

Coaches Helping Parents Cope With the Mayhem

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the super nanny depicted on reality TV instead of calling your mother.

"This is so American," said Dr. Alan E. Kazdin, director of the Child Study Center at Yale University School of Medicine. "We want a quick answer, we want to do it yourself."

On the sword-fight day, Ms. Levey was full of questions for her coach, Jennifer Mangan of Wheaton, Ill.

What should she do when Skylar resists doing chores? Should there be limits on how he spends his allowance? Should Forrest get dessert if he does not eat a healthy dinner?

And how should Ms. Levey deal with all that little-boy mayhem?

"There's a piece of grieving for me that I don't have girls," she told her coach. "For me, I'd be reading Laura Ingalls Wilder and drinking tea, and that's not what they are going to do."

Many parent coaches are quick to say — and to write into their contracts — that they are not experts in mental health and do not consider themselves therapists.

They come from a variety of backgrounds. Many are mothers who in previous careers worked with children or parents, and who like the flexible hours so they can manage their own parental responsibilities.

ing failed to solve the problems, she and her husband, David, 54, sought help from Leslie Mayer, a parent coach in Cambridge, Mass., who previously taught preschool.

"Some of the stuff was hard to bear, and sometimes I would actually dread the call," Ms. Sept said. "But she would give me things to work on. One time it was having a frustration with my son hitting me or hitting his sister or hitting something. Leslie said instead of saying, 'Don't do that,' show him what he can do. He was allowed to go outside if he was angry or punch a pillow instead of his sister."

Parent coaches often tell clients about their own experiences, something therapists rarely do. Responding to Ms. Levey's yearning for a daughter, Ms. Mangan said, "When I had Maggie, my fourth child, I wanted a boy. I said it out loud. It went away, but I still remember feeling like that."

Ms. Mangan also told Ms. Levey: "I have a sister-in-law whose first baby was stillborn, and it was a girl and she went on to have three boys. She still gets teary-eyed that she doesn't have a girl. I would be happy to put you in touch with her."

Ms. Mayer, coaching an Alaska couple worried that their 4½-year-old daughter slept in diapers, said, "My son is going to be 7 next week and he still wears Pull-Ups at night. We talk about it, that he doesn't need to wear them, but he's concerned."

There are no prerequisites or licensing for parent coaches. Some are certified by schools like Coach U, a company that provides several months of general coaching courses by computer or telephone, said Daniel Martynage, executive director of the International Coaching Federation, a nonprofit organization that accredits coach training programs and that finds parent coaching to be one of the fastest growing areas.

Most of those programs do not teach about child or parental issues. Mr. Martynage said, a parent coach would have to seek other instruction for that. The Parent Coaching Institute, based in Bellevue, Wash., requires prospective coaches to have at least two years of child-related work experience, said the institute's founder, Gloria DeGaetano. In partnership with Seattle Pacific University, the institute provides a 12-to-18-month program with distance-learning classes on working with families, weekend workshops in Seattle and 100 hours of practice coaching.

A few parent coaches, like Ms. Mangan, who trained at the Parent Coaching Institute, have reached the point where professionals in child-related fields refer clients to them. "If our first impression is maybe the kid needs a therapist, and the parents just need to learn how to work with the kid in a more constructive manner, and maybe there's not a lot of pathology in the family system, we say this is perfect for Jennifer," said Dr. Jeffrey B. Van Meter, a psychologist who runs Legacy Clinical Consultants in Lisle, Ill., specializing in treating adolescents.

But those relationships are rare. And some psychologists and child development experts are skeptical.

"These guys are really risking giving bad advice, even though it may well be well intended," said Dr. Mark W. Roberts, a psychologist and director of clinical training at Idaho State University. He added, "Any time you try to do therapy on



Lia D'Annolfo Levey with her sons Skylar, 7, center, and Forrest, 4, at home in Woburn, Mass. Ms. Levey started sessions with a coach last year.

'I was really just struggling with the intensity of life,' one mother says.

Others draw solely on their experience as parents. Ms. Mangan, 49, a former editor of a parents magazine, has taken parent coaching courses and has been coaching for nearly three years, with some referrals from a psychological clinic and a family court judge.

While no group tracks the number of parent coaches, a profession that did not appear to exist until a few years ago, coaching schools are reporting a surge in enrollment and advertisements are springing up on the Internet and in parenting magazines.

Even some psychologists are taking it up, the American Psychological Association says. Some employee assistance companies, like Magellan Health Services, also make coaches available at large companies, like Turner Broadcasting System.

