

INTRODUCTION

Imagine meeting a small child who's five or six. The little one cautiously approaches you and whispers, "I'm so scared. My mom has been hurting me," then turns around and gingerly lifts the back of a stained T-shirt. You immediately see the marks and bruises.

What do you do?

I can't think of anyone who wouldn't rush to comfort this little one, keep the child from danger, and find out what the hell is going on at home. It's obvious the child is helpless, in trouble, and needs protection. Parents or not, we instinctively know what to do: drop everything and take care of the child.

But what if that child is *you*?

I'm a psychotherapist specializing in trauma recovery, and that's the question I use to open the door to healing for adults whose lives have been damaged by the abuse they suffered as children. Every adult who was beaten, neglected, insulted, belittled, sexually assaulted, or otherwise abused in childhood carries the trauma inside. The traumatized child part of the self is vividly alive. Its experiences leave a lifelong imprint on both body and mind. And the most effective way I've found to recover from the effects abuse has left on your life is to work directly with the hurt child inside you.

You probably know, or strongly suspect, that something awful happened to you when you were small. No one lines up to see a

person who specializes in childhood abuse and trauma—or picks up a book like this—unless they’ve run out of other options, other therapies, other explanations for why their lives are so stuck and they still feel so bad.

This book is for you if you know or suspect you were abused—physically, sexually, or emotionally—or neglected as a child. It’s also for you if you’ve struggled with depression, anger, or anxiety and never gotten to its root. You might not necessarily label your childhood “abusive,” but you might describe life with your parents as “difficult” or “crazy” or “fucked up” and think it might be time to take another look at what went on—because every other explanation for the way you feel now has come up short.

You’re probably not sure going back into it will help. Most people who were abused in some way as children have grown up trying to persuade themselves that the pain they experienced then is something most adults should have outgrown by now.

So they “put the past in perspective.” Yes, they admit, things were tough when they were kids. Yes, even brutal at times. But that was a long time ago, and they tell themselves it makes sense to focus on the present not get bogged down in things that can’t be changed. “My parents did the best they could under the circumstances, and what good could it possibly do to demonize them or dwell on what happened?” clients tell me. “Maybe, all things considered, it wasn’t that bad.” Most people want to lose any sense that they were, or are, “victims.” They want to find some peace in forgiveness, and move on.

It’s a very adult perspective, and it may help you cope with a nightmare of a past.

But it won’t help you heal.

If you want to be more than a survivor, if you want to have the peaceful, centered life that’s always been just out of reach, you’ll have to stop justifying what happened to you. You’ll need to look

through the eyes of the lost, hurt, heartbroken kid who's been pushed aside each time you've said, "It wasn't so bad."

Most people who come to see me nod knowingly when I say that. Yet the abused kid they were is the last thing most smart, world-weary survivors want to think about. The whole idea of considering the experiences and needs of that injured figure from the past seems useless at best. What would be the point? Why go back to revisit some "inner child" when the outer adult is the one who needs help right now?

But it's the child inside who holds the elusive key to healing. And once my clients see a frightened little boy or girl—a child with their own face—asking for help, the image is hard to shake.

And so it is with you. Do you save the child or don't you? Can you really look into the eyes of the terrified or overwhelmed kid in the mirror and say, "Don't make a big deal of it. The people who beat you up or raped you or made you feel like you were nothing were doing the best they could"?

Do you tell the child inside you to shut up while you explain that the abusers were probably addicts or "under pressure" or abuse victims themselves? Or do you step to the child's defense? Faced with that choice, I believe you, like most people, will embrace the child within.

I'll help you do that, with a process I have used for more than three decades to help hundreds of people work with both their hearts and their heads to heal the deepest pain in their lives. We'll wade into the challenge of listening to and taking care of the hurt child inside, and step-by-step, I'll show you how to heal the wounds of a miserable childhood by coming to that child as a compassionate adult with the heart and mind and guts to rescue it, and show it how to grow up. It's the most challenging—and life-changing—work you will ever do.

Finding the courage to *care* for the child and *confront* the child's

truth—that’s the essence of the process, and why I think of what we’re doing as carefrontation, a blending of those two vital tasks.

Carefrontation is your guide to breaking free from the lies, secrets, and shame of the past and reclaiming your genuine self. Once you finally *feel* the truth of what happened to you and see the depth and breadth of how it continues to affect you, you can heal. You can thrive in the life you were meant to have.

Much of what we’ll do together is designed to get at the emotional truth and repercussions of the abuse, feelings that might be buried inside you. But we won’t stop there. I’ll also show you powerful ways to repair your damaged connection to the self that stumbled into adulthood without a loving guide or a map. In doing that, you’ll learn what your parents couldn’t teach you: an invaluable set of skills and practices that will give you the resources to live as a healthy, happy adult, using your own buried wisdom to guide you. With courage, determination, and the clear path I’ll lay out for you, you can finally release the suffering and burdens of a lifetime.

