

WORKSHOP FOR PARENTS OF HARD TO MANAGE CHILDREN

NAMI Montgomery County was pleased to have psychologists Dr. Georgia DeGangi and Dr. Anne Kendall hold a four-hour workshop for parents on “Tools for Helping the Hard-to-Manage Child” on Saturday, June 7 at Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church.

Drs. DeGangi and Kendall reviewed the basic characteristics of children with emotional dysregulation, which include irritability and fussiness for more than six months, trouble calming themselves down when agitated, difficulty with change, trouble with attention, ongoing difficulties with sleeping and feeding, moodiness, and over or undersensitivity to sensory stimuli at home and in the classroom (noise, light, textures).

They reviewed normal development in children and some children’s biochemical predisposition to dysregulation. They noted that dysregulated children react to overstimulation by withdrawing, overreacting, failing to orient themselves or avoiding the stimuli. They described these children’s problems with auditory processing (trouble following what is said, difficulty modulating own voice tone, experiencing loud sounds as painful) and tactile processing (only initiating touch on their own terms, difficulty sitting with peers, touching constantly), and eating (sensitivities to touch and smell).

Dysregulated children can also have problems with vestibular processing (inability to sit still, poor body control or balance, avoidance of sports), motor planning (resistance to trying new activities, difficulty with sequencing actions, hard time reading body language, gestures and facial expressions) and body regulation (trouble sleeping and eating). They noted that poor sleeping and eating patterns will increase emotional dysregulation, irritability and inattention for these children, and frequent small meals or healthy snacks can help.

Drs. DeGangi and Kendall also reviewed the difficulties these children face in the areas of attention and organization (impulsivity, carelessness and sloppiness, inability to sustain effort, forgetting to write down or hand in homework, losing things, distraction, overfocusing), mood regulation (intense responses, meltdowns in response to small stressors, accelerated agitation and being slow to calm down, physical and verbal aggression, perfectionism, obsessive thinking and compulsive actions), being withdrawn, communication (problems with receptive and expressive language and pragmatic language, nonverbal communication – turn-taking, reading body language, listening and waiting, interactive play), and the ability to empathize with others.

Both presenters spoke about the “Rule of Three,” starting with Rule One: Validate the Child. This means telling the child what she is doing right, empathizing with how she is feeling, and showing you understand and that you’re on his side. They stressed that it’s important to communicate that you are working together as part of a team and to express the idea that “you are great and you must change.” If parents can’t validate what a child is doing, then they can validate that they understand what he is feeling. They should practice Radical Acceptance of the situation – “it is what it is”!

One effective strategy for validating a child is to provide daily focused, non-judgmental attention for 10-30 minutes with no telephone or other interruptions. With older children this time can be spent watching them do something they love (sports, video games, art), sharing an interest (tv show, sports), or listening to understand their perspective. Having fun with a child is another way to validate; the adventures can be small, medium or large.

Rule Two is Keep Calm Yourself. This means learning skills that can keep you emotionally even and having a plan that can keep you confident and in control. They emphasized learning to soothe yourself with some relaxing activity, practicing mindfulness and distraction, focusing your attention, learning positive self-talk and using systematic relaxation techniques. Among the resources they suggested were “Ready, Set, Relax”, John Kabat-Zinn’s book “Full Catastrophe Living” and “The Eight-Minute Meditation.”

Rule Three is Provide Structure. Parents need to structure time and space for the child and have consequences for behavior that emphasizes positive over negative consequences. They recommended having the child get up and go to sleep at the same time every day with a deviation of no more than two hours, setting a time for being in the kitchen for breakfast and dinner, and creating a structure and a stimulus-free environment for doing homework. Having a place where backpacks and papers always go also helps.

Drs. DeGangi and Kendall recommended structure for rules of behavior (natural consequences, positive reinforcement, token economies), structured communication (sandwiching a message in between positive statements), ruling out medical or nutritional issues or disorders, and teaching children to self-soothe using mindfulness techniques including yoga, music and art projects and transitions using objects such as stuffed animals. Create structure for school with accommodations and computer for assignments and make rules for use of telephone and screens (internet, e-mail and computer games).

The final message that the presenters left the parents with was don't try to be perfect, be effective. If something doesn't work, try another method. Take care of yourself first and then take care of your child. These children are hard to manage for a good reason. Remember the Rule of Three: Validate, Keep Calm Yourself and Provide Structure.