



# Children's Defense Fund Protect Children Not Guns Interfaith Toolkit

## Education and Study Circle Resources

February 2018

*Many religious bodies, denominations, and other religious organizations have developed educational materials to discuss violence and peace with justice. These resources may be supplemented with the following recent texts: "How Long Until We Protect Children, Not Guns?!" by Marian Wright Edelman and "The Right to Bear Dreams: It's Time to Stop the Nightmare of Child Gun Deaths" written by Rev. Shannon Daley-Harris and published in 2013. Make copies of both and distribute them to read and discuss in small group settings, such as adult education classes, women's or men's groups, or youth groups. Use the discussion questions at the end of each as a jumping off point for your group's reflection and action.*

### ***"How Long until We Protect Children, Not Guns?!" Marian Wright Edelman***

*If I don't make it I love you and I appreciate everything you did for me*

--Text message sent from a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida to her mother

December 2017 marked the fifth anniversary of the indescribably horrible mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School when 20 young children and 6 teachers were brutally murdered by a 20-year-old with a gun he should never have possessed. As our nation was grieving, I wrote that this terrible tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut was no fluke but a result of the senseless, immoral and indefensible neglect of all of us in our nation to protect children instead of guns and to speak out against the pervasive culture of violence and the insane proliferation of guns by the millions that have no business in civilian hands. I truly believed at the time that these shocking and horrific murders would finally force our elected leaders to put child life and safety ahead of politics and the NRA and take the necessary steps to protect children instead of guns.

*Wow was I wrong.*

Sandy Hook marked a turning point in public opinion about guns and sparked a new wave of public advocacy to prevent gun violence, but it did *not* fundamentally change the cowardice of most of the men and women we have elected to represent us who put their political self-interest ahead of the safety of our children. Though some states made important strides to prevent deadly weapons from getting into the wrong hands, others have gone backwards. Our Congressional leaders have continued to offer platitudes after horrific mass shootings while doing nothing to *act* and expand and improve the background check system, limit access to assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines, deprive domestic violence perpetrators of their guns, or even take basic steps to prevent children from accessing deadly firearms by requiring safe storage of guns and ammunition. Congress has turned a blind eye and wallowed in inaction while the deadly plague of gun violence afflicting our nation has

worsened. The rate of child and teen gun deaths has increased every year since Sandy Hook and nearly 11,000 more children and teens have died.

On Wednesday it happened again.

This time the victims were teachers and students going about their day at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida – maybe excited about Valentine’s Day because of a secret crush, or planning to go to Ash Wednesday mass that evening. The shooter was a 19-year-old former student at the school with a history of disturbing behavior and an obsession with guns. Like many other mass shooters in United States, he was armed with an AR-15 assault rifle. In a short span of time seventeen people lost their lives and at least fourteen were injured. Once again we saw the scenes many of us first saw outside Columbine High School in April 1999 that now seem horribly and tragically familiar in America: frightened students fleeing with their hands up, frantic parents desperate to reunite with their children, and traumatized survivors telling television interviewers what happened and the horrors they heard and saw. And it goes on and on and will continue to go on and on until we stand up together and say no more.

An entire generation of children are coming of age understanding that there is no safe space in America after bearing witness to horrifying massacres killing 26 and 9 people in churches in Texas and South Carolina, 58 at a concert in Nevada, 49 at a nightclub in Florida, 9 at a college in Oregon, 14 at a workplace in California, 2 at Marshall County High School in Benton, Kentucky in January, and now 17 more children and adults on an otherwise ordinary day at a high school in Florida. Tens of thousands of other shootings have taught us all that gun violence does not discriminate. Twice since Sandy Hook we have had to put a new tragedy atop the list of the worst mass shootings in American history and gun death numbers grow in communities that often go unnoticed. When will the indefensible insane tolerance of violence end?! When will children and human life matter more than a gunman’s right to kill innocent people?

We have already waited too long for our leaders to protect children rather than guns.

