

Going It (Almost) Alone



Mariah Huot, of South Strafford, reads to her twin daughters, Jayde, left, and Justice Marsh, before attending entrepreneurship classes at The Family Place in Norwich.

VALLEY NEWS — SARAH PRIESTAP

Upper Valley Groups Offer Single Parents Another Set of Hands

By KATE ODEN

For the Valley News

At least when it comes to stopping her twin daughters' crying in the car, Mariah Huot has what she needs — a technique that almost always does the trick.

"OK, now it's my turn," she'll say to Jayde and Justice, and then she'll carry on like a toddler. Witnessing their mother have what appears to be a meltdown usually startles them into silence.

Huot, 19, from South Strafford, is all too aware that not every problem is so easily solved. As a single mother, all her family's problems fall on her shoulders. She is the world for her daughters, from the moment she wakes them in the morning to the kiss she gives each at the end of the evening.

At one point, she tried to meet the demands of her daughters along with those of attending school and working a job — a juggling act made all the more difficult by the lack of a reliable babysitter. It proved too much, she said, and she dropped out of school.

But in February, she started going to The Family Place

— a Norwich agency that provides support to Vermont and New Hampshire families — as part of Reach Up, Vermont's welfare-to-work program. She is now earning a high school diploma while her toddler girls are cared for at the agency's child care center.

Huot finds it hard to believe how far she's come in acquiring essential parenting skills in her five months with The Family Place's programs, and wishes more people in her situation had the full-range of services now at her disposal.

Single parents in the Upper Valley come in all varieties, of course. Perhaps the one thing they have in common is that they, like Huot, face the many challenges of parenting without backup — they lack what Huot said is "another parent to reassure you and to associate with, just kind of be there."

Being a single parent, Huot said, means she often becomes acutely aware of not being able to share developmental milestones of children. At other times, it means not having somebody else simply to help wrangle the children. It can require more emotional stamina to turn around a crying fit when one is the only person turning.

But, as Huot discovered through The Family Place, there are resources available to parents going it alone.

According to the 2010 Census, about one-third of households in Upper Valley towns are headed by a single parent, although that can vary significantly from town to town. About two-thirds of those single-parent households are headed by women.

Alice Ely, executive director of the Mascoma Valley Health Initiative, warns against making too many assumptions about the circumstances of single-parent households.

"There are so many different profiles of a single parent," Ely said. "There's the 19-year-old who became pregnant unexpectedly who's very likely living in poverty, doesn't have the level of education she could have. Walking in that woman's shoes is going to be very different than the 35-year-old woman with a master's degree in a good school district who's recently gotten divorced. She's not staring down the barrel of homelessness on a daily basis."

Finding child care might be the most common challenge faced by single parents, regardless of their circum-

SEE PARENTS — A7

Upper Valley Groups Offer Single Parents Another Set of Hands

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A6

stances. It is an issue that many households face during the preschool years, and it is particularly burdensome for single-parent homes, where there is less flexibility in day-to-day scheduling.

“Dealing with child care issues is really challenging,” Ely said. “The child care landscape for working single parents may in some cases be the most stress-inducing.”

Cindy Binzen, assistant coordinator with the Child Care Project at Dartmouth College, is in a position to help, and has noted changes in the demand for child care during her 13 years at the organization.

“When the economy went bad, in 2008 and ’09, we definitely saw a real decrease. I think people lost their jobs, their jobs were cut to part time, there were a lot more people out of work, perhaps friends and family were able to care for children. It has only slowly picked up since then. Also, in many towns there really are fewer children,” as falling school enrollment demonstrates.

The Child Care Project is a referral service funded primarily by the state of Vermont, serving northern Windsor County and most of Orange County.

It also extends to people on the New Hampshire side of the river through sponsoring employers Dartmouth College and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. It will also assist parents not affiliated with those organizations. The project provides guidance to parents on a number of child care issues, from placement to payment options.

“One of the first questions we ask (parents) is what’s their income level,” Binzen said. “We make sure they have information on who to contact, because both states offer funding to help fund child care” for eligible households.

For households that do not meet eligibility requirements, funding is sometimes available from child care centers themselves.

The Child Care Project also asks what type of care its clients seek.

There are significant differences between home care with a licensed provider, which offers a more familial atmosphere, and center-based care, which offers more structure and potentially a greater number of caretakers. In addition to these general considerations, developing a close relationship with an in-home provider can mean more flexibility for a single parent’s schedule.

The Child Care Project advises parents to make calls in advance, get their questions answered, and take the essential step of a preliminary visit.

Binzen recommends starting the search as early as possible, especially if seeking infant care.

