

As seen in the
November/December
2015 issue of

Bethesda
MAGAZINE

BRING IN THE EXPERTS

Moms and dads in the Bethesda area are used to succeeding. So what happens when they feel like they're failing at parenting?

BY KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GUIDERA



JEN CAMPBELL MUNN pried her son Lucas' arms from around her legs and handed the sobbing boy to his pre-K teacher. She reassured her 4-year-old that she'd be back after she finished leading a yoga class, which was due to start in a half hour. She watched as the teacher tried to settle him in her lap.

"The teacher looked at me and said, 'If you're going to leave, I think you should just go,'" recalls Campbell Munn, 45, of Bethesda. "It was one of those parenting moments that you hope never comes. You're leaving your child somewhere where they're physically restraining him. He's crying. You don't have an option."

As she left the building, Campbell Munn wondered how her son's behavior had deteriorated so quickly. Since he was a toddler, Lucas had thrived at the private school. But after winter break of his pre-K year, every other day seemed to bring another teacher's report of misbehavior: screaming, stomping, running around or crawling under a table.

At first she deemed it a fluke for the normally sweet-tempered boy, perhaps a reaction to being cooped up by winter weather. Lucas' parents and his teachers emphasized maintaining a routine and tried to set consistent expectations in hopes of curbing the misbehavior. "The crazy play happens outside in the park," Campbell Munn would say. But before long, his teachers seemed to give up on Lucas, calling Campbell Munn to pick him up early almost every day in the two weeks prior to that morning.

Campbell Munn and her husband, Jeff Munn, both have an older child from previous marriages, and neither had ever acted like this. How could they

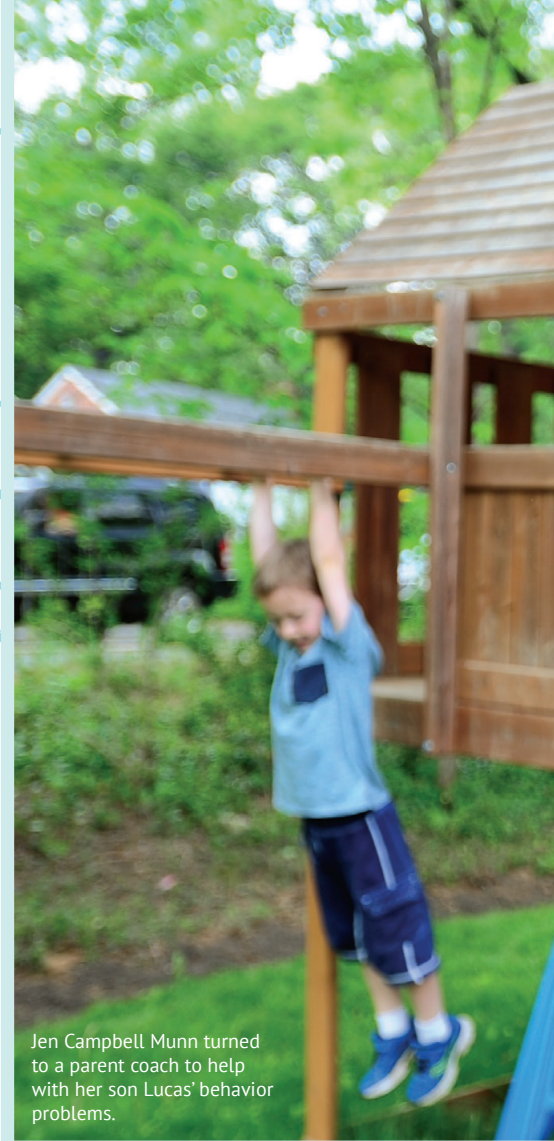
be so flummoxed by their pre-schooler's behavior?

