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Orlando Family magazine

JULY 2026

The charismatic actress continues to connect with audiences

FAMILY FIRST

Our annual guide detailing what parents need to know



alexandra BRECKENRIDGE

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page 54:
Superb Salads

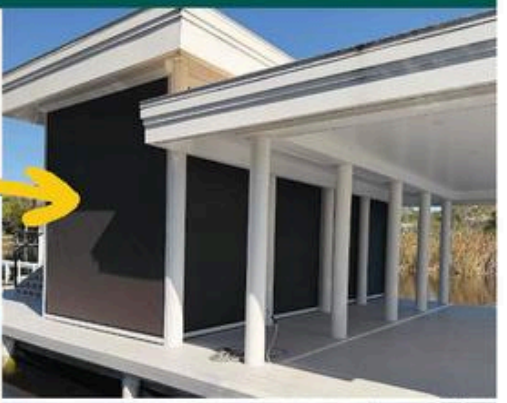
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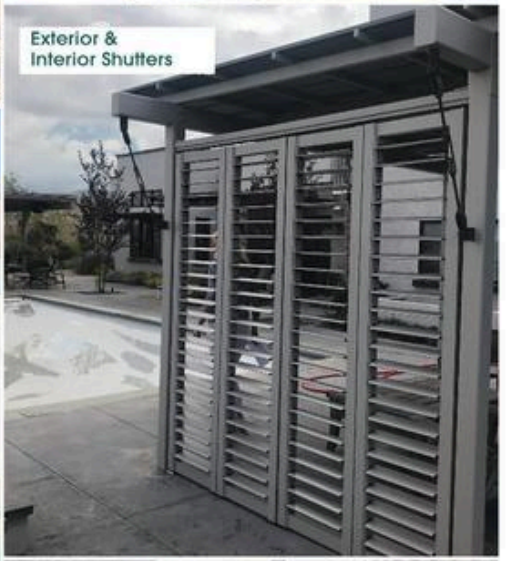

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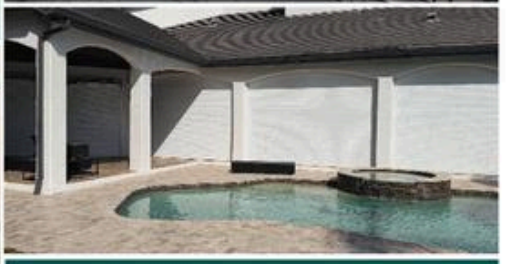
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Orlando Family Magazine is a free, trusted resource designed to inform, serve, and enrich local families and parents throughout the Greater Orlando area with parenting ideas, fun family activities, and a wide variety of invaluable resource guides. Please send all Editorial Correspondence for consideration to editorial@OrlandoFamilyMagazine.com or mail to 6000 Sagemore Drive, Suite 6104, Marlton, NJ 08053. All such correspondence is sent on a non-confidential basis and Orlando Family Magazine, LLC shall be free to reproduce, publish, edit, and/or use the content of any such communications, including any ideas, inventions, concepts, techniques or know-how disclosed therein, for any purpose, including developing, and/or marketing of the magazine and/or goods or services identified in the magazine, without compensation to, or acknowledgement of the author. Orlando Family Magazine assumes no liability for any unsolicited materials, including, but not limited to, manuscripts, photographs or artwork. All submitted materials become the property of Orlando Family Magazine, LLC and will not be returned. Please include a daytime telephone number for verification purposes.

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Home Front

by the Numbers

3

The number of people taken to the hospital after a strange odor was detected on an outgoing flight from Orlando International and the plane was forced to return to the gate.

300

The number of acres a proposed development plan will take up in Winter Garden, which was approved by the town's commission despite significant pushback and concerns from the community.

$123,000

The cost of repairs at the Winter Park Golf Course after an employee accidentally sprayed the wrong substance on the course's greens, causing significant damage to five of the nine holes.

154

The number of measles cases confirmed in Florida—with two confirmed in Orange County—ranking the state fourth in the nation for cases of the disease.

7

The number of schools that the Orange County Public School district has had to close due to low enrollment, having lost more than 8,000 students over the last three years.

$100,000

The amount of money Orlando-based attorney John Morgan is offering to an individual to help name a new political party he hopes to create in an effort to reduce the country's political divide.

$16.2 million

The amount of funds allocated by the FAA for extending the taxiway at the Orlando Sanford International Airport, part of a larger nationwide Department of Transportation project which will give 332 grants worth $523 million.

DATEBOOK

FIREWORKS AT THE FOUNTAIN

JULY 4

DOWNTOWN ORLANDO'S ANNUAL CELEBRATION WILL ALSO HELP COMMEMORATE AMERICA'S 250TH BIRTHDAY.

4-10 p.m., free, Lake Eola Park



31ST ANNUAL FOURTH OF JULY CELEBRATION

July 4

This Winter Park celebration features a dedicated kids' zone, live music, food and more.

6-9 p.m., free, Central Park

CELEBRATION'S STAR SPANGLED SPECTACULAR

July 4

The community comes together for a night of live music and fireworks. *5-10 p.m., free, Celebration Town Center*

WATERMELON 5K

July 4

Sponsored by AdventHealth, locals are invited to run or walk decked out in patriotic gear. *7:30 a.m., fees vary, Park Avenue, Winter Park*

BANDS, BREWS & BBQ

July 4-Aug. 23

This recurring weekend event showcases country and rock artists along with food samples and a selection of craft beers. *Park hours, included with park admission, SeaWorld*



TORI AMOS

July 9

The singer-songwriter brings her In Times of Dragons Tour to town. *7:30 p.m., prices vary, Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts*

MEGAN MORONEY

July 16

Catch one of country music's rising stars as she performs her biggest hits. *7 p.m., prices vary, Kia Center*



FROZEN

July 17-19

The popular animated film comes to life in this stage adaptation. *Times and ticket prices vary, Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts*

ADAM RAY

July 24

The longtime comedian returns to Orlando with new material. *7 p.m., $35-$45, Hard Rock Live*

LAKE NONA TRIATHLON

July 25-26

Swim, bike and run your way through this point-to-point race. *7:30 a.m., prices vary, Lake Nona Town Center*



LIONEL RICHIE AND EARTH, WIND & FIRE

July 25

Fans can expect plenty of songs to sing-a-long to at this throwback concert. *7:30 p.m., prices vary, Kia Center*

INTO THE WOODS

July 31-Aug. 2

Disney legend Jodi Benson stars in this Tony Award-winning musical. *Times and ticket prices vary, Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts*



BILL BELLAMY

July 24-25

The actor and comedian arrives for four shows in two nights. *Times and ticket prices vary, Funny Bone*



Hit

Four years after Army veteran Patricia Golden's home was severely damaged by Hurricane Ian, nonprofit Building Homes for Heroes teamed up with the Greater Orlando Builders Association and other partners to build her a new residence on the same property.



To help Orlando area elders get ready for the next big storm, Seniors First has delivered 60 portable power units to Meals on Wheels recipients throughout the state, allowing them to continue powering phones, medical equipment and lights in the event of an outage.

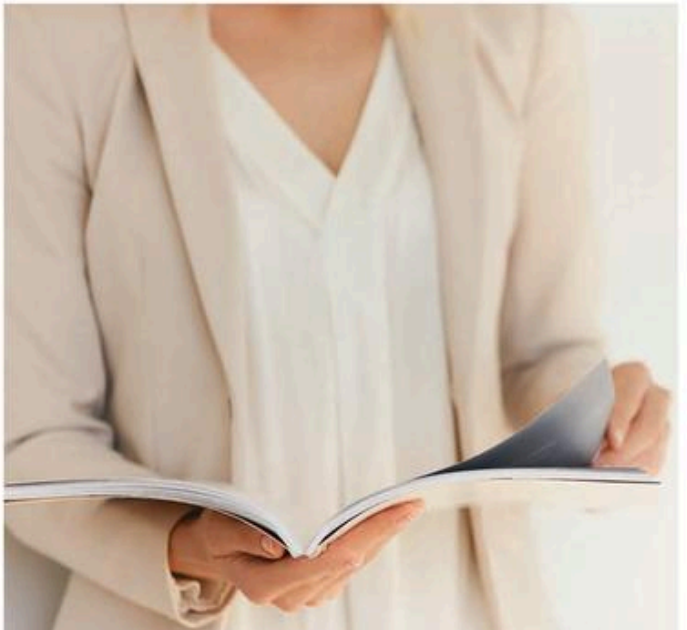
To better promote their 2026 summer reading challenge, Orange County Library System offered one free book to anyone under the age of 18 throughout the month of June.

A Chinese restaurant located in Orlando has been forced to close for a third time following a health inspection, which uncovered infestations of roaches and rodents still plaguing the eatery.

A Disney World guest was arrested at the park's Contemporary Resort after a dispute over seating arrangements at one of the property's restaurants led to a heated confrontation.

A man was arrested after allegedly forcing a woman into his vehicle and fleeing a Winter Park gas station. Thanks to surveillance footage and eyewitnesses, the man was located and charged with kidnapping, tampering with a victim and battery.

Miss



reader response

Each month *Orlando Family Magazine* will poll our readers with a question to spark a topic of conversation. This month we want to know:

What is your favorite summertime activity in Orlando?

Visit **OrlandoFamilyMagazine.com** and click on the contests tab to submit your answer!



Heart and Soul

Alexandra Breckenridge carries the emotional weight of Netflix's hit series *Virgin River* as a woman determined to embrace motherhood.

BY DEBRA WALLACE





A scene from Virgin River with co-star Martin Henderson

As the old standard Ella Fitzgerald song reminds us, "Into each life some rain must fall."

But when it comes to Mel Monroe's journey to motherhood in *Virgin River*, Alexandra Breckenridge believes the storm has lasted long enough.

When the hit Netflix series debuted in December 2019, viewers met Melinda "Mel" Monroe, a nurse practitioner and midwife who arrives in *Virgin River* carrying deep grief after losing both her husband and a stillborn baby.

Over seven seasons, Mel slowly re-opened her heart, finding love again with Jack Sheridan (Martin Henderson). Their relationship evolved from a slow-burning romance into marriage, but their shared dream of starting a family has remained painfully out of reach.

Along the way, Mel endured failed IVF treatments and a miscarriage—each setback compounding the emotional weight that she carries.

In Season 7, which began streaming in March, hope arrived in the form of a baby boy the couple hoped to adopt. But in true *Virgin River* fashion, that hope came with complications. After several roadblocks, the baby was diagnosed with a serious heart defect, raising the stakes once again.

But as Mel and Jack, a fiercely resilient couple, remind themselves: "We are the people who do the hard things. This baby needs us to fight for him."

The season's cliffhanger left fans reeling as Mel and Jack climbed into an ambulance, accompanying the baby to a children's hospital in L.A. for life-saving surgery—an outcome that won't be revealed until Season 8.

"I didn't like it either," Breckenridge says. "It really puts Mel and Jack through the wringer. I don't know how Mel is going to handle this, given everything she's been through. We'll have to see—but I hope it's going to be OK in Season 8."

Based on the 22 bestselling novels by Robyn Carr, the series focuses on second chances, resilience and the healing power of community—qualities that have made it one of Netflix's most popular shows worldwide.

Carr, who is also an executive producer on the series, has been especially impressed with Breckenridge's portrayal of Mel.

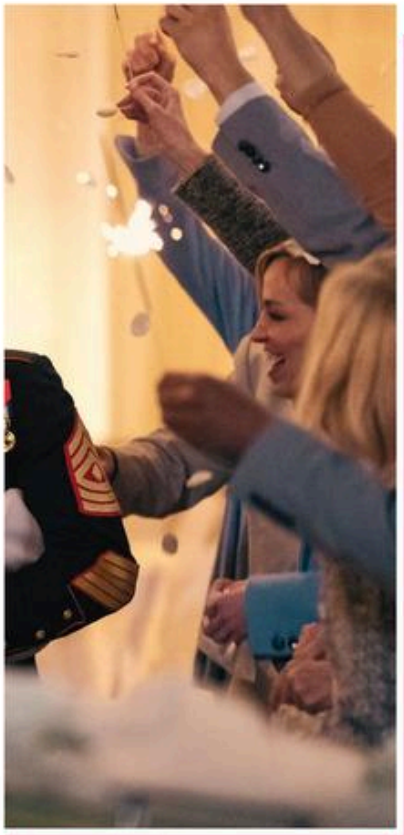
"You can read every emotion on her face," she says. "She gives so much with just an expression. That's exactly what I wanted for Mel, and she captured it immediately. Watching her evolve onscreen is even more emotional than reading about her."

Carr adds that when she hears from fans of the series, they appreciate the small-town community in *Virgin River* that helps one another through the sewing circle, and other groups.

"I believe you can have that anywhere; it doesn't have to be a small town," she says. "It can be through your school, church, neighborhood or where you work. It's when your friends become family, and community is the answer to most of our issues."

