

Parents key to earliest education

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Contributing Writer

Editor's note: This is the third in a three-part series about Parents as Teachers, the program for coaching parents, their children's first and most important teachers, based in Claremont and serving area families.

Parents as Teachers is helping Sullivan County and Fall Mountain area parents encourage their children's critical first five years of intellectual, social/emotional, motor and language development, Jana Gillespie of Walpole said. She is the P.A.T. director and a parent educator.

"I'm passionate about parenting. Talking with young parents is exciting. We give them as much information about child development and as many tools as we can to support them in this

important and sometimes difficult job," Gillespie said.

"Focusing on the prenatal period to kindergarten, Parents as Teachers helps mothers and fathers to be educated observers of their children and to guide activities such as reading, speaking and play in research-based ways that stimulate their emotional development," Gillespie said.

"We don't tell parents how to raise their kids. It's more like a smorgasbord. We offer many ideas and approaches, and parents can choose what they want to use. P.A.T. is really about helping parents understand what is happening in the rapidly changing years of early childhood — and sharing ideas that make that time very positive for everyone. It's not about pushing kids too fast with a rigid agenda," she said.

Ready for school and life

Parents as Teachers developed in the 1970s when Missouri educators saw that many children beginning kindergarten had not acquired the skills they needed to succeed. At the same time, modern research showed that greater family involvement can be a critical link in a child's developing academic skills, and also social and fine motor skills. Early childhood professionals suggested that a program to help parents understand their roles in encouraging their child's development right from birth could help prepare children for school.

Walpole School Principal Sam Jacobs, speaking to the Walpole Leadership Academy in October, noted that he sees kindergartners each year who simply have not acquired the skills needed for school. A Claremont study estimated

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that as many as 40 percent of kindergarten students are not developmentally ready for kindergarten. They have not had the stimulating experiences necessary to help their brains develop to the level needed to succeed in school. "Some of those children will have a difficult time catching up," Gillespie said.

"We are pushy about reading to kids — even if it's just pointing to pictures in a book and talking about them. This has a major impact on language development and broadening a child's world. A child's not likely to see an oil well or an elephant in Sullivan County, but simply seeing pictures and talking about such things can broaden his world and interests immeasurably," she said.

Home visits

Parents as Teachers offers monthly personal visits in the home by certified parent educators, group meetings for parents to discuss their experiences and concerns, developmental screenings, and referrals for services that are beyond the scope of the P.A.T. program.

Gillespie described P.A.T. home visits. "They're an hour a month to step back and think about what's going with your child's development."

During those visits, Gillespie or one of P.A.T.'s other certified parent educators usually sit on the floor with one or both parents and their child and chat informally about what the child is doing, what it suggests about his or her level of emotional and physical development, and what approaches parents might take to encourage that development.

As one parent said in a P.A.T.

survey, "The best thing about P.A.T. is that someone comes to our house and listens to our frustrations and celebrations, then offers ideas on what to expect next. We are more confident parents as a result."

Parenting expert

Gillespie, who is 52, earned an undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in home economics with emphasis on child development and family life. She taught for several years in Minnesota, spent 14 months in the Peace Corps in Jamaica, and then went to medical school and entered family practice. Moving to Walpole in 1996 with her husband, Don Sellarole, and three children, Gillespie worked for a time as a family practice physician in Keene. When the opportunity to direct the newly formed Parents as Teachers program, based in Claremont, she accepted the position in February 2001.

Currently nearly 100 families in Sullivan County and the Fall Mountain Regional School district are enrolled in the P.A.T. program. Eighty-nine percent say that P.A.T. has made them more knowledgeable about their children's development, and 100 percent said in a recent survey that they would recommend P.A.T. to other families with young children.

Further information about Parents as Teachers is available from the P.A.T. office at the Dianna Love Center at 169 Main St., Claremont, at (603) 542-4885 or by contacting Jana Gillespie at jgillespie@sau6.k12.nh.us. Information on the national level is available at www.patnc.org.