

A Practical Guide to

# Parenting a Child Exposed to Trauma

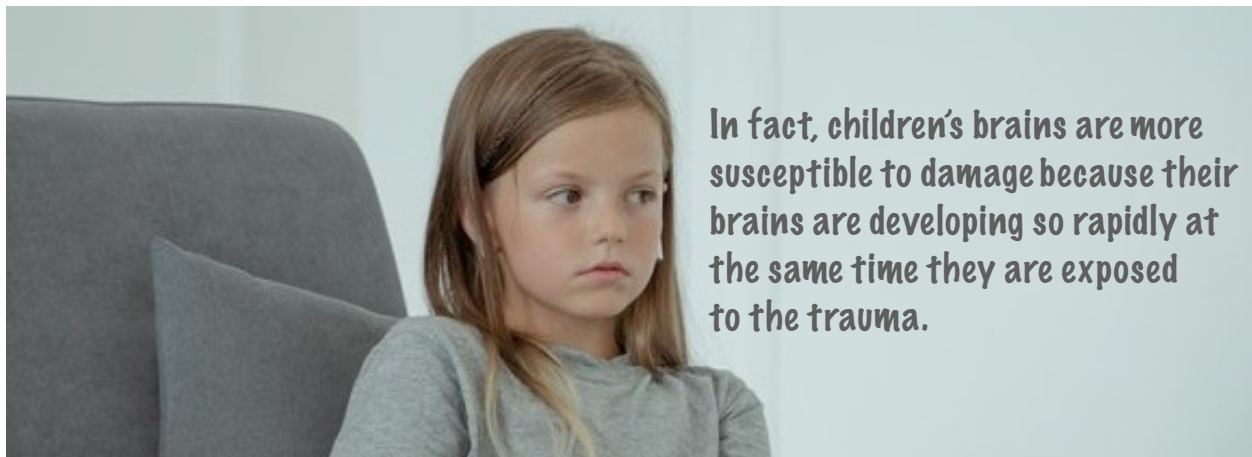


## Trauma-Informed Parenting

Parenting kids exposed to trauma is hard. Sometimes it's extremely hard, but these kids **need** parents, and these families **can** thrive. What do the experts say works when parenting a child who has been exposed to trauma?

It helps to start with the fact that trauma can come in many forms and exists on a continuum. Physical and sexual abuse clearly cause trauma, but more and more evidence is coming to light about the long-term trauma caused by neglect. Emotional abuse also leaves deep scars. For many children, trauma begins before birth through prenatal exposure to alcohol and drugs.

Regardless of the source, trauma impacts kids and the parents who love them.



**In fact, children's brains are more susceptible to damage because their brains are developing so rapidly at the same time they are exposed to the trauma.**

### How Does Trauma Affect Kids?

[Research](#) shows that exposure to trauma changes the very structure of a child's brain. In fact, children's brains are [more susceptible to damage](#) because their brains are developing so rapidly at the same time they are exposed to the trauma.

And a child's brain affects her behavior.

### Behaviors May Vary

Behaviors typical of childhood trauma can vary significantly depending on the child's innate temperament, the type of trauma, and healing environmental factors (including the parents). There are other complicating conditions to be considered, such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), learning disabilities, and mental illnesses.

A traumatized child might be withdrawn, depressed, or anxious. But a child who has experienced trauma might be defiant, argumentative, and generally uncooperative. Or a child might be a mix of all the above at any point of the day. Trauma can also impact the ability of a child to attach to new caregivers.



## How Does Trauma Affect Parenting?

Children exposed to trauma can be challenging for parents. The unfortunate corollary is that parenting challenging kids can often bring out the worst in a parent's behavior as well.

## Common Traits of Parents Worn Out by Traumatized Kids

In an [interview on the CreatingaFamily.org podcast](#), Dr. Russell Barkley, professor of psychiatry and pediatrics and author of *Your Defiant Child*\* and *Taking Charge of ADHD*\*, pointed out several common characteristics of parents who have been worn down by challenging kids:

- They tend to be inconsistent in their reactions to their child's behavior, for example, enforcing rules one day and giving up the next.
- They often drift towards extreme discipline with the child. This can happen because they feel as if nothing else has worked and they have reached the end of their rope.
- They tend to be emotional and not infrequently suffering from depression themselves.

