

IN OUR OWN HANDS

TOOLS FOR TALKING ABOLITION &
TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE
WITH LITTLE ONES



for Malik

About this Toolkit

This free guide was developed by artist, organizer, and social justice educator Rania El Mugammar. This document provides tools for starting (and continuing) conversations about policing, prisons and transformative justice in the lives of children, families and the broader community. This resource includes prompts, questions, and exercises to help challenge carceral thinking, copaganda, and surveillance to develop a more robust and collective sense of justice.

This guide is not for sale, and is intended for not-for-profit use by parents, caregivers, guardians, educators, organizers, collectives, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, and anyone involved in the care and wellbeing of children.

The guide can be used in whole or in part to facilitate group conversations, workshops, and other collective learning experiences to improve all our futures. This toolkit is by no means comprehensive or inclusive of all strategies, knowledge, and tools for cultivating an abolitionist politic and a commitment to transformative justice. It is, however, situated in the context of generations of organizing and decades of scholarship, which has contributed to the knowledge in this guide and continues to offer us many more lessons not contained within its pages.

It is important to engage in intentional conversations about punishment, policing, and incarceration, as well as imagining what it takes to build meaningful safety within our communities. Failing to do so indoctrinates children in our communities with narratives and systems that uphold policing and prisons as natural, good, and inevitable: which, if left unchallenged, can limit our imagination and our capacity to transform justice.

Building safer communities is in our own hands.

About Rania

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ORIENTATION MEMO

Thank you for making this toolkit a part of your learning journey, and for your courage in doing this important work. As we explore these transformative conversations with our children, we ourselves are working to unlearn the conditioning of carceral punishment. We are both guiding little ones and learning with and from them. As we navigate our shared thoughts and actions, we remain immersed in a world which reinforces the very systems that create and amplify harm in our lives. We must recognize that our learning, including that of little ones around us, is not linear.

The questions, tools, prompts and activities within these pages will introduce young learners to concepts and calls to action on the road to abolition, including: transformative justice & conflict resolution; defunding, detasking, and disarming the police; and community interventions & mutual aid through curiosity, creativity & critical thinking. The references cited here are a valuable resource for adults who are simultaneously sharpening their own understanding and analysis as they work to guide little ones towards an abolitionist future.

As little ones begin to understand that the police watch, hurt, arrest, and help lock away some communities more than others, it is imperative to develop an intersectional understanding of oppression. Use existing toolkits, literature, and knowledge to cultivate an understanding of racism, transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, ableism, classism, ageism and beyond. This understanding should be rooted in knowledge of historical truths and contemporary realities in an age appropriate and organic way. This is lifelong learning which requires patience, commitment, and empathy.

Imagining and building a police and prison-free future requires that we develop skills to repair relationships, kinship ties, and communities. We must also build systems and interpersonal practices that create safety and meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities. In this vision of our collective future, our safety is in our own hands.

REMEMBER

For children, witnessing and receiving apologies from adults is a profound way to model responsibility for actions, empathy, and changed behavior. These apologies challenge the adult/child power dynamic and dispel the idea that people with more power don't have to be accountable, or that we have to use coercive power to force people to change their behavior and acknowledge the harm they've caused.

Example: "I am sorry I was impatient with you. That was unfair. I understand you needed time to get ready, and I made you feel overwhelmed and upset. I apologize for being frustrated with you. I will give you more time to do everything next time. Is there anything I can do to help you feel better in the meantime?"

Not having an answer for a difficult question or a perfect solution for a complex problem is okay, we can model that we, too, are humble learners trying to learn the values and practices that bring us closer to a just world. Demonstrating curiosity and searching for possibilities and answers reminds children (and ourselves) that we are not without tools, that many before us and among us are asking the same questions, that we have some of the answers, and that we are on the way to more of them.

Example: That's a great question, I am so glad you're thinking about this. I am not sure what some good answers might be, it feels hard to think of one, doesn't it? I wonder what other people have come up with. Maybe we can find something to read or watch that can help us think of some ideas. Even if we can't figure it out right away, I am sure there is a lot we can try.

When discussing difficult and possible traumatizing issues, we may have the urge to lie or misrepresent the problem in order to protect little ones from potential harm. It is important to give truthful and age appropriate information. This honest foundation allows kids to build on their learning as they grow.

For example, as we work to draw the connection between poverty, police, and prisons, we can begin by explaining that sometimes, people don't have what they need, and there is no one there to give it to them. When people take what they need, they are punished, and sometimes taken away to prison. As a child gets older, we can begin to explore why people can't "hard work" their way out of cycles of poverty or personally "overcome" racism.

It can be easy to get off track when answering a complex question about abolition and transformative justice. Having a solid strategy for tackling difficult inquiries can prevent conversations from getting derailed or overwhelming.



As you co-learn about a prison-free and police-free world, you will undoubtedly engage in many more radical conversations about class, gender & gender identity, race, ability, sexuality, colonialism, enslavement and so on. Because these conversations are overlapping and intersecting, it might feel like you can't talk about one without talking about the other. Using a tool to set learning goals and identify resources to navigate the complexity can be incredibly helpful.

For example: use a "parking lot", a space where you and little ones (depending on their age) can make note of questions, words, and ideas that we need time to think about and help in exploring. We can take a question out of the lot, think about it, and return it. As an adult, you can use this tool to identify themes and topics to be explored through children's literature, art, theater, and community learning spaces. This multidimensional approach can help to provide a nuanced understanding of complex systems and ideas.

Critiquing and highlighting the ways in which policing and prisons have failed to protect us is only half of the conversation. We must also spend time imagining and building skills for taking our safety into our own hands. Focusing solely on all the ways our current world produces violence can produce a feeling that injustice is inevitable and that abolition is unattainable. We have to remember that there was a time when the abolition of slavery or overcoming the so-called "divine right of kings" was thought of as fantasy. People everywhere dream up freedom and make it real. Children do too: you don't have to wait to grow up to practice transformative justice or to ask for a liberated future. While this work is difficult, it is also creative and inspiring.

*Use examples of historical and contemporary movements that transformed things previously thought to be inevitable. You can use smaller, more context specific examples and practices, such as: school yard friendship benches which combat bullying & isolation; the successful student-led removal of police officers from schools; as well as larger examples such as the movement to abolish slavery and disability rights organizing. Focus on the role of children in these transformations. For example, the Birmingham's Children's Crusade of 1963 which is explored in *Let the Children March*, a 2018 children's picture book written by Monica Clark-Robinson.*

getting curious

10 QUESTIONS FOR RETHINKING POLICE & PRISONS

Fostering a healthy sense of curiosity and critical thinking about policing, prisons and punishment provides a strong foundation for an abolitionist politic and a transformative future. From the time we are young, we are presented with a worldview that paints policing and prisons as our only pathways to community safety and the only barrier between us and social collapse. Asking questions that foster a sense of skepticism about the way things are—and a sense of possibility for the way things could be—is an essential part of raising abolitionist kids.

Below are some questions, prompts, and facts about prisons and policing to help investigate our assumptions, values and potentials. Depending on the age and needs of the child(ren) involved, learners can engage independently, in groups, and/or with the support of an adult.

Each question or series of related questions is anchored by prompts which can help generate discussion, reflection, and clarity. These prompts help little ones arrive at their own conclusions grounded in the truth, rather than many of the assumptions and biases which favor policing and punishment within our culture. Following these queries are some exercises which can help to visualize and understand some of the facts and data included below.

