

## Local children's book author is on a mission to protect kids

By Kellee Hennessy Dickerson

Imagine a child harboring such an unspeakable secret, too horrified to tell a soul about the painful things they have been going through because of threats from the perpetrator. It happens. In fact, more than five children die daily as a result of child abuse. Approximately 80% of children who are killed as a result of abuse are below the age of four.\*

One local author is trying to end crimes against the innocent by writing stories encouraging children to empower themselves. One such story called *Tootles the Turtle Tells the Truth*, is an interactive tale about secrets.

"This is not a bed-time story," said author Lenell Levy Melancon of Denham Springs. "It is an interactive book meant to be read with a parent or caregiver and used as a resource to teach children at an early age to speak out and expose the burdensome secrets of bullying and abuse."

Bullying has become a problem of epic proportions. In fact, it's hard not to turn on the news or open a newspaper without being faced with headlines about bullying and abuse. There have been fatal consequences as a result of bullying and abuse on a national and even local level. You may remember one story reported recently on television where a smart young teenager in Pointe Coupee killed herself after reporting alleged on-going abuse and bullying by fellow students. Bullying and abuse, whether physical, mental, or sexual, have become even

more wide-spread due, in part, to the rise of social media outlets, according to Melancon.

"By addressing the sinister nature of these prevalent issues with children - and in my opinion the earlier the better - it will raise awareness of the secrecy involved in these situations," she said.

I am sure you must be wondering by now, where the desire to write the book originates? The author was not a victim of abuse growing up.

"I've been fortunate to have lived such a charmed life," said Melancon. "I was sheltered from this type of thing. In fact, growing up, I didn't even know it existed. I wrote the story in an effort to help a good friend's daughter who appeared to be getting very sick from a 'secret' she seemed to be hiding."

For several years following a divorce, the mother felt the child was keeping something secret, but had no idea what caused her child's peculiar behavior. The child's mother confided in Melancon, who wrote the story about telling the truth and sent it to the child.

"This precious little girl read my story and not long afterwards told her counselor, 'Tootles told me I could tell you what my Daddy did to me...but my Mommy's not going to go to jail, is she?' After the counselor assured the worried child that her Mommy was safe and would not be sent to jail, the brave young child then exposed the burdensome secret of many

episodes of sexual abuse," Melancon related.

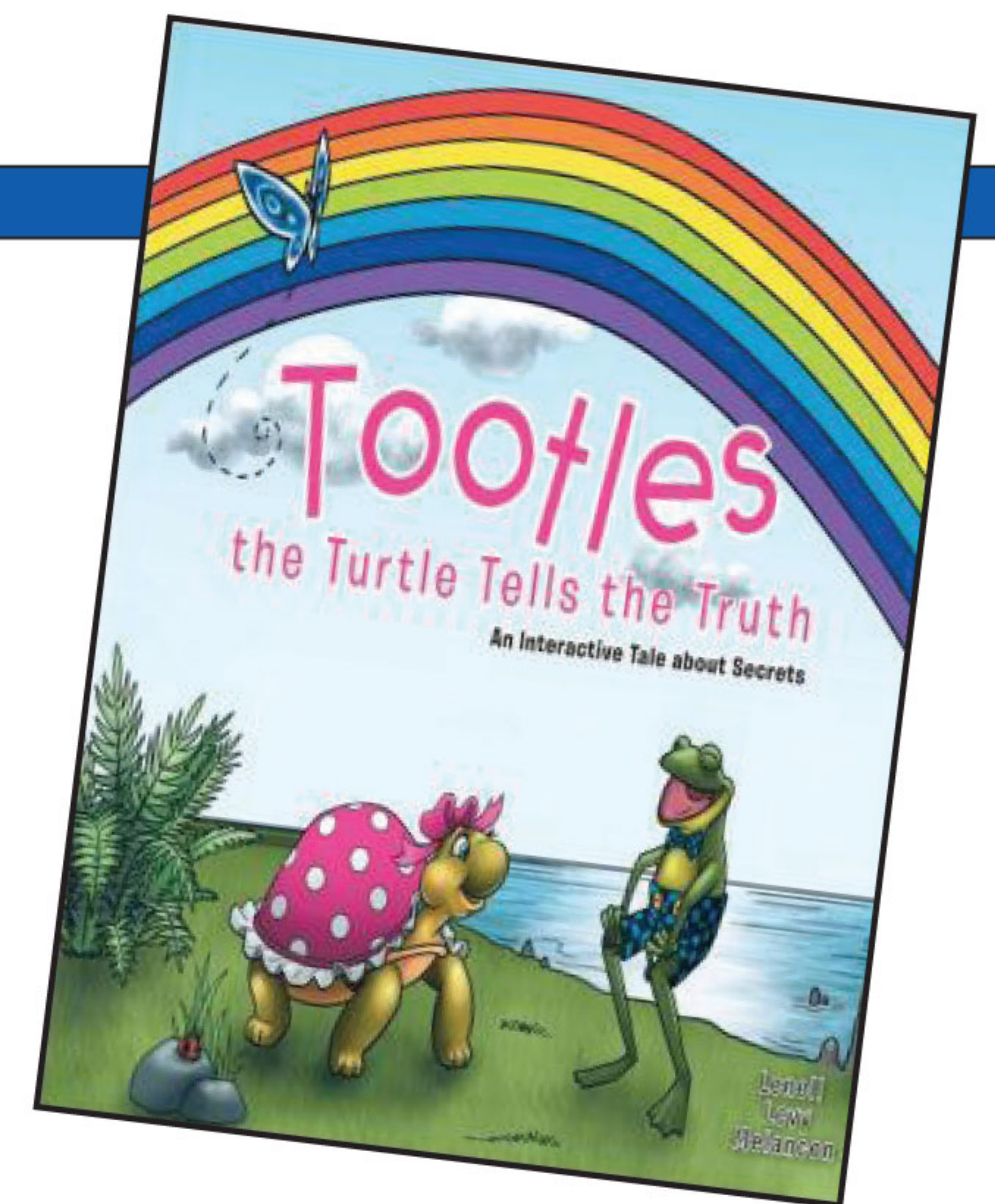
The case was "cracked," which led to the counseling and support the child needed. She began the road to recovery, while court action has been taken against the child's father.