Do these traits sound familiar? Obviously, none of these "techniques" is the best way to parent a traumatized child.

## The Good News is That Kids Want to Do Well

In an [interview on the CreatingaFamily.org podcast](#), Dr. Ross Greene, Harvard Psychology professor and author of *The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children*\* stressed that it is crucial for parents of children exposed to trauma to realize that **kids want to do well, and if they are struggling it is likely because they are lacking a specific skill needed to succeed.**

In the midst of dealing with a child whose behavior reflects their early life trauma, it's easy to think that this kid is intentionally driving you nuts. Reframing their behavior to be a lack of a specific skill turns this into a teachable moment, and teachable moments give us the power to help our child improve.

## What Skills is Your Child Lacking?

In [\*The Explosive Child\*](#)<sup>\*</sup>, Dr. Greene lists a number of skills that behaviorally challenging kids might be lacking or that might be significantly delayed. Some of the common ones are listed below.

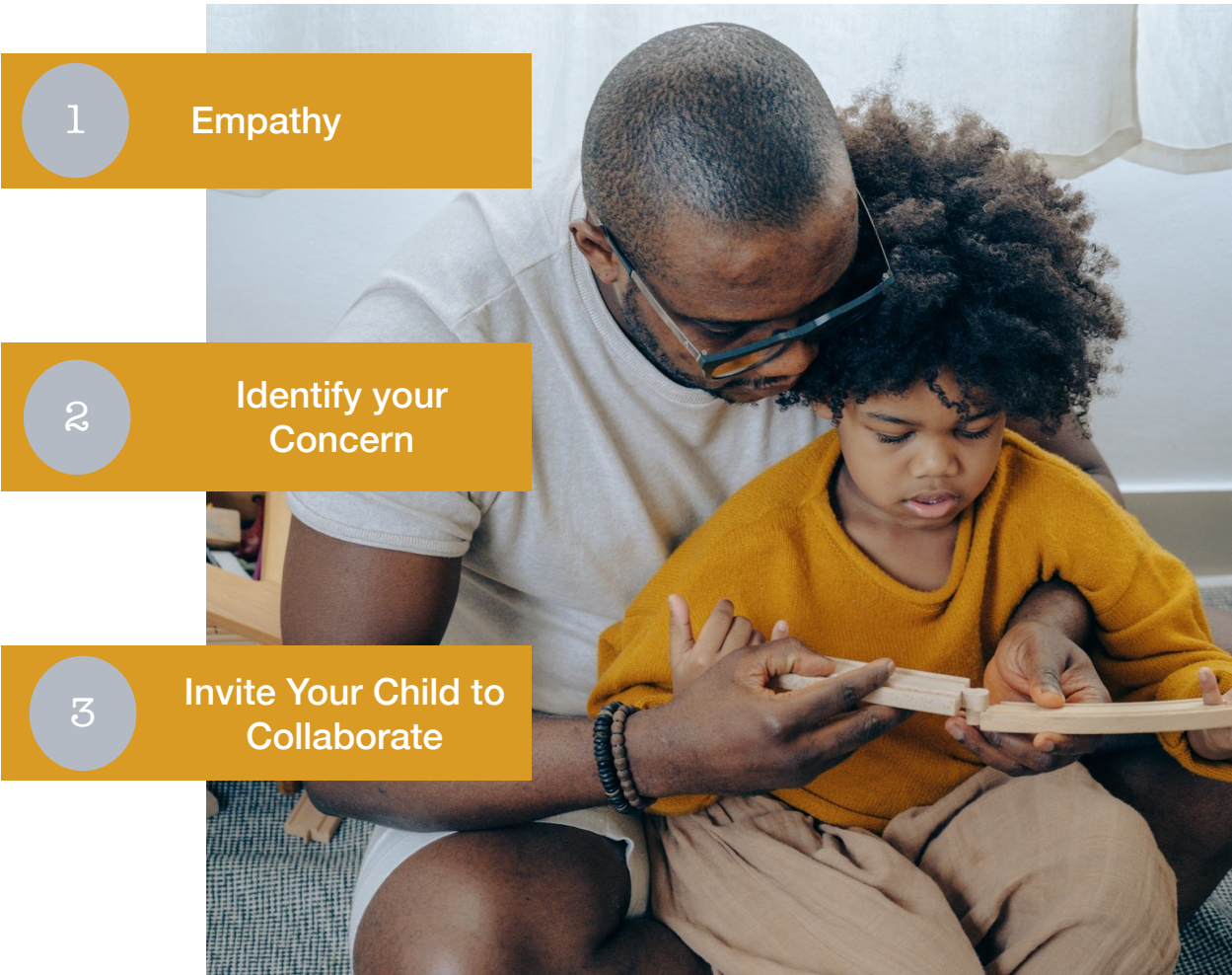
Spend some time identifying what skills your child is lacking. When is her behavior at its worst? Look for the pattern for when she struggles the most. Most children are predictable if we look for their patterns.

