



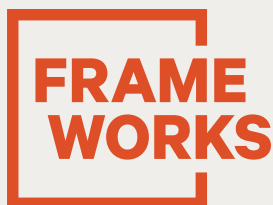
# CHANGING THE STORY OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION

Building a More Effective Narrative

# Changing the Story of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

Building a More Effective Narrative

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# Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is preventable. There is strong evidence that programs focused on preventing abuse before it happens are effective,<sup>1</sup> but these programs can be a hard sell for a fatalistic public that has difficulty believing that CSA can be prevented in the first place. The widespread belief among the public that people who commit CSA are irredeemable people contributes to people's fatalism about the issue and leads people to focus on extremely punitive responses to abuse rather than thinking about the possibility of preventing abuse before it happens.

To build understanding of and support for the prevention programs that work, we need a new narrative about CSA prevention—one that focuses on people who are at risk of committing CSA who *don't* commit abuse due to the systemic supports they receive. While talking about people who are at risk of committing CSA may seem counterintuitive at first due to people's existing fatalistic mindsets, our empirical framing research shows that a narrative that centers the role that prevention programs can play in the lives of people who are at risk of committing CSA is highly effective at overcoming the public's fatalism about the issue. This new narrative builds understanding among the public that prevention is possible, reduces their support for extremely punitive solutions, and helps build support for systemic change to prevent CSA.

Narratives are an important way to shape public discourse and thinking. The current narratives about CSA and its prevention in U.S. public discourse—what we're calling the *law and punishment* narrative and the *vigilant child* narrative—are highly individualistic and lead to victim-blaming and fatalism that CSA is inevitable. These narratives fail to offer meaningful solutions to address or prevent CSA, instead focusing on harmful and damaging ideas about survivors and offenders. But public thinking about CSA doesn't have to be this way. At their best, narratives can resonate with people and enable them to imagine other scenarios, which can build empathy and support for policy change.<sup>2</sup> To change the narrative about an issue, it's necessary to present people with an alternative or counternarrative that offers new ways of thinking about and making sense of an issue.

The *help provided* narrative described and recommended in this strategic brief is an alternative narrative that can do just that—change the way people think about the issue to build understanding that CSA is preventable with the right support. This new narrative focuses on the role of effective systems in individuals' lives rather than solely focusing on individuals. It centers the role people who are at risk of committing CSA can play in preventing abuse rather than focusing on what survivors should've done differently. And it demonstrates that an alternative scenario—one in which people who are at risk of committing CSA receive the systemic support they need to prevent them from ever committing abuse—is possible.

The *help provided* narrative described in this strategic brief is based on qualitative and quantitative prescriptive research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute in collaboration with MOORE | Preventing Child Sexual Abuse at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.<sup>3</sup> It is a continuation of our previous descriptive research on the topic in which we identified the challenges, opportunities, and initial recommendations for talking about CSA prevention based on the public's and practitioners' deeply held assumptions about the issue.<sup>4</sup> From 2021 to 2022 we conducted qualitative one-on-one interviews and peer-discourse sessions (a type of focus group) as well as two waves of an experimental survey with members of the U.S. public to prescriptively test framing strategies that would shift public understanding in productive directions. More details of the methods and sample composition of this research can be found as a supplement to this brief.

# Existing Narratives of CSA

There are two main narratives about CSA and its prevention that currently dominate public discourse on the issue:

## **The *Law and Punishment* Narrative**

This narrative about CSA portrays cases of abuse after they have occurred rather than focusing on prevention. It is highly prevalent in the public imagination. In this narrative, which can also be seen in public mindsets on this issue,<sup>5</sup> the person who commits CSA is seen as unimaginably “bad” and/or being so mentally unwell that they inevitably commit abuse, while the survivor is portrayed as being forever damaged. The narrative centers on the individual relationship between the survivor and the person who committed the abuse, and it tends to overlook the broader context or systems that failed to prevent the abuse from occurring. It leads people to assume that some people will always commit abuse and that nothing can be done to prevent abuse from happening. As a result, people tend to believe that the only solutions surrounding CSA are to address it after the fact with extremely harsh punishments, under the false belief that rehabilitation of people who commit CSA is impossible.<sup>6</sup> This narrative about individuals who are fundamentally untreatable and the inevitability of CSA is reinforced by the news media (as seen in our related project on child athlete abuse and wellbeing)<sup>7</sup> and television. It is perhaps best encapsulated by the TV series *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, in which storylines frequently center on a person who commits abuse without remorse and the survivor who is unalterably damaged by the abuse (rather than capable of healing with the appropriate support).<sup>8</sup>

## **The *Vigilant Child* Narrative**

Another common narrative that exists in public discourse focuses on preventing CSA through individual action and responsibility. This narrative tells a story that individual children (and their caregivers to some extent) need to be constantly vigilant for signs of potential predators in their midst and that they are solely responsible for preventing abuse. Consequently, if or when abuse does occur, the individual child can often be seen as to blame for their own victimization because they should’ve known how to recognize and resist CSA. The individualism inherent in this narrative extends to what survivors should do after abuse has occurred—they are seen as responsible for finding the “strength” to deal with their trauma on their own. Any discussion of systemic support for survivors or rehabilitation for people who commit CSA is missing from this narrative. In these ways, this narrative fails to see how societal systems are responsible for putting prevention programs in place. It also fails to counter the entrenched fatalism that people bring to this issue; the assumption remains that some people will inevitably prey on children, and the burden is on the child to recognize and resist CSA.<sup>9</sup>

