



Online Child Sexual Victimization: Picking up the Pieces

**A GUIDE FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS AFTER
VICTIMIZATION IS DISCOVERED**



CANADIAN CENTRE *for CHILD PROTECTION*[®]
Helping families. Protecting children.

- 1 GETTING HELP
- 2 ABOUT THIS GUIDE
- 2 DISCOVERING ONLINE SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION
- 4 UNDERSTANDING HOW YOUR CHILD MAY BE FEELING
- 5 RESPONDING WHEN YOUR CHILD HAS CONCERNING CONTACT ONLINE
- 13 IMPACTS OF ONLINE SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION ON YOUTH
- 16 SAFETY SUPPORT PLAN
- 18 HEALING AND MOVING FORWARD
- 19 STEPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD
- 24 REFERENCES
- 25 RECOMMENDED READING

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ALL INFORMATION HEREIN IS OF A GENERAL NATURE AND IS NOT INTENDED AS ADVICE. READERS SHOULD ASSESS ALL INFORMATION IN LIGHT OF THEIR OWN CIRCUMSTANCES, THE AGE AND MATURITY LEVEL OF THE CHILD THEY WISH TO PROTECT, AND ANY OTHER RELEVANT FACTORS.

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GETTING HELP

If you have discovered concerning or inappropriate online communication between your child and an adult/youth, it may be important to seek outside assistance to help you stabilize the situation and keep your child safe. Depending on the circumstances, this may involve contacting your local law enforcement or making a report to [Cybertip.ca](https://www.cybertip.ca)®.

REPORT TO CYBERTIP.CA

Online: [cybertip.ca/report](https://www.cybertip.ca/report)

Toll-free: 1-866-658-9022

CONSULT WITH US ABOUT A CONCERNING SITUATION

Email: support@protectchildren.ca

Toll-free: 1-866-658-9022



If you know or believe there are pictures/videos of your child's sexual victimization online, [Cybertip.ca](https://www.cybertip.ca) can help submit them into Project Arachnid® and reduce their availability online.

Project Arachnid is a tool that crawls the internet to detect known pictures/videos of child sexual abuse material for the purpose of issuing takedown notices to hosting providers.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to help parents or guardians whose tween/teenage child has experienced online victimization. It offers practical considerations for how to support your child and take appropriate action to protect them. With your help, it is possible for your child to move forward and heal from what has happened to them.

TERMS USED THROUGHOUT THE GUIDE

Parent: Any person with parental authority, including legal guardians, foster parents, and other parental substitutes.

Youth: A tween or teen.

Person of concern: An adult or youth who has victimized/is victimizing a youth online.

DISCOVERING ONLINE SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION

When a youth experiences online sexual harm, their general sense of safety can be shaken. Providing a safe and supportive environment can help restore their sense of safety and security.

It is common for a youth who has been harmed online to blame themselves for what happened, believing they attracted the attention. And when a youth has been victimized online by more than one person, they are even more likely to blame themselves. This can increase their feelings of shame and guilt. It is critically important for you to reinforce with your child that what happened to them is not their fault.

As your child's primary caregiver, you will play one of the most important roles in helping them. Therefore, it is important that you receive the support you need to work through your own feelings in order for you to be emotionally available for your child. You are one of the most important people in their healing process, offering support, advocacy, nurturing, and protection.

Feelings you may be experiencing:

- Shock
- Fear
- Anger
- Confusion
- Anxiety
- Overwhelm
- Devastation
- Guilt



Models in image intended as illustrative.

Questions that may arise:

- How did this happen?
- How did I not know this was happening?
- Will my child be okay?
- How do I help my child?
- How did I not protect my child?
- How do I manage my own anger, fear, and sense of guilt?
- What happens now?

UNDERSTANDING HOW YOUR CHILD MAY BE FEELING

Common feelings of youth who have experienced online harm:

- Worry about their parents' reaction
- Afraid of getting in trouble
- Worry about causing their family stress
- Worry about offline friends finding out
- Worry about being recognized by someone who has seen the pictures/videos
- Shame and humiliation
- Powerless and hopeless about the sharing of their pictures/videos online (or the risk that they may be shared at any time)
- If the pictures/videos were shared online, they may feel like they are being abused over and over again
- Fear of receiving threats from the person of concern
- Fear of receiving unwanted contact from others online



RESPONDING WHEN YOUR CHILD HAS CONCERNING CONTACT ONLINE

Carefully consider how you will intervene if you discover that your child has had or is having concerning contact online. The circumstances will be unique to your child and should be treated as such. Outside support and guidance may be required to develop a plan to intervene and ensure that proper supports are in place for your child (e.g., law enforcement, Cybertip.ca, school).



