

Annual Child Freedom Fearless Safety Interviews (Proposal)

As concerned community members, parents and civil gentlemen, given that children are so vulnerable, and have increasingly been abused, threatened, tormented, trafficked, coerced to be child brides and sometimes even killed within or by nearly every type of institution, including orphanages, hospitals and boarding schools, as well as by teachers, coaches, doctors, priests, ministers, law-enforcers, schoolmates, parents and other family members, in addition to threats by extreme weather, pollution and climate change, we propose and strongly advocate a policy of annual safety interviews for every child in every school and all other institutions and locations, if not enrolled in school, by qualified external nurses.

**Children's voices must be heard: Every child! Every year!
... a safe place, a safe time to talk**

Let's look at the numbers. Aside from glaring news headlines and videos about child abuse and violence, statistics from official sources indicate a count of 674 thousand incidents of child maltreatment during the year 2017 across the United States. As large as this number stands, it actually represents a decline in child maltreatment, which includes neglect, when viewed over the past three decades since 1990, as reported in Child Trends, which number peaked in 1994 with the count of 1,032 thousand cases. Younger children are noticeably subject to more abuse than older children consistently from the youngest ages through the teens, with the youngest having up to thrice the rate of teens. Data in 2017 show that

- children 3 and younger had a maltreatment rate of 15 per 1000,
- for ages 4 to 7 having a rate of 10 per 1000,
- for ages 8 to 11 having a rate of 8 per 1000,
- for ages 12 to 15 having a rate of 7 per 1000, and
- for ages 16 to 17 having a rate of 5 per 1000.

For elementary schools, this rate would apply to about one percent of their children being at risk, and slightly less than one percent for higher grades, on the average. The carryover from maltreatment prior to school age or in earlier grades may also continue to have adverse effects in later school years, the albatross of original sin. There are also significant differences for race and ethnicity cohorts where blacks and native Americans have almost twice the rates of maltreatment than

others. Suffice it to say that any school today with only a few hundred students is likely to have one or more children at risk at any one time, silently suffering. These numbers do not include additional incidents of school violence or bullying which often go unreported, as well as other adverse child experiences (ACEs) and environmental threats.

Since the onset of related problems and ACEs may have initiated even before school age, there's no way we can predict or intervene and unmask the earliest cases of child maltreatment and abuse or bullying and depression unless we invest our time to sit with and privately ask every kid, at least once every year, "How are you feeling today? Can we talk?"

These interviews will be standardized at the federal level with local embellishments, based on age (or mental age for special children), language and sex, to be held in private and secure settings and confidentially recorded on digital media. The suggested interview content will be age related and focus generally on safety and health at school, home, community and online. Specific topics may include the following and other related concerns of cultural, gender or historical relevance, as well as previous interview follow-up:

- 1. Personal and family or guardians' names, phone numbers and addresses, including social media and email addresses the child may have memorized or have available on a personal cell phone,**
- 2. Personal age, date and place of birth the child may have memorized,**
- 3. Nationality of parents or guardians,**
- 4. Languages spoken by parents or guardians at home,**
- 5. Religious beliefs of parents or guardians,**
- 6. Number and ages, gender of siblings or other children at home,**
- 7. Name and location of previous school,**
- 8. Personally most liked teacher at school,**
- 9. Personally most disliked teacher at school,**
- 10. Best friend at school,**
- 11. Experiences with bullying within the school or elsewhere,**

12. *Knowledge of threatening schoolmates or school staff members, or gang recruitment activities and shootings-violence at school or home and neighborhood,*
13. *Knowledge of schoolmates or staff who promote hatred or violence towards other students on the basis of race, nationality, immigration status, native language, religion, gender preferences, physical disabilities, or other descriptors,*
14. *Experiences with fighting in school or home,*
15. *Knowledge of any guns, weapons, explosives or fireworks at home or school,*
16. *Knowledge of any drugs, painkillers, e-cigarettes, alcohol or contraband located or sold at school,*
17. *Personal and parental health concerns (including chronic ailments, mental health, eating disorders, seizures and thoughts of suicide),*
18. *Personal thoughts about, or experience with, running away from home or place of residence,*
19. *Traumatic injuries or emergency medical services recently provided by doctors, nurses or others at school, home or elsewhere,*
20. *Sex education recently provided by school, parents or others,*
21. *Gender identity concerns,*
22. *Experience with dating and personal sexual encounters or activities,*
23. *Personal experience with pregnancy, maternity or abortions,*
24. *Personal regards for parents, what I like and don't like,*
25. *Personal regards for siblings or other relatives and frequent visitors at home, what I like and don't like,*
26. *Concerns about personal legal problems or immigration status,*
27. *Daily homework routine,*
28. *Personal allowances, employment, vending of goods, or other income sources, including soliciting donations,*
29. *Personal chores around the house or work to assist parents' livelihood,*
30. *Concerns about family legal problems, incarceration or immigration status,*
31. *Concerns about foster care, adoption or personal welfare if current guardian care is terminated or disabled, or parents are deemed unqualified as guardians,*

