

The Newtown Bee

Family Dynamics: 'An Ever-Shifting Mobile'

By Larissa Lytwyn

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Wendy H. Davenson, a licensed marriage and family therapist, is also licensed in drug and alcohol counseling and is a certified guidance counselor. But at the last Parent Connection forum on January 19, Ms Davenson did not focus exclusively on the types and trends of substance abuse.

Instead, Ms Davenson used her considerable expertise to create a "big picture" portrait of family dynamics and their effect on the family's individual members.

Despite the cold, snowy weather, a sizable crowd of parents, teens, and professionals, including Superintendent of Schools Evan Pitkoff, turned out to hear Ms Davenson describe family dynamics as an "every-shifting mobile."

"Your life is always changing," said Ms Davenson. "Think of your life as a mobile. Imagine when one child gets sick. There is a shift - of time, of attention. The sick child side of the mobile is weighed down while the others shift."

Others examples she used to illustrate a mobile's "shifts" were a parent's clinical depression or a family member's ongoing struggle with substance abuse.

The point was that every experience, positive or negative, on one family member's life triggered an automatic emotional response in the other family members. There is no such thing as a "static" family life.

Parents: Learn to Fight Fair

Ms Davenson spoke extensively on the effect of familial conflict on children, who may, in turn, act out with anger or other forms of misbehavior. Sometimes, these children are diagnosed with conduct disorders. The source for such behavioral problems, Ms Davenson said, often stem from family discord.

"You must realize that your kids sense everything," Ms Davenson said. "If you and your spouse are fighting, or recently fought, that can be sensed by the children. There is that unmistakable tension in the air."

In therapy, Ms Davenson continued, children often shared the emotional and physical impacts such familial tension had on their lives.

"Recognize that these children describe having horrible knots in their stomach," she said. "They're up all night, worrying."

At other times, children dealing with such issues may respond in the opposite fashion, raising an equally oppressive armor against the release of their emotions.

While divorce in itself can actually be a healthy, necessary decision for some parents, a less-than-amicable spousal split can spell familial disaster.

Commonly, children will blame themselves for the divorce, said Ms Davenson. Particularly damaging, she said, was one parent badmouthing the other in front of or even to their children.

"Divorcing parents must realize that their marital relationship is distinct from their role as parents," said Ms Davenson. "Although divorced, it is essential for divorced spouses to remember that parenting is a continual team effort."

The word "team" came up frequently during the remainder of Ms Davenson's talk.

Parents, she said, must learn to "fight fair," separating the practice of conflict resolution from down-and-dirty yelling or arguing.

"Every individual has a unique parenting style," said Ms Davenson, "which doesn't have to automatically lead to conflict. Teach each other."

During the question and answer period, one parent asked how it was possible to, in "the real world," always avoid "fighting" in front of the kids.

Ms Davenson suggested that a good way to handle it would be to behave straightforwardly and honestly. "You can say that you and your spouse are having a disagreement, but you are working it out," she said.

She even advised that it could be healthy for children to listen in on how disagreements are discussed and compromise is reached. Otherwise, she said, children could automatically equate disagreements with arguing and not learn the process of conflict resolution or the value of compromise.

Changing Moods

Ms Davenson also touched on the importance of identifying and monitoring one's moods.

"What triggers a change in mood?" she asked.

Parents called out a number of responses, including sleep-deprivation and work-related stress.

Ms Davenson then asked her audience how they dealt with their stress. A number of responses included exercising and talking to friends.

Ms Davenson said that children also relied on their friends to feel better, thus highlighting how both children and adults shared the humanity of the emotional experience.

She advised her audience to remember to "halt" and take a step back when they are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired (HALT), all of which are mood triggers.

Ms Davenson talked about how a number of teen problems, including substance abuse, over-programming-related stress, eating disorders, and depression, can be traced to familial conflict.

Parents that don't know how to fight fair often don't know how to handle their own mood shifts and emotions, Ms Davenson said. No one, not the parents and thus not the children, learn how to effectively cope with problems.

In these cases, turning to mood-altering substances and behaviors could become the primary coping method that is developed.

During the question and answer period, a parent stated that at a past forum, families had been advised to involve their children in activities because statistics indicated that such children were less prone to engaging in substance abuse.

Ms Davenson said that the key was balance.

As for easing over-programmed family members and, in many cases, entire families, Ms Davenson recommended that each family member come together as a group and prioritize which activities were most important to them. She recommended that children and teens have no more than one or two extracurricular activities, including a sport.

Ms Davenson also talked about the importance of having "reasonable" cause to worry.

At one point, the therapist recommended that a child suspected of using illegal substances be monitored to the point of the child giving their parents their email password.

One teen raised her hand, inquiring in concern, "But what about privacy?"

Ms Davenson explained that a measure as extreme as email checking was enacted from reasonable cause.

Ms Davenson encouraged families to be upfront and open with each other. She also said that children should know where their parents stood on issues including sex and substance abuse.

"If your child tells their friend, 'My parents would kill me if I did that,' then the position on the matter is clear," said Ms Davenson with a laugh.

It was also important, she reminded, to lead through role modeling. For example, she discouraged parents drinking and driving themselves after a social gathering.

In closing, Ms Davenson advised her audience to just "have fun" with their kids, to remember the simple pleasure of family time together.

She also again emphasized the importance of learning the value of working together as a team, thus building skills in conflict resolution and management through open communication and the implementation of compromise.

Happier, emotionally healthier, less stressed families are less inclined to have substance abuse issues, among other problems.

The next Parent Connection forum will be Tuesday, February 15 (snow date February 16), from 7 to 9 pm in the Newtown Middle School. Cher Shannon, MHSA, LADC, SAP, will present "If You Love Me Why Don't You Listen: Communication and Listening Skills for Families." As always, admission is free.

For more information, visit www.newtownparentconnection.org.