

Isolation and Desolation: The Need for Connection

On February 8, 2022, the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy testified on Capitol Hill, stating that loneliness has become a public health epidemic. Dr. Murthy was quoted as saying, “We now know that loneliness is a common feeling that many people experience. It’s like hunger or thirst. It’s a feeling the body sends us when something we need for survival is missing.” While researching this issue, he found that about half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness, with young people ages 15 to 24 showing the greatest changes in response.

Following the spread of COVID-19, schools and workplaces closed and Americans were faced with daily decisions about where and how to spend their time. Workplace social activities were often limited to online meetings. Engagement in social supports like community centers, extracurricular activities, and houses of worship sharply declined as people sought to avoid the risk of spreading the new virus. The internet offered the ability for many to work remotely, and staying at home became the norm for millions of people. Even the typical daily contact with others facilitated through trips to the store ended for those who selected to use delivery services.



Researchers in the areas of sociology and mental health have been studying the effects of decreased in-person social contact over the past decade and a half. These studies have indicated that having poor social relationships increases the risk of stroke and heart disease and does not offer the same buffer against the development of psychiatric disorders

including depression, anxiety, and dementia. Lack of social support also raises the risk of premature death by almost 30%. Isolation is a killer.

Dr. Brene Brown, professor, writer, and sociological researcher, stated, “Connection is why we’re here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering.” A basic need of all human beings and social shifts in recent years have left many of us in greater isolation, feeling unwell without a clear understanding of what has happened to us or how to get back to a sense of well-being.

While in-person contact remains at lower levels than before the pandemic, the use of online modes of communication to connect has continued to increase. Research is ongoing, but studies both shortly prior to the pandemic and as recent as 2023 suggest that the quality of relationships offered online does not equal that of spending time with others in person. For some the gloss of social platforms results in comparison, jealousy, and a lack of life satisfaction. This can be especially true for teens and young adults who are still forming their identity. This does not mean that online contact cannot offer some benefit, but that it is limited and is not meant to be our only method of connection with others. The use of social media by young people also needs to be monitored, limited, and guided with support from caring adults.

A massive shift in our social fabric has resulted in significant changes in the daily rhythms that many of us have become accustomed to. Feeling more alone in facing the burdens of day-to-day life has resulted to higher levels of chronic stress. Not surprisingly, the antidote to this new challenge is finding intentional ways to build healthy connections within our lives.

It is important to recognize that connection looks different for all of us and that some people naturally need more outward connection than others. Also, the kind of connection that is most meaningful to one person will be different from that of another. **Here are some ideas for connecting to consider:**

- Reconnect with family and friends. Make a list of people that you have not been able to connect with in a while. Choose one or two that you will reach out to. Even a short conversation over coffee may be just what you need.

- Build in time with casual acquaintances or strangers.

Just the simple act of a cheerful smile, greeting, or small talk with the cashier in the store or with your mail carrier provides benefits to both of you. Emotions are catching and you may be the one who turns around someone else's day.

- Find a furry friend. Spending time with animals suppresses stress hormones for those who enjoy them. Pets also provide an avenue for social engagement with other pet owners when taking walks or trips to the pet store. If you don't feel that you are able to care for a pet full time, volunteering in an animal shelter may be a potential option.

- Revel in nature. Make time for a walk or jog in a nearby park or nature area. Movement, fresh air, and sunshine all provide wonderful benefits. If you feel like it, bring a friend along.

- Find mindful ways to connect with yourself. Activities like yoga, tai chi, and meditation calm the mind and body. Science also recognizes the benefits of spirituality, prayer, and connection to a higher purpose.

Connection is important and can be found in a wide variety of ways. Find the form of connection that works best for you and take steps to add it to your life. **Our new podcast, Out Front with FamilyForward** dives deeper into the



importance of connection. Learn more about our first series, "Staying Connected," on the next page.

Healing Hearts

April is *National Child Abuse Prevention Month*. Foster and adoptive parents play a crucial role in healing the hearts of abused and neglected children. Every child in foster care has been exposed to some form of trauma. The very act of being placed in foster care disrupts their sense of security and familiarity. Trauma affects children's brains, bodies, behavior, and ways of thinking. It disrupts their sense of safety, altering their responses to people and situations. Research reveals how maltreatment changes brain structure and chemical activity, influencing emotional and behavioral functioning. Understanding these biological aspects helps foster and adoptive parents provide effective support and parenting. Below is a list of strategies foster and adoptive parents can use in their journey to heal the hearts of the children in their lives.

Strategies that can help you and your child adjust to trauma's effect (sourced from [healthychildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org)):

- Learn to notice and avoid (or lessen) "triggers." Find out what distracts or makes your child anxious. Work to lessen these things.

- Set up routines for your child (for the day, for meals, for bedtime) so they know what to expect.



- Give your child a sense of control through simple choices. Respect your child's decisions.

- Do not take your child's behaviors personally.

- Try to stay calm. Find ways to respond to outbursts that do not make things worse. Lower your voice. Do not yell or show aggression. Do not stare or look directly at your child for too long. Some children see this as a threat.

- Remain available and responsive when your child keeps you at a distance.