For its part, The Family Place offers infant care, and has expanded both the hours and the facilities of its child care center over the past nine years to meet demand. It’s gone from a one-classroom, half-day program to a two-classroom operation open four days a week.

Subsidies are available through a program called Family Assistance Child Care,



Mariah Huot, of South Strafford, right, talks to Katelyn Wong, a Tucker Foundation social entrepreneurship fellow, about newly made necklaces at The Family Place in Norwich. Huot, who has twin daughters, opted to pursue her diploma through The Family Place instead of finishing high school at a traditional school.

VALLEY NEWS — SARAH PRIESTAP

family educator Chris Ashley said, and any single parent can apply.

For those first, most disorienting months with a newborn — particularly daunting when faced alone — several local organizations provide support, notably Good Beginnings and the Women’s Health Resource Center in Lebanon.

While the Women’s Health Resource Center does not offer programs for single parents specifically, it does coordinate a range of parenting and baby support groups, including one for the newest parents called Fourth Trimester. It also provides groups for parents dealing with food allergies or autism, and a parent-child program in New London that provides a discussion space with child care included.

Good Beginnings of the Upper Valley and Good Beginnings of Sullivan County, based in West Lebanon and Claremont, respectively, offer different services to households welcoming a newborn. Good Beginnings of the Upper Valley, which serves parts of Vermont’s Windsor County, is primarily volunteer-based and matches families with a volunteer who will visit the home for a few hours a week to help out those negotiating the first several months of caring for an infant.

When families need more substantial assistance, that’s when Good Beginnings of Sullivan County (which also serves Grafton County) can step in.

“We can provide more intensive long-term support in the home — nurses, mental health workers and other professionals who can serve the most at-risk families,” said Ellie Tsetsi, executive director. (Vermont parents of children with special needs can look into Vermont’s Individuals with Disabilities Act Part C-Early Intervention program.)

“We’re seeing a lot of very young parents,” said Tsetsi, who equates raising a child in a single-parent household with piecing together a puzzle.

Of course, much of a single-parent’s struggle can simply be financial. A single parent’s income must support the whole family. That was the case with Audrey Perry, of Bradford, Vt., the single mother of a 6-year-old. By living in subsidized housing for a number of years, enrolling in the WIC nutrition-assistance program, and working part time at a bookstore, she was able to stretch her money so she could graduate from Lyndon State College with a degree in early childhood education.

Now employed as the child care director at The Family Place, Perry can testify about the struggles of her clientele from both personal and professional experience.

One bit of advice she offers to single parents: “Find time to find yourself.” That way, parents can bring a fresh, unburdened perspective to their parenting.

“If you have a whole day to deal with the things like doctor’s appointments, dentist’s

appointments, grocery shopping, paying bills ... you won’t be thinking about them as much when you’re with your kid and you’ll be able to spend more quality time with them,” Perry said.

With single parents at risk of being overwhelmed by any number of burdens — transportation, housing, child care, mental health — many of The Family Place’s programs include a home visit to identify which challenges might require early intervention.

For Huot, it was The Family Place’s comprehensive mix of services, with child care an essential component, that allowed her to feel like she had things under control. Huot takes pride in shouldering the responsibility for herself and her daughters, and sees it as an important part of being a role model for them. She meets the challenge of being a single mom by encouraging structure and routine, which she finds at The Family Place.

She is enrolled in the Families Learning Together program, which allows her to attend parenting and life-skills classes four days a week. Transportation, meals and child care are provided so parents can work toward a high school diploma or GED, for example, or benefit from workshops and seminars and use counseling services as needed.

Families Working Together often coordinates with the Reach Up initiative, which assists young parents with financial needs, insurance coverage and fosters educational goals on the way to the workplace.

Sometimes an eligible household’s child care costs at The Family Place can be covered by a combination of state and grant funding. Huot is just such an example. As part of the Families Learning Together and Reach Up programs, The Family Place tailors the education to the individual and often focuses on experiential learning.

It’s a method that is doing wonders for Huot, after traditional schooling did not. A key component is flexibility, of course, for a student whose primary commitment is no longer schooling, but a child or children.

Huot said The Family Place “does a lot for you to get to know your community, to get you life-ready, and to get a lot of skills you didn’t even know you needed.” She said she’s “learned so much here” in just five months, and is now considering her future beyond the year’s work she must see out to complete high school. She’s considering a career in nursing. But for now, she’s focusing on schoolwork and her children.

One of her best moments, Huot said, is when she finishes her school day and then walks next door and pick up her twins.

“If you don’t see them for a long time, they’re all really excited to see you and really happy. ... Definitely being a single parent has its rewarding moments. You teach them everything they know.”

For a comprehensive list of resources available to parents in each state, visit 211.nh.org and Vermont 211.org.