The Melissa Institute
For Violence Prevention and Treatment

REPORT
TO THE
COMMUNITY
2004
The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

— Martin Luther King Jr.
“The unknown isn’t such a haunting aspect
Of the life we live...the life we took.
It adds intrigue to our life’s little book.”

These lines are from a poem written by Melissa Aptman, a Miami native, in October, 1994. Seven months later, she was murdered during a carjacking in St. Louis. Her “life’s little book” was closed in one senseless, random act of violence. In the same poem, Melissa also wrote:

“To move ahead we must say goodbye.
To shape the soul, we must break old ties.
However, we never lose that which we once had at the start.
It remains engraved in each of our hearts.”

Melissa’s memory — the brightness of her promise and the tragedy of her death — remains engraved in the hearts of all those who knew and loved her. The Melissa Institute is dedicated to the study and prevention of violence. Through our work, we honor her spirit and continue to write in her life’s little book.

A year after Melissa’s death, her family and friends established The Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention and Treatment, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.

The Institute’s mission is to bridge the gap between research and direct application of that information to reduce the incidence of violence and to assist victims and their families. The Institute fulfills this mission through education, community service, research support and consultation.
Bullying: An Imbalance of Power

When Fran enters the school cafeteria, she is confronted by Cheryl and a group of Cheryl’s friends. They make it clear that if Fran does not hand over her lunch money, she will be beaten up, her clothes will be torn, and her hair will be cut.

In a separate incident, a teacher berates a student in front of the entire class: “Jeremy, you must have left your brains at home again. When are you going to start shaping up?”

These scenarios are examples of bullying — a form of aggression in which there is an imbalance of power between the instigator and the victim. The first instance illustrates face-to-face bullying. The second is more subtle in that it is an aggressive act exhibited by an authority figure. Both scenarios reinforce the pervasive notion that the powerful have the right to intimidate the powerless.

The Melissa Institute addresses the issue of school bullying through workshops, community education programs, seminars for teachers and counselors, as well as activities for students. In addition, the Institute helps raise awareness about the link between bullying and school violence.

Many people harbor misconceptions about childhood bullying. They believe it is usually perpetrated by boys, and that the victims of bullying may have been “asking for it.” They also incorrectly feel that children who are bullies will eventually grow out of it.

“As adults, we often see bullying behavior in children and think, ‘Well, that’s just how kids are,’” said Debra J. Pepler, Ph.D., an international expert on childhood aggression and a member of The Melissa Institute’s Scientific Board. “We have all had some painful experiences in the past, so we tend to detach from it. But now we are realizing that we can’t do that.”

For many children, the effects of bullying are not severe. However, nearly 20 percent will require some kind of intervention and support.

The problems are very serious for 10 percent. For them, the victimization may be more severe, more frequent, may follow them wherever they go, and may persist over an extended period of time. These children will carry the scars of their victimization through their entire lives. They often develop depression, sometimes severe enough to lead to suicide.

While 75 percent of teachers say that they usually intervene, only 25 percent of students agree with that statement. Out of desperation, the severely bullied child may resort to antisocial behavior and violence as a form
of retaliation. A noted example resulted in the tragic events at Columbine High School in Colorado. A report by the Columbine Review Commission states that “bullying is a risk factor in assessing the potential for school violence, in that many of those who have carried out lethal acts of violence had in fact been taunted and bullied at their schools.”

Bullying, however, is not just something that happens in school. It is a pervasive — often glorified — element of our society. From hostile corporate takeovers to violent video games, from national politics to the media’s treatment of aggression, children are sent the unambiguous message that might makes right. Today’s childhood bullies and victims may become the policymakers and cultural icons of tomorrow.

“Bullying is a covert behavior,” said Dr. Pepler. “Attacks can be physical, verbal or psychological, and can take as little as 10 seconds to happen.”

“It is a community problem involving all ages and both sexes,” said Suzanne Keeley, Ph.D., president of The Melissa Institute. “When it becomes a pattern of behavior, it can lead to sexual harassment, gang involvement, date violence, workplace harassment, child abuse, marital abuse and elder abuse.

“That’s why The Melissa Institute educates people about bullying,” Dr. Keeley said. “We need to have everyone step up to the plate and get involved in prevention.”

Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D., research director for the Institute, agrees. “The Melissa Institute plays a vital role in linking research with community awareness,” he said. “That’s why we host a one-week bullying education series each November in which we work with local police, school administrators, psychologists, students and groups such as D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education).” The Institute also gives presentations by request throughout the year.

