

PEP Testimony for Montgomery County Council Budget Hearing Meeting, April 20, 2022

Kathy Hedge, Parent Encouragement Program (PEP), Executive Director

Good afternoon Council President Albornoz and members of the Council. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I'm Kathy Hedge, the Executive Director of the Parent Encouragement Program, also known as PEP.

I know you are well aware of the serious mental health crisis facing children and families. What I'm here to tell you is that PEP has the experience and the capacity to do more to help.

We know, and research shows, that a close connection between a parent and a child is one of the best ways to help kids cope with stress and anxiety.

And that's what we do at PEP. We help parents develop a strong relationship with their children, so that their children feel safe, seen and soothed. And so that they grow up to be resilient, confident, and capable adults.

PEP is a local nonprofit organization that has been around for 40 years. We've been delivering programs with Linkages to Learning for the 5 years, mostly in Spanish for new immigrant Latino families. Our programs are culturally competent and responsive to parents of different backgrounds and contexts. I myself came to PEP 10 years ago as a struggling, anxious parent, and I will tell you, PEP saved my relationship with my younger son, who is now 21.

We appreciate that PEP is in the FY23 base budget for \$21,000 to serve 80 parents in 4 schools. But the thing is, that is drop in the bucket compared to the need, and we receive many more requests from schools than this funding can cover. And, we have the capacity to do more.

We are requesting that the PEP program be increased from \$21,000 to \$300,000, to expand our program to serve 1200 families in 30 schools. We are in discussions with the Dept of Health and Human Services and they are supportive of this request. We ask that the final budget contain funding for this expanded program so that we can help a lot more children, both now and for the long-term.

Finally, I'd like to add that we are members of Nonprofit Montgomery, and we do support the request to fund the full 10% increase for nonprofit grants and contracts.

Thank you.

Story from a PEP Parenting Class

Written by Gabriela Cordero, Manager of PEP Latino Programs

From the many PEP workshops for Latino parents that I have been a part of, one of the stories that has struck me the most is from Ms. Jacinta (pseudonym) who participated in a PEP program for parents of teens. During a session on “How to Improve Communication with Your Teen,” she told us about the day when she saw her teen daughter talking to a boy in school. This brought her a flashback to the day when she was a teen and her mother caught her talking with a boy in her school in her home country. Her mother got furious and bit her in front of her classmate and dragged her home. On the way her mother told her she was ungrateful, because instead of thinking about studying and taking advantage of the opportunity she never had, her daughter was looking to get pregnant and run away with a man.

Ms. Jacinta said that although she still remembers that scene with pain, now she can forgive her mother, because through the PEP class, she has been able to reflect on why her mother did what she did. She also realizes that her mother did not have a support group like the one that PEP offers, where parents can learn new ways of supporting and communicating with their children about common teen experiences and the world that their children are navigating.

Now, Ms. Jacinta said that with guidance from the PEP class, she was able to have an open and positive conversation about courtship and school with her daughter, in a way that builds trust and helps her daughter know that she can count on her as a mom. She also said that understanding the stages of child development and having effective tools to improve communication and guide children in a positive way creates relationships based on trust that are so necessary for children.

This particular case helped me reflect on some of PEP’s contributions to the Latino community, which include creating a safe space for parents to reflect on their past, exchange experiences with fellow Latino parents, and learn new parenting approaches that help them strengthen their relationships with their children.

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Opinion: Students likely to cope better with stress if they learn to be resilient at home

By Kathy Hedge | April 9, 2022 | 10:15 am April 9, 2022

Parents can set boundaries, offer choices, remain calm to build good foundation

bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/opinion/opinion-students-likely-to-cope-better-with-stress-if-they-learn-to-be-resilient-at-home/

Every week, it seems, there is an incident that highlights the need for mental health support for families in Montgomery County.

As Bethesda Beat reported in the March 25 story “[Magruder students say shooting ‘changed us,’ urge more mental health services](#),” it is clear that kids are hurting, parents are at a loss for what to do and under tremendous stress themselves, and there just aren’t enough mental health resources to meet current needs.

In addition to crisis resources, we need proactive efforts to develop resiliency in our children for the long term — not just in their classrooms, but by investing in entire families through parenting education.

Research shows that a close connection between a parent and a child is one of the best ways to address the effects of stress on developing minds. It can lead to better mental health and strong problem-solving and conflict resolution skills for children.

We also know that parents who are a non-anxious presence in their kids’ lives can help their children better deal with stress and anxiety. But today’s parents are increasingly stressed and fearful themselves, and that stress and fear often triggers their instincts to shield their children from experiencing stressful situations.

It’s completely understandable. We don’t want our kids to suffer, and stepping in to solve our kids’ problems can seem like the best way to be helpful.

But the short-term gain can be a long-term loss. In fact, the best way for kids to develop resiliency is to actually experience some stress, coupled with a safe, supportive home environment where they receive comfort and reassurance from a parent or caregiver whom they trust.

Ten years ago, I was an anxious parent, worried about my kids' grades in schools, their extracurricular activities, prospects for college and other short-term issues. Fortunately, a friend recommended I try the parenting support programs offered by the Parent Encouragement Program (PEP), where I am now the executive director.

PEP is a local nonprofit organization with 40 years of experience helping parents build resiliency in their children. Since 1982, PEP has taught over 65,000 parents how to use encouragement, connection, and non-punitive discipline strategies to promote self-discipline, cooperation, and independence in children, so they become capable, confident adults.

Practicing common real-life scenarios with other parents in PEP classes, I learned to stop parenting for the short term and start focusing on the long term.

Rather than viewing discipline as punishment, I learned strategies to help my children learn through the natural consequences of their actions and gain self-discipline.

I also learned how to:

- Set boundaries, which give my kids a sense of security.
- Give them a voice and choices within those boundaries, to foster their independence and autonomy.
- Avoid using external enticements like stickers or treats to elicit desired behaviors and instead focus on the most important thing I can provide my child, which is a meaningful relationship and safe harbor.
- Help my kids weather stressful situations by remaining calm myself.

Rather than always trying to fix their problems, I became more skilled at really listening to them and expressing empathy. As psychotherapist Tina Payne Bryson says, when we help our kids feel "safe, seen and soothed," they develop a secure attachment, which makes a stressful situation tolerable, instead of toxic.

All parents want good mental health for their kids. But when negative external forces are prevalent and powerful, parents may feel helpless. It is important that parents recognize that while we can't control factors that create stress for our children, we can prepare them to work through the challenges life will present.

Many parents like me have found our way to PEP with life-changing results. But most parents don't, or more precisely, can't.

That's why even before the pandemic, we started finding ways to partner with local governments, nonprofit organizations and employers to meet parents where they are — in their communities, schools, and workplaces — to give them access to tools proven to help create healthy home environments.

More parents need access to programs that strengthen essential parenting skills and help build harmonious and resilient families. This is a key to developing a comprehensive strategy for supporting the mental health and well-being of children.

Schools, workplaces and community-based nonprofit organizations that serve children and families can all play a role by offering parenting education to their parent and caregiver constituencies. It's an investment that promises significant return for children, families, and our community at large.

Kathy Hedge of Garrett Park is a parent of two boys and the executive director of the Parent Encouragement Program.

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