



**THE MELISSA INSTITUTE**

*For Violence Prevention and Treatment*

**2019 Report to the Community**

# Rising Up for Change



Dear Friends:

Change is the only constant in our unpredictable world. The Melissa Institute is channeling that change to lead to new growth and new possibilities. We are undergoing transformative enhancements to make our resources available to a broader community.

Our mission remains to prevent violence and promote safer communities through education and the application of research-based knowledge. It is even more relevant today than it was at our inception in 1996. However, as we envision the future, we realize that we must increase our outreach to a broader audience through new projects that include collaborations to expand trainings with direct service agencies. Our newly redesigned website, [www.melissainstitute.org](http://www.melissainstitute.org), has multiple resources for professionals in the field. In addition, the website now provides detailed, research-based information for parents and the general public. For example, there is now information for parents about how to discuss school violence with their children.



In this report, you will read articles from several of our esteemed Scientific Board members, who write about effective ways to talk to children about school violence, bullying effects and solutions, a mentoring program for violence prevention, adolescent peer relationships and how to promote wellness with your children and your community.

We know far too well that when tragedy occurs, lives are changed forever. Although this past year has been filled with terrible tragedies, including the Parkland school shooting and human rights violations, we look toward the future with hope. The courageous youth from Marjory Stoneman Douglas Senior High and other similar groups around the country have begun to generate prevention solutions. The Institute continues to serve as a catalyst by supplying the necessary research-guided tools to inform and accelerate the momentum of positive change. We know that early intervention and prevention through education, community service, research support and consultation are the keys to societal change.

We are proud of the work The Melissa Institute has done over the past 22 years. We have been successful because of the support of our donors. Like most nonprofits, fundraising remains our biggest challenge. We encourage you to support our mission with your generous donation. We also encourage you to have your friends and colleagues visit our website and join you in supporting our work. We are committed to continuing our efforts and broadening our impact to make the world a safer place. We could not have made the lasting impact we have achieved without you. However, there is much more work to be done.

With heartfelt appreciation,

**Lynn Aptman**  
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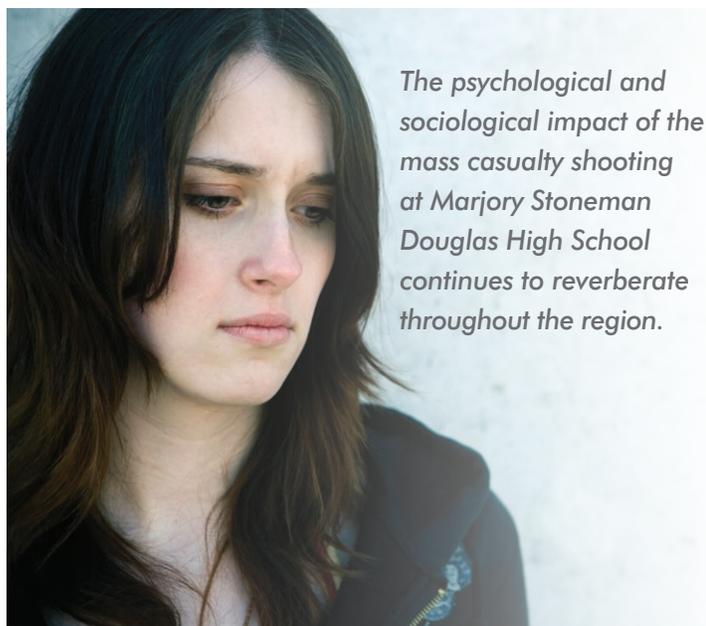
# Back in Session | Reflections on School Safety

By: Frank Zenere, Ed.S., Scientific Board Member, School Psychologist and District Coordinator of Student Services/Crisis Program for Miami-Dade County Public Schools

Classes have resumed in South Florida schools; parents are delighted, students not so much. The 2018-2019 academic year commenced in mid-August amid high expectations and anxious anticipation, along with a measure of apprehension and hypervigilance. As anticipated, the psychological and sociological impact of the mass casualty shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School continues to reverberate throughout the region, much like seismic aftershocks following earthquakes. The passage of several months since the tragedy has done little to ease the angst among those who work and learn in our educational institutions, as well as the parents who entrust the well-being of their children to educators.