Before *Virgin River*, Breckenridge built a diverse TV career, appearing in FX's *Dirt*, HBO's *True Blood*, NBC's *Save Me*, multiple seasons of *American Horror Story*, and as Kevin's partner on *This Is Us* opposite Justin Hartley. She's also a voice actor on *Family Guy* and is known for her spot-on celebrity impressions of Sarah Jessica Parker and Renee Zellweger.

Her film roles include *The Bridge to Nowhere*,



Photos courtesy of Netflix

Zipper, Grown Ups and the 2025 romantic comedy *My Secret Santa* with Ryan Eggold.

Family Drama

If there's one constant in *Virgin River*, it's emotional, deeply rooted family drama.

In Season 6, a central question loomed over Mel's wedding: Who would walk her down the aisle—her biological father Everett (John Allen Nelson), whom she had only recently met, or Doc Mullins (Tim Matheson), her longtime mentor and father figure?

When Everett fell ill, the decision became clear, and Doc stepped in.

The wedding offered a rare moment of joy following Mel's miscarriage and a devastating fire that tore through parts of the town. As always, the *Virgin River* community rallied to support those affected.

"It's hard to look toward the future lightly when you've experienced trauma," Breckenridge says. "Loss is part of life, and I've experienced it myself. It can be incredibly difficult to believe things will get better—or that you won't face more loss."

Matheson says their professional and personal relationship have completely evolved since the beginning. "Doc has fallen in love with Mel" in a way that she is the daughter Doc never had, he explains.

In addition, he calls Breckenridge "so present and such a great actor that I know my work is better when I am in a scene with her. Alexandra sets the tone for the entire series. When the No. 1 [on the call sheet] is a wonderful person, then no one else can be a jerk. Alexandra is the heart and soul of the show. I truly adore her strength, honesty and skill."

A Honeymoon Pause for Mel and Jack

One of Season 7's brightest moments came during Mel and Jack's honeymoon in Tulum, Mexico—a much-needed respite from the turmoil. The days were filled with swimming, dining, dancing and tons of romance.

"After everything they'd been through, I felt like they really needed that time to reconnect," Breckenridge says. "We needed to feel the romance again—why they fell in love in the first place. And the fact that they're still discovering new things about each other felt important, both for the characters and for the audience."

During the trip, they meet an older couple who offer an unexpected perspective on parenthood: that Mel and Jack are already parents in a spiritual sense—they just haven't found their child yet. But if they have faith and patience, everything they hope for will come to them. The couple also told them to savor every moment of their young love.

"That was a beautiful sentiment," she says. "It was a good reminder for Mel and Jack to stay optimistic and hopeful."

> "PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS KIND AND SHARE HOW MUCH THEY AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS LOVE THE SHOW, AND ASK IF THEY CAN TAKE A SELFIE. IT'S ALL VERY SWEET."

Breckenridge believes that Mel's defining trait is her empathy. "She's able to move past frustration and lead with compassion," she explains. "As a nurse, she approaches everyone with kindness. She's truly a bleeding heart who approaches everyone and everything with love, compassion and kindness."

Henderson, who has become a close friend of his leading lady, says that Jack has greatly evolved over seven seasons as his romance continued to blossom with Mel.

"I am so grateful for the success of the show and to come back every year to produce work with Alexandra and the rest of the cast," he says. "Knowing that the audience loves our work is a great blessing that I don't take for granted."

He adds that he appreciates the spirit of the series, which often feels like a period show. "It's like it represents a throwback to the way communities used to be, and I assume that's part of why audiences gravitate toward it. With all the tech we have in our lives, *Virgin River* has a down-to-earth simplicity."

The Fans Love Mel

When fans of Breckenridge, many who have followed her career from her earlier TV days, through *This is Us* and now *Virgin River*, often call out 'Hey, Mel,' when they see her.

"I never turn around and say it's not appropriate. If someone comes up to me, they usually know my actual name, especially as the show has grown and become more popular," she says. "People are always kind and share how much they and their family members love the show, and ask if they can take a selfie. It's all very sweet."

She adds that her two children don't quite understand why people come up to her to stop and talk, especially at the airport. "I always explain that it's nice that people want to talk to mommy about her work. What else can you do as a parent?"

In her personal life, Breckenridge has been married for 15 years to guitarist Casey Hooper, who has played with Katy Perry. They have two children, Jack, 9, and Billie, 8, who have shaped how she views Mel's future as a mother.

"I imagine it would be very hard for Mel not to become overprotective," she says. "It's hard to let go."

Breckenridge admits she relates. "After my son was sick, it was difficult not to worry constantly," she says. "I joke that I'm the 'safety parent'—the one always saying, 'You can't do that.' Thankfully, knock on wood, we've avoided broken bones so far."

For Mel, that instinct may be even stronger. After everything she's endured, motherhood—if and when it finally arrives—won't just be a new chapter. It will be hard earned, and hopefully lead to some much-needed family happiness.

parenting guide 2026

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pg. 46 SENIOR LIVING



RAISING A FAMILY involves navigating every stage of life—from early childhood and school years to caring for aging loved ones and supporting unique needs along the way. This special Parenting Guide brings together valuable resources and expert insights to help families thrive. Explore ideas for family fun, educational enrichment, senior living solutions, special needs support and health care services designed to strengthen and enrich your family's journey.

FAMILY FUN

A Gift for Children's Growth

Why traveling is the perfect getaway for not only family fun, but childhood development.

BY GIANA SCAFIDE

TAKING TIME TO TRAVEL with the people who love us is something we all value—those rare moments where we step away from the busyness of our lives just to be together. But beyond the excitement and relaxation, traveling, especially with kids, is much more than a break from our daily routines—it's an opportunity that helps them grow and develop valuable skills and knowledge needed for their future.

A Boost in Self-Confidence

Travel shapes a child's self-confidence in ways being at home can't. When they step into new environments, they're not just observing—they're participating. Speaking a language they never spoke before, navigating public transit in a foreign city or engaging in activities they never had access to are moments that get them out of their comfort zone.

"I've noticed that my kids have gained a huge amount of self-confidence since I started traveling with them years ago," says Jessica Kinkead, a family travel specialist and CEO of Journeys by Jess. "Whether it's speaking to new people in Paris, jumping off a small cliff in Greece or swimming in the ocean with marine wildlife in Honduras, they're not as afraid anymore since having experienced so many things that pushed them outside their comfort zone."

It's one thing to get to know your way around an unfamiliar destination. Even though it may be difficult to navigate, there is that sense of enjoyment about exploring the unknown. When it comes to departing for a trip, that's the part everyone can dread, considering that it's an overwhelming and intimidating process—especially for children.

"My kids grew up traveling, and now as teenagers they're extremely comfortable with things that can feel overwhelming to a lot of adults, like navigating airports, understanding flight changes, communicating with airline staff and figuring out where they need to go," explains Victoria Detz, agency owner and advisor at Wishlist Travel Collective. "Travel made those situations feel normal





to them instead of stressful. Travel naturally builds confidence because kids are constantly learning how to adapt."

Adjusting to the Unexpected

Adaptability and problem-solving skills are perks obtained when traveling. When plans change at the very last minute, children are forced to think quickly. Real-life challenges are put to the test, teaching them that setbacks are temporary and problem-solving is necessary to overcome issues.

"Children quickly discover that unexpected challenges can be managed," Lynn Fenster, owner and travel advisor of Vacation Planners of Metro Orlando states. "Depending on their age, children may make decisions about activities, manage spending money or adjust plans when circumstances shift. These experiences help build resilience and reinforce the belief that they can handle new situations."

Exposure to new environments can help further develop a child's social skills as well. Children are usually only exposed to interactions with family members, friends, classmates and teachers, but travel throws them into a diverse mix of personalities and backgrounds. Certain interactions teach them the art of conversation and the importance of active listening, qualities that will be handy in their future.

"You meet all kinds of new people—that's one of the best things about traveling with kids," Kinkead exclaims. "They learn how to start conversations, ask questions, listen carefully and interact with people of all backgrounds. This exposure to diversity helps them feel more comfortable with people who may look, speak or act differently than they do."

Empathy Through Exposure

One of the most beneficial aspects of travel is its ability to express empathy. When children see how others live, whether that's in a city, a countryside or an island, they develop a deeper understanding of the world they're a part of and others who live in it.

Detz says, "I think one of the biggest gifts travel gives children is perspective. It takes things from learning about it to actually experiencing it. As a mom and travel advisor, I've seen how travel naturally creates more curious, empathetic and open-minded children without it ever feeling like a lesson."

Broadening children's understanding of different cultures exposes them to different traditions, languages and ways of life. They begin to see that there's no single "right" way to live, and instead, learn to appreciate this difference. Over time, this exposure helps them develop a more inclusive mindset, one where differences are celebrated rather than ignored.

"Children can read about other countries in books or learn about them in school, but firsthand experiences often leave a deeper and more lasting impression," Fenster says. "Trying local foods, hearing different languages, observing customs and traditions, and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds help children understand that there are many ways to live, communicate and celebrate."

"Meeting people from different backgrounds and seeing the way other people live helps children become more open-minded and compassionate," Kinkead says. "They learn that there are other people out there who live their whole life without the many things that we take for granted in our everyday lives."

These moments spark curiosity, and curiosity leads to heartfelt conversations about privilege and respect. Travel shows them the beauty in diversity and the importance of kindness no matter how someone chooses to live or where they come from.

"I think it's important for children to see how other people live—to experience new cultures and environments that are different from their own. Even if it pushes them outside their comfort zone, that's where the real growth happens. They come home with a broader understanding of the world and of humanity that you can't teach any other way," explains Jessica Griscavage, founder of Runway Travel Co.

Traveling with children isn't just a memory maker—it's a chance to allow them to create a strong skill set to carry into adulthood. It teaches children that the world they are a part of is diverse and full of multiple opportunities. Whether it's through the lens of a new culture or relief in solving a last-minute issue, traveling is a great way for children to combine learning with leisure and help them become more well-rounded individuals.



Flying with Ease

Strategies to prepare young ones for the airport—and their first takeoff.

Getting the chance to travel comes with its perks, but one setback when it comes to traveling with children can be when they are first-time flyers. But with a little preparation, taking to the skies with children can be a smooth experience, no matter their age.

A couple days before arriving at the airport, a smart strategy for parents is to have an informative conversation to prepare children for the airport environment. Talking to them about protocols and procedures beforehand helps them understand what to expect, relieving them of any anxiety that may arise.

"For younger kids, making it feel like part of the adventure helps a lot. I'd have my kids hold their own passports, hand them to the agent, state their names and immediately hand the passports back to me. Now as teenagers, it's second nature to them. Those small habits over time helped build confidence and familiarity with travel instead of making airports feel intimidating," explains Victoria Detz, agency owner and advisor at Wishlist Travel Collective.

To ensure your child is entertained throughout the whole flight, be sure to pack enough essentials to bring onboard. A tablet with movies, games, or books and a comfort item like a stuffed animal are always a necessity with little ones.

Having enough snacks for when they get hungry is a must have as well. "Parents should think carefully about meals and snacks. Even when food is available onboard, bringing familiar options is often a good idea," says Lynn Fenster, owner and travel advisor of Vacation Planners of Metro Orlando.

For babies, feeding during takeoff and landing can help with the changing pressure in their ears. And when it comes to older children, they can benefit from drinking water or chewing gum. "During takeoff and landing, nursing, a pacifier or a bottle helps babies manage ear pressure," Jessica Griscavage, founder of Runway Travel Co., concurs.

One concern that dwells on parents' minds is the possibility that their child will begin wailing while in the middle of the flight. While these moments can be extremely stressful, it is important to remember that this is very common among families who travel with younger children and babies. Griscavage notes that, "It's OK to ask flight attendants for help—they've seen it all and are happy to assist. The more relaxed you are, the more relaxed your little one will be."

Remember, kids pick up on energy. If you are calm and reassuring, they're more likely to mirror that behavior. So take a deep breath, embrace the unpleasant moments and focus on the excitement to come.

--Giana Scafide



SUMMER FUN AND GETAWAYS

ATTRACTIONS

AQUATICA

5800 Water Play Way, Orlando
(407) 545-5550
AquaticaOrlando.com

Aquatica Orlando is glowing all summer long with the return of AquaGlow, the park's limited-capacity nighttime event running select nights through Sept. 26. Guests can slide under the stars with vibrant lighting, high-energy music, epic foam parties and all-new nighttime experiences like Riptide Ravers, a nighttime transformation of the park's fan-favorite Riptide Racer waterslide complete with fresh music and lighting effects. Guests can also enjoy complimentary soft drinks throughout this family-friendly summer celebration.

