



The Melissa Institute
For Violence Prevention and Treatment



Bringing Light
into the Darkness

2017
Report to the Community

Dear Friends:

In the two decades since The Melissa Institute was founded, our world has transformed dramatically. Today there are 117,000 gun deaths in the U.S. each year. The largest mass shooting in modern America's history occurred in June, just one day after the murder of singer Christina Grimmie and a few weeks after the Brock Turner rape case began gaining national attention. With the rise of social media, we are bombarded daily with every detail and perspective surrounding these tragic events. At The Melissa Institute, our goal is to provide the latest resources on various forms of violence prevention. From there, we offer research-based information and interventions, formulating next steps to make our world a safer place.



We become stronger when we stand together in an unwavering commitment to peace. We must face adversity head-on. To quote Desmond Tutu, "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

The history of the world is shaped by those of us who dare make a difference. For 20 years, with the help of our supporters, The Melissa Institute has been funding research-based knowledge and developing training programs and conferences to prevent violence. We have trained health professionals, school counselors, parents and other members of our Miami-Dade community with programs like ACT (Adults and Children Together) Raising Safe Kids. We have hosted annual bullying prevention conferences for fourth and fifth graders throughout Miami-Dade, as well as developed conferences on multidimensional topics of concern, featuring leading experts from our Scientific Board. They have shared their research and experiences with determined dedication to the field. We continue to look for new ways to be a source of strength for the community.

Melissa Institute co-founder Susan Keeley, Ph.D., once wrote, "In the months following the tragic murder of Melissa Aptman in 1995, I vividly recall sitting around the Aptmans' kitchen table, talking with her grief-stricken parents and trying to determine the best way to honor their daughter's memory. We knew we had two choices: to curse the darkness, or to light a candle." In the years that have passed, The Melissa Institute continues to be that light. We ask you to join us.

We have made great advances, but there is still more work to do. Even a small light cannot be overcome by darkness, but it will take more to conquer that darkness completely. Through the help of our donors, our light grows brighter and brighter each year.

We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of our former Executive Director, Dr. Frank DeLaurier, and commend him on his 13 years of dedicated service to the organization. Frank leaves behind a legacy of compassion and commitment. We welcome our new Executive Director, Heather Winters, who has the expertise we feel is crucial to the work we do. As someone with experience working with children, adolescents and adults in the mental health field, as well as a strong background in nonprofit management, leadership and development, Heather is sure to provide the Institute with exceptional guidance.

Thank you for standing with us in determination to silence the violence, propelling the vision of a brighter future for us all.

Sincerely,

Lynn Aptman
Founder and President

Michael Aptman, M.D.
Founder

Heather Winters | Q&A Interview



Heather D. Winters,
LMHC, M.S.Ed.

Q: What led you to violence prevention work?

A: It was not part of my original plan, but in working with school-age children, I've met many individuals who experienced some form of trauma, and a job opportunity became available for a full-time therapist position working with survivors of sexual violence. Working with survivors of trauma — in particular, interpersonal violence — became an area of expertise for me as I developed a passion to want to do more. I wanted to learn more about how to prevent violence and these types of events from occurring. And so I began doing prevention work with children, teens and adults, sharing information and education to increase awareness, with the ultimate goal of changing attitudes, values and beliefs that perpetuate violence in all different forms.

Q: How does this connect with the mission of The Melissa Institute?

A: I was initially interested in working with the organization because I really believe in the mission, and I know of TMI's excellent reputation in the community for its far reach in educating others about best practices and research-based information. TMI focuses on the full spectrum of violence, including bullying, harassment, interpersonal violence and gun violence. I believe my extensive background and experience in working with survivors of domestic and sexual violence bring to the table information which can be applied to the full spectrum of violence and trauma.

Q: What about this work is most rewarding?

A: We can make a difference on many levels. Whether it be providing children with information they can use for the rest of their lives to help them succeed in some way, supporting someone in the aftermath of a tragic event and helping them heal, or disseminating information on a large scale, we can make an impact on so many different peoples' work as they themselves touch so many lives on a day-to-day basis — be it in an office, school or another community organization. I feel like I'm making a greater reach now because of how our work impacts so many lives, within our community and throughout the nation. For me, that's a very rewarding thing to know.

