

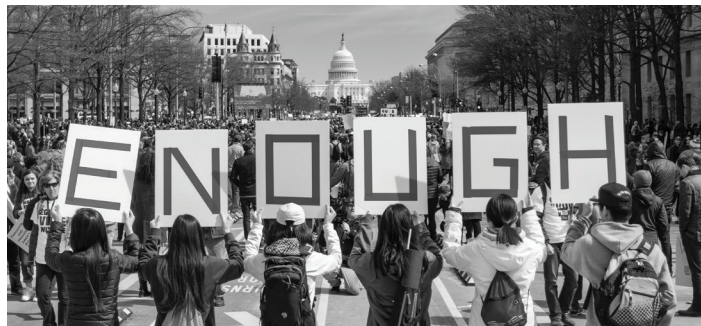
## The Elephant in the Room

In our city and country, it feels that we are faced every day with another mass shooting, so much so that we seem to have become numb to the information. It is impossible to keep track of what shooting occurred, where, and how many were killed or injured. The proverbial “thoughts and prayers” have become meaningless utterances that provide no comfort for grieving families. For some children in foster care, witnessing and/or living in a home with domestic violence brought them into care, with guns being inanimate objects of destruction at the center of a familial vortex.

Children of color die by guns at a rate that is six times higher than their white counterparts. And males are four times more likely to die by a gun than females. More disturbing is the sheer number of children who die by firearms every year. It is now the leading cause of death of children under the age of 19. Between 2019 and 2021, there was a 50 percent increase in firearm deaths among youth. Kaiser Family Foundation reports that five in ten deaths of youth are a direct result of assaults with a firearm, and three out of ten deaths among youth are by suicide. The reasons for this phenomenon are many and varied and are beyond the scope of this article.

Having a gun in the home is considered a risk factor for suicide. Research shows that nearly half of suicide attempts occur within 10 minutes of the initial suicidal thought. Combine those statistics with the impulsivity of adolescence, and you have a recipe for disaster. It is no wonder the state licensing requirements for foster parents surrounding gun/ammunition storage are so stringent. For those who own a gun for home and family protection, they argue that an unloaded gun is worthless if there is an intruder.

Contrary to that argument, a recent study conducted by David Studdert, a professor of Law and Health Policy at Stanford University, refutes the assumption that a gun in the home promotes safety. In fact, the numbers found that “people living in homes with guns face substantially higher risks of being fatally assaulted.” Interestingly, another study points out the discrepancy in the perceived effectiveness of safe gun storage in the home. Parent respondents in the study reported that their guns were securely stored in the home. Yet the youth in those same homes contradicted their parents and stated that they indeed had easy access to their parent’s firearms.



It is no surprise that being a victim or witness to gun violence has a negative impact on mental health. Active shooter drills that have become commonplace in schools, while meant to provide protection for the vulnerable, increase the level of fear and anxiety among the drills’ participants. With 26 percent of youth reporting being exposed to gun violence, our country has a mental health crisis that far exceeds our resources.

Though school shootings are the most publicized of mass shootings, they, in fact, make up a small portion of firearm deaths among youth.

Persistent fear and anxiety in children are known to negatively impact a child’s ability to learn. Therefore, their academic performance suffers, as well as the general sense of well-being both in, as well as outside of the school community. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a frequent diagnosis for survivors of gun violence.

It is foolish to think that our society, with its divisive culture, will change anytime soon regarding the prevalence of guns in our country.

### So, what can a parent do to protect their children from this pervasive violence?

1. It is essential that you be a safe person that can listen without judgment to your child when they need to talk about overwhelming stress, anxiety, or vulnerability that they may be experiencing because of the constant barrage of stories about shootings both locally and throughout the United States.
2. It is imperative to talk to your children about gun violence. Youth need to be educated and aware of signs of escalating rage, such as increasingly louder voices. Hearing threats of someone seeking revenge is a tip-off to moving away from

the source of such communication. Parents and youth need to agree upon reasonable times to be home. One wise father stated, "Nothing good ever happens after midnight." Gun violence can occur anywhere, but it makes sense for your youth to stay away from high-crime areas. It is also essential for them to always remain aware of their surroundings. People who have their heads down, earbuds in, and engrossed in their phones while out in public put themselves at a disadvantage in staying cognizant of the environment.

