

Living Bridges Project Transcript
Ending the Secrecy - Ending the Secrecy Part 2: We Cannot Be Led By Fear

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VOICEOVER: The following audio is part of the Living Bridges Project, an anonymous story-collecting project documenting responses to child sexual abuse. For more, please visit LivingBridgesProject.com.

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INTERVIEWER: How is this experience, being a CSA survivor and then all that you went through with your family, how did that impact and affect how you raised your child as a parent?

STORYTELLER: That's a very good question. It completely had everything to do with how I raise my child. I would say the first three years of her life, four years of her life, I was an absolute, 150% mess. This was about the time in my life where I was either an insomniac or I just was having horrific nightmares. I was completely terrified that someone was going to hurt my child and I saw myself getting into this pattern of wanting to protect her and shield her from the world. And I quickly realized that was not the right approach. I had to think about this information that I keep thinking about. I didn't have this information, I didn't have this language - she needs to have this.

So, after getting myself into therapy and working through - continuing to work through that - I decided I was going to talk to my daughter completely openly about her body, about sex, about desire, about relationships, about all of it. That it was going to be, of course, age appropriate, but I was also going to name body parts what they needed to be named - their proper names. I told her that she had the right to not be hugged if she didn't want to be hugged. And she used that all the time. She would say, "I don't want you to hug me. My mommy told me that I could say no," and I said, "and you can say no to me too. You can say no to me, you can say no to any adult." So, I gave her a lot of language around her body and how she could be with her body if she wanted to be naked, if she was going to masturbate, if she liked another kid - everything. And a part of that was around sexual orientation at that time. I came out and talking about that and what it meant to have a parent who was queer and all of it. So, we talked really openly about stuff and she just had a lot of information and that made me really happy because we communicated about all of it all of the time.

There were no secrets and she always knew that she could ask me absolutely anything and that I would never get mad, that I would be happy that she asked me, and that I would just be a wealth of information for her and if I didn't know I'd figure it out and we could figure it out together. So, I think it created a - this envelope of safety. And as she was growing up and going through puberty - giving her condoms, talking about sex, giving her her first

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vibrator – everything. We were completely open and honest about sexuality as a whole and that made me feel very at ease and not anxious. It allowed her to know that she has the power and she can make decisions about her body the way she wants to. She also understands the world and oppression and sexual assaults. We talked about safety, we talked about you know – we would do self defense classes together, we talked about it in a very realistic way – not putting her in a nice, neat, little secure bubble – but that we live in a world that has violence. How do we talk about this? How do we navigate this? How do we try to stay safe? How do we engage other people about it? That was really one of the major pieces that drove me in my parenting with my child.

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I can pinpoint it to a very exact day because I'll never forget it because I still feel guilty to this day. My daughter – she was probably 4 at the time – this was when I was still losing my mind over stuff – she was 4 and she and her godbrother always hung out, they were always together playing around and I started noticing they were experimenting one another. That was an incredible trigger for me. And one day I caught them – I think pants down, they were humping each other or something and I literally just flipped. And I was a parent that didn't believe in spanking. I was more about write an essay, you can't watch TV, all this stuff – I completely lost it and I spanked my daughter so hard on her bottom. I just spanked her so hard and to this day I could still see her crying and it makes me want to cry because I hurt her because of my fear. I was like I can't do this – this hurt is making me hurt my own child. I'm not even talking to her about it. I'm just going to spank her and be like "Don't do that!" That's not going to shift anything, that's not going to change anything. That's not going to break the cycle, that's not going to do anything at all. After that happened, after feeling immense guilt and apologizing to my 4-year old child for spanking her as hard as I did, I stepped outside of myself and started thinking about what I needed to do to change that. I thought about it "What they're doing is natural." He's not making her do anything, she's not making him do anything. They were two curious kids playing together. That was completely different from my sister who is five years older than me making me do things and manipulating me to do things. They were the same age. I had to start separating my abuse from natural childhood curiosity that is just normal. I think that was the day that everything shifted for me. Because I was like I'm gonna end up terrifying my child. She is going to be terrified of sex, she's going to be terrified of intimacy, she's going to be terrified of being naked because she's going to associate everything to this day that I hit her because I found her doing something that felt really good to her.

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It's funny though because after that happened with her godbrother and I just flipped and I became another person, a couple years later, she – because I started talking to her, because I was being open with her – a couple years later, one of her friends – a little girl in the

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neighborhood – she would come up to the house and they’d go in the room and play with dolls and stuff – they closed to door. I didn’t think anything of it. One day, my daughter comes to me and she said, after her friend left, she said, “We did something.” And I was like, “Ok, what did you do?” and she’s like, “It felt good,” and I was like, “Ok, what was it?” She starts describing to me that they took their pants off, that they laid on top of each other, that they did this. Now, old me would have completely just – I wouldn’t be able to hear it – it would trigger me in such a big way. But I listened to everything she said and I was like: one, I was jumping for joy inside that she felt so comfortable to tell me about this intimate thing that she just did with this girl that felt good to her – and she described to me what they did, that it felt good, that she wanted to do it again.