Campbell Munn withdrew Lucas from school and turned to Mali Parke, a parent coach who had been recommended by a friend. "My intention was for him to be at the school until high school graduation, to grow up in this environment, and it was shocking to me that that was not going to happen," Campbell Munn says. "I had a lot of fear, anxiety and uncertainty. How could we help him?"

LIKE MANY Bethesda parents, the Munns are polished and well-educated—she ran her own Pilates business, and he's a health care and retirement adviser. They're accustomed to being in control. Faced with a problem, they educate themselves and find the right solution. But when it came to their son's behavior problems, they were at a loss for what to do.

Since Dr. Benjamin Spock wrote *Baby and Child Care* in 1946, parents have turned to experts for help in raising children. But unlike the 1950s and 1960s, when father knew best, or the 1980s, when Dr. T. Berry Brazelton taught child development to the masses, there's no clear authority or widely accepted single answer today on how to parent. If anything, there's too much parenting advice, with each new book contradicting the last. Parents can easily become overwhelmed by the abundance of information and paralyzed by too many choices.

Although parenting classes and workshops started to pop up in the 1980s, experts say that the field of education for parents has flourished in recent years. Many attribute this growth to the popularity of parenting styles that turn away



Jen Campbell Munn turned to a parent coach to help with her son Lucas' behavior problems.

from punishments or rewards as ways to influence the actions of children, and instead seek to build kids' problem-solving skills, resilience and independence. "It's easier to be authoritarian than it is to be democratic," says Kimberly Greder, an associate professor at Iowa State University who specializes in family resiliency and parenting education. "You actually have to listen to your child, think about what they're saying and work with them."

Parent coaching, a subset of parent education that involves hiring a person to help you with your child, is an even more recent development, and one that has grown apace with the explosion of life and career coaches throughout the country. The International Coach Federation counted 47,500 coaches in 2012, up from 30,000 in 2007 and 2,100 in 1999. About 2 percent of those coaches focus on relationships, the category that includes parent coaches.



The trend has been especially pronounced in the Bethesda area, where some parents can be obsessed with raising the perfect child. We buy Oeuf cribs for \$1,000 and feed our children organic snacks; why not bring in an expert when our child misbehaves or won't sleep through the night? Bethesda-area parents are hiring coaches or taking classes for a wide range of problems: their high schooler won't sit down to do homework without being reminded a dozen times; their middle schooler dawdles and takes forever to get out the door in the morning; their toddler has started biting or hitting at preschool.

Parke, the Dupont Circle-based coach hired by Campbell Munn, says the parents who come to her typically fall into one of four groups. Some are feeling disconnected from their children and want more peace in the home. Others are attachment-parenting dev-

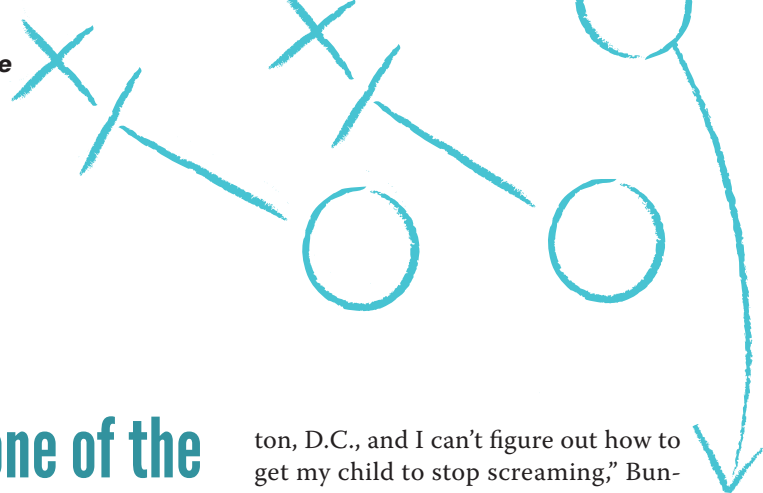
otees seeking more independence as their children move into the elementary years. Certain parents are struggling with a life transition, such as a divorce, or are seeing their children through a new developmental stage that is presenting challenges. Then there are those who merely want more tools and stronger parenting skills.

