



**THE MELISSA INSTITUTE**  
*For Violence Prevention and Treatment*

25th Anniversary Report to the Community

# Taking Pride in Violence Prevention

**Dear Friends:**

For 25 years The Melissa Institute has aspired to create a world in which all children and families are safe and enjoy positive mental health. Those goals are the basis of every training, conference, presentation, publication and program we provide.



Pandemic-fueled risk factors for violence (economic instability, stress) and weakened protective factors for violence prevention (support of social, mental health and outreach services) have led to a surge in various forms of violence across the nation. According to the New York Times, “The United States experienced its biggest one-year increase on record in murders in 2020.” In response to this blight, the Institute has successfully endeavored to empower communities with meaningful mental health and violence prevention strategies.

Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine-Cava recognized our expertise and appointed the Institute as a consultant to help develop a Peace & Prosperity Plan to address the underlying causes of gun violence and poverty. We were also honored to be asked to collaborate with White House officials working to prevent violence nationwide.

We know that evidence-based strategies can help to change the trajectory of violence in every community. The Melissa Institute supports and promotes a number of these strategies, including community outreach, bystander interventions and programs that support and engage youth. We also support evidence-based, cost-effective strategies focused on teaching children self-regulation skills and empathy. Literacy is a key determinant in preventing violent crimes. Our literacy website offers professional development to preschool and elementary school teachers. Our annual scholarships support doctoral candidates in their violence prevention research.

Today, more than ever, we need your financial support so that as many people as possible across our nation are exposed to prevention strategies that promote mental health and safer communities.

Please support us by making a generous donation via mail or through our website, [www.melissainstitute.org](http://www.melissainstitute.org). Together we must and will make a difference!

Lynn Aptman, M.Ed.  
Founder and President

Michael Aptman, M.D.  
Founder

Etiony Aldarondo, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

# 25 Years at the Forefront in the Use of Science to Prevent Violence and Assist Victims

Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D., Research Director



On June 10th I celebrated my 81st birthday. The joy of moving into another decade of life was tempered by news that there had already been 284 mass shootings during the year in the U.S. by that date. I am the father of four children and the grandfather of seven. Much of what I do in life I do to help make a better world for them. In this context, it has been an honor and a privilege to serve as Research Director

of The Melissa Institute since Day One. With 25 years in this role, I have had the opportunity to make the world safer not only for my children and grandchildren, but for children and families all over the world. The Melissa Institute has given me a formidable platform and support to do this, for which I am most grateful. Thus, I would like to use this opportunity to share a sample of the many impactful initiatives undertaken by the Institute during this time.

In the pages of this report you can find many more examples of the creative, caring and impactful response of The Melissa Institute to the evolving challenges of our times. For 25 years, the Institute has been at the forefront in the use of science to prevent violence and assist victims. Times change, new challenges arise, and our resolve to provide our communities with the best available violence-prevention knowledge and proven strategies gets stronger.

I urge you to visit our website ([www.melissainstitute.org](http://www.melissainstitute.org)) for a more in-depth look at the activities and products created in collaboration with the Institute's renowned Scientific Board members. As you do this, know that you are among the 2 million people worldwide who have visited our website.

Steps the Institute took in Response to Critical Violent Incidents	
<b>COVID-19 Pandemic</b> Provided free internet access to "Roadmap to Resilience" comprehensive publication on the topic, which has been downloaded by over 30,000 visitors in 122 countries. Created a COVID-19 Resources online repository.	<b>Shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas</b> Created a School Safety Plan Toolkit which was distributed to over 40,000 educators across the country.
<b>Use of lethal violence by police in the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others</b> Created and published an Anger Management and Bystander Intervention Course for police to equip them with proven tools to diffuse conflict and prevent violence	<b>Shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary</b> Developed tools to engage gun advocates to discuss possible gun control procedures in their communities.
	<b>Shooting in Thousand Oaks, California</b> Created and published a tool to improve the ability of mental health professionals and law enforcement personnel to identify potential mass shooters.