Then, we had a great conversation about was it something that the both of them wanted to do, did someone tell them they had to do it. Without being direct and “Did she make you do it?” we just had a good conversation about - ultimately consent. We had a conversation about consent. And then we had a bigger conversation about homophobia because her parent is queer and now she’s in the room with a girl doing something which could totally be taken out of context. It was just a wonderful conversation. This is what the world is like, this is what homophobia is like, this is your body, you can do what you want with your body as long as you want it and the other person wants it. It was great and I walked away from that feeling so good and feeling like I did a good thing. I did a good thing for my child because she’ll always feel comfortable to come and talk to me about anything sexual or desire-based. I want to be able to help her because I continue to remember feeling absolutely isolated and alone that I could not ever go up to anyone and say whatever it was – whether I have this feeling between my legs or something happened and I don’t know what that is. It did a complete shift after that. When I started changing how I talk to her, being open and available for her to ask me questions – she had just poured everything out to me. She would just come and tell me everything. Everything. [laughs] To a point where I was like “Ok, you can keep that for yourself” [laughs] But she felt comfortable enough to share these things with me which made me feel really, really good.

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I strongly believe – and I’m going to say an overarching thing and then get a little specific, but I strongly believe communication is everything. It’s not, I think – we have to, as parents, we cannot be led by fear because when we’re led by fear we make comments like “Has anybody touched you?” That question to a kid is, “What does that mean?” What does it mean for a parent to tell their kid “has anybody touched you” because what if the kid was touched and it felt good? What if they’re confusing feelings about something? What if it was consensual? That is too cookie-cutter, right? For me, communication is about really asking questions and really talking about specific issues – being open to uncomfortable conversations, being open to say “I don’t know about that, but we can figure it out

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together.” Those are really important and kids will remember that because they will know that they can come to you as a resource.

One thing that I did with my daughter that was invaluable – the best thing I could have ever done was to craft out time for us that I allowed my daughter to ask me any question at all. Nothing was off the table. She can make any comment she wanted at all. Nothing was off the table and she would not get in trouble for it. So, every – I think we did this every month. I’d take her to a café, we’d sit down, have some tea or something, and I’d say “The floor is yours. Tell me whatever you want, ask me any question you want, you can even disclose something you did and you will not get in trouble for it.” It was the best thing because she would ask me stuff about sex, she would tell me things that she did and that was wrong [laughs], but it was almost like this get out of – for lack of a better word – get out of jail free card [laughs]. I want to know you and I want to know what’s happening and sometimes fear doesn’t allow us to share things because I’m so scared I’m going to get in trouble, I’m so scared of this. Let’s just break that fear down. You tell me. And I was also able to tell her things as well and it was just a safe space. Let’s just be open. Because we had that, she knew – because I would always say “you know, I might get upset, I might get angry, but I’ll never walk away from you, I’ll never abandon you. I’ll always try hard to understand what’s happening. You could always talk to me.” And that’s key. I think children need to know that they can talk to their parent/guardian, the adult who’s helping to raise them. That they can open up in a way with their parents or the person who’s loving them that it’s safe. I think there’s just too much fear around stuff.

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There’s no real one manual on how to raise kids. A lot of us do trial and error. We learn through our mistakes and we have to be gentle with ourselves around that. But I also think that parenting is not something we could do in a vacuum. I truly, truly believe that parenting has to be a community effort. Not to say that you have ten people telling you how to raise your child, but that you could have ten people in your life that you could go to as a parent to toss ideas around, to talk about situations that arise because we need other people’s input. We need other people’s trials and errors so that we can be better parents. We need to be talking about parenting in a bigger way. To me, that’s very radical because we have this idea of “this is my private life” and sometimes: when we keep things quiet or secrecy – it’s just a breeding ground for a lot of messed up stuff to happen. I think if you have people you trust in your life – other parents, creating a space where you can share ideas, share pitfalls, share these things and be open to critique – and that is a big thing for parents. No parent wants to be told how to parent. Being open to that idea, especially from someone that you care about – I think is a good thing because it’ll just be a – I believe a better process to parenting outside of a private realm.

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We share a lot of experiences that are the same. We're not alone. We're not alone. A lot of times we think "I'm the only one, I'm the only one." We're not alone. There's someone else out there struggling or experiencing this thing and it's up to us to really work to figure these things out and be the best parents that we can be with our children and move with the times. We're in a time where we're talking about rape culture. This is something that happens consistently at colleges. We need to be having some really meaningful and tense, hard conversations with our children, age appropriately, because this is the world we are living in, unfortunately. Not to have these conversations is just sad. It's just sad. We're not preparing. We don't have - it goes right back to what I said before about me not having the language or the resources. We don't want to keep creating a situation where our children don't have the language or the resources. So, as time moves on, we have to move along with the times and address the issue of rape, rape culture, address the issue of intimate partner violence, address the issue of child sexual abuse and how that is connected to so many other forms of violence and abuse in our life. It's time to open our eyes and really have the real conversations with our children and have them be as prepared as possible.

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