WHY FOCUS ON THE CHILD?

You may be skeptical about the inner child, which sounds to many people like a meaningless cliché. So I’d like to explain how this work came about, and give you a look at its most powerful elements. Before we get into the work itself, I’ll also tell you a bit about the neuroscience that may help explain why it’s so effective.

The carefrontation techniques I’ll guide you through are the result of more than thirty years of clinical practice with thousands of adults who were abused as children. When I began my career, there was little awareness of the epidemic of abuse perpetrated against children by their caretakers and other people in their lives. The government had scarcely begun tracking child-abuse cases, and there was no public discussion of incest. The adults I saw early on

had grown up in a time when children were seen almost as their parents' property, subject to the parents' rages, neglect, or sexual abuse, because what happened behind closed doors was often considered to be "family business," not a matter for outside concern or intervention.

Freud's theory that children went through a phase of fantasizing about sexual contact with their parents—and were therefore to blame for "seducing" them if sexual abuse occurred—was accepted in many circles. One of the textbooks being used by psychology students then speculated that not only was incest extremely rare, but it did no harm. The authors believed it might even be beneficial, because children (never called victims) were "allowed" to act out their fantasies of having sex with a "safe" adult—and both sides might enjoy it.

But the lives of my clients made it very clear that the damage inflicted by every kind of childhood abuse is soul deep, and that it affects every part of life. It also became apparent to me that many of the problems for which my clients sought therapy had their roots in the trauma of being abused as children. I began questioning my clients early and directly about abuse, because frequently, we could trace long-standing problems with relationships, anxiety, self-esteem, depression, panic, self-harm, addictions, and more to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in their past.

The suffering and despair I saw in people who had endured childhood abuse was intense. In searching for ways to help them, I experimented with techniques that ranged from talking about their pasts to psychodrama exercises in which they acted out scenarios from their lives.

The work that John Bradshaw, the counselor and author, did with the inner child—the part of the self that carries the energy of the children we were—spoke to me. It made intuitive sense that healing the damage of the past had to involve understanding and

working with the child who had been abused. My clients' greatest growth, no matter what technique I used, seemed to occur when we came in contact with that child—when we talked *with* the child instead of just talking about it. People got a sense of peace and healing from Bradshaw's technique of imagining the child at various ages and doing short rituals to grieve its losses. But making brief contact with the child didn't seem adequate to me. I began spending more time in focused dialogues with the child, and my clients seemed to benefit most when they stayed in contact with that part of themselves.

The dialogues became particularly revealing when I discovered the work of Lucia Capacchione, an art therapist who, in the 1980s, popularized the concept of writing (or drawing) with the nondominant hand (usually the left) to connect with the right side of the brain, which we thought of then as the "creative" hemisphere.

I asked my clients to try using Capacchione's technique, writing questions for the child with the dominant hand and "letting the child answer" with the nondominant hand. As they did, they seemed to connect to the child in profound and surprising ways. The "voice" of the child that came through in the writing had a quality that felt real to all of us. I'd asked people to write to the child before, but now, when they used the nondominant hand, the child seemed less wordy, more emotional. Often, it was full of fear and anger. The child seemed to view the world as though the abuse was still going on, and it was constantly on guard, sometimes terrified.

The feelings of the child, and its sense that it was always in danger, seemed to be playing out in clients' everyday lives, even though they may have talked at length to other therapists about what had happened to them and understood on a logical level that they were adults now, and safe.

We needed to bring the child into the present. I thought about what part of the self was in the best position to communicate with

the child, and reassure it that it was safe, and I began to assign that job to the healthy adult part of the client. No matter how severe the abuse people had suffered, I saw that a part of them was competent. *That* was the part that could listen to the child, learn from the child, and bring the child into the safety of today.

To make the relationship between the healthy adult and the wounded child feel vivid and real, I asked clients to actively imagine they were caring for an actual child and were responsible for keeping it safe and healthy. Though they were sometimes incredulous or extremely skeptical about being able to do that, the healthy adult in them almost always stepped forward to look out for the child.

As that healthy adult took charge of the child's life—which was, in fact, the patient's life—people healed. My clients and I were not researchers testing theories of personality or approaches to trauma, but as we worked to soothe the hurt inner child and empower the adult, we refined a process that finally brought relief from lifelong loneliness, fear, and pain. People transformed suffering they thought they would have to endure forever, and graduated from therapy into happy, healthy lives.

