

November is National Adoption Month in Missouri

As we head into the season of holiday celebrations, we often find family at the center of the festivities. It is appropriate then, that adoption is celebrated in the month of November. In the FamilyForward community, adoption is the way numerous families are built. While family life can bring joy and a sense of purpose, it also has its share of challenges that can summon forth the better part of ourselves when we strive as parents to meet our child's needs. Adopting a child from a hard place is not for the faint of heart. So, honor your courage and celebrate National Adoption Month. Below are just a few suggestions to get you started.

The holidays are a perfect time to incorporate a child's past traditions into the new family. Familiar rituals can be comforting for children who find themselves in a new home, but they can also be a source of great sadness when they resurrect memories of what the child lost in the adoption process. If parents recognize that the child's moodiness comes from a source of anxiety or sadness about their loss, they can better take these emotions in stride. Remember to relax, adjust expectations, and go with the flow. Perhaps a more low-key celebration would produce more satisfying results for all involved.



While children are off from school, take time to work with your foster or adopted child on their Lifebooks. Too many times, these important tools are neglected because the parent wants to produce a perfect album reflecting the child's journey. Others resort to using computer programs that can make Lifebook production fast and easy. But there is something to be said for the old, copy, cut, and paste routine. The activity can be very therapeutic when the child is assisted by the parent at the kitchen table and fortified with a cup of hot chocolate and decorated sugar cookies. This old-fashioned process slows down time and taps into the senses that are affiliated with nurturing. An hour or two set aside to reminisce and construct the story line for a particular picture can make for a very enjoyable afternoon. Receiving a parent's undivided attention for a couple of hours may just be the antidote for keeping at bay the "I'm bored!" refrain.

When was the last time you updated your family portrait? Bundle into your warm coats, don the mittens and scarves, and head out with a family friend who can take some candid shots while you walk through the woods or sled down the neighborhood hill during the first snowfall. Once you select your favorite, frame and hang it in a prominent spot in the home. If you still send holiday cards, use the photo to keep friends updated. Make sure you place a copy in a family-themed frame and put in a conspicuous spot in your child's bedroom.

For the parent, [The Foundling](#) by Paul Joseph Fronczak delves into the question of "Who am I?" in a true-life page turner that begins in 1964 when a newborn is kidnapped from his mother's Chicago hospital room. The story, which includes elements of adoption and reunification, follows the author as he is consumed by his emotionally charged search for answers. This book provides a window into an adopted person's quest for belonging, family, roots, and identity – subjects that parents may grapple with when trying to understand their child's strong desire to seek out family who failed them in the beginning.

On the much lighter side, read a book to your child that addresses adoption. Take time to stop and discuss themes or answer questions that are naturally piqued by the book's topic. Or, slip into the DVD player one of the Disney films that have adoption as the central theme and watch while munching popcorn. These movies can be borrowed from your local library and watched at your leisure during the ensuing week. *Frozen*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Tigger Movie*, *The Odd Life of Timothy Green*, or *Tarzan* all provide numerous opportunities to address issues common to being raised in a family that you were not born into.

Finally, join other adoptive families in a good old-fashioned potluck supper and celebrate the uniqueness of each person. There is nothing better than sharing a meal with someone who is on the same journey as you. So come on, pick one or two suggestions, and celebrate National Adoption Month!

An Unexpected Root Canal

The role of parent is full of surprises. Not only is it impossible to fully comprehend how life will change once your family expands, but it is very hard to discern all of the expectations you may have neatly tucked away in your subconscious. In an attempt to give your new family members all the advantages in life, your schedule expands exponentially, you find yourself reading all those contradictory parenting articles, and guilt, stress, and an overwhelming sense of inadequacy settle in. Add on top of it that you are parenting a child with a history of trauma and no one around seems to understand the impact this has on your child. Time with your partner or friends dwindles, you can't remember what you like to do anymore, and you tell yourself that your needs are temporarily being set aside to help those who can't help themselves. After all, they need a hero. Your needs can come later, right?

Foster and adoptive parents often come to a therapist's office with the sincerest intentions. They want to get help for their child who is struggling in the home, in school, and with their relationships. In some cases, the first step is to perform an assessment to determine where the child's strengths are and what challenges need to be addressed. Once those results are finalized, the parent(s) meet with the therapist to discuss what the assessment uncovered. For some parents, this meeting provides validation of their observations while others don't get the answers they were hoping for. Depending on the parents' expectations, the review of the assessment can come with a sigh of relief:

"I'm not crazy, I knew my child was struggling in math." Or it could provide the parent hope that with new insights, the child's team can plan well and put in place appropriate, trauma-informed interventions.



