSALL

I have always wanted to give my kids a good childhood, something that I didn't have. On holidays or on their birthdays, I take them out to Toys R Us, Chuck E. Cheese, BBQ's, or Times Square. Seeing the smiles on their faces brings me happiness. It gives me a way to re-do my own sad childhood.

But other times I feel like I'm repeating my mother's depression and anger with my own children.

### Love and Hate

Throughout my childhood, I went back and forth between my grandmother's house, where I experienced love and normalcy, and my mother's house, where it was just me and her and sometimes my brother stuck inside all the time.

Over the years my mother has been diagnosed with many different mental illnesses, including schizophrenia,

depression and bipolar disorder. What I experienced was her mixed up anger every day. One minute she'd say she loved me and that I was the only one that didn't leave her. The next minute she told me that if my father wasn't such a jerk, she'd send me off to him just like she sent my brother to his father.

When I was 10, I found my mother in the kitchen after she tried to hang herself. I started crying so badly that I couldn't stop wheezing. I wanted to protect my mom but I couldn't.

I knew my mom wasn't OK. But I also felt like some of my mother's problems were my fault. I felt so sad when I thought that she'd be better off if I hadn't been born.

### My Pregnancy Fantasy...

I handled my feelings by crying and being by myself. Then, when I was 11, I also started cutting myself. I loved cry-

ing, letting it out, feeling relieved.

Still, when I graduated from junior high school, the one thing I asked for was to live with my mom. My grandmother had just had a stroke. I felt like I needed someone to show me how to grow into womanhood. But my mother's love-hate only left me longing for someone I could really depend on.

I was 16 when I got pregnant with my first child. I promised myself that I would be different from my mother. I also had the fantasy that having a child would make my mother feel close to me.

I envisioned us as a big happy family: my mom living with me, me making sure she was OK, and both of us showering my daughter with love. I wanted my mom to be involved in all my daughter's milestones—doctor's appointments, first words, potty train-

ing and training bras.

### ...And Reality

But the whole time I was pregnant I felt like my mother was choosing her girlfriend over me. And after my daughter was born, my mother didn't like her crying and fussiness. She also didn't like all the arguments between her girlfriend and me. When my daughter was a few months old, my mother told me that, because of the constant fighting, it was time for me to leave.

I suddenly felt like I had nobody in my corner. In minutes, my sadness overwhelmed me, and then it turned into rage.

I started yelling and screaming and throwing things. I threw a Virgin Mary statue, my cell phone, a chair. I punched a mirror and my hand started to bleed.

My mom called the cops. I told them I had a history of depression and that I needed someone to talk to. The officers took me to the hospital so I could talk to a psychiatrist.

I wound up staying at the hospital for a month while my daughter stayed with her dad. I felt ashamed that I was separated from my baby for a whole month because I couldn't control my anger or depression. I felt I was already failing my daughter just like my mother had failed me.

I spent hours in the arts and crafts room making my daughter bracelets and pictures of flowers and teddy bears. I wanted to find a way to show her that I loved her; even though right then I couldn't be the mother I wanted to be.

### Good Times and Bad

Now I have four children, ages 10, 6, 5 and 3. I have tried to be a good mother. I love being there for their celebrations, birthdays and holidays. I love getting us out of the house. When my children are invited somewhere, they go.

It's also Mommy to the rescue when they need me. Every time I am able to take care of them, I'm proving to myself I can put depression and par-

enting in two separate places.

But it also seems like every few weeks, something bad happens. Then every pain I've endured since childhood comes rushing back in my head. If I have a fight with my parents, my children's father, or my current boyfriend, if I start to feel too lonely or life feels too out of control, I have a much harder time being a good parent. Then I can't deal with my children screaming or jumping around. I yell, "Sit down." "Don't move." "Go stand in the corner." Or I take away the things they like.

When I'm angry, my kids look at me with sad faces, like they've done something wrong. They look scared, too. I don't want my kids to feel afraid of me. I want them to trust me and talk to me.

When I calm down, my oldest daughter comes out and asks, "Mommy, are you OK?" Then all my children are ready to fight whoever they think is hurting me. But my children can't really protect me, just like I couldn't protect my mom.

### My Terror Hurts My Kids

A few years ago, I lost control in a way that really scared me.

I was having a lot of conflicts with my children's father. That day, he called to say he was going to try to take custody from me. Then his mom called making it seem like I was a bad person. At that moment, I felt like I sometimes did as a kid, that I was being blamed for everything.

My mom was supposed to spend the day with me and my kids anyway. But when I called her to tell her what had happened, she told me that my problems were not hers and that she wasn't coming.

What hurt most was when my oldest daughter asked, "Does grandma love us?" At that moment I felt like my children were feeling the same way I had felt as a kid, that there was no love.

I tried to clear my head, and I went

into the bathroom and stared at my cellphone for about 30 minutes. Eventually I couldn't stand feeling so hurt anymore. I threw my phone and broke the glass mirror. Then I went into the kitchen and started flipping tables and chairs. Finally, I grabbed a knife and I cut my right forearm and I started bleeding badly.



An upstairs neighbor heard the commotion and called the cops but I must have passed out before they came.

### Too Much Pain

When I woke up, I noticed doctors walking by and people on stretchers, and I realized I must be in the ER.

I waited for one hour while I was strapped down to a bed, all the time crying and asking for my kids. Finally, the psychiatrist came and told me that I'd cut myself.

I looked at him in shock, and then I remembered how my kids had seen me in a rage. I was afraid I might have hurt my oldest child, who had come to comfort me right before I snapped. The police officer sitting with me told me I hadn't hurt anyone but myself. Still, I know that when I

lost control so badly, I did hurt my children.

### A Safe Place to Go

Recently, I started therapy to protect my children from my anger and depression. I even made a safety plan with my therapist for when I don't know how to help myself. If I am getting too upset, I will call 911, they will take me to the hospital, and the hospital will call my therapist for me.

I feel relieved just knowing that I have a safe place to go before I lose control. It feels great to know now that I have someone to turn to when I am in trouble, as opposed to feeling completely alone.

My therapist is helping me see that not everyone is against me. I have a great boyfriend, a social worker; my editor at *Rise*, a big brother; and a lawyer that are part of my support system. I think focusing on them will help me not feel so abandoned, which is what usually leads to my rages.

These are small steps but they feel big to me. I hope the steps I am taking now to heal from my past will help me make a better future for my children.

