

# The Henrico Citizen

## Parenting 101

### Commonwealth Parenting Center provides advice



*Six-month-old Denver Moore contemplates his next attempt at getting his mouth around a beach ball during a recent "Bringing Up Mommy" parenting course at the Commonwealth Parenting Center*

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Ask a traditionalist about parent education, and you'll likely hear, "My mother and father never needed 'expert guidance' and I turned out fine."

Child-rearing, according to these Old School parents, is an instinctive skill -- not something to be acquired from classes and books.

Twenty years of Commonwealth Parenting Center alumni would beg to differ.

Linda Brauer, CPC programs and grants manager, hears frequently from grateful students of the center's sessions on child development, communication and discipline techniques. And all the beneficiaries so far have yet to tune in those mythical signals from the Parental Instinct Fairy -- the one who supposedly bestows her wisdom on moms and dads debating their next step.

What's more, the extended families and close-knit communities that supported Old School parents have given way to a faster-paced, more geographically scattered society.

"They're not as connected [to their relatives]," says Brauer of today's parents. "Maybe they can call Mom, but they can't visit her. So they look to each other. . . CPC gives them the chance to be with other moms and dads, to share ideas and thoughts and to get guidance and instruction."

Since the non-profit center opened its doors in 1984, notes Brauer, support for parents has eroded in other quarters as well. Consider, for instance, the demise of the advice-dispensing family physician who followed his patients virtually from cradle to grave.

"We get a lot of referrals from pediatricians," Brauer says. "They have huge practices; there's no time to sit down with a parent."

Aside from the medical community, another major source of CPC recommendations is the old parental stand-by, word of mouth.

"Anytime anyone says anything to me about kid problems," remarked Carol Elrod after taking Parental Toolbox, "I say they should take this class. It was so wonderful!"

"Thank you so much for recommending [the instructor]," wrote another parent of a class on child behavior. "We followed up on her suggestions that very night and we are already seeing improvement."

### **Bringing up Mommy**

Long before a child reaches the age of discipline dilemmas and sibling rivalry, however, CPC offers support for new parents with Creative Play, Staying in Touch and other "Bonding with Baby" sessions.

On a recent morning, a half dozen moms and babies joined Cecile Myers at the center in the Forest Office Park for an informal session of Bringing up Mommy. While the babies slept, played or explored, their mothers relaxed on mats and discussed the daily challenge of finding time to relax and pamper themselves -- the theme of the day's lesson. As a special surprise to reinforce the theme, Myers enlisted Kate Crowther-Boehling of Catalyst Bodyworks to treat each mother to a 10-minute massage.

The moms also discussed topics ranging from setting tot TV limits to taking fall CPC classes. Several mothers expressed interest in sessions on exercising with baby and on communicating with touch and hand signals.

As they passed around a baby sling and took turns trying it on, Myers reviewed an earlier lesson on the benefits of baby-wearing. "The simplest thing stimulates your child," she reminded them, describing the benefits to growing brains of observing mother's activities and hearing them narrated. Judy Pearson, mother of three-month-old Sydnee, said that she had known about the benefits of language and physical stimulation, but that CPC helped her realize just how vital they are to a child's development.

"I loved the Creative Play," said Pearson. "People think [playing with babies] just comes natural, but I would've never known to do that," she said of several interactive activities she had learned.

### **Community Outreach**

In 2000, with the help of corporate sponsors that provide most of the center's support, CPC launched an outreach program to serve families with limited resources. The Commonwealth Family Partnership enables CPC, working through human service organizations, to reach target groups such as single mothers or at-risk youth needing help to make wise life choices.

Among the Partnership's successes is the Elizabeth Project, which matches expectant teens with mother-mentors from a local church. Funded by a grant from the Memorial Foundation for Children, the project begins with prenatal practice on life-size dolls, discussions of how to understand a newborn's cues and the need to give infants a sense of security. After delivery, mentors support the teen mothers through their children's early developmental stages and provide information on topics such as calming techniques and tot safety.

Community outreach also includes brown bag lectures and group presentations, and focuses on special needs of homeless families, hearing-impaired parents and adoptive parents.

Before she took the "Parenting for Homeless Families" session, said a mother of eight, "[I would] just tell the kids to watch TV because [I didn't] know what to do. Now I know."

"I came in exhausted," she added, "and I left feeling great."

### **Changing Times**

Lifestyles have changed in CPC's two decades of existence, and the center has tried to flex with the

times, says Brauer. Weekly sessions that once extended over seven weeks have been condensed into three evenings to fit busy schedules. A series of freestanding classes, like Parenting Toolbox, allows parents to miss occasional sessions without disrupting a sequence. And reduced fees for additional family members encourage both, or all, of a child's caregivers to attend classes together.

"So much of parenting, when possible, is having a united front," smiles Brauer, recalling a class attended by a grandparent, aunt, uncle and older sister -- all involved in the care of one child. The trend toward relatives raising children, whether due to parental military duty, death, or drug abuse, has led CPC to expand classes for that population as well.

"I love the teaching about infant massage," said one grandparent who participated, "because both of my grandchildren have trouble sleeping."

### **Twenty Candles -- Thousands of Fans**

As CPC approaches its 20th birthday, the staff looks forward to a special yet-to-be- announced fall celebration, while noting that any festivities will be secondary to the satisfaction of hearing from parents the center has helped.

Brauer recalls a testimonial, for instance, from a mother who was preparing move to another state. "I wanted to take one more class [before moving]," she told the center staff. "I tell everyone I know about the things you do. You have so many ways you reach out to parents. You do a great job."

Another gratifying comment came from a mother who recently enrolled her daughter in CPC's babysitting class. Noting that the 12-year-old first came to the center for a mother/infant class, the mom pointed out that her daughter symbolizes the second generation to learn about child care through the center.

"So the Commonwealth Parenting Center has come full cycle," concludes Brauer with satisfaction. "We are now - intergenerational!"