32. *Parents' or guardians' employment, business, or other income sources,*
33. *Domestic violence incidents at home,*
34. *Exposure to smoking, vaping or drugs at home,*
35. *Personal experience with smoking, vaping, alcohol or any drugs,*
36. *Nutrition and favorite foods at home,*
37. *Housing (including transient conditions, bathing, sleeping arrangements and place to do homework),*
38. *Primary sources of potable water at school, home or elsewhere,*
39. *External religious activities,*
40. *Recreational activities and sports,*
41. *Favorite pets at home, if any,*
42. *Frequency of playing on neighborhood streets and any dangers or concerns with conditions, such as traffic, gangs, bullies, other hazards, or particular neighbors,*
43. *Number of friends or playmates in neighborhood and activities or visits, if any,*
44. *Frequency of playing in neighborhood parks and any dangers or frightening experiences,*
45. *Any contact or experience with police or military and whether friendly or hostile,*
46. *Noticeable smog, smoke or other fumes and pollution at school or neighborhood that cause discomfort,*
47. *Experience with extreme weather, heat, cold, floods, wind that cause fear or trauma to child or family,*
48. *Knowledge of earthquakes, fires or explosions that have threatened or damaged school or home,*
49. *Experience with bombings, shootings, physical assaults or rapes due to military aggression or wars causing trauma to child, family or neighbors, and identity of aggressor group, if known or suspected,*
50. *Punitive treatment by caretakers and others, including frequency and type of treatment or trauma,*
51. *Traumatic or embarrassing treatment or unusual touching by anyone at home, school, church or anywhere else,*
52. *Favorite television shows,*
53. *Favorite digital games,*
54. *Favorite social media,*

- 55. Exposure to pornographic or nudity media or extreme violence and cruelty either printed or online,**
- 56. Experience with online bullying or threats, or invitations for sexting or dating,**
- 57. Any complaints the child may have about the physical classroom conditions, air conditioning, bathroom access, water access, lunch menu, or facility maintenance,**
- 58. Suggestions for additional classes or educational experiences that the student would find interesting,**
- 59. Suggestions for additional learning material, tech tools or science lab resources that would interest the child,**
- 60. Suggestions for additional athletic programs, sports or exercise equipment that would interest the child,**
- 61. Suggestions for additional policies, resources, personnel or equipment to improve the sense of safety at school.**
- 62. Any other concerns the child feels about conditions of safety or health in local village or city, or the environment, such as climate change, excessive wildfires, hurricanes or flooding, for example,**
- 63. Any participation recently undertaken by child in strikes or demonstrations to protect the future of a wholesome environment or to support other specific causes, including frequency of participation.**

Children, parents and the community will be advised and informed about these interviews in some detail as appropriate, but to reduce any family stress in anticipation, exact interview dates will be randomized and not publicized in advance for individual children, and no parent, guardian or family member will be allowed to participate in the interview of their child. All teachers and school employees will also be excluded, although school counselors and health care providers from other schools or administrator ranks will be invited to attend as witnesses, as long as they had no prior involvement directly with the child being interviewed. Children should be comforted if they hesitate to answer some questions and be advised that they do not have to answer any question that makes them feel uncomfortable. The interviewer should be adequately trained to discern when the child does not understand the question or is possibly embarrassed or afraid to answer truthfully. These interviews should not be handled as forensic in nature, although they may lead to forensic interviews as a follow-up. No information volunteered by a child in these interviews may be used as self incrimination.

Documentation and follow-up policies for safety or welfare of the child will be standardized and rigorously applied and supervised. Parents and educators will be important consultants on specific interview wording, but parents or private schools may not exclude their children from their annual child safety interview, for any reason. Home-schooled children will also be interviewed annually by nurses or child protection agencies. Any juvenile in detention by state or federal agencies, including immigration detainees, must also be annually interviewed. No exceptions. All new enrollees or detainees must be properly interviewed within the period between thirty to ninety days of participation. An exit interview will also be required for all enrollees and detainees regardless of the duration of the period of participation.