## Rise

**DIRECTOR**  
NORA MCCARTHY

**EDITORIAL DIRECTOR**  
RACHEL BLUSTAIN

**EDITORIAL ASSISTANT**  
PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

**PRODUCTION**  
EFRAIN REYES  
JEFF FAERBER

### CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

TYESHA ANDERSON  
LAMORA BEARY  
ASHLEY BREWSTER  
GIANNINA BRITO  
CARLA BURKS  
CARMEN CABAN  
WANDA CHAMBERS  
LAQUANA CHAPPELLE  
NANCY COLON  
LAWANDA CONNELLY  
RHONNEIL COOPER  
SONIA DIAZ  
LATISHA DUPREE  
SANDRA EVANS  
SYLVIA FLORES  
TAHITIA FOGGIE  
QUANDA GREEN BARNES  
LINDA HARVEY-PEARSALL  
TONI HOY

**ISSUE #25 // FALL 2013**  
[www.risemagazine.org](http://www.risemagazine.org)

80 E. 110th St. #1E  
New York, NY 10029  
646-543-7099

**ART INSTRUCTOR**  
JOANNE PENDOLA

**EDITING COACHES  
AND REPORTERS**  
TERESA BACHILLER  
TRACEY CARTER  
NICOLE GOODWIN  
ERICA HARRIGAN-ORR  
BEVANJAE KELLEY  
LYNNE MILLER  
ANTOINETTE ROBINSON  
JEANETTE VEGA

SABRA JACKSON  
ANNA JONES  
CODEE JONES  
NICOLE JONES  
EBONIE KING  
ROBIN LARIMORE  
HERBERT MORALES  
LASHONDA MURRAY  
DESIREE NAVARRO  
ILKA PEREZ  
SYLVIA PEREZ  
KATHY RANDO  
LORENZO RANSOM  
CHRYSTAL REDDICK  
WANDA RODRIGUEZ  
DESIREE RUIZ  
SAMANTHA RUIZ  
MARY THUNKER

# The Heart of the Problem

*Child welfare systems are beginning to recognize—and treat—parents' trauma.*

BY PIAZADORA FOOTMAN AND LYNNE MILLER

*Trauma is an experience that makes you feel that your life—or a loved one's life—is in danger and overwhelms your ability to cope. In recent years, child welfare systems around the country have been focusing on the role trauma plays in child welfare, and systems have begun to recognize how deeply trauma impacts not only children in foster care, but also parents.*

Here Erika Tullberg, associate director of the NYU Center on Coordinated Trauma Services in Child Welfare and Mental Health; Larry Small, deputy director, of the division of clinical practice and development in the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services; and Cheryl Smithgall, acting executive director of Chapin Hall describe how childhood trauma affects parents—and how child welfare could respond better to the impact of trauma.

**Q: How does trauma impact parents who come to the attention of the child welfare system?**

**Smithgall:** Parents involved in the child welfare system are more likely to have experienced trauma in their own childhoods than other parents. When the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services began doing trauma assessments, the experiences parents described included witnessing domestic violence or a parent's drug use, experiencing sexual and physical abuse, parents who either left or died, as well as a lot of community violence. Many parents also talked about how the adults in their lives hadn't protected them.

As parents got older, those traumatic experiences often followed them. In describing their adolescence, many parents described a lot of drinking and drug use, violent incidents with

gangs, discipline problems and dropping out of school. As adults, they had problems with substance abuse, housing instability, domestic violence, and mental health.

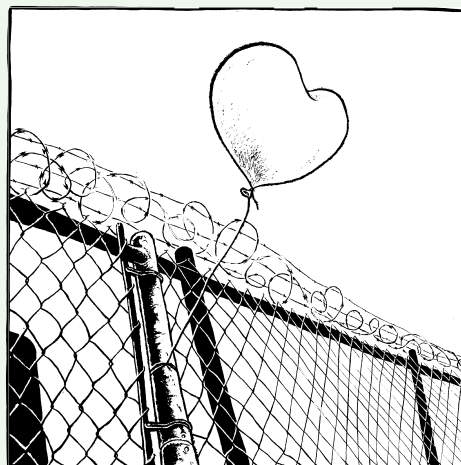


ILLUSTRATION BY THOMAS YIP

Research shows us how deeply trauma affects people's bodies and brains, which can lead to these kinds of problems. That's because trauma causes people to have intense responses even to ordinary stress. Trauma also leads people to try to escape their feelings in ways that can be destructive. Lastly, trauma hurts people's trust and that can make it hard for them to get help.

**Q: Why is it important for caseworkers to better understand parents' trauma?**

**Tullberg:** When you experience trauma, you experience a loss of power and control. Then, when you're dealing with the child welfare system, it can feel like everyone but you has the power and control.

That feeling of being victimized again can be paralyzing. A parent might fall into a deep depression and be unable to move forward or even show up for visits. If caseworkers don't understand that depression,

they might think the parent just doesn't care.

People who have experienced trauma also often respond to stress with a lot of anger. If a caseworker just sees an angry parent—as opposed to a parent who is being triggered and needs support—the worker may respond punitively.

**Smithgall:** Caseworkers have told us that working alongside a mental health professional who helped them fully hear a parent's story shifted their perspective away from just seeing the parent as the alleged perpetrator to someone they wanted to succeed.

We also know what happens when caseworkers don't understand trauma. In Illinois, we saw that many parents who experienced childhood trauma were very reluctant to engage in services. After reunification, those same parents were more likely to have their children return to care. Of parents who'd had four or more different types of childhood traumas, 30% had their children return to care as opposed to 7% of other parents. Clearly, those parents didn't get the help they needed.

**Q: What do you want to see change in how child welfare systems support parents affected by trauma?**

**Tullberg:** The first step is to understand parents' reactions. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network developed a series of fact sheets about the impact trauma has on parents. It doesn't magically transform things when workers understand trauma. But it can help them give parents appropriate services and support.

**Larry:** In 2005, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services made trauma assessment a central part of how it engages parents. In the first 45 days of a case, a caseworker and mental health professional work together to understand the parent's trauma history. Our hope is that the process builds trust and helps caseworkers think more carefully about parents' needs.

The first mother we ever assessed had a long history of childhood maltreatment, drug abuse, homelessness and prostitution. She'd already had nine children and lost most of them. But when she finally began to talk about her experiences, she was able to stop using drugs and get her youngest child back. The trauma assessment itself helped her and her caseworker build a trusting relationship.

It's not just child welfare workers who need to be trained about trauma, though. So do people in the courts. Parents need to feel that they will be understood and supported if they reveal their childhood traumas, not judged or punished.

We are also trying to increase the number of trauma-informed service providers that work with parents. Many times, caseworkers and the courts just send parents to a standard list of programs—parenting classes, anger management. But too often those services don't help parents with their own trauma or their children's trauma, and sometimes they even re-traumatize parents.

**Smithgall:** Better trauma-informed services are critical to improving the system. Without them, it's a little too easy to blame parents for not complying, when part of the question is whether we're referring them to services that are actually responsive to their needs.