3. Practice body language that exudes confidence, speak with authority, and utilize eye contact to reduce the chance of becoming a victim. Perpetrators are drawn to those individuals who appear naïve, timid, or distracted.
4. When out in public, make it a habit to note all the exits from the room or building. In the event of a shooting, a person's first choice should be to run away from the shooter. If escape is not possible, hiding is the next best option. Experts suggest fighting as a last resort—and it is not the time to fight fair; you are fighting for your life.
5. Limit/avoid opportunities for youth to watch violent movies or play violent games. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that youth who engage in watching violent movies and playing violent video games show an increase in dangerous behavior around real firearms. The most obvious preventive tactic is not to have a gun in the home!
6. The easiest prevention method is to work with your child in learning regulatory activities that they can employ when they begin to get upset. Being armed with multiple and appropriate coping strategies can assist your children in not becoming overwhelmed with feelings that could lead to extreme and dangerous behaviors. As parents, know that you are always being watched. How do you react when frustrations arise? What kind of things do your children hear you verbalize? Figuratively threatening bodily harm to someone who cuts you off in traffic may be interpreted by a youngster as an acceptable response to temporary frustration.

Lastly, if your child witnesses gun violence, it is important to engage with a therapist to process the experience. Left untreated, fear and anxiety can become debilitating.

**For more information about active shooter safety, go to [fbi.gov/survive](https://www.fbi.gov/survive) or scan the QR code below. Run, Hide, Fight is a four-minute video that might just save you or your child's life. Continue reading to learn more about a program in the**



**St. Louis area that assists individuals who have experienced assault with a deadly weapon.**



## Emotions: Watching the Clouds and Rolling with the Tide

Emotions, as defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary, are "a conscious mental reaction (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as a strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body; a state of feeling; the affective aspect of consciousness; feeling." While this definition may seem straightforward, the understanding of emotions, considering all the factors involved, remains an ongoing discussion in the field of psychology. As parents, we strive to assist our children in comprehending this aspect of themselves. So, what is most beneficial for children to be aware of when it comes to their emotions?

The internal experience of emotions - how they manifest physically in our bodies - is deeply personal. Helping children articulate their internal sensations and connect them to emotional labels can assist them in developing emotional language. Starting with basic feeling words such as mad, sad, and glad, and gradually introducing more nuanced terms like frustrated, hopeless, and optimistic, expands their vocabulary. Additionally, helping children recognize that individuals often feel several different feelings at the same time and encouraging them to name each emotion can be helpful. It is also important for our children to witness us embracing both comfortable and uncomfortable emotions, processing them transparently, and welcoming them into our shared spaces.

Understanding that emotions can ebb and flow is important for children. This understanding is especially poignant because, with limited life experience, many exposures are new or nearly new, evoking strong emotional responses. Adults have more context to relate to. Add hormones to the mix and you might as well call it a rip tide. Teens are known for being emotional shape shifters. No wonder it only takes a brief pause to impede a potential act of self-harm. If we are honest, most of us made some pretty ridiculous decisions in our youth and likely it was related to strong emotional reactions we were having at the time.

A challenge when addressing emotions is that we tend to censor our thoughts and feelings, often unaware of our internal script. Out of self-protection, we may fixate on uncomfortable emotions due to a sense of threat, or we might suppress them. This takes a significant amount of energy, and it is the emotions to which we give strong attention that affect us most profoundly. Like a wagon forming ruts

in a muddy field, the more we revisit them, the stronger the connections our brain makes, making it easier to move into dark spaces.