As noted elsewhere in this report, we should all take pride in preventing violence. And you should take pride in supporting The Melissa Institute, an organization that has been making a big difference in the lives of so many families for a quarter of a century and whose mission and work are as important today as they have ever been.

Your loving hearts and generosity are what keep us going. I urge you to donate as much as you can to The Melissa Institute. My grandchildren, along with countless others, are counting on your support.

## Spotlight on Dr. Colleen Cicchetti

### Supporting the mental health and resilience of children and youth

As the pandemic unfolded, Scientific Board member Dr. Colleen Cicchetti and her colleagues at the Center for Childhood Resilience in Chicago received numerous requests for information on how to support the mental health and well-being of youth affected by the crisis. In response to this need they created the Virtual Learning Community to provide free virtual on-demand training and educational resources to help educators, clinicians, parents and caregivers better support the mental health and resilience of the children and youth in their communities.

Virtual Learning Community trainings focus on trauma-responsive and healing-centered practices and policies, and foster personal and professional resilience, social-emotional awareness and self-care. They provide an opportunity to connect, collaborate and expand knowledge, and offer innovative and culturally attuned trainings.

Professional development topics include:

- Introduction to Trauma
- Trauma, Racism and Equity
- Psychological First Aid (overview of Listen, Protect, Connect, Model & Teach)
- Adult Social and Emotional Learning
- Self-Care for Educators

Through the Center's partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education, educators, administrators, school staff and school counselors who complete the trainings can earn license clock hours. Illinois licensed social workers and psychologists can earn Continuing Education Credits.

To date, over 5,470 individuals across Illinois and beyond have registered on the Virtual Learning Community to expand knowledge on trauma and resilience, create healing-centered spaces, and build community resilience through professional development opportunities and virtual communities of practice.

We are proud of Dr. Cicchetti's efforts and look forward to partnering with and her colleagues in bringing the Virtual Learning Community resources to educators, administrators, school staff and school counselors in Miami-Dade County.



# Violence Prevention: An Invitation

Etiony Aldarondo, Ph.D., Executive Director



Everyone working to make the world safer, more peaceful and healthier knows that it is not a good idea to recruit people to the cause by announcing that things are getting better. However, I believe an exception to be in order when it comes to recruiting people to support one of the most important accomplishments of modern times – the prevention of violence. As

crazy as this sounds to those of us consumers of front-page news and social media, research shows that daily life is significantly safer and less violent today than it has ever been. To echo the World Health Organization: “Violence is preventable. This is not an article of faith, but a statement based on evidence.”

To be sure, evidence that prevention works is no reason to be blindly optimistic; the impact and cost of violence in our lives are enormous. According to the Gun Violence Archive, nearly 20,000 people in the U.S. were killed by gun violence last year and another 24,000 died by suicide with a gun. The figures so far this year are over 14,000 and 17,000, respectively. Many more people have been injured and suffer from a range of physical, sexual and mental health problems. Worldwide, the cost of violence runs in the billions of dollars in healthcare, law enforcement and lost productivity. Add to this the human cost in grief and pain, and it is easy to understand why it is difficult to shake off a collective sense of dread and the lack of confidence in our ability to prevent violence. But shake these misguided limitations off we must to achieve widespread implementation of proven violence prevention strategies and programs.

For the past 25 years, The Melissa Institute has been a growing asset in this effort. Guided by a mighty staff, committed Board of Directors, renowned Scientific Board and dedicated community partners – along with the generous support of donors like you – we have educated thousands of people in our community on understanding the roots of violence and how to prevent its occurrence. The evolution of the Institute’s violence prevention efforts mirrors the growth of the field of violence prevention described by our esteemed Scientific Board member Dr. Ron Slaby during our 25th Anniversary Conference

– from early concerns about the impact of violence and whether violence prevention could work, to emerging data suggesting that violence prevention does work, to a better understanding of how violence prevention works best, followed by demonstrations that violence prevention can be scaled up, and the more recent realization that workable violence prevention efforts work better when they go hand-in-hand with activism and advocacy efforts to address inequities and other toxic conditions fueling the violence.

