

Parenting from you heart; building successful families

For more than 30 years Gestalt Associates and The Gestalt Institute of Central Ohio have provided innovative and effective psychotherapy for its clients and post-graduate training for therapists. The Gestalt Associates clinical group consists of founder and director Norman Shub, 3 therapists who work with children, 1 child psychiatrist, and 5 therapists who work with adults. Norman has worked around the world training therapists. His Working Paper series is used by clinicians, universities, and institutes in many countries

8 years ago, Norman and Gestalt Associates child therapist Margie Mapes began using Violet's work in teaching parents how to be with their child(ren) and thereby build a more successful family. Their series, Parenting From Your Heart, meets for 2 hours, one night a week, for 3 consecutive weeks. Recently the clinic has received requests for presentations to be held at nearby schools.

Margie was inspired to go back to school and train as a child therapist after attending a presentation by Dr. Oaklander in the early 1980s and has been working as a child therapist since 1992. She attended Violet's 2-week summer training four times and has been honing her skills in the Oaklander method and getting back on track when she needs it through monthly phone supervision with Dr. Oaklander for the past 18 years.

The style of their parent training classes is based on the belief that teaching parents to build more successful families is more than just learning intellectual concepts and ideas. The classes are experiential, and include sharing, and exploring how to apply, in the moment, the skills of the Parenting From Your Heart process at home. Their parenting program is concrete, and each of the three sessions gives parents an opportunity to hear the concepts and to listen to other parents' experiences. Parents may ask feedback on and help with what was hard for them and more information and examples on what's unclear. They get to share what worked, what didn't work and how their child reacted.

To really bring the sessions to life, Parenting From Your Heart includes the "Voice of the Child". Child therapist, Margie Mapes takes her place on the floor each session and assumes the role of a child, speaking from the child's perspective and sharing what a child actually feels and thinks. Throughout the evening, Norman turns periodically to Margie to ask her how what's being said feels to her. Drawing on her years of training in the Oaklander method and her years of working with kids, Margie lifts the veil that separates the world of parents from the world of their kids and gives parents a chance to experience their child's perspective. For example, a parent may say, "I do a lot of lecturing." Norman would turn to Margie and ask, "Child what's that like for you?" Margie's response: "It's really hard because it feels like what I have to say doesn't matter. It feels like you are not listening to me. It makes me shut down and stop talking to you."

The first week's session teaches parenting skills for connecting with children: joining, looking, hearing, seeing, noticing, responding, acknowledging. The second session focuses on melting and supporting: the ability for the parent to drop their defenses and let their vulnerable self emerge in the interaction, noticing when you move from okay to not okay, fluid to rigid, soft and flexible to hard and right, being caringly connected during a difficult time plus understanding why support is necessary and what makes up support. The third and final session teaches fair fighting: how to handle conflict with a child in a way that focuses on the situation and not the child, understanding how to help a child learn and grow by avoiding using shame, blame and fear, creating opportunities for a child to experience and develop by integrating children in processes and opportunities not normally considered by parents

Margie talks about the "window to your child." The younger the child is when you start, the longer the window stays open and the less it closes. The window typically gets progressively smaller till in the teen years when it's nearly or totally closed, not to begin to open again until after college.

Margie says that the essence of what they teach is how to be with the child. "It's a whole way of using yourself in the moment. There is not a list of 5 golden rules or 3 things you must do with your child. It's how you are with your child. A parent best prepares their child for a respectful, responsible role in our complex and difficult world by being accepting, open, curious and authentic. Being authentic and present and listening doesn't mean you agree with everything the child says. You hear what they say and then, and only then, you say why you disagree. Creating a container and setting boundaries are essential and work hand in hand with really being present and listening with full attention and respect. It means not having a dialogue in your head preparing responses, not looking for an opportunity to teach or ways to impose a consequence. Actually being with a child and meeting him or her where he or she is right now and being aware of the process of the child builds self esteem, self confidence and a strong sense of self. Using the Oaklander method in parenting builds the child's ability to hold onto themselves. A child needs to know how to hold onto themselves, who they are, what they feel, and what fits for them when life struggles approach in order to take truly good care of themselves. Children raised by parents using these parenting skills feel good about themselves because they've been treated with respect.