

## HELP YOUR KIDS OVERCOME TRAUMA FROM ABUSE AND DIVORCE

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://Flyingfreenow.com), and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.*

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 55 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Megan Parocha, and we're going to be talking about parenting children who've been traumatized by divorce, abuse, and other related things as well as what it's like as a parent who is dealing with your own trauma to be parenting children who have their own trauma and all of the different triggers that this involves. Megan is the perfect person to talk to about this because she has a Master's in Social Work. She has certificates in Trauma-Focused CBT, understanding addiction, school social work, and mediation. Megan wrote most of her graduate level papers on the dynamics of abuse, and she received an award in social justice in graduate school for her protection order case changing Colorado state law to protect survivors. Megan is also on the board of directors for Give Her Wings, one of my favorite non-profits, which provides financial scholarships to women and children who have left an abuser. Megan volunteers in policy meetings with Violence Free Colorado to continue working to change state law to protect survivors of IPV. Megan recently started her own non-profit, which we will talk about toward the end of the show, called Survivors United Network which aims to provide free community-based, peer-support group meetings for survivors of domestic violence. Megan is a proud mother of a wonderful and brave daughter and enjoys distance running and playing with her dog. Let's meet Megan. Megan, welcome to the Flying Free Podcast. Thank you for giving us some of your time and sharing some of your expertise with us.

MEGAN: Thank you so much, Natalie. I'm very excited.

NATALIE: We were talking before we started recording, and this is what you know about and what you've done your research on. I really think you are going to have a lot of good things to share with us. I recently decided to write a book on parenting post abuse (although I hate to say that, and I don't know how I'm going to frame that in the book). The problem with parenting, even after you get out of your abusive relationship, especially if you have kids who are underage, is that they are still more than likely dealing with the abuse because their dad is still involved in their lives. Then you are having to co-parent with that person and you are getting re-triggered. Your kids have been traumatized, so their trauma is triggering your trauma. It just can be a huge mess. I put a question on my Facebook page asking people to tell me what their greatest pain

points were or what they really wanted help with the most, and I got a gazillion responses. I realized this is a huge issue that needs to be addressed. I don't think there is anybody out there who is addressing parenting from this perspective. I've looked and don't really see anything out there that is significant. Why don't you tell us what you think about that and about the research and work that you've done in this area?

MEGAN: When I left my ex-husband, I had just started grad school to get my MSW. I like to ask a lot of questions, and I really wanted to look into how to be a better parent because I never thought my life would end up the way that it did, as a single parent. Like a lot of people I'm sure, I thought that two parents in the picture was the healthiest, having a father figure. So I was scared but also very curious about how to approach being a single parent while also dealing with someone who is very abusive and narcissistic. When I was in school, I took childhood trauma classes and read a lot of stuff on attachment theory. I learned a lot, and I also saw a therapist myself. I think one of the biggest things when you are dealing with all this trauma, the trauma of the divorce, the trauma of facing what happened to you, you start realizing that some of that pain carries onto your children. People tend to feel angry or sad or may even repress it.

After getting divorced I felt so empty. I didn't know who I was or what I wanted to do anymore. I didn't know how to give my daughter the attention that she needed because I wasn't completely happy inside. One of the things I really worked on was finding who I was again. I started doing yoga. I started running. I did a lot of things that my ex-husband didn't really let me do. He was very controlling and didn't give me the time to do them. One of the things my therapist told me was that you must be very present with your children. I think we live in a time with social media... just having your phone or computer within your eyesight or vision reduces your empathetic responses by 60%. So by being surrounded by all of this, we are not fully present with our children. Then compound that with trying to get divorced and the constant abuse that follows leaving an abuser through the family court and all of that.

Another thing that is important is that it is better to give your kids experiences rather than objects. With an abuser, you can so easily get stuck in that pattern of the abuser having more money and trying to buy things to try to exert control over your children. You don't want to get caught in that trap. It shouldn't be about who bought what or who gave them this. Buying things does not demonstrate real love or empathy to your children. What I learned through the research I did and all the books I read on attachment theory is that you can't ever give your children enough love. By that I mean present empathy: giving them experiences, taking them out hiking or swimming, giving them your full attention, letting them be completely creative and play and do art and all

of these things that people who may be more controlling and abusive don't like. They don't like the messes. They think it seems chaotic, but it is what children need to thrive and grow and explore the environment and who they are. For example, my ex-husband didn't even like to go outside. While we were together, he never wanted to go to the park. He never wanted to take my daughter to the beach because he didn't like sand. Being able to give your children those experiences is so healthy and leads to expansion in the brain.

