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Talk with kids

PARENTAL SUCCESS RELIES ON CREATIVITY



Child and family therapist Ron W. Taffel speaks at the Beechwood Hotel to the 31st annual Irving W. Jacobson Memorial Program, a workshop presented by Jewish Family Service of Worcester. (T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR)

Feeling powerless as a parent is not uncommon.

“There's too much information, not enough of a coherent adult voice, not enough of a community,” said child and family therapist and author Ron W. Taffel.

“We (parents) need to keep our expectations recognized. We have expectations of our children, and that is front and center in raising our kids,” said Mr. Taffel, chairman of the Institute of Contemporary Psychotherapy in New York, who spoke last week at the 31st annual Irving W. Jacobson Memorial Program, a workshop presented by Jewish Family Service of Worcester.

Addressing professionals who work with children and families, Mr. Taffel focused on how parents must find new, innovative ways to engage their children. Successful engagement will lead the child and parent

to become mutually empathetic toward each other, he said, allowing the parent to gain a feeling of empowerment.

According to Mr. Taffel, author of “Childhood Unbound,” today's parents are not certain the way that they are raising their children is the right way. This absence of certitude has been caused by a number of factors.

“It's the loss of neighborhood, urban and suburban sprawl, anonymous shopping centers, and the growth of technology,” he said.

These trends gradually loosened the connections between parent and child. The influence of a child's peer group and the lure of popular culture weakened the power of parents at home. Technological advancements — cell phones, electronic games and computers — have added to the disempowerment of parents.

“Parents started to feel overmatched,” he said.

For professionals and parents, like Mr. Taffel, it's time to even the score, he said.

Getting children to communicate with their parents is imperative. But no two children are alike. According to Mr. Taffel, children open up at different times of the day, and it is the parents' responsibility to observe the times at which their child tends to communicate regularly. Research has shown that children tend to be more willing to communicate with their parents in less than intimate settings.

“Kids talk more in the midst of doing other things, when they (parent and child) are not even looking at each other,” he said.

Parents must have a keen ear for times in which their son or daughter consistently opens up to them. This will allow parents to “ritualize” these times. Repetitive communication, even if only for 10 minutes, increases the chance of a child bringing up an important issue. Whether in the car on the way to basketball practice or right before a child goes to bed, parents have to take advantage of these opportunities for engagement.

“It is about maintaining and increasing your sense of authority as a parent,” said Mr. Taffel. “It allows us as parents to set limits.”

These gateways for communication serve both child and parent. The child ends up feeling engaged and heard. The parent is given a window of opportunity to convey his or her expectations, limits and values to the child. Together, child and parent create a sense of mutual empathy, a bridge of understanding.

“This creates greater respect — more of an ability to communicate and to get one's values across,” he said.

The 21st century has presented parents with an array of new challenges and obstacles. The main objective remains, however.

“It is still ultimately our job as parents to be able to instill in our kids the kinds of values we want them and expect them to go out into the world with,” said Mr. Taffel.