Q: Since you started as a therapist several years ago, how have your views of abuse, bullying and other forms of violence evolved?

A: A lot of my knowledge came from direct experience working with clients, as well as training that I received from other people who have spent several years in the field. So, it's definitely broadened my definition of what constitutes abuse; it has also shed light on human experience and what it means to heal and transform after some of the most horrific things you could ever imagine. One develops a perceptive eye, in terms of when something doesn't look right or feel right,

knowing early signs and symptoms and red flags. Once you learn a certain set of skills, you can't turn it off. And so when you are around others or in the community or working with kids, there is a sensitivity to the indicators that someone may have gone through a traumatic experience or have a past in which they've been exposed to some form of violence or abuse.

Q: Do you have any new projects that you're working on, or plans to expand further into the community?

A: The Melissa Institute has a history of doing a lot of wonderful things in the community, and I would like to see that expand into new neighborhoods and geographic areas within Miami-Dade in which we haven't had as much of a presence. I also plan to grow our Scientific Board so that we continue to have the best experts and top researchers in the field of violence prevention to help disseminate information and provide training for others.

Q: What makes Miami-Dade uniquely in need of The Melissa Institute's services?

A: One, we're a very large county. Miami-Dade is such a diverse community, and one that's ever-evolving and changing in the sense of its demographic makeup. Two, we have the highest rates of mental illness per capita in all of the United States. And three, we have individuals moving into our community on a frequent basis, who are adapting to a new environment, a new culture... and many of them have experienced traumatic events along their journey to come to this area. Because of these dynamics, there is an increased need to ensure that children are getting the services they need to be successful in both their home and school environments. Oftentimes, organizations in our community are strapped for resources to serve those in need, and therefore we can help assist those organizations by focusing on collaboration, to increase our reach and impact in the Miami-Dade community.

Q: What can members of the community do to aid The Melissa Institute in its mission?

A: There are many ways to contribute and become essentially involved. One way is to learn about all the resources we offer — whether through our training and workshops or the free resources available on our website — and to not only seek this information for oneself, but go on to share it with others who may benefit. It can also be helping to raise funds and attending the events or activities we host. When you spread the word and share our content, you are helping us fulfill our mission with the ultimate goal of making a difference in the lives of others and creating safer communities.

Working to Find Solutions |

Understanding the Epidemic of Gun Violence

Ten years ago, nine-year-old Sherdavia Jenkins was killed on her doorstep by a stray bullet in Liberty City. In February 2016, a disagreement on Facebook led to two groups of teenage rivals firing shots at each other. Six-year-old King Carter was leaving his Northwest Miami-Dade apartment to buy candy when he was killed in the crossfire. In the time between these two deaths, over 300 children in Miami-Dade have lost their lives to gun violence.

According to a recent nationwide poll from Quinnipiac University, more than half of registered voters in the U.S. support stricter gun laws. When it comes to requiring background checks for all gun buyers, 93 percent of those surveyed were in support, across various demographic and ideological groups. In 2013, The Melissa Institute commissioned a survey in conjunction with the University of Miami to see what South Floridians think about gun control. Ninety percent of the residents in the tri-county area were in favor of background checks. The overwhelming majority were in favor of requiring gun owners to register their guns.

There are now more guns than people in the United States.

“Domestic abusers pose a much higher risk to their partners when there is a gun in the house. According to a 2014 report by the group Everytown for Gun Safety, more than half of all women murdered with guns in America are killed by partners or family members. And people with a history of domestic violence are five times more likely to murder their partner if a gun is in the house.”

— The New York Times, “The Deadly Mix of Guns and Domestic Violence,” July 1, 2016

The 1996 Dickey Amendment prevents the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from being able to carry out the research required to better understand how to prevent gun violence.

And yet, in a letter to California Representative Mike Thompson, chair of the House Gun Violence Prevention



“Our children in the possession of firearms is a recipe for disaster and we must do everything humanly possible to keep our children free from the heinous acts of gun violence.”

Morris Copeland, CPM
Director, Miami-Dade County Juvenile Services Department

Task Force, Jay Dickey himself wrote: “It is my position that somehow or someday we should slowly but methodically fund such research until a solution is reached. Doing nothing is no longer an acceptable solution.”

