

When parenting gets tough, just breathe

by Suzanne Pollak
Staff Writer

Parenting “is not like baking where if you don’t get it right, it’s not going to come out right,” said Kay Abrams, a licensed psychologist.

Still, she noted, there are some definite dos and don’ts, many of which she imparted to about 10 parents of students at the Aleph Bet Montessori School in North Bethesda last Thursday as part of their monthly programs, featuring discussion, bagels and coffee.

Abrams, of Abrams & Associates Center for Family Psychotherapy in Kensington, spoke for more than 90 minutes on “Parenting in the Age of Anxiety.”

She urged the mothers and one father gathered to have another life and not treat parenting “as a virtual career,” worrying about everything from what toys go on the stroller to what your child must own.

“If you try and keep up, I think you are going to lose your confidence,” she said. And if a parent isn’t calm, things are going to skyrocket.

Sure, your child is going to have tantrums. And yes, they will take place in public places. Sure, your child is going to not want to go to bed or get ready to leave the house.

But don’t panic. Don’t explain everything to them. Parenting is not democracy. “We have this parenting myth that if you reason with them, they will comply. Everything is a democracy and a question,” she said.

Don’t ask your child if they want to go to bed, if they want to go to school. These are not choices, she noted.

“We are raising little lawyers” with very high verbal skills. But she questioned if that was really the goal.

Bribery and using the word *if* as in if you eat your vegetables, we will go to the movies, creates a child who stops to think “let me see what I will get,” and that’s not the goal of parenting, she noted.

“Potty training requires M&Ms. Everything requires a reward,” she noted, adding, “I want to release everybody from that.”

“Seventy percent of your parenting should be like — put your seatbelt on. It should be that simple,” she stressed.

Also, she questioned, is it really necessary to schedule every second of your child’s life, rushing from dance class to soccer practice and over to art class and a play date?

Shleping them somewhere so they won’t have the time to get into trouble or drugs is not the way to go, Abrams said. “It’s not, ‘Go outside and play’ anymore.”

In the earlier generation, “there was no one hovering over us,” she said. Creativity can come from boredom, she said.

Instant gratification is another problem



Psychologist Kay Kosak Abrams urges parents to rethink their parenting techniques and stop equating parenting with democracy.

Photo by Suzanne Pollak

she pointed to. The minute a toddler makes a noise, his or her mother grabs for the diaper bag looking for a snack or a toy.

“I have seen moms reach into their diaper bag every 60 seconds,” she said. But delayed gratification creates frustration tolerance, she noted.

Then there is all the technology — how much screen time can a child have? she asked rhetorically.

No matter how often you check your email, there is always another one waiting to be clicked on, she noted.

Technology, toys all around the room, decorations covering every free space in a classroom are all distractions and overstimulating, she noted. It’s hard to work in that environment, she said.

Toys of today require very little imagination, often already coming with their own names, sounds and movement.

“Everything is all figured out for the children. Put the toys away, and then just bring out a few. Rotate them and hide the others.

The children become desensitized” when there are toys everywhere.

Now is the right time to “hit the pause button so the frontal lobe can develop. Try to go back to saying, ‘Wait a moment.’”

Let them know mom and dad need to talk, that dinner is not over yet, she stressed. Don’t just throw a snack or a fast dinner at them, let them know a meal takes time.

And then there is the stress. Middle school students don’t need to have a special tutor or take a particular course to get to college. It’s too soon to think about that, she said.

When a parent asked how to deal with sibling rivalry, Abrams noted that it’s important and teaches children boundaries and limits to their aggressiveness. On the other hand, she said, no one can reasonably expect to leave two brothers in a room for the entire afternoon and expect everything to go smoothly. When things start to overheat, redirect them, she said.

We worry about bullies, but there have always been bullies. “We raise our children to

live in the world we live in. They don’t live in a bubble,” she explained.

All these problems will teach them how to cope with other life problems.

“Remind yourself that something strengthening is going to come out of this,” she said.

Sometimes correcting a child’s behavior is as simple as “holding up the mirror,” as she called it. Instead of yelling or punishing your child for pinching you, just say, “You just pinched me. Let them correct the behavior themselves.”

And when it seems overwhelming, don’t rush for the Prozac, she said, just breathe deeply — “nice, slow breathing.”

Remember to notice what works and what doesn’t, switch your parenting style, and just ride out the tantrums, she stressed.

Her parting words of comfort to those gathered — Have fun with your kids, and remember, “You are mother earth, a goddess, you rock.”

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