If a relationship/communication between your child and another person is exploitative and/or sexual in nature, it is important to consult with local law enforcement and/or Cybertip.ca.

When raising the situation with your child, they may:

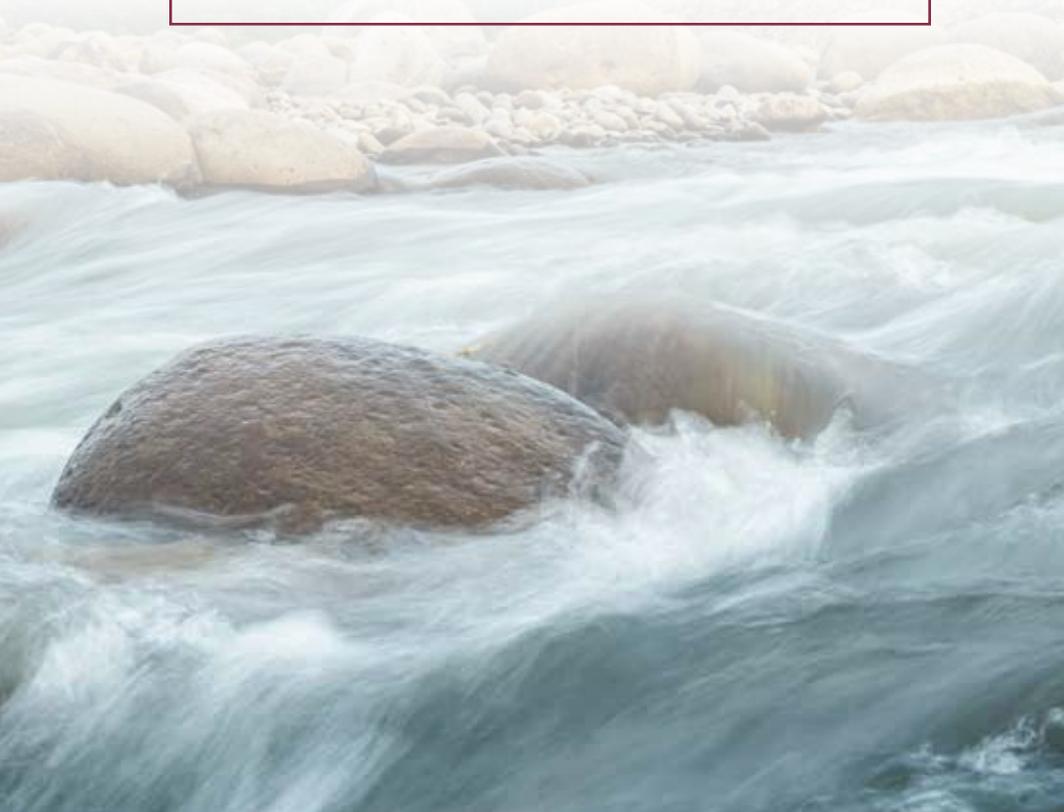
- Express little to no concern and minimize what's going on
- Be angry and resistant to talk about it
- Become desperate because their secret is out
- Believe they are in love with the person of concern as they have been manipulated and groomed
- Not understand that the relationship is exploitative and believe they are equally responsible for what has happened
- Be ashamed
- Express not knowing how to get out of the situation
- Show in their body language (e.g., shoulders/body relax) relief that a safe adult now knows

EMOTIONALLY PREPARING YOURSELF

Children and youth often worry about upsetting their parents or family, or getting in trouble. If your child perceives they have caused an emotional reaction from you, they may withhold or reshape information to protect you. It is, therefore, important that you work through your emotions—you are likely feeling a range of emotions—before talking to your child about what you have discovered. Feeling, acknowledging and addressing your emotions ahead of time will help you to remain calm in the face of a potentially strong emotional reaction from your child. Your calmness may help to calm their emotions and signal to them that you can handle the situation.