As the field of parent coaching has grown, so have concerns that you could be bilked by a coach who doesn't have enough experience or the right training to help with your problems. Before hiring any expert, but especially one in a relatively new field such as parent coaching, it's important to check references, ask about training and credentials, interview competitors and understand which problems they can—or can't—tackle. You don't want to muddle through with a parenting coach when your child has a developmental

issue in need of diagnosis and treatment by a doctor. On the other hand, if you're independently able to work through tough developmental stages with advice from friends and parenting books, there's no need to hire an expert.

"We rush to fix things too often that don't necessarily have to be fixed. They may resolve in a day or two," says Peter Stearns, a history professor at George Mason University in Fairfax and author of *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*.

The media and the outpouring of advice from parenting authors and researchers have created an "expert culture" that can cause parents to doubt their competence unnecessarily, says Lenore Skenazy, a public speaker and author of the book *Free-Range Kids*. "The whole idea that you need an expert for everything is wrong," Skenazy says. "The culture that says you personally need a teachable moment with every step



“Here I am practicing law at one of the top law firms in Washington, D.C., and I can’t figure out how to get my child to stop screaming,” says Karen Bunting of Potomac.

you’re taking with a kid can make you feel as if your instincts are not enough. It can be oppressive.”

Do we need experts? The simple answer is no. After all, generations of children reach adulthood with parents who feed them, clothe them and send them off to school without a thought of sleep consultants or parenting classes.

But some parents say that experts provide a valued outside voice and a wealth of wisdom from other families that have experienced similar challenges, and therefore a way to avoid painful trial and error. They help parents assess the situation dispassionately, notice patterns, suggest steps to break unhealthy cycles, and stick to their principles.

When my youngest daughter was about 3½, we began butting heads. She was extremely strong-willed—often refusing to dress or put on her shoes when it was time to leave the house—and my husband and I did not know how to deal with her behavior. We tried counting to three. We tried negotiating. One tactic would work but then lose its power a few days or weeks later. It seemed that every day, we were getting into power struggles that ended with yelling and tears. Eventually, we turned to a parent workshop.

Consulting an expert gave me an arsenal of new parenting tools, but more importantly, it helped me understand

better what kind of parent I wanted to be—a sentiment echoed by many of the parents that I interviewed for this story. In a sense, then, parent coaches and parenting classes may be as much about the adults as they are about the children—a way for parents to assuage our own doubts, decide how we want to parent, and filter out the conflicting messages from the media, friends and society.

FOR KAREN BUNTING of Potomac, it was an epic meltdown in Whole Foods that led her to parenting education. Bunting’s 3½-year-old son, Ryan, grabbed a treat off a shelf and started screaming when she took it away. She did what the parent books recommended, calmly picking him up and saying that they would return another time. But he kept crying and pleading with her to stay, his voice ringing through the store: “Just one more chance, Mommy!”

Her whole body flushed with embarrassment and frustration as she hurried out of the store. She didn’t want to follow in the path of her authoritarian Russian father, but her own parenting methods weren’t working. It was hardly the boy’s first public temper tantrum—since he turned 3, Ryan had been testing her patience, quite unlike his obedient older sister. “Here I am practicing law at one of the top law firms in Washing-

ton, D.C., and I can’t figure out how to get my child to stop screaming,” Bunting says. “I thought, ‘A mother bird knows how to feed her babies worms, why don’t I instinctively know how to truncate this behavior without getting into a power struggle?’ ”

A friend recommended taking a workshop through the Parent Encouragement Program (PEP), a nonprofit educational organization based in Kensington. Bunting started giving Ryan dedicated one-on-one time, using routines, offering more choices and finding ways to defuse power struggles before they began. Within a month of using PEP’s techniques, Bunting says Ryan’s behavior started to improve.