QUESTION

What do the police say they do?

(inspired by questions asked by Mariame Kaba in the course of organizing against the prison industrial complex)

PROMPTS

“To serve and protect.” explore police mottos, propaganda, media and news coverage to uncover stories of how the police talk about themselves. For younger kids, reflect on where we see police (and police-like figures) in cartoons and children’s literature.

Ask learners to try and remember where they first heard these stories, and where they are retold and reinforced.

FACTS

More police and prisons ≠ fewer crimes and safer communities. Even as violent crimes decrease, police are given more money and power.

What do you think the police actually do?

(inspired by questions asked by Mariame Kaba in the course of organizing against the prison industrial complex)

Explore the role of police in our communities, and in the day to day:

- Where we see them
- What we see them doing
- What we don’t see them doing
- How they make people feel
- How they make us feel

Most of the day to day work of policing is not about addressing violence and creating safety for the most vulnerable.

Data shows us that the police spend most of their time responding to non criminal calls, property crimes, traffic violations and other non violent crimes. In most instances, even in major cities, police spend less than 5% of their time responding to violent crime.

QUESTION

Do they need guns to do it?

PROMPTS

Plant the seeds of disarming the police: in the day to day, cops spend most of their time doing things like traffic stops, responding to theft & property crime, noise complaints and other non-criminal calls. Other kinds of professionals/everyday people can easily do these things.

We don't need to introduce someone with a gun and a lot of power into these everyday situations.

Ask older children to reflect on how much money is spent on police weapons, vehicles and technology in their community. Does it make sense to spend that money on these things, considering what we now know about how police spend their time doing?

FACTS

We are told that police have more dangerous jobs than other people. However, we know most deaths and injuries experienced by cops are from traffic accidents and illnesses which are often still counted as "line of duty" deaths.

QUESTION

Why do we call the police?

PROMPTS

Reflect on what we need when we call the police. For example we might be looking for:

- Mental health support for ourselves or someone who is struggling
- Stop someone from getting hurt (including ourselves)
- To get help when our homes and property are taken or damaged
- To stop someone with more power from being unfair to us
- To take away people that scare us
- When someone is in a place they shouldn't be
- To deal with loud music and noise complaints

To get someone to safety

FACTS

A large portion of calls to police are about non-urgent and non-criminal matters which can be addressed by a variety of people. These include civil servants (city/state/provincial/federal employees), mental health and other healthcare professionals, harm reduction advocates, mediators, caregivers, community groups, organizers and beyond.

NOTES & REFLECTIONS

QUESTION

Who else might we call?
How can they help us?

PROMPTS

Invite examples and reflections of how people already help to do many of the things outlined above without the police, not only as professionals and community leaders, but also as everyday people.

Ask learners to think about what they already know/know how to do that might be able to help. Additionally, note what skills or knowledge they might still need, and who might be able to help them learn.

FACTS

People across a wide range of communities are already building alternatives to calling the police, such as neighbors working together to get help to those who need it and to manage conflicts and disagreements (like noise complaints near your home or in a shared public space).

Who goes to prison?

Who do we imagine is in prison? What are the stories we tell about people who are locked up?

Use reflections from media, pop culture, and social biases to invite reflections. Address harmful stories and dehumanizing assumptions about people in prisons.

For children with incarcerated loved ones, this exercise will be challenging and can be modified to invite reflections on the complex and wonderful traits of their loved ones on the inside, and an affirmation that they also deserve to love and be loved.

Most people in prison are nonviolent offenders and people incarcerated for crimes of poverty (doing what they need to do to survive).

QUESTION

Why do we send people to prison?

PROMPTS

Encourage learners to think about the idea that just because something is illegal, it doesn't mean it's inherently bad or harmful. It's also true that many things are legal even though they hurt people and their communities.

We send people to prison because they have been watched, targeted, and punished.

FACTS

Most people in prisons are there for minor and non violent offenses. Crime happens for a variety of reasons, especially larger social realities beyond personal behavior and choices. Prison does not address crime by correcting behavior. Prison does not stop crime.

What happens once people are in prison? What happens when/if they get out?

Prisons are widely represented in our culture as "correctional" places that benefit society. Encourage learners to challenge this story by thinking about the impact of prison on the person who is locked up, their family, and the community.

Prison doesn't stop people from committing crimes: it hurts them, separates them from their families and hurts entire communities.

Create a space for hard questions, truths, and contradictions. For example:

What might people who are hurt by violence need to feel safe again?

Currently more people are in prison than have ever been before, and that number grows every day. Our communities continue to experience violence, injustice, poverty and conflict. There are more people who have hurt people outside of prison than inside it. Prison, like policing, does not do what it purports to do. It does not make us safe.

QUESTION

What makes you feel safe? What makes a community feel safe?

PROMPTS

Reflect on the relationships, resources, supports, knowledge and tools that can make us feel safe, for example, we feel safe when:

- We get to know what something new/unfamiliar is (like a new building/place we haven't been before, or a new food we haven't tried, or animals we have not met).
- We are with people who love and care for us.
- We are given the chance to apologize for our mistakes and to work towards fixing them.
- We have enough food and clean water, safe and accessible homes, healthcare and rest, as well as love and relationships,
- We have a community of people who can help us when we need it.
- We do not fear being hurt or punished.

FACTS

People already organize in really meaningful ways to create community safety. Organizations, individuals and collectives advocate for investment in community to make real safety.

QUESTION

Who is a “bad guy” (person)?
What makes someone bad?
Once you are bad, can you be good again?

PROMPTS

Invite honest self reflection (which can be done independently) as a starting place for understanding that even good people can do harmful things.

Ask learners to reflect on a time where they made a mistake that hurt others, and what helped them learn from that mistake and help fix it.

Begin addressing absolutist (someone is all bad) and either/or (you’re either good or bad) thinking.

FACTS

Hurt people, hurt people. For example people who experience harm, violence and abuse as kids are more likely to hurt others as they grow older. Of course, not everyone who is harmed harms others. People with support to heal are less likely to do so.

NOTES & REFLECTIONS

Activity

HIGHLIGHTING THE HELPERS

When we're young, we are often taught that police are "helpers" and that those who support our communities are in a position of power or authority.

This exercise challenges this idea by inviting learners to consider who in their communities truly offers help, safety, and support.