We can all agree that the perception of school safety has been altered by tragedies at Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and dozens of other campus shootings that have occurred over the past 25 years. That being said, perceptions often override reality. Data gathered over the past 20 years by the United States Departments of Education and Justice (2018) reveal that violent deaths on school campuses account for less than 3 percent of all youth homicides. Further, the likelihood of a student becoming a victim of a school shooting is less than one in a million (Musu-Gillette, L., Zhang, A., Wang, K., Zhang, J., Diliberti, M., and Oudekerk, 2018). I can assure you that the families, friends and teachers of the victims and injured are not comforted by these statistics; however, in reference to lethal school violence, schools continue to be much safer than the community.

Sadly, history tells us there will be more shootings this year in our nation's schools; some will bring mass casualties. As parents and caregivers, it is critically important to speak with our children and adolescents about these events. I



*The psychological and sociological impact of the mass casualty shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School continues to reverberate throughout the region.*

recommend that the following messages be delivered in developmentally appropriate language:

- Senseless violence is difficult to understand.
- Violence is never the solution to personal problems.
- Safety is everyone's responsibility.
- Caring adults are watching over you.
- Reporting knowledge of threats is not snitching; it is taking responsible action to keep yourself and others safe.

Limit exposure to media reports of school and community violence. Such coverage can be overwhelming and add to the anxiety, fear and grief already experienced. Media accounts may also serve to traumatize youth, especially those who are younger, and may also retraumatize others who had direct exposure or connections to the incident.

The National Association of School Psychologists (2017) provides additional tips for parents and educators to assist children and adolescents in understanding and coping with violence at school and in the community:

- (1)** Reinforce the point that schools are very safe places to be;
- (2)** Make time to talk; seek moments when they are open to sharing their thoughts and emotions;
- (3)** Keep explanations developmentally appropriate by providing age-sensitive information without unnecessary details;
- (4)** Review safety procedures and discuss actions that youth can take if they feel threatened in school and in the community;
- (5)** Look for changes in emotions and behaviors that may signal the need for professional support;
- (6)** Maintain a normal routine by following a schedule that restores and maintains a sense of normalcy, structure and expectations in the child's life.

As we have witnessed since the Marjory Stoneman Douglas tragedy, there has been significant attention, funding and action given to hardening the physical aspects of school safety and security. These measures include the provision of armed police officers on every public school campus in Miami-Dade and Broward counties; limiting access to and from schools to a single point of entry; the hiring of additional security monitors; the use of transparent book bags; and serious discussion about the potential use of campus metal detectors. With equal passion and action, we must build a school culture that creates and maintains psychological safety and security. This is best accomplished by creating and maintaining school environments that support the building of positive connections between students, as well as between students and teachers. Such a climate guards against student isolation, discrimination and bullying and leads to a venue where students feel they are supported, encouraged, accepted, included and respected, and where they experience a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves.

As educators, law enforcement and government officials, parents and other members of the community, we must accept the challenge before us to create schools that protect and prepare our youth for the world as it currently exists, and provide them with the tools to change the world to what it can become. There is much to accomplish. Let's get started!

# 22nd Annual Conference

Many children and youths are exposed to trauma and adverse experiences, creating life-span implications. Unrecognized or unacknowledged adversity and trauma can lead to toxic stress, including other issues that affect development and lifelong well-being. This was the focus of our May 2018 conference, *Impact of Trauma and Violence: Interventions for School, Clinical and Community Settings*, held at the University of Miami.

The conference presenters were Colleen Cicchetti, Ph.D., director of the Center for Childhood Resilience at Ann &

Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, and Don Meichenbaum, Ph.D., research director of The Melissa Institute and Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Waterloo in Ontario.

Dr. Cicchetti talked about the "invisible backpack" of emotions and experiences that children carry to school every day. "Along with creating a safe environment, school leaders and teachers can provide support in building relationships and improving emotional regulation," she said. "It takes a supportive team on every level."



Panelists Frank Zenere, Ed.S.; Marie D. Osborne, Esq.; Colleen Cicchetti, Ph.D.; Lisa Martinez; and Don Meichenbaum, Ph.D., discussed services for at-risk youth and community engagement.

## Suzanne L. Keeley, Ph.D. Community Service Award

This year's recipient of the Suzanne L. Keeley Community Service Award was presented to Family Resource Center of South Florida, for championing the rights of children to grow up in a healthy and safe environment, and for its dedicated service to prevent violence and promote safer communities.



Suzanne L. Keeley, Ph.D., President Emerita, and Oren Wunderman, Ph.D.

