

## From the Executive Director

Hello TNSTEP community:

We hope you and your families are enjoying these beautiful, warmer days as much as we are! I've been looking for any opportunity to be outdoors, and have been plotting my vegetable, herb, and flower plantings for this season.

This school year, returning to in-person learning has been challenging for many, and summer break is a great time to "breathe" and refresh. Our TNSTEP staff will be working this summer in preparation for assisting you, when you're ready, to gear up and prepare for next school year. In the meantime, have some fun and mix in some gentle learning opportunities!

In this edition of our Newsletter, we present our readers with a couple of "Spring Inspiration" family success stories; an announcement about our ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) Toolkit; an introduction to the TN Department of Education's new School Safety Toolkit; a few tips to avoid losing ground over the summer break; and an article on talking to our kids, age-appropriately, about school violence and safety, a topic that we've been promoting and emphasizing for the last year.

Change is always difficult, and we are sad to see Shuntea Price, our West TN Regional Director, leave our TNSTEP team. We wish her well as she pursues other career opportunities. Keep an eye on your inbox and socials as we'll be searching for a new team member to serve in West Tennessee.

As always, please feel free to reach out to our TNSTEP Team about any questions or concerns you might have about special education in general or your specific educational challenges, or to give us feedback about our Newsletter, critical or complimentary. We love hearing from you and will respond as quickly as possible.

Stay safe, healthy, and happy.

Gratefully,

Karen Harrison



## NEW ACEs TOOLKIT on TNSTEP Website

The TNSTEP ACEs Toolkit is a repository of resources related to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), trauma, and our state's Building Strong Brains and Resilient Tennessee initiatives. The Toolkit resides on the [tnstep.info](https://tnstep.info) website at [tnstep.info/aces-toolkit](https://tnstep.info/aces-toolkit).

ACEs are traumatic experiences that can interfere with child development. The more children are exposed to trauma, the more likely they will experience negative long-term consequences. ACEs include abuse and neglect, witnessing domestic violence, exposure to alcohol and substance abuse, parental divorce, parental mental illness, and the incarceration of a family member. When children experience ACEs they are also affected by toxic stress which can impact brain development, future health outcomes, and ultimately community well-being. Fortunately, science has shown that building resilience and the presence of at least one caring and nurturing adult in an individual's life can make a huge difference in how that individual is impacted by their exposure to ACEs.



The TNSTEP ACEs Toolkit is intended to provide individuals, families, educators, and the broader community with comprehensive current and historical information about ACEs, to spread awareness and inform our community about the impact of ACEs on individuals, families, and society, as well as strategies for lessening the lifelong influence of ACEs on children, adults, and families. The Toolkit is divided into a handful of categories: PowerPoint and Other Presentations on ACEs and Trauma; Informational Videos; ACEs and Tennessee; and National ACEs Resources. Our goal to keep the Toolkit updated with new and additional resources as they become available.

## Talking to Our Kids About School Violence by Celine Turco, COO/CFO Life Connect Health

Violence in schools has unfortunately become a common occurrence in today's world. As a parent, having open and honest conversations with your children about this sensitive topic is crucial. Discussing violence in schools can be a daunting task for parents, but it's necessary to equip your children with the knowledge and skills to stay safe. Here are some tips on how to talk to your children about violence in school.

**Start with open-ended questions.** When initiating a conversation about violence in school, start with open-ended questions that allow your child to express their thoughts and feelings. For example, "Have you heard about any incidents of violence at school?" or "How do you feel about the recent news of school violence?" These questions encourage your child to open up and share their opinions.

**Be honest.** It's essential to be truthful when discussing violence in schools with your children. However, it's equally important not to scare them. Explain the facts and statistics regarding school violence, but also emphasize that it's not a common occurrence. Let them know that schools have safety measures in place to ensure their safety.

**Discuss prevention strategies.** Talk to your children about prevention strategies they can implement to avoid violence. For example, encourage them to report any suspicious behavior to their teachers or school administrators, walk in groups or pairs, and avoid secluded areas. Teach them how to react in case of an emergency situation.

**Emphasize the importance of communication.** Encourage your children to communicate with you or other trusted adults if they feel threatened or unsafe at school. Let them know it's essential to speak up if they or someone they know is being bullied or threatened.

**Create a safety plan.** Work with your children to create a safety plan in case of an emergency. The plan should include emergency contact numbers, a safe meeting place, and what to do in case of an active shooter situation.

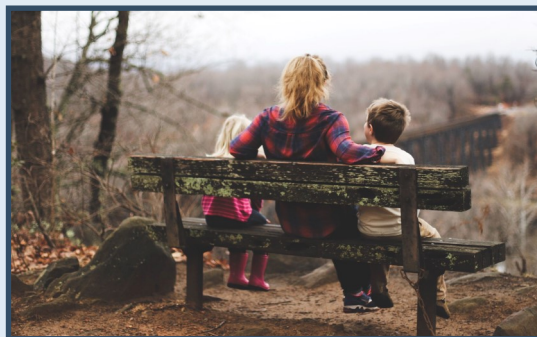
**Address their fears.** School violence can be very scary for children, and addressing their fears is essential. Let them know that it's okay to feel scared, but also reassure them that their safety is a top priority.

