Keep Your Head Up

For those who have found themselves caring for children from hard places, life often seems like a far cry from the reality of a typical family, whatever that may be. For some, just getting a good night’s sleep is a pipe dream while for others, it would be wonderful to have a weekday go by when a child’s teacher isn’t checking in again. Still others wish for a break from cleaning a new “Poopcasso” from the walls. As much as we have committed ourselves to loving these growing human beings, we don’t always like them. Many are not shy at all about sharing their thoughts and opinions openly, though what they say about us is not to be taken personally. This is much easier said than done and in the end, our self-esteem can suffer. Since children often model what they have witnessed, their self-esteem might have been compromised long before they came to stay with us.

In the face of adversity, how can we actively pursue healthier self-esteem? In the book, *Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency*, authors Allison Davis Maxon and Sharon Kaplan Roszia describe four pillars of self-esteem that include connectedness, uniqueness, power, and role models. Let’s explore each in greater detail:

**Connectedness**

Refers to a sense of rootedness and belonging to a family, a clan, or a community. Attachment is at the heart of connectedness, the base of which is the attachment a child forms with his or her primary caregivers. Previous relationships must be honored and preserved to the greatest extent possible, and honesty about a child’s past is paramount. For caregivers, connectedness comes by sharing life with others who are walking the same path and who can listen with empathy and provide unconditional acceptance and support. A community of like-minded others provides validation.

**Uniqueness**

Is the sense a person has of possessing distinctive, positive qualities. It comes from having the ability to express one’s true self and receive full acceptance. For children who lack knowledge of their genetic background and do not see aspects of themselves mirrored in those around them, it can be extra challenging. Care must be given to provide children with a wide variety of opportunities to explore their interests, talents, and unique modes of expression. It is important that parents take time to explore their creative side as well. This is best accomplished when spending time with others who will make note of their unique contributions. A strength-based approach throughout the family support system helps unearth everyone’s best qualities.

**Power**

Or agency is central to maintaining a positive view of oneself. All of us possess personal power, and the way we use our power is shaped by the values and
beliefs that have been reinforced by our environment. Many children from hard places come from families that may have lacked a strong belief system or discouraged the expression of personal power. The foster care system by its very nature lends itself to making others feel powerless. Giving children reasonable choices throughout the day helps them to regain this sense of power while still allowing the adult to maintain a safe environment. Letting children take on simple responsibilities within the family empowers them to see that they can make positive contributions. When caregivers find themselves facing a situation that seems hopeless, it is good to begin to reassess the situation to find where we can use our personal power for good. Often it may be making a phone call or two to clarify or advocate for a need that is not being met.

Lastly, positive role models allow children and adults to be with others who reflect both where they came from and who they hope to become. These people provide inspiration in the most dynamic sense. Children need to spend time with others who reflect their gender, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity, race, and those who can share their resiliency.

Parents and caregivers need the same, and a positive mentor can make a tremendous difference. Connection with others a step or two ahead on the road of life provides a safe place to learn and grow.

Parenting is difficult, and trauma adds another layer of challenge. Often, we are our own worst critics. Celebrate even the smallest steps in a positive direction and find others who can help you keep your head up. You are worth it!

Nurturing Parenting as a Lifestyle

February is the month dedicated to improving self-esteem. It is a ripe time to direct our attention to some improvement during the dreariness of winter. Parents play very important roles when it comes to building the self-esteem and self-worth of their children. Nurturing is the cornerstone of such development and though it may not be uppermost in our conscious brains, nurturing when practiced can become as natural as breathing in and breathing out.

Nurturing goes way beyond the basics of feeding, clothing, and providing shelter. Many individuals tend to parent the way they were parented. If you had nurturing parents, you will most likely be a nurturing parent. For children who have experienced instability in the first years of life, self-esteem may be very low, and it will require diligence on the part of the caregiver to nurture a child's self-esteem and self-worth into full bloom.

Research has uncovered specific elements or parental practices that are hallmarks of a nurturing parent.* Let's examine these constructs more closely. Nurturing parents are individuals who understand child development and what is considered normal for a neurotypical child. Based on the parent’s knowledge of their child’s realistic capacity, expectations for the child are appropriate and attainable in order to build confidence. For example, a common area of parental frustration surrounds toilet training. Children’s brains and bodies are not ready for bladder and bowel control until around the age of two. To attempt toilet training prior to that age can be disastrous and could lead to harsh discipline. Nurturing parents work in tandem with nature’s timeline, while considering a child’s potential delays due to their history.

Nurturing parents understand that empathy is essential for the development of a child’s healthy relationships both now and in the future. Empathy drives connection to others; it is walking alongside and feeling what another person feels. Nurturing parents encourage the expression of the full range of emotions.
of emotions, realize the importance of warm and loving touch, and model the practice of spirituality. They understand the distinction between needs and wants and encourage decision making, negotiation, and compromise based on the child's age. Decision making, negotiation, and compromise are practices that will prepare a child for navigating the world outside their families and are closely related to the construct of empowerment.

The third construct of nurturing parenting is providing discipline with dignity. Often, the word discipline is used interchangeably with punishment, but discipline is much more than punishment. Discipline is all about teaching children. Nurturing parents allow a child to immediately try to correct a behavior in what Dr. Karyn Purvis calls a “redo.” A successful redo is acknowledged and praised, and the parent and child move forward without lecturing or shaming. Allowing natural consequences to occur may require more time but is often superior to some arbitrarily imposed consequence that has no connection to the bad behavior. It is in discipline that family morals and values are transmitted and children learn right from wrong. Based on the child’s capacity, collaboration with the parents in establishing family rules facilitates buy-in. Remember that praising a child for a job well done or praising for an admirable quality are also great ways to build self-esteem.

