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Parenting



One Tough Job

Board helps parents to cope

(Editor's note: This is the third in a series of five stories regarding National Child Abuse Prevention Month and the services available in McKean County to help parents through what the McKean County Collaborative Board calls "the toughest job you'll love" — parenthood. Five protective factors have been identified to reduce the risk of abuse and neglect. This series identifies and explores those factors.)

By **MARCIE SCHELLHAMMER**
Era Reporter

Every parent knows about stress — starting with diapers and building through a child's years with school and homework and everyday life.

Parents who learn to cope with everyday stress and the occasional crisis have resilience, and the McKean County Collaborative Board can help parents learn how to achieve it.

"Parents are chaos control," said Lee Sizemore, director of the Family Centers.

MaryAnne Polucci-Sherman, psychologist with Bradford Recovery

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Systems, gave a basic definition of resilience. "It's an ability to recover from or adjust easily to change or misfortune. As parents, you are doing that every single day and every single minute."

She described traits that parents need to be resilient.

"I think humor is very important for resiliency. I think also that parents should have a bit of insight into themselves and others," Polucci-Sherman said. "I think that makes resiliency a bit easier if I can recognize my strengths and weaknesses and I can get feedback from other people from it."

A parent's ability to cope with the ups and downs in life serves as a role model for their child, she explained. A resilient parent is also very active in problem solving, she added.

"You address it as soon as you see there is a change or an issue or a behavioral need," Polucci-Sherman explained. "You don't wait or close your eyes and hope it will go away. It takes a lot of patience."

"When we talk about (parenting) being multi-layered and exhausting and the hardest job you love, I absolutely agree," she said.

Another part of that parental flexibility is being able to stand on one's own, the psychologist described.

"That's part of resiliency too is being able to be independent, being able to think for yourself and make your own decisions and not have to look to somebody else to guide you," Polucci-Sherman said. "Sometimes as parents we're a little apprehensive to do that."

One also needs to realize when a break is necessary so the situation doesn't deteriorate to the point of abuse.

"You have to have good self-control, and you have to realize when your self-control is not so good that you have to leave the area and return," Polucci-Sherman said.

"Exercise is awesome," suggested Sherry Rodgers, a parent who has found success with Family Center programs. Leave your child with someone suitable and take a walk."

Polucci-Sherman said that is all about knowing your own limits.

"I can't do it all and I can't be the lone star," she said, explaining a healthy attitude to have. "I need to find my voice and be able to ask for assistance and/or guidance and/or support."

And remember to spare some time for yourself, the psychologist said.

"You have to have some hobbies that you do or enjoy so you can be yourself. You can't lose your identity during your parenting."

Set boundaries with other adults and with your children, she said.

"You're the designer of your child's world," explained

Gladys LeCourt-Pelka, family development specialist with the Bradford Family Center. "If you want these boundaries, you have to set them early. If you want to teach your child how to handle stress, you've got to do it by showing them. You're the role model."

Greta Billings, co-chairperson of the Collaborative Board, said that taking the advice of the experts isn't always an easy thing to do.

"You talk about knowing boundaries and being independent, but also looking outside yourself for help," Billings said. "Those two things can clash for people. They don't reach out. They look at it as a weakness instead of a strength so they don't ask for help because 'oh, then they'll think I'm a bad parent.'"

"If you try to compare yourself to ... 'Leave it to Beaver' and have these expectations that are unrealistic, it makes it three times worse," Billings said. She added that every parent, every child and every family is different, and no one set of rules works for everyone.

Finding the right mix of what works for one's family can be tricky, but the experts available in McKean County can help. Sizemore explained the Collaborative Board has published the McKean County Resource Directory, which is available online, to help link parents with services.