The system will be designed for reliable cross-border identification with fingerprints, declarations of asylum requests by family members, if noted, and other related information, as available, including DNA swabs for all children new to the system. Documentation databases will reliably identify any child who disappears from subsequent annual interviews which will trigger appropriate investigations and accountability.

Equal, Universal Access and Non-discrimination

By requiring universal inclusion annually for all children, whether in public or private schools, boarding schools, orphanages, hospitals, detention facilities, refugee camps, migrating, home-schooled, homeless, abandoned or runaways, the policy will be fair and non-discriminatory, and provide equal protection for all, regardless of social status. Annual Child Freedom Fearless Safety Interviews will be universally available and provided by state mandate at no cost to all children. At the fringes of social communities it may be necessary to provide mobile interviewing units for privacy, comfort and support for the technical logistics of confidentially recording the interviews. Home-schooled children will also receive more privacy in mobile units, as well, which units may be parked close to the residence. Likewise, in many school settings, mobile interviewing units may also be practical and more secure in order to better standardize the quality of interviews and to eliminate any suspicion of secret, unauthorized recording bugs or cameras on campus. Many children in most need of this interview service and necessary follow-up may be those poor kids in the streets as runaways or sexually trafficked in urban areas. Once this program is

established, there may be some children who actually request an interview through a toll-free hotline.

The objectives of this policy, which we dub Child Education and Safety Assessment Interview Resource (CESAIR), may include the following:

- 1. Identify and document previously unrecorded critical trauma, abuses or harmful experiences, including sexual trauma, perpetrated by one or more individuals and expedite needed care and protection from further harm from alleged perpetrators,*
- 2. Identify and document recent threats to the safety of the child or bullying made by one or more individuals and expedite protection against further threats by alleged aggressors or bullies,*
- 3. Identify and document conditions, activities or behaviors at school, home or community that may directly interfere with the educational progress of the child and initiate a process of interventions or solutions to improve expectations for learning,*
- 4. Identify and document conditions, activities or behaviors at school, home or community that may directly enhance the educational progress of the child and initiate a process of sustaining or bolstering the beneficial circumstances,*
- 5. Identify and document conditions, activities or behaviors at school, home or community that may negatively impact the educational progress for identifiable cohorts of students,*
- 6. Identify and document conditions, activities or behaviors at school, home or community that may positively impact the educational progress for identifiable cohorts of students.*

While the interview itself will provide vital information, the full assessment of CESAIR will also depend upon actual academic performance, grades, tests, attendance, and parental or guardians' involvement. When presented to students and the community, it will be important to describe the positive aspects of the entire scope of the program. The interviews themselves should be presented in a friendly and pleasant manner with the anticipation that the majority of children interviewed may have had very little, if any, frightening or traumatic experiences to relate. We are primarily asking our kids for their own perspective on ways to improve their educational experience as well as improve their feelings of safety at school.

Enabling Legislation

Even though many institutions, including some schools, have to some extent allowed or negligently tolerated child abuse within their domains, logically we must depend upon our schools and teachers in each state to assume the leadership and demonstrate the know-how to provide solutions. Hopefully these vital institutions and professionals will also take on the challenges of this proposal, along with the full support, and perhaps some input, from the caring community and parents. Enabling state and federal policy legislation and funding should also be guided by the expertise of educators as well as concerned community constituents and stakeholders. Whether it takes a new executive in the White House and/or simply the clear vision and leadership of some of our elected representatives, we can only hope and demand to see an act of congress to provide incentives and minimal guidelines in this direction by the federal government, which may possibly be entitled something like the “Child Education and Environmental Safety Protection Act (CEESPA)”.

And let's all get involved and debate the details. Talk to your representatives, as well. Remember that many abused or neglected children don't even know that there's any other way of life. How can they complain? Let's find ways to help them talk in a gentle manner about some very personal experiences. Your own experiences may be very illuminating. Even the experts may welcome comments and narratives from people with unique stories. Today, every state also has a child welfare agency that can investigate any suspicion of child abuse or neglect. Please be a good neighbor and speak up for the sake of the kids. Look up the child abuse hotline in your area or call the national Childhelp hotline at 1-800-4-A-Child or 1 (800) 422-4453 which covers the entire U.S. and Canada and provides assistance in over 170 languages. See something, say something. The National Human Trafficking Hotline is 1 (888) 373-7888. Each child is precious. Each day may be critical in a child's life.