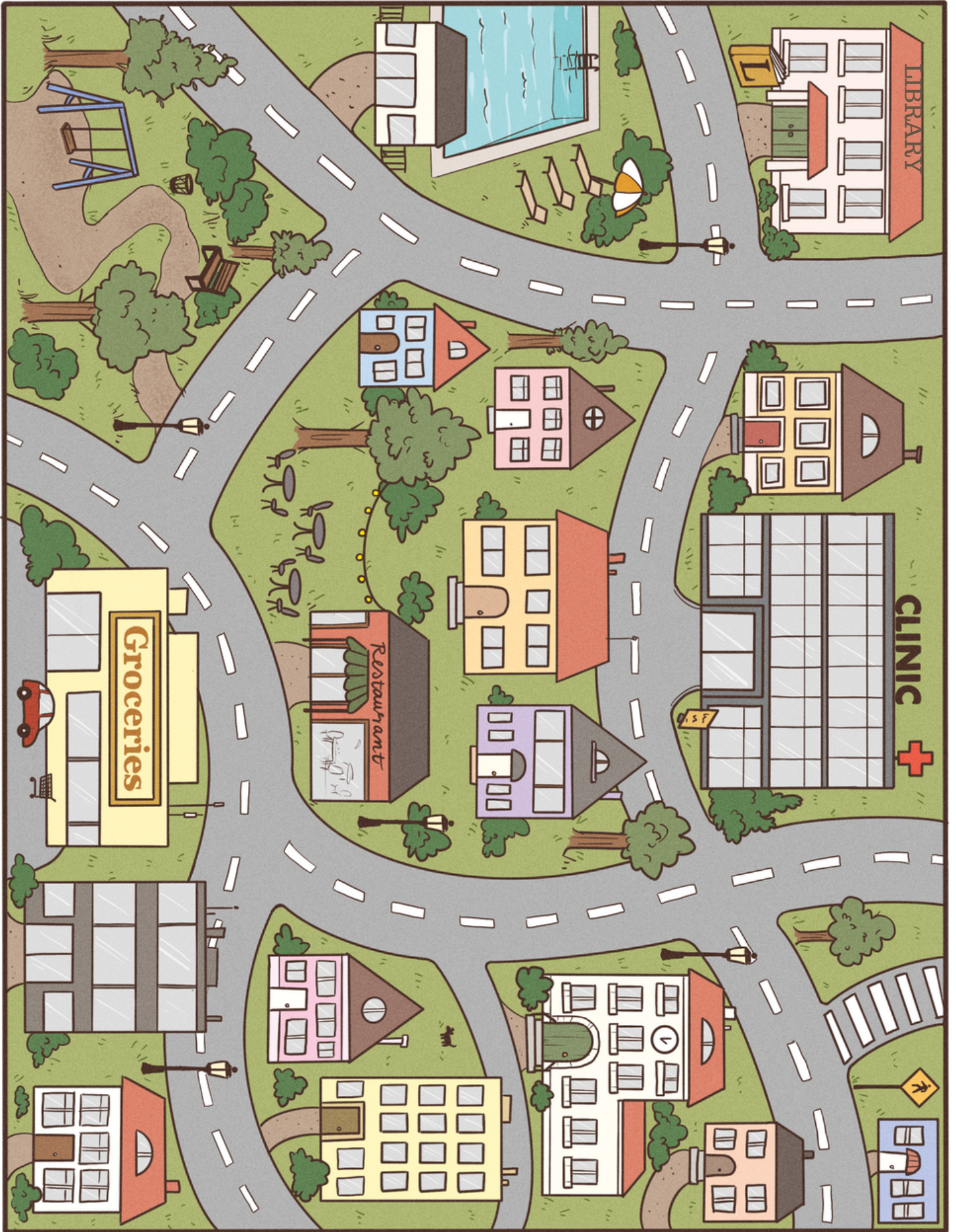
Look at the included neighborhood illustration and reflect on your own community, who helps you stay safe in the day to day? Who cares for you and others? Where are these helpers?

Place a sticker where a helper may be, talk to each other about these helpers. For example, at the cross walk in some communities there is a crossing guard, this person helps children, elders, people with mobility issues, parents with strollers, people carrying lots of groceries, and others get across the street safely. Pools have lifeguards who protect us while we have fun in the water, teach us to swim and even help people learn first aid. The Librarians in our local branch might help us find knowledge and community programs etc.

This exercise helps us reimagine safety, and who has a role in it.

Modifications:

- This exercise can be done as a group. A large neighborhood illustration can be drawn or printed, with various little ones adding their contributions. Encourage discussion, reflection, and collective learning among the group.
- Older children can be invited to draw their own illustration based on their neighborhood.
- Some learners may benefit from an active element of this exercise, such as a walk around the neighborhood encouraging observations of helpers. Learners can also take photographs of helpers/their locations on this walk (with consent).



good vs. bad

Much of our culture of surveillance, punishment, policing and incarceration is based on a binary worldview of good vs. bad that doesn't account for the complexities and contradictions of human life. Challenging this overly simplistic and judgmental worldview can cultivate empathy and provide a foundation for conflict resolution and transformative justice. Binary (either/or) and all-or-nothing thinking must be challenged because it can contribute to a rigid worldview and a lack of openness to new possibilities for our collective future.

Getting stuck in the either/or mentality can limit our ability to resolve conflict, learn from mistakes, and make failure more fruitful. We will make many mistakes and survive many failures on the road to freedom. The ability to hold complexity and compassion helps children overcome internalized self-judgment, guilt, and shame and engender a more transformative and empathetic relationship with the self. Practicing empathetic listening (listening with the intention to understand) with little ones, and modelling emotional understanding and support also helps to cultivate empathy for others in children. Research shows us that children who feel secure, loved, and supported are more likely to demonstrate sensitivity and compassion towards others.

We are taught that the police are the "good guys" who catch and punish "bad people," and then they put those "bad people" in jail where they can't hurt anyone. We are often told that people are in either one category or the other. This story is based on many lies and assumptions, broken down in the flowchart below.

Ground reflections on who we consider to be "bad" in an understanding of racism, classism, transphobia, ableism, and other intersecting oppressions.

THE WORLD

good people

bad people

do good things

police are nice to them

do not need to be punished

have no reason to fear the police

need protection

do bad things

police are not nice to them

need to be punished

should be afraid of the police

do not need protection (others need to be protected from them)



because they are good

because they are bad

The police are the only way to protect good people

The police are the only way to stop bad people from doing bad things

Punishing them will teach them to stop their bad behavior and stop them from hurting others

The logic of the chart above is rooted in false narratives and partial truths. Beginning to name and challenge them is foundational to an abolitionist politic. Some questions can help us to challenge these assumptions and fabrications and instill an understanding of the truth in ourselves and the children in our lives, these inquiries include:

- What makes a person bad?
- Once you are bad, can you be good again?
- What helps people become good again? What helps people learn from their mistakes?
- Do good people sometimes do bad things?
- Can you think of a time when you made a mistake, you were unfair to someone or hurt someone? What helped you learn from that mistake?
- Does punishing people or putting them in jail help them stop doing things that hurt other people?
- Do you think people sometimes get in trouble for doing the right thing?
- Who makes the rules?
- Can the rules be changed?
- What are some examples of rules you have to follow? (at home, school, community etc)
- Are there any rules that you have to follow that don't make sense? That are unfair?
- Should we follow rules that hurt us or other people? Rules that stop us from getting what we need?

More complex questions for older learners:

Are legal and good (moral) the same thing?

What are some examples of the police arresting people for doing the right thing? (encourage both historical and contemporary reflections)

What are some ways that people are punished for doing what they need to do to survive?

- This can be broken down to a series of smaller questions: what do people need to survive? What happens when they can't get those things? Why is that?

Ask children to share examples from the world around them (their favorite media and their real life experiences) that demonstrate the complexity of people and the assumptions, misunderstandings and lies that underpin the good vs. bad binary.

Learners in workshops gave the following examples:

“One time I was watching a cartoon called Elena, and there was a little guy causing trouble and everyone thought he was a bad guy but he just wanted his mom.”

