

The Times

SERVING OUR COMMUNITY FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY

Pilot program focuses on parenting practices

By CATHIE VIKSJO

Staff Writer

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP - Surviving a child's teenage years has been called the greatest challenge facing a parent - particularly in this day and age when youngsters are growing up faster than the speed of e-mail.

A group of Hopewell Valley parents have learned that they're not alone when it comes to worrying about their children.

"Nobody has it perfect. We're all there as part of the struggle and as part of the challenge," said Rob Seiz, a father of two boys, ages 11 and 15.

Seiz, a health planning consultant, has become a facilitator for a pilot program at Timberlane Middle School titled the Parent Leadership Corps (PLC).

Sponsored by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training (PCLT), the initiative teaches parents how to communicate with their children. The methods have been developed by educators and psychologists, and offer parents ways to reach out to their children and help them cope with the pressures of contemporary life.



Staff photo by Martin Griff

Wendy McDougall, a member of the Parent Leadership Corps, looks over a packet of cocaine brought by an undercover law enforcement officer during a recent meeting. The parents viewed different types of drugs to help them become more aware.

Timberlane is one of 12 statewide middle schools - the only one in Mercer County - selected to participate in this innovative project. The goal is to reach 1,200 parents across New Jersey.

"I could use all the help I can get. I'm no expert," said Bernadette Furlong, another PLC facilitator. "I'm concerned about being able to communicate with my children." Furlong has a daughter in eighth grade at Timberlane and a son who attends Hopewell Valley Regional High School.



Staff photo by Martin Griff

Hopewell area parents Tom and Nancy O'Leary share a laugh during a Parent Leadership Corps (PLC) meeting March 14 at Timberlane Middle School in Hopewell Township.

PRESENTED BY trained parent facilitators, like Seiz and Furlong, the six weekly sessions are designed to encourage parental self-examination and to develop healthy attitudes and behaviors in their offspring.

Sessions cover subjects such as: "Talking With and Listening to Your Adolescent"; "Looking at You, Your Teens and Substance Abuse"; "Managing Stress - Yours and Your Teen's"; and "Supporting Healthy Practices."

(The workshops usually take place at the middle school's all-purpose activity rooms. A second offering of this series begins next month.)

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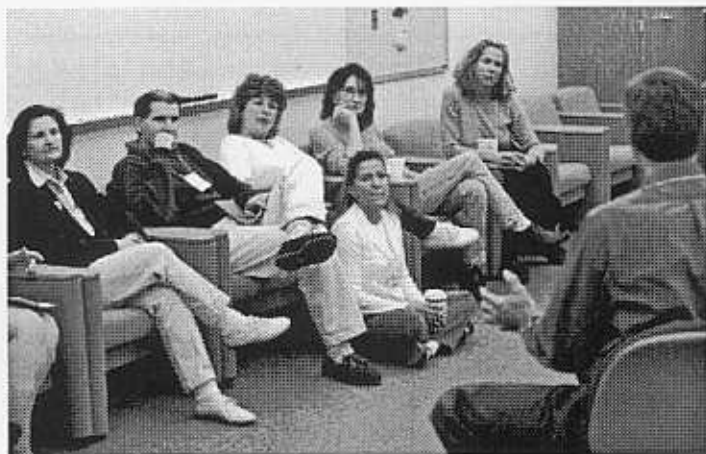
Sponsored by the N.J. Department of Health and Senior Services, the program is part of the N.J. Peer to Peer Substance Abuse Prevention Network, said PCLT Executive Director Sharon Rose Powell.

Now in its third year, the peer network for youth was also developed by Powell and her associates at the nonprofit educational organization, headquartered at 12 Vandevanter Ave. in Princeton Borough.

"We have developed a Parent Training Model that ... is one of the most promising aspects of our prevention strategy," said Powell.

"A primary goal, as we work with parents, is to help them understand how they must change their behavior and their role modeling if they expect their kids to have healthy values and practices," she said, adding, "Parents can be trained to become facilitators and then reach out to other parents. The idea is that 'I get it and then I pass it on.'"

"I learned so much just listening to the other parents," said Furlong. "People really do share honestly about some of the issues they were struggling with in their families."



Staff photo by Martin Griff

Parent Leadership Corps facilitator Rob Seiz, right, leads a discussion group with Hopewell area parents during a recent meeting at Timberlane Middle School in Hopewell Township. From left are Judy Jones, Phil Volpe, Marlene Serratelli, Stacie Hodes, Elsie Sheidler and Alice Huston.

AT TIMBERLANE, the first training sessions took place last fall.

"This has the potential to build on itself," said Seiz. "What's happening is that we're building a reservoir of parents who could take a step forward and facilitate the program," he said.

Interested parents like Seiz, whose wife is PTA co-president, signed up for a special weekend educational retreat which, in turn, trained them to be facilitators for the six-week Parent Leadership Corps sessions.

Many parents were initially skeptical but now give the training a "thumbs up."

"With my own (facilitator) training, it was very, very disturbing,

because I felt that there was this gap between what was suggested as theory and the reality of what it's like being a parent," said Seiz. "But, it was very helpful and I basically learned about some of the behaviors and approaches that worked better than others."

"A key thing is that we're not looking for perfect parents. We're looking for real parents who are just struggling and trying to cope with their adolescents on a day-to-day basis, and are looking for ways to improve their relationship," Seiz added.

"If we can set the stage and build the foundation now, we feel confident that it will provide them with the strength to say 'No' to drugs and other problem behaviors," he said.

Even parents who felt good about their relationship with their children learned something.

"Initially, it was a little questionable to me as to what they could tell me to improve the communication that I have with my (11-year-old) son," said Elsie Sheidler. "I was also unsure about how they could teach me specific skills related to communication about drugs."

BUT SHEIDLER'S impressions changed as the sessions progressed. Most important, she learned about her primary influence as a role model.

"In hindsight, you realize you can do it. Stay open-minded and model your behavior," she said.

"Our kids really watch us. We don't think they're watching, but they are picking up on everything we do," said Furlong.

During the introductory session, the parents were asked to remember their adolescence.

When these parents were teenagers, school problems centered on chewing gum, running in the halls, dress code violations, and littering. Fast forward to the 1990s, and their children confront a different set of societal problems. In addition to substance abuse, there are concerns about suicide, pregnancy, rape, robbery, assault, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

"I felt then (during my teen years) that I had free time to daydream and read," recalled Furlong, "but now, by the time the weekend comes, my kids are exhausted. They just go from one activity to the next ... our lives are inundated with stress."

"I'm concerned about all of it," said Furlong. "I want my children to know that there is nothing they can't come to me and talk about ... that I'm here for them."

Perhaps the most important benefit of the parents' memories of their teens is the perspective that time brings.

"Sometimes, as parents, we're so concerned and worried about our kids," said Powell. "But the other side of that is that you do grow up and get past those problems."

For more information on the Parent Leadership Corps, call (609-252-9300).