# From Existing to Living

*I needed courage and support to face my childhood and reconnect with my kids.*

BY ERICA HARRIGAN-ORR

When my daughters were 4 and 2 years old, I began to feel so numb to my children. I grew up in foster care and have been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. At the time, I felt alienated not only from being a mother but being a person. I was lost in space, feeling nothing but emptiness. I didn't feel human.

## Far From Normal

When I tried to play with my children, I would get an unsettled feeling that the walls were closing in on us and the kids and I were going to suffocate. A few times I just felt weird. I was obsessed with thinking, "These are actually my kids. I gave birth to them." **It was hard to grasp that I was their mother. I felt like I was a little girl myself.**

Other times I felt grown but I was frustrated by seeing that they were enjoying their childhood while I was robbed of my own. **I felt torn between childhood and adulthood, between being a mother or being my kids' sibling and rival.** Sometimes I would even think, "Thank goodness my kids can't read my mind or else they'd see a monster instead of Mommy."

## Closed Off

Now, three years later, I see how closed off I was. My kids were seeing me constantly off in cyberspace, or on the apps and music on my phone for long amounts of time, finding anything and everything to drift myself away from reality. It's so painful to remember myself in that state of blankness, knowing I wasn't feeling, and yet not really wanting to feel all the painful and overwhelming emotional baggage I was harboring. **At the time, I didn't know that my emotional withdrawal could impact my babies.** I thought, "They're just babies—what do they know about



emotions?" But no matter how much I tried to hide behind a phony smile, **my kids knew something was wrong with Mommy.**

## Something Missing

ACS came to my door because I had gone off my medication and started fighting with my husband. The fighting

**against me.**

**The way I saw it, my kids were good. They had a roof over their heads, food, clothes, diapers and toys, and I kept them up to date with appointments and services. As a child, I didn't have those things.**

**I didn't know that my emotions could impact my babies. Now I see that when I was missing in action mentally, my girls were clingy and desperate to connect.**

was serious. My husband called my therapist, and because I would not comply with treatment, my therapist called child protective services.

My behavior was far from normal but **I could not understand the charges**

I also had never taken out my anger on my kids, and when I fought with my husband, the kids were in a different room. **I didn't know kids could be affected by their parents fighting if they were not in the same room.**

Most importantly, I didn't realize that my idea of a mother's role was pretty limited. I didn't show a connection to my kids beyond changing diapers, washing, dressing and feedings. **The professionals who came into our family could tell that I was a devoted mother who loved her kids, but they also saw that something was missing.**

## The Help I Needed

These things that were invisible to me began to make sense after I got back on my medication, began attending individual, family and marriage therapy, and took anger management and a group called Parenting Journey.

The Parenting Journey I attended was a 14-week group for parents of children with special needs. (Both of my daughters were diagnosed autistic.) **When I first went I felt overwhelmed, guilty, stressed, confused, angry and depressed.**

Then one day the group leader read an inspirational piece about parents having a tendency not to pay attention to their own emotional lives. **The article asked, "How can parents help their sons and daughters feel comfortable with their feelings if they are uncomfortable and frightened by their own?" That made a big impression on me.**

## Open to My Children

Therapy was also a supportive service for me. Many times I vented, saying things like, "The system didn't take care of me, so how is it they want to take my kids?" I would rant and rave about how the system is a money scam and the workers were kidnappers.

Underneath, though, I felt stuck with this terrible mental illness. **Borderline feels like being stuck emotionally—like having the extreme joys, tantrums,**

fears and separation worries of a 3- or 5-year-old. I never had anyone to teach me to slow down, calm down, look at the big picture, love myself and plan. I needed my mommy but my mommy wasn't there.

I started therapy feeling almost jealous of the attention I was supposed to be giving to my children's feelings. Over time, I became more confident that all the work I was doing as a mother would help me gain more control over my illness. Everything I do with my kids in mind is a gift to me as well.

### Seeing What Was Invisible

Getting support with my own pain also helped me be more open to the pain my children feel when I act so withdrawn, and it made me want to build a stronger bond with them.

I began to see that when I was missing in action mentally, my girls would try to bring me back. Our 4-year-old, Emma, tried to break up arguments when my husband and I fought. My 2-year-old, Michel, tried to bring herself to my attention by banging her head or doing other things that I thought were weird, like repetitively saying, "Michel loves Mommy."

Both girls were extremely clingy. My children would even wet themselves on purpose because they were desperate to be babied again. I didn't realize that they felt rejected or needed attention, so I didn't see their behavior as a sign that they were trying to connect.

### Taking Risks

It's been difficult but I have been able to change bit by bit. I've had to be very brave to take the risk of opening myself up to my kids even though I was afraid that they would reject me or remind me of my own losses.

My oldest daughter is my biggest challenge. I see myself in her strong

emotions, and that scares me. When I play with Emma, it bothers me that she gets hyper to the extreme. We like to play-wrestle or play games like Simon Says, Red-Light Green-Light, or tag, but often Emma starts jumping all over, playing too rough and not knowing when to stop. Once she's in go-mode, it's hard to calm her down.

Sometimes I'll help her to sit still for a minute, but then she has to burst up out her seat and make moves. Often she's just expressing happiness with her body. She wants to dance and to sing loud Glee songs. But she won't stop sometimes until she is out cold in the middle of the floor and I have to put her to bed. It feels impulsive, uncontrolled.

### Gentle But Firm

These moments used to really stress me out. I felt trapped. It would be a mad house—an insane, unstable

but firmly holding her arms, so she won't hurt herself or me. I whisper calming and loving words in her ear, like, "Mommy loves you and Mommy needs you to calm down." I repeat this until she cools down and listens. Breathing, counting and having a back-up plan have helped me to keep playing with my daughter without losing it.

### Strength and Courage

For three years, ACS and the court monitored my family. Our case just closed in April. At times, I have been very angry with the way ACS has treated my family. Twice my girls were removed and placed with strangers. Both times, the judge sent them home in less than a week. Those days apart scared and stressed us all. At the same time, I feel thankful for the knowledge I've obtained from attending services and for all of the help I've received.

I see myself in my daughter's extreme emotions and that scares me. I calm down by deep breathing and giving myself a mental pep talk.

home—if I gave in and did nothing but play with Emma without reinforcing some kind of structure. Still, I didn't want to come off as this mean, bossy, evil mom. I wanted to be someone she could trust and rely on.

Before, I would avoid playing, or just keep silent until I had reached my breaking point. Now I help myself calm down by deep breathing and giving myself a mental pep talk. Then I count, a gesture she takes as a warning. Sometimes she'll listen.

Other times she ignores me. Then I go to Plan B, time out. If that doesn't work, it's time for "hands on the body." I sit her in my lap and hold her with her legs crossed and her arms crossed, with my arms gently

as far as I see myself as worthy. Myself as an individual? I am still just existing, not living.