If there is one thing we have learned during this process, it is that lack of knowledge is a major obstacle in the implementation of violence prevention strategies. Unacquainted with the evidence, many embrace the idea that criminal justice interventions are the only ones that work. But as another esteemed Scientific Board member, Dr. Alexis Piquero, recently reminded us, research tells us that we should not put all of the burden on policing and other law enforcement strategies given the growing number of non-police violence-prevention strategies found to be cost-effective and sustainable.

The Melissa Institute creates safer and healthier communities through the dissemination and implementation of proven violence prevention strategies and knowledge. A major priority for us today is to educate, activate and persuade all sectors of society to commit themselves to this objective. We are supporting the development of regional and national plans and policies to prevent violence, creating bridges between sectors, and building important community partnerships. The success of this new phase of The Melissa Institute requires both your continued financial support and your participation to help others increase their knowledge of and confidence in proven interventions to prevent violence. So please accept this invitation to join and recruit others into one of the most important and accomplished causes of our times – the prevention of violence.



## May Conference 2021

Our virtual 25th Annual Conference – Advances and Innovations in Violence Prevention & Treatment: The First 25 Years of The Melissa Institute – brought together members of The Melissa Institute’s Scientific Board. Jim Larson, Ph.D., Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D., Guerda Nicolas, Ph.D., Debra Pepler, Ph.D., Isaac Prilleltensky, Ph.D., and Ron Slaby, Ph.D., presented their research and engaged in two lively panel discussions.



These leading experts presented research in violence prevention to over 100 attendees via Zoom. Dr. Prilleltensky drew inferences regarding the prevention of violence and the promotion of well-being at personal, organizational and community levels, while Dr. Nicolas unpacked the impact of trauma and racialized violence in Black communities.

# Reimagining How to Prevent and Treat Violence Among Children and Youth

Debra Pepler, O.C., Ph.D., C.Psych.



“Nearly all problems of human behavior stem from our failure to ensure that people live in environments that nurture their well-being” (Biglan, 2015, p. 3). We must keep this idea in mind as we endeavor to prevent and treat violence among children and youth.

There are seven years of warning before a boy moves into delinquency (Loeber et al., 2003).

This means that there are seven years during which the adults involved in the boy's life should be aware of the difficulties that he is experiencing and work actively to prevent his journey along the antisocial pathway to crime. Support for troubled children can be provided in four ways:

Observing children to understand not only what problem behaviors they have developed to cope with their life circumstances, but also what they have not yet developed to enable them to engage positively.

Identifying children at risk for behavior problems as early as possible to deter them from an antisocial pathway. The Early Assessment Risk List (EARL), Augimeri et al., (2021) has been developed to identify evidence-based risk factors associated with later criminality for boys and girls ages 6-11 and their families.

Intervening to scaffold children's development of essential regulation and social-emotional skills, e.g., the Stop Now and Plan Program (SNAP), Child Development Institute (Pepler, 2006).

Ensuring that all relationships in which children are embedded are nurturing their healthy development (Pepler, 2006).

Children's healthy development depends on healthy relationships, particularly with the adults who are responsible for nurturing them. Healthy relationships are those that help children feel safe and valued, support them to learn a wide range of skills, do not add stress to their lives, but help to buffer the stresses they encounter.

Children who are aggressive and dysregulated tend to have missed out on relationships in which they were safe, secure and supported. When children grow up in

adverse circumstances, they experience physical, mental and social health problems that can last a lifetime (Felitti et al., 1998).

Thinking about children's development raises two critical questions: “What is going to help children be motivated to learn the behaviors and orientations required for healthy development?” and “What is going to help children be motivated to relinquish behaviors and orientations that they have learned work for them?” A developmental approach provides consequences that teach and support students in learning the skills, capacities and understanding they have yet to acquire. It also focuses on how children's relationships promote or fall short in supporting their healthy development. A developmental approach also raises questions about discipline strategies that tend to punish, marginalize or exclude students from safe and caring school contexts.

