

Breaking the Pattern: Relearning Safety as an Adult

By Hope Denton

The Smile That Covered Everything

There's a childhood photo of me — grinning wide, hair brushed, outfit clean. I looked like a kid with nothing to worry about.

But smiles don't always tell the truth.

That photo doesn't show the instability I was navigating: a fractured family, relatives silently battling mental illness, a father who lived out of his truck for an extended time and could only see us at my grandmother's house, and trauma I didn't yet have the language to explain. Like many children of the '80s and '90s, I learned early how to perform "fine." To stay quiet. To shrink. To survive.

And for a long time, I thought that was enough.

When Parenting Reopens the Wounds

It's easy to believe the past is behind you — until you become a parent.

Raising children shines a flashlight on corners of yourself you thought were sealed off. Moments with your kids stir up memories you'd buried deep. You catch yourself reacting too strongly, too fast — and realize the voice coming out isn't even yours. It's inherited.

I'm a mother of three — ages 15, 12, and 6 — and with every stage of their growth, I'm reminded that I'm not just parenting them. I'm re-parenting myself.

And that work? It starts with recognizing what I used to call "normal" — and choosing, daily, to do something different.

A New Kind of Normal

In our home, we aim to pause before reacting. We try not to yell. We say sorry when we get it wrong — even as adults.

My husband and I stay united in front of our kids and work out disagreements in private. We tell our children that we're learning, too. That they're figuring out how to be kids — and we're figuring out how to be parents. Grace flows in both directions.

This isn't the parenting I knew growing up. But it's the parenting we've built from scratch.

We didn't come here to blame. We came here to break the cycle. Because awareness gives us power — and with power comes choice.

The “Laundry Basket” of Emotions

A therapist once told me I managed my emotions like a laundry basket — stuffing them in until they toppled over. The metaphor landed.

Trauma survivors are often taught to block out pain just to function. But parenting forces it all back up. Your child slams a door and your stomach knots — not because of the door, but because of everything it reminds you of.

There was a time when those moments unraveled me. Now, I notice them. I catch myself more often. Not always — but more.

And that's what breaking the pattern looks like. Not perfection. Just progress.

When Your Child Is Who You Once Were

My six-year-old still sleeps in our bed. She says she's scared to be alone. And we let her stay.

As a child, I had the same fear. But I was met with confusion and teasing. Nobody asked why I couldn't sleep in my own bed for so many years. Even now, as an adult, some family members still make comments about it — and about my daughter.

But I understand her fear. I understand mine. And that's enough.

Because giving her safety isn't indulgent — it's reparative. It's parenting not as performance, but as protection.

A Conversation That Shifted Everything

Recently, I told my dad something I'd never said out loud:

“The lesson I learned from childhood wasn't the one you wanted me to learn.”

I wasn't blaming him. I was offering clarity.

What I learned was to pick my battles more selectively. I learned that hair color can grow out, piercings can be removed, outfits can change.

But what sticks is how a child is made to feel about who they are. What can't be undone is the damage that happens when we mistake control for care. When we forget that discipline without connection can create distance.

So now, I pick differently. I protect differently. Because I want to teach something else: that safety is not earned, it's given.

Trauma Isn't Always Obvious

When I read [this IU Health article on Generational Trauma and ACEs](#), I saw my story mirrored back.

It explained how trauma stays in the body, how parenting can unlock what we tried to forget, and how awareness is often the first tool toward healing.

One line especially struck me:

“When you're having a hard time as a parent or feeling stressed, does it evoke something about how you were parented? Before you repeat old habits, ask yourself: Do I need to take a moment for myself?”

Yes. That. That's the pause. That's the pattern breaking.

This Generation Is Doing the Work

We — the kids of latchkey households, of “tough love,” of chaos mistaken for normalcy — are doing the work.

We're showing up in therapy. We're reading the books. We're rewriting scripts mid-sentence and whispering apologies before breakfast.

We're imperfect. But we're intentional.

And we are, in many homes, the first generation to say:

That didn't feel good.

That wasn't normal.

That ends with me.

Forgiveness Without Forgetting

I've forgiven those who couldn't give me what I needed. Not because they apologized. But because I don't want their pain shaping my kids' lives.

Forgiveness, for me, is like a reset button. It says: I'll honor the past, but I won't be bound by it.

And that's what healing is — not erasing where you came from, but choosing where you're going.

What Breaking the Pattern Really Looks Like

It looks like pausing instead of yelling.

It looks like saying "I'm sorry," and meaning it.

It looks like letting your child feel safe, even when it's inconvenient.

It looks like modeling peace — because now, we're safe enough to do so.

This isn't just about parenting. It's about emotional safety. Self-trust. Generational change.

We don't get to rewrite our childhoods.

But we do get to decide what comes next.

And for me, that's what healing looks like.

That's what breaking the pattern really is.