

LifeLines

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safer, healthier relationships
for children and families

It's the Little Things That Make the Difference

Parenting is rewarding, but it's also a tough gig. Nothing truly prepares someone for what to expect. Because children rely on adults to meet many of their needs, a lot of energy goes toward making sure that young ones are tended to. When parenting children with extra challenges, this takes tremendous amounts of time and vitality. Divorce rates among couples raising kids with special needs are higher than in the general population because there is more stress to be absorbed by the family system.



If you are parenting as a single person, hopefully, you have several people around you who can step in and allow you to have a break now and then. If you are parenting with a partner, then being able to divide tasks and time commitments can help tremendously. But if all the time goes to parenting the kids, where does the partnership come in?

Similar to any relationship, romantic partnerships require time and effort to stay healthy. Couples often make the mistake of prioritizing

their children at the expense of self-care and intentional time for each other. Over time, this oversight can lead to a lack of connection. Even if conflict is not present, there may be very little connection. So, what is a couple to do?

John and Julia Gottman have been studying couples for over 40 years. In their research, they have a few recommendations that help couples stay happy for the long haul. It all comes down to the little things.

One of the first recommendations that the Gottman's make is to build what they call "Love Maps." This involves dedicating a few minutes each day to check in and find out what is happening in each other's lives and making time for rituals of connection when leaving and arriving at home. Whether with a kiss, a hug, a smile, or an expression of joy to see the other. Think back to when you were dating and the excitement

you had when you were together. Reconnect with it and communicate it with your eyes, facial expression, and physical touch.

In addition to those things, pay attention to each other's "bids for connection," responding positively and avoiding negative patterns like criticism, blame shifting, and name-calling. This is what is also called "turning toward." For example, one person might notice an interesting video and make a comment to the other about it. The other person has a choice – they can ignore, turn away, or express interest to learn more. Taking just a few moments to respond makes all the difference.

There are also negative patterns that couples fall into. Criticism, blame shifting, and name calling are all things to avoid. Rather, couples need to stick together, give one another the benefit of the doubt, and face challenges as a team. When heated conversations come up, make sure to leave time for breaks and set up a time to regroup later on. Also, taking responsibility for your own part in a problem is important, though not the easiest thing to do. And being gentle when sharing ideas for change will help the other to hear what you have to say.

Focusing on the positives is incredibly important. Finding ways to express appreciation each day can turn a couple's focus around in only a few days or weeks. A good exercise is to find a space, maybe on a whiteboard on the refrigerator, maybe on the mirror in the bath, where you can write down notes to one another about what you are thankful for. An "I love you because..." kind of place. Many times, each partner is making positive contributions, but they are getting missed in all the busyness of life.

It is common that one of the parents in a couple will flex around the needs of the children more often. It can be tiresome and taxing for the parent who is doing all of the custodial things, like making appointments, attending school meetings, and driving children to activities. The child may act quite differently with these parents, being compliant and easy going with the "fun parent" and pushing hard to test the boundaries of the other. This is because attachment takes time, and if one parent is spending a lot more time with the child, that attachment is forming more quickly. Figure out how you can flip the script and give each other a break and a role change.

When you're raising kids who function a bit differently in the world, sometimes family isn't as accepting as you thought they might be. It's important for parents to have support. If you find this to be the case, broaden your definition of family and find others who will validate what you are going through. Too much negativity can ruin even the strongest of bonds.

Though the daily, small gestures are by far the most important, it is imperative to put yourselves on the schedule for regular times away, both individually and as a couple. Use your respite, find other couples to swap childcare with, and plan for a date here and there. If you can't get away, put the kids to bed early or in front of a movie. Eat a calm dinner for two in the next room and focus on one another's goals, aspirations, and dreams.

Last of all, apologize when someone is hurt. Extend grace to your partner and be gentle with them. Friendship and commitment is at the heart of staying healthy together. Focus on sharing appreciation for the wonderful person you are walking this journey with, realizing that no one is perfect.

With Valentines Day coming up, we are offering a class designed to help you put these practices in place in your relationship. **Check out our Prioritizing Your Partnership class offered via zoom this February.** You'll be glad you did!

Handing Over the Baton: Partnering to Help Older Youth Develop Positive Healthcare Practices

Caring for older foster youth places a significant responsibility on foster parents to advocate for quality physical and mental healthcare. This task is understandably daunting. In addition to being fierce advocates, foster parents must also encourage older foster youth to actively manage their healthcare, recognizing its crucial role in their future well-being. Understanding the unique challenges faced by foster youth is fundamental, as they may require additional support to navigate a complex healthcare system. Due to their trauma history, they face a higher risk of chronic health conditions and mental health issues, often with limited access to quality healthcare in adulthood. Addressing these unique needs is essential for ensuring their future well-being.