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ExploreFCM.org

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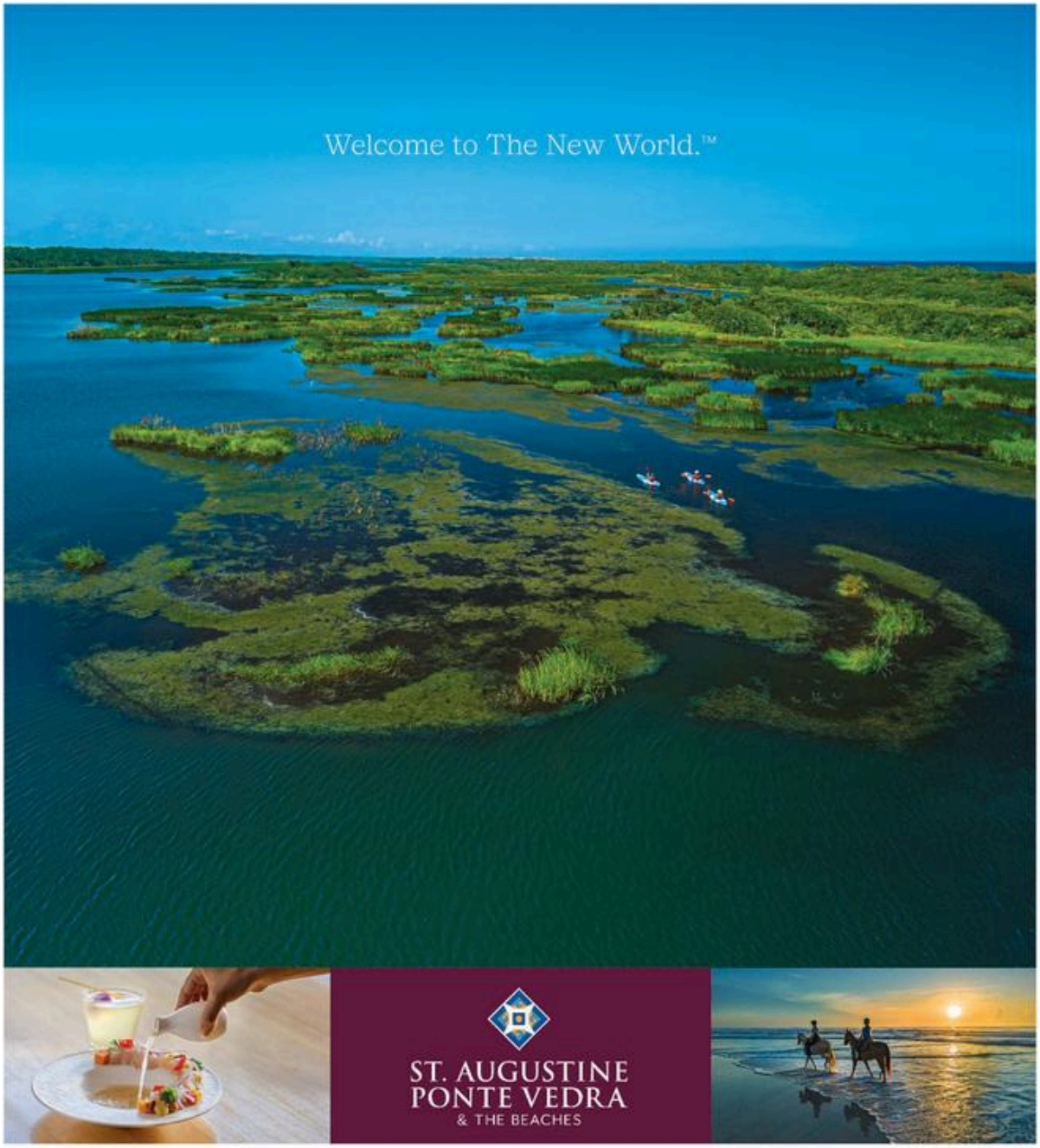
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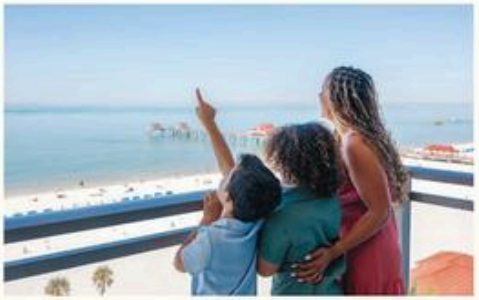
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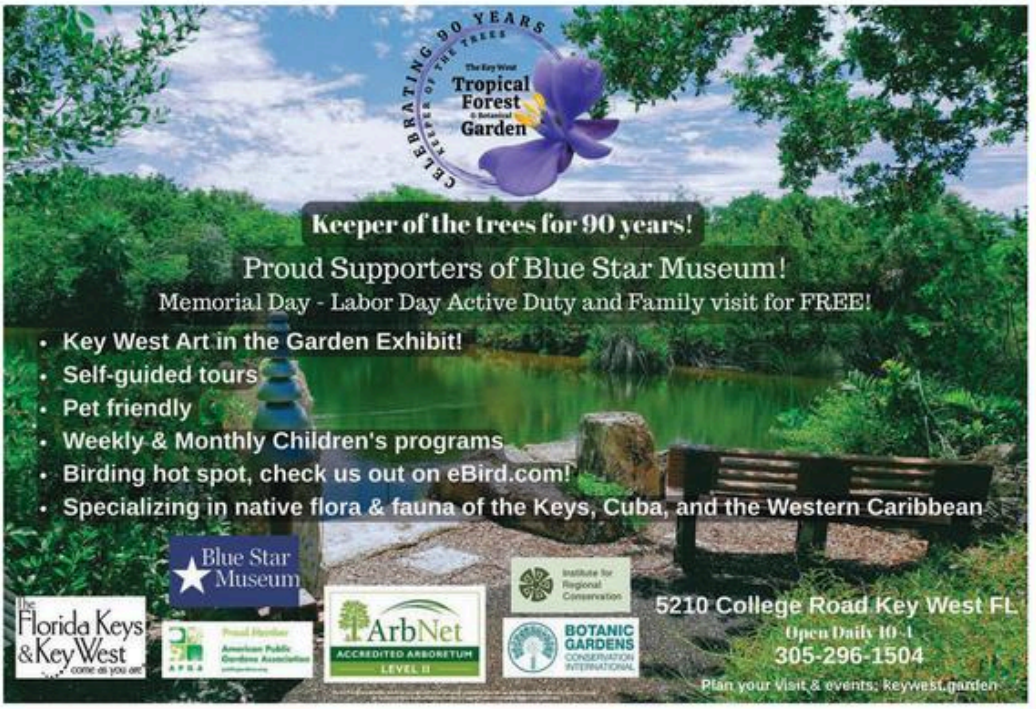


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education

Nurturing Young Minds

Active engagement helps parents be able to better guide their children in their educational journey.

BY ABIGAIL TWIFORD AND GIANA SCAFIDE

THERE IS ONE SIMPLE TRUTH TO RAISING CHILDREN that affects their performance in education: when parents take the time and engage with their child, the results speak for themselves. They'll receive positive feedback, higher test scores and a new found love for learning. These aren't just hereditary talents, but qualities built from their parent's support, encouragement and showing up when it matters the most.

True Academic Success

Academic success looks different for every child. Many parents like to define it as an A+ on every test or more than four hours dedicated to studying each night, but academic success is all about embracing a child's enthusiasm for learning, their attitude when faced with obstacles and their readiness to increase their knowledge. But what does meaningful parental engagement look like, and how can parents support their children without overwhelming them?

"I see success when children develop confidence, curiosity, independence and a genuine love for learning. Every child learns differently, so success means helping each student reach their individual potential academically, socially and emotionally," Paola Rosado, owner of Build Brains Academy says.

Academic success can even begin long before students step into a traditional classroom, with staff at Children's Lighthouse, an early education childcare organization in Winter Garden, working to engage children's neurodevelopment as early as possible.

"The teachers are constantly talking with the kids to try to make those brain connections with the infants, and then moving on from there and introducing other things … like having them exposed to different words and interactions that they're having with the teachers and other children here as they get older. Even when they're playing, they're still learning because our kids are trying to figure out how the world works and putting all that stuff together. They're getting to learn basic skills with us and how to use those skills," says Deanna Gustafson, executive director of Children's Lighthouse.

From an educator's standpoint, academic success is not just about achieving high grades or passing tests. It is about nurturing a child's ability to think critically, engage actively and apply knowledge in all aspects of learning. Children who take ownership of what they're learning and actively participate in classroom discussions embody this vision, and parental involvement is the core in forming these qualities. When parents show genuine interest in their child's education, they show just how valuable learning is.

"For me as an educator, I think it's about the love for learning. It's a child's desire to always question, explore and try new things," Danielle Hunter, Ed. D, director of education at The Nest Schools Winter Garden says. "When children love and are truly excited by learning, then teaching them any number of skills becomes possible."

Balancing Support and Independence

When it comes to involvement with children, parents often struggle with how much effort is needed. Too little interest might convey that education is unimportant, while too much can come off as controlling, undermining a child's independence and creating added pressure. Praising effort rather than perfection promotes a growth mindset, helping children understand that learning is a long process.



"When we engage deeply with a child about their education, and we're asking them questions about what they're learning, how they're learning it, how they're growing and what kind of challenges they're facing, that shows them that their education matters. That then implies a level of importance for what they're dedicating a majority of their time to and showing that we care about their progress. And the most important thing is that when we have those conversations, we really are focused on the growth of the child, on what they're learning and how they're growing through the process," says Brenda Fields, assistant high school director and IB diploma program coordinator for Windermere Preparatory School.

Avoiding the urge to redo assignments or set unrealistic expectations is just as critical. Children need space to make mistakes and learn from them without fear of failure. Framing school as an opportunity rather than a punishment allows children to form a positive attitude toward learning.

"Parents can encourage their children to succeed by creating an environment that promotes growth, confidence and student responsibility. A balanced approach involves setting clear expectations, providing guidance and offering emotional support without dictating every decision or outcome," says Sarah Reynolds, upper school principal at Foundation Academy.

Engagement Through Conversation Starters

The most common question parents ask their children about their school day is just that—"How was school today?" While the positive intention is there in wanting to inquire about their school day, it often leads to brief and uninformative answers. To further the conversation deeper, parents can question what their child found most interesting or surprising in class, what challenges they faced or what they would teach others if given the chance—questions designed to make them think deeper.

"Rather than asking, did you have a good day or a bad day, ask, 'What's the most interesting thing you learned today? What were some of the positives and some of the not so positives in your day? What's something you struggled with today that you want to try again tomorrow?' Asking those in-depth questions actually gets conversations going and it engages the kids more," says Joyce Kwak, upper school principal at The First Academy.

Parents can also show interest by connecting school topics to everyday life or exploring their child's interests through certain activities. This type of engagement makes learning enjoyable, reinforcing the connection between both school and home.

Rosado says, "[Parents] can stay involved by reading together, attending school events, reviewing classwork positively and maintaining communication with their child's teachers. It's important to have those small daily interactions—these make children feel valued and supported, which allows them to continue their amazing work."

Embracing Emotional Support

Children who feel emotionally supported are less likely to experience feelings of stress, confusion and conflict while being more likely to take academic risks, persist through difficulties and ask

for help when they need it.

"Social-emotional development in our children is one of the most important areas of growth," says Hunter. "There's so much pressure to perform academically on young children, which starts at a younger age as the years goes on, and the emotional support and guidance that we as trusted adults can give them plays an important part in the overall outcome."

Providing children with this support involves normalizing mistakes and struggles by listening without immediately giving solutions, validating feelings and celebrating their efforts regardless of the outcome.

"When children experience stress or low self-esteem, it impacts their focus, motivation and confidence in the classroom. That's why strong emotional support helps children, which leads to a development of resilience, confidence and the ability to navigate challenges more successfully both academically and socially," Rosado says.

Ensuring that the home environment feels consistent with their schooling also helps to ensure children, especially younger ones, feel safe to learn and grow in both.

"We always try to encourage whenever we're talking with the families, so we're all saying and doing the same things. That way the kids have consistency from home to school. If we're all using the same words and doing the same things because the kids need the routine and they need the structure, that's going to help them," says Gustafson.

Recognizing and Addressing Disengagement

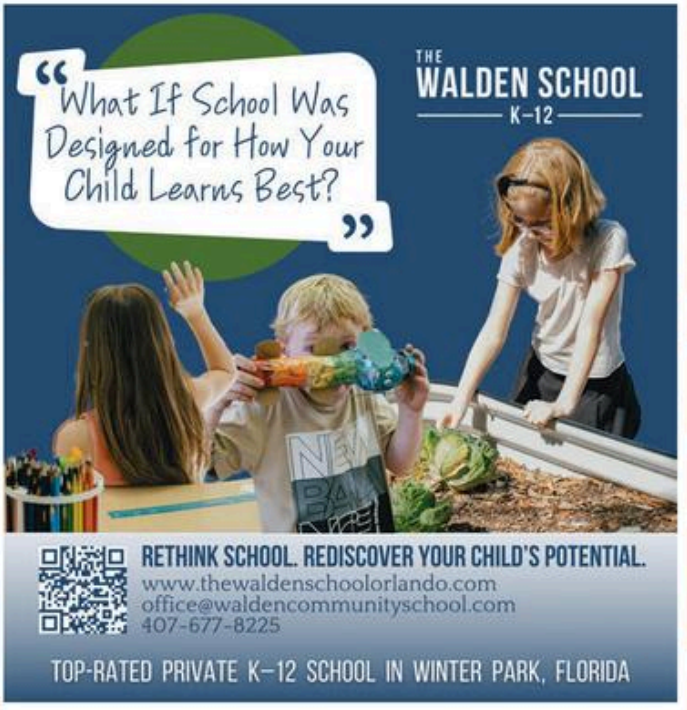
Being disengaged from school can have numerous causes and can lead to avoidance with homework, negative self-talk, not participating in class discussions, a drop in grades, missing or incomplete assignments, absences and possible outbursts. Even not wanting to be part of school functions or activities can be a sign of this mental withdrawal.

