

By Barbara Holden

Each day in the life of a first-time parent presents a new challenge. For new moms and dads, knowledge is more than just power it's the key to keeping their sanity and not losing their cool.

In economic times like these when the threat of foreclosure is rampant and families are under greater amounts of financial stress, too many parents simply don't have a support system to turn to and they don't know where to look for it.

As a result, they make poor parenting decisions or are so paralyzed by fear they make no parenting decisions at all. Worse, they take their frustrations out on their child or someone else's child.

Just days ago, two Memphis babies died at the hands of two separate ill-suited and unprepared caregivers. Reoccurring tragedies like this are a signpost of a community of parents lacking the support systems needed to parent appropriately.

"Parents need help. They need proactive intervention before anything goes wrong and reactive guidance when they are going through stressful times. It goes back to a saying that has become fairly cliché but it holds true, it still takes a village to raise a child," said Urban Childhood Institute Associate Kenya Bradshaw.

"Recent events should serve as a call to arms for every person in this community. Each one of us should set building an infrastructure of new parent support as our priority."

Our community must reach out to families and provide easily accessible new parent educational classes, early interventions and relevant early childhood brain development information.

Every parent may not know what percentage (it's 80%, by the way) of their child's brain will develop before his third birthday, but they need to know that reading to him is one of the most important things they can do to help his brain grow.

Parents don't have to know the definition of a synapse but they need to understand that the parts of a baby's brain that produce his crying bouts are actually a good thing. Parents need to know that it's completely natural for a baby to cry – a lot.

This is why creating, staffing and implementing an infrastructure of support and parenting interventions to provide these educational resources are a must for the Memphis community.

A great example of this type of support is The University of Alabama's Parenting Assistance Line (PAL), a free, confidential phone service offering information and support for moms, dads, grandparents, and relatives whose children are ages birth to twelve.

According to the PAL website, www.pal.ua.edu, the purpose is simply to help caregivers parent with confidence. “All parents have times of frustration or stress over difficulties in raising a child. ‘Talking it out’ can help us not ‘take it out’ on our children.”

Washington State also has a great parent support infrastructure in the form of the Children’s Trust Foundation. This non-profit works to ensure that parents have the knowledge, skills and encouragement they need “to become more confident and more competent.”

And that’s what we are talking about here – building up the confidence of new parents by empowering them with the basic parental knowledge they need and seek, but may never have been exposed to before.

I’m not asking for anyone to throw money at a problem. I’m asking each of us to make our children and their families a priority before any law is passed, any vote is cast or any money is spent.

None of us really parent on our own. I certainly didn’t. I had the support of a family structure, my pediatrician and the advice of friends and loved ones who were parents before me.

We don’t often acknowledge it, but our success as a parent is significantly enhanced by the strength of our support systems. Every new parent needs that supportive environment. Certainly every new parent deserves one.

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other care givers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to www.theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.