# *Help Provided:* The New Narrative

The new narrative put forward in this brief presents CSA prevention from a different angle. It is empirically tested and provides an alternative to the existing harmful narratives about CSA. The *help provided* narrative changes the plot from a story about irredeemable individuals to one about systems that, when functioning, can prevent abuse from happening. And it changes the point of view to focus on the people who are at risk of committing CSA—those who do not commit abuse with access to the right systemic supports. The counter-intuitiveness of this new narrative is perhaps what makes it so effective, as it presents an alternative narrative about people who are at risk of committing CSA that builds empathy rather than disgust. It also centers on the role that society and systems, rather than individuals, can and must play in preventing abuse.<sup>10</sup>

## **Features of the *Help Provided* Narrative**

To build this new narrative, we must identify the key elements needed to develop stories that resonate with and change thinking among the public. Based on previous FrameWorks research on narrative form, we've identified the main features of a narrative: the characters, setting, plot, point of view, evaluative judgments, intended audience, and activated social and cultural context associated with the narrative, as well as how these features are related.<sup>11</sup> We've also identified another frame element, a metaphor, that can help shift thinking in productive directions and be used in conjunction with the narrative features. The main features of the *help provided* narrative are described below.

## Features of a Narrative<sup>12</sup>

Feature	Description	What This Looks Like in the <i>Help Provided Narrative</i>
Characters	The type of person or people who are the protagonist in the story	People who are at risk of committing CSA (but don't do so)
Setting	The type of context in which the story takes place	The functioning system and the perpetration prevention programs within it
Plot	The pattern of what happens in a story; the narrative arc	Prevention is possible with the right systemic supports
Point of View	A particular group's perspective told from their social position	People who are at risk of committing CSA, both third-person and first-person narration
Evaluative Judgments	Implicit or explicit evaluations of the plot, characters, and setting	Affirmative and efficacious
Other Frame Elements	Other types of communication strategies that can be incorporated into a narrative	Guardrails metaphor
Intended audience	Group the narrative is created for and for whom it is addressed	The general public and policymakers
Activated social and cultural context	The cultural mindsets or scripts through which people make sense of a narrative	Public thinking around the severity of CSA; stigma surrounding the issue; and the need for mental health support (e.g., talk therapy)
Relationships among features	The ways that different aspects of a narrative are related	Character and point of view (POV) are related; setting and plot are interconnected; evaluative judgments tie everything together



## The Characters: People Who Are at Risk of Committing CSA

Characters in narratives typically involve a profile, or a specific *type*.<sup>15</sup> It's important to avoid overly simplistic characters, such as “hero” vs. “villain,” particularly given the current narratives about CSA that employ harmful and reductive characterizations of people who are at risk of committing or have committed CSA. Rather than having “heroes” in the story, the people who are at risk of committing CSA characters are doing their best in a system that is functioning as it should to prevent CSA.

The person who is at risk of committing CSA character can be described in different ways. For example, this character can be described as someone with an unwanted attraction to children. In particular, our research found that it is highly effective to center this group of people in stories about CSA prevention. This may be related to the fact that the public is largely unaware of or unable to conceptualize people with an unwanted attraction to children, and therefore building a story about this type of character leads to increased understanding and empathy of a previously unknown type. At the same time, it is possible to talk about other factors that affect someone's risk of committing CSA, such as belonging to another high-risk group (e.g., adolescents, people who routinely work with children, and/or people who are in positions of power when working with children). The person who is at risk of committing CSA character doesn't need to be described in full detail, but it is necessary to humanize them by talking about their activities, interests, and healthy relationships. Importantly, the character's motivation to *not* commit CSA should be highlighted. The point is to provide context that the character here isn't irredeemable but, rather, a complicated person with real issues they want to address.

Additionally, it's important to make it clear in the story that the identity of the person who is at risk of committing abuse is being kept confidential. If people think that confidentiality isn't part of a perpetration prevention program, they tend to lose faith in the program and its ability to prevent CSA, which can trigger people's fatalism about CSA prevention as a whole. To overcome this fatalism and build people's understanding that prevention is possible, it's important to signal that perpetration prevention programs can provide the appropriate support to people who are at risk of committing CSA, which includes maintaining their confidentiality. This can be done by using generic identifying features of the character—for example, using a first name only, describing generic or common hobbies or interests, not using names of the person's family or friends if they're mentioned in the story, or providing additional information that names have been changed to protect confidentiality. Samples of how to personalize the people who are at risk of committing CSA characters while still maintaining their confidentiality are included in the “Examples of How to Tell the Help Provided Narrative” section later in this brief.