"Some children may also show signs of frustration, boredom, anxiety or withdrawal from activities they once enjoyed. When parents notice these signs, it is important to approach the situation with support rather than criticism. Open and nonjudgmental conversations can help uncover the underlying reasons for the disengagement," Reynolds says.

As students get into middle school, it may be harder to see these signs of angst and frustration, so it remains vital to have open conversations with a child whenever you may deem it necessary.

"Finding careful moments to pry and to dig deeper and say, 'I really need you to tell me what's going on. What are you learning in school? What do you like?' When they say they don't want to talk about it, ask them why. They might not want to engage in that conversation [readily], but I think it is our job as parents to make some time," says Fields.





Preparing for Lifelong Learning

Sending a child off to college can be nerve-wracking, so it's important to ensure they are prepared with life skills and realistic expectations.

By Abigail Twiford and Giana Scafide

THE END OF HIGH SCHOOL is an exciting time for college-bound students as they prepare to graduate, decide on a major or program and get ready for life on campus.

Though this time in one's life can be very positive and full of anticipation, it can also be anxiety-inducing or even scary—for both students and their parents. As young adults begin looking into which colleges they are interested in, it raises many questions about how they will be able to handle their lives when they are on their own, particularly for students heading to distant locales out of state.

Many parents will consider if it may be best for their soon-to-be college student to stay closer, if not continuing to live at home altogether. But before worry takes over too much, there are several factors to be considered.

The starting point for many students going to college is to determine what careers they are interested in and which schools offer the best programs to set them up for success.

"It really depends on the program or the major the student is pursuing. I think that's one of the factors, because we want to make sure that our students, or even one who just graduated this year, is able to pursue a major that's not going to put him or her in a bad situation later on when they graduate college," says Angel Nguyen, Windermere Preparatory School's director of admissions, marketing and communications.

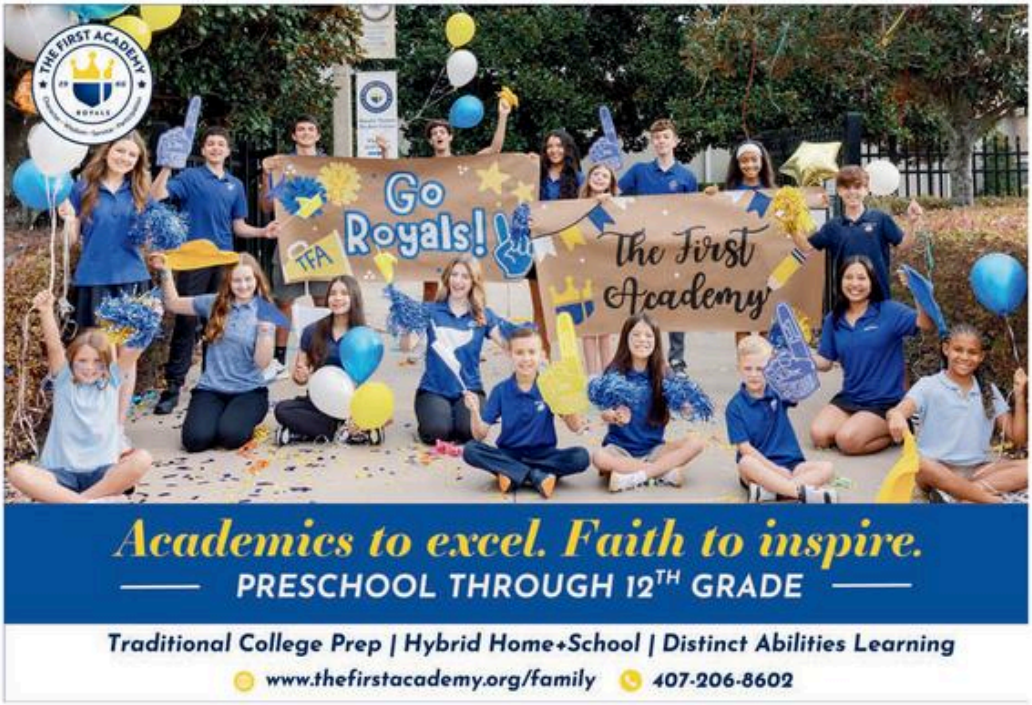
Besides choosing the right program and getting finances squared away, if a student is going to go out of state, or even just live on their own while remaining in Florida, they will need to have some basic life skills to ensure they will be able to successfully navigate being truly independent for the first time in their lives.

"I don't think there's a true gauge of if a child is ready or not. If parents feel like they aren't confident their child will survive elsewhere and they don't have certain life skill sets, that's something that they need to be working on," says Joyce Kwak, upper school principal of The First Academy.

Besides being able to cook, keep their space clean, get to their classes and finish assignments on time without being managed by an authority figure, students also need to be able to operate their own social lives without having anyone else to fix things for them if they mess up. Self-advocacy, problem solving, communication and the ability to work things out for themselves are some of the most important skills for anyone living on their own.

Additionally, Kwak emphasizes that some level of struggle isn't necessarily a bad thing, as not everything will always work out perfectly and those challenges can help to develop positive qualities.

"Thinking that everything's going to be smooth sailing; that's the wrong expectation [to have]. That's not life," says Kwak. "… There's going to be challenges, there will be trials, there will be tribulations … but you can stay committed, put in the work, persevere through all the ups and downs and you can still be successful."



EDUCATION



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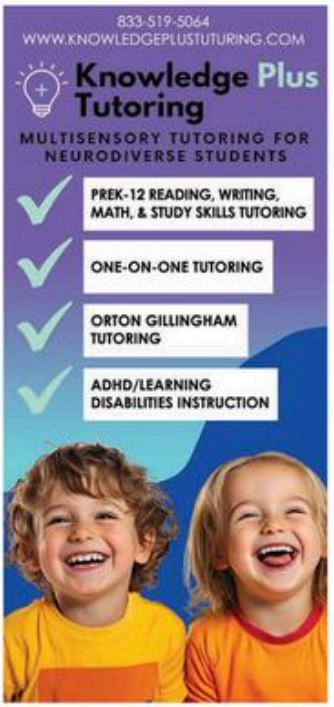
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EDUCATION

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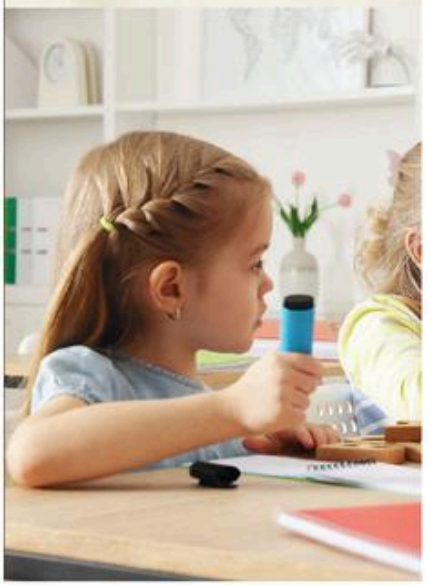
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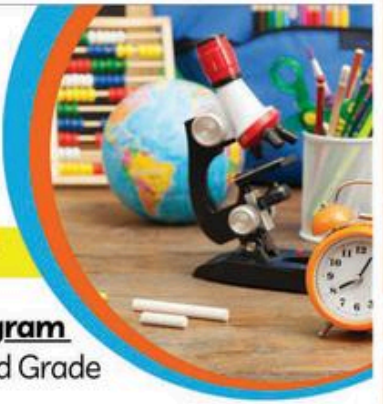
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HEALTH & WELLNESS

Hit the Sack

Getting a good night's sleep is critical for both children and adults in order to make healthy choices and avoid lingering issues.

BY MATT COSENTINO

MOST PARENTS GIVE A LOT OF THOUGHT TO SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE for their children when it comes to polite manners, a strong work ethic or a positive attitude. Being a role model in terms of having the right sleeping habits, however, is usually not top of mind—but maybe it should be.

"Children are like sponges," says Dr. Chirag Panchal, a family medicine physician with Orlando Health. "My son is 2 years old and he copies everything that I do. They learn from what we do and what we say, and healthy sleep is something that we can adopt as a family habit, not just a child habit."



Sleep recommendations vary according to age, but both children and adults are urged to prioritize a good night's rest in order to feel fresh on a daily basis and to avoid any long-term health issues. "Sleep deprivation causes us to make poor choices during the day," says Dr. Holly Skinner, a sleep medicine neurologist who serves as medical director of the AdventHealth Center for Sleep Disorders at AdventHealth Orlando.

"We tend to be less physically active and eat less healthy food. So inadequate sleep can lead to excessive weight gain. Also, sleep deprivation can cause impaired learning, mood dysregulation, tired appearance and lower self-esteem. Furthermore, we are more likely to get sick with infections when we are sleep deprived."

Dr. Panchal and Dr. Amber Teague, the chief of pediatric emergency medicine at HCA Florida Osceola Hospital, zero in on signs that a child may not be getting enough sleep. These include mood swings, irritability, difficulty with paying attention or problem solving, short temper and falling asleep on short car rides.

"Sometimes increased anxiety and depression can be side effects of not having enough sleep," Dr. Teague adds. "Sometimes children will complain of daytime fatigue and sleepiness, and that can be communication from them that they're not getting the right amount of sleep. If they're not getting good quality of sleep over a period of time, it can lead to other health things like increased blood pressure or obesity. If you're struggling with those things with your child … a sleep issue might be a component of it."

The physicians interviewed for this article agreed that having a regular routine, with established times for going to bed and waking up, is beneficial for both children and adults. Other suggestions to promote healthy sleep are avoiding caffeine later in the day, stopping screen time 60 minutes before going to bed, not eating four hours before falling asleep and doing relaxing activities like reading or yoga before bed.

Of course, some of those are easier to pull off than others.

"These are recommendations, but our lives are challenging and it can be hard to follow them," Dr. Teague says. "A lot of families are busy; they have multiple kids who are active in sports and doing things late, so sometimes you have to figure out a balance that you can make work for a happy, healthy kid, but also try to think about the consequences it can have on that sleep schedule."

Also, just following the medical recommendations does not ensure a person will get sufficient sleep.

"If you or someone you love seems to be following good sleep practices—including regular bedtime and wake time, avoiding caffeine after lunch, not using electronic devices in bed and being physically active during the day—but is still having trouble sleeping, then they may benefit from being seen in a sleep medicine clinic," Dr. Skinner says. "Additionally, snoring, recurrent nocturnal awakenings, unrefreshing sleep and daytime sleepiness despite adequate time in bed for age, are all clues that someone may benefit from seeing a sleep medicine provider."

For children, poor sleep can be signs of sleep apnea, anxiety or ADHD, Dr. Panchal explains.

"Before we treat the poor sleep, we have to diagnose it," he says. "We have to see what's going on. This is where it's very critical for parents to be involved and just attuned to how the child is doing. … There are a whole host of medical conditions that can affect and impact a child's ability to sleep and sleep well. So, I always encourage bringing your child into a pediatrician or your family medicine doctor if you're concerned that they might be getting poor sleep."

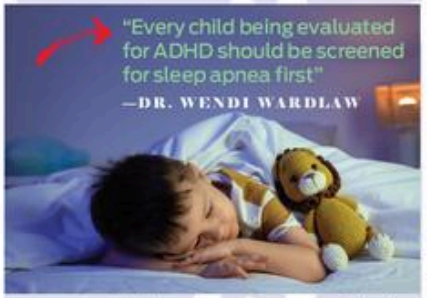
Dr. Wendi Wardlaw, who practices airway dentistry, stresses the importance of airway health for wellness throughout the body. She believes that sleep disorder breathing is often misdiagnosed as something else, such as ADHD.

"The American Academy of Pediatrics said over a decade ago that every child being evaluated for ADHD should be screened for sleep apnea first. Physicians are still not doing that," she says. "A child who is not breathing properly at night looks inattentive, looks hyperactive, looks impulsive and looks emotionally dysregulated every single day, and we are calling that ADHD and medicating it. The mouth is where it starts and nobody is looking there.

"Before we put a child on a stimulant medication for ADHD we should be asking, 'Is this child breathing properly at night? Is their mouth closed? Are they grinding their teeth? Are they mouth

breathing during the day?"

Dr. Wardlaw adds that obstructive sleep apnea is on the rise for children, and that those suffering from it may be at much higher risk of experiencing anxiety or depression.



She also encourages parents to consider that crooked or crowded teeth in a child may be a sign of an underdeveloped jaw and that braces might not necessarily be the answer. A thorough examination by an airway dentist can help.

"I'm super passionate about [airway dentistry] because nobody knows about it and we're living in a society where we're putting lipstick on a pig," she says. "We're just treating a symptom instead of going to the root cause, and the root cause of systemic disease goes back to the mouth.

