

LifeLines

Volume 16, Issue 1 | Winter 2023



safer, healthier relationships
for children and families

The Best New Year's Resolution

The new year is here, and with it come resolutions for self-improvement. Statistically, only about 9% of people ultimately reach their goals. Many of these individuals have something in common that helps them maintain their motivation. Many have chosen to give themselves one of the best gifts, an absolutely worthwhile resolution—the gift of self-compassion.

What do we mean by self-compassion? Simply put, self-compassion is including ourselves in the circle of kindness and being a good friend to ourselves. However, this is not our default, and often we are our worst critics. This happens in all areas of life but is especially important when it comes to self-evaluation of our parenting.

Culturally, being self-compassionate is often viewed as weak, and there is a fear that it makes us lazy or complacent or we have failed in some way. After all, why would we change if we are accepting ourselves as we are? Not only that, but our brains also perceive failure as dangerous to survival and utilize criticism and negative self-talk as a means of protection.

Interestingly, there is a large body of research that indicates that our cultural wisdom on this topic is completely backward! Studies show that self-compassionate people experience more positive, or what we prefer to label “comfortable,” emotions than self-critical individuals. When people treat themselves kindly instead of critically, they are more likely to believe that they can make changes and re-engage their goals as opposed to increasing stress and guilt, resulting in rumination around missing the mark. Researchers theorize that self-compassion helps us be more mindful of our thoughts and emotions instead of avoiding or exaggerating them. From this place of kindness, we can sit with less comfortable emotions and remain regulated during difficult experiences.

For those caring for children with extensive trauma and special needs, every ounce of physical and emotional energy may be consumed by the parenting role. How can we recharge? Negative self-talk provides no gifts, despite the intention of teaching ourselves a lesson. Unfortunately, when our inner voice is unkind, we ultimately lead ourselves to burnout, which is just the opposite of what we had hoped for.



When we struggle through a hard time, if we are lucky enough, we find an empathic friend who offers words of encouragement. And when our kids have had a tough day, we fill this role for them. We help them explore and honor difficulty, allowing for growth. Most of us have come to understand that gentle and empathic redirection is much more productive than harsh criticism when helping our kids with their challenges. We need to do some reparenting for ourselves in this area. This can be especially challenging for those who experienced abuse or neglect as children.

Parenting can be downright painful. Amid difficulty, we can turn our caring selves inward. In kindness to ourselves, we can honor our pain and recognize the suffering that is part of all human existence. This may involve giving gentle self-touch, such as placing a hand on the heart and stating, “This is tough. May I be kind to myself” or “Other people have felt this way too.” In attending to ourselves when struggles come, we are present in the moment and fill ourselves with gentleness and warmth. Even nonverbally, this peaceful inner state is “caught” by those around us, a phenomenon referred to as empathetic resonance. Sometimes we may tell ourselves that we don’t deserve this kind of treatment, but that is simply untrue. Each of us is equally deserving of kindness and dignity, even on our bad days.

By giving ourselves the gift of mindfulness, recognizing our common humanity, and extending self-compassion, we give ourselves the gift of a loving presence. We are worth receiving this gift from ourselves. With our own cup filled, we can also give to others. In doing so, we remain motivated for change and growth.

May your new year be filled with kindness and self-compassion. Resolve to make it so!

The Quest for a Kinder, Gentler World

"America is never wholly herself unless she is engaged in high moral principle. We as a people have such a purpose today. It is to make kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world." —George H. Bush, Inauguration speech, January 20, 1989.

Almost 35 years ago, we were exhorted by an incoming president to rise to a higher purpose in this country. As we begin 2023, some may ask, where do we go from here? New beginnings often prompt a reflection of the recent past as we look to measure if we have made progress or taken steps back into a darker space. Certainly, as I write this article, we have no need to look further than the headlines that grip the nation. Racism, hate-mongering, the widening wealth gap between the classes, mass shootings, and inequities in systems that prevent individuals from getting health care, education, and employment are all chalked up as negatives. For Debbie Downers, these shortcomings can push some to throw up their hands and say, "There is nothing I can do about it. I am one against many!"

But there is something that all of us can do, and it can begin with simple acts of kindness in our families and in our communities. Often, these acts of kindness will cost nothing but some of our time. Sure, the Bill Gateses of the world will get media coverage when millions of dollars are donated to combat a deadly disease. But it is the quiet, unheralded simple acts of a caring human that can become transformative for both the giver and recipient of kindness.

It truly does not take much to make a small difference in someone's day. Just to even respond in a courteous manner, with a thank you, please, and you're welcome can take the edge off an encounter with a stranger who may be waiting in line at the license bureau or pumping gas at QuikTrip.



To begin the new year, consider incorporating some of the following acts of kindness into your day as you meet people or parent your children.

- Notice the sales associate's name badge so that you can use their name when you thank them for locating an item you couldn't find.
- Write a simple note of encouragement and slip it into your child's lunch bag.
- Open and hold the door for the person immediately behind or ahead of you.
- Tell your child that you are proud of their perseverance with a challenging task.
- Pick up wayward trash from your neighbor's lawn.
- Smile and wave to your mail carrier.
- Allow someone to go ahead of you in the grocery checkout who may only have one or two items.
- Leave the quarter in the Aldi cart for the next person.
- Ask a sick friend if you can pick up anything for them when you go to the store.
- Give your child a gentle touch and tell them you love them, even when they are trying your patience.
- Place a note of encouragement on your child's bathroom mirror.
- Post a positive review OR hold off on a negative review.
- Share a piece of chocolate with a co-worker.
- Call someone who lives alone.
- Send a thank you note to a teacher.
- Donate gently worn clothes to a thrift shop.
- Make it a family affair to pick up trash in the park or at the playground.
- Graciously accept a compliment with a simple thank you.
- Watch "On the Road with Steve Hartman" with your child.
- RSVP for the party invitation you received or the class you registered for.
- Put away your phone and listen to your child as they tell you about their day.
- Engage with your child in their favorite activity.