“I was thinking about when we talked about a lot of superheroes being like the police and then all of a sudden I was watching Antman and thought holy cow! These people can time travel, fly, teleport, grow plants with magic and do all kinds of amazing things and they’re putting people in a tiny prison? That’s their best idea?”

“I was listening to the radio with my mom and they were saying that some kids at a school were wearing summer clothes and they got in trouble because I guess it was too short even though the weather is hot, so the kids protested and someone called the police on them! I couldn’t believe it, what’s that gonna help?”

The good vs. bad binary is also at the root of conflating good (moral) with legal (allowed under the rules of a certain place). We should make a concerted effort to challenge the idea that laws are inherently good, that they benefit and protect all of us. We have to understand the role that laws play within a system of policing and prisons, and how they intersect with race, class, gender, age, ability, sexuality, status and so on. Through challenging these core assumptions, we can remind children that the rules can be changed, and help them to cultivate the skills and knowledge needed to challenge unjust rules from our playgrounds to our legal systems. The law is not neutral, equal, or beyond reproach. Some of us are criminalized not only for what we do, but for who we are.

THINGS WE KNOW TO BE TRUE

Through these guiding questions and reflections, we aim to establish a solid understanding of the following truths, give solid examples from your local context to help illustrate these statements, and ask kids to share their own examples:

People are not either all good or bad.

Example: Just because someone does something bad, it doesn't mean they are bad. I have done some things I am not proud of, and sometimes I've upset or hurt people. I learned from those things and tried to make it right. We should have the chance to learn from our mistakes and do better without being thrown away.

The police are not there to punish people for doing “bad” things, they are there to enforce the rules (law).

Example: In some neighborhoods the police punish young people for hanging out together in a public space or even a park: they call that “loitering.” Sometimes kids even get tickets for misbehaving at school. Who might be hanging out in a park? Who might misbehave at school? Who might not be able to pay a ticket and probably get in more trouble?

Sometimes the rules are about doing what is good for a whole community, but most of the time, they are not.

Example: In some communities, the rules stop people from donating food that didn't end up selling at a restaurant or grocery store to people who may be hungry and have no food of their own.

In many neighborhoods, the police punish our houseless neighbors for just being in public spaces, then they hurt and punish the people who try to help them.

Sometimes the rules punish people for doing what they need to do to be safe, or taking what they need to survive. People are often punished for being poor, not for being bad.

Example: Sometimes people are being hurt, and they protect themselves, either by hitting back or running away to safety. Sometimes people are punished by the police for both of these things.

People who don't have (enough) food needed to survive steal food from grocery stores or take things without permission from other people. People sometimes go to jail for taking what they need to survive and to take care of their families.

People who live in places where there is war and not enough for everyone to have what they need make long, difficult journeys to come to places that are a bit safer. Sometimes people are put in jail (migration detention) because they did the only thing they could do to survive, but they didn't do it according to the rules.

The police watch some people more than others, they are more likely to catch those people breaking the rules than others. People are policed because of their race, class, gender identity, mental health, status in the country, age and ability among other things.

Example: Grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods (communities with less money and resources) often have more security cameras, security guards, police officers, and "mystery shoppers" (security guards dressed as regular store shoppers to catch unsuspecting people while stealing) than those in neighborhoods with more resources. In most communities people who steal are fined money (punished by being asked to pay a fee) or go to prison. People in these neighborhoods are also more likely to be Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. If you're stealing to survive, do you think that you would be able to pay a fee? Does it make sense to send someone to prison because they don't have money to pay a fee?

When people are caught breaking the rules, they are not always punished equally. Some people are punished more badly than others. Some people are not punished at all.

Example: Some people are thought of as bad or assumed to be up to no good because of stories we tell about their skin color, religion, how much money they have, where they are from, and so on. These people are often punished more harshly than others who are thought of as good because of their skin color, religion, how much money they have, where they are from, and so on. This is part of a long history of injustice (unfairness) that is still happening today. The police watch, arrest, hurt/punish and put some people in jail far more than others.

When people are punished, they do not get what they need to help them follow the rules. Prison is not about helping people to survive or to be better.

Example: Sometimes people are sent to prison, punished and hurt for taking what they need to survive. When people are locked up, it doesn't help them to get the money, food, shelter, and support they need to live. People who are poor are more likely to go to prison in the first place, prison makes them even poorer.

The rules are much harder, sometimes impossible, to follow for some people than for others. The rules protect some people and hurt others.

Example: When it comes to immigration or people moving from one country to the next. The rules (law) tell people to stay in a place that is dangerous, and possibly wait to get badly or hurt (or even die) until they are given permission to come to a safer place. Some people are already born in safe places. Are the rules easy to follow for people everywhere? Should people follow the rules if the rules are unfair to them or to other people?

Copaganda

CARTOON COPS & OFFICER FRIENDLY

Policing sustains much of its power by telling and retelling stories where cops are the only option: they are the line between our communities and complete chaos. These stories are told to us in cartoons, books, film & television, public education, news media, and from the police themselves. They paint the police as mostly peaceful, helpful, and fun: any representation of harm from policing is usually framed as a “few bad apples.” They cement the image of “Officer Friendly,” an ahistorical narrative of police as builders of safety and community.

Copaganda can look like social media posts made by police departments of its members volunteering at a community event, hugging vulnerable community members, and making charitable donations. While police officers may indeed do these things, they also carry weapons, harm the most vulnerable with very little accountability, and hoard the resources of communities to fund their expanding budgets.

This type of police propaganda is dangerous because it creates a false narrative about the role and impact of policing, and limits our imagination about what possibilities for real community safety look like.

Children are particularly targeted by copaganda and messaging that introduces the idea of the benevolent cop and socializes children to obey police. Media messaging, coupled with deliberate campaigns and coordinated programming, has been ongoing for over half a century and has become deeply ingrained in our cultures.

Although challenging these omnipresent narratives can seem like a daunting task, it's important to remember that Black, Indigenous, Latine, racialized, undocumented, communities among many others, already challenge these narratives in order to protect their children from police and state violence. Many children are already aware of these realities because their safety depends on these honest intergenerational conversations, as does the safety of all children and communities.

Building on the initial questions in *“Getting Curious,”* which ask us to consider what the police tell us they do vs. what they actually do. We can begin to explore propaganda more specifically through the following inquiries:

- Where do we see the police represented?
- What do they do? What are they like in these images/stories?
- Do we see the police in our communities? What do they do? What are they like?
- How do the police make us feel?
- Who tells a different story about the police? What are some of those stories?

Encourage age and context specific reflections and ask follow up questions, for example:

“Chase is a character on Paw Patrol. He is a police dog who has lots of cool gadgets, he helps to catch runaway hot air balloons and helps aliens who lose their stuffies far away from home.”

Follow up questions: How many aliens do you think the police help in real life? Who do you know that is good at finding lost things? Who might share their stuffies with a new alien friend? Who might help a real life runaway hot air balloon?

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“There are police officers at our school. Sometimes they search our bags, mostly they watch us and make us feel nervous, sometimes they get kids in big trouble.”

Follow up questions: Who/what might make us feel safe at school? Do you know why the police were brought to schools/your school? Do you go to the police for help at school? Why do you think they search people’s bags? Whose bags do they search most often?

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“Our library has a book called Cops and Robbers, and the police in that book do silly things to catch people who steal.”

Follow up questions: Why do you think people steal? Do you think the police do those silly things in real life? What do the police do when people steal (in real life)?