But for a number of parents, the review of the assessment is disappointing, frustrating, and sometimes anxiety-producing. These parents may have approached the therapist assuming they would hear the answers they anticipated, such as "Yes, your child has severe problems," "What I am seeing in this child's behavior is extreme compared to his peers," or "Your child is on the autism spectrum." When such statements are not in line with the parents' expectations, the adults may get angry or defensive. This reaction is fully understandable. After all, you came to this person to help with your child, and now they seem to be talking about something entirely different.

At times, the therapist may observe some red flags in the parents' relationship, or observe that one parent is very anxious, or less invested in the child than the other parent. Research validates that high levels of stress on the part of the caregiver are directly mirrored in the children in their care. When such things come to light, it may be hard for the parent to hear that they are contributing to their child's problems in the home or in the parent/child relationship. Blaming or denial may come into play when the parent's own responses are mentioned as the potential source of the underlying dysfunction perceived within the child. No parent wants to hear this from their child's therapist. Adults will take the same course of action that we see in our children when they become fearful. The adult will either disagree (fight) with the therapist, run from the suggestions never to return to the therapist (flight), or just tune out (freeze).

Let's face it, having our weaknesses exposed is about as fun as having a root canal. Some find it so painful they may choose a root canal over having their vulnerabilities brought to light. In the end, the adult's denial of their own dysfunctional responses will hinder emotional growth in their child. World-renowned trauma specialist, Dr. Bruce Perry of the ChildTrauma Academy, has commented on the phenomenon that can be seen when dealing with parents who have experienced transgenerational trauma. As the foster or adopted child begins to heal, and they reach or surpass the emotional maturity level of the traumatized parent, the child's progress can be halted. The parent unknowingly sabotages the relationship or begins to disengage from the child, perhaps to the point of disrupting the placement.

Dysfunctional behavior in a parent is not necessarily the result of a traumatic childhood. It could be the result of the parent's attachment patterns or personality type. A need to control or a sense of general anxiety can play havoc with the parent/child relationship. If the parent truly wants their child to recover from traumatic experiences, the parent will need to work on their own unresolved childhood issues. The late Dr. Karyn Purvis used to say that "we cannot ask our children to go where we have not gone."

It is common for individuals who have experienced trauma in their childhood to gravitate toward fostering because they do not want another child to experience what they did, or they feel they are in a position to empathize with foster children because they have "been there." Because this is often the case, the parent needing support through counseling is a distinct possibility. Understanding that the family is a system and needs to be addressed as such is non-negotiable.

If you find yourself in a situation where a therapist suggests that your issues are contributing to your child's problems, it is easy to become defensive. Please do not automatically dismiss the suggestion that the parent or couple could use some of their own therapy. The experience could be a source of tremendous growth and open up new windows to view the world. A child observing his parent taking part in therapy to deal with challenges could send a powerful message: "Nobody is perfect and we all can use a little help with stuff." Why would parents want to build resiliency in their child and not seek it for themselves? We have to own our history in order to mature and grow to our fullest potential as parents and human beings. Be courageous and do the more difficult thing. Give yourself the gift of self-discovery and healing.

Concerned About Your Foster Child's Case Management?

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) was established in 2002 as an agent of accountability regarding services rendered by the Children's Division (CD). This office provides several services that may come in handy for foster parents who are concerned about their child's case. The OCA provides an avenue for *any* Missouri citizen to obtain an independent and impartial review of disputed decisions, actions, or inactions regarding a child at risk of abuse, neglect, or harm. The office will review case management for a child in the system or unsubstantiated findings. The office can also mediate between parents and schools regarding abuse allegations in the school setting and provides information and referrals for families needing resources. Anyone can call the office: a foster parent, neighbor, teacher, grandparent, or police officer. All information provided by the caller is confidential and is not disclosed without permission. There is also the option of completing a complaint form online. Numbers reported for the year ending in 2015 reflect that the office received 1,490 complaints involving 1,345 children. Many of the complaints came from birth parents, grandparents, and other relatives. These numbers should not deter foster parents from registering their complaints regarding a child's case. Possible levels of investigation can run from no investigation is needed up to and including the review of CD case files and on-site investigations. These investigations should be concluded within 45 business days; however, some situations will prolong this time frame. Upon concluding the investigation, the complainant and different levels of management, including the Children's Division Director, will receive a letter summarizing the investigation. You may call the OCA at toll-free number 866.457.2302, or visit their website at **oca.mo.gov**.