It is time to reimagine how we prevent and treat violence among children and youth. Education of the whole child needs to be a relational process in which teacher-student relationships are nurtured and valued. We need to reach out to support marginalized, racialized and disadvantaged students, academically, emotionally and socially. We need to foster positive peer relationships in recognition of their critical role in life learning. Finally, we must strive to understand and respond to children's and youths' antisocial behavior from a developmental rather than a discipline perspective.

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## SOS Donation

The Melissa Institute received a \$2,000 donation from Students Offering Support (SOS) 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.

# To curse the darkness or to light a candle

Leena Augimeri, Ph.D.



As an advocate for high-risk children and youth for most of my life, an admirer of The Melissa Institute's extraordinary work and now a proud member of the Institute's Scientific Advisory Board, I have found inspiration and guidance in the Aptmans' invitation following the murder of their daughter Melissa to choose "to light a candle" to help repair the world. As a parent of

two daughters, one also named Melissa, I am not sure I could have found the strength and resolve shown by the Institute's founders to turn loss, grief and pain into this formidable vehicle for peace and harmony. I offer this reflection to help keep the candle burning and shed light on this critical work.

Everyone has a story and becomes passionate about things as a result of their own experiences. Mine starts with my family. English was not my parents' first language, as they had immigrated to Canada from Ukraine and Italy a few years before I was born. They worked hard to provide for our family, working in jobs that required long hours, like construction and cleaning homes and offices. Even though I was raised in a loving home with my three brothers, and an extended group of friends and family, it was not without its difficulties, many of which could be considered what we call ACEs (adverse childhood experiences). Some in my circle of family and friends did well. Others did not. Growing up in this environment made me question what it was about certain kids who thrived and succeeded versus those who struggled, got in trouble with the law and/or ended up with serious addictions or mental health issues. These experiences led me to pursue a career in children's mental health and crime prevention.

Early in my career, I met a young boy named Bobby. He was 6 years old, angry and feisty, and didn't care about much. He was referred to our SNAP (Stop Now And Plan) program at the Child Development Institute for stabbing a child at school with a pencil. He'd had enough of a boy who was being mean to him, so he asked the teacher for a new pencil, sharpened it, then quietly walked up to the boy and stabbed him in the shoulder. This was just a glimpse into Bobby's world and the destructive path he was on. We can debate over whether such aggressive behavior is a result of nature or nurture, or both. We know from research that children develop severe behavioral problems for several reasons, such as living in a

dysfunctional home environment, or from poverty, abuse, neglect, trauma, racism and other risk factors.

When Bobby was 12, he said to me: "I probably would have killed someone...I buried some friends I was walking down the same dark path with..." What helped this young boy change his life trajectory was finding an organization that provided an evidence-based early intervention program that worked with him and his dad, as well as his school and community. The program helped him not only improve his emotion regulation and learn how to make better choices "in the moment," but helped his dad learn to do the same while also learning effective parent management strategies.

As Bobby stated: "I was a reigning terror and I was mean. I didn't care what I did. I didn't care who I hurt. It didn't matter to me... What stands out the most for me is thinking about where I would be if I didn't get the help I got from SNAP. I'd be in one of two places: either dead in a grave or in prison for life because of the road I was on. I can honestly say I know that without this help I would've murdered somebody and wouldn't have thought twice about it... and that's scary for me because, having a family now, I don't want my kids to ever think like that. I want them to know who their father is. I don't want them to see me through glass or a jail cell or visit me at a grave."

We as a society must do better. We must continue to invest in and address the root causes of violence: children and youth mental health; culturally responsive, evidence-based, cost-effective programs; measurement-based care; implementation and fidelity monitoring of evidence-based programs; and expert training and supervision of professionals. This requires time, commitment, human capital and dollars. More than anything, we must listen to our kids, build strong and healthy relationships with them, offer opportunities to improve their life circumstances, ensure that they feel loved and valued, and that their lives matter. This is what The Melissa Institute is all about: finding out what works for whom, and helping kids like Bobby to prevent tragedies like the Aptman family and others have experienced. We must keep the candle burning.