## Character Example: Person with an Unwanted Attraction to Children

### What to Highlight

The character's activities, interests, and healthy relationships

The character's commitment to *not* commit CSA

The character's participation in a perpetration prevention program

The character's first name only

### What to Avoid

Presenting the character as a simplistic "hero" or "villain"

Using first and last names

## Why These Characters Work

Including the people who are at risk of committing CSA as the main characters in the story may seem counterintuitive, given the public's widespread aversion to thinking about the perpetration of CSA and default ideas about irredeemable people who commit abuse. However, in qualitative focus groups (the peer-discourse sessions), participants responded productively to these characters. This was particularly true regarding descriptions of people who are at risk of committing CSA that included some details about them beyond their unwanted attraction to children. These extra pieces of information (such as their hobbies) helped build a sense of empathy among participants—they were able to think about the people who are at risk of committing CSA in humanizing ways, as people who needed help and could receive it through an appropriate and accessible prevention program.

## The Setting: The System + Prevention Programs

The setting is the type of context in which the story takes place. While oftentimes the setting is a type of physical place, in this case the setting is a context—that of a system in which prevention programs are widely available for people who are at risk of committing CSA. The type of system portrayed in this narrative is one that works as it should to prevent CSA. It has the right programs in place, and it provides access to people who are at risk. A somewhat idealized description of the system as the setting is necessary to overcome people's fatalism about whether CSA can be prevented (see Examples of How to Tell the Help Provided Narrative).

Within this system, the prevention programs may be described as occurring in a physical place, particularly if you're describing real-life examples of prevention programs, but they can also be described in the abstract. We found that setting the story of CSA prevention in a real-life setting of an existing prevention program, as well as in a more abstract setting of an unnamed prevention program, helped to build understanding of CSA as preventable.

### **Real-Life Setting: Help Wanted Prevention Program**

Using a specific example of a program that is currently in existence or one that worked in the past as the contextual setting of the story helps build understanding of CSA as preventable. A specific example helps contextualize a difficult topic and gives people a sense of what exactly prevention can look like. Talking about a program such as Help Wanted (developed to help people with an unwanted attraction to children to not act on their attraction) helps build understanding not only of the problem of CSA and what it involves but also of a concrete solution to address the problem preventatively before abuse has occurred. There's no need to shy away from talking about the specifics of a CSA prevention program. In fact, the more details provided, the better, because the public is generally unaware that these programs even exist. By learning about the specifics of a prevention program such as Help Wanted, members of the public can envision prevention as a viable alternative to their default fatalism about CSA.

### **Abstract Setting: Prevention Program Focused on Mental Health**

It's also possible to use mental health prevention programs more broadly as the contextual setting of the story. Talking about perpetration prevention programs that are focused on providing mental health support can also help overcome people's fatalism and build an understanding of how CSA is preventable. However, it's still important to describe these programs with as much detail as possible so people understand exactly what the setting of the story involves and how these programs help prevent CSA. Additionally, the framing of these programs is important—we recommend talking about general prevention programs as being about mental health. Centering the setting on mental health support helps people overcome their default thinking that rehabilitation is not possible by giving them the appropriate context to understand people who are at risk of committing CSA as needing counseling or therapy rather than extremely punitive responses.

## Why This Setting Works

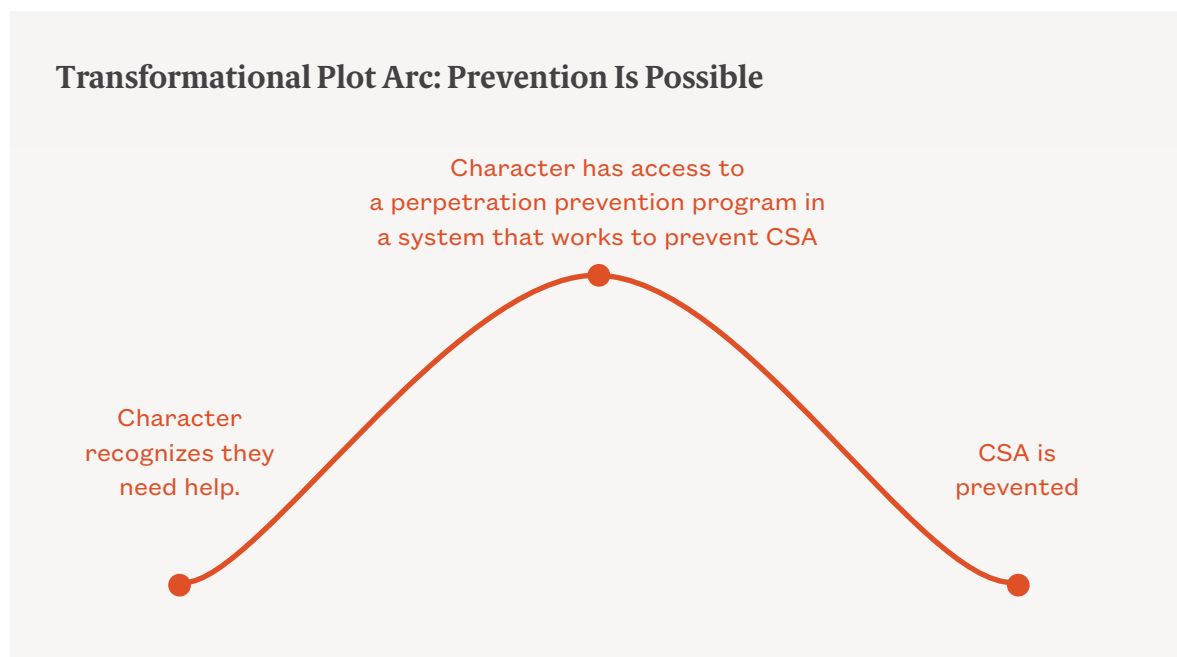
Situating the system as the setting in this narrative is an important way to shift people's thinking away from individualistic ideas about CSA and how to prevent it. Describing the system in detail by talking about prevention programs is necessary to build understanding of the contexts that shape our society and CSA prevention in particular. Across FrameWorks' research, we have found that centering the stories of individuals in their larger systemic contexts can help build understanding of and support for systemic solutions since these stories give people a better understanding of how systemic factors shape life outcomes and, therefore, how systemic change is necessary to address structural issues.