**What practical steps can we take to empower our children regarding their emotions? Here are a few activities designed to do just that:**

1. Put up an emotion chart and check in a few times throughout the day. Notice how quickly the emotions shift together. Keep track.
2. Be curious. If you could sit down and have tea with the emotion, what would it tell you? What do you need?
3. Use visualization. A popular illustration from Dr. Dan Siegel involves envisioning emotions as clouds. Practice noticing them and letting them drift by. Another illustration commonly used involves sea waves. They roll in, hit your toes, drift out, and are replaced by new ones.
4. Do the opposite of what a feeling is telling you to do and notice what happens. For example, if you are feeling depressed and want to head back to bed, put on a cozy outfit, grab a refreshing drink, smile, and head out for a walk in the sunshine. This isn't meant to ignore that emotion, but simply to help you recognize that it does not have ultimate power over your choices.

Why not experiment with some of these techniques? Choose something from the list to try this week and see what you learn. Share your experiences with your children - communication is key! With these tools, everyone in your family can learn how to better express their feelings, recognize that feelings change sooner than imagined, and that there is power to accept, learn from, and respond to their feelings in the ways that serve them best. Enjoy riding the waves together!

In a world that can feel overwhelming, it's important to take time to focus on yourself. Here's a simple tea recipe that can help promote calmness and centering.

### **Stressbuster Tea**

- 1 tsp green tea
- 1 tsp dried lavender blossoms (or lavender tea)
- 1 tsp dried chamomile blossoms (or chamomile tea)
- 3-4 cups water (heat till barely a boil)
- 1 tsp honey (optional)

#### **Instructions:**

Place your herbs/teas in a teapot, french press, or large mason jar. Add hot water, stir, and let steep for at least 5 minutes. Strain, pour, add optional honey, and enjoy!

## **Resource Spotlight: LOV - Life Outside of Violence**

Life Outside of Violence (LOV) is a program created by the Institute of Public Health at Washington University, in collaboration with the Office for Victims of Crime, Barnes and Children's Hospital, St. Louis University Hospital, and Cardinal Glennon Hospital. It is available to residents of St. Louis County, St. Louis City, and the Metro East region (within a specific radius) who are between eight and 30 years old and have been injured in incidents of assault, gun violence, or stabbings. The program's goal is to reduce the cycle of violence that often occurs when an assaulted person seeks revenge or retribution. Participants receive assistance in developing a safety plan and connecting with community resources. Once enrolled, ongoing guidance, support and treatment can continue from six to twelve months.

Program participants meet with a Community Outreach Representative (COR), who has personal experience as a victim or a relative of someone affected by violence. The COR serves as a link to case managers and services provided by the LOV project. Additional services offered by LOV include counseling, support for employment, basic needs, education, and housing.

For more information, visit [publichealth.wustl.edu/lov](http://publichealth.wustl.edu/lov), call 314.327.6697, or email [projectlov@wustl.edu](mailto:projectlov@wustl.edu).





safer, healthier relationships  
for children and families

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#### Chief Program Officer

Sharon Skidmore Stern, MSW, LCSW



## Our Vision

FamilyForward leads the community in providing innovative solutions for advancing safer, healthier relationships for children and families.

## Our Mission

FamilyForward moves vulnerable children in the direction of hope by delivering comprehensive therapeutic and educational services to support biological, foster, and adoptive families.

Visit [familyforwardmo.org/publications](http://familyforwardmo.org/publications) to read LifeLines online.

## Educational Opportunities for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Parents

All in-person classes will be held at the new campus located at 11358 Van Cleve Ave in St. Louis County.

### **Spaulding - Making the Commitment to Adoption**

Tuesdays, July 11, 18, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Spaulding training is required for any family already licensed as a foster parent who is moving forward with adoption. Please ask your case manager to contact Tonya Williams at Children's Division to register ([Tonya.Williams@dss.mo.gov](mailto:Tonya.Williams@dss.mo.gov)).

### **Prioritize Your Partnership (Virtual)**

Mondays, July 17, 24, 31, 2023 | 6:00-8:30 pm

Families can only be as strong as the parents' relationship. In this 3-week course, couples will learn evidence-based principles and techniques designed to help strengthen their connection to one another. The course content includes a brief examination of historical changes within marriage/partnership and the importance of having realistic expectations. Systems theory and the critical role of prioritizing the parent partnership in providing a strong, stable family base are at the core of this curriculum. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is presented as an important framework for considering the adjustment of expectations during times of crisis.

