

Parenting to Prepare

BY MICHELLE DE BOER, B.A., GRAD. DIPL.

The premise for most sporting events is to end up with a winner and a loser. Finishing in a tie often leaves us feeling disappointed. We love celebrating accomplishment, especially when “our” team is the one succeeding! When it comes to raising our children, the same notion often applies: we want our kids to be winners.

We, too, want to feel that we have succeeded as parents. We may feel that the success of our children is a direct reflection of our parenting skills. As parents we often take credit when our children do well; we also blame ourselves when our kids make mistakes. But sometimes

the sting of disappointment, regret, and failure can actually drive us as parents to over-protect our children.

My experience as a therapist working with parents and children has shown an interesting trend: often we are talking about childhoods where kids have not genuinely experienced

rejection or failure. And instead of thriving in this bubble-wrapped, parent-manufactured realm, children are responding with anxiety, even with paralyzing anxieties. Not only that, but ironically these children may even demonstrate high-risk, self-harming behaviours—behaviours unimaginable to their parents!

PREPARING FOR LIFE

As parents, we are encouraged to praise, encourage and provide physical affection in a nurturing and safe home environment. And that’s good: our children thrive in safe environments with rules and boundaries, love and support, laughter and guidance. Children of all ages look to their parents for affirmation; parents get to celebrate their child’s uniqueness and value in the family.

But troubles arise when the focus is on parenting to *protect* instead of parenting to *prepare*. In his book *Too Safe for Their Own Good*, Michael Ungar, a therapist, social worker and professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, expresses concern about Canadian parents’ tendency to offer children too much safety. He notes that taking risks and seeking responsibility are essential aspects of the natural maturation process. “Too much risk and we endanger a child. Too little risk and we fail to provide a child with healthy opportunities for growth and psychological development” (*Too Safe*, p. 3). Exploring and navigating the world begins almost immediately in children’s lives; their curiosities and discoveries are often coupled with eventually experiencing natural consequences. A girl, upon discovering the thrill of running, will at some point fall ▶



and feel the hurt of a skinned knee. A boy who discovers the motion of opening and closing a kitchen cupboard door, will at some point feel the pain of a pinched finger. The examples become more complex as the child grows older, from riding a bicycle to driving the family vehicle. But each one illustrates a healthy experience of setting up challenges that lead to either failure or success. Yet this essential experience does not happen if as parents we are overly concerned with protecting and safeguarding the explorations of our children. We then deprive our children of the ability to process stress and learn from their mistakes.

LEARNING LIMITS

Ungar suggests that “children are happiest and most likely to avoid really dangerous behaviour... when adults make their worlds a place of challenge and adventure” (p. 73). He shows that there is value in accomplishment but also in failure to achieve; “children need to know their limits and how to bounce back” (Ungar, p. 2). There is huge value and growth in the child’s ability to pull himself off the

ground, brush off his skinned knee, and get back on his bicycle!

Ungar encourages parents to raise “4C children”, children who become “competent, caring contributors to their communities”. A 4C child “knows her talents and has opportunities to demonstrate them... the ability to show and be shown empathy... contribute to the well-being of others, thereby developing a sense of personal power and self-efficacy and being a part of community” (p. 12). It is our desire as Christian parents to raise healthy, well-adjusted and successful children who will one day contribute to society and give glory to their Creator while thriving in work, play, and family.

Parenting to prepare incorporates balancing between fostering a learning environment and empowering the child, as opposed to controlling and manipulating both the child and his/her environment. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky describes parenting to prepare as “scaffolding” parenting. “We (parents) do this by

offering small, achievable challenges, served up one at a time, like rungs on a ladder” (p. 3). A child faced with too many challenges becomes overwhelmed; so too, however, does a child who faces too few challenges.

Part of a child’s development and maturation involves testing and evaluating; this process contributes to positive growth in a child’s self-definition and self-esteem. Through risk-taking and responsibility-seeking actions, the child is able to view him/herself as able-bodied, empowered, and competent to handle the same or similar challenge or stress when s/he meets it again.