That feeling of abandonment never disappears, even as an adult. Looking at my kids and seeing them being so happy at times makes me cry. I say it's tears of joy but deep down it's because of the sadness of that inner child in me, feeling like, "Why did I never have this natural smile as a child?"

Still, I find it very beautiful to think of myself coming to recognize my own worth. I am more than a provider of a clean home, meals and so on. I am someone my kids really love to be with. My kids glow when they feel my eyes and smile on them, as they do more and more these days.

### No Longer a Child

I've had to face that I am no longer a child. My childhood came and went. I have to grieve my losses and keep growing up if I don't want my children to endure the same painful childhood I had. But it's going to take time and practice to fully shake off my childish ways.

Not long ago, I bought some Barbies at a yard sale. I loved Barbies as a child. I played with them all the way to age 12.

I bought those Barbies for myself and wasn't planning to share them. My husband was telling everybody who walked by us that I was working out my childhood fantasies. He told me to not be selfish—to share. I was telling him no!

But when I got home, I saw my kids looking so happy and amazed, gazing at the bin full of Barbies. I ended up sharing them and having fun with my girls.

Things have changed in my family. I feel different. The kids' behavior is different. All of our service providers notice. Michel is not even considered autistic anymore. The therapists think she was just stressed out and mimicking her sister's behavior.

Emma no longer has to divide Daddy and Mommy. When my husband and I have disagreements, we can handle it in a more mature, safe manner; away from the kids. Our arguments are less heated. We talk while the kids are asleep, or in marriage therapy.

### Not Healed Yet

I know that I am not healed yet. I feel in touch with myself emotionally again as a mom and a wife, but that's

# A Family That Heals Together

*Child-parent therapy can help parents and children recover from trauma.*

BY ERICA HARRIGAN-ORR

All parents feel overwhelmed sometimes when their children do normal things, like have temper tantrums or act demanding. But for parents who have experienced trauma, those difficult moments can remind us of painful childhood experiences when we felt terrified or overwhelmed by someone who was out of control. When that happens, we can respond by getting too angry or by shutting down.

Susan Chinitz, the director of the Early Childhood Center at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, calls this the “trauma lens”—we see normal behaviors as threatening. But Dr. Chinitz, who runs a program through Bronx Family Court for moms who have babies in foster care, says that Child-Parent Psychotherapy, where moms and their children play together with a therapist, can help parents make great progress in removing that “trauma lens” and building a strong bond.

## Q: Can you describe the impact that trauma has on parents?

**A:** Trauma is an experience that makes a person fear for her life—or a loved one’s life—and overwhelms a person’s ability to cope. People can be traumatized by things like earthquakes or 9/11. But research shows that the most devastating trauma occurs when people who are supposed to love us and keep us safe do us harm. Things like physical or sexual abuse or domestic violence, especially when they occur in close relationships, can shake people’s sense of trust and make it hard for people to trust anyone. Trauma can also hurt how people feel about themselves, even though the abuse is not their fault.

Trauma can also impact how parents respond to their children. Parents may have more trouble staying calm with their children if they’ve experienced a lot of trauma. That’s because,

when we’re in dangerous situations, our bodies and brains are programmed to have quick, automatic reactions—to either fight or flee. But for people who have had a lot of traumatic experiences, their fight or flight reaction is easily triggered, even by things that are not dangerous, like when a child cries.

A mother who was brought up in a nurturing relationship might see her baby having a tantrum and try to comfort the child. If the child is hitting, she might teach the child that we don’t hit. But a mother who has experienced a lot of violence might put a lens of past abuse on the child’s behavior and find the child’s hitting or tantrum aggressive and scary. She may become much more punitive or aggressive back.

When people have had many harmful experiences, they also try to protect themselves from their own suffering by blocking out their feelings, and they may block out their children’s feelings, too. Sometimes, that leads parents to not be as concerned about danger as they should be. They might think their kids need to toughen up because survival is hard. Or they may have grown up with so much danger they experience it as normal. Other times, parents can become overly protective of their children because they see danger everywhere.

When a parent is easily angered, rejects the child when the child acts needy, or is not responsive, a child may become “insecurely attached.” Attachment is the ability to be in a relationship with at least one person who is extremely committed to you, who’s predictable, and who finds



ILLUSTRATION BY DAYTON TOWN

child’s emotional state might be. Is your child expressing frustration? Curiosity? Is he trying to get your attention? Is he scared?

One mother came to therapy with her three little kids, who had all witnessed a lot of violence in their parents’ relationship until finally the father was arrested. When I met the mom, she wanted to know why the court was forcing her to come to therapy. All she wanted was to stop thinking about the violence and move on. Meanwhile, in the playroom, the boy was pretending to arrest his little sister over and over again, and she was getting

very scared that she was actually being arrested. The children were showing in their play that they were not able to just move on.

Parents often think kids are too little to understand—or hope they are. It can be very painful to realize that our children are in pain and we’ve caused it. But parents also have the power to help their children heal. We try to help parents stand in their kids’ shoes so they can acknowledge when something terrible has happened in a child’s life, see how their children feel, and respond in a safer, more nurturing way.

That’s especially important when children have experienced trauma themselves—including the trauma of being placed in foster care. We use play as a way to help parents and children enter the story of what has happened in a family. Telling the story gives parents a chance to assure their children that whatever happened in the past is not going to happen again. For parents and children, trauma does not have to become a place where everybody’s stuck for the rest of their lives.

joy in the relationship. When attachment is secure, children generally feel secure about themselves and have positive expectations of others. When attachment is insecure, children feel unsure of their worth. Some children cry a lot or cling. Other children dampen down their need to depend on their parent and act like they don’t need anyone. But we know inside they’re really suffering.

## Q: How can parents heal—and build a safe bond with their children?

**A:** Some parents are aware of how past trauma is affecting them with their children. But a very big part of trauma is avoidance—wanting to not have to reflect on what you’ve been through because it’s too painful to think about. In therapy, we try to help parents feel safe becoming more reflective.

First, we try to help parents reflect on how their children might be triggering their past traumas. We also try to help parents slow down their automatic responses and reflect on what’s going on in their child’s mind—not just their child’s behavior but what a

# Smoking Away the Pain

*Can I face life without marijuana or will I fall apart?*

BY SONIA DIAZ

For 25 years, I've been smoking marijuana to cope with a lifetime of trauma.

When I was young, my family life had some order. My sister's father and my mother had strict rules for us. We went to church and my sister and I sang in the choir. I remember singing on the fire escape with my sister. People passing by would stop to listen.

But my mom also hit and kicked me nearly every day, and when I was 14, things got a lot worse. My mother was accused of running with another woman's husband and we had to leave our church. My stepfather left us and moved in with another woman in our building. My mother quit her job as a corrections officer and became an alcoholic. Then she got a new boyfriend who wouldn't stop touching me. When I told her what he was doing, she didn't believe me. I felt lost and alone.