In particular, it is possible to center the system as the setting of the story through descriptions of perpetration prevention programs. These programs provide the right context to a story about preventing CSA. This contextual setting is especially important because it provides new information to the general public, which is largely currently unaware of programs and policies to prevent CSA that are geared toward people who are at risk of committing CSA. While using both real-life and abstract examples of prevention programs as the setting is effective, these two types of settings are doing slightly different things. In our quantitative research, we found that the real-life Help Wanted program helped build understanding of the factors that influence whether CSA happens (such as power dynamics between adults and children, regular exposure to media that sexualizes children, and experiences of abuse or substance abuse at home). The abstract setting of prevention program focused on mental health marginally increased understanding of some of the factors that influence whether CSA happens (experiences of abuse and exposure to sexualized media, and power dynamics between adults and children). The mental health program also helped participants understand how harsher punishments are not effective in preventing CSA, which in turn reduced support for extremely punitive policies to deal with CSA. Whether talking about real-life or abstract perpetration prevention programs, giving context and detailed information about these systemic solutions is a key part of building the new narrative around CSA prevention.

## The Plot: Prevention Is Possible

The plot is the pattern of what happens in a story. It consists of the beginning, middle, and end of a story, showing its narrative arc.<sup>14</sup> There are many types of plot arcs, but they typically include some sort of causality to show how different parts of the story are connected. The plot arc of the *help provided* narrative is focused on prevention of CSA—namely, that when the system works and has programs in place to provide support to people who are at risk of committing CSA, this can prevent abuse from occurring. In this sense, the plot lays out the causal pattern of how systems prevent CSA, particularly through perpetration prevention programs that are accessible to those who need them. Importantly, the plot arc demonstrates change and transformation, wherein the person who is at risk of committing CSA recognizes they need help and can change, thanks to the system.

The exact details of the plot can vary depending on the story that communicators and advocates want to tell. The systemic setting may vary, focusing on a specific prevention program or talking about perpetration prevention programs more generally (as described above). And as mentioned above, the characters of the people who are at risk of committing CSA may vary depending on advocates' particular focus. They may be people who have an unwanted attraction to children or people from high-risk groups, such as adolescents (see the examples below for a suggested way to talk about this particular group). Despite these differences in how the setting or characters are portrayed, the overarching plot arc remains consistent: with the right policies and programs in place, prevention is possible. The plot needs to be centered on systemic solutions to prevent CSA so it can build a sense of collective efficacy and responsibility around the issue and to overcome fatalism and individualistic thinking.



### Why This Plot Works (and Why Other Plot Arcs Don't)

Centering the plot on prevention means talking about what exactly prevention involves and what it looks like when it's successful. In our research, we found that describing what CSA prevention looks like—particularly in terms of perpetration prevention programs (the setting described above)—as well as talking about CSA prevention as something that's *possible* helped overcome people's fatalism about the issue. Stories with a prevention plot arc—those that describe how systems can help individuals to not commit CSA—help build understanding that CSA is something that is preventable in the first place and that there are policies and programs that can make that happen.

### Why Public Health Language Should Be Avoided

When incorporating a prevention plot arc into a story about CSA prevention, it's best to keep it as simple and straightforward as possible. To keep it simple, use the language of “prevention” rather than “public health.” Members of the public don't have a firm grasp of what public health means as a concept, and they are largely unaware that public health refers to a preventative approach. In our quantitative research, we found that using the language of “public health” to frame CSA prevention didn't help build understanding that CSA is preventable, likely because people are unfamiliar with public health as a concept. A simpler plot arc that uses the language of “prevention”—that with the right systemic support, prevention is possible—is much more effective.