It's hard because you are up against someone who keeps you stuck in this pattern of buying stuff. Not all narcissists do this, but a lot of abusers use money and objects for control. It was hard for me because my daughter would go see her dad, and he would buy her absolutely everything she wanted. But she was only there for several weeks a year. Then I felt like the bad guy by saying, "No. We don't need that." But it is our responsibility as parents to teach our children emotional intelligence. We must teach them empathy. We must teach them what matters. It feels really difficult sometimes to have to say "No," or to explain to your children, "I prefer to give you these experiences this time rather than buy you two million "LOL Surprises" that you don't need or play with constantly."

I think a big part of parenting after divorcing someone who is abusive is being confident: learning how to come back to being confident with yourself and enjoy the time you have with your kids, because that is precious. It goes by so quickly, as everyone says, and even faster when you are going through all this trauma. I was very lucky getting the opportunity to go to grad school and having this time with my daughter.

But parents can teach children... Most personality disorders are learned behaviors, and most abusers have a personality disorder because the key sign of abuse is a lack of empathy, and the key sign of narcissistic personality disorder is a lack of empathy. That's why I keep referring to narcissism in this. I think what can happen with these family cycles of abuse... they are called a cycle and they pass down generations because what ends up happening is one parent causes a trauma because they were traumatized or for whatever reason. And we will talk in terms of the mom: The mom comes to the rescue, feels bad, wants to make things right, buys their kids everything they want, tries to make them happy by getting them what they want or telling them that they are better than everyone else or special. That can create another narcissist. There is a lot of research that says narcissistic personalities can be a combination of kids being spoiled (given too much) and any sort of trauma before the age of five can be part of it, but not always. So it is important to not tell your kids they are better than other kids. You want them to feel special and to feel loved, but you should never tell

them they are better than other children because that's what makes them feel like they deserve more or feel like they are entitled, which then can lead into being a user or someone who is more abusive.

NATALIE: I have a question. What if you've got children who don't think they are anything special, though you might tell them that they are, but they have gotten so many messages from their dad that they are not good enough, that they don't measure up because their dad is super critical of them? Then they come home and they feel like or even say things like, "I just want to die. I hate myself. I will never get anything right." They will literally have meltdowns in front of you as they repeat these messages to themselves, and then you as a mother are left wondering how to deal with that.

MEGAN: That's a very good question, and it's very common. People who are abusive will fluctuate between tearing someone down and then saying they are perfect and better than everyone else. It's something my ex-husband did. He did it to me and he does stuff like that to my daughter, who is only four years old. It is hard. I'd say the best thing to do is to just build up their internal world. There is a lot of research on parenting with emotional intelligence. I think we are just now starting to get into that especially in school systems where there is a shift toward teaching social and emotional intelligence. You should comment and not objectify. Suppose your child does an art project and you say, "That's amazing! That art is beautiful." It's better to communicate how hard they worked to make it and on their strengths. Then say, "Do you think what your dad says is true?" Then point out times when it's not true, because narcissistic or abusive thinking is very black and white. It is all good or all bad. A lot of times one child (the scapegoat) will be pointed out as the bad or no-good child, and everything wrong is placed onto that child because people with personality disorders cannot see each person as their own whole human being. Again, it is that black and white thinking of all good or all bad.

Sometimes another child will be the all-good child or the pedestaled child. There are a lot of terms with this kind of parenting. It's important to teach your kids that they are whole, that they are good at multiple different things, and to comment on what they are doing and how they are doing it rather than... It means more to say, "You worked so hard on that project. You put so much effort into it," rather than to say, "That's really good." People are stressed. We're tired when we are parents. It's hard to take that extra second to think about how to talk to your children in a way that builds their emotional intelligence, their empathy. With those situations with parents who tear them down and tell them they are awful, you have to challenge it and constantly say, "This is not what I see. Look at what you've done. Look at these situations where you've done great things, you've achieved things," or whatever it is. You just keep challenging that. It might take time, but if you are able to maintain your own inner peace and balance and not

get caught up in the reactions and emotional responses, that is the best way to approach those situations. The narcissist wants you to get angry and to get you to react. They want to create this chaos because that's how they maintain their control. It is so hard when they do it to your children. That's the hardest. It tears at your heart.