- Difficulty handling transitions, shifting from one mindset or task to another.
- Difficulty doing things in a logical sequence or prescribed order.
- Poor sense of time.
- Difficulty reflecting on multiple thoughts or ideas simultaneously.
- Difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of actions (impulsiveness).
- Difficulty considering a range of solutions to a problem.
- Difficulty managing emotional response to frustration to think rationally.
- Difficulty deviating from rules or routine.
- Difficulty accurately interpreting social cues.
- Difficulty appreciating how he is coming across or being perceived by others.



## How Can Parents Build a Child's Lagging Skills?

Dr. Greene summarizes collaborative parenting in a three-step approach to build a challenging child's problem-solving skills. It's important to remember that these steps are proactive in nature. Practice them when things are going smoothly, and there are no tempers (yours or theirs!) flaring.



Practicing these three steps creates a new, regular pattern of interacting with our kids that says, “I’ve got you – we can do these hard things together.” Then, when the meltdowns happen, your child already has access to that felt safety of working with you on the skills she needs to manage her big feelings in the moment.

This [Creating a Family.org](#) article, [Parenting a Challenging Child: A Collaborative Approach](#), takes you through all three steps of the collaborative approach in greater detail, including examples and scripts for how to practice with your child.

## Seek Attachment with Your Child

Trauma impacts attachment. Period. And attachment is crucial to a child's mental health and to parenting satisfaction. The effect of trauma on a child's behavior can impact a parent's ability to attach and bond with the child.

The late Dr. Karyn Purvis, child psychologist and author of [\*The Connected Child\*](#)\* shared this [practical advice for creating attachment](#) on the CreatingaFamily.org podcast.





*Dr. Karyn Purvis's*

## **Practical Ways to Create Attachment in Kids Exposed to Trauma**



### **1. Meet Needs.**

Your #1 goal is to find out what your child needs and do your best to meet these needs. The best way to find out what she needs is to ask her. Dr. Purvis said she often used this exact language: "I'm a sure thing. Tell me what you need."



## 2. Say Yes.

Focus on saying yes to your child, more than you say no. Every “yes” puts trust in your child’s trust bank. Your goal should be to say 7 “yeses” to every 1 “no.”

## 3. Make Eye Contact.

Look your kiddo in the eye every chance you can and encourage your child to make eye contact with you. Our eyes speak louder than our voices and can express so much love and warmth. Get on your child’s eye level when you speak to them, even if your knees creak and you grunt when you stand up.





#### 4. Touch.

Touch your child affectionately and often. Pay attention to your child's cues as to whether they feel safe being touched. If your child resists touch, use a "symbolic touch"—reaching out to the child, but stopping short of touching them to respect their space. Some kids need us to ask permission before we touch them.

#### 5. Mirror Behavior.

Parents and children in healthy homes match each other's behaviors naturally. When infants coo, parents coo back. When toddlers laugh, her parents laugh too. These matching behaviors build trust and attachment. Older adopted or fostered children have often missed out on these matching moments so parents must be intentional and consistent in creating these opportunities. For instance, your child is playing on the floor with blocks, you can match that child's behavior in play, by playing with the blocks in the same manner alongside your child.