“There are cops in a lot of the video games I play, they always [have] really high tech gear and weapons, that stuff is probably really expensive in real life and in the video game.”

Follow up questions: What do they use those weapons for in your game? What do they use those weapons for in real life? How much do you think those weapons cost? What can we do with that money in our communities?

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To support ongoing learning, encourage kids to actively observe and challenge representations of police officers (and by extension prisons/carceral punishment) in popular culture, news media, and from the police themselves. For older kids, this might look like discussing and challenging news stories that uncritically copy and paste police press releases without verifying or questioning any of the claims. For younger learners, this might look like pointing out how often police officers are represented in children’s entertainment and what they do in those roles vs. what they do in real life. Keeping the focus on the role of policing (and what roles our communities actually need) will help little ones challenge the salient narratives of “good cops” through the understanding that policing itself is not good.

punishment

vs.

consequences

Alongside copaganda, punishment and carceral logic are central themes and values within children's media. These values are reinforced through our family dynamics, our education system, and the way we do things as a society. Punishment is a primary instrument for dealing with harm, disruption, and disobedience.

While you work to challenge assumptions about punishment and changed behavior, valid questions about what we do when people make mistakes and hurt others will emerge. Creating a clear distinction between punishment and consequences can help children understand that our commitment to addressing harm without creating more harm does not mean that mistakes won't lead to consequences.

The idea of natural and logical consequences can also help to illustrate these differences. Natural consequences are a result of behaviors, choices, and at times accidents which are not imposed by a person - they can be imposed by nature/society. Logical and natural consequences are often predictable outcomes of certain events.

For example: if the weather is cold, and I don't wear a coat, I will feel cold. If I neglect my garden, weeds will grow.

PUNISHMENT

Meant to physically, emotionally, or mentally hurt people who hurt us/ make mistakes

Arbitrary, not connected to transformation or restoration, punishes past behavior

Imposed by people

Often happens inside a power dynamic, uses fear as its primary motivator

Meant to coerce, bully, or force someone to behave in a particular way

CONSEQUENCES

Can be natural or logical, not only imposed by other people

Connected to restoring or creating safety for the collective

Connected to changed behavior and transformation in the future

Some consequences can be positive

Meant to teach through cause and effect

NOTES & REFLECTIONS

PUNISHMENT CASE STUDY

Teddy and Ella are students in the same class who sit close to one another. On Monday, their teacher, Ms. M asked them to complete a spelling test. Teddy had a very hard time with the words because the letters were all mixed up and they all sounded the same. He felt overwhelmed and frustrated, and he began to move around and make lots of noise. Words are always hard for Teddy. Ella was feeling distracted and upset because of his behavior. They began to argue and Teddy screamed at Ella, making her feel sad and cry.

Ms. M. approaches the pair and tells them they're in trouble for arguing. They try to tell Ms. M what happened, but she didn't seem to listen much. Teddy is punished for misbehaving: he will have to stay inside and do more spelling during recess. Ms. M told him that next time, his punishment will be much worse: he will be sent to detention, and a phone call home, where she reminds him that his grandmother may punish him again. Ella was left to stay sitting next to Teddy, and told to focus on her own work. Neither of them was given a chance to rewrite their spelling test, so both of them scored poorly and lost their chance to be student of the month.

Both Ella and Teddy are still very upset, and Teddy is especially worried about getting detention and his marks on the spelling test. Ella is nervous that Teddy might scream at her again, and she doesn't know what to do. She is also a little worried about getting in trouble.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How were the people in the story punished?

Will the way they were punished change the situation?

Will it make sure it doesn't happen again?

Do we know what the people in the story need?

Do we understand why they were punished?

CONSEQUENCES CASE STUDY

Teddy and Ella are students in the same class who sit close to one another. On Monday, their teacher, Ms. M asked them to complete a spelling test. Teddy had a very hard time with the words because the letters were all mixed up and they all sounded the same. He felt overwhelmed and frustrated, and he began to move around and make lots of noise. Words are always hard for Teddy. Ella was feeling distracted and upset because of his behavior. They began to argue and Teddy screamed at Ella, making her feel sad and cry.

Ms. M approached the pair, asked them both to take a deep breath, giving them time to calm down and feel comforted. Ms. M spoke with both of them separately. When she spoke to Teddy, she realized he may need more support with writing, reading and test taking. Ms. M, Teddy and Teddy's grandmother came up with a good plan to help him when he is feeling overwhelmed. He will also practice spelling with his grandmother at home. Ms. M also asked Teddy to think about how screaming at Ella might make her feel, Teddy felt sad, and he worked with Ms. M, his sister and the school counselor to help him write a good apology letter to Ella. Teddy is also working on finding a better way to express feeling frustrated.

Ms. M spent some time talking to Ella, who shared that she felt upset that Teddy was being disruptive during the test because she needs silence to focus, but more than anything, she was upset that her friend screamed at her. She didn't feel ready to talk to him, and wanted to sit somewhere else for the time being. Ms. M moved Ella to a quieter space that was more suitable for her needs while writing a test. Ms. M told her that she understands and respects her boundaries, and that Teddy will write her an apology that she can open when she is ready. Ella says that she will ask for help from her teacher if she tries to communicate her needs to a classmate who isn't listening to her or understanding her. Ms. M asks both of them if they feel supported and okay to return to class with one another, and they say yes. Both of the students were given another chance to write the test in a way that makes sense for them.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What are the consequences in this story?

What will the consequences result in?

What do people in the story need to move forward?

Is there a plan for the future, just in case Teddy and Ella have more problems?

NOTES & REFLECTIONS

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PUNISHMENT AT HOME

Punishment is a central practice in the power dynamics of many of our families. Adults punish children, and home becomes the first place we learn coercive power. We learn that some people have the power to say “do this or else” and use manipulation and fear to force people to comply with their wishes or rules. Home is often the first place where we are inflicted with physical, emotional, and mental punishments with the assumption that they will change our behaviors. Childhood is a position of disempowerment within our families and our society as a whole. We often expect children to comply, keep their objections quiet, and do things that make very little sense to them without input or explanation.

We must challenge punitive logic in our family dynamics and kinship ties. In reality, punishment is often the easier option in the short term. It takes less energy than the deliberate, patient and empathetic work of transformative justice and gentleness with children. Kids, like all people, feel safer, more secure and more emotionally regulated when they feel informed and when they are able to voice their questions and receive clarity. We all feel safer when we have agency, input and choice. Similar to the logic of policing/law, children are not only punished for what they do in our families, they are often punished for who they are. This is especially true for neurodivergent children, kids with complex trauma, who are queer and trans, who are darker skinned, who are sick and disabled, who struggle with their mental health, and more. We punish kids for not being like the dominant culture, and for objecting to things that make very little sense to them.

Unless we can name and transform the beliefs that center punishment in how we exist in relationships as parents, elders, siblings, educators, grandparents, caregivers, and people who are in community with children, we risk teaching conflict lessons that weaken the commitment of little ones to justice, and a world free of police and prisons. **Additionally, we leave kids internalizing shame, guilt, and punishment as the ways to address their own behavior and flaws.** For many of us, we have a punitive relationship with ourselves and our own bodies. Many of us can look back at our childhoods and realize that fear and punishment made us more concerned with not being caught than with changing our behavior.