If you are concerned that your emotions may take over, it may be helpful to visualize yourself as a boulder in a river and your child's emotions as the water—no matter how wild and powerful the water rushes around the boulder, the boulder remains strong and still. Practice visualizing this in preparation for talking with your child.



GATHERING INFORMATION

Information gathering will be ongoing. It will begin when you first discover concerning communication and will continue when you talk with your child. Your child likely won't share everything all at once. They may share bits of information here and there over a period of time. It's important to keep the lines of communication open.

Information to gather:

- How do they know each other? Is this someone they know offline?
- If they met online, have they met or made plans to meet offline?
- Information about the person of concern (e.g., name, age, date of birth, city/province, username(s), email address, phone number).
- What platform(s) are they communicating on (e.g., social media, gaming, chat)?
- How long have they been in communication with one another?
- What is the nature of the communication?
- How often are they communicating?
- What is the intensity of the relationship?
- Have any pictures/videos been taken? If so, were they exchanged and/or possibly distributed to other people?



TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD

1. Engage your child in the conversation when you can dedicate the time and you are not going to be interrupted.
2. Before addressing the concerning behaviour, you can support this conversation best by letting your child know that you need to have a conversation about something serious—and first you want to reassure them that you love them. You can start with something like, “I love you, and I want to make sure you’re safe, and this is why it’s important that we communicate about difficult things sometimes.”
3. Talk to your child honestly and let them know that you are aware of the concerning online communication. Explain that you realize you do not have all the information, but you would like to hear from them what is going on.

It is important to remember how difficult it is for anyone to talk about inappropriate contact from another person, especially when it’s a youth who has had this type of experience. Therefore, it is unlikely they are going to tell you everything in the first conversation and they may be defensive and/or distressed.

Your child may respond by crying, getting angry, becoming worried, embarrassed, desperate, or defensive, or they may completely shut down and not respond—all of these responses are understandable.

4. Reassure your child that you will sort through this together. Stay calm and express that you understand how difficult this situation is for them. Let them know that what happened to them is not their fault and you are sorry this has happened to them. Again, offer reassurance that you love and accept them. You might say something like, “I want you to know, no matter what, I love you. Nothing you have experienced will change how much I love you.”
5. Let them know that you are getting involved and putting protective measures in place—not because they are in trouble, but to keep them safe because it is your job as their parent.
6. Your child may be resistant to talk to you about it, and that’s normal. Youth often share information in small pieces. It will be more of a process than a one-time event. As you learn new information, you will start to put the pieces together like a puzzle and get a sense of what is going on. Rather than pressing for too much information all at once, approach it in doses, getting a little at a time. If your child gets very emotional or shuts down, stop the conversation and regroup.

What your child needs from you:

- To know that they are not in trouble
- To hear from you that you aren’t angry with them
- To hear from you that you love them
- To know that you can handle what is happening and will protect them
- To hear from you that you are sorry this happened to them and it is not their fault
- To be treated as the person you know them to be, not as fragile or damaged

AFTER TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD

1. Take steps to interrupt all communication your child is having with the person of concern. Your child may be unable to stop contact on their own and may in fact feel compelled to continue contact—this is common. In situations where a relationship is well established, taking devices away may be necessary to help create distance in the communication and space from the influence of the person of concern. Remind your child that these measures are in place, not because they are in trouble, but for their safety.
2. Carefully involve other safety supports around your child. These supports could include extended family, school personnel, and supportive friends and their parents. Reach out to these individuals purposefully—the intent is to not overexpose your child, but to make select supportive individuals aware that your child is going through a tough time so they can be an additional source of support for your child.
3. Be available and present for your child. Even if your child pushes you away and resists your support, it is important to stay closely involved, physically present, and responsive to the situation.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR SECURING DEVICES AND INFORMATION

1

Secure your child's device(s)

Take your child's phone and other device(s) until you determine what steps to take for safety reasons. Remind your child again that this is for their safety and it is temporary.

For older youth, it may not be realistic to take their device(s), even temporarily. If this is your situation, it is important that you pay close attention to their device use and provide additional support as needed. Refer to the *Safety Support Plan* section later in this guide for additional steps you can take.

!