Nurturing parents understand their own history and realize that it plays a powerful role in the way they parent. Life experiences, both positive and negative, will shape the way people respond to others. Nurturing parents do not expect children to fulfill a parent’s needs and they avoid role reversal. A male child should not be dubbed the “man of the house” or a daughter “mom’s best friend” or confidante. When a parent understands their history, they can adjust and learn to reduce stress in ways that are appropriate and healthy for all family members. If a parent doesn’t take the time to nurture themselves, they will not have the full capacity to nurture their children or build the child’s self-worth.

The final aspect of a nurturing parent is one who encourages a child’s independence and empowers them to give voice to their thoughts and feelings. Through empowerment, a child can stand firm in the face of peer pressure or is able to say no to unwanted touch or advances. Nurturing includes helping a child learn life-affirming ways to cope with unpredictability. Empowering children creates their sense of competency in facing life’s many challenges. Meeting these challenges builds a child’s self-esteem.

So, before the month is out, challenge yourself and assess where you are in nurturing as a parent. Make a conscious decision to adopt nurturing as a lifestyle; start small and gradually establish your toolbox of nurturing practices. You’ll build your child’s self-esteem as well as your own.

*Nurturing constructs were developed based on the extensive research of Stephen J. Bavolek, PhD.
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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 and Foster Parents

Each session counts as training toward your licensure requirement. Sessions are provided at low or no cost to all adoptive and foster parents. Registration is required.

Please note that all classes are for adults only. Children are not permitted in the classroom as training content is often not appropriate for them. Please arrange for childcare in your home as children cannot be left unattended in the lobby or hallways of the building. Thank you for helping keep your children safe.

Level A Youth with Elevated Needs
Mondays: January 6, 13, 27 and February 3, 10, 17, 2020 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
This six-week course is required for families that are caring for youth designated as having elevated needs. This training is just one of the curriculums approved by Children's Division Central Office; therefore, all six weeks must be completed at FamilyForward. Completion of coursework does not automatically qualify a resource parent as a Level A provider, skill acquisition should be demonstrable within the core competencies. Registration for this training must be completed by the resource parent’s case manager through Children’s Division.

Trauma 101
Thursday: January 16, 2020 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
When a child is abused or neglected, it can affect every aspect of the child’s development: physical, emotional, social, psychological. A video will kick-start the discussion that focuses on the reasons for delays and challenges based on the neurobiology of brain development. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network Core Concepts of Traumatic Stress are presented. This course incorporates the required reading material that is mandatory for all resource parents and provides a solid introduction to the topic of trauma.

Understanding the Effects of Sexual Abuse
Wednesdays: January 22 and 29, 2020 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Parenting a child with a history of sexual abuse can be frightening – from responding to the child’s acting out behavior to dealing with emotions. Discussions focus on the best ways to minimize the trauma and help your child heal. Sex trafficking will be explored in the training. This is a two-week class and attendance at both weeks is strongly encouraged.

Importance of Sibling Placement
Thursdays: January 23 and 30, 2020 | 6:00 pm – 9:30 pm (note longer class time)
This seven-hour course is based on Sibling Practice Curriculum from the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning Hunter College School of Social Work. It has been modified to relate to the target audience of foster parents. A decision-making matrix is used in a mock staffing the second week. This training is required by Children’s Division for licensed resource parents.
Healthy Relationships
Wednesday: February 5, 2020 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Children in the foster care system often have not had healthy relationships modeled for them within their families of origin. They may have witnessed domestic violence, inappropriate familial and peer relationships, and experienced 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 of becoming comfortable with the subject matter. Developing healthy self-respect is the foundation for future healthy relationships and as their caregivers, we must engage our children in on-going conversation.

Level B Youth with Exceptional Needs
Wednesdays: March 4, 11, 18, 2020 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

This three-week course is required for families that are caring for youth designated as having exceptional needs that require 24-hour oversight. This training is just one of the curriculums approved by Children's Division Central Office; therefore, all three weeks must be completed at FamilyForward. Topics will include crisis and suicide prevention/intervention and impact on the family unit. Completion of coursework does not automatically qualify a resource parent as a Level B provider, skill acquisition should be demonstrable within the core competencies. Registration for this training must be completed by the resource parent’s case manager through Children’s Division.

STARS Preservice Training for Prospective Resource Parents
Mondays: March 2, 9, 16, 23, 30 and April 6, 13, 20, 27, 2020 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Interested individuals need to contact their local county Children’s Division office for registration to this nine-week (27 hours) class. Attendance is mandatory for all individuals seeking licensure as a foster parent.

Register for Training
Contact Sarah Gamblin at 314.968.2350 ext. 5230 or sarah.gamblin@familyforwardmo.org

Our Location
1167 Corporate Lake Dr, Saint Louis, MO 63132-1716

Visit familyforwardmo.org/calendar to view training information online.

All classes are in-person and registration is required.

Important Notice

On November 5, 2019, Children’s Division issued a memorandum explaining policy revisions that will impact the licensing of prospective foster parents effective immediately with the publication of the memo. For those families already licensed, you have six months from the memo date to complete the required training.

Children’s Division has expanded the training that is required prior to a person being licensed as a foster parent or approved as an adoptive resource. The two-hour trainings include Psychotropic Medication Management (V013) and Informed Consent (V150).

A one-hour Psychotropic Medication training will be required for all individuals seeking license renewal. This training is not yet available; information will be forthcoming from Children’s Division.

These classes can be found online at dss.mo.gov/cd/foster-care/information-for-foster-parents.htm. Families without internet access are encouraged to go to your local library to complete the trainings and print corresponding certificates.