While we attempt to build the village it takes to raise our little ones, we are undoing our own relationships to punitive thinking and carceral logic. It is difficult to raise kids without punishment in a punishing world when we have been conditioned to punish and be punished.

Fear is the central motivator in punishment. Living with fear can lead to:

- Severe and/or lifelong mental illness
- Brain shrinkage, reduced creativity and poor academic performance
- Emotional dysregulation, dishonesty and exacerbated troubling behavior
- Misbehavior in kids leads to greater punishment from adults, and vice versa
- Future aggressive or impulsive behavior
- Increased anxiety and elevated stress hormones
- Hypervigilance, conflict aversion and fear of confrontation

As we understand the impact of fear, punishment, and trauma on the brain, we should also come to know that healing, support, empathy and encouragement not only transform behavior, but they also help our brain develop new neural pathways.

We can transform the dynamics in our families and home, through practices such as:

- Non-coercive discipline, learning and problem solving
- Honest communication, it helps to understand “why” rather than be expected to comply with a rule you feel makes no sense
- Options/choice which can help kids feel more in control and affirms their agency
- Reinforce an understanding of natural and logical consequences
- Use positive reinforcement and encouragement
- Be consistent, approachable, and accountable for your own mistakes as an adult
- Interrupting self-punishing behavior in ourselves and others (such as punitive restrictions with food, rest, pleasure, or asking for help)

In our own hands

TRANSFORMING CONFLICT & HARM

Harm has always been a part of the human experience, but policing and prisons haven't. How did our ancestors deal with conflict? What do we do when people hurt us? Who do we call when we need help? What is safety and how do we build it? These big questions (and others) are constantly appearing as we work towards a new world. We can approach these inquiries with curiosity, creativity, and imagination. They remind us that there was a world before this one, and many possibilities for a different world after. Injustice is not inevitable. We can explore these possibilities with little ones through play, art, craft making, and discussion.



While we may not have all of the answers, exploring these questions makes clear for us that we cannot replace our current (in)justice system. It reminds us that we have to take our safety and wellbeing into our own hands. We can do this by collectively organizing our communities to develop the skills, tools, and resources necessary to address and transform intersecting forms of injustice. If we all get better at navigating conflict, intervening in harm, caring for each other, and making sure we all have what we need to survive, heal, and thrive, we will reduce our reliance on carceral systems and enable ourselves to address harm without creating more harm.

When we are learning alongside children, it's important to be honest and clear about these questions and to try to contextualize with examples from your local community.

Things we know to be true:

- We are figuring out the answers we don't have yet, but we do know that the way things currently are is making more hurt and suffering to stop hurt and suffering.
- Most people who need help don't get help from the police.
- People break the rules for a lot of reasons. Changing the rules and helping people have what they need will make us all safer than punishing people for breaking the rules (law).
- If each of us gets a little better at talking about hard things and working to change our behavior when it isn't good for us and our communities, we will all be much safer.
- Some people will hurt us and will not want to be with us in a good way. We deserve to be safe from them.
- People who don't want to learn to be safe with the rest of us will have to build different communities. They don't have to go to jail, and we don't have to let them hurt us.
- We are working to take away police and prisons and to build lots of different things to help keep us safe.
- All of us can play a part in making our communities safer with skills we have and new things we can learn.
- We have enough for all of us if we all share.
- People who hurt people and people who are hurt are sometimes the same person.
- Lots of people are already doing things to make their communities safe without the police.

Examples of people doing things to protect their communities:

- People organize ridesafe/walksafe programs that make people safer walking alone in some places.
- People stop fights and help people find gentler ways to figure out their problems.
- People work hard to get our neighbors on the street the care they need.
- People stop flights that send people who want to be here far away.
- People get to know their community and talk to their neighbors and friends when they have problems and conflict.
- People apologize and work hard to change their behavior when they've hurt others.
- People practice taking care of each other and sharing what we have to make sure we've all got what we need.

What are some examples in your community?

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

Transformative justice (TJ) is a big part of community safety: it works to deal with harm without creating more harm. Collectively restoring (or creating) safety and accountability, TJ is not a practice that relies on institutions and authorities. It asks us to take our safety into our own hands to build the knowledge, resources, and systems that allow us to take care of ourselves.

When we practice TJ, we try to work together to solve conflicts, to heal harm, and to help people be accountable to our collective good. We can practice TJ at our kitchen tables with our families, among our friends, in our schools, in our neighborhoods, and all the places where we gather.

EXPLAINING TJ TO KIDS

TJ means working together to figure out what to do when people hurt people without adding to all that hurt. When we practice TJ, we think about how we stop that hurt from happening again instead of just punishing people. We also think about helping people heal. There are lots of ways we already do this in our families, friends and neighborhoods. Can you think of some of those ways?

As we talk about TJ, we must also begin implementing its practices in our relationships. We have to both show and tell, and encourage little ones to think about responsibility more than guilt. We are not trying to decide who is bad/guilty, we're trying to figure out how we can change this situation and help with healing.

Some conflict resolution and transformative justice practices to colearn with little ones:

- **Being honest and sharing what we know**
- **Listening with the intention to understand**
- **Apologies through changed behavior**
- **Focusing on the impact of actions that hurt people**
- **Avoiding blame and assigning guilt**
- **Accommodating, collaborating and compromising through conflict**
- **Setting and respecting boundaries**
- **Expressing our needs and working to help meet the needs of others**
- **Building relationships in our local community**
- **Learning with others**
- **Asking for time when you need to think about things**

Use guiding questions to help kids reflect and act when they hurt people and make mistakes in relationships:

What happened?

What were you thinking/feeling at the time?

What have you thought about and felt since?

Who was affected by what you did?

How do you think that affected them?

What do you think you need to do to make things right?

What do you need from us to help you make it right?

What would help you make different choices in the future?

Questions to think about when we've been hurt:

What happened? Do we want to tell our story?

How did it impact us?

What do we need from those who hurt us to start making it right?