**Follow up.** After discussing violence in schools with your children, follow up with them regularly to see if they have any questions or concerns. Let them know that they can always come to you if they need help or support.

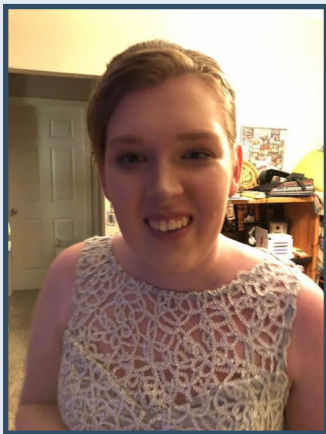
**Don't neglect your own emotional needs.** Just like we're instructed to put the oxygen mask over our own faces before helping our kids, it's essential to deal with our own fears, concerns, and reactions to the seemingly non-stop news about violence in schools and other public spaces.

In conclusion, discussing violence in schools with your children can be a challenging conversation, but it's necessary to ensure their safety. By following the tips outlined above, you can have an open and honest conversation with your children and equip them with the knowledge and skills to stay safe. Remember to emphasize the importance of communication, and practice or review your safety plan in case of an emergency.

*Celine Turco has had the experience of shots fired into her daughter's school. Managing her own anxiety afterward was equally as important as managing her daughter's.*



## Spring Inspiration: Shaylee's Prom by Shaylee's Mom, Ginger Walton



Allow me to introduce you to Shaylee J'Nonne. Shaylee is a 24-year-old high school graduate. She graduated in 2021, with an occupational degree. She is the fifth of six children in her family. Shaylee is considered "non-verbal" because she does not speak fluently, and sometimes her words are not purposeful. However, Shaylee does communicate her feelings and desires with minimal words, facial expressions, various motions and behaviors.

Shaylee was diagnosed with severe autism at the age of two. She started having absence seizures when she was three, involving brief and sudden loss of consciousness. She was diagnosed with polymicrogyria when she was 10. Raising this precious daughter is an unexpected treat I did not know I was signing up for, but I am incredibly grateful I did. It has absolutely been the most challenging and the most wonderful journey at the same time. Shaylee has taught her siblings and me about patience, tolerance, endurance, forgiving, and pure unconditional love, at a depth we would have never understood, or been able to learn any other way. We are so grateful for her, and so proud to be her family.

There is something about Shaylee that attracts people to her everywhere she goes. She's like sunshine, with a little bit of lightning mixed in for flavor. She has a spunky personality and loves to laugh. As she has gotten older, she has learned to tease a bit, and has a funny sense of humor. Shaylee has many interests, but her favorite thing to do is dance. She loves music.

Since graduating high school, we are constantly looking for activities for Shaylee to participate in. We are incredibly grateful to the local churches who offer ministries for individuals with different abilities. Shaylee had the wonderful opportunity to attend a prom sponsored by one of these churches. The one thing Shaylee loves almost as much as dancing is getting all "dolled" up and having her hair done.

Fortunately, one of Shaylee's sisters, Attiana, is a master stylist and a make-up artist. Attiana also works for Shaylee as her personal assistant. These two sisters have a very close relationship. Shaylee loves spending time with Attiana, and Attiana is very good to Shaylee. Attiana has always only seen Shaylee's potential and abilities.

To begin Shaylee's prom experience, we went dress shopping. The women working at the department store were very kind and helpful. Shaylee enjoyed trying on a couple of dresses and modeling them. We narrowed it down, and Shaylee chose a beautiful dress with a sparkly top. Shaylee was so excited and kept repeating, "cute, cute!"

The day of prom, Shaylee couldn't wait to slip into her dress. Of course, if you're wearing a princess dress, you must wear glitter shoes, and she did.

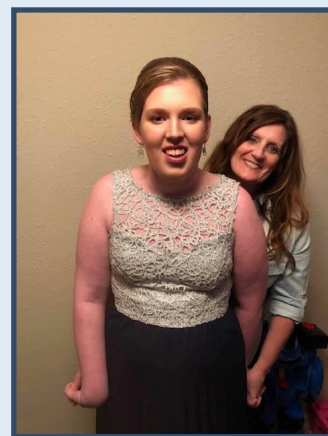
I took Shaylee to Attiana and she began the "glam" transformation. Attiana set Shaylee up in a chair in front of a mirror. She draped a towel over her shoulders and prepared to paint her canvas, aka Shaylee's face. Attiana invited Shaylee to select various colors of makeup to use on her eyes, lips, and cheeks, and began to apply it. Shaylee was full of giggles and happiness. She sat perfectly and enjoyed every minute.