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for children and families

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About FamilyForward

To better serve the community, Children's Home Society of Missouri and Family Resource Center officially united to become FamilyForward on April 1, 2017. Together, the agencies have 169 years of experience helping children and families.

FamilyForward is a movement and the name for the merged entity of two of St. Louis' most accomplished, leading-edge non-profit organizations. FamilyForward is the direction for hope and for new opportunities to build safer, healthier relationships for children and families.

FamilyForward provides therapy, coaching and education, foster care and adoption, trauma assessment and psychological evaluation, therapeutic preschool, and care for children with developmental disabilities. Visit **familyforwardmo.org** for more information.

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 foster and adoptive parents. Registration is required.

Impact of Strangers Under Your Roof

Monday, October 9, 2017

6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Bringing foster children into your home can create challenges for both you and your biological children. Having realistic expectations prior to the placement of children in your home, coupled with the acknowledgement of feelings, current family functioning, and coping with increased stress will all contribute to the outcomes for the children in care.

Working with Birth Families

Thursday, October 12, 2017, 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

-or-

Friday, October 13, 2017, 9:30 am – 12:30 pm

As resource parents, working with a child's birth family can be a daunting task; their values, morals, and behaviors may conflict with your own. How can you keep your cool when you see what has happened to the child in your home? Learning to step back and be non-judgmental, yet supporting a parent's effort to regain custody of their child can be very difficult. Resource parents will explore ways to navigate this difficult terrain. Setting boundaries with birth families will also be explored for adoptive parents.

All About Adolescents

Thursdays: October 19 and 26, 2017, 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

-or-

Fridays: November 3 and 10, 2017, 9:30 am – 12:30 pm

This two-week course will look at a wide array of topics that are pertinent to the adolescent years. Topics will include teen sexuality, dating, and the developmental tasks of the adolescent years considering a child's history of adoption and foster care. *The Teenage Brain* and *Off and Running* are two videos that will be used in conjunction with class discussion and group activities. Join other parents as they explore this wonderful and often frustrating period of human development.

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 as children cannot be left unattended in the lobby or hallways of the building. Thank you for helping keep your children safe.

Blood Brothers Documentary

Mondays: October 23 and 30, 2017

6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Many children in the community have been exposed to deadly violence; whether in their family, the community, or vicariously through media. In this two-part training, we will view a documentary produced by Saint Louis University. Interviews with police, lawyers, physicians, social workers, and students will cover the topic of gun violence that has become so prevalent in the St. Louis area. Five video segments will be followed by questions that are designed to ignite discussion and explore viewpoints and the development of solutions to this escalating problem.

Prioritizing Your Partnership

Mondays: November 6, 13, 20, 2017

6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Parenting children with a trauma history requires time, patience, and lots of energy. If you are fortunate enough to have a parenting partner, it is no surprise that this hard work takes a toll on your relationship. However, a strong bond between parents or caregivers is vital to the health and wellbeing of the entire family. This three-week course is designed for couples to complete together, with each week building on the next. It covers evidence-based concepts and practices that result in greater harmony, satisfaction, and intimacy within the parenting partnership. Schedule some time to prioritize your partnership today!

Trauma 101

Wednesday, November 29, 2017

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, and behavioral. This class focuses on the reasons for delays and challenges. Material covered is from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and is required for all foster parents for licensure. The neurobiology of trauma is introduced.

Transracial Parenting in Foster Care and Adoption

Mondays: December 4 and 11, 2017

6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Parenting a child of another racial or ethnic heritage brings with it additional challenges and opportunities. In this two-part class, activities include viewing several videos of transracial adoptees discussing their experiences and discussion on ways to better prepare to meet the cultural needs of children. Grandparents are welcome to attend this class.

Creating a Lifebook

Monday, December 18, 2017

6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

For children in foster care or those who have been adopted, it is important to have their life stories documented. Learn about this essential tool that parents can use with their children in making sense of their past and chronicling their journey toward adulthood and healing.

STARS Training will begin at FamilyForward's Creve Coeur site on Thursday November 2, 2017. Time is 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm. Interested individuals should contact their local Children's Division office for further information and registration.

To register for training, contact Heather at
314.968.2350 ext. 258 or heather.fjone@familyforwardmo.org.

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