Frequently, older youth may be hesitant to involve their caregivers in their healthcare plans. As they age, they rightfully gain the autonomy to make health decisions independent of a caregiver's input. As caregivers for some of the country's most vulnerable individuals, there are actions you can take to help support and be involved in your foster child's healthcare journey:

1. Establish a Foundation of Trust: As with most things, building trust is central for the youth to feel comfortable in involving you in their healthcare needs. Most of the time, this can be accomplished through the demonstration of empathy, active listening, and respecting their need for autonomy. It will take time and patience.



2. Engage in Open Communication: Discuss healthcare (physical & emotional) while making it clear you are genuinely interested in their physical and emotional care. Be open and non-judgmental, allowing them to express their concerns, preferences, and fears.

3. Educate Yourself: Invest time in understanding the youth's medical conditions, medications, and any specific healthcare needs they may have. This knowledge not only equips caregivers to better support them but also demonstrates a commitment to their overall well-being.

4. Involve the Youth in Decision-Making: In healthcare decisions, include the youth in discussions and empower them to make choices whenever possible. This inclusivity helps them feel valued, respected, and fosters a willingness to include caregivers in healthcare appointments and decisions.

5. Attend Healthcare Appointments Together: When appropriate, attend healthcare appointments with the youth to demonstrate commitment to their health and to gain a better understanding of their medical needs. Be supportive, encourage questions, and assist in preparing for appointments, fostering self-advocacy skills. If they will allow you to, help them come up with questions prior to their appointment and make notes together. This helps build their self-advocacy skills.

6. Maintain Confidentiality: Respecting the youth's right to privacy is paramount. Ensure you have their permission to access and share their medical information. By honoring confidentiality, you further strengthen their trust in you.

7. Collaborate with Healthcare Professionals: Establish a collaborative relationship with the youth's healthcare providers. Communicate openly with medical professionals and seek their guidance and advice. This will help facilitate seamless care and coordination.

8. Normalize Healthcare Experiences: Foster a positive outlook on healthcare by normalizing the experience. Emphasize the importance of overall well-being, encourage self-care practices, and promote healthy habits to help youth incorporate good healthcare practices into their daily routine.

Building a strong connection with a youth in foster care requires time and patience. By adopting these tips, caregivers can create an environment that nurtures trust, openness, and shared decision-making, ultimately empowering the young person to take control of their healthcare while including caregivers as supportive partners along the way.

Dating On a Dime

If you are parenting with a partner, finding time to spend alone together can be challenging, but it's essential. To cut costs, it's ideal to find a friend or family member willing to provide childcare free of charge. Alternatively, consider exchanging childcare services with another family one or two times a month. If getting out is difficult, putting the kids to bed early or in front of a movie while you hang out in the next room may be another option. Either way, here are some creative, less expensive ideas for a date night with your partner:

If you have childcare:

- Explore a local park or nature trail, opting for a bike ride if you prefer cycling to walking. The St. Louis Dockless Bike Share Program provides a no-cost option if you don't own bikes: St. Louis Bike Share Program.
- Google "open houses near me today" and check out homes in your area for some fun decorating inspiration.
- Try geocaching and leave trinkets from Dollar Tree at the sites you find. If you're unfamiliar with geocaching, refer to the resource links to the right to get started!
- Visit an upscale retail bookstore, read together, and perhaps enjoy a coffee in the in-store café.
- Select a fancy hotel and head to the lobby. Purchase a couple of drinks and sip by the fireplace while observing the patrons.
- Head to Goodwill. Find some interesting outfits and go out on the town representing your favorite decade or century.
- Explore the St. Louis Art Museum or the St. Louis Zoo, both offering free admission. Or pull up Groupon and plan your activities around that.



If you are staying in:

- Serve an early dinner to the kids separately. While they're occupied with a movie in the next room or after putting them to bed, enjoy a candlelight meal together.
- Engage in indoor activities such as board games, card games, puzzles, or art projects.

- Take a trip down memory lane by going through old photos and reminiscing.
- Get into the kitchen and cook or bake something new together.
- Have an at-home movie night with blankets, popcorn, and cozy surroundings.
- Take an online quiz to spark conversation. Here are a couple of suggestions - Discover Your Love Language® - The 5 Love Languages and Enneagram Assessment. Refer to the resource links below.



Geocaching

www.geocaching.com/sites/education/en/



The Five Languages

www.5lovelanguages.com



Enneagram Type Assessment

www.yourenneagramcoach.com

FamilyForward Podcast COMING SOON!

Out Front with FamilyForward was created to bridge the gap between research and real-world parenting. Join us as we explore the diverse and dynamic spectrum of family life and equip you with the knowledge to make a positive impact on your family's journey.