"But I'm seeing miracles. I'm fixing airways and people's autoimmune diseases are disappearing; their bodies are healing; they're coming off high blood pressure and diabetes meds; they're coming off ADHD and depression meds; my kids are going from barely making good grades to getting straight A's. I'm seeing it, and that's why I'm passionate."

Setting Limits

Technology plays an important role in children's education, but too much screen time is a concern.

By Matt Cusentino

THERE IS NO DOUBT that today's children are growing up in a much different world than the one their parents experienced at the same age. Tablets have replaced textbooks in the classroom, many kids have their own cell phone by age 12 and social media has transformed the way interactions occur and information gets shared.

The big question, of course, is how much screen time is too much, and how do parents balance the pros and cons of technology?

"That is a hard one, and one that I think us as a society are going to continue to figure out and find a balance," says Dr. Amber Teague, the chief of pediatric emergency medicine at HCA Florida Osceola Hospital. "The ability to have technology at our fingertips for our learners has a vast impact on the knowledge they can gain and their understanding of the world. There's an ability to grow

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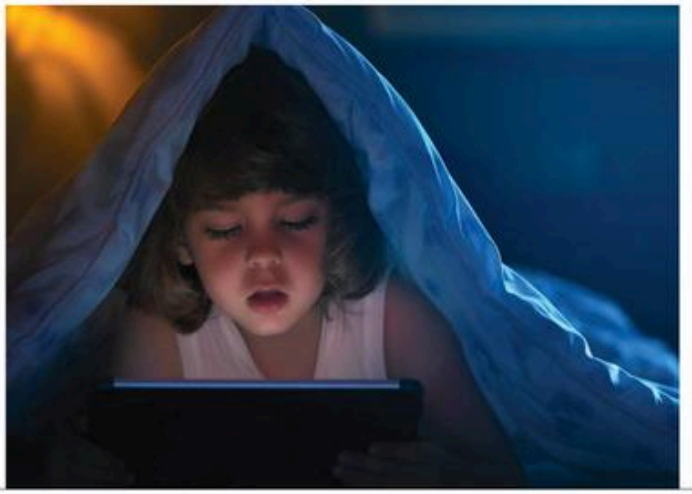
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and respect new cultures and societies in a way that wasn't there before. At the same time, the constant exposure to technology and screens does have negative health affects."

Dr. Teague points to research showing an increase in anxiety, particularly in teens and young adults, because of social media. She also explains that screens and their lights can affect the way people focus and ultimately eye function, and can have negative impacts on the sleep-wake cycle.



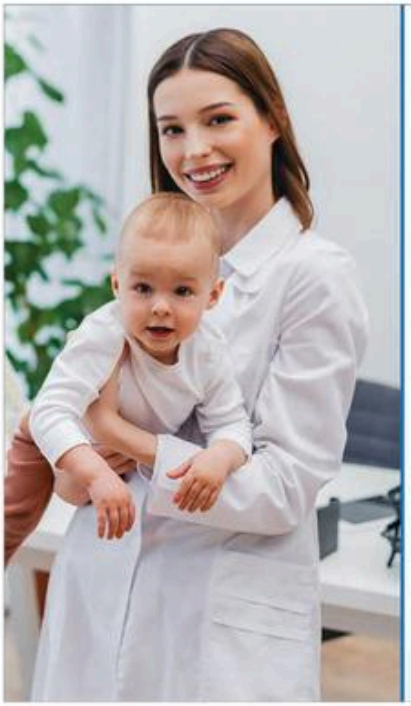
With that in mind, recommendations for children are no screen time at all for infants six months and younger; an hour a day for medium-aged children; and no more than two hours a day for those 6 and older. Of course, kids are often getting more screen time than that just during school hours.

"That's a challenge to accomplish with all of the demands of life," Dr. Teague admits. "There is research coming out, and the CDC even put out a policy statement recently, about evaluating the way we use technology in school and how we can balance the positive learning that we can achieve with it, while at the same time switching to more pen and paper rather than continuously using technology because of these potential side effects we're noticing that are out there."

Research into increased body mass index and obesity for the pediatric population suggests that screen time is one of several factors that may be influencing the rise. Screen time has also been linked to sleep deficiency.

As with many aspects of life, Dr. Teague encourages moderation.

"We have to figure out how to have healthy sleep, less screen time, encourage more activity, encourage more creative and independent thinking, but still at the same time support advanced learning opportunities," she concludes.



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SPECIAL NEEDS

Partners in Progress

Behind every effective special education plan is a parent committed to helping their child thrive.

BY PETER PROKO



When interacting with educators, families need to feel respected and valued.

PARENTS OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN are used to meeting challenges head-on, no matter how unique or unfamiliar they may be. This is especially true when it comes to education, where parents are relied upon to provide valuable insight into their child's strengths, struggles and needs. As their child's first teachers and strongest advocates, their participation in decision-making, communication with educators and support at home helps ensure that children receive the services and opportunities necessary for success.

After all, while educators bring expertise in teaching and development, parents know their child better than anyone else. But it's also important that parents understand they are not on this journey alone and that there are numerous services and support organizations ready, willing and able to lend a much-needed hand when the path forward becomes harder to navigate.

Natassia Ferguson understands this well. In her professional role with UCP of Central Florida, she has witnessed the notable impact these forged partnerships can make. And as a parent of a child who attended a UCP charter school, she personally knows that the journey can sometimes feel overwhelming.

"At UCP, we encourage families to be active partners in their child's education. We want parents to ask questions, share concerns, celebrate successes and advocate for what their child needs. The best outcomes happen when families and educators work together toward a common goal," says Ferguson.

As both a clinician and a fellow parent, Rachel DeSando feels similarly. The speech-language pathologist is the founder of Speech For Life and believes parents play one of the most important roles on a child's educational team.

"They know their child in ways that no assessment, report or school team ever could," she says. "They see the struggles, strengths, frustrations and successes that happen outside the classroom which in turn have an impact on academics."

But while their role is integral, DeSando advises that parents don't need to have all the answers or become experts in special education. "What matters most is staying engaged, asking questions, sharing what they're seeing at home and trusting their instincts when something doesn't feel right."

Taking an active role

Parents who take an active role in their child's special education process help create a stronger foundation for success. By attending meetings, communicating regularly with teachers and staying informed about their child's progress, parents become valuable partners in educational decision-making. Their involvement allows them to advocate for appropriate services and accommodations while ensuring that their child's needs are being met.

Active participation also helps maintain consistency between home and school, as parents can reinforce learning strategies and goals outside the classroom. When parents remain engaged throughout the process, they contribute to a more supportive and effective educational experience for their child.

According to Moresa Culbreath, Psy.D., a licensed school psychologist as well as the executive director and founder of We Care Support Services, early detection can not only help formulate the best approach to suit a child's needs, it can also be an eye-opener for parents.

"As someone who has been doing this for almost 20 years, I see a lot of parents of children with disabilities that don't know the importance of early detection," Culbreath says. "A lot of times they think their child is going to grow out of being nonverbal or that the child will grow out of being socially awkward. They see these things as something that is going to go away and so they do not get those early intervention services that are so important in a child's developmental journey.

"There's nothing wrong with a parent finding out that maybe their child isn't shy and on the spectrum, which a lot of times happens when a child is 10 or 11 years old. … A lot of the times when I do a clinical interview, the child has always had developmental challenges, but parents just interpret it as something else."

Forming a strategy

When it comes to the partnership between parents, advocates and educators, frequent communication, transparency and a shared focus on the child's growth help build a foundation of trust.

"Families need to feel heard, respected and valued," says Ferguson. "And educators need opportunities to understand the goals and concerns

of each family."

Encouraging parents to share information about what is happening at home, even what one may view as a small or inconsequential detail, can also provide important context that helps educators better support a student.

"Open communication helps establish common goals, trust and ongoing support," says Margaret Newman Thornton, Psy.D., chief operating officer with OCA, who adds that the communication should include both positive and negative feedback, and any novel changes that will impact the other. "Without thorough and complete information, each party cannot properly support each other or the child."

"When everyone is working from the same information and toward the same goals, children are more likely to thrive," affirms Ferguson.

Culbreath also stresses the need for parents to regularly meet with teachers to learn of their child's progress and to be sure key questions are being answered or areas of concern are being addressed.

"If they have a 504 plan or an individualized education plan (IEP), you want to make sure those plans are tailored to the child," she says. "What are those accommodations and are they being implemented? If it's an intervention, is it being done by an ESE teacher or someone else that comes in to provide those services? And are those services being implemented when they are supposed to be?"

DeSando says she wishes schools put more emphasis on helping parents understand the IEP process, noting that she has many parents come to her feeling afraid, anxious and completely unsure of what to expect.

"Facing an IEP team can feel overwhelming, especially for families navigating it for the first time. There are acronyms, assessments, meetings and recommendations that can be difficult to make sense of. Learning how to navigate within the system and structure can be tricky. … Many parents want help, but aren't always sure where to start," she says.

Some children may also need more intensive, specialized or frequent assistance away from school. Outside services can help address specific developmental, academic, behavioral, emotional or communication needs and provide additional opportunities for growth and skill development.

All in all, parents play a vital role in the special education process by working alongside educators and other professionals to support their child's growth and success. Their involvement helps guide important decisions, strengthens communication between home and school, and ensures that a child's individual needs are understood and addressed. While additional services and support systems are often necessary, parents remain key advocates for their child throughout the process. When everyone works together, students with special needs receive consistent support and are more likely to reach their full potential.





special needs

Making Connections Count

Small steps, guidance and support can help children develop the social skills needed to thrive.

BY PETER PROKO

FOR MANY CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS, social interaction can be one of the most complex parts of the school experience. While academic support is often at the center of special education planning, the ability to form friendships, navigate group settings and build peer relationships is just as important. Parents often find themselves in a unique position—not only advocating for services, but also helping their children develop the confidence and skills needed to connect with others in meaningful ways.

This support frequently begins at home, where everyday interactions become opportunities for growth. Parents may help their children rehearse conversations, interpret social situations or recognize emotional cues that might otherwise go unnoticed. Over time, these guided moments help children build a stronger understanding of how relationships work, making social environments feel less unpredictable and more manageable.

Beyond the home, many families actively seek out structured environments where social skills can develop more naturally. Organized activities such as community programs, interest-based clubs, or adaptive sports can provide valuable opportunities for peer interaction. In these settings, children are often able to connect through shared interests rather than social expectations, allowing friendships to form in a more organic and less pressured way.

"Children engage when they are interested in the topic," says Margaret Newman Thornton, Psy.D., OCA's chief operating officer. "Find ways to incorporate their personal interests into engagement, and they will naturally be drawn to participate. When children engage with others in an environment focused on their preferences, the engagement becomes naturally reinforcing and promotes further engagement."

While these social skills are developed with practice, there can be bumps in the road along the way. On the surface, parents may wish to not expose their children to any negative experiences but those moments of discomfort can actually have some underlying benefits.

"While it's natural to want to shield our children from disappointment, growth happens when they have opportunities to experience, navigate and learn from social situations with appropriate support," says Natassia Ferguson of UCP of Central Florida.

Ferguson further advises parents to start small and build confidence gradually. This might mean arranging one-on-one playdates, participating in clubs or activities centered around a child's interests or practicing social scenarios at home before entering new situations. They key is to provide support by helping children process social experiences without immediately stepping in to solve every challenge.



"Social skills training is one of the most important interventions when a child has difficulty with social engagement," says Moresa Culbreath, Psy.D., executive director and founder of We Care Support Services.

Culbreath recalls her former career as a school psychologist when she would introduce students to various social scenarios where they would hear a story and learn about how one is supposed to act in these specific situations.

"They may not understand social innuendos, jokes or things like that," says Culbreath. "These social scenarios give the children the necessary tools to express themselves and also to understand how to interpret what is being said to them as well."

Another helpful approach is for parents to focus on having their child form individual friendships rather than seek inclusion in larger peer groups. Ultimately, it's important to recognize one's natural preferences for how they like to engage socially and respect those preferences.

"My advice is usually to start small. Rather than focus on large groups, focus on helping a child build their turn taking, expressing feelings and problem solving with you in an effective way before expecting them to be able to do that with peers," says Rachel DeSando, speech-language pathologist and the founder of Speech For Life. "That said, shared interests can be an incredibly powerful way to spark a friendship, so starting at the [LEGO] club at the library or gymnastics may be a great place to start. Sometimes children connect more naturally through a common hobby, activity or passion than through direct instruction on social skills."

"There are introverts and extroverts throughout history, and the type of engagement that is promoted should meet the individual needs of that person to reduce the risk of it being aversive. Personal comfort will make the experience more meaningful," says Newman Thornton.

Because social development can be just as important as academic development, parents are encouraged to be proactive with these situations and beginning to do so at a young age will only further help prepare a child as they enter into adulthood and a series of new experiences.

"We learn through experiences, and having a loved one to help us navigate makes the experience far less stressful and provides a model for appropriate responses. Debriefing after a new experience also provides a learning opportunity to prepare for when a similar situation is encountered in the future," Newman Thornton says.

