

“An Answer Line Just For Parents”



BILL LOHMANN *POINT OF VIEW* Richmond Times Dispatch
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One thing to avoid when it comes to parenting -- and most any other issue in life -- is someone who claims to have all the answers.

Me? I'm still trying to figure out the questions.

And there is no shortage of questions when it comes to raising children. Commonwealth Parenting Center, entering its third decade of serving the Richmond area, knows this and is doing something about it.

Tomorrow, CPC will launch a support line (804-545-1928) for parents and caregivers. Each Wednesday from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. a member of CPC's family education staff will be available to field questions.

"We will offer suggestions, alternative parenting strategies and recommendations for additional support," said Elizabeth Pearce, CPC's executive director. "Maybe it will be a behavioral problem they saw that day or maybe they just want some quick advice or maybe people just want to check in and make sure they're on the right track."

Callers are asked to keep their conversations short and to use CPC's main line (804-545-1272) to register for classes or schedule an appointment.

"We'll see how it goes and see if there's a need," Pearce said.

My guess is, there won't be any shortage of callers.

The parent support line is another example of CPC's attempt to broaden its reach into the community, both in terms of geography and target audience. It is trying to reach deeper into outlying counties and even rural areas, and it plans to start a service for local businesses that want to provide parenting education for employees.

CPC has long offered a variety of parenting classes -- on communication, discipline and even play -- but it's made a push in recent times to reach more families, including those who might not have tuition money readily lying around. Last year, CPC served 2,400 families, 800 of whom were on "limited resources" and received scholarships, Pearce said.

As part of that outreach, CPC conducts interactive workshops and community fairs at churches and schools and last year went into an apartment complex and did a parenting presentation for single parents. Besides classes, CPC also offers its staff of family educators for private, hour long consultations, a part of the operation that has become more popular in recent years.

"We've grown so much, but the original idea is still the same: helping parents with education and skill development," said Pearce, who has taught parenting classes for many years and joined CPC two years ago after moving from Tennessee.

CPC, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last fall, remains independent but more than a year ago became affiliated with Bon Secours Richmond Health System, which enabled CPC to move to more spacious digs in Innsbrook. It continues to be financed by family and corporate

foundations, individuals and churches. Its parent educators include counselors, therapists, an authority on special education and a nurse. Serious issues are referred to outside specialists.

So, what are parents asking about these days?

Balancing work and family, why is the 4-year-old not sleeping through the night, how come my child won't behave.

Some things never change.

"We get more calls from people with younger children," Pearce said, "but we're getting a number of calls from parents of middle-schoolers."

The issues with older kids, Pearce said, include risky behaviors and, relatedly, how they seem to grow up faster than children in generations past.

"I don't think it's harder to parent than it was 50 or 100 years ago . . . but I think we're faced with challenges earlier as far as [children's] exposure to drinking and drugs and sexuality," said Pearce. "I think sometimes parents call because they fear their parenting style is not adequate to meet the challenge, when often it is. They just need some tools and ideas."

Pearce said surveys have shown almost 50 percent of those who come to CPC for help or advice represent repeat business, which she interprets as meaning "they've gotten something out of it and they're coming back for more." One mom, Pearce said, gives herself an annual CPC "check-up" consultation as a birthday gift.

CPC views itself as a "preventative agency," said Pearce, a place for parents to find advice and assurance that they're not the only ones out there dealing with whatever issue they're facing.

"As parents, if we can just make our own little world as safe and consistent and reliable as it can be, we can give our children the confidence to go out and make it in the world, make the right choices and take the right path."

She smiled. "I guess that sounds kind of corny."

Corny, maybe, but also true.

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