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Parenting workshop puts focus on communication

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By Sue ellen Ross Post-Tribune correspondent February 28, 2014 12:52PM

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Clear communication is important in any conversation, but when dealing with a child's education, it can become paramount.

A recent workshop, "Connecting with Parents," sponsored by the Indiana Parenting Institute, found one dozen educators, counselors and social workers tuning in to the specifics of dealing with hard-to-reach parents.

The goal was to be able to discuss their children in a way that communicates the reality of their behavior and ways to bring it to a positive level.

"We are here to exchange ideas," said IPI facilitator Laura Smith-Wynn. "Our mission is not to solve (parents' and children's) problems, but to help them find ways to take responsibility to solve them on their own."

Some of the main points to find success with parent communication are listening closely, and staying on the same level with them — not lecturing or talking down — according to Smith-Wynn.

"For many parents, their consensus is that once a child is on school property, they no longer are responsible for them," she said. "There's nothing wrong with that concept, but that's not how the schools work."

And although parents do not like to be told what to do when it comes to their child, each school has a rule book that must be adhered to. When schools offer assemblies for orientation, they may state what is expected of the students, but the rule book states it in black and white.

Both students and their parents should become familiar with it, Smith-Wynn believes.

This is an important factor when issues are raised about the child's behavior. "They need to know about these 'rules of engagement,'" she said. "And they also need to know the position of the school representative when meeting with them."

Francine Birgans, admissions representative at Aspire Charter School in Gary, develops special events and felt the workshop would benefit her in regard to connecting parents with those events.

"Keeping everyone in the loop is very important for a positive outcome," she said. "These types of workshops are valuable, as the others here also can share ideas."

Conducting motivational interviews by asking open-ended questions can go a long way toward putting parents at ease; acting cordially and showing that you're listening can make parents look at all angles and feel part of the decision-making process, and follow-through as well, attendees were told.

Asking what they want to accomplish also can open up dialogue, encouraging parents to find ways to do something by themselves.

Carmen Wilson of the Midwest Institute on Aging in Gary also was in the audience.

"Today there are many older parents, as well as grandparents who are raising children," said Wilson, who is a former high school counselor. "We can't assume all parents are young."

According to the Indiana Parenting Institute literature, growing evidence is proving that parenting education and family literacy positively

impact parents' interactions with their children in ways that lead to better child, family, and community outcomes.

The challenge for most parent educators, teachers, and family service professionals is getting parents committed and engaged.

"We are in the people business and all about the process of communication," Smith-Wynn concluded. "We want to treat others as we would like to be treated. Our job is to help facilitate their issues."

Indiana Parenting Institute offers caregivers and parents of children, ages birth to 18 years old, the opportunity to enhance their parenting skills, strengthen family relationships and achieve personal growth. Various programs, workshops, and activities are available.

For more information about the Indiana Parenting Institute, call 886-1111 or online at www.indianaparentinginstitute.org.

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