Founded in 1982 by Linda Jessup, a nurse practitioner who was raising three biological and four foster children, PEP was one of the first parent education centers in the Washington area. Based on the philosophies of psychiatrists Rudolf Dreikurs and Alfred Adler, PEP’s curriculum aims to teach parents how to encourage their children, treat them with respect, hold them to high standards of behavior, and train them to be contributing members of the household and society.

As the demand for parenting education has grown, PEP has grown, as well. Today it serves 4,000 parents in the region each year with parenting classes, workshops and consultations. Instead of using carrot-and-stick tools (promises of ice cream or toys, timeouts and punishments), PEP teaches parents to use reflective listening, respectful requests rather than commands, routines set by the entire family, and consequences that are agreed upon in advance.

In the ground-floor social hall of the Kensington Baptist Church, parents seated on gray folding chairs form a semicircle around Jessup. One mother describes with relief a transformation in her morning routine. Previously, the

children would drag their heels while she nagged or pleaded with them to hurry. When she started implementing PEP tools, she was seething inside but pretending to have faith that they would cooperate. Now she completes the five things on her personal to-do list—shower, dress, hair, makeup and breakfast—confident that the kids know what to do and will be ready to go on time.

“That’s a big step,” responds Jessup, 75, who lives in Silver Spring. “Attitude is really hard to change, so when you find that is shifting in yourself, that’s worth the class.” The parents gathered around her are completing their third and final series of classes in PEP’s core curriculum.

Jessup then shares the memory of her youngest son, Luke, calling her to the porch, where several boys were shaking up crawdads in bell jars and making them fight. Furious, she threw out his friends and told them they could return in a week to apologize for being cruel to animals. After she cooled down, she started to apologize to Luke for losing her temper. He burst into tears and said that he came to get her because he didn’t know how to curb the torture. “I realized that he was counting on me to stop them,” she says. “Your kids count on you to stand up for the things you believe in.”

One example of a PEP approach: Your daughter comes home upset that her friend Emma is being mean, insisting that she wants to disinvite Emma to her birthday party. Your impulse might be to critique Emma’s behavior, or perhaps to lecture your daughter on the protocol of party invites. Instead, PEP would recommend reflecting back her feelings: “It sounds like Emma made you furious,” or “That probably made you feel pretty embarrassed, huh?”

The goal of reflective listening is to help a child understand and name her emotions, and to provide support, rather than judging or moralizing about the situation.

UPTOWN. DOWNTOWN. INTOWN. BETHESDA OFFERINGS...



BUILD YOUR DREAM HOME

**BRADLEY HILLS GROVE,
1.43 ACRES: \$2,349,000**



FACING QUIET COURTYARD

**DOWNTOWN BETHESDA:
\$1,649,000**



2BR, 2.5BA, PRIVATE DECK

**KENWOOD FOREST
PRICED TO SELL!**



FRENCH QUARTER STYLE!

WYNGATE AREA: \$1,300,000



SOLD IN ONE WEEK

EDGEMOOR: \$2,100,000



**GRETCHEN KOITZ:
MEET HER ON PAGE 135**

the
KOITZ\GROUP

5471 Wisconsin Ave, 3rd Fl.
Chevy Chase, Md 20815
202•491•1275

CONTACT US!
koitzgroup.com
301•442•8122

COMPASS


bring in the experts

When you ask questions and reflect back what you believe you're hearing, the PEP thinking goes, you strengthen your connection to your child. This tool opens the door for a child to problem solve on her own, and learn to manage her emotions.

This is one of the techniques PEP teaches in a series of eight-week to 10-week classes costing about \$250 each. The workshops also teach parents to incorporate one-on-one time with their children, start weekly family meetings, and enlist children's ideas in tasks such as housework. The result may be the same jobs chart that the family already used, but may be more likely to be followed because children participated in its formation.