If you are concerned your child's reaction may affect their safety (e.g., hurt themselves, run away), or if at any time your child goes into crisis, contact a crisis line for immediate assistance.

Visit <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/mental-health-services/mental-health-get-help.html> for Canadian crisis line information.

2

Contact Cybertip.ca for assistance

Online: [cybertip.ca/report](https://www.cybertip.ca/report)
Toll-free: 1-866-658-9022

3

Search the device(s)

Search through the device for information to help determine what has transpired—communication, sexual communication, picture/video sharing, livestreaming, etc. If you don't already have your child's usernames/passwords, you will need your child to share them with you.

Take care to minimize your child's distress and overexposure while searching the device. You may want to involve them in the decision of who is best to go through the device. If content is found, do not delete it; safely secure it and consult with local law enforcement and/or Cybertip.ca.

SEARCHING FOR AND SECURING CONTENT:



For assistance navigating the apps on your child's device, contact [Cybertip.ca](https://www.cybertip.ca).

- Review all messaging or social networking applications (apps) where pictures/videos can be shared, such as Snapchat®, Instagram®, Facebook®, Facebook Messenger®, Kik Messenger®, WhatsApp®, and VSCO®, to name a few.
 - Explore what your child has been posting on these apps to ensure they are using the apps safely.
 - All of these apps have a chat function. Search the conversations within the apps.
- Review all photo or file storing/sharing applications on the device, such as iPhoto, Google Photos, iCloud®, Dropbox®, Microsoft OneDrive®. Be sure to check all albums/folders, including *Hidden* and *Recently Deleted*.
- Collect any information available about the individual your child is communicating with, such as their name, username, any identifying information, pictures, etc.



If problematic sexual pictures/videos, chat logs, or conversations are found on the device, do not delete them. Secure copies and contact [Cybertip.ca](https://www.cybertip.ca) for next steps.

IMPACTS OF ONLINE SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION ON YOUTH

Every youth has unique reactions to traumatic experiences. Not every youth who has a traumatic response to online exploitation will show the same signs. It is important to know that your child could be distressed even if they don't act the way an adult might expect someone in distress to behave. Sometimes the signs are obvious and sometimes they're not.

Youth who have experienced online exploitation may feel:

- Emotionally overwhelmed
- Numb
- Withdrawn
- Depressed
- Anxious
- Irritable
- Hopeless
- Lack of motivation or interest
- Shame and humiliation
- Lack of trust
- Lost sense of who they are



Youth can also demonstrate symptoms that may include:

- Difficulty with memory and concentration
- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Chronic pain
- Difficulty sleeping
- Nightmares
- Loss of appetite
- Compromised immune system (getting sick easily)
- Self-destructive behaviour (self-harming)



YOUR CHILD MAY WANT TO CONNECT WITH THE PERSON WHO VICTIMIZED THEM

A youth who has been sexually victimized online may have conflicting feelings about the person who victimized them. In some situations, the feeling of being special to someone and liking the attention they receive can be confusing for a youth as it is mixed in with the uncomfortable feelings associated with the victimization. In other situations, a youth can feel panicked about the person who victimized them as the victimization may have been degrading and humiliating.

A youth who has experienced online sexual victimization may want to know if the person who victimized them:

- is alright
- is upset with them
- knows what they did was wrong
- is going to get in trouble for what they did
- is going to retaliate and harm them

While it is normal to feel this way, the space you create by disrupting contact between your child and the person of concern is essential — it helps provide an opportunity for you to challenge the manipulated beliefs purposefully shaped by the person of concern to control your child. It is important for you to understand and show compassion for how confusing the situation may be for your child. Many youth experience a lot of distress as a result of their trust being betrayed. Regardless of the circumstances of the victimization, the betrayal is toxic and corrosive.



SAFETY SUPPORT PLAN

INCREASED SUPERVISION

Supervision is a key element in the personal safety of all children and youth, **but is even more necessary for children and youth who have experienced victimization** as they may be vulnerable to re-victimization.



As the adolescent brain is not yet fully developed, youth often continue to go back to unsafe/unhealthy relationships and communication with others online. It is important that parents be the 'brakes' for their child to stop them from this type of communication.

Parents and caregivers need to establish a more protective environment around the child for a period of time. This requires direct adult supervision and support from many individuals during the healing process.



