



Karen Nichols/Daily Inter Lake

ANDREA HANSON reads to her daughter, Maisie, left, and Beth Brash on Thursday evening at the Nurturing Center while parents meet with each other in the ParentCare support group.

For Family matters

Kalispell's Nurturing Center offers a resource for parents

By CAMDEN EASTERLING
The Daily Inter Lake

How many parents have found themselves wondering why their child didn't come with an instruction manual? Raising children often is a challenging task and one that can be tough on families. But for 25 years, the Nurturing Center in Kalispell has provided services and been a source for guidance for families.

The center and its staff, though, serve as more of a support system and provider of ideas and resources rather than hand out step-by-step directions for rearing children.

"There's no end to the kind of issues families are facing," said Susan Christofferson, executive director of the center.

And there is no one solution for solving those problems because families differ in terms of morals and dynamics, she said.

The Nurturing Center is sensitive to those kinds of differences, so staff members give parents numerous suggestions for parenting strategies rather than telling them one method is the right way.

The center wants to strengthen families, not dictate their morals, Christofferson said.

Those suggestions take the form of classes, support groups, a resource library and some counseling services. During the 25 years since its founding, the Nurturing Center has added services and expanded its office space to help more Flathead Valley families.

FOR MANY PARENTS, seeking the center's help may feel like an admission of wrongdoing or inadequacy, according to Christofferson and numerous adults who visit the center.

But asking for help is a sign that parents care enough to seek the best for their families, they said.

"I think the strongest parents are the ones who come to us saying, 'I need a little help with this one area,'" Christofferson said.

Judy Subatch, 28, the mother of three young children and now a leader of the Bigfork parent support group, remembers her first meeting in 2002.

She was nervous that going to a support-group meeting would label her a bad mother.

"But I finally said, 'We need to do something about this,'" she said.

Since that initial meeting, Judy and her family have made much progress, she said.

Her husband, Jason, helps her run the Bigfork support group.

The couple, married in 2001, sought the Nurturing Center's help when they were butting heads on how to discipline Judy's two children, Courtney and Tyler, now 7 and 5.



NURTURING CENTER Executive Director Susan Christofferson talks with parent Jodi Smith while child-care coordinator Arlene Brash plays with Tera Hagen before the evening support group for parents.

In 2002, they went to their first meeting of ParentCare, a support group for parents to share their troubles with children and discuss strategies.

"Just that one meeting made a big influence on us. It was like, 'Oh, we want to keep going,'" she said. The couple listened to other parents share their stories and offer suggestions. After attending several meetings, Judy and Jason began to speak out themselves.

She and Jason began practicing the tips they learned from other parents. They used to yell or spank the children to produce the desired behavior. They switched to counting to three before they put the kids in timeouts for not doing what they were told, such as brushing their teeth.

"We noticed within a month that they began working as a team rather than as adversaries, Jason said.

Jason also found that the tactic was effective. And Courtney and Tyler seemed to mind him more once he and Judy began using the same disciplinary methods.

Their marriage improved when they began working as a team rather than as adversaries, Jason said.

"We have a relationship with the kids now where before it kind of made you wonder if they even liked us," Judy said.

AS SUBATCH and Christofferson point out, though, the Nurturing Center helps families with problems on any scale.

Some parents prefer to use the Nurturing Center as a way to learn how to handle small problems so they don't get out of hand and require crisis management.

Whether their problem is major or minor, parents are welcome at any of the support groups, Christofferson said.

The center also hosts ParentShare groups geared toward parents of children from birth up to age 5. The center occasionally sponsors classes that focus on specific parenting concerns, such as discipline.

And the center at 146 Third Ave. W. maintains a library of books and other resource materials that families can take home.

The 15 Nurturing Center staff members assist parents who call with concerns and refer them to the proper group or tell them how the center can help. They also refer parents to other local agencies and organizations.

The center tries to meet whatever needs the community expresses and will add services or groups as needed, Christofferson said.

Other services include a mentoring program for ninth-grade girls and recommendations for reliable child-care providers.

SOME PARENTS have found that improved relationships, not just better behavior, are the most rewarding results of going to the Nurturing Center for help.

Jeff Hagen, 41, of Kalispell, went to the center when he was going through a divorce and wanted suggestions on how to help his three children, now ages 6-11, adjust to the situation.

He took classes at the center, where he now is in the process of becoming a support group facilitator. He learned how to effectively communicate with his children. Most of all, he said, he learned to listen.

"They don't want you to fix their problems, they just want you to be there for them," he said.

Although Hagen sought out the Nurturing Center during a tumultuous time for his family, he has noticed that most parents have the same trou-

At the center

The Nurturing Center offers a variety of services and support groups at different locations throughout the Flathead Valley.

The ParentShare program is a support group for parents of children from birth to age 5.

ParentCare focuses on positive parenting practices related to discipline, child development, communication and problem solving.

Tot Time is a play group for children.

Free child care is provided at parent meetings.

The Nurturing Center may be contacted at 756-1414.

Kalispell
ParentCare meets Thursdays from 6:15-7:45 p.m. at the Nurturing Center's Lakeside House.

Bigfork

ParentShare and Tot Time groups meet Tuesdays from 10-11:15 a.m. at the Lakeside Elementary School Family Center.

For more information, contact Jennifer Rogge at 844-3216 or Margaret Newman at 844-2208.

Bigfork

ParentCare meets Tuesdays at 7 p.m. at Bigfork Elementary's Family Resource Center. Contact Jason and Judy Subatch at 837-2775 or Barry Flannigan at 756-1414.

March 9: Tot Time for children who will start kindergarten in a year or two meets from 2-3 p.m. in the Bigfork Elementary kindergarten room.

For more information, call Renee Wynne at 837-2488.

ble with their children.

"Different picture, different circumstances. They may tell a different story, but the underlying stories are all the same," he said.

Hagen said he believes the underlying problem is that parents tend to raise their children the way they were brought up, including repeating mistakes. The center teaches parents to become the kind of parents they want to be, he said.

Christofferson encourages parents to ask the Nurturing Center for help so they can be stronger parents.

"If there wasn't a need there, we wouldn't be here," she said.

For more information, call the Nurturing Center at 756-1414.

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