### Why Using Education or Healthy Sexual Development as the Plot Arc Should Be Avoided

Additionally, there are other plot arcs that should be avoided in stories about CSA prevention. Talking about CSA prevention as a story that is primarily about the education or healthy sexual development of everyone in society doesn't overcome unproductive thinking about CSA and tends to reinforce existing *law and punishment* and *vigilant child* narratives. In our quantitative research, we found that framing CSA prevention primarily as an issue of educating everyone in society helped build understanding of how CSA is preventable. Meanwhile, framing CSA prevention as primarily an issue of ensuring everyone's healthy sexual development increased a sense of collective responsibility for preventing CSA. However, both of these frames backfired in our qualitative research. While geared toward everyone in society, the frames' focus on education and development made people focus on children, which triggered unproductive thinking about children as vulnerable victims who are forever damaged by abuse (as seen in the *law and punishment* narrative), and/or that the burden of preventing CSA is on children to recognize and report abuse (as seen in the *vigilant child* narrative). Moreover, the healthy sexual development frame triggered transphobic ideas about sex and gender education in schools, cueing people's thinking about the current moral panic surrounding trans children's rights. Instead of centering stories about CSA prevention as being primarily about education or healthy sexual development, talk about education and healthy sexual development as *systemic solutions* to prevent CSA. These are important solutions that can help people understand how prevention works—particularly when discussed as broader initiatives beyond the traditional educational system—but they are counterproductive when used as the central plot arc in the *help provided* narrative.

## The Point of View: People Who Are at Risk of Committing CSA (First- or Third-Person Narration)

A narrative typically adopts a particular group's perspective and is told from a particular social position.<sup>15</sup> In this case, the POV is told from the perspective of people who are at risk of committing CSA as they access the necessary perpetration prevention programs within a larger system working to prevent abuse. The POV in the *help provided* narrative does not refer to an individual but, rather, the position that people who are at risk of committing CSA hold within a functioning system. While narratives often adopt one “voice” or narration, here we recommend both the third-person omniscient and the first-person voice because both help build understanding that CSA is preventable by creating a sense of empathy, albeit in different ways.

### Third-Person Narration

Using third-person omniscient narration can be useful to employ the POV of people who are at risk of committing CSA. The third-person narration describes the journey of people who are at risk of committing CSA and how they received access to the help they needed. The third-person narration creates some distance between the reader and the people who are at risk of committing CSA, which can be useful to help members of the public take a step back from their initial assumptions and help build understanding of what someone may be going through. Third-person narration is also useful to present the plot arc of a story in a matter-of-fact, pragmatic way. In this case, third-person omniscient narration can be used to pragmatically describe what's happening in the main character's life—that they recognized they had a problem (e.g., an unwanted attraction to children) and had access to the support they needed to prevent CSA. By presenting the characters' journey in this matter-of-fact way, the third-person narration can help normalize perpetration prevention programs and CSA prevention on the whole.

### First-Person Narration

Using first-person narration can also be effective in building understanding of and support for CSA prevention, albeit for different reasons. The first-person narration of a person who is seeking help with unwanted attraction to children can help build a sense of empathy (and generally does not cue a negative response among members of the public). A story of CSA prevention that comes from the POV of people who are at risk of committing CSA and uses first-person narration can easily talk about the specifics of perpetration prevention programs,

as these can be directly described through people’s first-hand experience of them. Moreover, the first-person narration allows for a full discussion of the positive effects of prevention programs on people’s lives. The potential downside with the first-person narration is that it can make the story too individualistic, leading people to assume that this is a story about a unique individual rather than indicative of what prevention programs can do for everyone who needs them. For this reason, it’s important to clearly connect stories with first-person narration to the larger context—particularly through more detailed descriptions of the systemic setting of perpetrator prevention programs—so it’s clear that this story isn’t limited to one individual (see below for examples).

### Why This POV Works

Adopting the POV of people who are at risk of committing CSA is highly effective at shifting public thinking in productive directions, particularly using third- and first-person narration. The third-person narration performed the best in our quantitative research—it helped build understanding of how CSA is preventable, marginally increased a sense of collective responsibility to prevent CSA, and helped build understanding of what CSA involves. It also significantly reduced support for extremely punitive policies. And for people with experience of CSA, the third-person narration helped build understanding that CSA is preventable and reduced support for punitive policies.

On the other hand, the first-person narration helped build understanding that CSA is preventable, helped build a sense of collective responsibility to prevent CSA, and helped build understanding that people who are attracted to children don’t inevitably commit CSA. While there has been some concern that using first-person narration would cause the public to react negatively, in our research we found that members of the public productively engaged with a story that used first-person narration to relate the perspective of a person who is at risk of committing CSA. In qualitative research, the first-person narration helped build a sense of empathy and shifted thinking away from the *law and punishment* narrative’s harmful thinking and fatalism. In fact, it was notable how the first-person narration helped to dramatically shift people’s thinking from demonizing people to empathetically imagining how someone could have an *unwanted* attraction to children and voluntarily seek help to address it.

One important caveat from our quantitative research, however, is that the first-person narration does not help build understanding of CSA prevention or help build a sense of collective responsibility or efficacy to prevent CSA among people with experience of CSA. Therefore, we recommend that communicators and advocates use the third-person narration for stories that are specifically geared toward people with experience of the issue.



## Evaluative Judgments: Affirmative and Efficacious

Narratives involve implicit or explicit evaluative judgments about plot, characters, and setting.<sup>16</sup> These judgments can vary widely, from heroizing or demonizing particular characters, providing plot arcs of failure redemption, to including romanticized or dystopian settings. In the *help provided* narrative, the evaluative judgments are affirmative and efficacious throughout all the elements of the narrative—the characters, plot arc, setting, and POV.