A PROCESS WITH A BEGINNING, MIDDLE, AND *END*

This book is a map that can guide you through the process of healing by learning to rescue, and love, your inner child. It will give you the techniques and exercises my clients have used so successfully, and help you meet the challenges along the path. This is difficult work, and I strongly suggest you do it with the support of a therapist or therapy group that can help you deal safely with the emotions that will arise. Working person-to-person is important for many reasons. The child part of the self receives powerful healing from the presence of a strong, secure adult, whose nonverbal physical cues can give you a comforting sense of safety and acceptance. You didn't

get that when you were growing up, and it's something you can't get from a book. I provide that kind of loving presence, along with individual guidance, for my clients, and a therapist can do that for you.

But it's extremely valuable for you to know the techniques I'll describe for working with the inner child moment-by-moment through the day, and you'll also benefit greatly from having a clear vision of how the process of healing can unfold for you. Without a map like this, you can find yourself spending years in a kind of talk therapy that ignores the child and does little or nothing to help you. That's what most of my clients experienced before they came to me.

This process of repairing and reparenting the child part of the self is not meant to last forever. It has a beginning, a middle, and, most important, it has an *end*. At each stage, I'll help you face what happened to you as a child, with deepening care, love, and kindness toward yourself. I've only given the specific label "carefrontation" to the last stage, but everything we'll do is grounded in the larger carefrontation process of learning to care for the child inside you and finding the courage to confront the truths you find. Let the title of this book remind you that care comes first.

The process starts with making a commitment that the healthy adult inside you will reach out to the hurt child and care for it as if it were a "real" child—seeing to it that the child gets adequate food and rest and that it's always protected from danger. You'll begin writing with your "other hand" to communicate with the child, and you'll learn to approach that part of yourself with curiosity, respect, and kindness—things the child was deprived of because of the abuse.

As you establish trust with the child, you'll start to talk to it about the past. You'll let the child teach you about what it's experiencing when something in your life triggers its panic, and you'll help it calm down. I'll teach you techniques you can use to soothe your physical body, which is also actively involved in memories of

the abuse. And I'll show you how the child can begin to help you find your way back to pleasure and fun, which I'm guessing have been missing from your life for a long time.

In the middle of the process, the child—and you—will become more able to feel that the abuse really is in the past, and you will know in both your mind and heart that you were not responsible for what happened. I'll help you free yourself from old patterns of victimization and move beyond any lingering sense of waiting for someone else to rescue you from difficulties in your life.

You'll learn skills your parents or caretakers couldn't teach you: how to set boundaries with other people, especially those who were responsible for your abuse. How to say no. How to say "I want"—and most important, how to *know* what you want, and feel entitled to getting it.

As the healthy adult part of you takes charge, I'll help you match your behavior in the world to the feelings that are changing inside you. You'll feel lighter and freer as you step away from hiding and drop the child's old survival tactic of putting other people's needs ahead of your own. You'll learn to step to the center of your own life. Here, I'll also introduce you to an especially helpful part of yourself, your wise essence, which I call the One Who Knows.

Finally, I'll help you take the concrete action that most fully puts your healthy adult self in charge of your life: telling your abuser or abusers how their abuse affected your life, and asking them to take responsibility for the way they harmed you. Doing this demonstrates to the child in the most powerful way possible that the healthy, powerful adult you are now is fully in control. It is that adult who looks the abuser(s) in the eye and holds them accountable. I call that meeting a carefrontation, because it is a necessary confronting that will show you how much you care for the child. It lays the foundation for a relationship with the abuser(s) that is based on truth and honesty rather than secrecy and lies.

The prospect of carefrontation may seem extremely frightening to you right now, but you have not yet become the person whom I will ask to do the carefronting. That person, the one who stands at the end of this process, can look at the abuser(s) through the eyes of an adult not those of a petrified child. That person no longer feels the terror of abuse that happened long ago.

That person is you, healed and whole. Living fully in the richness of the present.

Free.

TRAUMA AND YOUR BRAIN

To heal from trauma, you need to know what happened to you. Usually we think of that in terms of remembering and integrating the story of the abuse, which will be a strong element of this work. But it's also helpful to know what happened on the biochemical level, where the abuse left imprints that have significant effects on the way you experience your life. In the past fifteen years, brain imaging has helped neuroscientists explain some of the mysteries of how abuse affects memory and brain development, so I'd like to give you a brief, simplified picture of the findings I find most intriguing. Trust me when I say there's not going to be a quiz. But if you stick with me, you'll gain a better understanding of why it has been so difficult for you to recover.

We know today that abuse and neglect in childhood change the way the brain develops. The experience of abuse puts the brain's focus on survival, and the parts of the brain that help us navigate threat become more active and fully developed than the parts devoted to reasoning, introspection, and making sense of experience.