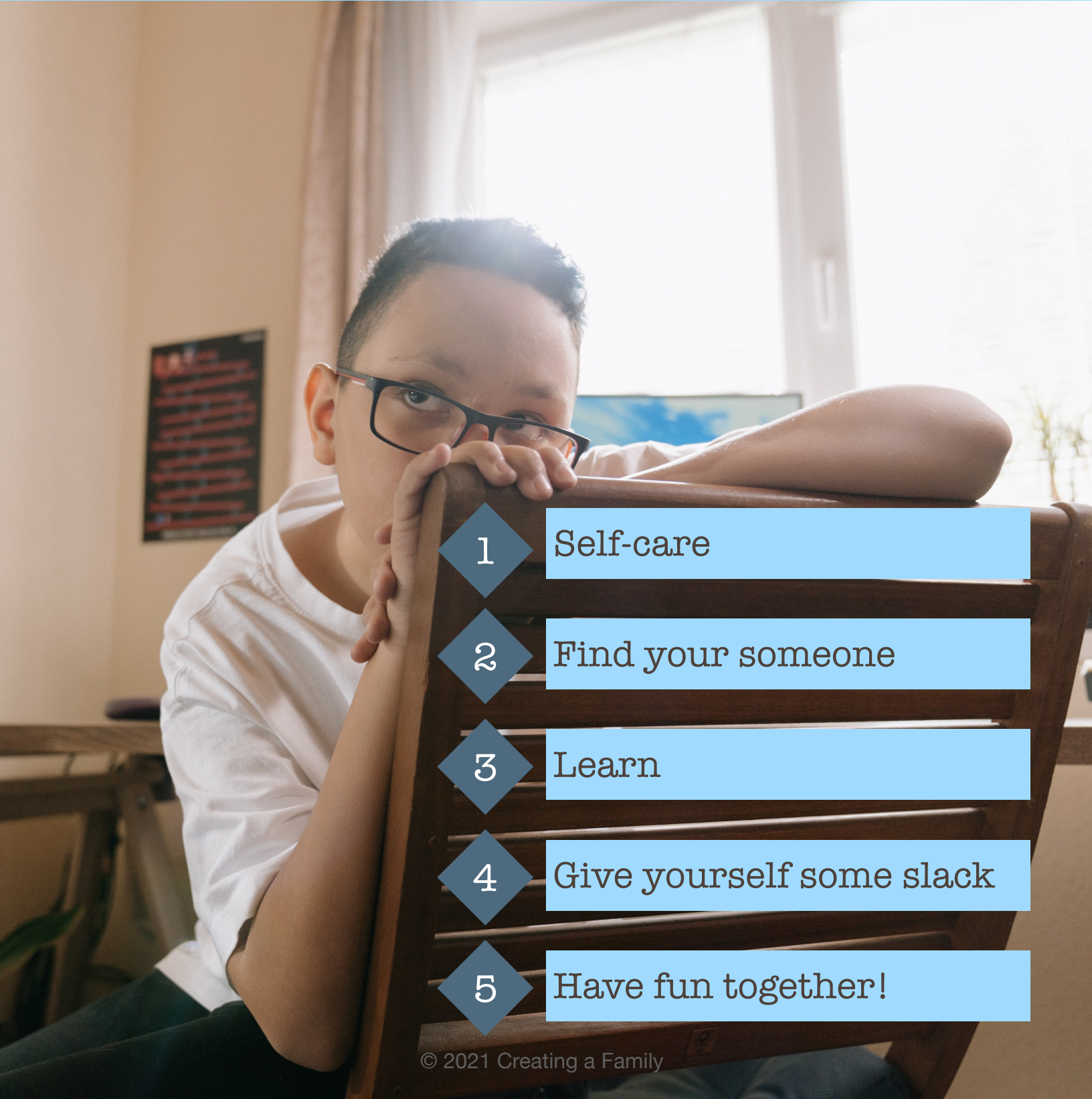
## 6. Follow.