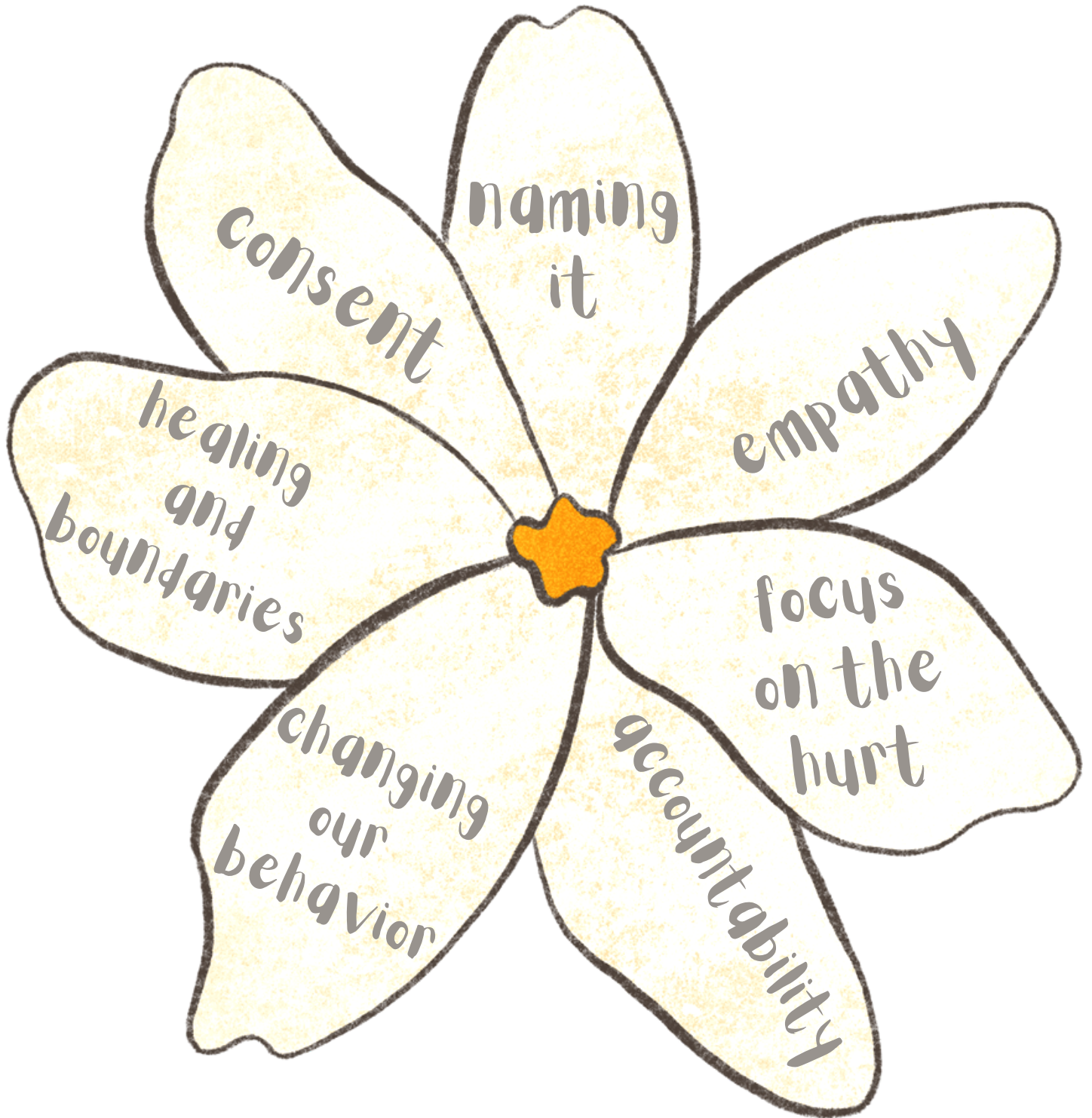
What can make us feel safer now?

Do we have boundaries that we want to share?

What do we need from people around us to help us heal?



TOOL BLOOMING APOLOGIES



Consent - Getting permission from the person we want to say sorry to. When we do this, we give them a chance to tell us if they're not ready, if they need time for their feelings, or if they're looking forward to hearing our apology.

Naming it - Showing the person(s) we've hurt that we understand what we have done to them, and how it impacts them.

Empathy - Letting the person we've hurt share how they feel with us without judging the way they feel. Understanding and respecting someone's feelings.

Focus on the hurt - Focus on the feelings of the person you've hurt when you're apologizing. It's okay to feel a little upset or bad when we hurt people: it means that we care about their feelings. We can ask for help from other people in our communities (like friends and family) to help us talk about those feelings.

Accountability - Taking responsibility for our behavior, not making excuses to avoid feeling bad.

Changing our behavior - Making sure that we don't hurt people in that way again and getting help with changing our behavior. Sorry is a word, an apology is about the choice we make every time after that.

Healing and boundaries - Working to forgive ourselves and being proud of our progress while respecting the needs and boundaries of the people we've hurt.

Blooming Apologies in Action

Teddy: Hi Ella, I was wondering if I can say sorry to you? It's okay if you want to be by yourself.

Ella: You can say sorry

Teddy: I am sorry for disturbing you while we were writing the quiz, and for screaming at you. I shouldn't have done that. I know I made you feel scared and sad. I am going to use my calm voice next time. It's okay that you wanna sit by the window, I won't bother you.

Ella: Thank you Teddy, I am gonna play by myself now

Teddy: Okay Ella, have fun!

Community Safety

DEFUND, DISARM AND DETASK THE POLICE

In this section, we focus on deepening the questions in the beginning of the toolkit. In *Getting Curious* we began to uncover that police do not create public safety and to learn what it is the police actually do. Now, we can demonstrate how policing and prisons hoard our resources, leaving our communities underfunded. These resources belong to all of us, and it would be better to use them to meet our needs, rather than to punish us.



Understanding the origin of policing and prisons—in particular their role in colonization, anti-indigenous racism, and as enforcers of enslavement and anti-blackness—is foundational to understanding present-day state violence towards these communities. This violence encompasses queer and trans communities, disabled, mad, and chronically ill people, undocumented people and those who are criminalized in many ways.

There is a lot of creative, positive work ahead of us, and imagination is a powerful tool in community safety. Little ones should be encouraged to use their imaginations to dream up a better world.

People everywhere use **mutual aid** to help each other and to make sure everyone in the community has the care, food, shelter, healthcare and relationships they need to survive. In mutual aid we don't wait for the police, social workers, or any other organization to save us. We take care of ourselves!

Creative Activity

BLANK SPACE POEM

Invite kids to imagine what a safe community looks like—to picture it in their heads. This community is a possibility for our future. Draw an image of it and use the template below to write a poem about it.

The future has _____

In the future I am _____

The future has _____

In the future we are _____

Modifications:

- If working with a group, write out a large version of the poem with additional spaces and allow each child to fill in a few spaces (repetition is okay). Alternatively, individual poems can be attached to a large poster.
- Give little ones words on sticky notes to inspire them to think about possibilities for the blank space.
- Allow little ones to break form and to use as much repetition as they wish.

DEFUND THE POLICE

In many communities, the money given to the police is far more than any other service or group. In cities like Los Angeles, the police budget takes up more than half the city's resources! The city of Toronto spends more on policing than it does on Libraries, Economic Development & Culture, Paramedic Services, Employment Services, Children's Services, Shelter Support & Housing and Transportation Services.

Cities spend more on the police than they do on housing, other emergency services, food security, libraries and parks combined. Defund the police, refund our communities.

