

Moms and Dads Seeking Out Parenting Lessons From Pros

Many Parents Are Using Paid Coaches and Family Therapists for Lessons on Becoming Better Parents

By ERIC NOE

June 8, 2005 — - In 1995, Louise Loening was living in New York and pregnant with her first child. With no other friends who were pregnant or had children, the prospect of becoming a mother left her feeling intimidated and scared.

On the recommendation of a friend, Loening began meeting with a group of young mothers at New York's Soho Parenting Center four months after the birth of her daughter, Heidi. The center is one of a wide spectrum of local and national outlets Americans are using to learn to become better parents.

Ten years later, Loening, now 39, still sits down with the group twice a month. In fact, four of the mothers had second children three years later, just months apart. Their children have become like cousins to one another during their mothers' decade of parent counseling. It's a relationship Loening said has benefited not only her parenting skills, but the health of her entire family.

"I was feeling very isolated and alone, and it was a very supportive environment from the start," Loening said. "Now our kids are entering pre-adolescence, and there's even more to talk about."

Paying others for parenting tips is a trend previous generations might have scoffed at. But coaches and family therapists say a growing number of people are looking for help rearing their children and understanding family dynamics.

Parenting experts say an onslaught of media representations of bad parents and mixed-up children, including TV shows like "Dr. Phil" and "Supernanny," have over-stimulated and confused parents to the point where they're unsure of their abilities. That confusion has led to the expansion of parent coaching as a business.

"There's so much anxiety and pressure right now -- there are so many indications in the world that children are not doing well, and parents really want help," said Lisa Spiegel, co-director of the Soho Parenting Center. "I think it's been de-stigmatized. It's OK to want help if you're thinking there's something wrong."

'Sublime to Ridiculous'

Parenting instruction can range from broad life lessons like understanding childhood development benchmarks to basic things like learning to play with a child. Suggestions that people are flocking to parent

coaches just to learn how to play baseball with their children or dress up a doll may be a bit overplayed, Spiegel said. But she pointed out that some people do need guidance on how to communicate and play with kids.

"We work from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the most minute things to gigantic life issues, and we do talk about just playing," Spiegel said.

The Soho center has been in business for 18 years, but Spiegel said the center has seen a 50 percent increase in new clients in the past year. And a major national coaching service, the Washington state-based Parent Coaching Institute, reports a 500 percent increase in inquiries over the past three years.

The level of interaction between parents and their coaches or therapists varies widely between the different businesses, as does the cost. At the Soho center, mothers like Loening often begin with an eight-week early motherhood class that costs \$320. It is not unusual for clients to stay with the program for years.

That can turn into a lot of money during the course of a childhood, particularly when compared to parents who rely on the old standby of parental intuition, which is always free of charge. But Loening said she has no regrets.

"I can't understand why people wouldn't pay for help. I think you either pay now or pay later in therapy bills when the children become adults," she said.

The small groups meet for 90 minutes a week with one of the center's counselors, often Spiegel, who has a master's degree in developmental psychology, or her co-director, Jean Kunhardt, who has graduate degrees in early childhood education and special education.

Parenting Over the Phone

At the Parent Coaching Institute, parents learn mostly through one-hour telephone sessions with coaches accredited by the institute. The standard fee is \$75 per session. The institute's general policy is that parents sign up for 12 sessions over a span of three to six months.

"It's like a personal trainer. You don't just use a personal trainer once, you stay with it through the whole program," said PCI founder and chief executive officer Gloria DeGaetano.

To become an accredited coach, candidates pay \$5,800 to PCI to complete a yearlong program developed by DeGaetano. The classes run in conjunction with Seattle Pacific University, where DeGaetano teaches child development and parenting classes.

The PCI has produced 19 full-time coaches thus far, and an additional 100 are currently enrolled in the program. Some still take phone consultations referred through the PCI coaching system, while others have chosen to become independent contractors who develop their own client lists.

But Are Parents Too Programmed?

One parenting expert said parents should think twice before spending money on lessons they could learn on their own. Armin Brott, who writes a syndicated parenting column and authored the book "Fathering Your

Toddler," said that parents who become overly reliant on coaching run the risk of losing some of the spontaneity that is essential to parenting.

"Somewhere along the line we've taught parents that they don't know enough themselves to be good parents," said Brott. "Most parenting is a function of just time spent with the child and focusing on the child. If you do that, you'll probably be in good shape."

"Before you plunk down a couple hundred bucks you should really sit down and think about whether you need to do that."

Both the PCI and Soho Parenting say their services focus on the idea that developing a relationship with your child is the most important aspect of good parenting. They say they teach parents to trust their own intuition. It's a seemingly simple message, but one that is often muddled in the glut of "how-to" guides, unhelpful media messages and the competition to get children into prestigious private schools or colleges.

"Some sort of fantasy has developed that people can be a 'perfect parent.' That's not really realistic -- parenting is not about getting it right or perfect," said Soho Parenting's Spiegel. "We help them trust their instincts and develop a relationship with their child rather than trying to produce a product."

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