

**TO
ZERO**



Growing Up Safe:

A narrative and messaging guide
to prevent childhood sexual violence



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Acknowledgements

To Zero serves as a catalyst that seeks to support and amplify the work of individuals, organizations, and communities across the globe working to end childhood sexual violence. As part of this effort, To Zero supports partners to analyse and shift dominant narratives around childhood sexual violence that create barriers for their work.

To Zero, in partnership with Spitfire Strategies, gathered insights about existing narratives and brought together community partners in person in Dublin in September 2025 for a convening we called a Narrative Summit. The goal for the convening was to identify hopeful, aspirational narratives and messaging guidance for the field that uplifts solutions and prevention.

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Introduction

Is ending childhood sexual violence possible?

The report, "[A Vision To Zero](#)", which reflects conversations with over 330 experts in the field, shows that it is. But, even with significant evidence that childhood sexual violence is preventable and a roadmap for accelerating progress, it's still hard to convince people that a world without this violence is possible.

It's clear that our efforts to keep children around the world safe must include changing the narrative about childhood sexual violence from one of despair and avoidance to hope and action.

Why?

For too long, the dominant narrative around childhood sexual violence has been that it's inevitable — an unavoidable part of human nature — and that the only solution is to lock away the perpetrators. The alternative? Silence. We avoid the conversation because it feels too horrific to face.

These narratives lead to fatalism and inaction on one of the biggest public health issues facing children and young people globally. It means government officials focus on reactive policies rather than investing in evidence-based prevention programs; the media covers this issue through a lens of fear and sensationalism; survivors continue to feel unsafe speaking up; peers aren't equipped to recognize the signs or risk factors of abuse; and much more. This is especially true for children and young people who face additional risks of experiencing sexual violence because of their identities (race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, etc.).

With this in mind, To Zero commissioned [Spitfire Strategies](#) to develop this narrative and messaging guide to help advocates and practitioners advance a new narrative about childhood sexual violence that supports the global vision that "A Vision To Zero" laid out. The guidance herein builds on a high-level overview of existing media coverage of the topic, insights from leaders in the field shared at a Narrative Summit, and messaging best practice gleaned from Spitfire's over two decades of strategic communications experience.

Now is the time to reject fatalism and the stigma associated with childhood sexual violence because we know that practical, scalable solutions exist. Momentum is building: prevention programs are ready to scale, survivors are pushing us forward, and civil society is reinforcing messages about open dialogues and prevention. By working together to shift narratives about this critical public health issue facing millions of children globally, we can and will build a brighter future, one where every child and young person can live safe and healthy lives.

Terms to know

Stories are accounts that describe events from beginning to end, often stemming from a point of conflict or triumph. They often include frames and narratives, all working together to set the terms of an issue and loading each story and message with meaning and context.

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world and can set the terms for how people understand an issue. Think: individualism or collective action.

Narratives are the deeper stories that surround these issues; they are shortcuts for how to explain the world and the myths that define us. Think: It takes a village to raise a child.

Narrative framework

What do we know about the current dominant narrative frames?

Based on Spitfire’s high-level media review, which looked at over 400 news articles (in English) across six continents between May 2024 and May 2025 as well as conversations with participants during the Narrative Summit, we identified three main dominant frames about childhood sexual violence. Note this is not an exhaustive list but an overview of the most dominant frames in our review. These frames are also not mutually exclusive. They often operate together.

Underlying all these narratives is a sense of sensationalism, fatalism, inevitability, and punishment. When we work within these negative frames, it’s difficult to persuade people that childhood sexual violence is preventable or to center survivor’s voices.

As a field, we must prioritize and leverage narratives that hold systems accountable and push for systemic change.



Individual monsters

This frame blames “bad apples” or “monsters” for childhood sexual violence. As such, solutions rest on crime and punishment. This frame does not include context about WHY people commit these terrible crimes or highlight available and evidence-based solutions, which can make the issue feel unsolvable.



Systemic failures

This frame blames powerful, faceless institutions (e.g., Catholic church) and industries (e.g., Big Tech) for childhood sexual violence. Similar to the individual monster’s frame, the focus is on taking action after the crime rather than how to prevent it. While the individual monster frame focuses on punishment, institutional failures focus on conspiracy, cover up, power, and profit.