ACTIVITY - PIZZA PIE ENOUGH FOR ALL

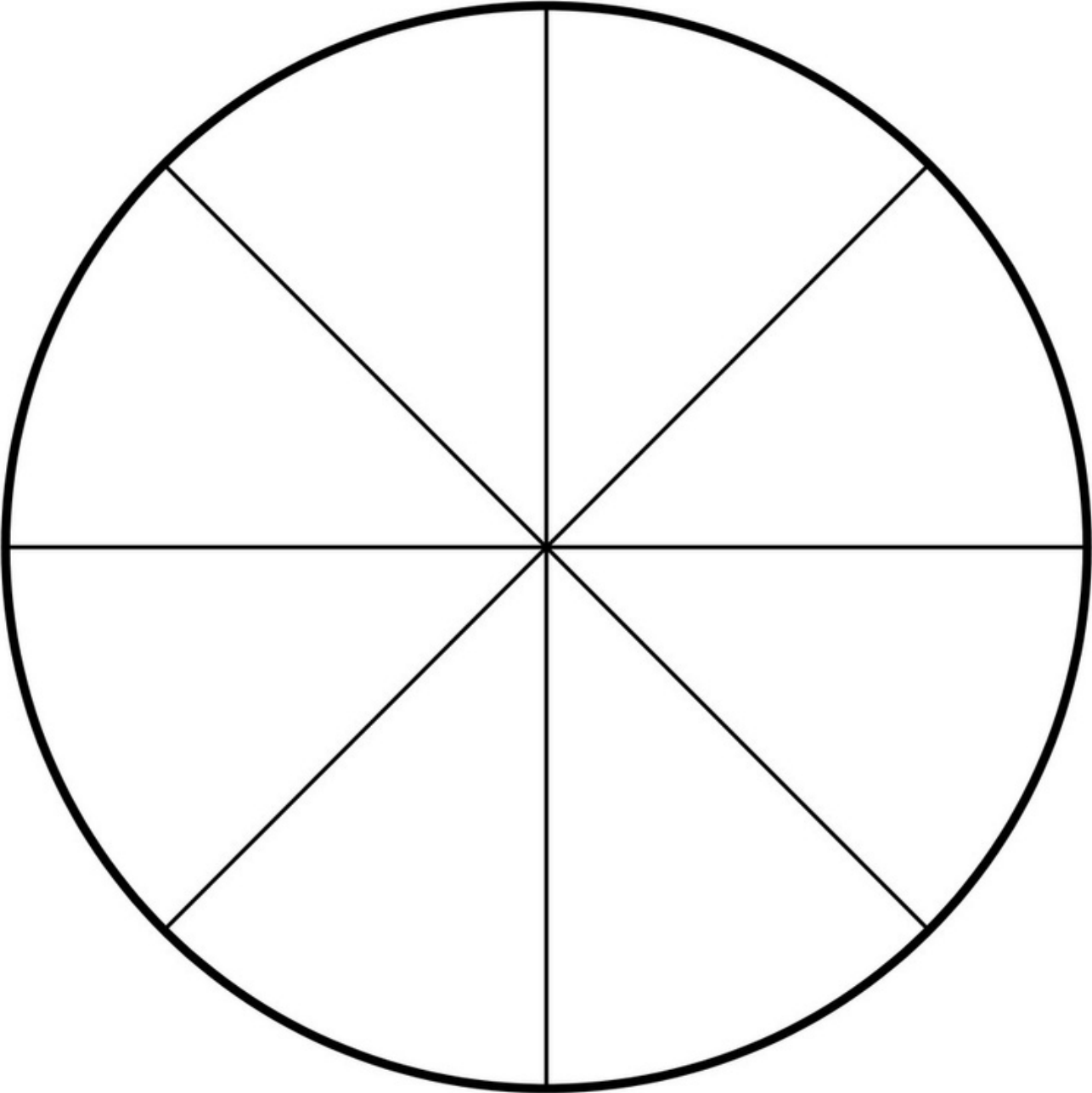
Look for information on the budget in your local municipality/county. Break down the different categories of funding into fractions. Use the attached (pizza) pie chart and crayons to color code segments that correspond with the portion of funding allotted to each category.

Discuss your chart and empower little ones to imagine a different way of sharing our resources. Ask them to color up the chart according to what they think is important and encourage them to add new categories.

Modification

If information on funding in your own community is not easily accessible, use data from a nearby large city.

Divide slices if needed.



DETASK THE POLICE

We know that the police spend the majority of their time doing things that can be done by other people, and that they're given more resources and power to deal with non-violent and non-criminal matters. In *Getting Curious*, we explore myths about what the police spend their time doing. As we learn about detasking, focus on concrete examples of the tasks we can take on ourselves, such as:

Police are called when people are being too loud. → Each of us can have kind conversations, make agreements and compromises with neighbors.

Police deal with people who break traffic rules. → People without guns can work to help people stay safe on the road. Building cities that are safe for people walking, driving, riding bikes and rolling in mobility devices is even better.

Police are called to take our neighbors on the street away from public spaces. → Communities work together to make sure everyone is housed.

Who else can take on some of the things the police do?

Detasking the police is on the road to abolition. We take more power and resources from the police and use them to care for our communities instead. Other people and groups can do a better job with many of these tasks, with less resources, and without weapons or fear.

DISARM THE POLICE

Weapons, militarized and policing technologies, and armored vehicles/police cruisers monopolize a massive amount of resources that could be used to care for our communities.

Armed police hurt us more than protect us: this is especially true for some communities more than others. Police spend a lot of money on weapons that could be spent on making sure we all have what we need. Lots of communities all over the world do not have armed police.

What tools, skills, technologies, or supplies could our communities actually benefit from?

NOTES & REFLECTIONS

RADICAL READS

for little ones

0-7= YEAR OLDS

1. The Prison Alphabet: An Educational Coloring Book for Children of Incarcerated Parents by Muntaquim Muhammad (2014)
2. When We Were Alone by David A. Robertson and Julie Flett (2016)
3. When Dad Was Away by Liz Weir (2013)
4. On the Trapline by David A Robertson and Julie Flett (2021)
5. Visiting Day by Jaqueline Woodson (2015)
6. See You Soon by Mariame Kaba (2022)
7. Missing Daddy by Mariame Kaba (2018)
8. Mama Loves Me From Away by Pat Brisson (2004)
9. Let the Children March by Monica Clark-Robinson (2018)
10. On Our Street: Our First Talk About Poverty by Jaime Casap and Jillian Roberts (2018)
11. Tar Beach by Faith Ringgold (1991)
12. Maddi's Fridge by Lois Brandt (2014)
13. Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen by DyAnne DiSalvo (1991)
14. Fly Away Home by Eve Bunting and Ronald Himler (1991)
15. Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice by Ann Hazzard, Marianne Celano, and Marietta Collins (2018)
16. The Hard-Times Jar by Ethel Footman Smothers (2003)
17. Miss Maggie by Cynthia Rylant and Thomas DiGrazia (1983)
18. Howdy, I'm John Ware by Ayesha Clough (2020)
19. Community Soup by Alma Fullerton (2013)
- Africville by Shauntay Grant (2018)

RADICAL READS

for little ones

7-12+ YEAR OLDS

1. *Crenshaw* by Katherine Applegate (2015)
2. *Front Desk* by Kelly Yang (2018)
3. *Free Lunch* by Rex Ogle (2021)
4. *Talking to the Moon* by Jan Coates (2018)
5. *Just Lucky* by Melanie Florence (2019)
6. *Awake and Dreaming* by Kit Pearson (1996)
7. *Money Hungry* by Sharon G. Flake (2001)

TEENS +

1. *April Raintree: Revised Edition* by Beatrice Culleton Mosioner - with Foreword by Justice Murray Sinclair (2016)
2. *Brother* by David Chariandy (2018)
3. *The Book of Negroes: Illustrated Edition* by Lawrence Hill (2012)
4. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987)
5. *Flying Kites: A Story of the 2013 Prison Hunger Strike* by the Stanford Graphic Novel Project (2021)

This list was compiled by Laila El Mugammar. Laila El Mugammar is a Black Canadian journalist and published researcher on anti-Black racism in public institutions. She holds a BA in English from the University of Guelph with areas of specialization in Black Canadian writing and postcolonial literature, and is a Master of Library and Information Science candidate at Western University, with a special focus on library service to children and youth.

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2022

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