

Parents get schooled: Portland moms and dads can learn experts' tips about raising boys and girls

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PORTLAND, OREGON-Sept. 6, 2011-- Over a glass of wine (optional, of course), parents learn about the art of parenting from instructor Sheri Louis (standing, right) in an evening class at the Redslate Wine Company in Southeast Portland. Randy L. Rasmussen/The Oregonian

Is it bad if your daughter is obsessed with princesses?

What if your 3-year-old son has such killer tantrums, you're at the end of your rope?

Though the Internet offers countless answers, a growing number of moms and dads are learning to be better parents the old-school way: in class.

Dargan Mudge, a Northeast Portland mom, took a Mindful Parenting class in a wine bar last spring to help negotiate with her two young sons. "My husband and I just felt like it was getting out of control," Mudge said. "I am at home full time. He's working 50 hours a week. We're not always on the same page." The four-week workshop taught her everything from the science of brain development (what's happening in a toddler's mind) to practical tips (address the kid who got punched before addressing the child who hit him.)

Last year, the Oregon Parenting Education Collaborative was launched to help make parenting education a community norm. The program is giving away \$1.2 million a year for at

Parenting Classes

Parenting classes

Metropolitan Family Services classes
www.metfamily.org

Cost: Free

Make Parenting a Pleasure (English), 13-week class

Lynch View Elementary School, starts Sept. 27
Lynch Wood Elementary School, starts Oct. 5

Make Parenting a Pleasure (Spanish)

Parklane Elementary School, starts Sept. 20
Shaver Elementary, starts Thursday

Guiding Good Choices (English)

Lot Whitcomb Elementary School, Milwaukie, five week-class, starts today at 6 p.m.

Mindful Parenting

For details, email mindfulparentingpdx@gmail.com

least three years to organizations that help school parents. "We think that investing in strong parenting is one of the most effective ways we could be spending our resources because parents are their children's most important teachers," said Mary Louise McClintock, early childhood program director at the Oregon Community Foundation, a partner in the program along with Oregon State University and The Ford Family Foundation. "Parenting programs have been proven to help strengthen family relationships and child outcomes."

"We require it be a best practice parenting curriculum," McClintock said. "If we're going to pay for a multiseries class, we want to show that it is going to make a difference for parenting, not for breast-feeding or how to childproof your house. Those things are important, it's just not our goal."

Another goal is to help parents find resources, such as classes, in one central location.

Sheri Louis, the mom of two young children and a former elementary school teacher, started teaching the Mindful Parenting classes after commiserating with fellow moms.

"As parents, we get so much information about giving birth but very little information about what happens afterward," Louis said. In her classes, parents learn that a young child may not be able to understand what they're being told, for example, if a parent says not to run. A child might not be able to picture what "not running" looks like; instead, telling the child to walk next to the parent and hold hands might be easier for a child to understand, Louis said.

"I liked the thought of parents stopping to be mindful of their parenting," said Louis, "rather than just raising your kids the way you were raised. I feel personally I was parented from a place of fear where 'I'm the parent you need to listen to me.'"

Gender specific sessions

Of course, not everyone agrees with her approach.

"There definitely is questioning, which I really appreciate," Louis said. "What I always say to parents is take whatever you need from this class. If it doesn't feel right, if it's not going to work with your family, don't use it."

In July, Louis held her first session focusing on girls called Navigate Her. The one-night class, which will be repeated Thursday, includes information about dealing with tweens and media, eating and conflict resolution.

Janet Allison, the mother of two grown daughters, teaches a class on raising boys that draws on her book *Boys Alive*.

"I can't emphasize enough how important it is to understand the difference between the genders," said Allison, who spent 15 years as a teacher and started studying boys after she had a classroom loaded with XY chromosomes. "I see parents from middle schoolers on down. Their sons are changing and they want to understand what's going on. He's not a little baby anymore. Strategies aren't working. Timeouts aren't working."

Allison now works with teachers and families and hopes to instill in people that boys are made differently than girls and should be treated as such.

"Our world sets up boys to be wrong," she said. "Why can't you read? Why can't you write beautifully? They just aren't set up to do that at an early age."

Boys aren't meant to sit still, she said, in part because they were the hunters of our hunter/gatherer past.

"Teachers aren't taught that boys have to move. Hunters travel 12 miles a day, not sitting at a desk and definitely not quietly," Allison said.

The information, she said, has literally brought some of her students to tears.

"I'll have wives say, 'I understand my husband better,'" Allison said. "I'll have men come up literally with tears in their eyes and say, 'I understand myself better.' This is powerful stuff."

Parents get to share

In the Portland area, Metropolitan Family Services offers free classes to parents in more traditional settings -- at schools in east Multnomah County and Clackamas County.

Since 2003, Metropolitan Family Services has sponsored Make Parenting a Pleasure, a 13-week class held two hours a week with topics about children up to age 8 such as communication, positive discipline, child development and literacy.

"It's great to have a group of supportive adults to talk to and to share concerns," said Amy Corbett, program manager for family support services at Metropolitan Family Services. "We're not trying to tell parents how to parent. We want them to share what works for them, what hasn't worked."

Another class, Guiding Good Choices, focuses on children ages 9-14. The five-week class emphasizes parents helping kids to refuse drugs and alcohol and includes a panel of middle-school kids who answer parents' questions.

The classes are held in English and Spanish, and some instructors are bicultural. Though private classes can have a hefty price tag, Metropolitan Family Service's classes are free and include child care and food. But with grant funding drying up, classes are scheduled to run only through December in Multnomah County unless additional funding is secured.

"Most organizations aren't charging for classes unless they're serving middle income or higher income families," Corbett said. "There's really a lot of energy in the state around parent education; there just isn't a lot of funding for classes."

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