



Life Patterns That Increase Protection Against Child Sexual Abuse

Child safety hinges on relationships, routines, and accountability layers—not impassioned slogans or single-policy adjustments

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SEXUAL ABUSE

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Across parts [one](#) and [two](#), one theme becomes unavoidable: risk factors tend to cluster. When instability, isolation, weak supervision, emotional distress, substance use, and risky sexual behavior overlap, a child’s vulnerability rises—while the protective “friction” that would normally stop a perpetrator often falls away.

That matters because prevention can’t stay limited to awareness campaigns alone. Many communities have improved at recognizing warning signs and responding faster, but major gaps remain in proactively reducing the deeper, underlying conditions that make abuse more likely in the first place.

The good news is that these risk patterns have practical opposites. If vulnerability increases in predictable ways, then protection can also be strengthened in predictable ways—through stable relationships, attentive caregiving, layered community oversight, reduced drug and alcohol exposure, emotional healing resources, and institutions (including faith communities) that pair meaning and belonging with humility, transparency, and safeguards.

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What follows is a prevention framework drawn directly from the patterns in the research: 10 life patterns that increase protection, with concrete steps families and communities can take to reduce opportunity for offenders and increase safety for children.

Multiple, overlapping risk factors

When less-educated parents who are no longer married and use alcohol are raising children in a home that struggles to find sufficient material resources, lacks healthy community connections and doesn't have any higher purpose or meaning, those children are, statistically speaking, more likely to be sexually abused, according to studies across the world.

It's helpful to also acknowledge some overall limitations in research—for instance, research in countries outside the United States is more limited. There is also [less examination](#) in the research of both protective factors and abused boys, compared with risk factors and abused girls.

Yet what we learn from such analyses can be hugely beneficial. Even one risk factor can have consequences, with cumulative risk emerging as these factors add up. In one [2020 study](#) looking at three separate “key risk indicators”—exposure to parental domestic violence, parental addiction, parental mental illness—the authors observed that “levels of child sexual abuse for women in 2010 were 28.7 percent for those experiencing all three, and 2.1 percent for women with no risk indicators. Those with two or more risk factors had between five- and eightfold higher odds of child sexual abuse.”

For instance, a younger child who has experienced significant prior trauma, is largely isolated, in a setting of high stress (poverty) and high conflict (divorce), enduring emotional disorder or substance abuse, and with limited educational background, is much more likely to experience abuse, including sexual victimization—compared with a child facing none of those environmental conditions.

Likewise, an adult or older teen who has experienced significant prior trauma, is largely detached from other relationships, enduring immense current stress (financially or otherwise) and high surrounding conflict, enduring emotional disorder or substance abuse, and with limited educational background is more likely to perpetrate abuse on others—including sexual violence, compared with an adult or older teen with none of those conditions.

Overall, we can see that various lifestyle patterns constitute a substantial risk burden for victimization. “Health-related risk-taking behaviors are associated with the likelihood of being a victim of violence” research on [adolescent lifestyle risk and violent victimization](#) shows, from data on students in South Carolina who reported engaging in risky lifestyles like drug and alcohol abuse, and sexual promiscuity and faced increased risks of being victims of dating violence. They call this a “lifestyles theory explanation of violent victimization in adolescent dating relationships.”

In summary, children will have very [different levels of vulnerability](#) to sexual violence depending on the atmospheres and family/community lifestyles they are being raised in. These [clear patterns in the risk-factor literature](#) can thus act as powerful signals to guide more effective prevention strategies. Based on our review, we outline below what that might look like.

10 life patterns that increase protection

A tremendous amount of effort over recent decades has gone to the prevention of abuse in all its forms, including the most tragic of all: child sexual abuse. Much of that has centered around awareness raising efforts—such as [teaching children](#) the difference between good and bad touch and [helping adults](#) become more vigilant to watch for signs of abuse.

Despite significant benefits from these and other encouraging efforts, the CDC [highlights](#) “critical gaps” in the U.S. response, with “few effective evidence-based strategies available to proactively protect children from child sexual abuse.”