I've also been raped a number of times, the first time when I was 15 and the last time seven years ago. Sometimes I ask myself, "Was I put on this earth to be abused?" I wonder if something is wrong with me that I've been through so much pain. I fear that I'll never be able to keep myself safe.

## Trying to Cope

As a child, I coped with terror and despair by losing myself inside. I would go into my mind and pretend I was a doll in a big dollhouse. When my mother's boyfriend abused me, I felt like I came out my own body and looked at myself lying there.

My brain learned to block the stuff I didn't want to remember. I lost days and hours disappearing from myself, and I still do. When I was younger, it

was comforting to be able to shut myself in a world where I didn't have to feel anything. But now, as an adult, it seems scarier. I come back to reality and don't even know what day it is.

## Smoking My Life Away

At 18 I tried smoking weed for the first time. Soon it felt like I couldn't stop. Smoking seemed to help me stop thinking about painful memories.

Now, at 43, I'm feeling very depressed that I can't seem to stop smoking weed. I feel like I've totally messed up my life. I never finished

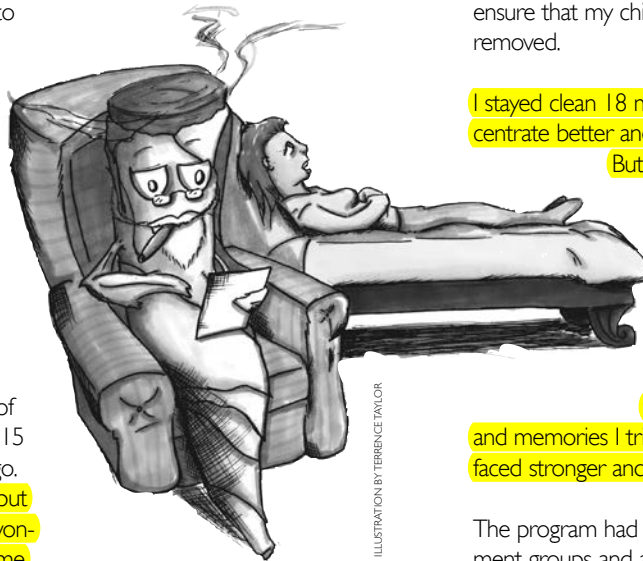


ILLUSTRATION BY TERENCE TAYLOR

school. I never accomplished my dream of making a book of my poetry. When my kids were little, I barely went anywhere with them because I wanted to smoke. Now my children are grown and I regret that I kept them isolated like I was.

The worst part is that I started smoking in order to forget, but weed just pushes my feelings to the side for the moment. When the high wears off, I'm back to where I started: depressed, angry, lost and confused.

## Searching for Help

I have tried to get help to deal with

the trauma of being abused and raped. I've seen so many counselors and psychiatrists and I've tried taking medication.

But despite years of counseling, I'm still the same. I honestly don't know how you can take someone's nightmares out of her head.

## Afraid to Open Up

In 2007, I ended up in rehab. Child Protective Services came to investigate my sister, who is addicted to crack and was living with me, and they asked me to take a drug test, too. I had to go to treatment to ensure that my children weren't removed.

I stayed clean 18 months. I could concentrate better and breathe better. But I found that everything bothered me and made me angry. Kids crying, people talking loudly, noise. When I was sober, all the bad feelings and memories I tried to block surfaced stronger and angrier.

The program had anger management groups and a survivors group for women who had been raped, but I never spoke about my issues. I kept them in and that led me back to smoking again.

## Trying to Stop

I've been trying new things to build up my confidence. In 2008, I joined the Parent Leadership Training at the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a parent advocacy organization in New York City. I also started writing for *Rise*. Joining CWOP and *Rise* make me feel alive inside.

I've also been trying a new way to block upsetting thoughts. When bad

thoughts come into my head, I tell myself, "Try hard to think of good things that have happened in your life." I like thinking about my kids when they were young and how good it felt to be a mom.

In the last three months, I've been trying hard not to smoke. I stay outside and I keep around people who don't smoke, and I come to CWOP and *Rise* to help out. But I still do smoke, usually at least three times a day. If I don't, I get angry at everything, and at night, all types of bad thoughts run in and out of my head.

## I Need More Help

I know I need to get help again. For years now I've been having panic attacks at least twice a week. My body shakes like I am having a seizure and my heart pounds.

I catch panic attacks if one of my children goes out to the store. I'm terrified someone is going to start with them, or there's going to be shootings. Often I feel like someone is going to end my life and there will be no way to protect myself.

I want help. I'm dead inside. On the outside, I might not show it, but inside there's only darkness.

## I Want a Change

Not long ago, I started going to survivors' groups on Mondays. The woman there said she was going to get me to a psychiatrist. I quickly stopped going.

I keep thinking of the last time I got help. I felt more confident. I was going places and doing things. Then I got raped again. I want to change my life but I can't go through that again. I hope I can find the guts to try again. I want to do something with my life besides smoking all the time. I can do this, I know I can, but I'm afraid, so afraid.

# Too Close for Comfort

*I was afraid to show my daughter all the love I really felt.*

BY TAHITIA FOGGIE

When my daughter was an infant I showed her a lot of love, but when she was 4, our lives changed in a terrible way, and I began to feel that hugging and kissing my daughter was wrong.

Child protective services took my daughter from me when she was 4 and returned her 9 months later because I had been sexually inappropriate with other children in my home. One day when my nieces and nephew, two of my cousins, and my boyfriend's kids were over playing truth and dare, I encouraged two of the kids to hump each other, and then I dared another two kids to do it.

At the time, I had no idea that what I was doing was wrong. I grew up in the foster care system, where I was physically and emotionally abused my whole childhood. I was also sexually abused from a very young age. Forcing anyone to be sexual against his or her will was the last thing I wanted to do, because I knew how much that hurt. But being sexual also seemed like something everyone did, even kids. I thought that kids want to see what being sexual feels like but are scared to say it.

But the children knew more than I did, and they told their parents. Their parents called child protective services and reported me, and that's how I lost my daughter.

## Less Than Human

When my daughter was in care, all I wanted was to bring her home. In the beginning, I was all hands-on, giving her hugs and kisses. But so many experiences made me feel like I couldn't trust myself anymore and I began to pull away.

Once during a visit at the agency, I went to take my daughter to the restroom and the caseworker told me she had to watch me. I felt less

than human.

My own family didn't trust me either. Even though I had been sexually abused by family members as a child, I was singled out as the one with the problem. I heard my brother tell his wife and children that I was a child

## A Wall Between Us

So to protect us both, when my daughter came home, I created a wall between us.