For Jay Dickey’s full letter regarding the necessity of gun violence research, please see below.

GUN VIOLENCE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH NEEDED

Many years ago the highway industry took on studying, from a scientific viewpoint, how head-on collisions could be reduced. They didn’t include in their scope of study the elimination of the automobile, which would have been a simple solution; but what came out of this were three- or four-foot barricades that are placed in between lanes of traffic in our interstate highway system. We have all seen these fences, but what isn’t generally known is how overwhelmingly successful this project has become.

Back in 1998, I took part in cutting off gun violence research dollars at the federal level because of what was considered a misapplication of the dollars by the CDC. I have recently expressed my regrets that we didn’t continue that research with the provision that nothing shall be done in this project to infringe the rights of gun ownership as guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution in the Second Amendment.

Research could have been continued on gun violence without infringing on the rights of gun owners, in the same fashion that the highway industry continued its research without eliminating the automobile.

There is no ready answer to the question, “How are we going to accomplish the desired result of reducing gun violence under these circumstances?” For sure the same dilemma faced the scientists in the highway industry some years ago. The highway industry answered the question of how to reduce traffic fatalities through scientific research. In the same way, scientific research should help answer how we can best reduce gun violence.

Even though my opinion and the opinion of my colleague, Dr. Mark Rosenberg, have been spread to media outlets all over our country, there has been only one member of Congress who has expressed any support for this endeavor. I can tell that member that though there is no groundswell of agreement, at least I have not been tarred and feathered and run out of town...yet.

To sum this up, it is my position that somehow or someday we should slowly but methodically fund such research until a solution is reached. Doing nothing is no longer an acceptable solution.

— Jay Dickey, Member of Congress, 1993-2000 • December 1, 2015

20th Annual Conference | **Dangers and Promises of Social Media**

Our May 2016 Conference, **The Dangers and Promises of Social Media and Computer Technology for Children, Youth and Their Families: A Call to Action**, brought together members of The Melissa Institute's Scientific Board, who have over 200 years of cumulative experience in violence prevention and treatment. These leading experts shared their research and experiences with the challenges and potential benefits of electronic social media for the 21st century community of children, youth and their families, raising questions about the impact of social media in today's electronically saturated society and bringing to light how the technological promises of instantaneous communication and

collaboration create dangers for electronic aggression and victimization.

"In a culture where children frequently experience social pain that powerfully affects their future lives and those of others, this conference's topic and content were incredibly valuable," said Susan Snyder, Ph.D.



From left: Conference presenters Jim Larson, Ph.D., Debra J. Pepler, Ph.D., Wendy Craig, Ph.D., Lynn Aptman, M.Ed., President, and Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D.



Dan Santisteban, Ph.D., Director of Dunsbaugh-Dalton Community and Educational Well-Being Research Center in the School of Education & Human Development at the University of Miami, pictured with Heather Winters, Executive Director of The Melissa Institute.



Isis Hones, Mitigation Specialist from the Miami-Dade Public Defender's Office, Felony Division, and Tony Perkins, Assistant Public Defender, Lead Training Attorney, Juvenile Division.