### **Conquering the Stress Monster (Virtual Lunch and Learn)**

Friday, July 21, 2023 | Noon-1:00 pm

This hour-long presentation examines the factors that cause stress in our lives and presents evidence-based techniques for stress relief.

### **Collaborative and Proactive Solutions**

Tuesday, August 8, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Formerly known as Collaborative Problem Solving, this approach, originated by Dr. Ross Greene, operates under the assumption that children do well if they can. It views challenging behavior as a deficit in cognitive skills, specifically in the domains of flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving. By adopting a sympathetic perspective, parents can better understand their child's needs. The three steps of collaborative problem-solving, namely Empathy, Define the Problem, and Invitation, are practiced by parents.

### **Improving Executive Function in Children**

Tuesday, August 15, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Many children struggle with organizing, planning, goal setting, time management, and memory retention. What may appear as defiance and laziness in a child could indicate a deficiency in their executive skills. In this course, parents will learn effective strategies to assist their child in functioning better at home, drawing from common practices utilized by classroom teachers.

## Creating Lifebooks

Wednesday, August 23, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Lifebooks are essential tools to assist children who are in foster care or have been adopted in connecting their past, present, and future. This tool can facilitate identity development and attachment. The class emphasizes demonstrating age-appropriate activities and utilizing tools that will aid children in comprehending their life story from a strength-based perspective.

## Trauma and its Impact in the Classroom

Thursday, August 24, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

This class examines the impact of trauma on a child's development and explores how it manifests within the school setting. It provides practical tips for creating a trauma-sensitive environment. Parents are strongly encouraged to invite their child's teachers to attend the class.

## CORE Teen: Nurturing Youth's Cultural, Racial, Ethnicity and Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression

Wednesday, August 30, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

The training aims to enhance awareness of the intricate nature of a youth's developing identity. Demonstrating acceptance and support for your child within the family will significantly influence the long-term well-being of the youth.

## Stop Bullying NOW!

Tuesday, September 5, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Parents gain an understanding of why a child bullies, signs of a child being a victim of bullying, and intervention approaches within the community and school settings. The content is based, in part, on the national program "Stop Bullying Now!"

## STARS - Preservice Training

Tuesdays, September 12, 19, 26, October 3, 10, 17, 24, and November 7, 14, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

STARS preservice training is required of any individual wishing to be licensed as a foster parent through the state of Missouri. Please contact [Tonya.Williams@dss.mo.gov](mailto:Tonya.Williams@dss.mo.gov) for further information and registration.

## Strangers Under Your Roof

Monday, September 25, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

This training explores the impact that occurs when a family introduces a foster or adoptive child into their home. Family dynamics undergo significant changes, priorities shift, and social activities are transformed as a result of incorporating a new person into an existing family structure. Unmet expectations often cause angst for all family members. Parents will learn about the predictable developmental stages of resource families and how the unit can progress towards mobilization in the pursuit of a new and more fulfilling family reality.

## CORE Teen: Understanding and Managing Youth's Challenging Behaviors - Part 1

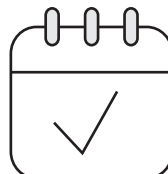
Thursday, September 21, 2023 | 6:00 - 9:00 pm

The session will focus on survival strategies that are now recognized as dysfunctional within a family unit. Rejection, testing, disrespect, anger, and withdrawal can be particularly challenging for parents who discover that their previous parenting strategies are ineffective when dealing with a teenager who has experienced trauma and loss.



### Online resources

Sign up for our LifeLines email newsletter and view training information online by scanning the QR code or by visiting [familyforwardmo.org/calendar](http://familyforwardmo.org/calendar)



### Register for training

Call: 314.534.9350 ext. 7234

Email: [intake.dept@familyforwardmo.org](mailto:intake.dept@familyforwardmo.org)