## Fact | **Bullying Causes Serious Harm**

Bullying causes a number of social, physical and mental health problems. Compared to children who do not report involvement in bullying problems:

- Children who are bullied suffer more headaches, stomach aches, depression and anxiety. Mental health problems associated with bullying tend to last until later in life.
- Children who bully, and those who are bullied, are at greater risk of suicide.
- Children who bully, and those who are bullied, will be more likely to miss school, show little interest in their studies and suffer poor grades.
- Children who bully are more likely to use drugs and alcohol and engage in criminal activity. According to one of the world's leading researchers on bullying, 60% of boys who frequently bullied others in elementary school had criminal records by age 24.

Solution: Bullying is a disrespectful peer relationship problem. It is essential to identify and help children early — both those who bully others and those who are at risk of being bullied — to support the development of healthy relationships.

— [www.Prevnet.ca](http://www.Prevnet.ca)



## **SOS Donation**

The Melissa Institute received a \$4,000 donation from Students Offering Support (SOS) in May to support our bullying prevention services. The money was raised through the annual Bowling Against Bullying event and other fundraising activities. We are thankful for their generous support.

Josh Solesbury, 2017-18 SOS Treasurer; Elise Suna, Education Director; and Chase Moralejo, 2017-18 SOS President



## **Confined by Violence**

Kristian, Chicago Public Schools 4th grader

I want to go outside and play

*But I can't*

Not because it's a rainy day

It's to avoid the gunshots

That may come my way

I want to go outside and play

*But I can't*

Not because I have no bike to ride

It's because my mom fears

I'll be another victim of a senseless homicide

I want to go outside and play

*But I can't*

Not because it's after-hours

Or even that it's way too dark

It's because of all the bloodshed

That occurs in the neighborhood park

I want to go outside and play

*But I can't*

Not because I have no friends

It's because of the violence

It seems it never ends

I want to go outside and play

*But I can't*

Not because I don't deserve it

There's this thing called Life

And I'm just trying to preserve it

---

Confined by Violence was the poetry contest winner at the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence's Student Voices. Dr. Colleen Cicchetti shared the poem at her presentation during our May conference.

# A Culture of Mattering Prevents Depression and Aggression

By: Isaac Prilleltensky, Ph.D., Scientific Board Member,  
Vice Provost for Institutional Culture, University of Miami

Feeling valued and adding value, the act of making a difference, are at the core of mattering. Appreciation, love and respect lead to self-confidence, mastery and the desire to make a difference. This, in turn, will make you feel valued, creating a virtuous cycle. Marginalization and exclusion, on the other hand, engender frustration, alienation and even violence, which makes it very hard to gain positive regard from others, creating a vicious cycle. Indeed, there is evidence that feeling devalued can lead to depression and aggression.

There are two types of experiences that really make a difference in how we matter: experiences of wellness and experiences of fairness. Wellness, a positive state of affairs in physical, psychological and interpersonal domains of life, derives largely from self, relationships and community. We feel well because we feel that we matter to people around us. We feel that we are important to them, and that they care about our well-being. But wellness is often obstructed by lack of fairness. Lack of respect, oppressive treatment, violence and injustice get in the way of wellness. Indeed, there is ample evidence that lack of fairness leads to lack of wellness.

Three psychological needs are the pillars of feeling valued: secure attachment, belonging and dignity. Classic studies on early attachment by Bowlby and Ainsworth, as well as recent investigations, support the hypothesis that feeling valued derives from relationships with people close to us throughout our lives. Experiences of exclusion, injustice and inequality, however, threaten the need to feel valued.

There are two main mechanisms through which people add value to themselves and others: self-determination and self-efficacy. The self-determination theory, developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, posits that people are driven by three motivations: autonomy, competence and relatedness. However, efforts to add value are threatened by helplessness and powerlessness. Helplessness ensues when people are confronted with uncontrollable events. If you are trying to change a situation, but no matter what

you do nothing changes, you are going to feel despondent and helpless. This phenomenon has been extensively studied, and its relation to depression is well-established. Studies on hopelessness demonstrate that the presence of negative thoughts about yourself exacerbates the impact of the situation even further. What's more, there is evidence that self-deprecating beliefs are tied to early experiences of emotional abuse.

Powerlessness is another threat to adding value. Exposure to chronic powerlessness, at home, work or in the community, can lead to mental and physical wounds. If you belong to a minority, or if you are poor, you face more threats and you are going to experience more stress. Acts of discrimination, small and large, create hypervigilance, which in turn leads to the release of cortisol and a plethora of damaging physiological reactions. Reduced physical, cardiovascular and intellectual performance often accompany chronic exposure to stress. Anxiety, depression and panic attacks are more common among the poor.