NATALIE: Yeah. I was going to recommend a book here while you are talking about emotional intelligence. It's a book by John Gottman called "Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child." Have you heard of that?

MEGAN: I have that. Yes, it's a great book.

NATALIE: So for anyone who is listening who wants more information on that, that book is helpful for you too. For me, I started shifting my thinking from the "Growing Kids God's Way" method of raising children to the research that has been done about raising children and learning all of the ways that I was raised and how they affected my life and the scars that it left on me. I have a large family with nine kids, but I raised the first four or five differently than I've been raising the last four because I've done a lot of research and I've done my own shifting in my own life. One of the biggest things I realized was that I needed to change myself and my own thinking in these things before I could work on these things with my kids. It was a lot of personal work for me deprogramming from a lot of the propaganda that I had been fed my whole life about God, about parenting, about what makes a good kid and what doesn't, and the whole idea that if your kids are good then that means that you are good, which is associating your identity with the way that your kids turn out.

MEGAN: Right.

NATALIE: It's been very freeing in my own life. It's been really healthy for my older kids to be able to live their lives (because they are older now and are adults) and know they can come back to me. They can make mistakes and know I'm not going to give them a lecture or try to control what they do or try to poo-poo their choices. Yes, I might not agree with their choices. I might not make them. But I'm trying to come at it now with the perspective that I want them to take care of themselves. Always think before you make a choice, "Is this going to be a choice that is caring for my body, my mind, my spirit, and for my future?" and shift your mindset. Because we've been taught, "Well, it is selfish to think about ourselves," but no. If we're healthy then we will have healthy relationships and create a healthy environment around us.

MEGAN: That is 100% correct. So much behavior is modeled and learned because you see how your parents and other people behave. I grew up with my mom who stayed

home, so you have these perceptions that you have to do these things a certain way based on how you were raised. I feel that I am a better parent when I have some time to myself and when I go work. Then I come home I have a lot more energy to sit down and be present with my daughter. I think there is a lot of shame, especially with being a mother in society, that we can never do enough. We're expected to work and cook and parent and do all these things without... I think that is a whole shift we need to make in American culture and society that women are better parents when they are taking care of themselves, when their cup is filled up. You can only fill up another's cup when yours is full.

I was like you. I had such a hard time. I was working full-time when I left my ex-husband and I came home to live with my family. I had such a hard time just taking time for myself. I didn't even know how to do that. You are just constantly going, but it is so important. Kids can sense your happiness. When you are happy and grounded and doing what you love they are going to feel that, and it will lift them up and make them feel better. I think we have to value women and parenting and how you can offer so much more empathy and presence when you are taking care of yourself and doing things you enjoy.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's hard to do that. Anyone who is a survivor of domestic abuse understands that when you are trying to survive, you have very little to offer your kids. You do the best you can, and you love them with all your heart. But you are so depleted and so concentrated. Talk about selfish! This isn't selfish, but this is what we naturally do as human beings. We are surviving, so our bodies are shutting down. Our brains are shutting down out of survival. The Christian world says, "It is so selfish to take care of yourself." No! It's actually selfish not to take care of yourself because when you are not taking care of yourself, you have nothing to give to other people. Just like you said, your cup is empty and you have nothing to spill over.

MEGAN: Exactly.

NATALIE: I want to go a different direction. One of the biggest things people are mentioning is that they are feeling so out of control because their abusive husband or ex-husband... By the way, I want to remind listeners that this is a podcast for women. So if you are a man who is listening, believe me, we know women are abusive too. We've experienced that in our families of origin. If you are a male survivor, just switch the genders and it all applies to you as well. For those of you dealing with ex-husbands or husbands who are bad talking you behind your back, the kids come home and say things like, "Daddy says you stole this," or "Daddy said you lied," or "Daddy said you're a bad mom," or "Daddy said you are sleeping with somebody." Or any of these crazy lies



that these kids are coming back with. We've been told, "You have to be careful not to badmouth your spouse or your ex because he could take you to court for that." Yet they seem to get away with that with you. Do you have any ideas as a parent how you would navigate that with your child so your child understands the truth, but you don't necessarily have to say, "Your dad is a freaking liar"?