Victims, survivors and families impacted by gun violence too often are forgotten. We must not let that happen again. How evil it was that on the very same day last December a national vigil was held just blocks from the Capitol to remember victims of gun violence, the House of Representatives voted 231 to 198 to pass the Concealed Carry Reciprocity Act (H.R.38), a NRA priority that would allow individuals to carry concealed weapons across state lines even if the state to which they are traveling has much stronger gun safety laws. For example, if the Concealed Carry Reciprocity Act were to pass the Senate now, a person from Mississippi, Missouri or Wyoming who is not even required to have a permit to carry a concealed weapon, could travel with it to Massachusetts, California or New York, which all require that in order to apply for a concealed carry permit an applicant must first demonstrate good cause or a justifiable need. Forcing all states to recognize the concealed carry requirements of all other states regardless of their own laws and protections poses a significant threat to public safety across the nation. The concealed carry bill must not be taken up in the Senate.

Several other bills have recently been introduced in Congress and offer potential progress. I hope we will take any positive steps we can to move them forward. For example, the Lori Jackson Domestic Violence Survivor Protection Act (S.2044/ H.R.4186) would close loopholes in federal law that currently permit the sale and possession of weapons to dating partners or former dating partners convicted of domestic violence crimes, and prohibits the sale or possession of a firearm by a person subject to a temporary domestic violence restraining order.

Research shows women in domestic violence situations are five times more likely to be killed if their abuser owns a gun and their children are also at risk. An analysis by Everytown for Gun Safety found a majority of mass shootings from 2009-2016 were related to domestic or family violence. Only 13 states require law enforcement to remove firearms at the scene of a domestic violence incident.

A domestic violence conviction should have barred the individual who killed 26 people in a Sutherland Springs, Texas church in November from purchasing a gun. The Air Force failed to report his conviction to the national background check system enabling him to clear a federal background check to purchase the rifle used in this horrific crime. The bipartisan Fix NICS Act of 2017 (S.2135) would help ensure data get promptly and accurately reported. It requires federal agencies and states to create plans to comply with existing federal laws requiring reporting of mental health and criminal records to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) and provides financial support to states that comply and penalizes agencies that fail to report these records to the system.

Both these bills are common-sense approaches to help limit gun violence. While they do not close all the dangerous federal loopholes that allow potentially dangerous people to get deadly weapons, their passing would be a critically important first step. There also are pending bills that would allow more research on gun violence, prohibit the sale of guns before completion of background checks, close loopholes in the background check system, and ban devices like bump stocks allowing shooters to increase the rate of fire of their semiautomatic weapons. All these positive steps deserve a vote. And it is also past time to reinstate the ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines that consistently increase the body count in our all-too-frequent mass shootings. We *must* keep using our votes and voices to move forward and never never ever give up until we succeed.

Every person who cares about protecting children and human life must stand up right now with urgency and persistence, join hands with those directly affected by gun violence, and demand Congressional action to prevent and break up the uniquely evil American love affair with guns and stop the scourge of gun violence that has killed more than 140,000 people and devastated thousands of families between Sandy Hook and this week's tragedy. A child or teen dies from gunfire every 2 hours and 48 minutes in the United States; 3,128 children and teens died from guns in 2016, enough to fill 156 classrooms of 20 children. It is a profoundly immoral travesty that the NRA and its craven Congressional allies continue pushing to weaken gun laws although the majority of Americans cry out for stronger safeguards and children witness and suffer from mass shooting after mass shooting.

In memory of the 17 children and adults whose lives were snuffed out this week at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, the 2 children killed at Marshall County High School in Kentucky less than a month before, the 26 who died at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and the tens of thousands more children and adults killed in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Charleston, Seattle, Orlando, Las Vegas, New York City, New Orleans, Sutherland Springs, and cities and small towns across our country now is the time to call and visit your elected leaders urging them to *protect children, not guns*.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- Mrs. Edelman believes we all have a moral obligation to protect children from violence. What sacred texts and teachings inform your understanding of the value of every child and our responsibilities to protect children? Where do you see us succeeding and where do you see us falling short in valuing all children and protecting all children? How could our sacred texts and teachings fuel and guide our efforts to protect children?
- Mrs. Edelman notes that a child or teen dies from gunfire every 2 hours and 48 minutes in the United States. That routine slaughter of children does not generate the level of attention that tragic massacres like those in Newtown and Parkland did. How can we bring attention, concern, and action to bear on the daily gun deaths as well?