Culbreath echoes this sentiment, saying that parents of young children who are taking these proactive measures are ahead of the curve.

"You're doing what you're supposed to be doing at the right time because a lot of times once children get these interventions, they thrive. They may struggle a bit with the transition from elementary school to middle school or from middle school to high school, but once you get them ready for [life's] big changes, they are able to navigate them pretty well," she says.

Ferguson stresses that while being proactive is essential, it should never translate into pushing a child into situations they are not ready for.

"It means intentionally creating opportunities for them to practice communication, problem-solving, self-advocacy and relationship-building in age-appropriate ways," she says.

"Some of the most successful young adults I've worked with aren't necessarily the most outgoing. They're the ones who understand their strengths, know how to ask for help when needed and feel comfortable building relationships in ways that are authentic to them," says DeSando.

As children with special needs approach adulthood and prepare to leave school, the transition to employment becomes another critical milestone. Through early planning and collaboration with schools and community partners, families can help ensure a smoother path to meaningful employment.

One organization that helps prepare people with disabilities transition into the workforce is employU, which works to establish individualized career plans that help create opportunities while simultaneously working to build up confidence.

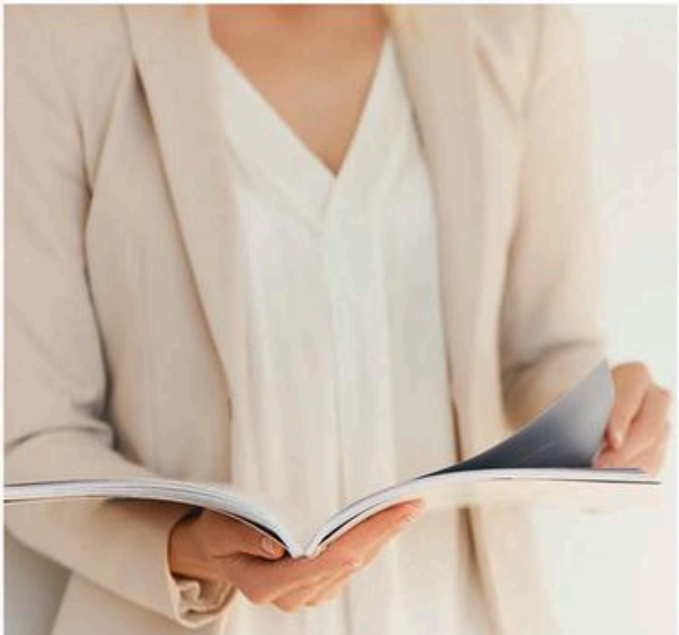
"Our goal is not only to prepare youth for employment, but to empower them to envision a future where they are meaningfully contributing to their communities while achieving their personal goals," says Kim Amiro, marketing and communications director.

As children grow under employU's guidance, they become increasingly more comfortable, making the transition to starting a career less daunting.

"One of the most rewarding aspects of our work is watching young people discover what they are capable of. Many participants begin with uncertainty about their abilities or discomfort in new social and workplace situations. Through hands-on experiences, skill-building activities and supportive coaching, we often see remarkable growth in self-confidence, communication skills, independence and problem-solving. As they gain experience and achieve successes, they become more willing to take on new challenges and advocate for themselves," says Amiro.

Ferguson notes that as parents gradually expand a child's comfort zone, it's important to provide support and encouragement along the way. Celebrating growth wherever it occurs helps establish the ultimate goal: greater independence.

"Every conversation, friendship, challenge and success contributes to helping a child become a confident adult who can navigate the world, build meaningful relations and advocate for themselves," she says.



reader response

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Swing of the Ax

In his historical fantasy Valhalla Burning, novelist **Michael Pogach** tells a story about the metamorphic power of family, grief, and vengeance.

BY BILL DONAHUE

Michael Pogach has been a storyteller for as long as he can remember. He traces his love of stories to the culture of his youth, including action figures and games such as The Legend of Zelda. His parents deserve some credit, too. As a child, when he asked for toys during shopping trips with his family, his parents—his mother in particular—had a simple rule: "Yes, to a book. You can always get a book."

Their encouragement paid off. Pogach, has had many of his stories picked up by publishers. His latest novel, *Valhalla Burning* from Diversion Books, will be released in July. A work of historical fantasy, *Valhalla Burning* is a richly written (and occasionally bloody) tale about a Northman named Runr who undertakes a transformative journey after the death of his daughter.

Q&A



To boil it down, *Valhalla Burning* is a dark story about family and grief and vengeance—and Vikings. What compelled you to write this story?

When I finish writing a book, I have a massive existential crisis where I don't know if I'm ever going to have a story again to tell. I was on sabbatical from my teaching job in the fall of 2020. … Right about that time, I was playing *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. Because I have little kids, I can't play video games like I used to. It took me about a year and a half to [finish] *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. Somewhere in there, I just decided: Hell, I'm going to write a Viking book. That was kind of the start of it. I had just read *Heart-Shaped Box* by Joe Hill, and I decided I wanted to do a Viking ghost story. … I sat down and wrote 30,000 words and then put it away, and then in the spring I came back to it. Over the next year or so it morphed away from being this ghost story into what it is now, which is what I pitched as like John Wick but with Vikings.

The story begins quickly, with an event that sets the rest of the story in motion. I don't want to give away too much, but tell me about how you got into the mindset of your main character, who goes on a long, hard journey, we'll say.

Runr [the novel's protagonist] has lost his four-year-old daughter, and this is obviously traumatic for him, and he's trying to come to terms with that loss: what it does to his family, to his status in his village, what it means for him as a Northman, as a man; the book definitely has a lot to do with what it means to be a human versus a man versus a woman versus what society says about what you feel, who you really are. He starts to learn, once he gets out of his insular home, what the world really offers and what he's capable of in terms of growth and healing, but also in terms of rage and vengeance and things like that.

The story seems rooted in actual history, but it has supernatural underpinnings, too. Based on your research, what role did the supernatural—connections with gods, prophets, the afterlife—play in Vikings' beliefs, their lives and the way they saw the world?

In all of my books, I like to play with mythology and folklore. One thing I like to tell my students, when we talk about things like Norse mythology, we don't talk about what the Scandinavians of the 9th and 10th centuries believed, because that implies the idea that they understood that it was this thing they were choosing to involve themselves in. It's the same approach we take when we talk about witchcraft in the later Middle Ages. [People back then] didn't believe in devils and witches; they knew they were real.

Mythology is about explaining the things we don't necessarily have the tools to explain some other way. Norse mythology is not just Loki doing his thing and Thor swinging a hammer; it's also very granular, [and] very involved in the earth and the water and the sea and the fjords, the mountains. It's about everyday life. The gods are a part of the characters' lives, the mystical nature of life, and death and birth and everything else. Then there's hints of straight-up monsters and other fun stuff as well. … I chose which aspects of Norse culture to focus on to give the feeling of legitimacy and honest history.

Senior Living

Aging Without Worry

When a person becomes incapacitated, many questions arise about how their medical, financial and legal decisions will be made, which is why establishing a power of attorney is vital.

BY ABIGAIL TWIFORD

AGING IS A TIME IN ONE'S LIFE that's completely unlike any other stage, coming with both its own special set of benefits and unique challenges.

A person's senior years can come with leisure and free time that allows older adults to relax, put more focus into their hobbies, spend time with family and friends, do house and yard work, learn new skills, stay active or volunteer for a cause they care about, especially for those who are able to partially or fully retire.

While these benefits of becoming an elder are something for many to look forward to, growing into old age also comes with risks and concerns. Though many midlife adults have at least one chronic health condition, risks of these already existing conditions progressing or developing a new condition increase as one gets into their senior years.

Due to these concerns, especially for those who do have preexisting health conditions or disabilities, it is important to be prepared in the event of an emergency, especially one where the elderly individual in the situation may be incapacitated in some way, whether from an accident, a stroke or an illness that diminishes one's capacity, like dementia or Alzheimer's.

This is why establishing a power of attorney well in advance of actually needing one may be a good idea for anyone, especially seniors.

A durable power of attorney, or DPA, is a legal document that allows a person, called the principal, to designate another person as their agent. In this role, the agent is authorized to handle all of the principal's financial and legal dealings on their behalf during their lifetime.

Acting under this document, the agent is given the power to buy and sell real estate, refinance mortgages, access bank accounts to pay bills, and speak with creditors, utility companies or lenders on behalf of the principal.

"A durable power of attorney is often the most valuable tool in an estate plan as it can give someone authority to manage your finances during your life," says Pamela Martini, an Orlando-based attorney who, along with her team, specializes in elder law, probate and trust law, estate planning and guardianship.

In the absence of a DPA, no one is given the automatic authority to act on an incapacitated person's behalf, meaning a court process to establish guardianship is initiated and forcing families through the court proceedings. These court processes eat up time, are invasive to the family and can get very expensive, with attorney fees and other costs generally reaching between $5,000 and $15,000. In the case of a court-appointed guardian, the costs don't end there, with required representation every year for the rest of the ward's life, bringing in further fees and costs.



Costs aren't the only worry in a guardianship case, as there's a chance that the judge overseeing the case will appoint a professional guardian, a person who is unknown to the person and their family and who is not chosen by anyone but the court.

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"They are now in charge of every aspect of your life, so it's always best to be prepared with the documents, so that if you lose capacity, we've already planned for that, and we have the right person in the right role," says Michelangelo Mortellaro Esq., founding attorney of Mortellaro Law, which specializes in estate planning, elder law, asset protection and probate law. Mortellaro has also spoken at the Florida Geriatric Society's Annual Symposium.

In the best cases, this is an uncomfortable situation to be put in. In the worst cases, guardians can abuse their power to utilize finances and assets in ways that are not to the ward's benefit.

Ensuring that a guardianship process does not need to be initiated is not the only benefit of having a DPA, as the document, when drafted properly, can also serve as a way to protect one's assets and get governmental assistance when needed.

Mortellaro emphasizes that for these elements to be properly included in the document, a qualified elder law attorney should be the one drafting it over an estate planning attorney, explaining that DPAs drafted by estate planning lawyers are generally five to 12 pages while those drafted by legal professionals with expertise in elder law are 32 to 35 pages.

"Elder law attorneys include asset protection and elder law language in their power of attorney documents that, at least in Florida, will allow you to obtain government benefits, such as Medicaid long-term care coverage, and let the government pay for home care, assisted living, memory care or skilled nursing, while allowing you to avoid the default Medicaid rules, which are that you spend all of your assets down to below $2,000," says Mortel-



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Senior Living

Aging Without Worry (continued)

laro, going on to explain that his firm has handled cases where individuals have had up to $12 million in assets that did not have to be spent down with the inclusion of the correct language.

It's important for a lawyer to guide the process, as all documents need to be drafted in accordance with state law in order to be effective.

"In Florida, the controlling law is Chapter 709 of the Florida Statutes. The attorney will explain which powers can legally be delegated. Without proper drafting, a DPA may fail when it is needed most," says Carolyn Sawyer, a member of the Senior Resource Alliance Advisory Council and retired elder law attorney.

Having a power of attorney in place in case of incapacitation is not only beneficial for ensuring legal and financial matters are squared away, but also for ensuring that medical questions and treatments are able to be handled as the person would wish.

"We would all like for our aging relatives to always be with us mentally and physically, but unfortunately there come times when it doesn't happen that way. We would like to know what their medical wishes and concerns are, and by having that power of attorney, that is already established before things take a turn for the worst, and their wishes could be taken care of, no matter what happens," says Dr. Reo Peniston, chief of family medicine at Community Health Centers.

In addition, having a health care power of attorney in place can ensure care is given swiftly and arguments don't arise among family members over major decisions about medical interventions like resuscitation and intubation if a medical condition progresses far enough.

"In the health care environment, when you do not have a health care power of attorney and life decisions need to be made, there can be things like family conflicts. Medical decisions can get delayed, which means treatment gets delayed," explains Dr. Chirag Panchal of Orlando Health.

Though it is important to establish a health care power of attorney, Florida has a default system that allows a person's family to make those major decisions without going through the court process required for other financial and legal decisions.

"If you don't want your family making those decisions, if you've had a falling out with your kids … it's critical to have powers of attorney. Otherwise, people that you don't want to be making decisions for you may be doing it," says attorney Randy Bryan of Hoyt & Bryan, LLC.

Professionals in both the legal and medical fields agree that there are certain criteria that anyone being considered to take on the role of one's power of attorney should follow.

Honesty, reliability and the ability to make difficult decisions under stressful circumstances are all important traits for any agent to possess.

"You must choose someone who you absolutely trust to manage your affairs on your behalf and not someone who would engage in exploitation or act outside the authority you have granted them. … When you execute a durable power of attorney in Florida, it is effective immediately, meaning that if your designated agent has the DPOA document, they can use it to access your accounts, even if you are not incapacitated. This is why you must designate a trustworthy party and remember that the authority can be revoked if any concerns arise," says Martini.

In addition to trustworthiness, the skills to properly execute financial and legal matters on the principal's behalf are important.