When my daughter hugged me, I would hug her quickly without holding on too tight. When she laid her



ILLUSTRATION BY NATANIEL AGUIAR

molester. When I interacted with their children, I felt them watching me.

It reminded me of a time when I was 8 and a friend and her little sister, who was 3, came over to visit my sister and me. I sat the little girl on my lap but my sister told our friend not to let me because I would "touch" her sister. I felt like I was nasty and dirty. Although I knew I wasn't going to "touch" her, I wondered if maybe I was in denial and there really was something wrong with me.

Now I felt the same confusion again. I knew I never had any intention of molesting anyone. But I feared that if I got too close, even to my own daughter, something bad might come out of me.

head on my lap, I would make up an excuse to get up and move away.

When my daughter took a bath, she would ask me to wash her or put lotion on her because that's what I did for her baby brother. I would tell her, "No, you do it. You're a big girl." All these things happened more times than I care to remember. I would always worry, "Am I loving my daughter too much or in the wrong way?"

## 'You Must Have Done Something'

Over the years, I treated my daughter in other ways that made her feel unloved as well.

As a child, my older siblings physically

abused my younger sister and me, and no one protected us. I didn't want the same thing to happen in my family. So whenever my younger children would complain about their sister, I would yell at her, saying, "Why are they crying? You must have done something." They are not going to cry for nothing."

The memories of my brother and sister abusing me came back frequently. It was hard for me to see that what was going on with my children was just normal sibling bickering.

My daughter would try to plead her case, but I didn't believe her. My older siblings had been domineering and sneaky. I thought she was the same way. This, too, put an enormous hole between my daughter and me.

## Sharing My Fears

My daughter was about 10 or 11 when I found a therapist I could trust. After my daughter was taken, I had felt so judged and misunderstood that it was hard for me to look at how I might have hurt the children in my home. The evaluating psychiatrist even looked me in the face and called me "sick." After that, I just shut down. I did all my services because I desperately wanted my daughter home. But I was really just going through the motions.

But my new therapist never made me feel judged. We talked about so many painful topics from my childhood before we talked about my actions. The therapist helped me to not blame myself for being raped, beaten, tortured, molested, and burned. She helped me understand that it wasn't my fault.

Building up that trust helped me to open up about what I had done to my nieces, nephew, cousins and my boyfriend's children. For the first time, I was able to really talk about what happened that day when we played

Truth or Dare and accept responsibility.

Over time, I shared other fears of mine, including my fears of hurting my daughter. I shared that over the course of one year I had told my daughter that I loved her only maybe three times and that I hadn't hugged her at all. **After I said that, I didn't need the therapist to say anything. Just hearing myself say those words let me know it wasn't right.**

My therapist told me that every loving and healthy parent shows her children affection. She told me that she tells her children that she loves them and hugs them all the time. Our discussions helped me understand that it is and always was OK to hug, hold, cuddle and bond with my daughter.

### Was It Too Late?

After those conversations, I wanted to feel close to my daughter again. But I had gone so long without doing it. **I thought maybe it was too late.**

Still, I decided I had to try. Whenever I saw my daughter, I would go over and give her a hug or a kiss. My daughter would freeze up like a statue and say, "I am not affectionate."

**I felt awkward, too, like I was hugging my daughter just because my therapist did it with her children.** Plus, a part of me still felt afraid that if I got too close to my daughter I would start acting more like a friend or a sister and not enough like an adult.

But I also knew that my daughter needed affection and that I had to make things right.

### I Began to Listen

Then one night my daughter was acting more distant than usual. I asked her what was wrong. She said she wanted to see her cousin, who she is close to.

I thought she was feeling lonely in her own home, which made me sad, so I asked her why she didn't seem to want to spend time with her siblings. She said they weren't close and that I didn't believe her during conflicts with them. She explained all this to me with tears in her eyes.

It was hard for me to hear her pain but I needed to hear it.

Over time, my daughter opened up to me more. She told me that when I yelled at her without first hearing her side of the story, she felt like I didn't trust her. My therapist also helped me see that I was confusing my daughter; because when I would run to the store my daughter was in charge, but she didn't feel in charge.

**The first psychiatrist called me 'sick.' My new therapist helped me understand that being beaten, molested and burned was not my fault.**

Again, I started to change.

When I went out, I told my daughter to keep track of how her siblings misbehaved. She would give me the list when I came home and I would handle the consequences myself. My

daughter liked this because I was finally listening to her; being fair and appreciating her help.

### I Love Her Immensely

I also kept showing my daughter affection. **Even though she said, "I am not affectionate," I just kept hugging her and telling her I loved her.** It felt good to see that my daughter didn't avoid me. A few times I noticed her smile even while she was protesting.

daughter is now 16 and she has only recently started laying her head on my shoulder and giving me a kiss.

Still, I feel blessed to have been able to let go of those irrational beliefs that had me and my daughter jailed before she went off to college. If she had gone off before I made those changes, the damage might have been irreversible.

I have also explained to my daughter in bits and pieces about my broken childhood so she can better understand why it was so hard for me to show her affection, or to trust her with her siblings.

I escaped a violent relationship when I was pregnant with my daughter so I could be here for her. Sometimes it's hard for me to accept that I let my twisted childhood make me feel like I was wrong to love my daughter immensely. Today I am making sure she knows it.

## Finding Our Way Home

BY JANELLE ALLEN

When I was young, life with my mother was good. I used to love going to her job, playing and watching her work. We played little hand games like "thumb war" and "boom-boom clap-clap." At day care, I didn't want her to leave. She always knew how to make me feel good.

But as I got a little older, it seemed like my mom was always stressed out and depressed. She looked like a big cloud was over her shoulder that could rain on her any day.

I didn't know about the violence my mother had experienced as a child, or the pain she'd lived with after her mother died. All I knew was that she didn't seem to care anymore about having fun with my brother and me.

### I Just Didn't Care

My mom would constantly tell us she wasn't doing a good job with us

and she thought we'd have a better life with her sister Gina. Then one day my mother told a counselor at my brother's school that she couldn't take it anymore, and child protective services took us away.

I was scared. I missed my mom a lot.

But **soon we were placed with my aunt Gina,** and pretty soon, I started enjoying it there. My mother would call and ask if I wanted to come home. Of course I said yes, but I didn't mean it. On holidays and birthdays, when my mom visited, I didn't want to see her. After three years, when my aunt told us it was time for us to return to my mom, it felt like a slap in the face.

### Gaining Back the Bond

When my brother and I came home, my mother didn't know what to do with us because we were

both so disrespectful. **Still, she said she wasn't going to give up on us again. During the years we were away, she'd gotten a lot calmer and stronger.** Finally, she took us to family counseling.

In therapy, my mother and I really listened to each other and started gaining back the bond we once had. My mother still has doubts about our relationship because I don't tell her every little thing about my life. She says she has made so many mistakes. But **I see her as a strong person who has managed to get through a lot.**

In the past I felt like I would never be able to forgive my mother. But now I feel like I can accept what happened and move on.