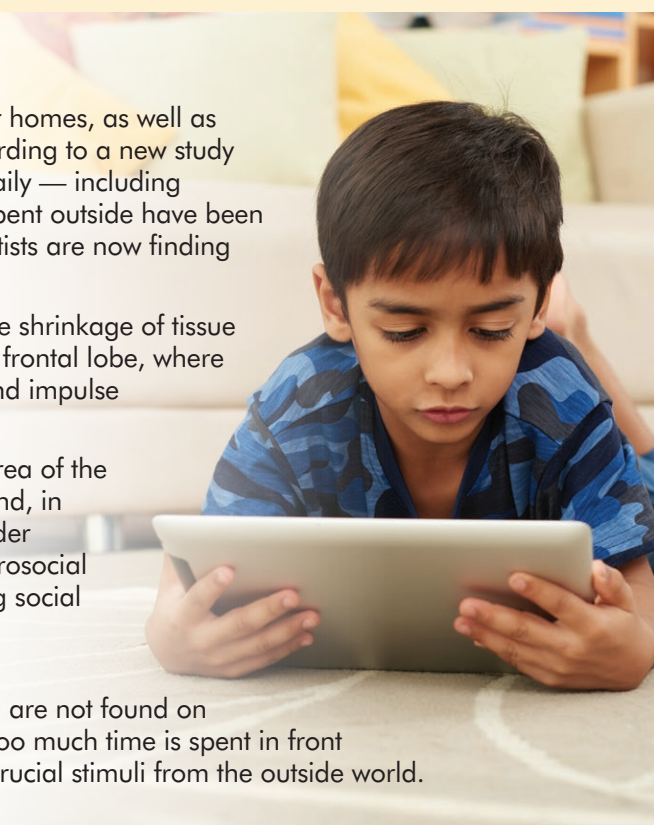
Effects of Screen Time on Children

Today, children have multiple televisions and computers in their homes, as well as iPads in their backpacks and smartphones in their hands. According to a new study from Pew Research Center, 92% of teens report going online daily — including 24% who say they go online "almost constantly." Hours once spent outside have been replaced with limitless time sitting in front of screens, and scientists are now finding that excessive screen time is damaging our children's brains.

Brain-scan research shows that too much screen time can cause shrinkage of tissue in areas of the brain where processing occurs, in particular the frontal lobe, where executive functions such as planning, prioritizing, organizing and impulse control occur.

It has also been found that there is damage to the insula, an area of the brain involved in the ability to develop empathy, compassion and, in turn, interpersonal relationships. The ability to share and consider the thoughts and feelings of another individual can influence prosocial behavior. As the amount of time that young people spend using social media continues to increase, this subtle damage to the brain is of great concern.

According to an article in the Harvard Gazette, essential stimuli are not found on today's tablets. A child's development becomes stunted when too much time is spent in front of a screen, with no time left over for getting developmentally crucial stimuli from the outside world.





Bystander Phenomenon

Bystanders have significant influence in bullying situations. They can use their power to help stop bullying or perpetuate the violence. Bystander behavior refers to situations in which those present either participate or fail to take action to stop the bullying. Below are some facts about bystanders.

- 85% of bullying occurs in the presence of an audience.
- When asked how they should respond, two-thirds of young people say they should intervene, yet only one-quarter of high school teens actually do (*Drs. Craig and Pepler*).
- 43% of teens ages 13-17 report they have experienced some sort of cyberbullying in the past year.
- 50% of students say cyberbullying is worse than real-life bullying (*Mishna et al. and Agatston et al.*).
- Girls are significantly more likely to be cyberbullied than boys (*Wang et al.*).

What is the bystander effect? The bystander effect is the phenomenon that the greater the number of people present,

the less likely any individual is to help a person in distress. Why is this? The presence of others creates a diffusion of responsibility, meaning that an individual feels less responsibility to take action because the responsibility is assumed to be shared among everyone present.

Bystander to Defender:

1. Notice that something is happening and be able to recognize and understand when bullying occurs.
2. Understand the potential harm and/or danger of the situation.
3. Take responsibility for providing help — individuals must feel a responsibility to take action against bullying.
4. Know how to help — individuals need to acquire the necessary tools and knowledge to know how to intervene appropriately.
5. Take action — for further information, contact The Melissa Institute at 305-284-2930.

By the Numbers: Twenty annual conferences and numerous special-topic symposiums have been attended by nearly **7,000** professionals in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties since 1997.



SOS Donation

The Melissa Institute received a \$5,000 donation from Students Offering Support (SOS) in May to support our bullying prevention services. The funds were raised through the annual Bowling Against Bullying event and other fundraising activities. We are thankful for the generosity of these impressive high school students.

Christopher Garrett, 2016-17 SOS President, Heather Winters, Melissa Institute Executive Director, Karyn Cunningham, Councilwoman and Melissa Institute Board Member and Lauren Archer, 2015-16 SOS President.



ACT Raising Safe Kids

ACT (Adults and Children Together) Raising Safe Kids is a national family violence prevention program developed by the American Psychological Association in collaboration with the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The program’s goal is to train the trainers — certifying ACT facilitators to conduct ACT Raising Safe Kids classes for parents and other caregivers of children from birth to eight years old. The curriculum is designed to improve parents’ and caregivers’ understanding of child development, roots and consequences of violence in children’s lives, positive parenting and prevention skills.



