

Learning how to be a good parent

A learning programme devised by Carolyn Webster-Stratton has helped parents around the world to cope with the pressures of bringing up children, writes **SYLVIA THOMPSON**

"People in Ireland say to me, 'We don't do praise here. That's an American thing'. But, when they say that, they are not understanding the value of praise to bring out the behaviour you want in a child," says Carolyn Webster-Stratton.



IT'S ONE OF the most important jobs in the world, yet something that we have very little training for. This widely held view of parenting is complicated by the fact that if you do a good job, you make parenting look easy.

Yet, if problems arise, the value of professional help with parenting becomes a lifeline for both children and parents alike.

Prof Carolyn Webster-Stratton, director of the Parenting Clinic at the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington State, US, knows more than most about parenting.

She has developed training courses for parents, children and teachers which are used in various countries around the world.

Webster-Stratton was in Dublin last week to speak at the national conference of Archways, the training organisation for her Incredible Years programme in Ireland.

“I started out as a nurse practitioner working with paediatricians and I saw the way parents asked questions about their children’s behaviour and development,” she says. “I also saw how we gave parents a lot of support before and after having a baby, but very little to help them enjoy parenting and bring out the best in their children.”

So in the 1970s, Webster-Stratton began making videos on how to get the best from children through encouragement and praise, and ignoring bad behaviour.

“Children will work for attention from others, especially parents, whether it is positive (praise) or negative (criticism) in nature. If they do not receive, positive attention, then they will strive for negative attention since that is better than none,” she explains.

To this day, Webster-Stratton lists the same essential foundations for successful parenting. These include play, praise, tangible rewards, limit setting, ignoring bad behaviour, time out, and teaching children to problem solve.

She also believes that there is a universality to parenting that crosses all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. “All parents want their children to be happy, to do well at school, to have friends and to be respectful of others,” she says.

But, despite this instinctual understanding of the common ground we share in parenting, Webster-Stratton says that when she is explaining aspects of the Incredible Years training courses to people in different countries, they suggest otherwise.

“For example, people in Ireland say to me, ‘We don’t do praise here. That’s an American thing’. But, when they say that, they are not understanding the value of praise to bring out the behaviour you want in a child.

“I’ve never seen a child with behaviour problems come out of a family with too much praise. In fact, it’s not uncommon to hear 40 to 50 critical statements – commands, corrections and criticisms – directed at a child in half an hour,” she adds.

In general, Webster-Stratton believes that families nowadays are under a lot of stress due to a combination of factors, such as both parents working full time to keep up financially, lone parenting and the absence of support from extended families.

“For these reasons, I think parenting courses can have the added advantage of becoming a support system for parents within their communities,” she says.

“Not only can you empower yourself as a parent and learn new skills in a group setting which helps normalise the problems you face, but also these parents start helping each other out after the group has finished,” she says.

In Ireland as elsewhere, the Incredible Years programme targets children with emotional and behavioural problems between the ages of three and eight. This early intervention approach aims to prevent such problems developing in adolescence into bigger issues such as alcohol or drug abuse, failure at school and criminal or violent behaviour.

More recently, the Incredible Years programme has, however, been expanded to include training for babies and toddlers and nine to 12 year olds. “We also separate the training into age groups from three to five and six to eight, so that parents and teachers can focus on the developmental stage of the child,” she explains.

Interestingly, Webster-Stratton had been developing her parenting programmes for 15 years before she became a parent herself at the age of 36. So, did having children change her approach to parenting?

“I remember my husband saying things like, ‘I thought you said we should ignore this behaviour when I was clearly being drawn into the situation’, so yes, I became much more aware of all the emotional stuff in parenting when I became a parent myself,” she says.

Her children are now grown up. Her son, Seth (25), has recently started medical school, while her daughter, Anna (22), has just graduated from college.

“I would also say that I had developed the basic parenting skills programme before I had children myself, but I developed the advanced programme after my children were born,” she says.

“The advanced programme has more on how to deal with your own frustrations, anger and depression, and how to work things out with your partner and talk to the teacher about problems.

“It also has much more on both the emotional and cognitive (thinking) aspects of parenting, while the basic parenting skills programme focuses on how to get the behaviour you want from your child.”

And for those who think it’s time she hung up her boots, Webster-Stratton is keen to point out that there are more people she would still like to reach with her programmes.

“In the United States, I’d like to get the programme to both the biological and the foster parents of children who are referred to court. Parenting programmes are suggested for these parents, but often they will just go to watch a video on parenting rather than participate in an evidenced-based parenting programme like Incredible Years,” she explains.

She’s also keen to get grandparents trained up. “Grandparents often help take care of children nowadays and I think it would be fantastic to give them training in things like child- directed play or social coaching, which is about helping children see the value of sharing things through becoming aware of how other children feel, as well as understanding how it makes them feel better about themselves,” she says.