Policy means punishment

This frame characterizes punishment as the sole policy/practice to address childhood sexual violence. Increasingly severe punishments are the norm — not preventive measures or additional protections for children. This means the onus for the crime is focused on individuals rather than the systems that enable perpetrators and ignore effective prevention strategies. Also, the severity of the punishment is the headline, not the crime itself or survivors’ stories.

To convince people that childhood sexual violence isn’t inevitable, we must shift to aspirational frames that emphasize prevention, highlight solutions, reduce stigma, and instill hope.

Organizations are well-positioned to promote successful examples of prevention and compassion that center survivor voices, reduce stigma, and present a hopeful vision of a world without childhood sexual violence.

What do we need a new, aspirational narrative to do?

We must reframe childhood sexual violence as an issue we can prevent and solve together, rather than a matter of individual failings. To achieve this, the new narrative should:



- Promote the idea that we all have a **collective responsibility** to keep children and young people safe from sexual violence.
- **Highlight the systemic and structural factors** that enable childhood sexual violence, moving beyond dominant narrative frames that focus solely on individual perpetrators.
- Frame childhood sexual violence as a **solvable problem**, not an inevitability.
- Demonstrate **effective preventative measures and solutions** that are proven to work.
- **Decrease the stigma and shame** around this issue and ensure the **voices of survivors, children, and young people are heard.**
- **Increase attention and intention** around support for children and young people who are at **higher risk** of experiencing sexual violence due to their **identities** (e.g., race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, disability, socioeconomic status).
- **Challenge narratives** and prevailing **assumptions** that **some children are more deserving than others** of support, safety, dignity, and care.
- Consider different global perspectives and cultures, acknowledging that **narratives need to be adapted to local contexts**, as there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution to childhood sexual violence.
- Uplift and **celebrate people and organizations working everyday to keep children safe in media coverage**, rather than just focusing on perpetrators.

How will we know if we are successful in shifting the narrative?

Narrative change takes time and collaborative effort. We need to know how we'll track our progress toward our larger goals.

Short-term:

- **More media coverage focuses on solutions and prevention efforts globally.**
- Reporters are informed and can report on childhood sexual violence through a **survivor-centered lens that emphasizes hope and prevention.**
- **Survivors feel empowered** to share their experiences and lead childhood sexual violence response and prevention efforts.
- More stakeholders worldwide develop and implement campaigns and strategic communications that **showcase prevention success stories and solutions.**
- More parents and caregivers **openly discuss prevention with their children** and know what services are available to prevent and respond to harm.

Long-term:

- Legislators, policymakers, and other government officials **view childhood sexual violence as a preventable problem and therefore see it as their responsibility to eliminate it by championing expansive, comprehensive, evidence-based prevention efforts.**
- Tech companies, social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube), and AI systems are **more proactive about prioritizing child well-being and protecting children online before harm occurs.**
- Administrators, schools, and community leaders committed to child well-being **advance prevention programs and help build coalitions that sustain lasting change.**
- **Public awareness and open conversations** about childhood sexual violence **become normalised.**

Please review the resource section on [page 14](#) for more guidance about how to track narrative change.

Guiding messages

The high-level messaging below is intended to support organizations to counter harmful narratives about childhood sexual violence and seed a new, affirmative narrative that promotes prevention, solutions, and hope. Tailor these messages for different audiences based on their unique values and the barriers you need to overcome to inspire them to act.

A note about terminology

In our media scan, the term most often used to refer to this issue was “childhood sexual abuse.” In fact, although “childhood sexual violence” is the preferred term by many in the field, the coverage we reviewed did not include it at all. We recommend either shifting your terminology to meet audiences where they are or defining “childhood sexual violence” in clear and accessible language. Please note that stakeholders across the field are actively working to refine terminology and explore the use of metaphors when discussing issues related to childhood sexual violence. See the resources section on [page 14](#) for more information.

A note about the narrative approach

Research shows that messaging that taps into emotion is more effective in moving broad audiences than messaging focused on legal rights. The movement for marriage equality in the United States is a good example. Strategists shifted from the frame “marriage is a civil right” to the frame “love is love”, which helped lead the movement to victory. The messaging below uses a similar approach. It centers a “deservedness” frame that we can all deeply relate to, rather than a “rights-based” frame, which relies on legal frameworks.

Additionally, the messaging focuses on prevention because, as noted above, this is a critical gap in the current dominant narrative frames around childhood sexual violence. This emphasis does not diminish the importance of supporting survivors. Both are essential to ending childhood sexual violence.