If you are poor, you are likely to live in a noisier, more polluted and dangerous part of town. A constant state of stress results in damage to certain regions of the brain involved in planning and goal pursuit. As Dacher Keltner recently put it, "powerlessness undermines the individual's ability to contribute to society....powerlessness robs people of their promise for making a difference in the world." This outcome derives from preoccupation with illness and reduced bandwidth. If you are afflicted with digestive, immune, respiratory and cardiac problems, not to mention discrimination, you are going to have fewer cognitive and emotional resources with which to engage with others in the community, which will further increase isolation. That research supports the emphasis on fairness.

In short, there is ample evidence that mattering can lead to mental health and harmonious relationships. Exclusion and marginalization, on the other hand, can lead to depression and aggression. We must teach our kids that they have a right and responsibility to feel valued and to add value, not just to themselves, but to others. If they do so, they will promote not only wellness, but also fairness.



# Peace, Harmony & Moonlight



The Melissa Institute hosted its annual Peace, Harmony & Moonlight event in March at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. Guests enjoyed a cocktail reception, live music and silent auction on the garden lawn, followed by dinner. Our keynote speaker, Scientific Board member Dr. Jim Larson, spoke about healthy schools in a dangerous world. "School violence should be treated as a public health emergency and approached from a multi-tiered, risk analysis-risk reduction perspective," he said. "All children are at risk — for becoming either victim or perpetrator — and all children need to be provided the environment and the skills to avoid becoming either."



Event Chairpersons Vanessa and Dr. Edward Silverman



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*Peace & Harmony*  
**Don't miss next year's**  
**Saturday, March 9**  
**at The Ritz-Carlton, Coconut Grove!**

# Adolescent Peer Friendships | **Birds of a Feather?**

By: Cliff O'Donnell, Ph.D., Scientific Board Member, Professor Emeritus of Psychology, University of Hawaii

Adolescence is a time when friendships among peers become increasingly important. Groups of friends often share interests in music, style of dress, attitudes and activities. Social media facilitates these common interests. Many studies show how adolescents influence each other and how that influence affects thinking, emotion and behavior.

Adolescents who engage in drug use, criminal activity and other antisocial behavior are much more likely to be friends with peers who engage in the same activities. Changes in delinquency are linked to the changes in delinquency of their friends. High-risk peers encourage deviant behavior among their friends, while their association with low-risk youth reduces deviant behavior. A 35-year follow-up study of high-risk youth showed this influence continuing well into the adult years.

A separate study of adults found that friendships in middle school predicted arrests 25 years later. Those arrested were much more likely to have had friendships with those who were also later arrested. The reverse was also true: Those not arrested as adults were friends in middle school with peers who 25 years later had no arrests.

A common reaction to these studies is that "birds of a feather flock together." The question then becomes, what are these "feathers" and how are they formed? Certainly, demographics plays an important role. Socioeconomic status, neighborhoods and family relationships all affect our experiences and contact with other people. Schools, juvenile justice, child welfare and mental health systems also influence the formation of peer groups in adolescence. Social media allows the formation of virtual peer groups. As youth engage each other in peer group activities, they develop common experiences. These experiences form the ties that facilitate peer influence on thinking, emotion and behavior, both positive and negative. The feathers are created in the process.

Schools help to create the feathers by policies of detention, suspension and academic performance tracks. Do we want to encourage students in detention to "flock together"? Or to form friendships with those who are not doing well academically? Does it make sense to create programs that bring adolescent substance abusers together? Or high-risk youth? The best predictor of delinquency is participation in a delinquency prevention program that brings high-risk youth together. It is time to reexamine these and related policies. Perhaps we can create different feathers and new flocks!



The Melissa Institute participated in PhilADthropy Miami in February 2018, at which time a team of students from University of Miami's School of Communication worked on branding and communications for the Institute.



Students participating in our Bullying Prevention Youth Conference

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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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*This list represents donors from August 1, 2017, through July 31, 2018. We regret any omissions due to the printer's deadline.*

On May 5, 1995, Melissa Aptman 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

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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.

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### **Belfer-Aptman Scholarship Recipient**

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 2018 recipient!

- **Kiet D. Huynh, M.A.**

Debbiesiu Lee, Ph.D., Advisor  
University of Miami

*"Structural Equation Model of the Indirect Effect of Traumatic Heterosexism and Racism on PTSD Symptoms Through Coping Mediators in LGBT People of Color"*

- **Matthew Lee, M.A.**

Shelley Hymel, Ph.D., Advisor  
University of British Columbia

*"Do Teacher Responses to Peer Victimization Differ Based on Victim Emotional and Behavioral Problems?"*



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