Although most countries today have constitutions or legislation that mandate a free education for all their children, the USA does not enjoy such at the federal level. And even if a free education were constitutionally mandated, an education that is not also protected from fear and abuse, is like asking our kids to run the gauntlet just to get a high school diploma. Even though our states fortunately all mandate a free education, they must also ensure a safe educational environment for all children. Teachers and staff also need to feel safer, and carrying a

weapon in the classroom, as some have proposed, will only create greater hazards for all. Ironically, although the legal principle of 'equal protection' has leveraged better quality education in some ways for minority students in historical court decisions, the remedies have failed to adequately address the issues of health and life-saving protections.

Delayed Disclosure of Abuse

Nowadays our children are exposed to mandated school attendance with dubiously equal and clearly inadequate safety protections within the school grounds, in addition to external threats from a few too many wayward parents, pastors, priests, police, predators, pedophiles and outright terrorists sometimes driven by hate. To protect the next generation, our schools need to become the ultimate refuge for our kids, a safe haven in which to relax, be curious and learn, not just another place for paranoia and panic. Getting a free lunch at school is great and healthy, but not so great if you always have to watch your back, or walk around the school grounds with a bullet-proof backpack.

Today's plaintiffs: All kids required by the state to run the gauntlet in dangerous schools (apparently all schools today) without adequate health and safety protections. Our children are unwitting canaries in a coal mine, only the coal mine is now the schoolyard and the neighborhood, where undisclosed and superficially unnoticeable insults, trauma and torments accrue often till the breaking point! Withheld disclosure of sexual abuse and other assaults for children is often due to lack of guidance , innocence, fear and shame, while complaints may be further delayed especially when the offender is a family member.

As civil gentlemen, we know that parents do not own their children, nor do husbands own their wives even when married at a young age. The antiquated arguments to justify the inhuman treatment of slaves, for example, are long past any recognition of validity or respect for ownership of any other person. Children have a right to protest in order to protect their lives and wellbeing even if the threat is perpetrated by their own natural parents or legal guardians or custodians. This concept is also codified by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Although the U.S. helped to draft it and it was signed by the United States Ambassador to the United Nations in 1995, the CRC has yet to be ratified by any U.S. president. Nor has any president officially

presented the CRC to the Senate for approval, which constitutionally would require a two-thirds majority vote as a treaty.

CRC Ratification

Several candidates for U.S. presidency in 2020 have talked about policies that may benefit children, including health care, family care, pre-K-12 education support, climate change management, gun control, immigration reform and lowering college tuition and loan debt, for example, but whether any candidate will carry the political football of CRC ratification to officially enforce a voice for all children remains to be seen. Some of the opposition has come from conservative groups and religious institutions. These may be the same people that believe that corporal punishment is necessary to discipline their children. Others may be concerned that giving all children a voice may expose their ministry or schools to accusations of unsavory conduct and abuse. With all the notorious child abuses in the news by clergy and others in recent times, it's time more than ever to stand up for our kids and officially recognize the voices of all children by the ratification of the CRC. Religious institutions today are walking a tightrope of credibility and tradition which may lead to further isolation unless they reverse their opposition to CRC ratification and become a champion, instead of lobbying with the cloak-and-dagger politics of the devil (paid for by charitable contributions?). If necessary, it's best to clean your house before applying another coat of whitewash.

Individual Learning Plans, prepared by teachers for each student, may also be informed by interview data. It would also be interesting to see how AI resources like IBM Watson may utilize these data to predict educational progress for individual students and groups and possibly suggest ways to positively adjust to negative influences, especially if they are not clearly obvious (more time and less distractions for homework). However, could it be that optimum homework time for a given student, may be useful, as an example? Interview data could also tie into parent-teacher conferences, where some issues revealed by students in their interviews may be discussed. This may help to fill the gap of information from the child, since children are not invited to parent-teacher conferences.

As members of a civil society and parents or future parents, we must ultimately acknowledge and accept, after all we've seen to date, that for child health and safety, we must take responsibility to duly monitor

ourselves and every institution and individual involved in the care, custody and education of our children, with regular direct third-party child interviews, as proposed. The cost is great, but doable. The benefit, exponentially greater: Smiles instead of tears. Prevention and education instead of trauma. Saving lives. This may also help us learn to become better parents and avoid serious mistakes. Professional providers of care, education, religious services, recreation and other services, will quickly learn, as well. The game is over for those who routinely have taken advantage of silent victims in the past. Prevention beats prosecution, cheaper, too. It's in our hands. A happy childhood to pass on to the next generation. At least, if some abuse or trauma has now initially become revealed, the earliest intervention will minimize or prevent future episodes of the same. The younger the age of interview participation, the better.