Reprinted with permission from Represent: [www.representmag.org](http://www.representmag.org).

# To Speak or Not to Speak

*Weighing the pros and cons of revealing past trauma in court.*

BY NICOLE GOODWIN

When parents are facing a child welfare case, they often keep silent about their past history of trauma. Sometimes parents' past experiences are **too painful to talk about**. Other times parents fear that talking openly about experiences of violence or victimization **might hurt their case**. Parents are right to be concerned that what they say in court or to their worker can be used against them. At the same time, keeping all past trauma a secret can lead the court and caseworkers to misunderstand and even misdiagnose a parent's behavior.

**How well a parent's past trauma is understood and dealt with in court can make the difference between a family's recovery and the end of a family's life together for a long while—or for good.** Below, Brenda Zubay and Lisa Beneventano, social workers at The Bronx Defenders, an agency that provides legal services to child welfare-affected parents, discuss the **benefits and dangers of revealing past trauma in court**, and explain the **importance of parents taking control of their story before the court takes control of it**.

**Q: What leads parents to keep silent about past trauma, especially in court?**

**Beneventano:** Many parents have never talked about their traumatic experiences with anybody, and court is not an easy place to suddenly start talking about overwhelming and painful experiences. Parents also may not connect their past trauma to the ways they are coping with life now, and they may be afraid to share too much because they will **have very little control over how their information is used**.

**Zubay:** Sometimes parents have also reached out for help in the past and been hurt.

For instance, a parent who grew up in foster care may have had workers

who told her, "I'm here to help you. You can tell me anything." But workers are not always equipped to deal with trauma, and that parent may have been **judged or left hanging**. Or a parent might have kept disclosing trauma like rape or sexual abuse hoping to get help, but instead she fell through the cracks or completely **lost control of the "help" she got, with others insisting on what she had to do**. Opening up wounds and being forgotten or overpowered can itself be traumatic.

**Q: What are the dangers of revealing and not revealing past trauma in court?**

**Zubay:** As social workers, we understand that healing is a process and that human beings are complicated. But often what courts provide can feel very much like a checklist: "She had trauma; she needs therapy"—even though not all therapy is the same and not all people respond in the same way to it. Once parents receive therapy, the **courts often want to see that parent transform quickly**. Parents can be **made to feel like they're failing**, rather than that healing is an ongoing process.

**Beneventano:** At times, revealing past trauma can also **prolong the time it takes for parents to get their children home**. The more courts know about a parent's history of violence or victimization, the more services they may mandate before **families reunify**. Sometimes those services benefit a parent's personal growth but have nothing to do with the safety of children.

On the flip side, when parents don't

reveal past trauma, the court **may not understand what led a parent into difficulties and just judge her as a bad parent**.

Parents are also frequently given inaccurate mental health diagnoses in mental health assessments ordered by the court. Parents may be diagnosed as having bipolar or a mood disorder because people with trauma histories can have intense mood swings or depressed moods just like people with those diagnoses.



ILLUSTRATION BY ROSA FERN

**Beneventano:** It's important to work with your lawyer to decide what to share and what to keep private—or talk with someone outside the child welfare system. What's really important is that you take control of your own story before the court takes control of it.

**Zubay:** Your lawyer can also help the court focus on your strengths and the coping skills you've developed to get through hard times. If you have supportive people in your life or a supportive therapist, having those people provide statements to the court can also show your strengths. If you feel you've been given a misdiagnosis, working with your lawyer to get a second opinion is also important.

**Beneventano:** Still, the burden should be on the courts to be **trauma sensitive, not on parents**. Everyone in the courts should be **trained in trauma-informed practice**.

The courts also need to **understand how much trauma is about the**

**loss of power and control**. Instead of making parents feel more powerless, the **courts should include parents as much as possible in decision-making about themselves and their families**.

**Zubay:** Lastly, the courts should understand that trauma is healed in the context of a relationship. Too often, the courts say, "This parent has an issue. She needs to go get treatment over here," and, "This child has a problem. He needs to get his own services." But **parents and children need services together** if they are to heal from the impact trauma has had on their family.

**Q: How can parents present themselves so the court sees their strengths as well as their struggles?**

# There Is Always a Way Forward

*Therapy showed me I could build a better future for myself and my children.*

BY MICARLINE LAVENTURE

When I started attending the Safe Mothers, Safe Children program at the ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute, I felt like my past had completely destroyed me and my relationship with everyone

As a child, I used to have to look down when an adult was talking to me. If I looked up, then I would get hit. My family called it disrespect. But when I became an adult, I felt disrespected by everyone, including my children. I often felt so angry at them that they were afraid of me. At the same time, I would give in to them all the time. I didn't know how to be a parent.

As a child I was also violated so many times I can't even count. As an adult, I was so afraid that I wouldn't even sleep with my bedroom door open, even though I knew my kids were the only people in my house. I just didn't feel safe, even behind closed doors.

## Ashamed of My Story

When I started therapy, I was so ashamed to talk about anything that had to do with my life. But my therapist supported me. There were times that I didn't feel like talking to her about my past, but she helped me realized how good it would be to let it out, and I did.

She also gave me charts to fill out for homework that helped me monitor my feelings so I could pay attention to when I was feeling angry or confused. Those charts helped me pay more attention to how strong my feelings were, and learn ways to bring down the intensity.

## Learning to Play

I also began to play with my children. My therapist gave me logs to write down whether I had played with my children for even 5 minutes a day, and whether there were any obstacles.

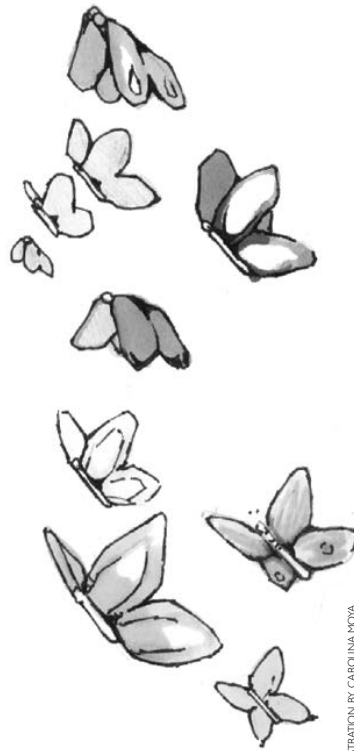


ILLUSTRATION BY CAROLINA NOVA

At first I just took small steps. But as we played, I felt like I was learning how to play right along with them. I stopped being afraid to enjoy myself.