*Steps to consider:***1**

Circle of support — Establish a team of people to be a part of your child's safety circle. This may include family members, school personnel, friends, a therapist, their health care provider, victim services workers, law enforcement, etc.

2

Online supervision — Pay close attention to internet use and devices. When technology has been misused to facilitate harm, the youth may feel compelled to be online to gain some control, so adult supervision is critical. It is important to understand the capabilities of the technology your child uses and establish safe filters and settings prior to them re-engaging online. It is also important to utilize the people in your child's safety circle to help with this as your child may look for other ways to access the internet/devices (e.g., at school, a friend's device).

3

Safety education — Introduce safety information to enhance your child's safety and reduce their risk of victimization moving forward. Visit protectchildren.ca/order to explore our resources library.

HEALING AND MOVING FORWARD

As their parent, your love and support during this time will help your child heal and move forward. Research tells us that when children have a strong supportive relationship with a parent, it serves as a protective factor for that child. Children with caring adults around them are more resilient in the face of stress. Helping your child heal can begin with letting them know that what happened to them was not their fault and reassuring them that you love and support them.

A connection with even one caring person—a sibling, parent, teacher, grandparent, or friend—helps to give hope and reduce the destructive impact of online victimization.

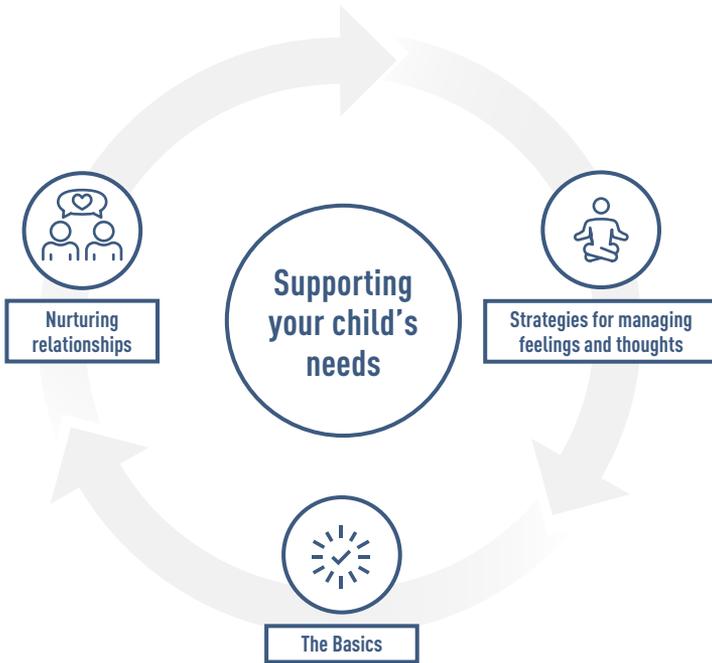


Hope is an essential element in recovering from trauma. While we think of hope as a feeling, it is actually the foundation of a chemical reaction in the brain that calms fear and anger.

Your child needs to believe they can recover and move forward from this harmful experience.



STEPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD



1 **Build a sense of safety.**

Reassure your child they are not alone and you will get through this tough time together.



2 **Reach out for support.**

Lean on supportive family members and friends for your emotional support so you can be emotionally available for your child.



3

Consult with your health care provider(s).

They will be able to help support you and your child, as well as provide referrals for services such as counselling, occupational therapy, art therapy, music therapy, dance therapy, etc. Earlier intervention promotes better resilience in the long run.



4

Learn more about impacts of trauma on development.

Work with trauma-informed professionals to learn more about impacts of trauma and supporting your child through their healing.



5

Back to Basics:

Establish regular routine. Clear routines promote consistency, predictability, and reliability that can help your child regain a sense of security and control.

Provide balanced nutrition. Prepare balanced food options for your child that are low in refined sugar. Balanced nutrition is important for helping their body to regulate.

Provide time for physical activity. Engage your child in 30 minutes of daily physical activity for direct mental health benefits.

Help manage night sleeping. Nightmares and generalized fearfulness are common for youth who have experienced abuse. It can be helpful, for example, to leave lights on in their room or to sit with them until they fall asleep.

Ensure your child has time for fun. Make time for doing fun things that are structured and safe so they have a chance to be a tween/teen.