Next, came the hair. Attiana asked Shaylee what she wanted, and showed her a couple of pictures. Shaylee pointed to her favorite. She had decided on an "updo." Attiana began to work her magic: curling, backcombing, and pinning her locks of hair up.

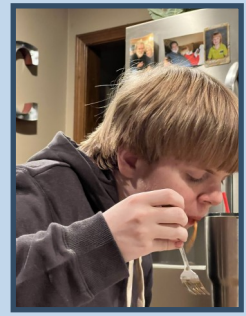
Once the beautification process was completed, Attiana walked Shaylee over to a full length mirror. When Shaylee saw her reflection, she beamed ear to ear. It was truly delightful. In that moment, Shaylee was just like all of her peers, feeling beautiful and excited to go dancing.

Shaylee felt like a princess. She kept showing us her dress, holding the side of the delicate fabric and swaying it back and forth. We couldn't help being thrilled right along with her.

As their mama, my heart was touched. It is such a gift to have your children celebrate one another, encourage, and cheer each other on. Each of these daughters have their own special gifts and talents. They are such blessings to our family.



## Spring Inspiration #2: Gunner's First Meal by Gunner's Mom, Kristi Clemmons



*Editor's note: Over the years, TNSTEP staff members have given presentations on "learning to adult" for middle and high school students with disabilities. Part of our message is encouraging youth to work on developing their independent living skills, like waking up on their own, doing their own laundry, setting up bank accounts, and preparing meals. When Kristi posted her son's accomplishment on Facebook, we thought it fit nicely into our efforts to help kids transition to life after high school, and live more independently. Here is their story.*

So, I took my 18-year-old son, Gunner grocery shopping. Not for the first time, but the first time that he had a grocery list he was shopping for. Gunner is learning daily living skills. His therapist planned an outing and I got to tag along. A grocery list was made, and a date was set.



With some support, Gunner navigated the store, found the items on his list, scanned, and paid. This was a glorious day for our family! He was able to work through the sounds in the store that usually cause him to be overstimulated. We were so proud.

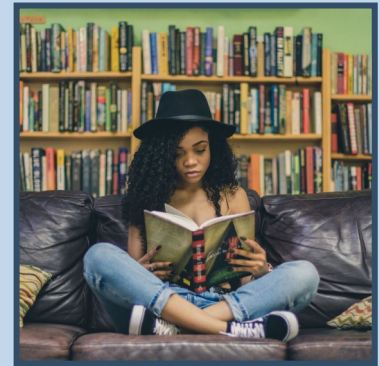
But our day and story doesn't end there. We went home and together, we prepared the ingredients. We made spaghetti, and guess what? Gunner ate two plates of it. In our home, that was a miracle. Our family is learning and finding our way daily. A lot of days our normal doesn't look like other family's normals. But with grocery shopping, preparing a meal, and eating it together, we enjoyed a typical family experience.

### A Few Tips for Avoiding the "Summer Slide"

Over the summer, students can lose the equivalent of about a month's worth of learning, mostly in the areas of math and spelling. Research has also found that summer learning loss is more severe among students with disabilities, English language learners, and students living in poverty. There's no denying that our kids need a break from the intensity of long school days, tests, papers, projects, and homework. Parents need a break too, from the responsibility of ensuring our children succeed in school. So, here are a few low-pressure tips for keeping the students in your home sharp:

- Visit the library for events and reading opportunities
- Play board games that involve math and reading
- Do craft projects with different art mediums
- Promote physical movement and outdoor play
- Encourage your kids to keep a summer journal
- Take a day trip to an historical landmark
- Take turns planning, shopping for, and cooking meals
- Start a Family Summer Book Club, and encourage your kids to write mini-reviews

We at TNSTEP sincerely hope you have relaxing AND rewarding summer breaks!



### A New DOE Toolkit for School Safety

A new resource, developed by the Tennessee Department of Education, the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, and the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, gives families a toolkit to help students be safer at school. Executive Order No. 97 was signed by Governor Bill Lee to enhance school safety procedures across the state, and to promote engagement with parents and families.



This Toolkit covers how students and families can report suspicious or concerning activity through the new SafeTN App, and access mental health resources provided by the Department of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services. It also provides tips and resources for boosting parental involvement in their child's school community, strategies around bullying, suicide prevention, and questions to ask your child's school about their preparedness for emergency events.

The School Safety Toolkit can be accessed at [bit.ly/43EK6PS](https://bit.ly/43EK6PS).

## CONNECT WITH TNSTEP!

ESPAÑOL: (800) 975-2919

BUSINESS OFFICE: (423) 639-0125 (phone)

TOLL-FREE: (800) 280-7837

[gethelp@tnstep.info](mailto:gethelp@tnstep.info)

Follow us online at [tnstep.info](http://tnstep.info)

and on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn at @tnstep

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The PTI is funded through OSEP. TNSTEP produced this website under the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs Grant No. # H328M200054. Kristen Rhoads serves as the project officer. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Department



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