

Building Community Parents Supporting Each Other

I've been talking with 5th grade families these last few weeks about parenting in the middle school years. One of the things we talked about is the real need to build community with other parents. This is especially true as children go off to a bigger school world and make new friends – friends with families you may not know. But having a supportive group of parents you can talk with and think things through with is important at any point in a child's life.

There was a time, perhaps when we were all children, when it was easier for parents to get to know each other. People tended to stay in one place for a longer time. Neighbors knew each other and each other's children and there was a sense that other families could help out if you got in a "jam" or just needed a break. My mother (who had 12 children) belonged to a group called Mother's Council (no Dads back then). Today we would call Mother's Council a parent support group. It was a loose organization, but it was a place where Moms could talk about parent issues. I know it gave her a sense of belonging. It gave a sense of not being all alone trying to raise children.

Times have changed, but the need for support and belonging hasn't changed. Parenting is not an easy job and it's only made more difficult if we're trying to do it in isolation. Here in Arlington we do have a pretty transient community. Neighbors come and go and most of us live far from our own families. So, it's even more important that we be able to turn to each other for support. As Ron Taffel says in his book, *Parenting by Heart*, "We are expected to nurture without being nurtured". It's no wonder parents feel over-burdened and stressed.

So what can we do? How can we make this happen? First we have to realize that, given the changes in our society, it won't just happen by itself. We all have to be deliberate about building this community of parents. We may not need any kind of formal group, but there are attitudes and actions that would help. Supporting each other as parents means we have to:

- **Reach out to each other.** For some of us that's very easy, for others it's very difficult. If you're an outgoing person, try to ensure that more introverted, shy parents are included in the conversations at the soccer field or in the parking lot.
- **Suspend judgment.** Every family is different and each family passes through the developmental stages differently. A particular behavior in a child may bother you tremendously, but may not bother another parent. You don't have to agree with that parent to be supportive, but you do have to resist the urge to label other parents as "bad".
- **Be open to other parents' ideas.** Again, every family is different and sometimes another parent can bring a new perspective to an issue you're dealing with. A little distance from a difficult situation can give a different perspective.

- **Be honest with each other.** There's no such thing as a perfect family and we can waste a lot of energy trying to convince ourselves and others that everything is just perfect in our families. Being willing to admit we've hit a rough time or that one of our children is having difficulty is a powerful way to support yourself and other parents. When we admit we could use some help, we give others permission to be less than perfect too.
- **Stop competing.** Raising children is a process, not a contest. Many things we worry about as parents of children have nothing to do with what we really want for our children. Who reads first, who plays the piano best, who gets the best grades, who's the best athlete really doesn't matter much by the time you're grown up. What does matter is that we've tried to help our children become the very best each one of them can be. There's room for all kinds of talents and all kinds of success.
- **Agree to disagree.** There will be times, especially when children hit the teen years, when you may find that you are in total disagreement with the rules in one of your child's friends' families. If you are trying to be supportive with each other, it will be much easier to talk about these differences in family rules together and perhaps reach a group agreement on curfew or "R" movies or dances or driving or other issues. But, in the end, you are the one who sets the rules in your family, even if everyone else disagrees with you. And you need to stand your ground. But in a supportive community of parents your decision will be respected.

Arlington is working to be an asset building community because that's what's best for all our children. Parents who nurture and care for each other are an essential part of this asset building community.