

Online Parent Support Group

by Dr. Steven Wilson



“Mental and behavioral health challenges can affect the whole familial unit,” says Debbie Gingrich, vice-president of Behavioral Health at The Children’s Home. “When you combine these stressors along with daily pressures of holding down a job, maintaining a household, and taking care of a family parents can understandably feel overwhelmed.

“That’s why we felt it important to establish a parent group for peer support,” she said.

The parent support group is the brainchild of Karen Hargis, school-based day treatment therapist at The Children’s Home. Hargis says the sole purpose of the group is to focus on supporting parents and guardians who have children enrolled in the agency’s school-based day treatment services.

“Parents have opened up about their struggles with their children and these challenges at home,” she said. “Before the pandemic, we would treat these clients in a school-based setting, away from home, which gave the clients and the parent some respite but now that equation has changed.”

Hargis said during the time she has implemented a telehealth treatment model, she experimented with coaching Teaching Family Model skills to parents and children during their sessions.

“The parents began practicing those skills with their children and the parent feedback was very positive,” she said. “This sparked the idea of formally implementing a Teaching Family Model parent support group.”

The Teaching Family Model

Therapists at The Children’s Home using the Teaching Family Model is no accident. It’s designed to teach skills that allow a client who is experiencing challenges to excel and improve in their community, home, or school.





“The Teaching-Family Model helps children begin to realize and think of consequences, both positive and negative, before they act out,” said Greg Payne, evaluation coordinator at The Children’s Home. “This is important, because rather than dictating to a child what is right or wrong, it plants the framework to begin to make that decision on their own, which helps develop empathetic and free-thinking young men and women.”

The whole idea behind empowering parents to use TFM at home, and providing mutual support in a parent group, is to shorten the amount of time clients need therapeutic care.

“The client has to unlearn the unwanted behaviors and then replace them with new and preferred behaviors,” said Hargis. “This takes time and repetition. But if a client is exposed to these skills at home, 24-7, the chances for mastering the new behavior is high. This is important for the client to be able to learn the new behavior and return to their classroom setting and a sense of normalcy as soon as possible.”

The group will hopefully help some parents who are juggling their professional as well as personal lives.

“All of the parents are exhausted from trying to be everything for their children and that included being their child’s teacher for some when school was still in session,” said Hargis. “Everyone has voiced that they need support and are interested in the parent support group.”

Telehealth Delivery Model

The telehealth delivery model has been a lifeline for Hargis’ clients – for the kids she is providing therapeutic services as well as the new parental support group.

“Each of my clients lives in a single-parent home, below the poverty line and eligible for Medicaid,” she said.

“The COVID-19 shut down has been especially hard on parents who have to try to return to work, find daycare, as well as try to keep their child who needs our help in services. The only thing making it possible to do all of this is the online format.

“These families have all suffered from trauma, both parents and children, and they desperately need the services The Children’s Home provides,” Hargis continued. “This is our community’s most vulnerable population and these families deserve our support.”



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