The right side of the brain, which specializes in emotion, comes heavily into play in abuse. It registers all the nonverbal cues, emotions, and *sensations* that come with experience—the images,

sounds, smells, tastes, touch—all without language or a sense of time. In trauma, parts of the left side of the brain—where words, reason, and analysis reside—often go offline, so memories of the abuse are stored on the speechless right side. And because those memories have not been attached to time or language, two important things can happen.

First, as long as memories are only stored in the right brain, we aren't conscious of them. They're part of our experience, but it's an experience we haven't named or understood. We don't know the memories are there until something triggers them and brings them to the surface. A second quality of these memories is that they are vivid, rich with sensory detail and emotion. And because they haven't been processed by the left brain, which has the job of placing them in time and context, when they surface, it's as though they're happening right now. They don't yet have the left brain's understanding of sequence, or of cause and effect.

You could think of the child part of us that endured the abuse as being stuck there, in the right side of the brain, living and reliving the memories of the abuse. Those memories keep the threat-detecting parts of the brain on alert for anything that could bring another instance of abuse. That can mean they might read any raised voice, any gesture an abuser might have made, or any sensory element of the environment today that resembles the abuse of the past as a potential threat—even a matter of life and death. The threat-detecting system triggers the hormones that make our hearts race and our stomachs clench and prepare us to fight, run, or—when we feel overpowered—simply freeze. But we often have no idea we're reacting to a memory of the past and not the situation in front of us. All we're aware of is a jolt of rage or fear or shame or terror that we interpret as a logical response to what's happening now.

One key part of recovering from the abuse involves turning down the sensitivity of the threat-detection system, so our bodies

are not constantly on high alert and our minds can be guided by reason instead of staying in an instinctive survival mode. That allows us to activate the reasoning part of the brain and safely bring the hidden memories into our awareness. As we make conscious connections between the reactions we're having now and what happened during the abuse, we can put the past back in the past and rewire our brains for pleasure, connection, and satisfaction—by giving ourselves the experience of having them.

SOME THEORIES ABOUT WHY INNER-CHILD WORK WORKS

I (and modern neuroscience) learned all this long after I developed my methods of working with the inner child and had already helped generations of clients heal from abuse. I've known what works for them for many years now, and I've been fascinated in recent years to see theories that might explain more about *why* the techniques I'll teach you are so effective.

A school of therapy called Internal Family Systems Therapy, developed in the 1980s and '90s by Richard C. Schwartz, also deals with the relationship between parts of the self, and it too works with the relationship between the healthy adult part of the self and the traumatized child part, while also looking at many other internal parts. People have guessed about what happens as the healthy adult part of the self listens to the inner child. The speculation is that as the adult takes charge of the child, the parts of the brain involved with reason, analysis, and language become activated and the "emotional" parts of the brain, along with the threat-alert system, become quieter.

Another theory, posed by a researcher in London who's applying mathematical models to ideas about how the brain works, is that as the adult self imagines and interacts with the inner child, the brain creates new neural networks that establish the parent-child bond that the child never got from the abusive caretaker(s).

As far as how writing with the nondominant hand works, no one's done a study mapping brain activity as people do this, or connected the scientific dots about what happens in the mind. My guess is that, at the very least, writing with the nondominant hand slows down our ability to use the usual pathways to the language centers of the brain and perhaps makes it easier to access our emotions. It could be too that seeing the shaky, childlike handwriting produced when you write with your other hand makes it easier to imagine and identify with what the child has to say. What I know from what I've seen again and again is that the child and its feelings appear on the page, and its words go straight to the heart.

I promise you, you won't need any kind of theories, or a model of the brain on your desk, to heal. What you *will* need is commitment, an openness to getting to know the hurt child inside you, and a willingness to stand up for that child. As you'll see, this is heart work, designed to bring the child out of hiding and help put the abuse in the past, so it won't keep creating chaos in your everyday life.

The only way to do this is to work at it in a focused, loving way

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As we get started, you'll need to gather some tools: a few childhood photos of yourself from the time the abuse began and when it ended, a pen, a notebook, and a recording device (your smart phone has this capability).

In the notebook, you'll record your progress and document your growing relationship with many parts of yourself. Keep it in a safe, private place.

It's fine to read the chapters that follow all the way through before doing the assignments, but be sure you do more than read. Bring everything you have to the work, even if you feel skeptical.

Because you'll come in contact with buried feelings that may be

intense, I urge you to bring this book to a therapist who will read it and support you as you work your way through it. It's important that you find a person who specializes in trauma and abuse, and who has a familiarity with inner-child work. Be sure you feel comfortable with him or her. Don't work with anyone you don't trust, anyone who does not believe you, or anyone who suggests you were in any way responsible for the abuse you suffered.

A therapy group that is willing to work with the book can be another source of comfort, encouragement, and support.

Be gentle with yourself. We'll take things a step at a time.

Let's get started.