"It is my desire that *Tootles the Turtle Tells the Truth* will raise awareness and prevent bullying and abuse by shifting the paradigm so much so that Tootles becomes a household word replacing the word 'tattling.' Also, that children know it's okay to tell secrets perpetrators scare them into keeping. By telling the secret, it takes away the power from the perp, or the bully, and returns it to the child," Melancon said.

*Tootles the Turtle Tells the Truth* has been endorsed by the I CARE Program of East Baton Rouge. Also, the book is now in the Livingston Parish School System in the hands of licensed counselors who are able to use the book as a resource if bullying or abuse is suspected.

Melancon, who has invested her time, energy and resources into the publication of the book, hopes corporate sponsors will assist in getting the book into the hands of the children who need it and will benefit from its powerful message.

Melancon says children are taught at an early age not to take candy from strangers and to





# INSPIRED Education

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**Lenell Levy Melancon, author, shown left at a book signing**

*\*Statistics from ChildHelp and the National Child Abuse Hotline*

Details: *Tootles the Turtle Tells the Truth* is available locally at Cavalier House Bookstore in downtown Denham Springs and online at [www.cavalier-housebooks.com](http://www.cavalier-housebooks.com). Also see [www.tootles.org](http://www.tootles.org) and Facebook/Tootles the Turtle.

look both ways before crossing the street. She believes now is the time to teach our children, early on, the difference between good and bad secrets, to always tell the truth and to never keep painful or scary secrets.

“If this book can prevent even one child from experiencing the devastating effects and horror of abuse or bullying,” she said, “it will be well worth the effort.”

## Strategies for parents and children to help prevent bullying

October is National Bullying Prevention Month. The time to start an ongoing conversation with your children about bullying is now.

- Help kids understand bullying. Explain what bullying is and how to stand up to it safely. Kids who know what bullying is can better talk about it if it happens to them or others
- Keep the lines of communication open. Talk to your children daily and really listen to them. Know their friends, ask about what happens at school, and try to understand their concerns. Ask if they have ever been bullied or been afraid of getting bullied. Let them know they can always talk to you about their feelings.
- Encourage kids to do what they love. Special activities, interests, and hobbies can boost confidence, help kids make friends with common interests, and protect them from bullying behavior.
- Bullying can start in small ways. Be aware that your child or some of their friends may have bullied another child. Ask if they or their friends have left a kid

out on purpose or made fun of another child, and how that made the child feel. Ask if they think that was bullying. Why or why not? How did your child feel when it happened?

- Tell your child straight out that bullying is unacceptable. Explain that they should never put up with being bullied nor should they ever give in to peer pressure to participate in bullying of someone. Urge them to help kids who are bullied by showing kindness or getting help – and make sure they know how to get help.

- Model how to treat others with kindness and respect. Kids learn from adults' actions. By treating others with kindness and respect, adults show the kids in their lives that there is no place for bullying. Even if it seems like they are not paying attention, kids are watching how adults manage stress and conflict, as well as how they treat their friends, colleagues and families.

*These strategies were provided by [www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov) where more information is available for parents and educators.*