This U.S. agency then emphasizes our need to “increase our understanding of risk and protective factors for child sexual abuse perpetration and victimization”—which can guide, in the words of [Norwegian researchers](#), more “targeted prevention strategies for children and adolescents.”

In addition to identifying abuse already taking place and intervening more effectively to stop it, expanded awareness could supercharge efforts to root out the underlying conditions that make abuse more likely —“ensuring that all children have safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments,” as the CDC states.

A child raised in this context will be significantly less likely to be victimized.

That’s why I believe these patterns above can be so helpful—informing more proactive steps to further protect children. Notice how many researchers have been calling for the same thing:

- “Efforts to decrease child sexual abuse need to be [based on research](#),” Zych & Marín-López emphasize, calling for “more accessible evidence regarding the breadth of risk and protective factors and effectiveness of interventions to reduce child sexual abuse needs to be provided to policymakers.”
- “[Novel data on perpetrators of the violence and the risk factors for experiencing violence](#),” Pankowiak et al. state, “provides further context to inform safeguarding strategies.”
- “By identifying and understanding the [systemic factors which enable child sexual abuse](#),” Dodd et al. write, in the context of sports, “more effective prevention and policy interventions can be developed to make sport safer for children.”
- “Knowledge of the [risk and protective factors](#),” Owusu-Addo et al. agree, “can guide and inform the development” of better prevention programs.
- This aligns with other efforts to develop “a prediction model to [identify those at greatest risk](#)”—specifically aiming to “identify youths at greatest risk before they are harmed.”

These patterns point to straightforward implications that are often overlooked in public discourse.. Based on our review, children raised by educated, happily married in homes with adequate financial support, nourishing community connections and a sincere and healthy religious commitment, those children are far less likely to get caught up in drugs and alcohol and are less likely to be victimized sexually.

More specifically, here are 10 steps that could protect children based on these findings:

1. Helping lift families and communities out of poverty
2. Expanding educational opportunities for mothers, fathers and children
3. Helping ensure more children are raised within a healthy marriage and continue into adulthood with happy family ties
4. Strengthening exhausted parents' ability to nurture their children and create strong bonds
5. Surrounding children and families with layers of trustworthy social support
6. Proactively encouraging more lasting emotional healing
7. Encouraging teens to delay sexual behavior until marriage
8. Teaching empathy, compassion and self-control to those struggling with aggression and anger
9. Helping prevent youth drinking and support adults in finding freedom
10. Embedding children in a healthy spiritual/religious atmosphere

(A broader summary of these concrete steps is [available in the Deseret News](#) — *with my full analysis of all 215 sexual abuse studies available at my Substack.*) As reflected here, some of the best ways to ensure children experience reduced risk for sexual exploitation may be to find ways to encourage an upbringing embedded within:

- Healthy marriages with parents willing to nurture lasting attachments to their children—with back-up support from multiple protective layers of trustworthy community connections.
- An atmosphere where education is prioritized and there are adequate resources to provide for the financial needs of the family.
- An environment where teens are encouraged to avoid drugs and alcohol, delay sexual behavior until marriage and learn how to control their anger and impulses.
- An atmosphere where youth and adults are provided with support for deeper healing when current emotional struggles exist or previous abuse has taken place.

- An environment where faith, spirituality and religious community provide children and parents with higher purpose and deeper meaning to life.

According to the available research literature, a child raised in this context will be significantly less likely to be victimized sexually (and by other forms of abuse). By contrast, a child raised within an atmosphere of conflicted or broken families, neglectful parents, poor education, financial deficits, spiritual detachment, limited healing resources, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, community acceptance of aggression and out of control anger, faces a higher risk.

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If you or someone you love has experienced sexual assault of any kind and needs additional support in the U.S., contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline (1-800-656-HOPE)—with virtual and text-based options available. This is a confidential networking service in the U.S. that helps connect victims with local agencies that can offer therapeutic support across the country. Similar kinds of hotlines exist in many countries around the world.

About the author



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