Parent coaches say they try to be both chipper cheerleader and straight-talking sage, rather than proponents of a particular parenting philosophy. Several parents said coaches have helped them change their children's behavior, or at least not get so upset or harbor unrealistic expectations.

"My children were beating me down," said Jane Sept, 37, of Salem, Ore., the mother of a 6-year-old boy and a 3-year-old girl. "They were winning the war with the whining and just the constant needing me and not being able to do anything themselves."

After a parenting class and read-



Jennifer Mangan, left photo, coaches a divorced parent, Steve Zeidler. Ms. Mangan is also coaching Mr. Zeidler's former wife, Gail Vandon, right.



Photographs by Kenneth Deckman for The New York Times

the phone it can easily blow up in your face." Dr. Kazdin of Yale said. "If parent coaches are here to comfort and support parents, that's wonderful, as long as they don't think they're doing more. If you really need to change a child in any way, this is not going to do that."

Mr. Martynage acknowledged that "anyone can hold up a sign and say, 'Hey, I'm a coach.'" But he said, "We really draw a distinction between mental health and coaching. In a lot of ways we're close to what a personal trainer does in a gym, work with you to achieve your personal goals." Ms. Mayer and others said that if they believed clients needed psychological help, they told them so.

Not all the clients have comfortable incomes, and some have children with serious behavioral problems or special education needs. Marcia, a single mother in Seattle whose 17-year-old daughter has destructive outbursts and trouble staying in school, is getting free coaching from Mary Scribner, a former community health worker. In a recent session, Ms. Scribner helped Marcia's confidence, urging her to "take

time for self-care." When Marcia, who did not want her full name used, told Ms. Scribner that heeding her advice to remain calm had helped curb one of her daughter's angry explosions, Ms. Scribner said, "Give yourself a pat on the back, Mom."

Among those who have hung out shingles are Rachel Zawidowski, a 36-year-old nanny and former Gymboree teacher in Boston, who said, "Not only do I do the coaching aspect, but if you need somebody to organize your playroom, I do that, too."

Sharon Teitelbaum, 56, of Watertown, Mass., a former computer systems analyst and amateur folk singer, took courses with Coach U and now charges \$350 for three 45-minute sessions a month, mostly helping working parents juggle or change careers to fit family responsibilities.

And for \$30 a month, there is a Web site, www.aboutmykids.com, that offers coaching via phone or instant messaging, e-mail access to the coach between sessions, and "daily parenting tips and motivational messages from your coach."

Sean Slavenski, president of Hummingbird Coaching Services, which

runs aboutmykids.com, said their coaches are under contract with employee assistance companies.

When Judge Elizabeth Sexton of Family Court in DuPage County, Ill., presided over the divorce of Gail Vandon and Steve Zeidler last May, she attached a condition. She ordered them to see Ms. Mangan for help in raising their daughter, then 15.

"I was grasping at straws, to be honest with you," Judge Sexton said. "Neither parent had psychological problems, but they didn't know how to parent a teenager."

For Ms. Vandon, a 42-year-old substitute teacher, and Mr. Zeidler, a 44-year-old supermarket owner, Ms. Mangan, who coaches each parent separately in her office, is almost a go-between, helping parents who barely communicate with each other navigate issues like discipline, chores and television-watching.

A watershed for the couple came when Ms. Mangan, a child of divorce, persuaded Ms. Vandon, who has sole custody and rations how often her daughter sees her father, to allow Mr. Zeidler to take their daughter to her oboe lesson one afternoon.

Another time, when their daughter resisted going to diving team practice, Ms. Vandon said: "I was so torn, I didn't know what to do. I called Jennifer and she was like 'bam.' In 10 seconds she had the right answer. My daughter had to go."

Ms. Mangan's current holy grail is to help the couple grant their daughter's fervent wish that they sit next to each other at her band concerts.

"It's a far-off goal," Ms. Vandon said.

One hallmark of parent coaching is helping parents control their emotions, even if they cannot curb their children's behavior.

"My older son is, I would say, off-the-charts physical," Ms. Levey said, "and I needed to find a way to say I really don't enjoy playing football all that much. I don't want to read Captain Underpants, I really don't want to look through your Lego catalog."

"My younger son is more fragile emotionally, and before, I might have felt really agitated and stressed," she said. "Now, if he wants to cry, I don't have to make him stop. I just have to be there to be as a support."