

The Power of Peers – How Group Therapy Helps Kids and Teens Heal

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Often, when discussing psychotherapy, individual, couple, and family counseling come to mind. Although “group therapy” has been a recognized part of mental health treatment in the United States since the early 20th century, we know that sharing stories in a group has benefited many cultures around the world since the beginning of humankind. But why is group therapy so helpful, especially for children and teens who have experienced adversity?

Creates a sense of belonging/“I’m not alone”

Childhood and adolescence typically unfold in ways that can leave youth wondering, “Am I normal? Is this normal?” For kids who have experienced abuse or neglect early in life, the feeling of being different from everyone else is further amplified. They are more likely to be removed from the classroom or traditional summer camps because of their behaviors, which isolates them from their peers and reinforces the notion that “I’m different” or “I’m bad.” The groups and camps offered at FamilyForward provide a space where children feel seen for who they are beyond their behaviors, allowing them to connect with peers, establish friendships, and feel like they fit in.

Normalizes ways of coping

Often, the behaviors of kids who have experienced trauma are perceived negatively by family, friends, teachers, and community members. Labels such as “manipulative,” “attention-seeking,” “clingy,” and “oppositional” are viewed by the adults in their lives as inherently bad, when in fact these are usually maladaptive attempts to get their needs met. Groups and camps normalize the ways kids try to cope by approaching behaviors from a nonjudgmental and shame-free lens. Participants can see that others have similar struggles, and no one is shamed or blamed for that. The focus of the groups is on regulation and connection.

Provide peer support and accountability for enhancing or establishing new skills



FamilyForward groups and camps foster a “we’re all in it together” mindset that encourages children to take the brave step of trying on new skills. Being able to watch peers struggle and succeed at different times throughout the group experience normalizes the idea that change is hard but worth it. Group members cheer each other on when working through a difficult thought, feeling, or behavior, and they validate one another when pursuing a goal feels overwhelming or unreachable. With the guidance of therapist facilitators, the youth encourage each other to stretch and expand their skill sets, even when it feels a little scary. Of course, individual and family therapists do this as well, but we know it can have a greater impact on kids when support comes from their peers.

Finding joy/fun among stress and challenges

Academic, social, familial, and socioeconomic challenges often cause internal turmoil, stress, and anxiety in day-to-day functioning. The difficulties that children and teens impacted by trauma face often consume their focus as well as that of their

families and teachers. Unfortunately, their challenges are frequently viewed by others and internalized as their identity or “just who they are.” World-renowned couples’ therapists and researchers Drs. John and Julie Gottman state that “what we focus on grows,” meaning that the more we focus on challenges and stressors, the more likely that emphasis will overshadow and negate any positive aspects that might be co-occurring. This negative focus over time impacts a person’s view of themselves and can lead to low self-esteem and a diminished sense of worth. Groups and camps provide an opportunity for kids to find joy in themselves and others, to have their strengths and talents acknowledged, and to recognize the powerful impact that creative play and fun can have on healing. Youth are so much more than their struggles. Group therapy celebrates the unique ways in which children and adolescents experience the world around them and explores how kids can use their abilities to navigate their stage of development and all that comes with it.

The cliché “It takes a village…” is especially true for children who are working through and healing from trauma. FamilyForward’s groups and camps provide the peer aspect of the “village,” a uniquely supportive piece in the patchwork quilt that is mental health treatment.

To inquire about FamilyForward’s group and camp offerings, visit familyforwardmo.org or reach out to our Group Coordinators at groups@familyforwardmo.org

RESOURCES — to learn more about the efficacy of Group Therapy, check out:



Psychology Today



National Library of Medicine



Sage Journals



Frontiers in Psychology

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY CORNER

Ashley Wagner, OTD, OTR/L, Director of Occupational Therapy

Put Me In, Coach: Strategies to Prepare for Success with Extra-Curricular Activities

Occupational therapists (OTs) specialize in problem-solving how clients can successfully participate in various activities. Yet, when it came to figuring out how to best support my son in finding an activity outside of school, I was stumped! We tried music lessons—too much structure, not enough play. We tried soccer—too many strangers at games. We even tried puppet club—okay, this one was a success, but only once we convinced the leader to let our son stay behind the curtain for the entire final show. It wasn’t until I used my OT lens and started considering which aspects of activities would best fit my son’s comfort zone and which would require further advocacy or problem-solving that I could take some of the stress out of after-school activities for our family.

Extracurricular opportunities like sports, music lessons, and clubs can provide important moments for children to build relationships, see how others handle stress and frustration, and learn about new skills or interests. However, unlike intentionally therapeutic groups like those offered at FamilyForward, extracurricular activities through schools or community centers pose the risk of not always providing the inclusive, trauma-informed environment that kids at FamilyForward sometimes need to be successful.

So, what can we do to give our kids a better shot at successfully participating in extracurricular activities to reap the benefits of those structured social enrichment opportunities? There’s no one right way to approach after-school activities for your family, but perhaps the suggestions below from our FamilyForward OT team can provide some reassurance or offer new strategies to try:

1. Call Ahead

- Call or email the activity leader before signing the child up or before the first activity session.
- The goal of this discussion isn't to demand things be done in a certain way, but to start the collaboration process and figure out if the activity leader is willing to work with you on problem solving for your child or teen's success.
- The leader might avoid some of the biggest frustrations and stressors by planning for situations ahead of time.