The first episodes will launch in the coming weeks. Scan the QR code to sign up to receive an exclusive first peek at the podcast before it launches to the public!



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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 to read LifeLines online.

Educational Opportunities for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Parents

All in-person classes will be held at FamilyForward's Developmental Trauma Center located at 11358 Van Cleve Ave in St. Louis County. *Light refreshments will be provided.*

Trauma 101

Wednesday, January 17, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

When a child is abused or neglected, it can impact every aspect of the child's development: physical, emotional, social, and psychological. A video will kickstart the discussion, focusing on the reasons for delays and challenges based on the neurobiology of brain development. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's Core Concepts of Traumatic Stress are covered. This course incorporates mandatory reading material essential for resource parents and offers a comprehensive introduction to the topic of trauma.

Building Parental Resilience (Virtual Lunch and Learn)

Friday, January 19, 2024 | 12:00-1:00 pm

From the catalog of the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) Right Time Training, this discussion will emphasize the importance of self-care for parents who are fostering or adopting, along with practical ideas on how to incorporate it into their daily routines. We will unpack ways to help parents understand why maintaining their own mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being is crucial when caring for children who have experienced trauma, separation, or loss. A link to this virtual program will be shared upon registration.

Preparing for Adulthood

Tuesday, January 23, 2024 | 6:00-8:00 pm

From the catalogue of the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) Right Time Training, this theme provides an overview of the common skills that youth will need to effectively navigate as an adult and provide strategies on how families who are fostering or adopting can prepare youth to successfully transition into adulthood. The theme highlights the variance that can exist between chronological and developmental age for children who have experienced trauma, separation and loss and how this can impact the transition to adulthood. Some of the challenges that youth may face during this transition are highlighted.

The Amazing Brain

Wednesday, January 24, 2024 | 6:00-9:00 pm

This training will give caregivers a deeper understanding of brain development from conception to maturation. The impact of early childhood trauma on the brain's organization will be explored through a small group activity utilizing The Brain Architecture Game. Will your team be able to build a brain that stands up to toxic stress?

Healthy Relationships

Wednesday, January 31, 2024 | 6:00-8:00 pm

Children in the foster care system often have not had healthy relationships modeled for them within their families of origin. Some have witnessed domestic violence, inappropriate familial and peer relationships, and experienced the violation of their bodies, distorting what is or is not appropriate in relationships. Exploring topics that may be difficult for adults to discuss with children and teens is the starting point for becoming comfortable with the subject matter. Developing a healthy self-respect is the foundation for future healthy relationships, and as caregivers, we must engage our children in ongoing conversations.

MO C.A.R.E. (Replacing STARS)

Tuesday, February 6, 13, 20, 27, March 5, 12, 19, 26, and April 2, 9, 2024 | 6:00-9:00 pm

MO C.A.R.E./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 for further information and registration.

Prioritizing Your Partnership (Virtual)

Mondays, February 12, 19, 26, 2024 | 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. Course content includes a brief examination of historical changes within marriage/partnership and the importance of 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 way to consider the adjustment of expectations in times of crisis. A link to this virtual program will be shared upon registration.

Working with Biological Parents

Wednesday, March 6, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

For many resource families, the prospect of working with a child's birth family can be intimidating. This class is designed to examine the benefits and realities of working with birth families and to provide tools and ideas to help bridge the gap. The intergenerational nature of trauma, along with special considerations in dealing with kin relationships, will be discussed. Setting boundaries in continued relationships with the birth family, both prior to and following adoption, will also be examined.

Sexual Development and Identity

Monday, March 11, 2024 | 6:00-8:00 pm

From the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) Right Time Training catalog, this training offers an overview of healthy sexual development and provides guidance on discussing it with children, including aspects of healthy sexual relationships. It delves into the specific needs that children who have experienced trauma, loss, or separation may have in forming a positive and healthy identity concerning their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) and overall sexuality. Additionally, the training will highlight strategies for parents who are fostering or adopting to support their child's sexual development.

Building Children's Resilience (Virtual Lunch and Learn)

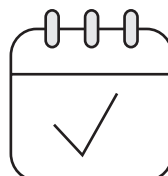
Friday, March 15, 2024, 12:00-1:30pm

From the catalog of the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) Right Time Training, this theme assists parents who are fostering and adopting in comprehending concepts and definitions related to enhancing the resilience of children who have experienced trauma, separation, or loss. It provides descriptions of protective factors, coupled with strategies on how to build upon these factors to support children in developing their identity, self-esteem, and skills for self-advocacy. A link to this virtual program will be shared upon registration.



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



Register for training

Call: 314.534.9350 ext. 7234

Email: intake.dept@familyforwardmo.org