Like Karen Bunting, the organization I turned to for help with my daughter was PEP. My husband, Brian, and I signed up for an eight-week class, where I learned to use Jessup's techniques. I found it transformative to stop trying to "win" clashes with my daughter. Instead, we learned strategies to defuse the situation before it escalated—we would distract her, turn the conversation into a game, or give her a way to do the activity herself. Rather than nag about a backpack left in the hallway, I'd place a Post-It on the bag saying, "Please hang me up! Love, your backpack." She'd chuckle and instantly tidy it up.

The classes also gave me a community of support and peer role models. Talking to other parents who were having similar problems helped me stop taking her behavior personally or seeing it as evidence that I was failing as a parent. I realized that what she was doing was completely normal. And that—in itself—was incredibly liberating.

BY THE TIME Briana Pobiner's son, Toby, was 5½ months old, the accumulated days and nights of sleep deprivation had turned her into a frazzled wreck. Her husband, Peter Nassar, suggested that she take a night off and sleep at a



Linda Jessup, a nurse practitioner, founded the Parent Encouragement Program (PEP), one of the first parent education centers in the Washington, D.C. area, in 1982.

friend's home. It was a blissful night of rest for Pobiner, but when she returned the next morning, she realized it wasn't enough. "I still felt not quite settled," she says. "That was the turning point. I said, 'I can't do this anymore.'"

The Wheaton mom, 40, turned to sleep coach Jessica Dodson with a list of issues she wanted help with: how to gently end co-sleeping, how to phase out

napping in a swing, and how to nudge him to sleep through the night. Pobiner, an archaeologist at the Smithsonian, and Nassar, 46, a biology professor at Montgomery College, had already read several sleep books and asked friends for advice, but nothing had worked.

Dodson told them to track Toby's sleep patterns, which led them to understand that he really didn't need to nurse

bring in the experts

at night. So she helped the couple break the habit of nursing him to sleep, suggested they give him a lovey as a sleep cue and a pacifier for comfort sucking, and taught them how to set consistent times for his naps and bedtime. The parents learned to read his activity level and alertness for signs of sleepiness so they could put him into the crib just as he was ready to fall asleep.

"She was gentle, but firm and supportive, and really talked us through things," Pobiner says. "He was sleeping through the night by 6 months. Within four to six weeks, all the big problems were basically gone."

Dodson, who is based in Chevy Chase, D.C., says that when parents come to her, they usually have tried several baby books and are confused by all the conflicting advice. They're rarely inclined to let their baby cry it out. "Practically speaking, the people who call me are tear sensitive. If anyone was inclined to close the door and let their child scream, they would do it and they wouldn't need me," says Dodson, who offers a newborn consultation for \$185, or a \$395 package for parents whose babies are older than 4 months.

Dodson had never held a newborn before having her son, Jonah, now 5. She heard Annapolis-based Kim West, known as The Sleep Lady, speak when Jonah was 3 months old, bought one of her books, and started implementing her methods. "I asked a question during the Q&A, and she started describing my son," Dodson says. "I felt like she was a psychic."

When Jonah was about 11 months old, West began offering a program to train sleep coaches. Dodson signed up because she wanted to learn more about children's sleep, and found it so fascinating that she decided to pursue sleep coaching as a career, launching her business in 2011. It was around the time that she was trying to decide what to do with her life, since she didn't want to return to her pre-baby career in international development. "I really love working one-



Sleep coach Jessica Dodson (left) advises Briana Pobiner on how to deal with her son's sleep patterns. "People don't trust their instincts a lot of the time," Dodson says.

on-one with people," she says.

Parents generally enlist her because advice from books, their friends and their pediatrician isn't working or doesn't align with their values. Moms are frazzled by the combination of unrealistic expectations that infants will sleep through the night, sleep deprivation and, often, the pressure of returning to work after just a few months of maternity leave.

