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Helping children 'find the missing pieces'

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By [VICKI BENNINGTON](#)
For The Telegraph

EDWARDSVILLE — The overall mental health of children affects their home and social life and school experiences, along with everyone around them.

The upcoming Piecing It All Together: How Children's Mental Health and Mental Illness Affect Home, School and Community conference on Friday, March 4 and Saturday, March 5, at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville will address the reasons for mental upset or illness in children and address ways to help them heal.

Presented by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Illinois, the seventh annual event is for parents, caregivers, school personnel and mental health professionals.

On Friday, keynote speaker Heather Forbes will kick off the conference with a discussion on "Helping Children Heal — Understanding the Attachment-Challenged Child." She also will present programs later in the conference on "Effective Strategies for Difficult Behaviors in the Classroom" and "It Shouldn't Hurt to Be a Parent."

Saturday, March 5, gets started with David Anderson Brown, author of "Duct Tape and WD-40 ... A Parent's Guide to the Mysteries of a Bipolar Child," who will present excerpts from his book with his daughter, Emily Egan.



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John Roope, with Peggy North-Jones, will present "The Essential Role of Co-Regulation; Understanding Young Children's Behavior by Understanding Our Own" at the Piecing It All Together Conference.

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Saturday also will feature the Shut Up Sisters, Patricia Konjoian and Gina Gallagher, with their own brand of humor regarding raising imperfect children in a world obsessed with perfection.

Jane J. Roennigke, child and adolescent education program coordinator for NAMI Illinois, said that one in five children is affected by some degree of mental illness.

"That's 20 percent," she said. "That's a lot of kids, and those kids are in our schools and in our communities. But unfortunately, most of the time, nobody sees the child as having an illness; they see the behavior."

Mental illness in children most often appears as "bad behaviors or strange behaviors." Parents get frustrated and worn out trying to help their child when they have no idea what to do. Roennigke said the conference brings all those who influence a child together to hear the same message — a message of hope and recovery.

"There are things out there to do that can help our children succeed," she said. "We know that with the right help, kids with mental illness can go on to live successful lives."

The conference was started in 2003 by a parent who wished there was more recognition for children's mental illness. A group of like-minded individuals and organizations from the Metro East met and decided to try to put on a children's mental health conference. Traditionally, about 300 people attend from around the state.

The African proverb says, "It takes a village to raise a child." This is especially true when you have a child with a mental illness. You need the support from the school, the community and even from your own family, Roennigke said.

Forbes specializes in helping parents with children who exhibit difficult and severe behavior.

"There's almost always something that the child has viewed as trauma in their past," Forbes said.

It may be something like a medical procedure; some even say the birthing experience — things that parents would not necessarily know had caused upset to the child, but yet there's a piece that has been broken in the child's feeling of safety or security.

"Sometimes, families will say that one child is so different from the other children in the family, and they don't know why. There could be that one experience that only the one child had," she said.

Sometimes, it's hard to find, but that experience may have manifested into difficult behavior, where children act out or perhaps become withdrawn. It's a journey for the entire family, and the behavior usually becomes more intense when the child becomes a teenager.

"Love-based parenting can help," she said. "It involves using unconditional love — with boundaries, of course. It's a soft but stern approach."

Forbes is the author of four books, traveling around the country and the world to give understanding of what is driving children's behaviors. She uses some of her own grass-roots ideas, based on traditional techniques that come from science.

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"I try to bridge the gap between science and where the 'rubber hits the road,'" Forbes said. "Children who have had traumatic events in their lives are different than an average child. But just because they have intense behavior doesn't mean they are bad; it's due to their own life experience."

Parents' reactions to the behavior can make all the difference. Interaction is important.

"My own two adopted children gave me the passion for this field," Forbes said.

Forbes said she felt invisible growing up and had little connection with her parents. She filled the void with academics, where she excelled. She attended college and became an architect. Later, when she adopted two children from Russia, she was confronted with the effects of their early childhood experiences of abandonment, abuse and neglect, which left them with issues that affected the way they behaved. Even though they now were in a safe and loving environment, her son was violent, and her daughter was introverted.

Forbes began to conduct research on how she could help them and improve her family situation, eventually deciding to go back to school, where she earned a master's degree in social work, and pursued additional training in attachment and bonding.

Changing herself and the interpretation of her children's behavior helped her to carry out the role of parent in a new way. Her children now are teenagers, and she has wonderful relationships with them.

"Unconditional love is the real 'cure' to creating peace in the home," Forbes said.

Struggling with the effects of trauma takes a ton of understanding and commitment through loving relationships.

"Beyond Consequences, Logic and Control: A Love-Based Approach to Helping Children With Severe Behaviors" is co-written by Forbes and B. Bryan Post. Forbes also runs online parenting classes and provides free information on her website at www.beyondconsequencesonline.com.

On Friday afternoon, John Roope and Peggy North-Jones will present "The Essential Role of Co-Regulation; Understanding Young Children's Behavior by Understanding Our Own." Roope is director of early childhood mental health services at Chaddock Training Institute in Quincy, and has worked professionally with children and their families for 26 years. North-Jones is an instructor at Saint Louis University for master's and doctorate level students, and the associate director for Caregiver Connections in Quincy.

"Treating Trauma and Related Attachment Disturbances in Children" will be presented Saturday morning by Shirley Crenshaw, a psychotherapist and recognized professional specializing in attachment and trauma therapy.

Sessions such as "Families and Caregivers — Are You Ready for R.E.S.T. = Resources, Education, Support and Training" will be presented by the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership, with other breakout sessions on eating disorders, depression, collaboration, parenting, brain development, medication and sensory integration, to name a few.

Other speakers include Kelly Gable, Kathy Boyd Fenger, Joseph Pangelinan, Megan Jedlinski, Nichole Albrecht, Stephen Hupp, Benton K. Johnson, Lauren Milton, Teri Brister, Patricia Konjoian, Gina Gallagher, Ron Mriscin, Nel Daymon, Benton K. Johnson II, Sandra Becker Warden, Sara Hoffstot and Lynn Jarman.

"Piecing It All Together: How Children's Mental Health and Mental Illness Affect Home, School and Community" will begin at 8 a.m. Friday, March 4, and 8:45 a.m. on Saturday, March 5. For more information or to register, e-mail namiil@sbcglobal.net, visit <http://il.nami.org> or call (217) 522-1403.

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