Incorporating affirmative and efficacious evaluative judgments in each feature of the narrative means the following:

- ✓ Talking about the characters as people who are capable of not committing abuse
- ✓ Talking about the setting as a system that is functioning as it should to prevent abuse through perpetration prevention programs (either specific or general mental health programs)
- ✓ Using a plot arc that involves affirmative changes—the characters recognizing there is a problem and receiving the help they need preventatively
- ✓ Employing the POV of the people who are at risk of committing CSA in ways that highlight what can be done to prevent abuse and ensure the wellbeing of everyone.

Evaluative judgments tend to emerge through the POV of the narrative. Affirmative and efficacious judgments are easily combined with a third-person narration that presents a story from a more distanced position, as well as with a first-person narration that describes how the character gets the help they need with the right systemic support. Using affirmative and efficacious judgments will help build a sense of empathy for the characters—people who are at risk of committing CSA—and will help build a sense that prevention is possible, overcoming people's fatalism.

### Why These Evaluative Judgments Work

In our qualitative research, stories that used affirmative and efficacious language, combined with the POV of people who are at risk of committing CSA, helped shift participants' thinking in productive directions. People were able to see how prevention is possible and were largely able to see how people who are at risk, especially those with an unwanted attraction to children, need preventative support rather than punitive responses. On the other hand, talking about CSA prevention as a crisis didn't shift thinking in productive directions in our quantitative research. By invoking fear about CSA and its effects,

a crisis tone has the potential to reinforce fatalism about prevention. The public needs stories that are about what went *right* in preventing CSA, and using affirmative and efficacious judgments is central to telling these stories in the *help provided* narrative.

## Other Frame Elements: The Guardrails Metaphor

Due to the power of explanatory metaphors to explain complex topics and build public understanding of an issue, stories may incorporate metaphors to strengthen the overarching narrative. In this case, using the metaphor of guardrails can help strengthen the message of the *help provided* narrative. In this metaphor, guardrails are the systemic solutions that are needed to prevent CSA—just as guardrails are needed to prevent crashes on the road, systemic solutions, such as perpetration prevention programs, are needed to prevent CSA. This metaphorical language may not always be appropriate or make sense for a particular story. However, it can be incorporated into the new narrative in useful ways—for example, when used to talk about perpetration prevention programs.

### Why Talking about Guardrails Works

In qualitative research, the idea of putting up guardrails to prevent CSA stuck in people's minds and helped them think about specific systems and structures that could prevent CSA. This is because the metaphorical language of guardrails speaks to the ways that society puts in place protective and preventive systems in public life, which helps people draw a connection between common and existing forms of prevention like road safety measures and what society can do to prevent CSA. In quantitative research, we tested a road safety metaphor that included language of guardrails. For people without experience of CSA, the metaphor helped build understanding that people with an unwanted attraction to children do not always commit CSA and that CSA is preventable. It also marginally increased people's belief that CSA prevention is *possible*, thereby helping to overcome people's fatalism about the issue.

## Intended Audience + Activated Social and Cultural Context

When creating a new narrative about an issue, it's important to keep in mind who the intended audience is—that is, the social group that the narrative is created *for* and who it's addressed *to*.<sup>17</sup> In this case, the *help provided* narrative has two main audiences: the general public and, more specifically, policymakers who have the power to implement changes in how CSA prevention is approached at the policy level.

While the overarching features of the new narrative can remain the same for each audience, there may be cases where it's useful to emphasize certain elements of the narrative over others. For example, when communicating with the general public, it may be more useful to emphasize the characters—people who are at risk of committing CSA—to help build empathy and overcome fatalism about preventing CSA. For policymakers, it may be more useful to emphasize the setting—perpetration

prevention programs—to build support for these programs among this group and help enable policy change. The toolkit that we’re developing for this project will provide more specific guidelines for how to use the framing recommendations in this brief in different materials geared toward specific audiences.

Audience: General Public	Audience: Policymakers
What to emphasize: characters—people who are at risk of committing CSA	What to emphasize: setting—perpetration prevention programs
<p>Example:</p> <p><i>I'm a brother, a friend, a cyclist, and <b>someone who is at risk of committing CSA.</b> I participated in X program to get the help I needed to not commit abuse.</i></p>	<p>Example:</p> <p><i>X [character] received the support they needed to not commit abuse. When people are at risk of committing CSA, they need access to <b>perpetration prevention programs</b> like [insert detailed description of the program].</i></p>

It’s important to keep in mind, however, that policymakers are not separate from the general public; they are part of the social-cultural context of the U.S., including sharing the same cultural mindsets about these issues that the general public holds. Indeed, these two levels of intended audience for the *help provided* narrative—the general public and policymakers—share cultural mindsets through which they can make sense of the new narrative. This is the social and cultural context that a narrative can activate. The existing *law and punishment* and *vigilant child* narratives about CSA activate certain cultural mindsets—namely, individualistic ideas about irredeemable people who commit CSA, and individual children and parents who must remain constantly vigilant to prevent abuse from these fundamentally bad actors. These mindsets breed fatalism about preventing CSA and skepticism about the possibility of rehabilitation.