ESSENTIAL PARENTAL MESSAGES

This is nurtured especially when parents step away from being managers of their children’s lives and adopt more of a coaching position (p. 81). Each of us experiences the spectrum of emotions God created us with; it is what we do with and how we express these emotions, that can make our emotions appropriate or inappropriate, healthy or dangerous. Our children watch, learn, and apply how we evaluate and express ourselves; this offers opportunity to coach towards controlling reckless impulses yet fostering healthy risk-taking and responsibility-seeking behaviours. And as parents we want to offer alternative and more adaptive ways of exploring and experiencing risk and success, while remaining safe.

“We do our children no favours sheltering them from the challenges that come with living life fully” (p. 23). Ungar describes four powerful messages parents communicate when they encourage constructive risk-taking and responsibility-seeking behaviours:

- “You Belong”
- “You’re Trustworthy”
- “You’re Responsible”
- “You’re Capable”

When a child feels s/he is loved, valued, trusted, and seen as responsible and capable, s/he develops an understanding and belief system that authentically and intrinsically embraces a self-definition that includes these messages.

Parenting to prepare is summed up in this: “When we provide children with both structure and respect, balanced by a realistic assessment of the risks they face and what they can handle, then children get everything they need to grow up well: permission to mess up, and the structure to land softly after making mistakes” (p. 112). Allowing our children to

explore, fall down and get back up again helps build character, strength, and a sense of ability and capability, especially when accompanied by parental support and encouragement, a listening ear, and the curiosity to discover and experience together.

Parenting is humbling; it is not easy! May God bless you as you *parent to prepare* your child for a life of love, hope and meaning.

Michelle De Boer, BA, Grad Dipl, is an Art Therapist at Shalem and a member of the Canadian Art Therapy Association. Her counselling at Shalem includes working with children and families with issues of addiction, divorce and separation, grief, anger, and behavioural difficulties at home and school.



Dr. Michael Ungar, a partner with Shalem, is one of the leading researchers internationally in the study of resilience in children and youth.



For the past year, Michael (www.michael-ungar.com) has graciously and generously partnered with Shalem in helping us to design a comprehensive evaluation regime for our WrapAround program, using in part some of his resilience measurement tools. Our WrapAround work is supported by World Vision Canada. On November 15, 2011, Shalem co-sponsored, with the Hamilton Early Years Network, a one-day conference in Hamilton on resilience, and an evening for parents, with the Hamilton Boys and Girls Club, both led by Dr. Ungar. In addition to his own generous support, Dr. Ungar’s involvement with Shalem is funded by two grants from the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health.

WrapAround wraps community supports around people struggling with complex needs.

Go to our website for more information!



{ DIRECTOR’S CORNER }



MARK VANDER VENNEN, MA, M.ED, R.S.W. Executive Director

THE CONGREGATIONAL ASSISTANCE PLAN (CAP)—IT’S VITAL, HEALTHY AND GROWING!

In 2005, the Shalem Board was fascinated by the concept of the Congregational Assistance Plan (CAP). With CAP, churches purchase for all of their members the possibility of up to 6 counselling sessions from a local, Master’s-degree level Christian therapist. CAP removes barriers for getting help: the service is anonymous and there is no cost to the client. CAP is designed to enhance a church’s diaconal efforts to support the needs of its members.

In 2005, the questions the Board wrestled with were:

1. Would CAP be a fit for churches? Would churches understand CAP as a way to live out their mission, serve their members and nurture healthy congregational life?
2. Would parishioners use it?
3. Would churches consider the costs of CAP to be affordable?

Now we know the answers: a resounding YES to all three!

In 2006, we began a small CAP pilot project, involving two churches in Ontario, one urban, one rural. In 2008 we added three more churches to the pilot. And in mid-

2009 we opened up CAP to any interested church.

The outcome? To date, 18 churches are CAP churches, plus one Christian High School (using a modified CAP structure called CAPS, or Counselling Assistance Program for Students). CAP churches are now found across southern Ontario, from Chatham to the Belleville area, and each church that began with CAP continues to use CAP. We are excited by our partnerships with CAP churches—partnerships to help equip churches to further support healing and restore hope.

Here is a sample of just two of the many responses we’ve received about CAP:

“I am so grateful for CAP. It is great to have a place to go to work through this unexpected crisis in my life. I am grateful for my church’s involvement in CAP, providing this helpful resource to its members in times of need. Really demonstrates to me the church’s theological understanding of people as holistic beings—social, spiritual, psychological and physical “.