"We're brought to our knees by this baby thing," Dodson says. "People don't trust their instincts a lot of the time. A lot of parents have this overriding concern: 'I'm not doing it right.' I really don't believe there's right and wrong; it's your child. I really feel that my job is to help people find that groove for their family."

WHEN PARENTING COACH Mali Parke met with Jen Campbell Munn, she suggested a number of tools the mother could use to manage her anxiety over Lucas' struggles in school and to strengthen the bond with her son. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by crisis, Campbell Munn learned to take a breath and think before she reacted angrily to something Lucas did. Parke also encouraged her to take care of herself, to recognize the rituals she needed to maintain her energy for parenting. Campbell

Munn stopped viewing her one moment of calm each morning over a cup of tea as an indulgence, and recognized it instead as an important way to center herself for the day ahead. She used family meetings and special code words to work through problems with the kids. For example, "peaches" meant a promise to revisit a disagreement after everybody had calmed down.

Instead of focusing narrowly on how to solve an immediate behavior problem, Campbell Munn became comfortable riding out the bumps. "The family is a place of safety and growth, and a place where it's OK to lose it so we can learn together," says Campbell Munn, who took Lucas to an occupational therapist for an evaluation of his sensitivity to noise and stimulation. He's now a well-adjusted 6-year-old, thriving in a new school and still receiving occupational therapy to regulate his vestibular system, which helps us maintain balance and orients us in space.

My daughter, now 9, is also doing well. Brian and I kept taking classes through PEP and last year began leading them ourselves. Many of the parents who come through the door want to know how to change their kids, how to make them more obedient or less argumentative.

bring in the experts

They are looking for the perfect words or parenting technique that will transform a stormy house into a tranquil one.

PEP has taught me dozens of helpful maneuvers and phrases that I use every day in my parenting. But the most important thing I've learned is that no single moment is crucial—and there are no magic words or tricks to fix every problem. I focus on creating a loving home and setting appropriate limits. When my child misbehaves or is upset, I sometimes still lose my cool, but I always follow up with a sincere apology.

It's our children's job to test limits, to challenge us, to learn about the world. That's how they develop important character traits like empathy, resilience and independence. I teach the parents in my classes that the point of parenting isn't to avoid those difficult moments—if that were even possible—it's to make the most of them. When we refuse to let our daughter quit swim team, she learns to stick to her com-



Class members discuss a parenting question in a small group during a PEP "More Tools for Parenting Preschoolers" class. Pictured from left are Naomi Johnson, Beatriz Quintos and Susana Uria.

mitments. When we resist nagging a child about homework, and she turns in a half-finished page, she learns from the teacher the consequences of her action.

My daughter still has a strong stubborn streak, which I hope will serve her well resisting peer pressure as a teenager. We've learned that when she starts acting up, it's usually a sign that she needs more responsibility—or more

time with us. We cook dinner together or go for a bike ride, and that usually does the trick. ■

Katherine Reynolds Lewis is a Potomac-based journalist who covers parenting, education and workplace issues. She and her husband, Brian, have children aged 9, 11 and 22 and are active volunteers in the Parent Encouragement Program.

COURTESY PEP/ASHLEY MATTISON

Bethesda
MAGAZINE
BEST
of
Bethesda
2015
Winner
Readers' Pick
Best Hair Salon

Nader DESIGN IN CUT & COLOR

301.897.8700 • www.SalonNader.com
Wildwood Shopping Center • 10243 Old Georgetown Road
Bethesda

Luxmanor

Welcome to 8 Sedgwick Lane, a custom-built treasure utilizing the finest materials, luxury appointments and artisan quality workmanship. Five bedrooms, three and one-half baths, two master suites, three-car garage. Level 21,452 sf lot. Walk to METRO, schools, shopping and worship. Offered at \$1,599,000.

M
METRO1

Contact Jon Siegel
jon@jonmarkhomes.com
301.343.1000

R **H**
REALTOR HOMEOWNERS