

Tips for 'mindful parents' to help kids reduce stress

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By Phillip Ludley

There was a humorous irony in watching how many Westport moms raced to the exit following a meditation exercise aimed to calm them down.

But a program on mindful parenting practices led by expert Linda Lantieri filled the Town Hall auditorium to capacity last Tuesday morning, with hordes of cars double-parked up and down Myrtle Avenue. Over 300 parents — all but a few of whom were female — came out to hear some answers on helping their kids reduce stress and raise their levels of emotional intelligence.

Lantieri, director of the Inner Resilience Program, is an author and well-known lecturer who, in separate talk last week, addressed school and town officials, as well as Weston residents.

At one point in Lantieri's talk, the glut of cars around Town Hall itself even served to illustrate a point regarding the fight, flight or freeze response after an announcement was made regarding three cars that had to be moved immediately.

"You got triggered," she said, but once they realized it wasn't their car, some people "were able to come back to a balanced place." But not so for everyone.

"Others, you have not come back yet and the reason is that your nervous system, that calm place ... is not strong," she said. "It takes a long time for you to come back ... You had different levels of what happened based on that part of the brain that contains that centered place that brings you to what's called homeostasis."

Work on mindfulness, Lantieri said, begins to change that.

Asked how many people in the audience maintained some daily quiet practice, such as meditation, yoga or inspirational reading, less than five hands went up among the packed auditorium. Likewise many confessed to having some levels of stress, as well as concerns relating to their children's baseline ability to deal with stress and crises.

Lantieri said that one out of every five children today between ages nine and 17 walks around with a diagnosable mental illness. Not only that, she said, more and more research is demonstrating that academic success is not the best indicator for lifelong success and happiness.

"The research is telling us that if our kids have a beautiful report card and they've made a great college, chances are not high, if they only have that, that they will be successful in life ..." she said. "More and more we're finding this out that this concept of resilience, the ability to balance what comes our way and regulate our emotions, has all to do with everything."

"Our emotional intelligence may be a better predictor of future success," Lantieri said.

But ironically, she said, in order for parents to adequately serve as "emotional coaches" to their kids and make any headway in helping them cope with their feelings and stressors in the world, it is imperative that parents themselves first implement a calming, coping program of mindfulness into their own lives.

"I think of one of the hardest jobs in this world right now is being a child," Lantieri said, noting that the health of a nation is reflected in how its children are treated.

"The second hardest job I would say is not being a teacher, but is being you, a parent ... and it never ends ... This morning I'm hoping that we get inspired a little because what happens often with things like becoming parents, becoming teachers, becoming folks that shape kids' lives, sometimes we forget that we have to be filled up with something before we can give, otherwise we do good badly."

"The good news is that this community is really thinking long and hard about some of these things, so that perhaps after today we might be able to do some things," she said.

"What we're going to talk about today in terms of mindfulness has a lot to do with increasing that part of ourselves that brings that balance to us," she said, "and we can grow it. We can nurture it. It's a part of our brains actually ... and we can nurture it by doing certain things."

Lantieri defined emotional intelligence with four categories — self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

Self-awareness, she said, was the ability to "be aware and label emotions you are feeling, to give voice to them ... Self-management is when you have the feeling you're in control of what you do with it."

"Social awareness is about empathy," she said, "being able to understand what someone else is going through, particularly someone who is different from yourself ... Social awareness is about tuning in to a whole other level about what's going on."

"Relationship management is about having the skill to help facilitate getting done what you want to happen between people ... I got a relationship here that I want to continue to nurture and cultivate and the way that I'm going to handle this is very important," Lantieri said.

In order to promote mindfulness, Lantieri presented a range of suggested practices—both formal and informal—which focused on finding quiet, unhurried moments. These practices, she said, strengthen neuropathways in the brain, which increases people's abilities to cope with emotions and peripherals experiences.

Among the formal exercises are meditation, conscious breathing and movement practices, such as yoga. Informal activities include nature walks and focusing on sunsets, creating quiet spaces for coloring and unpressured activities, writing or sharing gratitude lists as a family ... "Anything that slows that pace down," Lantieri said.

"We can change our brain," she said. "Our brain is so malleable because of what we call neuroplasticity that what we experience changes both the structure and the function of the brain."

"It's like a brain gym," she said. "The more we can strengthen (it)," she said, the more likely we'll be able to regulate our emotional states.

"It's not easy to be a kid and orchestrate what's going on for them and as a result we as caregivers have to realize we need to equip kids," she said.