The need for bullying education and violence prevention is a basic one, according to Dr. Pepler. “Kids have a right to be safe and to feel safe at school,” she said.

**FACTS ABOUT BULLYING**
- Female bullies are more likely to use verbal and social methods. Males are more prone to use physical violence.
- One in four high school juniors and seniors has experienced date violence.
- Girls are as likely to initiate date violence as boys.
- Bullies are more likely to have been abused themselves.
- Exclusion and gossip are indirect forms of bullying.

**SIGNS OF VICTIMIZATION**
- Fear of going to school
- Missing possessions (money, clothing, etc.)
- Injuries
- Withdrawal or depression
- Low self-esteem
- Disturbed sleep/nightmares
What happens to children and families in the aftermath of natural disasters, terrorist attacks or domestic violence? How can children suffering from anxiety disorders, recovering from abuse or grieving the loss of a loved one cope? How are children affected by the war in Iraq? These are some of the subjects that were addressed at “Trauma, Children and Families: Practical Ways to Help,” The Melissa Institute’s seventh annual conference on May 2, 2003. Nearly 350 teachers and psychologists, guidance counselors, social workers and others involved in the care and upbringing of children attended.

Nationally recognized speakers included Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D., Annette La Greca, Ph.D., and Wendy Silverman, Ph.D. Dr. Meichenbaum is research director of The Melissa Institute and one of the founders of cognitive-behavior therapy. Dr. La Greca is associate editor of the Journal of Clinical and Adolescent Psychology and professor of pediatrics and psychology at the University of Miami. Dr. Silverman, director of the Child and Family Psychosocial Research Center at Florida International University, is a member of The Melissa Institute Scientific Board.

At the conference, The Melissa Institute also honored three persons for their service to children and the community: Theresa (Terri) O’Donnell, reading specialist at Homestead Middle School, won the Norma Bossard Award for her work in helping children learn to read. The award also includes a gift from Scholastic, Inc., which will provide $500 worth of books for the school. “Terri believes that every child can learn and constantly encourages the teaching staff to emulate that belief,” said Suzanne Keeley, Ph.D., president of The Melissa Institute, as she presented the award.

Beth Davis, a teacher at Jack D. Gordon Elementary School, received The Melissa Institute Educator Award. Ms. Davis established Kids 4 Kids, which has delivered thousands of filled backpacks to impoverished children in Miami since 1996.

Walter F. Lambert, M.D., director of the Child Protection Team at the University of Miami School of Medicine, received The Melissa Institute’s Community Service Award.

May 2004 – The Eighth Annual Conference will focus on “Family Violence: Treatment and Preventative Approaches.”

Dr. Walter Lambert was moved by the recognition he received from The Melissa Institute.

From left: Judge Norman Gerstein, Melissa Institute president Dr. Suzanne Keeley, Dr. Walter Lambert, Theresa O’Donnell, Beth Davis, Lynn and Dr. Michael Aptman, at The Melissa Institute conference.
It was with great joy and honor that I was awarded the Norma Bossard Award. It is my mission to help promote literacy in the Homestead area, where more than 85% of our students are on free or reduced lunch. Hopefully this will help reduce the incidence of violence.

Theresa O’Donnell
Reading Specialist
Homestead Middle School

“You have shown that even the most unthinkable tragedy can leave behind seeds that plant world change. As a mother, teacher and a student, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for being who you are.”

Beth R. Davis
Kids 4 Kids Founder

About 350 teachers learned ways to help children who are victims of trauma at the Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention’s annual conference.
Book Reading Raises Funds

About 70 women enjoyed a luncheon and book reading at the Pinecrest home of JoAnn Lederman, who hosted the fund-raiser for The Melissa Institute. Ms. Lederman’s sister, author Patricia Volk, read selections from her book, Stuffed: Adventures of a Restaurant Family, and autographed copies for those attending. The critically acclaimed book is a memoir of Ms. Volk’s and Ms. Lederman’s New York childhood. The event raised nearly $7,000.

“The book reading was, in turns, inspirational, moving and hilarious,” said Suzanne Keeley, Ph.D. “We are deeply indebted to Ms. Lederman and the other hostesses, Carole Masington, Lois Lester and Lisa Rosen, who created such a wonderful event to benefit the Institute.”

DID YOU KNOW?

- There are more than 220 million guns in the United States today. That’s almost as many guns as people.
- More American teens are killed by guns than in any other country in the industrialized world.
- In the U.S., every six hours a young person commits suicide with a gun.
- A gun in the home makes it three times more likely that a family member or friend will be killed.
- The Melissa Institute has distributed thousands of free gun locks, as well as gun safety bookmarks and other prevention materials.