On the other hand, the *help provided* narrative activates and brings to the fore cultural mindsets about CSA that enable people to think more systemically and allow them to envision a society in which CSA is prevented before it happens. The *help provided* narrative activates public mindsets that recognize the severity of CSA and how societal and cultural sexualization of children contributes to CSA, both in person and online.<sup>18</sup> Yet instead of activating people’s fatalism about the issue, the new narrative helps expand people’s existing understandings to think about the possibility of prevention and provide specific examples of what prevention can look like. The new narrative expands people’s existing understanding of stigma and mental health supports to help them think about how both survivors and people who are at risk of committing CSA experience stigma and require support from mental health professionals. The *help provided* narrative builds on and expands existing cultural mindsets, which creates space for people to think about CSA prevention as possible with the right supports.

## Relationships among Features

The different features of a narrative are related in various ways. In the *help provided* narrative, the efficacious and affirmative evaluative judgments infuse all other features of the narrative. The plot arc and the setting are interwoven—a transformative plot arc takes place in the setting of a perpetration prevention program, and the setting is highlighted and emphasized through the plot arc that prevention is possible. The characters of people who are at risk of committing CSA are central to the narrative, particularly through their POV, which can be represented through either first-person or third-person narration. Moreover, the intended audience and the activated social and cultural context provide the larger structure through which the characters, plot, setting, and POV are understood. Taken as a whole, the features of the *help provided* narrative form a cohesive, interconnected approach to framing CSA prevention that can help change people's minds about the problem and the possible solutions. In the next section, we provide examples that put everything together to demonstrate the relationships among the narrative features in more detail.

# Examples of How to Tell the *Help Provided* Narrative

Understanding the features of the *help provided* narrative is essential to developing stories that can incorporate the characters, setting, plot, POV, and evaluative judgments necessary to build this new narrative. Below we provide some examples of stories and other approaches that include these features in distinct ways to demonstrate the diversity of stories and other approaches that can be created within this new narrative. We are also developing a strategic toolkit, which will include more specific examples and strategies for communicators and advocates.

## EXAMPLE #1

### Real-Life Prevention Program + First-Person Narration

My name is Alex.\* I am many things—a sibling, a runner, an artist. I am also sexually attracted to children, but I didn't choose to feel this way. In my commitment to keep children safe, I found a free online self-help program called Help Wanted. It was specially designed for people like me who have a sexual attraction to children but don't want to act on their feelings. After reading through hundreds of testimonials from participants who said the program was helpful in preventing them from abusing a child, I signed up. Help Wanted taught me the harms of child sexual abuse and provided clear strategies that help me cope with my feelings in productive ways. The program created a supportive and affirmative environment and introduced me to positive role models I can talk to when I need support.

Free self-help programs like Help Wanted help people like me gain the knowledge and support we need so that we can live productive lives and never abuse a child. After completing the program, I feel better able to cope with my feelings, I know that I have good role models I can lean on for support, and I am more confident that I will not abuse a child. If programs like Help Wanted are made more widely available, I am certain that we can more effectively prevent child sexual abuse.

\*Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

Adding some additional information about the person who is at risk of committing CSA character, such as their hobbies, can help build a sense of empathy and overcome extremely punitive thinking.

Describe the specific program or solution that you want to highlight; the more detailed your description, the better.

Consider adding specific language that makes it clear the person who is at risk of committing CSA's identity is being kept confidential, as that will help build empathy and support for these types of programs.

## EXAMPLE #2

**Abstract Prevention Program**  
+ **Third-Person Narration**

Alex is many things—a sibling, a runner, and an artist. Alex is also sexually attracted to children, but he didn't choose to feel that way. In Alex's commitment to keeping children safe, he found a perpetration prevention program. It was designed for people like Alex who have a sexual attraction to children, but don't want to act on their feelings. The program provided Alex with access to group and individual therapy with **mental health professionals** who are specially trained to work with people who have an unwanted sexual attraction to children. Through therapy sessions focused on coping with unwanted feelings and establishing clear strategies to decrease the likelihood of abuse, Alex learned how to cope with his feelings in productive ways. And because the program guaranteed confidentiality and Alex's participation remained anonymous to other health care providers, Alex could speak freely to mental health professionals without fear of stigma.

Perpetration prevention programs help people like Alex gain the knowledge and support they need so they can live productive lives and never abuse a child. After completing the program, Alex feels better able to cope with his feelings, knowing that he has mental health professionals he can lean on for support, and he is more confident that he will not abuse a child. If perpetration prevention programs are made more widely available, Alex is certain that we can more effectively prevent child sexual abuse.

For audiences that are specifically composed of people with experience of CSA, the third person POV works best to build understanding of and support for CSA prevention.

Talking about mental health in these stories is important, and we have found in other recent research that the public views mental health in far less stigmatizing ways than in the past. However, it is crucial to talk about mental health in ways that don't stigmatize people with mental health issues. This can be done by talking about mental health as one aspect of overall health and as something that everyone needs to take care of, to help further normalize the idea of mental health support.