## Suzanne L. Keeley Community Service Award

This year's recipient of the Suzanne L. Keeley Community Service Award is Guitars Over Guns. Founded in Miami by Dr. Chad Bernstein, Guitars Over Guns creates safe spaces for youth to express themselves through music and empowers them to make positive choices at school, at home and in their communities. The award recognizes Guitars Over Guns' goal of giving students the opportunity to use the arts as a way to build the life skills they need to thrive in school, at work and, one day, as adults with families of their own and as community leaders.

# Creating Trauma-Informed Virtual Spaces for Violence Prevention

Elise Suna, LMFT, Education Director



After 25 years, The Melissa Institute continues to be at the forefront of the evolution of violence prevention. And in this year of the pandemic, we are part of another important and accelerated transformation. Like many other organizations, the Institute shifted its focus to online presentations and services. That shift invited new challenges, one

of which was how to create trauma-informed virtual spaces. Without the familiarity, comforts, visual cues and opportunities for engagement afforded in physical spaces, and aware of the high levels of stress and suffering caused by the pandemic, we set out to create welcoming and safe virtual spaces for educational conversations about difficult and potentially triggering topics like domestic violence, psychological trauma, bullying, gun-violence and more.

As we continue to grow in this area, we have found inspiration and direction in the guiding principles of trauma-informed care outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration: **Safety, Empowerment, Voice & Choice, Collaboration & Mutuality, Trustworthiness & Transparency, Peer Support, & Mutual Self-Help, Cultural, Historical & Gender Issues.** In accordance with these principles, we offer a few suggestions on ways to foster a trauma-informed virtual space.

- State or write your preferred pronouns. Incorporate cultural, historical and gender issues throughout your presentation.
- Structure interactions at the beginning of the meeting by outlining what to expect and when breaks will be, and give disclaimers/ descriptions before sharing stories, videos or information.
- Take a moment to ground and acknowledge everyone's unique experiences and how different emotions and feelings may come up during the conversation, class, meeting or presentation.

- Normalize the personal impact of virtual learning, such as fatigue.
- Encourage breaks and provide individuals an opportunity to step away as needed, not just during a structured break time.
- Leave adequate time at the end for questions and for participants to reflect together on the presentation.
- Invite opportunities to follow up and share resources.
- Ask for feedback and use it to guide future meetings or presentations.

Nearly six decades ago, communication expert Marshall McLuhan taught us that "the medium is the message"— that all forms of media technologies are extensions of human abilities and shape the quality of our lives. We hope that following these suggestions will help you make your online interactions an extension of our abilities to care and be compassionate for each other — to create safer and healthier virtual spaces in which to learn and work.

6 PRINCIPLES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE	
 Safety	 Empowerment, Voice & Choice
 Collaboration & Mutuality	 Trustworthiness & Transparency
 Peer Support & Mutual Self Help	 Cultural, Historical & Gender Issues



## Peace & Harmony

On May 1, The Melissa Institute hosted its 25th Silver Anniversary Peace & Harmony virtually. Guests enjoyed a wonderful evening full of presentations and humor, along with a silent auction of over 60 items.

Thank you to all of our volunteers, donors and supporters!

Mark your calendars for next year's Peace & Harmony on Saturday, March 5!



# Student art from South Miami Senior High School



Laura Guzman



Kalla Dominguez



Selena Bracamontes



Mia Chiofalo

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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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*Melissa Aptman*

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.

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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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University of Nebraska-Lincoln

“Resilience to Adult Revictim-  
ization Among Survivors of  
Child and Adolescent Sexual  
Assault”

Helen Hailes, M.A., M.Sc.

Lisa Goodman, Ph.D., Advisor

Boston College

“When You Can’t Believe Your  
Own Eyes: A Mixed-Methods  
Investigation of Gaslighting in  
Intimate Partner Violence”

Monique McKenny, M.S.Ed.

Guerda Nicolas, Ph.D., Advisor

University of Miami

“A Spectrum of Health: Investi-  
gating the Protective Potential  
of Racial Socialization for Black  
Adolescent Health Outcomes”

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