ACT Facilitators Patricia Bryant and Trish Ramsay presenting Deneen Neilly-Johnson with ACT training certificate.

On May 23 and 24, Patricia Bryant of Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) co-facilitated a two-day training session with The Melissa Institute’s Education Director, Trish Ramsay, who is a certified ACT training coordinator for the state of Florida. Also in attendance were MDCPS professionals from the Norland feeder pattern in the Miami Gardens area, staff from Overtown Youth Center and a graduate student from the University of Miami School of Education.

The ACT Raising Safe Kids program recently received a number of important recognitions, including:

- The World Health Organization, in its recently published handbook on Implementing Child Maltreatment Prevention Programs: What Experts Say, listed ACT as one of just three parenting programs, along with Triple P and The Incredible Years.
- ACT has officially entered the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families/Office of Head Start “Compendium of Parenting Interventions.” This means ACT is one of the programs listed “that are most likely to be effective with families of young children” and therefore recommended.



Students from 14 different schools worked together in “Action Stations” for bullying prevention. These students created a skit about becoming “Upstanders” instead of bystanders.

Annual Youth Conference

Research has consistently shown that bullying is a major contributing factor in incidents of school violence. The 13th Elementary School Student Conference on Bullying Prevention focused on cyberbullying issues. This event, held at Christ the King Lutheran Church in December, was facilitated by Palmetto Elementary School counselor Julie Astuto and our Education Director, Trish Ramsay, with assistance from Perrine Academy of Arts counselor Dr. Alma Dean, Snapper Creek Elementary School counselor Rosanna Timmons and Coral Reef Elementary School counselor Susan Sirota. In attendance were 140 fourth and fifth graders, including students from the Miccosukee Reservation.

Peace, Harmony & Moonlight

On St. Patrick's Day, The Melissa Institute hosted its annual Peace, Harmony & Moonlight event at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. Along with the silent auction, guests enjoyed a private tram ride through the Garden, live music and a wonderful dinner. Special thanks to members of the Greater Miami Youth Symphony, SOS: Students Offering Support, The Orchid House, Parties by Lyn, Esprit Miami, Inc., Denise Winston and Harp Productions. We could not have done it without you.



Dr. Barbara Bloom and board member Ken Bloom.



From left: Jessica Silver Aptman, Carolina Gelber, Lynn Aptman and Gregg Gelber.



Former Executive Director Frank DeLaurier presented with a commemoration honoring his years of service.



Don't miss next year's Peace, Harmony & Moonlight, March 16, 2017!

Suzanne L. Keeley Ph.D. Community Service Award

The Melissa Institute would like to congratulate Love in Action for its outreach ministry to make a difference in the life of a child by sharing God's love with foster children and foster home parents. This organization's dedicated service helps prevent violence and promote safer communities through education and application of research-based knowledge.

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Without the participation, expertise and leadership of our volunteer boards, the Institute could not accomplish its goals. These include the Board of Directors, Scientific Board and Honorary Board.

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Next year marks marks 22 years since Melissa Aptman's death.

On May 5, 1995, Melissa was murdered in St. Louis. A Miami native, she was just two weeks away from graduating with her bachelor's degree from Washington University. One year after her death, Melissa's family, friends and violence prevention experts established The Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention and Treatment to honor her memory and make a difference by working to prevent violence and assist victims.



Melissa Aptman

The Melissa Institute is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to the study and prevention of violence through education, community service, research support and consultation. Our mission is to prevent violence and promote safer communities through education and application of research-based knowledge.

Belfer-Aptman Scholarship Recipients

The Belfer-Aptman Award is available to graduate students who address issues of violence prevention or treatment. The goal of this award is to support violence prevention research. Congratulations to the 2016 recipients!

- **Lauren Gutman, B.A.**

Etiony Aldarondo, Ph.D., Co-Advisor, Debbiesiu Lee, Ph.D., Co-Advisor, University of Miami, *"Towards an Understanding of the Experiences of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children in Miami, Florida."*

- **Elizabeth A. Miller, M.S.**

Sandra T. Azar, Ph.D., Advisor, Penn State University, *"Social Information Processing Deficits and Economic Stress in Disadvantaged Rural Fathers: Informing Child Maltreatment Prevention With an Understudied Population."*

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