In fact, the luncheon sold out so quickly that Lynn Aptman, an Institute founder, hosted a cocktail reception for Ms. Volk in order to accommodate those who could not attend the luncheon. Ms. Volk’s reminiscences were so popular that the group ran out of copies of Stuffed.

Second Step

The Melissa Institute is collaborating with Ponce de Leon Middle School, Coral Gables, to bring the nationally recognized “Second Step” violence prevention program to faculty and students. The research-based program, acclaimed by the Journal of the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association, teaches social and emotional skills for violence prevention. Second Step includes curricula and materials — such as posters, videos, scripted lessons with overheads, activity sheets — that teachers can use to address disruptions and other behavior issues in the classroom. As a result, children learn how to recognize and understand feelings, make positive and effective choices, and keep anger from escalating into violence.

The curriculum focuses on empathy, impulse control, problem solving and anger management. Ponce Middle School has implemented the program through its social studies curriculum.

“Miami-Dade is the fourth-largest school district in the nation,” said Dr. Keeley. “That makes violence prevention especially challenging and important. To address the problem, the Institute has introduced a research-based conflict resolution program. It’s unlike anything that has been implemented before in Miami because it has an
New Initiatives

The following projects are currently under development by The Melissa Institute. Your help is needed to bring these projects to fruition.

The Melissa Institute Educators’ Website

The Melissa Institute Educators’ Website is a project in which resource materials will be made available electronically to principals, teachers, counselors and parents. This interactive site will offer information to deal with violence and other antisocial behaviors that occur in the school setting. The Robert and Renee Belfer Foundation has funded Phase One of this project. Additional funding is necessary to complete and sustain this worthwhile initiative.

Classroom Organization and Management Program

The Melissa Institute is funding the installation of the Classroom Organization and Management Program (COMP) at J.R.E. Lee Opportunity School in South Miami. The school serves students in grades 6-8 who are excluded from their home schools due to behavioral problems, or who have been assigned there by the juvenile justice system. COMP is a research-based program designed to increase academic achievement and reduce student discipline problems through teacher training.

The Melissa Institute Literacy Initiative

The Institute’s Literacy Initiative evolved out of research that demonstrates the clear linkage that exists between literacy and violence prevention. Students who do not learn to read by third grade are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior. This is a major contributing factor to violent behavior throughout their lives. The number of incarcerated adults who are illiterate constitutes a majority of the prison population in our country.

The Melissa Institute has taken a position that supporting programs with a demonstrated success in promoting literacy in children is an important part of its mission. Dale Willows, Ph.D., an internationally renowned expert in the teaching of reading and a member of the National Reading Panel, will be working with at-risk, bilingual children in grades K-3 at Hialeah Elementary School. Funding for this program is being provided by Larkin Community Hospital.

Dr. Willows and the Institute have made a three-year commitment to this program. Teachers at Hialeah Elementary will be provided with in-depth training that far exceeds anything they have experienced in their professional careers.

DISSERTATION AWARD RECIPIENTS 2003

The Melissa Institute offers financial support to graduate students who will work in areas of violence prevention and treatment of victims.

Joie Acosta
University of Hawaii
Department of Psychology
Clifford R. O’Donnell, Ph.D., Advisor
“Chronic Community Violence and Adolescent Peer Group Activity Settings: A Cross-Cultural Comparison”

Heather K. Blier
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Child Study Center, Department of Psychology
Thomas H. Ollendick, Ph.D., Advisor
“Teacher Attribution and Disciplinary Reaction to Students’ Aggression and Violence in the Classroom”

Hannah Moore
University of Miami
Department of Psychology
Annette M. La Greca, Ph.D., Advisor
“Peer Victimization and Depressive Symptoms in Adolescence: The Role of Rejection Sensitivity”

Andy Williams
The State University of New York at Buffalo
Department of Psychology
William E. Pelham Jr., Ph.D., Advisor
“Childhood Predictors of Adolescent and Young Adult Delinquency”

Art by Kyle Wolfer
Grade 7
Centennial Middle School
Peace and Harmony a Huge Success

A standing ovation for jazz vocalist Allan Harris concluded the most successful ever “Peace and Harmony: Music for a Better World” dinner and concert. The annual event raised more than $60,000 to support the educational and research efforts of the Institute.

“It was a night of beautiful music,” said Suzanne Keeley, Ph.D. “We are deeply indebted to Leslie and Tom Murphy Jr., who chaired the event and were major sponsors.”