## EXAMPLE #3

**First-Person Narration + Guardrails Metaphor**

Preventing child sexual abuse concerns all of us, and just like with other issues in society, we need **certain guardrails in place to keep everyone safe**. Luckily, there are resources that exist to prevent this abuse from happening. I am someone who has an unwanted attraction to children, and having guardrails in place—like targeted mental health prevention programs—helped me from ever acting on those feelings. For people like me, being able to access a perpetration prevention program run by mental health professionals helped me develop strategies to prevent child sexual abuse from happening. Programs like these provide the guardrails needed to prevent child sexual abuse from happening and allow people to live their fullest lives, just like how guardrails help prevent crashes on the road and keep everyone safe.

Use the guardrails metaphor with a light touch. People are familiar with the metaphorical use of the term guardrails, and they can easily understand how that concept maps onto programs that can prevent CSA.

## EXAMPLE #4

**Public Health vs. Prevention More Broadly****Instead of ...**

If we treat child sexual abuse as a **public health issue**, we can more effectively keep child sexual abuse from happening. Sam's story shows the importance of treating child sexual abuse as a public health issue. When Sam was in middle school, he inappropriately touched another child. He was expelled from school and didn't get the support he needed to learn about consent and appropriate boundaries. He then went on to commit child sexual abuse later in life. If Sam had received rehabilitative support through public health programs when he was younger, the future abuse he committed could have been prevented. We can prevent child sexual abuse if we treat it with the same urgency as any other public health issue.

Using public health language without explaining what you mean can be confusing for the public, who doesn't have a good understanding of what public health entails.

**Try ...**

Child sexual abuse is a **serious issue that can be prevented**. Sam's story shows the importance of focusing on prevention programs to prevent abuse from happening. When Sam was in middle school, he thought about inappropriately touching another child. His school enrolled him in a prevention program, led by mental health professionals, in which Sam learned about consent and age-appropriate boundaries. As a result, Sam received the support he needed, and abuse was prevented. Prevention programs like the one Sam participated in can provide the support that high-risk people need so they never abuse a child, which will keep our communities safe and healthy.

Focusing the story on prevention and using an efficacious, neutral tone helps build understanding right away that CSA is an issue that has solutions. Following up with specific examples of what CSA prevention looks like will help build understanding and help to overcome fatalism.

EXAMPLE #5

Healthy Sexual Development: Main Plot Arc vs. Outcome of Prevention Program

Instead of ...

Child sexual abuse is an issue of healthy sexual development. We can prevent child sexual abuse by ensuring healthy sexual development for everyone. Sara is a parent of a middle-schooler. She learned the signs of child sexual abuse and has open conversations about healthy sexual behaviors with her child. Her child now knows when to speak up and knows about age-appropriate boundaries. When children are able to learn about sexual development in a healthy way, this can help to keep abuse from happening in everyone's homes, schools, and communities.

Try ...

Child sexual abuse can be prevented with the right support. For example, when people who are at high risk of committing child sexual abuse have access to prevention programs that focus on mental health and wellbeing, they are better able to develop appropriate boundaries that will keep them from ever abusing a child. Sam is someone who benefited from one of these programs. In middle school, Sam thought about inappropriately touching a classmate. Sam's school enrolled him in a perpetration prevention program for adolescents. Sam was connected with mental health professionals who helped him recognize and develop healthy and age-appropriate boundaries. Sam's story shows how programs that help those at risk of committing child sexual abuse develop healthy sexual boundaries work to prevent child sexual abuse from ever happening.

When the main plot arc is about healthy sexual development, this may lead to problematic backfiring.

Focusing the story on parents can lead to individualistic thinking about the *Family Bubble* — that parents are solely responsible for preventing abuse, which makes it hard for people to see the important role that systems and institutions need to play in preventing abuse.

When children are made the sole focus of abuse prevention, this can reinforce the *vigilant child* narrative and can make it difficult for people to understand how abuse can be prevented at a societal level.

The story follows the features of the new narrative: the plot is about prevention, and the setting is a prevention program.

Healthy sexual development is talked about as the outcome of prevention programs rather than as the main plot of the story.



# Conclusion

When existing narratives about an issue are harmful and unproductive, creating an alternative narrative is crucial to shifting thinking in productive directions. Building a new narrative about CSA prevention is essential to overcoming the fatalism and individualism that are inherent in the existing *law and punishment* and *vigilant child* narratives about this issue.

The *help provided* narrative presents an alternative to these harmful narratives. Incorporating the features of this new narrative—the characters, plot arc, setting, POV, and evaluative judgments—into the stories communicators and advocates tell about CSA prevention can help shift public thinking away from fatalism and toward optimism that we, as a society, can prevent CSA before it happens. And being attuned to the intended audience and activated social and cultural context when telling these stories as part of this new narrative can help build understanding that prevention is *possible* and build support for systemic solutions to prevent CSA at a societal level.

Shifting public thinking about a topic as sensitive as CSA prevention requires a careful and rigorously tested approach. This is exactly what FrameWorks provides in this report—an empirically tested set of strategies to build an alternative narrative about CSA prevention that advocates and communicators can use in a variety of contexts and spaces. With a coordinated effort on the part of advocates and communicators working on this issue, it is possible to overcome harmful narratives and build the *help provided* narrative together.

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