We also recognize that cultural contexts shape how messages are received. Concepts, emotions, and frames can resonate differently across communities, and therefore messaging must be adapted to ensure it remains respectful, relevant, and effective.

Guiding messages

| Purpose | Messaging |
|--|--|
| <p>Value Lead with a shared value that generates broad support for the aspirational narrative.</p> | <p>We all deserve to grow up safe. Science tells us that a healthy and happy childhood has lifelong benefits – not just for individuals but for whole communities.</p> |
| <p>Barrier Breaker Address the limitations of the existing narrative that we want to shift without repeating the barrier.</p> | <p>Childhood sexual violence or any type of nonconsensual and forceful sexual conduct is one of the greatest threats to growing up safely. Globally, 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 7 boys experience some form of sexual violence.* That’s more than the number of children who have cancer or other serious diseases combined. Children and youth from marginalized backgrounds are at even greater risk.</p> <p>But instead of focusing on preventing harm in the first place, we spend millions locking up perpetrators, if we take action at all. No more.</p> |
| <p>Solution Identify the collective solution that the aspirational narrative supports. Organizations should add in specific solutions their audiences can support.</p> | <p>We can and must prevent childhood sexual violence.</p> <p>Whether it is [educating ourselves about childhood sexual violence, initiating necessary conversations in our communities, engaging with government, policy makers, the media and the private sector, uplifting survivor voices, or supporting the people who are already making a difference,] we all have a role to play in safeguarding childhoods.</p> |
| <p>Vision Describes how the world will look different if the narrative is realized.</p> | <p>We all benefit when children grow up safe. Together we can ensure that every child and young person grows up safe and joyful, giving them and their communities the opportunity to flourish and thrive.</p> |

* UNICEF. "Child Protection: Violence – Sexual Violence." Data.UNICEF.org. Accessed October 28, 2025.
<https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/sexual-violence/>

Bringing the narrative to life

Messages in action

But how do we uplift the narrative in our day-to-day work? Good question.

Pages 9 and 10 show examples from To Zero of how the above messaging can be brought to life in your organization's social posts and partnerships with reporters.

Social media posts

Social post example 1



Social post example 2

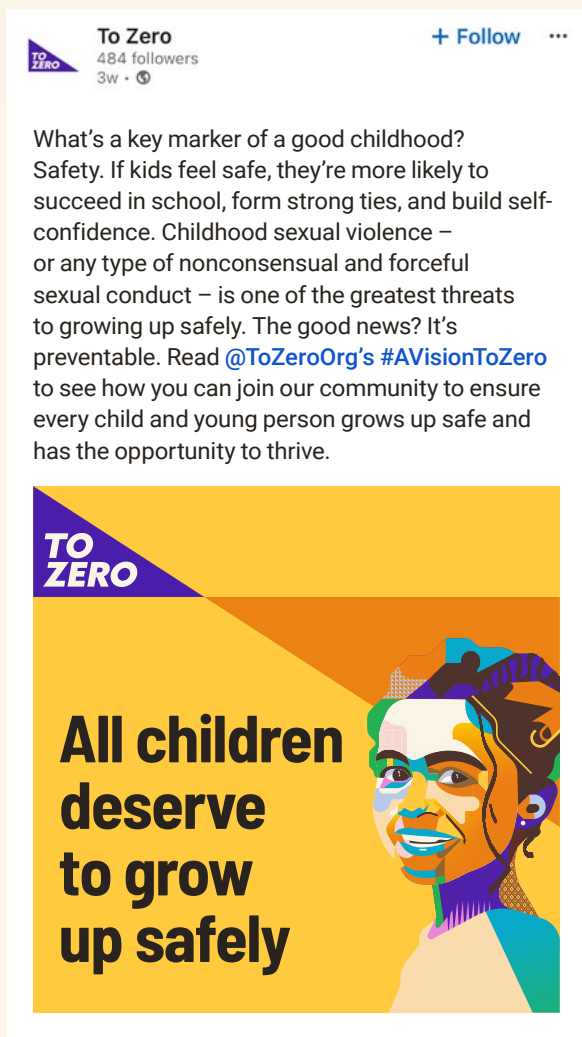


Social post example 3



Social media posts

Social copy (Instagram/LinkedIn)



The image shows an Instagram post from the account 'To Zero'. The profile picture is a purple square with 'TO ZERO' in white. The bio says '484 followers' and '3w · 🌐'. The post text reads: 'What's a key marker of a good childhood? Safety. If kids feel safe, they're more likely to succeed in school, form strong ties, and build self-confidence. Childhood sexual violence – or any type of nonconsensual and forceful sexual conduct – is one of the greatest threats to growing up safely. The good news? It's preventable. Read @ToZeroOrg's #AVisionToZero to see how you can join our community to ensure every child and young person grows up safe and has the opportunity to thrive.' Below the text is a graphic with a yellow background, a purple triangle in the top left corner containing 'TO ZERO', and a stylized illustration of a young girl's face. The text on the graphic says 'All children deserve to grow up safely'.