MEGAN: Right. You have to just maintain your inner peace or balance because it is them trying to get a reaction so that in court, they can point to you and say "Look, she's crazy." They are the ones telling all these lies. It happened to me. My ex-husband was prolifically cheating and then he accused me of cheating. Then he told my daughter that I left him for another man. It's just hilarious! Now I can laugh about it. You're right. You can't say anything bad about them. Then there is the whole thing in family court with parental alienation, which is not even an evidence-based practice. It's used against women who allege domestic violence or are trying to protect their children when the ex-husband says, "You are alienating me." That's where you must be careful because the research is showing that if an ex-husband who has been abusive uses parental alienation, you are way more likely to lose a lot of physical custody. So it is very scary.

On the other hand, all the research says that you should be honest with your children. They know when you are lying or when you're not telling the truth. It can be very damaging and that causes a cognitive dissonance and your children don't trust you. I've researched this, too, because I didn't know how to approach the topic of domestic violence with my daughter because she was only a year old. I figured she probably didn't remember anything, but the brain does remember. The trauma that they have heard or seen, even if it was only against the mother or the father, the children were there. They feel it in some way, and it does impact the brain. There are a lot of play therapists out there. We tried the play therapy thing and it helped so much just to be able to go with your child and talk about the emotions. You want to do it at their level, so I'd say it's important to do your own research and find out how to talk to your kids about it. You want to do it in a way that you're just saying, "This is what happened. This is my experience, and this other person has a different experience." You don't want to accuse them because you don't want to get caught in that game where there is constant chaos, because it's not healthy. But you do want to be honest with your children and say, "This is what happened," so that they don't grow up with this alternate reality and cognitive dissonance. It's so hard to navigate that.

Unfortunately, so many court systems are not trained in this. It is something that, in Colorado at least, we are working on. Unfortunately, you can get in trouble, so you must be limited in what you say, but you want to validate the feelings. That is most important. You want to be able to talk about it in a way that is age appropriate. Again,

there is a lot of research on attachment theory and how to talk to your children about domestic violence. Our society with parenting, we like to tell kids how to feel. For example, say they fall. This is something my dad did. Whenever I fell, he would make a joke and say "Oh, did you hurt the ground?" When domestic violence happens, kids will internalize it. If they were present, they are going to think the divorce or whatever happened is their fault if it is not properly explained to them. You don't want that to happen because as they grow up, they aren't going to know how to appropriately handle their feelings or identify their feelings. That could lead into being a target for another abuser if they don't know how to properly own their own feelings and hold other people accountable for how they made them feel. So it is important even with small things to pay attention to how children feel and validate that. If they fall on the ground and scrape their knee, instead of saying, "You made a mistake," or "Why did you run? That was your fault," it is important to say, "That really hurt, didn't it? How does that feel?" Get them talking about their range of emotions because being able to talk about all of your emotions is part of emotional intelligence. That is part of how we grow and have healthy relationships.

NATALIE: Right. It all ties into being able to accurately assess reality, the reality inside of us and the reality outside of us. You mentioned cognitive dissonance. If things are tilted and there are things that are hidden that we can't understand, that is where dysfunction comes from. That is how we as survivors got so entangled in all this stuff. But when we start waking up and telling ourselves the truth, we start to see things more clearly. Then we can untangle a lot of the dysfunction.

One thing I think that helps kids and us is articulating what is inside of them, because I think a lot of kids know deep down inside that something is not right, but they don't have the opportunity unless we draw it out to articulate it. Once they bring it out into the open, now you can look at it, you can see it, you can talk about it, and it is not as scary. If your dad is lying to you all the time, that's a really scary thing if you can't talk about it, admit it, and acknowledge that it's true. But if you can talk about it, if you have noticed that he says things that aren't true on a regular basis... I've had these conversations with my own kids. I don't even have to say, "Your dad's a liar." They come to me and tell me, "Dad told me this, but is that true?" I'll say, "Well, what do you think? What is your experience?" Then they articulate it and come to their own conclusion, "I don't think that is true." They have all eventually come to their own conclusions that dad sometimes tells the truth and dad sometimes lies, and they have accepted that. They know that about their dad, and they've accepted it. They still want to have a relationship with him, but they have a relationship with him based on the reality that they know that sometimes he will tell them the truth and sometimes he will not, and they will probably never know for sure which is which, so they just need to be careful



around him.