"It is also wise to consider family relationships and potential sources of conflict. An attorney can help you think through these issues and select the person best suited for the role," says Sawyer.

Additionally, a person's health care power of attorney and DPA for legal and financial concerns can be different people.

"The decisions are very, very different for the two powers, and it's not unusual for somebody to say, 'I want this group of people over here to make my medical decision, but I prefer to have a different lineup or legal and financial stand for decisions,'" says Bryan.

Power of attorney is not the only document available to those looking to ensure that all of their estate planning boxes are ticked. As the authority bestowed by a DPA ends with the death of the principal, for any matters that need to be taken care of post mortem, a last will and testament is needed.

A revocable living trust is a document that gives a person of the principal's choosing the responsibility for managing property at the principal's direction during their life, as well as being able to execute the person's wishes for their estate after death as well, distributing trust property to beneficiaries or managing the property for the benefit of said beneficiaries.

All of these documents require the proper professional care in their drafting, as they are important tools for estate planning and protecting one's wishes before and after death.

"It's about protecting your future voice," says Dr. Panchal.



Signs of Decline

It's important to look out for the warnings of cognitive issues in seniors before any potential neurological or dementia-related diseases are able to further degenerate the mind. *By Abigail Twiford*

One of the most commonly accepted parts of getting older is slowing down, both in the physical and mental aspects of life. Part of this is the choice of some seniors, but some of it is necessitated due to physical or mental limitations that can accompany aging in some individuals.

While it is generally accepted that some mental lapses come with growing into old age, it is important not to take that fact for granted, as some actions and behaviors that are often written off as a loved one simply getting older can be signs of cognitive decline that signal a larger overall neurological health concern.

"It's just a matter of making sure we know the difference between simple things that come with aging versus is this part of the cognitive decline, and that's when we start doing examinations and tests," says Dr. Reo Peniston, chief of family medicine at Community Health Centers.

One early sign of cognitive decline is forgetfulness, especially if that forgetfulness is unusual for them or if it's a pattern. Common initial indicators of this are bills going unpaid or appointments being missed, asking repetitive questions or telling the same story over and over again.

"While occasional forgetfulness can be a normal part of aging, consistent or worsening changes should be evaluated," says Kaila Radka, president and CEO of the Senior Resource Alliance.

Simple forgetfulness can be a signal of decline that may degenerate as time goes on. Symptoms can become more concerning, like trouble planning and problem solving, difficulty finding the correct words, identifying objects, completing familiar tasks or getting lost while driving or walking around their own neighborhoods. Mood swings, isolation, depression, anxiety or other changes in behavior or temperament can also indicate that seeing a doctor would be wise.

While all of these can warn of cognitive decline, that is not the only possible cause, and it is important to rule out other conditions with a trip to their primary care doctor.

"There are several things that can look like dementia, but aren't. So you don't want to just hop to the worst-case scenario, and [instead] get that person checked out," says Robin Rountree, director of communications and marketing for the Alzheimer's & Dementia Resource Center.

If all other possible conditions are ruled out and some form of cognitive decline or dementia is the culprit, the next step is a referral to a dementia specialist, who can look for signs of neurodegenerative disease.

"Alzheimer's starts with mild changes in cognition, which progress over time (months to years). We now see that the earlier they are diagnosed the more options for treatment someone can have," says Dr. Valeria Baldiviezo of AdventHealth's Neuroscience Institute.

If the symptoms of decline are impacting the senior's daily life, particularly if they are being endangered in any way such as through wandering or becoming disoriented, professional memory care is strongly recommended.

Mary Travis, PhD., of Travis Psycho Educational Services Inc., emphasizes the importance of getting memory care early.

"Have the conversation early. Because if you wait, people are going to become quite defensive," says Travis.

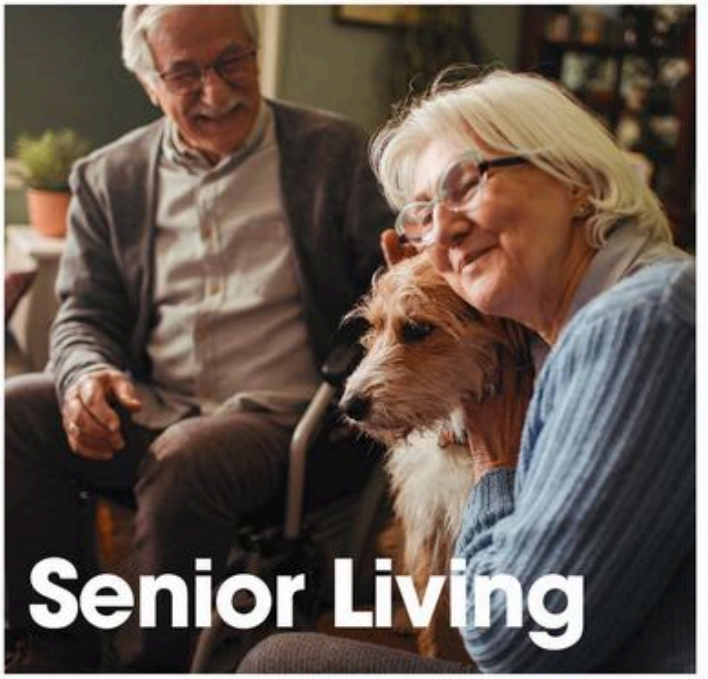
Memory care takes many forms. In early stages of any form of dementia or cognitive condition, care mostly takes the form of preventing further decline. Prevention and memory care in this stage can include medications to help slow the decline, as well as lifestyle changes that promote brain health.

"This is part of an all-encompassing approach to health. What's good for your heart can be good for your brain, regular physical exercise, good social engagement within the community around you, mental stimulation. Screens in general, they're more passive. I encourage people to read books, encourage people to do puzzles, something that stimulates the mind. Learning a new skill or language, you're never too old and you're never too young," says Dr. Chirag Panchal of Orlando Health.

While all of these things can help to partially prevent a senior's mind from slipping further, if these measures prove ineffective and the decline progresses, more comprehensive memory care like assisted living can help specifically to increase safety and aid the senior in the specific ways they may need.

"Reach out for help before you think you need it. A lot of times our ego gets in the way and we think we can handle this. But if you're dealing with a dementia-related illness, you really need a ton of support," says Rountree.





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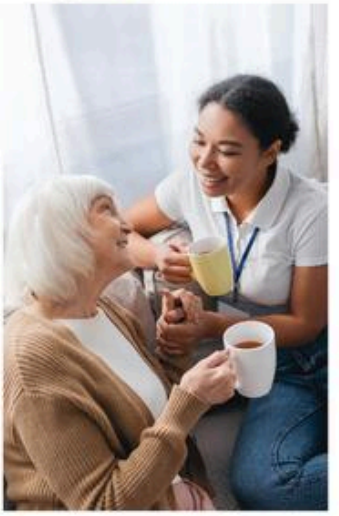
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Abby Harrell and Josef Wright

Two outstanding high school performers will represent the Florida region at the Jimmy Awards in New York City after being named nominees at the 12th Annual Applause Awards at Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts. Abby Harrell and Josef Wright earned the coveted honor in front of a sold-out crowd inside Walt Disney Theater, securing their spots in the national competition.



Chris Martin

The American Red Cross Central Florida Coast Chapter recently honored Seminole County Fire Department Firefighter/Paramedic Chris Martin during its Great Orlando Salute to Heroes Breakfast. Martin was recognized with a First Responder Hero Award for his courage, compassion and dedication to pediatric drowning prevention efforts that embody the mission of the American Red Cross. He earned the recognition for his commitment to drowning prevention education and pool safety initiatives throughout Seminole County following the tragic drowning of his son, Gunner Martin, on April 6, 2016. The loss inspired Martin to pursue a career in the fire service in 2022, and he recently became a paramedic.



Dhruv Patel and Angie Bai

Two students at Orlando Science Charter School (OSS) East Campus are advancing to the National Math League Competition. Sixth graders Dhruv Patel and Angie Bai qualified for the event while demonstrating their skills with and without a calculator during the state-level tournament, which was hosted at the main OSS campus in May. The mathematicians will once again be tested on their arithmetic when they go up against hundreds of participants from across the country in July.

Each month, Stars features exceptional students, student-athletes, educators and all-around boons to the Greater Orlando area.



Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida

Nearly 300 local hunger fighters recently came together to raise over $370,000 for Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida. The funding generated at this year's Ultimate Garden Party presented by Glenda G. Morgan Foundation and supported by CoreGiving will help provide 1.5 million meals for Central Floridians experiencing food insecurity.



Quest, Inc.

Central Florida nonprofit Quest, Inc. is celebrating raising $500,000 to help people with developmental disabilities live full lives. In May, the organization hosted its 30th annual Wine Quest in partnership with Southern Glazer's Wine and Spirits at the Caribe Royale Orlando. Proceeds from the two-night signature fundraiser directly support Quest programs such as children's therapy and education, employment training and placement, residential communities, life-skills training and summer camp experiences.



Soul of a Warrior

Thomas G. Waites, actor, director and front man for the band Heartbreak Waites, reflects on his journey to the limelight.

BY BILL DONAHUE

Thomas G. Waites, who grew up in Levittown, has enjoyed a sprawling career that linked him to many legends of stage and screen: Wilford Brimley, Farrah Fawcett, Debbie Harry, Andy Kaufman, Al Pacino and Kurt Russell, to name only a few. He has since honed his talents as an acting instructor, screenwriter and director. (His 2023 film, a titillating sexual comedy called *Target*, is available on Amazon Prime.) He says he learned a lot about running a set from Carpenter—namely, to always maintain a sense of humor and to treat his actors with the utmost respect.

Waites likes to keep multiple irons in the fire, new projects to stir his excitement. Perhaps his greatest passion at the moment is his music. He leads a folk-rock-Americana band called Heartbreak Waites and his goal with his music is "to raise the vibration of the planet."

Waites, now 71, remembers himself as a creative kid—and, admittedly, a bit of a troublemaker, until his trajectory took a dramatic turn. While studying at Bucks County Community College in Pennsylvania, he won a scholarship to The Juilliard School in New York. Juilliard not only helped him refine his craft as an actor, but also planted the seeds for his career as a musician.

"I am a determined sort," he says. "When I want something, I'm like a bulldog with a bone in its mouth. I just keep banging on the door until it gives in. Here I am a septuagenarian protest singer, talking to you to try and get audiences to come and share my music."

Following are excerpts of my hour-long interview with Waites, during which we talked about his struggles and successes.

You were early into your career when you were in *The Warriors* and *The Thing*, and then *The Clan of the Cave Bear* shortly after that. What was it like for you being a young guy, on set in places so far and different from the small working-class town where you were born and raised?

Here I was this kid growing up, thinking that the greatest job in the world was working in the steel mill, and there's nothing wrong with working in the steel mill, but I am not a steel-mill guy. How does a person with artistic inclinations fit in to this working-class, blue-collar neighborhood? … I found my way through Shakespeare. Shakespeare is what got me out of there, and got me a scholarship to Juilliard where I was trained as an actor. Then all of a sudden I was catapulted into the world of Hollywood, which is quite an interesting place. There I am, 23 years old, shooting *The Warriors*, and we were in some rugged places: the Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island, Coney Island. Coney Island was probably the roughest place.

Actors by and large, especially when they're in a starring position or main character, are treated like children. This was a shock to me. For my first film, [I was] being flown first class, they do your dry cleaning, they do your laundry, they pay you per diem to eat, they pay you enormous amounts of money. It's quite different from how I grew up—and I enjoyed being spoiled.

Setting was a huge factor in all three of those films—being on the ice for *The Thing*, and on the tundra and in the forest for *The Clan of the Cave Bear*. When you were in these places did you ever think: What the heck am I doing here?

It's one thing to go on adventures in the city. It's another thing to go on adventures in these places—especially in *The Clan of the Cave Bear*—that hadn't been touched since they were discovered. It was practically virgin territory. The immensity and beauty of nature was stupefying; you just looked around and saw nature at her grandest. In *The Thing* as well, in Hyder, Alaska, it was quite beautiful. Hyder was the base camp, and we would go to British Columbia for certain shots.

In *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, we spent a long time in those kinds of conditions, in caves; it was a brutal shoot. *The Thing* was a blast; it was like going to a party every day and getting paid for it. Because John Carpenter has this enigmatic way of veiling his will upon the actors without them ever knowing it and making it seem like you're having fun, yet he's getting a great performance out of everyone. And he happens to be a particularly kind human being that has been very generous and friendly with me throughout the years, and helped me out in a lot of different ways.

You mentioned being a creative kid who felt like he didn't belong, looking for a place to fit in. You talked about Shakespeare being formative in your career. What was it about Shakespeare that unlocked something for you?

Life has a way of guiding us. I was not a good kid; the police had been to my house three times by the time I was 13. The universe sent a car to hit me and put me in the hospital for nine months. My femur was broken in half. … After I got out of the hospital, I'm in a body cast from the chest down, and my oldest sister, Kathleen—my personal hero in life, an amazing woman—took me to the drive-in to see Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*. And I wept. And I wept for my life and I wept for the lives of all the people around me who were trapped in this kind of nightmare of, "You're never going to get anywhere, you're never going to be anything." I saw this film, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the next day I memorized the entire balcony scene, both characters, and I can do them to this day. And I used that to get a scholarship to Juilliard.