Help your child stay connected. Encourage them to stay connected to people who are supportive of them and to activities they enjoy or enjoyed in the past.



6

Be patient and tolerant of moody behaviour such as clinginess, pushing away, and outbursts.

Let your child know that you can handle their big feelings and will stay by their side. It may be helpful for you to remember that your child is behaving the way they are as a result of what has happened to them, not because there is something wrong with them.



7

Help manage overwhelming emotions.

The body is the best intervention tool. We have to settle the body before we can settle the brain. Youth engage when they feel safe and they use it to connect. Playing catch or board games, doing crafts, etc. while you talk can help them regulate and connect. Stay calm and keep the environment low key. Be consistent and help your child understand, express, and tolerate their strong emotions. They will get through strong feelings. Reassure them that the feeling will pass, the way a storm passes. For more activities, see *Additional Practices* in the next section.



8

Help manage flooding thoughts and feelings.

Help your child see the link between their thoughts and feelings. Assist them in understanding how working on controlling their thinking can help control how they feel. Encourage them to take a break from upsetting thoughts by engaging in an activity they enjoy — perhaps colouring or art, listening to music, watching a show, or being physically active.



9

Supervise online activity.

Supervise online activities, ensure safety settings are in place, and pay close attention to whom they are communicating with online. Children who have experienced trauma can have a difficult time assessing risk and could be susceptible to revictimization. Explain the care that needs to be taken with information, pictures, and videos shared. Turn off Wi-Fi at night and consider keeping devices out of their bedroom overnight.



10

Be supportive as your child processes their abuse experience.

You can take an active role in deciding what comes next in their life. Reinforce that this negative experience doesn't define who they are. Explain that healing is a process that takes time; they will have good and bad days, and you are by their side to help every step of the way.



11

Advocate for your child.

Be their champion and work with professionals and your circle of support to help your child recover from trauma. Help others view your child through a trauma-healing lens so their expectations are realistic and their responses are supportive.



12

Take care of yourself.

To effectively take care of your family, you must take care of yourself. Taking care of a child who has experienced trauma is hard work and it affects the entire family. Seek the supports necessary for you and your family. For example, you may wish to find a counsellor for each family member. Your child depends on you for support.

ADDITIONAL PRACTICES

Below are additional practices you can do with your child to help them connect and regulate emotions.

- **Deep breathing:** Practice deep breathing and relaxation exercises. These exercises are among the best ways to regulate the body. Try square breathing — have your child breath in for four seconds, hold for four seconds, breath out for four seconds, hold for four seconds, and then repeat.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** Practice relaxation exercises to help ground and regulate the body. For a script you can use to guide your child through progressive muscle relaxation, see *Recommended Reading*.
- **Mindfulness:** Give your child something to squeeze and move back and forth between their hands, or toss a ball between the two of you to help bring them into the present moment and out of their thoughts. Help them slow down their thoughts by playing “I spy” or picking a colour and finding items of that colour in the room.
- **Physical exercise:** Encourage movement and physical exercise; put on music and dance, go bike riding, run, or play a physically active game.
- **Visualization:** Help your child visualize a calm and relaxing place—imaginary or real—where they can go to take a break when thoughts are overwhelming or they feel unsafe.
- **Journal:** Have your child journal, write stories or poems, draw, colour or paint, or listen to music.
- **Emotions:** Teach your child emotion words and play games to label how they are feeling. Identifying and labelling feelings can help them manage and process their feelings.
- **Social engagement:** Engage your child’s brain by tapping into their curiosity in something; build something, put together a puzzle, play a game, or cook together.

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RECOMMENDED READING

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New Directions. (2021). *Making sense of trauma*. www.makingsenseoftrauma.ca
Tools for responding to trauma in children and youth.

Smiling Mind. (2021). <https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>
A free mindfulness and meditation website and app for adults, families, and youth.

Trauma Recovery. (2021). *Introduction to recovery*. Manitoba Trauma Information & Education Centre <http://trauma-recovery.ca/>
Resources on understanding and recovering from trauma.

UC Regents, UC Berkeley School of Law. (2021). Progressive muscle relaxation script. https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/Progressive_Muscle_Relaxation.pdf

A script for practicing progressive muscle relaxation.



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