MEGAN: Yes! Exactly. My daughter is only four years old, and it's the same kind of conversations we have. You are exactly right. You must facilitate those conversations but allow them to come to their own conclusions. It's very dangerous to tell your children... because it's not true, even with people who are abusive. They are not always awful. They are not always bad. A lot of the research talks about learning to manage your expectations. That's what you are doing. You are questioning your children, "What is your experience of them? How do you feel when you're around them?" Point out these inconsistencies in behavior and their honesty. I think it's important to help your kids heal, help them learn to manage their own expectations, their own internal world, and their emotions so that they can be better equipped to handle the situations when they are with their father or whomever the abusive parent was. Also, as they grow into adults and see relationships or have their own relationships then they can better assess based on the validation they feel about their own internal world. If you can give them that and help them pay attention to their feelings and validate them, that is the biggest part. Even with domestic violence there is a lot of chaos. Even the person who is abusive feels bad at points. There are just a lot of feelings involved. It's important to teach your kids that their feelings matter and that they are important in the situation.

NATALIE: Before we go, I'd like you to share with the listeners about the work that you do and the non-profit that you recently started. Tell us what your life is like now.

MEGAN: I just graduated with my MSW, Master's in Social Work. I did a lot of my research on trauma and abusive relationships. I probably wrote most of my grad school papers on domestic violence and family court. I met a woman three years ago who helped me with absolutely everything. We used to meet for coffee. She would help me with applying to housing and all this stuff because as you are going through the divorce you are just in this constant reaction trigger mode. It is hard to sit down and do things for yourself and take care of yourself. We had an idea three years ago to start something where women can all get together, share their stories, feel validated, and have a mentor who walks with them in this and helps them get resources. A lot of times so many women don't have the capacity to ask for help or apply for resources.

So we started this non-profit. It's called Survivors United Network. We had our first meeting last night, and it was amazing! I cried. There were four women there. We shared our stories. I think it's just so important to have a community of women who've gone through this who can meet up in person. Part of it is that there is so much that society still does not want to talk about. Even with family members and other friends, if they don't understand they are not going to know how to best help you recover or

validate what you are going through. We're really working on the groundwork for that. We're going to be starting another group in Centennial Church. We want to have some groups in churches that are kind of like Alcoholics Anonymous where people meet anonymously and talk about their stories of domestic violence. Part of the healing is just being able to share your story, to feel heard, and to feel validated and not feel like you are crazy or like what is happening to you is your fault.

A lot of the research on the brain in addiction is that the domestic violence relationship causes the same oxytocin release as a lot of addictions because you are stuck in this cycle of being treated horribly, but the little piece of time where your abuser is nice gets you addicted. You keep hoping that the good moment is going to come back. You get stuck in that cycle and it is addictive. We want to offer groups where women can feel validated, supported, and taken care of, and hopefully grow that so you could have a mentor who helps you in court or with all of the things you need help with when you try to leave someone abusive. We have women in eight different states who are interested in starting up one of these groups. I've put together guidelines and surveys for the groups. Hopefully it will grow. I'm also on the board of directors with Give Her Wings. We're kind of working together with that. We also want to do a book club with this that is once a month and provide workbook readings and things for women to leave and heal through all of this.

NATALIE: Is it mainly for women of faith, or is this for anybody?

MEGAN: It's kind of going in two different ways. I'm working right now with a church in Colorado. We're going to develop this program specifically for women of faith. But we also want to offer it to anybody, so there will be groups that can meet up and use the guidelines... kind of how Alcoholics Anonymous has started. We're really hoping this can grow and turn into something that can help a lot of women.

NATALIE: That sounds absolutely incredible! I am excited about that. I don't know if I knew that you were on the board of directors with Give Her Wings. But Give Her Wings is an organization that I have supported for a few years, and I love that organization. I did hear about you through Megan Cox, so I guess that makes sense. I want to thank you so much for being willing to come on the Flying Free Podcast. Also, just to let listeners know, Megan has agreed to do an expert workshop within the Flying Free Sisterhood Group. If you want to learn more about that group, we bring in a different expert every month. You have access to all the past experts that we've brought in when you join. You can find out more by going to [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com). That is it. Fly free!