

PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE 'Circle of parents' is an outlet for local families

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By LUCIA ANDERSON

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Jenna Veazey was home alone.

She was the only grown-up, anyway.

Her Merchant Marine husband had gone to Kuwait. The King George County mother was left to cope with a preschooler, a toddler and an infant.

"I was feeling a little out of my mind," Veazey said.

Then she noticed the ad for the Circle of Parents, sponsored by the Rappahannock Area Council of Children and Parents, in the Fredericksburg Parent magazine.

"There was free pizza; child care was provided, I thought, 'Why not?'" Veazey said.

The weekly meetings, which allow parents to gather and talk about their frustrations, provided a lifeline for Veazey.

That was three years ago. Now she's the parent facilitator for the group that meets in Dahlgren on Monday nights. That group, like the other six, starts at 6:30 p.m. with a free pizza supper for parents and children. The group splits after that, with a supervised activity program for children and a discussion group for parents.

Each session covers a topic, such as what can be expected of a child at each age level or how to deal with a defiant child. Parents also bring up their own frustrations and receive suggestions and perspective from the others.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month. RACCAP started the Circle of Parents in 1989 with just that goal in mind--preventing child abuse and neglect by teaching people how to be good parents.

During fiscal year 2005, budget figures show 124 adults taking advantage of the program.

"It's for parents seeking support, dealing with the frustrations of parenting," Veazey said.

"Whatever stage their kids are in, they've reached a brick wall."

Kameshia Minus, leader of the Spotsylvania group that meets at Salem Baptist Church, joined Circle of Parents two weeks after her son was born.

Besides the newborn, she had a 3-year-old daughter.

"I'd been in the area for four months. I hadn't met anybody," Minus said.

Julie Menold, leader of the Spotsylvania Courthouse-area group, joined after a divorce. She had a child with special needs, and wanted some help.

Circle of Parents provided both women with the support they were seeking.

There are single dads and couples in the groups as well as single moms and divorced parents struggling with shared custody.

"It's a good safety net. They can vent their feelings, learn positive strategies from other parents," said Julie Rivnak-McAdam, director of RAACAP.

"There are common frustrations," Veazey said. "You don't feel so alone when you hear somebody else talking about the same thing. You never know where that tip is going to come from."

It isn't easy to admit to needing help.

"There is a stigma attached to reaching out for support," Rivnak-McAdam said. "But when you look at the positive results, you can see that it's a good thing to get that support."

Professional social workers agree that Circle of Parents fills a need that's not met by government or court programs.

"It's a support source for families from other families," said Karen Clark, Child Protective Services supervisor for Stafford County's Department of Social Services.

She noted that support from Social Services is provided by career professionals. The Circle of Parents, on the other hand, is a group of people with the same set of difficulties and frustrations.

"They're somebody you can really relate to," she said. "They share, learn from each others' experiences."

"So many of our families don't have those built-in support systems any more. Who do they go to when they don't know what to do?"

The fact that there are discussion topics set for each meeting keeps them from turning into gripe sessions, she noted. "It focuses the parents."

Robert Cloughley, Spotsylvania County's Child Protective Services person, favors the parent circle idea so much that he takes the topic calendar to families who come to his attention as needing help.

"They see other people who have the same problems; they're not so defensive," Cloughley said.

The biggest step in preventing child abuse is to get started in some kind of help group, he said.

And Circle of Parents fills the bill.

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