To Zero
484 followers
3w · 🌐

What's a key marker of a good childhood? Safety. If kids feel safe, they're more likely to succeed in school, form strong ties, and build self-confidence. Childhood sexual violence – or any type of nonconsensual and forceful sexual conduct – is one of the greatest threats to growing up safely. The good news? It's preventable. Read @ToZeroOrg's #AVisionToZero to see how you can join our community to ensure every child and young person grows up safe and has the opportunity to thrive.

TO ZERO

All children deserve to grow up safely

Social copy (X/Bluesky)



The image shows an X/Bluesky post from the account 'To Zero @ToZeroOrg'. The profile picture is a purple square with 'TO ZERO' in white. The bio says '1d'. The post text reads: 'We all have a role to play in safeguarding childhoods. Read @ToZeroOrg's #AVisionToZero and see how we can prevent childhood sexual violence.' Below the text is a graphic with a yellow background, a purple triangle in the top left corner containing 'TO ZERO', and a stylized illustration of a young girl's face. The text on the graphic says 'All children deserve to grow up safely'.

To Zero @ToZeroOrg · 1d

We all have a role to play in safeguarding childhoods. Read @ToZeroOrg's #AVisionToZero and see how we can prevent childhood sexual violence.

TO ZERO

All children deserve to grow up safely

News headlines

We must partner with reporters to ensure coverage reflects the aspirational frame. Here's an example of how we'd update a news headline to do so.

Original headline

~~Millions of children face sexual violence as AI deepfakes drive surge in new cases – latest global data~~

Revised headline

As AI deepfakes drive surge in childhood sexual violence, lawmakers, advocates and parents join forces to find solutions.

Recommended activities

New narratives only take root when they are shared and adopted widely. This guidance and messaging are meant to help the field uplift a more hopeful narrative about childhood sexual violence prevention.

Four ways you can integrate this framework and messaging into your day-to-day work

- 1** Partner with the media
- 2** Uplift stories about solutions
- 3** Tap into cultural moments
- 4** Champion collective action

1 Partner with the media

The majority of media coverage about childhood sexual violence is focused on the problem. Rarely does coverage include context for *why* people commit childhood sexual violence, nor does it outline solutions for how to prevent it. We recommend partnering with trusted reporters to increase coverage of solutions that give people hope and make childhood sexual violence feel like a problem we can solve together.

This could include:

- Creating a guide for journalists and fiction creators about responsibly covering this topic – what language to avoid and how to provide necessary context and resources for them to learn more.
- Proactively offering the suggested narrative and framing for breaking, high-visibility stories, such as coverage of the Epstein Files in the United States.

- Organizing training sessions and workshops to support journalists in developing responsible, survivor-centered, prevention-focused coverage.
- Pitching stories about solutions at key moments throughout the year.
- Writing op-eds and commentary pieces in partnership with survivors, practitioners, or other advocates for local, national, or international outlets to reach diverse audiences.
- Reaching out to reporters when they cover this topic to offer feedback – either guidance for how to more responsibly report on the topic or to thank them for thoughtful coverage. This helps you build a trusting relationship and positions you as a useful resource for future stories.

- Building a media list to track coverage on childhood sexual violence and related issues. Tracking coverage shows how narratives are changing over time and keeps tabs on which reporters are covering this issue.



Recommended activities

2 Uplift stories about solutions

As noted above, despite a major increase in research and examples from around the world that prove childhood sexual violence is preventable, media coverage rarely includes news stories about solutions for addressing this issue. As people and organizations who care about this issue, we must not only try to shift news coverage to incorporate solution-based stories but also integrate more of this type of storytelling into our everyday work.