The Melissa Institute Website provides global access to research-based information for professionals and parents. To access the Website, go to: www.melissainstitute.org.

From left: Melissa Institute Board member Remi Kajogbola, Gloria Kelly, and County Commissioner Jimmy Morales enjoyed the evening’s festivities.

Leslie and Tom Murphy Jr. chaired the annual fundraiser.

County Commissioner Katy Sorenson and Dr. Michael Aptman showed their support for “Peace and Harmony.”

Vocalist Allan Harris headlined “Peace and Harmony.”

Peace

Peace from one, peace from two,
Wherever you look there’s peace all around you
But not always, sometimes there’s a fight,
But if you make peace, it brings out your inner light
Your inner light is truth, your inner light is love,
They both are signs of peace
Just like a beautiful flying dove.

By Rachel Piero
Grade 4
Palmetto Elementary School
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Without the participation, expertise and leadership of our volunteer Boards, the Institute could not accomplish its goals. The Boards include the Board of Directors, Scientific Board and Honorary Board.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS
Committed individuals who volunteer their time to oversee the operation of the Institute, assist with fund-raising, plan projects and represent the organization at community events.

Suzanne Keeley, Ph.D., is President and a founder of The Melissa Institute. She is a psychologist in private practice with extensive clinical experience in treating victims and perpetrators of violence.

Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor Emeritus, clinical psychologist, research director and a founder of The Melissa Institute.

Petey Adams, Vice President, SunTrust Bank.

Lynn Aptman, M.Ed., Melissa’s mother, one of the founders and Director of Information Services.

Michael Aptman, M.D., neurologist, Melissa’s father, and one of the founders of the Institute.

Jo Baxter, MBA, Corporate Vice President, Baptist Health South Florida.

Robyn Cassel, Esq., past Treasurer, former nurse and dedicated community volunteer.

Penn Chabrow, Esq., Director, Wampler Buchanan Walker Chabrow & Banciella, P.A.

Martha de Cespedes, associated with The Pharmed Group, active in children’s organizations.

Judge Norman Gerstein, Circuit Court judge, Miami-Dade County.

Susan M. Kahn, MBA, retired marketing executive active in community affairs.

Remi J. Kajogbola, MBA, Treasurer of the Institute and Corporate Region Vice President, Cardinal Health.

Judge Orlando Prescott, County Court judge for the 11th Judicial Circuit of Florida.

Elizabeth Ritter, Esq., attorney in private practice.


SCIENTIFIC BOARD
This board comprises international experts in the areas of violence prevention and treatment of victims.

Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D., is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, and Research Director of The Melissa Institute. He is one of the founders of cognitive-behavior therapy. In a survey reported in American Psychologist, he was voted “one of the 10 most influential psychotherapists of the century.” He has published extensively, and his most recent book is Treatment of Individuals with Anger-control Problems and Aggressive Behavior. Other books include Treating Adults with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Nurturing Independent Learners, and Stress Inoculation Training.

James Larson, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology and Director of the School of Psychology Training Program at the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater. His recent book is Helping School Children Cope with Anger: A Cognitive-behavioral Intervention. He has more than 25 years’ experience with the study and treatment of anger-related behaviors in children and youth. He was a school psychologist with the Milwaukee Public Schools for 14 years and directed its violence prevention program.

Clifford O’Donnell, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii and Director of the Community Studies Program. He is an authority on childhood aggression and violence, and he has addressed the issue of gun violence and youth. He has also developed culturally sensitive community programs for youth and their families.

Debra Pepler, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at York University, Toronto, Ontario, and Director of the Judy LaMarsh Center for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution. She is an internationally recognized expert on bullying and childhood aggression and an authority on school-based interventions. She speaks widely to professional and community audiences and publishes extensively. She was honored with the Contribution to Knowledge Award from the Psychology Foundation of Canada.

Wendy K. Silverman, Ph.D., is a Professor of Psychology and Director of the Child and Family Psychosocial Research Center at Florida International University. She has authored/co-edited four books, including Helping Children Cope with Disasters and Terrorism with Dr. Annette La Greca. Dr. Silverman is a member of the scientific advisory board for Child and Adolescent Trauma Treatment in New York and editor of the Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology.

Barbara Hanna Wasik, Ph.D., is Professor of Education at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and Director of the UNC Center for Home Visiting. She is a pioneer and leading authority in the area of home visiting. Her book Home Visiting: Procedures for Helping Families is a classic in the field. She has consulted internationally on home visiting and early intervention programs.

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Art by Reinaldo Sonchen and Kyle Wolfer