If we want to encourage kindness in our children, we must be kind to them. Modeling kindness for a child is extremely powerful in counteracting the harshness that might have marked their beginnings. As Mother Teresa once said, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.” Imagine the exponential effect on our families and communities if this maxim were practiced daily.

According to the Mayo Clinic, performing random acts of kindness can greatly impact your attitude, outlook, and even your health. Practicing acts of kindness can “rewire your brain” to help you be more present to others while boosting your own mood. February 17 is the unofficial “Random Acts of Kindness Day.” But don’t worry if you miss it, you can begin sharing kindness on any day to make the world a kinder, gentler place.

Resource Spotlight: TREE House of Greater St. Louis

Animal-assisted therapy is an approach that can be beneficial for individuals who have experienced trauma. Often, people may think of dogs in therapy, but there are opportunities to use horses, also known as hippotherapy or equine therapy. Therapeutic Horsemanship was founded in 1975 and has since changed its name to TREE House of Greater St. Louis. TREE is an acronym for Therapy, Recreation, Education, Exploration. Located on 90 acres of property in St. Charles County, the agency is heavily supported by volunteers who assist in walking with the horses during therapy sessions. TREE House offers a number of services under the direction of certified therapists and occupational, physical, and speech/language therapists. A variety of concerns can be addressed, including anxiety, depression, improving relational skills, and building resiliency as well as self-esteem. There are numerous avenues for services to be covered, including Medicaid, the Department of Mental Health, or private insurance. Check out their website for the full list of services provided thstl.org or call 636.332.4940. They currently have a waiting list, but it is important that you sign up to be notified when openings become available.





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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

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

Philosophy of Nurturing Parenting

Friday, January 13, 2023 | Noon - 1:00 pm | Virtual Lunch and Learn

To nurture is to care for and encourage the growth or development of a child. It is the foundation from which parenting skills are built and developed. At its best, nurturing must be an intentional, lifestyle choice made by parents. Children with trauma histories often have missed this essential component. As resource parents it is necessary to use empathy to encourage attachment between child and caregiver, while providing structure and a sense of safety.

Understanding the Effects of Sexual Abuse

Tuesdays, January 17 and 24, 2023 | 6:00 - 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, attendance at both weeks is strongly encouraged.

Family Forward Parenting KIDS (Kids In Difficult Situations)

Thursdays, January 19, 26, and February 2, 9, 16, 23, 2023 | 6:00 - 9:00 pm

Children with histories of abuse and neglect tend to exhibit very difficult behaviors such as chronic lying, stealing, aggression, difficulties with eating and/or sleeping. Trauma-informed parenting is discussed with an emphasis on the impact of trauma on brain development. Insuring a child's physical, emotional, and psychological safety is paramount to decrease behavioral issues and change the brain's default response for appropriate behavioral responses. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network curriculum is utilized and supported with additional material/videos from professionals in the field of developmental trauma. 18 hours of class time is covered in six consecutive weeks.

Trauma 101

Monday, January 30, 2023 | 6:00 - 9:00 pm

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

Personal Power

Friday, February 3, 2023 | Noon - 1 pm | Virtual Lunch and Learn

This lunch and learn will explore how encouraging a child's personal power is important in giving children voice and building their capacity to get their needs met in desirable ways.

Creating Lifebooks

Tuesday, February 7, 2023 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

Lifebooks are an important tool to help children who are in foster care or adopted connect the past, present, and future. Identity development and attachment can be facilitated using this tool. Class focuses on the demonstration of age-appropriate activities and tools that will help children understand their life story from a strength-based perspective.

Collaborative and Proactive Solutions

Tuesday, February 21, 2023 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

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

Prioritizing Your Partnership

Mondays, March 6, 13, 20, 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. 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 is at the core of this curriculum. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is presented as an important way to consider adjustment of expectations in times of crisis.

Child Development: Is This Behavior Normal?

Thursday, March 9, 2023 | 6:00 - 9:00 pm

Children do not come with manuals! This class will provide an overview of normal childhood development. Adoptive and foster parents are sometimes stumped about a child's behavior and what if anything they should do about it. Training will cover childhood developmental tasks and explore ways that parents can nurture their children at each stage.

Developing Empathy

Friday, March 10, 2023 | Noon - 1 pm | Virtual Lunch and Learn

Empathy is the capacity to perceive emotions, needs and desires of another and specifically for a parent, the ability to care for a child. Empathy honors the feelings of a child and plays an important role in the task of discipline.

TIPS 1 and 2 (Trauma Informed Parenting for Success)

Tuesdays, March 14 and 21, 2023 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

This series of classes takes a closer look at the core strengths required for healthy child development as outlined by Dr. Bruce Perry, of The ChildTrauma Academy. CTA believes that health promotion is violence prevention. The training focuses on how parents can facilitate these strengths after a child has experienced a traumatic beginning. Attachment is the foundation with which all other strengths are built including self-regulation, affiliation, attunement, tolerance, and respect. This is an excellent refresher course after taking FamilyForward's Parenting KIDS.

ACE Scores and Building Resilience

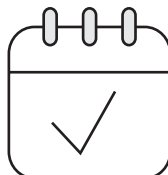
Thursday, March 16, 2023 | 6:00 – 8:00 pm

The Adverse Childhood Experience score is reviewed along with the higher risks for chronic health conditions as adults. ACEs are extremely common yet are now being considered a public health crisis. Learn ways to build resiliency utilizing the protective factors critical to the strengthening and nurturing of children.



Online resources

Sign up for our NEW 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