And a pastor wrote:

“Some people shared with me that they reached out for help and have been really blessed by the counselling. Most of them would not likely have reached out for counselling without this resource. I find it reduces both the financial aspect and the stigma that accompanies counselling for some. It also communicates to our church family that we know life can be hard at times and we care deeply. Thanks again for your ministry.” ▶

A Continuing Partnership for Shalem

Shalem is pleased to announce the receipt of a one-year “Doing Evaluation” grant for our WrapAround program from the

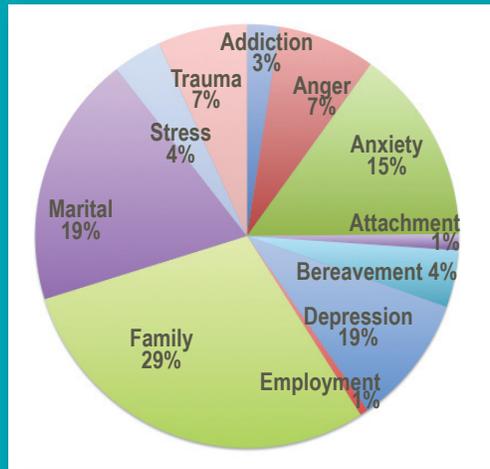
Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, beginning October 1, 2011. This follows a previous one-year “Planning Evaluation” grant from the Centre. We are grateful for this exciting partnership!



Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health

Presenting Issues

Here is a breakdown of the presenting issues across all CAP churches in 2010. We provide such information to CAP churches quarterly—but with no names or identifying information of any kind, safeguarding the anonymity of the service. Our hope is that churches find this information helpful in tailoring their ministries to emerging needs.



So, 1) is CAP a fit for churches? Clearly, yes. 2) Would parishioners use it? Yes—at a higher rate on average than employees use counselling services through Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs, which CAP is modelled after) (see Box). 3) Would churches consider the costs of CAP to be affordable? Yes—which is not to say that some churches haven't struggled. But all of them have found ways to pay for the service, and they continue to do so. CAP costs about \$40 per household in the church per year—thus about half of the cost of one counselling session “purchases” the possibility of high quality Christian counselling, not just for you and your family but also for your neighbour in the pew. CAP is a way of reaching out in the name of Christ.

All of these trends are continuing in 2011, with additional churches. So far all CAP churches are from the Christian Reformed denomination (CRC). There is still considerable room for growth among CRCs—and numerous others are considering CAP. Concerted outreach efforts are now also underway with other denominations to broaden our CAP ministry as widely as possible.

Further, a CAP research and evaluation Work-

ing Group has been formed, with a view to publishing information about CAP as it emerges in professional journals and popular venues. In addition to Marg Smit Vandezande, our CAP Director, and myself, the group includes Kenneth Van Wyk, Executive Director of Christian Counselling Services in Toronto and the originator of the CAP concept, and Dr. Rick Csiernik of the University of Western Ontario, one of Canada's leading researchers on EAP counselling programs.

Praise God for the exciting affirmative answers to the Board's three questions! We are deeply grateful to each CAP church, CAP clients, and our CAP therapists. But we are also profoundly grateful for and humbled by the support of Shalem's members and friends for this ongoing ministry. *Without your support—prayers, donations and promotion in your own networks—CAP would not be a reality.* Please read this report about CAP as a celebration of your trust and engagement in Shalem's work—and especially as a form of thanksgiving to God, the sure Healer of all of our wounds.

CAP Numbers in 2010

In 2010 the average usage across all CAP churches (15) was 6%—that is, 6% of church households across CAP churches received counselling in 2010

total # of clients.....105
 total # of files.....144
 total # of sessions.....636
 total # of CAP counsellors....70
 around Ontario

Shalem is committed to best practices in mental health and is a member of Family Service Ontario. All services are offered in strictest confidence.

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Mental Health Network

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PLEASE CONSIDER HAVING CAP AT YOUR CHURCH!

For more information, contact:
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Marg will be happy to meet with any group from your church, and she can put you in touch with another church enrolled in the CAP program to hear about their experience.