Allow your child to be the play leader for a specified time frame. Teach your child to use a timer and have him set it for 15 minutes. During that time, he has your undivided attention without the laundry, the TV, or your phone to distract you. He decides what you play, and you match his posture and type of play. If he's on the floor making a track for his cars, you get down on the floor and ask what shape track piece he needs next. Being the play leader gives your child power and a voice. Both are crucial for creating trust and attachment.



# Tips for Parenting Children Exposed to Trauma

*A quick reference guide of tips for what to do when you have reached the end of your rope.*



1

Self-care

2

Find your someone

3

Learn

4

Give yourself some slack

5

Have fun together!

# #1

## Self-care

Our number one recommendation before you do anything else is to [take care of yourself](#). You've heard the airplane analogy ad nauseam, but it's true: "You have to put on your own air mask before you can help someone else." Your sanity and your energy are the most important thing you bring to your family and to this challenging child, so you must find a way on a regular basis to recharge. An afternoon window shopping (or actual shopping) at the mall by yourself, a Saturday morning at Starbucks, a monthly massage, regular attendance at an exercise class, participating in the church choir, or a daily run. Whatever feeds your soul qualifies as self-care, and this should be a priority.



## Find your someone

# #2

This is like self-care, with a similarly trite analogy: When your battery is dead, you need to connect with a live battery to recharge. Who is your live battery? Who can you connect with when you are in the trenches? Who will understand and support you? An online or in person friend who's been where you're at, a therapist, your spouse, or all three. Find this someone and let them know that you are struggling and will need to lean on them to help you through.



## Learn

#3

Our mantra here at [CreatingaFamily.org](https://www.creatingafamily.org) is “knowledge is power”! The more you learn about the forces that shaped your child/foster child and you, the better able you are to cope and to raise this child.

- Read or listen to interviews about the impact of trauma on a child [here](#) and [here](#).
- Learn about how alcohol and drug exposure during pregnancy can leave their mark [here](#) and [here](#).
- Learn more about raising a challenging child and how to help her gain the skills she needs, [here](#) and [here](#).
- Learn how your own temperament, personality, and [attachment style influences how you respond to this child](#) and [what you can do about it](#).

#4

## Cut yourself (and your child) some slack

Cultivate empathy for yourself and your child. When you are in the parenting muck, it’s hard to do, but after she is asleep (and looking angelic), list in your head the things that happened to her that brought her to this place. Focus on the fact that your child is not purposely trying to drive you crazy and make you feel like a failure.

And while you are thinking, direct some thoughts inward. [What issues from your past are you bringing to this interaction?](#) Do you hate conflict because of the family you came from? Do you need a lot of order in your life to feel secure? Does your love language conflict with this child’s love language? For example, do you crave physical affection, but this child expresses love through being helpful?

# #5

## Have fun together!

If we could stress one thing above all others in this Practical Guide to Parenting a Child Exposed to Trauma it would be to find a way to have fun as a family. Never underestimate the power of fun as a person and family to help you through the dark times.

As Allison Douglas, Family Advocate with the Harmony Center, said in a CreatingaFamily.org podcast, [Parenting Toolkit for Harder to Parent Kids](#):

*“The more difficult the child, the more fun you should be having with them.”*

[Find one thing that you and your child both enjoy](#) and make a point of doing it frequently. Once you find one thing, look for something else. It should be simple and cheap: bike riding, playing catch, watching Sponge Bob, reading books out loud, or baking cookies.

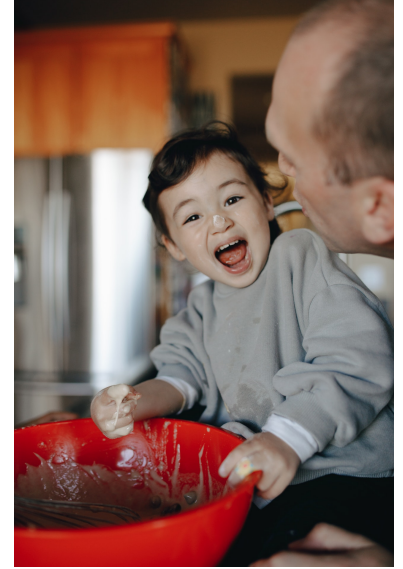


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