We must all acknowledge that being a good parent or guardian is an on-the-job learning challenge, further complicated by the individual differences of each child and their changing needs and expectations each year as they mature. Not to mention our own personal changing needs and economic or marital stresses over the years. Even those of us parents with the best of intelligence, motivation and material resources, should enthusiastically welcome the parenting quality feedback from our children in the standardized objective observations provided by these interviews. Think of the questionnaires and surveys frequently tendered by health care providers and some educational institutions to solicit evaluations of their services by their patients and students. If these organization are motivated to undergo the cost for our feedback as a tool for quality control, how much would we as parents be willing to pay through taxes for feedback from our kids to help us become better parents, and our schools better and safer education providers? Add to that, our awesome responsibility since our kids are utterly dependent upon us for their very survival, education and spiritual wellbeing. They say it takes a village. If so, this may be a bridge to guide us to that village, whenever needed. This is not a pass-fail test for parentage, but rather a tool for incremental improvements for possibly better relations at home and a better, safer educational environment for our kids.

Yes, the child is the ultimate monitor, the witness, as innocent as he or she may be. If some innocence be lost by interviews, let it be a small cost in comparison with the innocence lost by demoralizing trauma.

Only by establishing and maintaining the highest level of trust, can the proposed interviews successfully penetrate so deeply into the privacy of the child's life, revealing secrets that the child may have feared to ever reveal in the past. This trust can only be balanced by the child's expectations that the adults and care providers in the room are fully committed to the best interests and love for the child. In some cases, the child may have sadly already learned that some adults and even elder family members or friends are not really trustworthy. The bravery of this child to trust new strangers in the room, obligates the civil society to never violate this trust or neglect the need for further protection by all measures within our control. No child left unprotected.

No interview data will be allowed to be unscrupulously exploited or unprotected in the cyber world, as well. The highest and most secure data management tools must always be deployed and regularly audited. It should also be acknowledged that these data may also predict future economic trends and industrial positions down to the level of various products and social media. The data may also be very useful in measuring trends in communicable diseases and chronic ailments in various regions, which may be even more useful if similar standardized interview policies are deployed globally.

Climate Change Impacts

These data may also help us measure the direct health and economic impacts of global climate change as experienced by children, for example, in a normalized manner based on access to educational institutions and the cooperation of related governmental and non-governmental organizations worldwide. Always remembering that the confidence and privacy of every child and family must be absolutely protected. No online interviews. No commercials or social media sponsors. Only verified ecologically sustainable corporate interests may be invited to partner in this endeavor, if any such exist. The primary beneficiary of all the data collected is the child and immediate family. That interest must absolutely be protected without compromise, and the resulting social and economic benefits to the community, a secondary plus.

Proposal Summary and Outlook

By shedding light on the dim underground of child abuse and torment in our schools and community with mandated interviews for all, as we propose, we can optimistically expect that the majority of oppressed children will be emancipated from overwhelming fear and panic. Clearing the suppression and negative expectations for hundreds of thousands of children each year will also improve the outlook for our shared communities and the wider well of goodwill. Freedom at last for all, including more respect for the smallest and youngest!

Organized crime and gangs will also feel the pinch when trying to expand their recruitment and contraband marketing in schools, as well. No criminal secrets to be effectively protected in the school! If we can't clean the swamps in politics, at least we should be able to clean the gangster scum or those who promote hatred or violence in our schoolyards. When discipline of offending students is necessary, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) should be preferred over exclusionary practices whenever possible, as recommended by the National PTA . Hopefully, some kids who are saved from parental abuse and neglect, or other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), by these interviews at an early age, will also be diverted from joining a gang or a hate clan in the first place. Kids are taught to hate, just like they can be taught to love.

The need is great when you look at the numbers, the potential benefit even greater at a time when our global society needs to cooperate to the highest levels to tackle so many problems including climate change, careless and irresponsible capitalists and corporations (you know who you are), and myopic politics. We need the talent of all our children and their spirit of optimistic and sustainable progress. If it's not sustainable, it's not progress. The back end and burps of oxen (methane) doesn't get us where we need to go!