### ***“The Right to Bear Dreams”: It’s Time to End the Nightmare of Child Gun Deaths The Rev. Shannon Daley-Harris, CDF Religious Affairs Director***

*(Note: Numbers have been updated to reflect the most recent available data in 2018)*

“What about our right to bear dreams?” That was the question my nine-year-old niece asked in the wake of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School as she tried to understand the NRA’s devotion to the Second Amendment right to bear arms. She had shed tears, felt terror, and now was trying to make sense of the senseless.

What about children’s right to bear dreams? What happens to that right, and the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, when gun violence, poverty, child abuse, lack of health care and mental health care take a daily toll?

Part of the shock of the Sandy Hook slaughter was the setting—it was a community that fully expected its children to have and achieve their dreams. In other communities, dreams were long ago surrendered to daily, living nightmares.

A close friend recounted a conversation between a pastor and three young boys. The pastor was talking with the boys about what they wanted to be when they grew up. The first said he wanted to be a superhero. The second said he wanted to work at McDonalds. The third child picked up a stick and in the dusty ground drew a picture of himself lying on the ground; he said, “I’ll be dead before I grow up.” What happened to our children’s right to bear dreams?

Whether we are parents who previously thought our children were insulated from horror or those who long ago surrendered dreams to grim reality, the massacre on December 14th was a wake-up call and we cannot afford to go back to sleep.

When did we as a nation allow the right to bear arms to supersede children’s right to bear dreams? There are more gun dealers in our nation than there are houses of worship. When did the hunger for weapons outstrip our hunger to glimpse God’s dream for us as a people?

God's dream for us was captured by the prophet Isaiah:

*17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*

*18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.*

*19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.*

*20 No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.*

*21 They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

*22 They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.*

*23 They shall not labor in vain,  
or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—  
and their descendants as well.*

*24 Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.*

*25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.*

How did we so utterly fail to be partners in God's glorious new creation? After a calamity like the massacre of children in Sandy Hook Elementary School, after the daily calamity of more than seven gun deaths of children and youths, surely we as people of faith recognize that children's right to bear dreams, and our determination to realize God's dream for us, is more important than the right to bear arms. God's dream as found in Isaiah speaks of economic well-being, but more than 13 million children live in poverty in our rich nation. It is a dream in which infants don't die, but every day 64 babies die before their first birthday. It is a dream in which children will not be born for calamity, yet every day in our nation four children are killed by abuse or neglect, seven children or teens commit suicide, and eight children or teens die from guns. Isn't it time, finally, to work together to realize God's dream for us?

When the NRA finally made a statement, a week after the shooting, the pronouncement was made as if they still called the shots—literally and figuratively. Do they think we as a nation can be lulled back to sleep, guns cradled in our arms? Charlton Heston infamously said anyone wanting to take away his gun would have to pry it from his "cold, dead hands." The thing is, it's not mostly movie stars but children whose hands are cold and dead, cut down by the guns to which the NRA demands such unfettered rights. A child or youth is killed by guns every three hours and fifteen minutes [2 hours and 48 minutes] in our gun-crazy nation. That is a nightmare.

Some years ago, the teens of a small church in a poverty-stricken and violence riddled community outside Boston planned the Christmas pageant. The volunteer pageant director invited the youths to engage with the story and reimagine its meaning in their lives, in this day. Come Christmas Eve, as the pageant unfolded the congregation craned forward to see what the “wise men” were bearing to lay down before the Christ child. What they carried and set down were replicas of the real weapons that had taken so many young lives of neighbors and classmates. The teens could think of no better gift to offer the Prince of Peace than the laying down of weapons—something they longed for all in the community to do.

Isaiah prophesied that a little child would lead us. They are trying. Will we follow?

***Questions for Discussion:***

- What do you believe is God’s vision for us and our world? What sacred texts or teachings shape your understanding of how we are to live in community and care for children?
- What parts of the vision in Isaiah are most powerful for you? What aspects of that vision do you feel like we as a people can be working toward right now?
- How do you see children’s capacity to dream and achieve their dreams being affected by violence? What other factors do you see impacting children’s capacity to dream and achieve those dreams?
- How do we support and follow the leadership of children and youths?
- What can we do as individuals and as a place of worship to fulfill God’s vision for us and our children?
- What opportunities do your own faith traditions in your communities offer for the laying down of weapons as was done here?