My younger children began to trust me more and more. My 6-year-old daughter used to be so afraid to

As I played with my children, I felt like I was learning to play right along with them. I stopped being afraid to enjoy myself.

come to me when I called her, and she would lie to me all the time. But she began to really open up. It felt wonderful when my 5-year-old son started telling me everything about his day when he came home from school.

## 'I Will Never Give Up on You'

It was much harder with my older daughter, who is 15. While I was in therapy, she overdosed. I was overwhelmed with so many feelings. One way I began to sort them out was by filling out a special chart. I wrote down how angry I was with my daughter; but also how helpless I felt, and how guilty that her overdosing had to do with me and the kind of mother I used to be.

I also wrote down my actions and the results of my actions. I realized that when I refused to take my daughter to the hospital because I was so angry, that made her think that I think I'm better off without her. That was painful to realize.

I also wrote down alternative actions I could take, like telling my daughter, "I understand why you did what you did. I'm here for you, and I will never give up on you." I wrote down other feelings I could have about myself as well, like being proud of not giving up on my daughter.

## Finding Ways Forward

In so many ways, therapy helped me take control of my life and believe that there is always a way forward. It helped me give my children some-

I have the right to feel and express my feelings, both positive and negative.

I have the right to make mistakes.

I have the right to have my own opinions and convictions.

I have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

I have the right to change my mind or decide on a different course of action.

I have the right to protest unfair treatment or criticism.

I have the right to expect honesty from others.

I have the right to my own values and standards.

I have the right to be angry at someone I love or anybody for that matter.

I have the right to say "I don't know" no matter what the question may be.

I have the right to negotiate for change.

I have the right to be in a non-abusive environment.

I have the right to ask for help or emotional support.

I have the right to my own needs for personal space and time, even if others want my company.

I have the right not to have to justify myself to others.

I have the right not to take responsibility for someone else's behavior, feelings, or problems.

I have the right not to have to anticipate others' needs and wishes.

I have the right not to always worry about the goodwill of others.

I have the right to choose not to respond to a situation.

I have the right to be respected and taken seriously.

I have the right to a happy life.

I have the right to my freedom.

When I completed the therapy program, I received a certificate. I call it my diploma. I told my therapist, "This program changed my life." But she said to me, "No, Micarline, you did it. And I'm proud of you."

# ABOUT Rise

Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and to guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

Our tri-annual print magazine and monthly stories on our website, [www.risemagazine.org](http://www.risemagazine.org), help parents advocate for themselves and their children. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use Rise stories in parent groups and parenting education classes. We partner with parent advocacy organizations to use Rise stories in child welfare reform.

Stories in this issue were developed in partnership with the Safe Mothers, Safe Children program of the ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute at NYU Langone

Medical Center; the Brooklyn Family Defense Project; and the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP).

Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at [nora@risemagazine.org](mailto:nora@risemagazine.org) or (646) 543-7099 for information about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work. For help with a child welfare case, please contact our partner organization, Children Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a parent advocacy and peer support organization in East Harlem, NY: [www.cwop.org](http://www.cwop.org) or 212-348-3000. For youth perspectives on foster care, visit [www.representmag.org](http://www.representmag.org).

Rise is fiscally sponsored by the Maidstone Foundation. Rise supporters include the Child Welfare Fund, Dammann Fund, North Star Fund, NYC Children's Services, and the Viola W. Bernard Foundation.

## Subscribe to Rise

Order copies of Rise for yourself, or to hand out to parents, foster parents, or staff. Rise is published three times a year.

# of copies per issue	price / yr
10	\$30
25	\$60
50	\$110
100	\$195
500	\$955

To order visit [www.risemagazine.org/pages/e-store.html](http://www.risemagazine.org/pages/e-store.html).

You can fax us a purchase order at (212) 279-8856.



## HEALING OURSELVES, HEALING OUR CHILDREN

A parenting skills workbook, 86 pp.  
10 stories, discussion guides and worksheets, \$12

Rise workbooks use true stories to model how parents have made changes in their families. *Healing Ourselves, Healing Our Children* shows how parents who grew up with chaos, trauma, or family separation can build safe, nurturing homes. Stories focus on setting routines, improving parent-child communication, and using positive discipline. Each story is accompanied by a discussion guide and worksheet. Ideal for use in a parenting class or support group.

### TO ORDER GO TO:

<http://www.risemagazine.org/pages/e-store.html>

## Rebuilding Ourselves

*After Iraq—and removal—I had to heal myself and my daughter.*

BY NICOLE GOODWIN

I learned early on that black women are supposed to be "strong" and endure pain in silence. The three years I spent in the military and the five-and-a-half months I spent stationed in Iraq taught me the same lessons: Be strong. Be silent.

A month after my daughter, Shylah, was born, I kissed her good-bye and flew off to Iraq. When I came home, I brought painful memories with me in the form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I was riddled with anger, self-hatred and loneliness.

### A Joyful Reunion

The one bright spot was my daughter. Seeing her eyes light up when it dawned on her that I was her mom gave me great hope that I could make things right.

But over the years, my PTSD grew worse. I had nightmares so bad I would wet the bed. Eventually I had trouble getting up in the mornings.

Then one day in January 2010, when I was having a particularly hard time, I slapped Shylah, who was 6. She told her therapist and the therapist called Child Protective Services.

My daughter was in care for six months. Most of that time, I was lucky to see her almost every day.

I also spent six weeks in a veterans' hospital for women who had been raped while serving their country. There I got to talk about other problems that I'd never dealt with, like being molested in childhood and the rift it put between my mother and me. When I left, I thought I was ready for Shylah.

### An Angry Reunion

But when Shylah came home, she would go from zero to sixty having complete meltdowns. When I

told her she needed a time out, she would kick, punch and bang her head. When we argued, she would say the most hurtful things, like, "You don't love me," or "You never wanted me."

For about four months, the battles continued. Then the social worker at Shylah's school introduced me to the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a parent-led advocacy organization in New York.

At CWOP I joined a reunification group where we read Rise stories by parents who had reunified. Those stories helped me see that believing in your family's recovery is the most important thing.

### The Mom I Want to Be

I also took a class called the Parenting Journey. There I wrote a letter to my mother expressing the feelings of abandonment that were at the core of my sadness. Writing that letter helped me focus my energies on the mother I wanted to be—a mother that listens, is nurturing and forgiving, and takes responsibility.

With Shylah, I went to family therapy. Over time, I learned that Shylah had cried for me every night, and that she felt blamed for what was happening. One of the hardest things for me to hear was that Shylah felt abandoned by me. Even though it hurt to hear how I had hurt my daughter, I realized all my hard work was paying off when she wanted to hold my hand again, or be held, or here and there, gave me a kiss.

For a long time I thought my traumas made me strange and unlovable. At some points, I thought I didn't deserve to have my daughter. My daughter hugs me now for no reason, and it feels glorious. Little by little we're rebuilding ourselves.