2. Create a List of What They Can Expect

- Consider what your child or teen can expect from this activity (e.g., Will they go in without you? Will they be indoors, in water, or in leotards? Will there be downtime or strict routines?).
- Highlight 2 or 3 aspects that your child or teen will excel at or that will feel good to their bodies.
- Highlight 2 or 3 aspects of the activity that might not feel as good to them or that you might need to problem-solve with them for success or comfort (Note: this can include family barriers like time, transportation, etc.).
- Keep your list objective and ensure that the number of barriers and benefits is equal so the child doesn't perceive it as you trying to sway them.
- Use this list to help them decide which activities are right for them or to prepare for activities once they've signed up.

3. Prepare Your Child or Teen

Have multiple, short discussions before the activity related to the following topics:

- What to expect.
- What to do with the unexpected (e.g., a change in routine or location).
- What to do if they have a conflict with peers or leaders.
- What to do if they get frustrated, nervous, etc.
- How you will respond if the activity leader calls you with a concern.

4. Use Your FamilyForward Team!

Pull us in to navigate these conversations and help plan for success!





safer, healthier relationships
for children and families

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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.*

Sensory Processing and Integration

Tuesday, October 15, 22, 2024 | 10:00 am-12:30 pm

Difficulties with sensory processing are often confused with behavioral problems. Children who have been in foster care or adopted are at a heightened risk of experiencing these challenges. Learn about Sensory Processing Disorder, what it is, signs and symptoms, suggested ways that parents and teachers can help, and resources in the area. This two-part training provides parents with a hands-on experience.

Self-Compassion (Virtual Lunch and Learn)

Friday, November 8, 2024 | 12:00-1:30 pm

Self-compassion has become a popular term these days. But what does that mean? Self-compassion is an essential trait that caregivers must learn to practice to sustain themselves through the long, challenging job of parenting. Understand that being kind to yourself is not selfish but rather a gift you need to give yourself to prevent compassion fatigue.

Spaulding/Adoption Training

Monday, November, 18 and 25, December 2 and 9, 2024 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Spaulding Adoption Training is a **twelve-hour course** that provides families with the tools and information they need to understand the Missouri adoption process. It is required in Missouri for families to become an adoptive resource for a child. The curriculum covers topics such as cultural competence, attachment, expectations, and working as a member of a professional team. The discussion will include how creating a family through adoption differs from a biological family or foster parenting. The training is facilitated by an experienced adoptive parent and a child welfare professional.

Humor in Parenting

Tuesday, November, 19, 2024 | 10:00 am-12:30 pm

Humor is a handy tool in life's toolbox. When you are parenting children with unique challenges, it's especially important not to take yourself too seriously. This class will explore the nature of humor and how to incorporate it into your parenting repertoire.

Show ME Healthy Kids: MO Healthy Kids Presentation, Mary Mogg, MSW

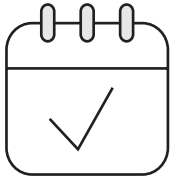
Tuesday, November, 19, 2024 | 6:00-8:00 pm

SMHK offers several benefits that you may not know about, such as earning money for well-care doctor visits, transportation services for birth parents to visit their children, and free sensory kits for some children. Get help navigating the healthcare system so members can get the treatments and benefits they need.

Holiday Stress

Tuesday, December 3, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

The holidays often bring much excitement and celebration for families. But for children who have experienced the disruption in their lives of being separated from their families, the holidays can be a time of great emotional upheaval. The stress level can become intolerable. This class will help parents see the holidays through their child's eyes and give tips on navigating this wonderful time of year.



REGISTER FOR TRAINING

Call: 314.534.9350 ext. 7234
Email: intake.dept@familyforwardmo.org



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

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SEASON TWO OF THE PODCAST IS LIVE!

Scan the QR code to listen!

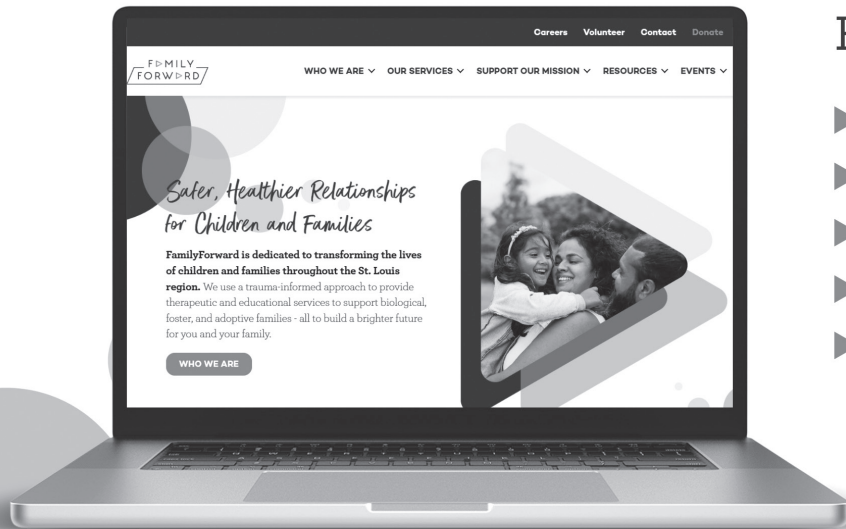


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www.familyforwardmo.org



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