- Avoid discipline that uses physical punishment. For a child who was abused, this may cause panic and out-of-control behavior.

- Let your child feel the way they feel. Teach your child words to describe their feelings when they are calm, words they can use when they get upset. Show acceptable ways for them to deal with feelings. Then, praise them for expressing their feelings or calming down.

- Be consistent, predictable, caring, and patient. Over time, this shows your child that others can be trusted to stay with them and help them. It may have taken years of trauma or abuse to get the child in their current state of mind. Learning to trust again is not likely to happen overnight—or anytime soon.

- Ask for help whenever you have concerns, questions, or are struggling. Pediatricians, developmental specialists, and therapists can suggest ideas why your child reacts in certain ways, and effective responses. Sometimes medications, used appropriately, will help to manage symptoms and make learning new ways possible.

Resource Spotlight: The Recreation Council of Greater St. Louis



While planning for summer activities, consider reaching out to The Recreation Council of Greater St. Louis. The council provides resources for individuals with disabilities to explore social and recreational opportunities within the community. Staff members at the council help caregivers locate programs within the community that best meet each child's interests and level of support needed to help ensure a positive experience. Scan the QR code to learn more!



DailyDose: A Daily Resource for Caregivers

In honor of National Child Abuse Prevention Month in April, we want to emphasize the need for united efforts in preventing child abuse and neglect. Every weekday next month, we will share a DailyDose story – quick and actionable social media stories with resources and tips for families and communities to incorporate in their day-to-day lives. These DailyDose posts will cover a range of topics to empower you to keep children safe and be aware of child abuse prevention practices. Scan the QR codes to follow us on your favorite social media platform and get your serving of DailyDose this April.



Facebook



Instagram

FamilyForward Podcast is Live!



LISTEN NOW!

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.

Series One: Staying Connected

The need for humans to have connection now is more important than ever. Despite being easily connected in this digital age, people are feeling more isolated than ever. In this four-part series, we are exploring the importance of connectedness: why it matters, what its impacts are, what support looks like, and how we can reconnect. Scan the QR code to subscribe and listen!





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.*

Crisis Management

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

Parents will learn what qualifies as a crisis, the signs of escalation in their children, and methods to de-escalate the dysregulated child. The development and use of safety plans for the home will be discussed. Police CIT (Crisis Intervention Teams) and protocols for engaging their assistance will be introduced.

Preparing for and Managing Visitation

Monday, April 22, 2024 | 6:00-8:00 pm

From the catalog of the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) Right Time Training, this theme offers an overview of the importance of children maintaining visits with their family. It provides guidance on how to check in and address concerns, questions, and emotions that children may encounter before and after the visits. The theme also offers strategies on how to assist children in naming and validating the range of feelings they may experience before, during, and after a visit, as well as understanding the role that parents who are fostering or adopting play in these visits.

Collaborative and Proactive Solutions

Tuesday, April 23, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

Formerly known as Collaborative Problem Solving, the originator, Dr. Ross Greene, operates under the assumption that children do well if they can. By perceiving challenging behavior as a deficit in cognitive skills, specifically in the domains of flexibility and adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving, parents can look at their children through sympathetic eyes. Parents engage in the three steps of collaborative problem-solving: Empathy Step, Define the Problem Step, and Invitation Step.

Managing Placement Transitions

Monday, May 6, 2024 | 6:00-8:00 pm

From the catalog of the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) Right Time Training, this class offers an overview of the impact transitions, both planned and unplanned, have on children who have experienced trauma, loss, or separation. The theme delves into strategies for managing disruptions and making children feel welcomed and connected before, during, and after transitions occur.

Family Dynamics: Bring It Home

Wednesday, May 15, 2024 | 6:00-8:00 pm

From the catalog of the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) Right Time Training, this theme offers an overview of the impact fostering or adopting can have on family dynamics, including its effects on marital relationships, biological children, and existing foster or adoptive children in the home, as well as extended family members. The theme aims to assist parents who are fostering or adopting in gaining insight and increased understanding of how their family may need to adjust. It also provides strategies for supporting healthy family dynamics during this transformative process.

Psychopharmacology Plus Week 1

Wednesday, June 5, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

This course introduces the basic use of medications in the treatment of mental health and behavioral concerns commonly found in the childhood population that has experienced chronic, complex early childhood trauma. The course reviews the roles of neurotransmitters in altering moods and behavior, their metabolism, and potential side effects, including special dietary interactions. Additionally, the course covers navigating the medical system, advocacy, and establishing a partnership with the medical team. Medication storage, administration, and disposal will also be addressed

Psychopharmacology Plus Week 2

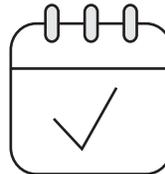
Wednesday, June 12, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

This course introduces the basic use of medications in treating mental health and behavioral concerns commonly found in the childhood population that has experienced chronic, complex early childhood trauma. The course reviews the roles of neurotransmitters in altering moods and behavior, their metabolism, and potential side effects, including special dietary interactions. Additionally, the course covers navigating the medical system, advocacy, and establishing a partnership with the medical team. Medication storage, administration, and disposal will also be addressed.



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