

M.A.P.S. - A Savvy Support Group With Heart.

Do you have a child with a disorder such as ADHD, depression, OCD, ODD, Tourette Syndrome or Autism Spectrum Disorder? Would you like a place where you can share your parenting frustrations and stories with people who understand, yet still leave feeling positive and recharged? Mahtomedi Area Parent Support Group (M.A.P.S.) may be the place for you.

Three mothers who felt a need to connect with other parents with special needs children to share information and discuss similar issues started the group nearly three years ago. They have created a savvy and healthy group, born of the heart.

"We want to give people some education and a lot of support. We keep meetings upbeat and down to earth," says Cathy Ferrazzo, one of the founding leaders. The group mission is: to educate and offer support to parents of children with neurological/biochemical disorders; to further develop knowledgeable parenting skills related to a variety of challenges and situations; and to continue to maintain and promote positive relationships between parents, children, teachers, and other professionals.

"When my son was diagnosed with a neurological disorder, I went looking for a support group and couldn't find one in our area. With the other two founding women, Kathy Cedarleaf and Julie Tatro, we decided that even though our children's disabilities were different, our need for support was the same. The issues we were dealing with were actually quite similar: the grief of knowing our child will never be 'typical', the difficulties of navigating the school and social service systems, the stress of living with a child with special needs, etc. We began the group with a few people. Since then, we have grown to about twenty members; at any given group, about ten to twelve people attend," Ferrazzo said.

The group has the support of Mahtomedi Schools, with O.H. Anderson school psychologist, Terry Trautman attending all groups. Trautman says, "This is an extremely positive group with a real healthy mission and good boundaries.

The leaders have borrowed from the best principles of other successful groups and they adhere to a healthy set of ground rules based on confidentiality, trust, and respect. They are people who want to make positive changes, but they have humor and realism about what they can and cannot accomplish." Ferrazzo says about Trautman, "Terry has been invaluable: he helped get the group off the ground and is a wealth of information. People pick his brain at every meeting and can get some of their questions answered in a casual atmosphere."

The group brings current information to participants in a variety of ways. Occasionally, speakers are invited to present topics. In addition, the group maintains a lending library that is stocked with a good selection of materials and open to anyone. Limited funding is available to any member to use for classes or workshops with the understanding that the person will in turn bring information back to the group. Finally, the leaders will research any question that a participant has, and deliver the information.

Talk to parents who are in the group, and you will hear similar descriptions of it from each of them: fun, non-threatening, informative, upbeat, supportive, and a place to build friendships. One member, the mother of a 3rd grader with Tourette Syndrome, said, "At first I was a little reluctant to share my story, so I went there and just listened to others'. I quickly realized that people were not judging anyone on how they were raising their children, and what was going on in my house was going on in theirs too. So many of their daily living experiences were similar to mine. I still learn something new every time I go."

Another, the mother of a 6th grader with cognitive developmental delays, says, "I can say things there that I probably wouldn't say to many others, like, 'Am I ever going to have a life outside of this kid? I wonder what life would be like without this kid,' and no one will think less of me. Instead, someone always has the right thing to say, then we all laugh, and then I think, 'OK - I can keep doing this every day'."

The group welcomes new members from any community, not just those in the Mahtomedi School district. Although their focus is on children of any age with neurological/biochemical disorders, families of children with any special needs are welcome. The group accepts tax-deductible donations to fund speakers, build their resource library, and contribute to the fund that is used to send families to classes and workshops.

Meetings are held on a Thursday from 7:00 PM -9:00 PM; dates vary from month to month and are located at the Mahtomedi Wildwood Elementary cafeteria. For more information call: Terry Trautman 407-2332.