

Parent Support: It's great for kids, too

By Sherry Kahan
staff writer

All parents are convinced at time that their little boys are really made of snakes and snails and puppy dogs' tails and their little girls have traded in the sugar and spice for bags of temper tantrums.

During these times it is good to know there is a group around called Parent Support. It meets the third Tuesday of each month in room K-100 at Jackson Center, 32025 Lyndon, Livonia.

What the group has to offer is a place to meet other parents and a chance to improve the child-parent relationship through the development of effective, practical communication skills.

Mary Lou Marenza of Westland recently sat down with two other Parent Support members to talk about what they had learned about parenting through the organization. With her were Denise Tardif (455-1963) of Plymouth and Kathy Kallio of Livonia.

ALL THREE commented about developing listening skills, building esteem, brainstorming solutions to problems, and power and punishment.

Tardif, who teaches effective parenting in community education programs in the Garden City, Plymouth-Canton, Livonia, South Redford and Redford Union school districts, would have parents develop a long term view about the stages in the life of their child.

"We give parents the idea that a lot of child behaviors are part of their development," she said. "They'll outgrow them. You can look ahead and be more accepting of that behavior if you know it will not last. It is necessary for the child to go through these stages in sequence as they grow. The first stage usually helps the child prepare for the stage that's coming."

For instance, the "Terrible Twos." Parents dread this tantrum-prone age, noted Tardif, but actually it's the developmental period when the child

realizes he is a separate, independent individual.

"He is not as easily managed," she said. "He learns he can say no. So he begins to use this new-found power."

PROBLEM SOLVING is an area on which Parent Support spends a great deal of time. The ideal way to reach solutions is not to use "parental power" to win the conflict at the child's expense, pointed out Kallio, a homemaker formerly employed by Farmer Jack.

Nor is "water power," the result of the child's tears, the best way of trying to win the day. In fact, it is better that there be no losers, only winners, the women indicated. A solution acceptable to all should be reached.

Listening skills must be sharpened at a time like this. The parent uses them to listen carefully to the child explain his feelings, noted Marenza. She and her husband Don are group leaders for Systematic Training for Effective Parenting sponsored by the Livonia

school district.

"You have to identify the problem," she said. "You must decide who is not getting his needs met. You must listen to all stories. Then everyone can brainstorm solutions."

"It is important at that step that everyone's solution gets attention. Parents often confront a problem with a preconceived solution in mind. But they need to give their kids a chance to generate their own solution."

TARDIF SUGGESTED writing down all the suggested solutions, even the unrealistic ones. "It gives the child the experience of being involved in democratic problem solving," she explained. Kallio emphasized: "Used properly the involvement of the child is a real builder of his confidence. If a child realizes he is taken seriously and his opinions are considered equally with adults, it improves his self-esteem. It develops his thought processes."

"Sometimes you uncover problems you never knew about. In homes where this democratic procedure is not reinforced, adults win and children lose." She suggested that parents go over the solutions mentioned by everyone, and discuss the probable results of each. Eliminate the ones that won't work.

THE WOMEN presented an imaginary problem taken in the support

group. A daughter of 14 wished to entertain her boyfriend in the family room one night. But her 12-year-old brother planned to listen to stereo music in the same room, and her younger sister wanted to watch "Mork and Mindy" on TV there. Dad was also counting on the family room as a place to read his newspaper. Mom was going shopping.

"The solution we came up with in role playing," explained Kallio, "was that the son agreed he could listen anytime. The father had several hours to read before the boyfriend arrived. They moved the TV to the daughter's bedroom and the 14-year-old entertained in the family room."

Television is often the source of family conflict, the women agreed, recommending arguments be worked out with democratic give and take.

Tardif advised evaluating decisions to see if they actually work.

"Sometimes people agree to do something but find they don't have time to do it or it is too difficult," noted Kallio. "A child may have volunteered to scrub the floor, but finds it is too hard. It may be necessary to go through the problem solving steps again."

"HAVE A WEEKLY family meeting," put in Marenza. "It shouldn't be a gripe session. Talk about the contributions of family members during the week. Listen to gripes only if they are

willing to find solutions." But she also advised working out problems on an individual basis as they come up.

The term "I message" is strong in parenting today. Kallio pointed out that this means "telling the child how you feel in a non-blameful way."

Don't say, "Shut up, you're too noisy while I'm on the phone." Say instead, "I can't hear my friend because of the noise."

Tardif stressed the importance of a good relationship between parents and child. Effective parenting won't work "if relationships are so poor following years of power and punishment."

"The child will only respond to mother's message about the telephone if he cares about his mother's needs," she added. "It is necessary to establish a relationship in which everyone is concerned for the other. In families where there is a lot of power, punishment and name calling, the family relationship deteriorates so much by the time the children are teenagers that they don't care."

THE WOMEN believe that over-authoritarian parenting produces low self-esteem in children, and leaves them with feelings of resentment, anger and inadequacy.

"Parent Support is something I really believe in," added Marenza. "I find it a system that is loving, caring and democratic."

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