Help for Parents of 'Out-of-the-Box' Children

By Bracha Schwartz

When children are struggling, parents feel their pain. They want to help, but don't know how. They feel isolated, wondering 'Why is my child not like the others? Am I doing something wrong?'

You're not alone. Get valuable guidance at a panel discussion on "The Out-of-the-Box Child: Strategies for Successful Parenting," Monday, May 15 at Shomrei Torah in Fair Lawn. The program is part of the series "Inspired by Ilona," sponsored by the Bravman family in Ilona's memory.

The program will address concerns about children who struggle with social and educational systems, ADHD, anxiety, sensorimotor issues, learning challenges and behavioral concerns. "Our goal is to make people feel less alone," said Nancy Bravman. "We want to give them strategies for coping and helping their children."

The panel includes professionals with different perspectives: Moderator Dr. Benjamin Gottesman, a psychologist in private practice who also works at the Clear View School, a therapeutic school in Westchester; Dr. Rebecca Eliason, a psychologist and consultant to schools and families; Shulamit Roth, head of school at Yeshiyat Shalshelet, a day school for students with language-based learning disabilities; and Michelle Goodman, a board-certified behavior analyst who coaches parents of children with developmental disabilities and behavior challenges.

Dr. Gottesman sees many children with social and emotional challenges who aren't developing according to standard milestones and can't adjust to the typical school environment. "I work with parents to develop an accepting, compassionate approach to their children," he said. "You have to understand why the child is acting the way he does and work with their nervous system instead of against it. Some kids are shut down, or they can't function because they have their head in the clouds all the time. Some act out and are disruptive. Whatever the case is, parents run into trouble when they know their child is 'out-of-the-box' and they try to shoehorn them back in. That's not useful. They will pop out of the box again."

Dr. Gottesman said he and Bravman together drew up a list of questions for the panelists in advance so they would have time to research the answers. Ouestions include: What are the challenges parents experience when raising an out-of-the-box child? How can parents fulfill the important role of enjoying their children, when confronted with challenges? What are some self-care strategies parents can employ when their child is struggling? "Parents are the most important people to help children with struggles," said Dr. Gottesman. "We want them to come away from this program with a sense of belonging to a community and a sense of empowerment."

Dr. Eliason hopes to give parents who attend the program practical tools they can use with their children, family, friends and community, and provide different strategies families can try. She will share suggestions about how to recognize when intervention might be needed to address concerns, and when to allow for natural progression and development. "It is important to look at the social, emotional, behavioral and developmental performance gaps between the child and their sameaged peers," she explained. "We want to see if the gap is closing and how fast the child is progressing." Dr. Eliason often utilizes diagnostic evaluations that can be analyzed to determine the best approach for research-based interventions, as well as setting realistic goals and expectations.

Another topic she plans to address is how parents can help their child navigate social situations and decrease parent isolation through constructive communication with fellow parents. Dr. Eliason believes that most parents want their children to go out of their way to befriend other children. "Take concrete steps to create a positive experience-perhaps limit initial playdates to a short timeframe and communicate your plans directly with the other parents to help ensure you're fostering a positive experience," she advised. Her hope is that by providing parents with additional strategies, and involving the broader community, the program can minimize the feelings of isolation so many individuals experience.

"Children do well when we provide them the tools to be successful, which can be tricky to navigate when supporting an out-of-the-box child," said Shulamit Roth, head of school of Yeshivat Shalshelet, a Yeshiva day school in Bergen County for children with language-based learning differences. "When a child is struggling, there can be a variety of factors impacting his or her experience. It is always important to identify which of a child's skills are lagging when compared to classroom expectations, whether in the academic, social and/or emotional realm. Behavior is often a child's way of telling us that they are struggling."

Roth's participation in the out-of-the box parenting program fits in with the

school's mission to be a community resource in addition to educating its own students. "This program will be invaluable to families struggling with how to support their children," she said, "There is help for every child; this is an opportunity to feel vou have resources."

Michelle Goodman wants parents of out-of-the-box children to know, first and foremost, that they have to reframe the expectation that they should know what to do. "Parenting in-the-box kids is intuitive if you're smart and committed. Not true with an out-of-the box child," she said. She made the analogy that it's like if you need toe surgery, you shouldn't expect to intuitively know how to perform that surgery. You'd know that you need help, because this falls outside the domain of what you expect vourself to know.

Goodman said the starting point of all learning is observation, and this requires the child to be calm and attentive. "Outof-the-box children often struggle with observational learning. They may not always be calm enough to take in all the moving parts, and their attention may sometimes be compromised. This means that we may be making faulty assumptions about what has, and has not, been learned."

Goodman works primarily with parents of children who struggle with anxiety, ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, and sensory processing differences. She uses the research from applied behavior analysis as the backbone of her treatment. The research has been primarily applied to children on the autism spectrum but it applies to children across populations. Her approach to treatment is to use a practical framework. "It's about capitalizing on a child's strengths while identifying and teaching the skills that have not yet been learned," she said. "If a child is struggling with bedtime, we target bedtime. If he has difficulty following adult directions, we teach him how to become a better listener. It's much less about diagnosis than it is about filling in any lagging skills."

The Out-of-the-Box Child: Strategies for Successful Parenting" program will take place Monday, May 15 at 8 p.m. at Shomrei Torah, 19-10 Morlot Avenue, Fair Lawn. To view on Livestream, visit www.inspiredbyilona.com. Meet other parents and get valuable guidance.



