

Tips for Dealing with Early Childhood

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BY DAWN BAUMGARTNER VAUGHAN

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DURHAM -- Times have changed, and a current method of dealing with young children's behavior is positive communication and discipline, Cindy Riley told a group of faith educators this week at Duke Memorial United Methodist Church. Riley and Patience Mulkelavai are parent educators with the Welcome Baby program in Durham. They spoke on "Turning No Into Yes: Positive Communication with Challenging Young Children" as part of a lunch and learn series presented by the Early Childhood Faith Initiative.

Clergy and Christian educator leaders from Presbyterian, Episcopal, Catholic and other denominations in Durham attended the session, which was also translated into Spanish. The Early Childhood Faith Initiative is a project of Durham's Partnership for Children and End Poverty Durham.

"We want to model behaviors we want to see," Riley said. "Consistency is really important to discipline." Discipline and punishment are two separate things, she said. Parenting little ones is about picking battles, she said. "Do socks have to match? If it means getting to work at eight o'clock, can there be one blue sock and one red sock?"

Mulkelavai said it is important to be clear with directions. Instead of just saying, "Stop!" tell them what to stop. A positive way to communicate is exchange a phrase like "quit shouting" to "please use your inside voice," and make sure you're using an inside voice, too.

Take a negative statement and make it a positive one, and be specific, she said. Instead of saying "Don't run," tell them to walk. And if you make a threat, follow through, Mulkelavai said.

"There are reasons why kids do what they do -- a lot of time it's for attention, positive or negative," she said.

Nancy Rozak, director of Christian education at Westminster Presbyterian Church, asked how they should handle children who are permitted to do things at home that are against the rules at church. The best way to handle those situations would be to say, "In this school, we don't do that," Riley said.

Molly Reingruber, director of children's ministries at St. Philip's Episcopal Church said that working in a Sunday school classroom, discipline needs to model God's kingdom.

"So how do we speak to them?" she asked.

"With Christian kindness, but also show the right way," Mulkelavai said.

For discipline at home, she said that time outs should be used not as punishment, but for counting down.

"It's about going away and getting control of your emotions," she said. Mulkelavai said she doesn't agree with the idea of three minutes for 3-year-olds, four minutes for 4-year-olds, etc. "It's about calming down, getting control of emotions and then talking about it."

She and Riley also talked about giving little ones limited choices. Things like safety and going to school are not choices, but some things can be. For example, a child could be asked if he or she wants macaroni or chicken for dinner, they said. The kid gets to choose one, not demand something else. And if they don't choose, the parent does and sticks to it.

They also suggested picking your battles, like the mismatched socks or if a child plays soccer or basketball. Sometimes it really doesn't matter, Mulkelavai said. Life is the best teacher, she said, and let children receive natural consequences of their actions, as long as it's safe.

Riley said she still picks her battles with her son, who is now 17. Rev. Marilyn Hedgpeth of First Presbyterian Church said that negotiation is an important skill for children to learn.

Riley and Mulkelavai said that whenever you use a tool with a child, look at the positive and negative outcome. A combination of kind and firm parenting is a good balance, they said.

Hedgpeth spoke at the end of the session, urging congregations to consider ways to reach out to parents in the community beyond their own churches, like with playgroups.

The next lunch and learn session from the Early Childhood Faith Initiative will be about "Welcoming Autistic Children to Faith Classrooms," from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. May 10 at Duke Memorial UMC, 504 W. Chapel Hill St. Sessions are held in the Soul Café -- the entrance is behind the church on Memorial Street. The guest speaker is Anna Berkeley, an inclusion consultant for Durham Inclusion Support Services.

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