Your organization can do that by:

- Drafting blog posts about new prevention research or stories from your prevention work.
- Sharing stories from survivors or those impacted by childhood sexual violence that demonstrate why prevention must be prioritized and highlight the critical need for effective response, healing, and justice.
- Posting solutions focused on news articles on your organization's social media channels so they reach a broader audience.
- Presenting on the importance of prevention and solutions at conferences and events.
- Participating in podcasts to share hope-based, solution-oriented stories, whether on shows about child safety and well-being or topics that reach general audiences.

- Highlighting solution-based stories during key moments when people are already talking about this issue, such as the World Day for the Prevention of and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Violence or adjacent observances like the International Day of Hope. These stories can also gain traction during major global events such as the UN General Assembly, sporting events, political summits, or regional integration forums.

- Partnering with values-aligned influencers or non-traditional media sources who can amplify our movement's messages and reach wider audiences.
 - For example: [Feminist](#) has over 6 million followers on Instagram. The account is a global platform on intersectional feminism.



Recommended activities

3 Tap into cultural moments

Narratives are shared through a variety of mediums — from books to television shows to memes and GIFs on social media. Cultural touchpoints are often more effective in seeding new narratives than a blog post or fact sheet because they reach a larger audience. The Netflix show “Adolescence” is a good example. It **sparked** a global conversation among audiences who otherwise might not engage about the impact that online violent content has on children.

Consider what cultural moments or opportunities you can tap into to help spread the aspirational narrative far and wide. [The Center for Cultural Power](#) and [Center for Artistic Activism](#) both have useful resources on how to tap into the power of culture in your work.

4 Champion collective action

Narrative change is a collective effort that takes time and cannot be attributed to a single organization. Narratives resonate because they connect to people’s emotions and shape how they see the world. Organizations and stakeholders around the world are already doing great work in this space. Reinforce this work by amplifying their messages on social media, finding opportunities to collaborate, and sharing resources that benefit others in the field or adjacent sectors. Our power lies in collective action. Change happens when we act together.



Resources

This section includes additional research and resources to support efforts to uplift new narratives about childhood sexual violence. This is not a comprehensive list.

Have a resource you'd like us to add?
Email info@to-zero.org.

Narrative, messaging and language

[How to Talk About Childhood Sex Abuse in a Digital World – WeProtect Global Alliance & FrameWorks Institute UK](#)

[How 20 Years of Framing Shaped Public Thinking About Child Wellbeing – FrameWorks Institute](#)

[Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse – Interagency Working Group / ECPAT International](#)

[Shifting the narrative on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: guiding principles on preventing victim-blaming language, communication and behaviours – ECPAT International](#)

[The Truth behind the Myths: Confronting harmful assumptions on child sexual exploitation and abuse \(CSEA\) to better protect children – Down To Zero](#)

[How to Measure Narrative Change – Stanford Social Innovation Review](#)

[Words Matter: Guidance for Reporting on Sexual Violence in Ireland – Sexual Violence Centre Cork](#)

[Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Communications Toolkit – Prevention Global \(MOORE, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health & FrameWorks Institute\)](#)

[Methods Supplement: Changing the Story of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention – Prevention Global \(MOORE, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health & FrameWorks Institute\)](#)

Prevention and solutions

[A World Without Childhood Sexual Violence: Solutions for ending Childhood Sexual Violence – To Zero & Solutions Insights Lab](#)

[LINEA Project: Learning Initiative on Norms, Exploitation and Abuse](#)

[Building Safe Futures: Solutions to end childhood sexual violence – Safe Futures Hub](#)

[Formative Research: Understanding Fatherhood in South Africa – Heartlines](#)

[The Report of the Independent Inquiry Into Child Sex Abuse – Independent Inquiry Into Child Sexual Abuse](#)

[Parents Talk Online Safety – More in Common](#)

[Keeping Kids Safe Online: UK Comms Toolkit – di:ga](#)

[Keeping Kids Safe Online: US Comms Toolkit – di:ga](#)

News media

[Examining Media Coverage of Online Violence Against Women in East Africa – Akedemie](#)

[Narratives of Child Maltreatment and Child Sexual Abuse in the Canadian Media – FrameWorks Institute](#)

[Media Guide: Reporting on Sexual Violence – RAINN](#)

[Shaping the Story – Media Guidelines for Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse](#)

[Media Guide – National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\)](#)

Cultural considerations for talking about childhood sexual abuse

[Child Sexual Abuse and Continuous Influence of Cultural Practices: A Review – National Library of Medicine](#)



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If you have questions about this guide or “A Vision To Zero” report, please contact info@to-zero.org.



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