You went to Juilliard for acting, but it's known mostly as a music school. At what point did music come into your life? Was it always there and you just tamped it down, or did it come about later?

First of all, I was stone tone deaf when I was 21 … but I had a director from the Moscow Art Theatre direct me in a play called *The Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorky. My character had to play the guitar and sing a very difficult Russian ballad—very difficult. So I spent $25 on an Epiphone guitar. If you were having a party and wanted everyone to go home, you would ask me to play guitar and sing. But during the process of rehearsing that play, I learned that song. I was surrounded by the greatest musicians in the world, and they taught me painstakingly how to play the song. Then I learned I had a knack for [music]. It seemed like every play I was in, I had to play or sing, or both. I actually did a musical on Broadway with Deborah Harry in 1983, called *Teaneck Tanzi*, which was so bad it almost closed at intermission. People left in rows, but not because of Debbie; she was fantastic to work with. … It was Andy Kaufman's last performance, lovely man.

Photos courtesy of Thomas G. Waites


The Chapman

THE 10 SPOT: Salads

By Peter Proko

No longer just considered as a side dish, there's something overly satisfying about a well-made salad where the ingredients sing in perfect harmony. The best ones deliver crunch, color and bold flavors that could steal the spotlight from any main course. Our area is full of inspired and inventive offerings and these 10 standout salads prove healthy eating is far from boring.

1905 at Columbia Restaurant
This award-winning salad gets a lot of attention and is certainly worth the hype. Iceberg lettuce is topped with julienned baked ham, Swiss cheese, tomatoes, olives, grated cheese, Worcestershire sauce and is finished with an intoxicating homemade garlic dressing.


Giardino

K&Q at Giardino Gourmet Salads
A combination of kale and romaine set the stage for a comforting assortment of organic quinoa, roasted sweet potatoes, chickpeas, creamy goat cheese and sliced almonds, all of which are topped with a flavorful ginger dressing and toasted pitas for a little textural balance.


Sizzlin' Greens

Italian Chopped at Sizzlin' Greens
A fan favorite featuring an amalgamation of shredded romaine, salami, mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses, olives, roasted red peppers, pepperoncini, cucumber, red onion, heirloom tomatoes and chickpeas with drizzles of a house-made Mediterranean vinaigrette.

Seasonal Floridian at The Chapman
Peppery arugula and little gem lettuce are the foundation for English pea shoots, goat cheese, strawberries, blueberries, mango, hearts of palm, peas, avocado, pistachio and a tart, tangy citrus vinaigrette.

Grazing Cow at Greens & Grille
Romaine is topped with smoky grilled onions, juicy tomatoes, crispy bacon, creamy avocado and sharp aged white cheddar. Finished with a bold chipotle-lime dressing, this salad balances fresh, savory and smoky flavors with just the right touch of heat.

Emerald Kale and Chicken at Hillstone
Tender kale and rotisserie chicken are tossed with fresh herbs, shaved Parmesan Reggiano and a rich roasted peanut vinaigrette, delivering a mix of nutty, herbaceous and creamy flavors with a fresh finish in every bite.

Brussels and Broccoli at Lazy Moon
While this place is beloved for its oversized slices of pizza, don't overlook this concoction made with Brussels sprouts and broccoli that's been roasted, chilled and chopped, and then served with toasted cashews, dates, pecorino cheese and a maple-mustard vinaigrette.

Mediterranean at 903 Mills Market
There are lots of superb salads on the menu here, but we're suckers for this medley of lettuce tossed with spinach, tangy banana peppers, Kalamata olives, crumbled feta and your choice of eggplant or gyro meat.

Ensalada Superica at Superica
This eponymous salad features a star-studded lineup of cucumber, roasted corn, avocado, pickled red onion, cheese, crispy tortilla chips and a creamy Mexican oregano dressing, bringing together forkfuls of vibrant flavors.

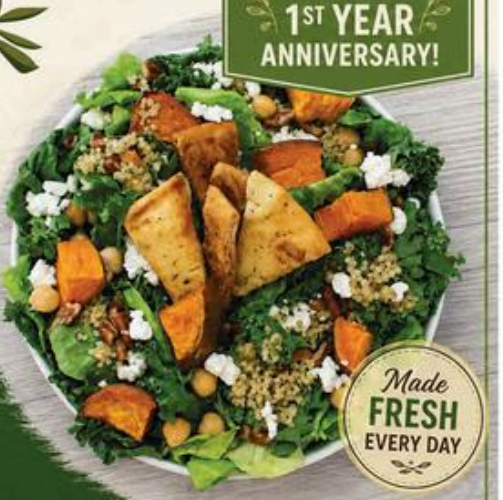

Greenbeat

Nostra Salmon at Greenbeat
Green leaf and spring mix lettuce are topped with feta, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, Kalamata olives, red onion and roasted salmon, with a bright basil-lime dressing adding a light citrusy touch.

Giardino

salads | bowls | wraps | soups

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OUT & ABOUT

A look at upcoming events around the Greater Orlando area

July 1
Summer Family Art Workshop: Printmaking Party, 10 a.m.-noon, free, Art & History Museums, Maitland

July 3
Violectric Presents "Tribute to American Rock Bands", 7-9 p.m., free, Aloft Orlando Downtown

July 4
22nd Annual All American Kids Parade, 8-10:30 a.m., free, Winter Garden Masonic Lodge

July 3–5
Independence Day Celebration, 9:30 a.m.-4 p.m., free, The Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art

July 6
Free Day & Story Time at Leu Gardens, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., free, Harry P. Leu Gardens

July 8
Jodi Benson with Benjamin Rauhala, 7 p.m., ticket prices vary, Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts

July 10
Launch Paw-ty: "Dog Days of Summer—The Ulti-Mutt Art Exhibit", 6-8 p.m., free admission, Winter Garden City Hall: Art in Public Places Gallery

July 10
Are You Ready for It: A Taylor Swift Dance Party, 7 p.m., $20-$25, The Abbey

July 10–12
Urinetown: The Musical, Times and ticket prices vary, Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts

July 11
Past Meets Present, America 250: The Declaration of Independence, 1-2:30 p.m., free, Winter Park Library

July 11–19
FIFA World Cup 2026 Experience at LEGOLAND Florida Resort, Park hours, included with admission, Winter Haven

July 11–19
Orlando Soccer Celebration Presented by Verizon, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., free, Pointe Orlando

July 13–19
Color Days: Teal, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., included with admission, Crayola Experience

July 17–19
Moon Festival, Park hours, included with admission, Kennedy Space Center

July 17
Grand Opening Gala 7:30 p.m., $150, The Winter Park Playhouse

July 18
Archives Day, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., free, Central Florida Railroad Museum

July 18 & 19
Puppet Play Day: Peter Rabbit, Varies by date, starting at $15, Orlando Family Stage

July 19
Collectors World Outpost Summer 2026, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., $5 for adult tickets, kid tickets free, DoubleTree by Hilton Orlando Theme Park Resort

July 23
Louis Tomlinson: "How Did We Get Here?" World Tour, 7 p.m., ticket prices vary, Addition Financial Arena

July 23–26
Enchanted: Live the Fantasy, Time varies by date, prices vary, Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate

July 24
Sunset at the Zoo: Celebrating Black & African American Heritage, 5-8 p.m., starting at $6 each, Central Florida Zoo & Botanical Gardens

July 25 & 26
Patriotism on Plant: A Musical Journey Celebrating America's 250th, Times and ticket prices vary, Garden Theatre

July 30
Anime Soundtracks Live: The Music of Yoko Kanno Feat. Raj Ramayya, 8-10 p.m., $25.50 to $45.50, Hard Rock Live

Recurring daily through Sept. 6
Summer by the Lake at Grande Lakes Orlando, Time varies by date, prices vary, JW Marriott Orlando, Grande Lakes

Recurring daily thorugh Sept. 7
Red, White and Blue Nights, Sunset to 10 p.m., free, Luminary Green Park

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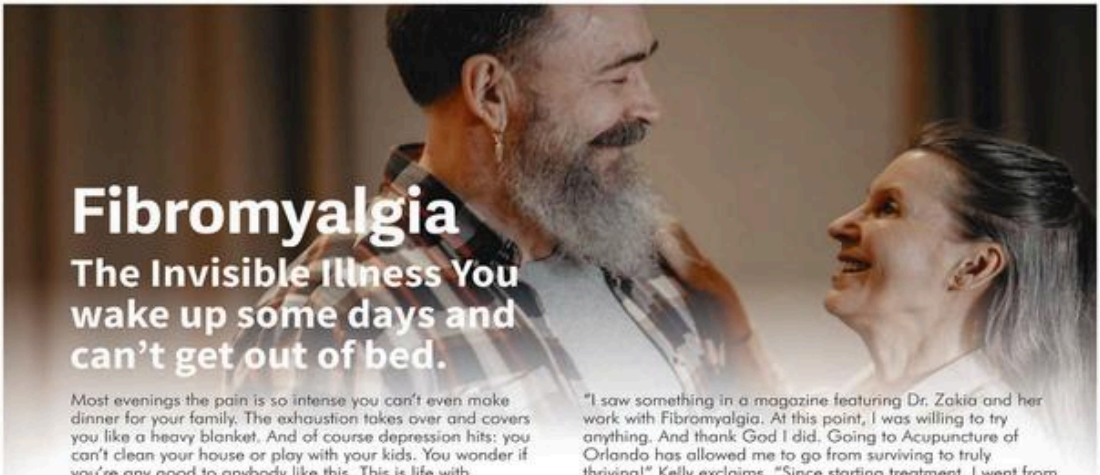
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Fibromyalgia

The Invisible Illness You wake up some days and can't get out of bed.

Most evenings the pain is so intense you can't even make dinner for your family. The exhaustion takes over and covers you like a heavy blanket. And of course depression hits: you can't clean your house or play with your kids. You wonder if you're any good to anybody like this. This is life with Fibromyalgia. And it was everyday life for Kelly C. of Orlando, FL.

"I would spend my days in bed as the pain traveled to different parts of my body. Often it would feel as though there were bugs scurrying under my skin, a sensation I wish on no one. Look, I knew my family needed me, and it was devastating to disappoint them day after day because I didn't feel well," shares Kelly.

Fibromyalgia is a complicated and chronic condition that disrupts the lives of over 4 million people in the U.S. Because of inconsistent and all-encompassing symptoms, fibromyalgia remains one of the most difficult conditions to diagnose and treat. Ultimately, it becomes a diagnosis of exclusion. Scans show nothing, tests come back inconclusive, and your questions don't have answers so the doctors diagnose you with "fibro."

A majority of practitioners will recommend anti-inflammatory diets, increasing your intake of magnesium, or prescribe prescription medications that come with a slew of uncomfortable side effects. All of these are band-aids, masking the symptoms rather than fixing them.

"All the doctors and specialists I met with couldn't offer me a real solution. Some even had the audacity to tell me that my pain was all in my head. I had never felt so defeated and disrespected. I started doing my own research - reading articles that told me to go gluten-free and eliminate toxins, even in my face wash. I did all of it and didn't find any relief. However, I was having such a hard time focusing and concentrating. I'm not entirely confident in anything I did."

Kelly's story is not uncommon amongst those suffering from fibromyalgia. The pain is inconsistent and unrelenting, causing debilitating chronic fatigue and brain fog, something the afflicted not-so affectionately refer to as 'fibro fog.' There are a few suggested causes for fibromyalgia including genetics, infections, and physical trauma, but so much about this disease is still so unknown that it has been dubbed the 'invisible illness.' Until now!

"I saw something in a magazine featuring Dr. Zakia and her work with Fibromyalgia. At this point, I was willing to try anything. And thank God I did. Going to Acupuncture of Orlando has allowed me to go from surviving to truly thriving!" Kelly exclaims. "Since starting treatment, I went from not being able to cook dinner for my family to cooking for my daughter's entire graduation party and playing slip-n-slide with two dozen teenagers. I was even able to go visit my mother for the first time in two years! Before I was unable to make the ride because it put me in too much pain. I even hugged her!"



And why do Dr. Zakia and the staff at AOO have a 90% success rate in treating Fibromyalgia?

Dr. Zakia shares all. "In addition to acupuncture, which has been used to treat pain for thousands of years, we use ATP Resonance BioTherapy®. It's a cutting edge technology that targets specific tissues in the body. It then reprograms them for optimal performance. We have protocols for a myriad of chronic conditions from neuropathy to tendonitis. We can even target the pain and inflammation caused by fibromyalgia."

It's in combining her decades of experience, the time-tested science of acupuncture, and modern medical solutions like ATP Resonance BioTherapy® that Acupuncture Of Orlando are giving much needed relief to those suffering with fibromyalgia and other complicated, chronic conditions.

Because Dr. Zakia designs very personalized treatment programs for each of her patients, an initial consultation is required in order to receive treatment. For a limited time the consult is complementary. Visit aorelief.com to learn more or call (407) 440-2808 to schedule today.

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