

# EPIC helps Wayland group promote 'professional' parents

By Teresa A. Parsons

Every Wednesday, while six-year-old Tara Fox labors in her first-grade classroom, her mother, Rose Fox, is also in school.

A student at St. Joseph's School in Wayland, Tara learns the alphabet and listens to stories. Rose, along with the parents of nearly two dozen other youngsters, listens to stories and advice on one of society's most underrated professions — parenthood. She believes that the wisdom parents share and take home with them each week has an impact beyond their immediate families.

"Our job is to bring up tomorrow's adults and parents," Fox said. "Through better parenting, our children will be better parents."

The ability to bear children is a gift. But being a gifted parent requires work, according to Fox. "You learn to become a parent — you don't just become one," she said.

She and other Wayland parents have discovered a wealth of knowledge in one another through Effective Parenting Information for Children (EPIC).

EPIC was founded by a victim of bad parenting. In 1977, Robert L. Wilson's wife was murdered by a foster child who lived in their neighborhood. When Wilson checked the youth's background, he learned that the boy had bounced between foster homes and holding centers throughout his brief life.

Wilson, a Buffalo resident, believed he could help prevent tragedies like the one his family suffered by bringing together primary forces in the lives of children — parents, schools and communities — to support positive behavior and effective parenting.

With help from experts in a variety of fields, he developed EPIC programs for parents and teachers, and has dedicated his life to promoting them. Formally established in 1981, EPIC has spread to more than 50 schools throughout western New York, including half-a-dozen Catholic schools in the Diocese of Rochester.

EPIC came to Wayland via a group of parents who have been meeting for the past three years. They first came together at a Lenten workshop offered at St. Joseph's Parish in 1983. At the suggestion of the couple who presented the workshop, more than half-a-dozen parents continued to meet each week for informal discussions and to share taped talks and other resources on

child rearing.

"We really wanted information on how to be better parents," said Fox, one of the original members and a mother of two youngsters. "I looked at it as a support group."

What happens in today's support groups used to take place informally, over coffee in someone's kitchen or at card club. But society, the structure of the family and children have all changed a little since then. Fewer women are at home for each other anymore. Families are more mobile and more fragmented. Grandparents are less likely to live nearby than in the past.

Many new parents depend on their own parents' example for child-rearing techniques. But children have changed in some ways.

Kathy Snyder, a member of the EPIC group and mother of two St. Joseph's students, believes that children demand more choices and more explanations at a younger age than children did in the past.

"Parenting isn't 'you do as I say' any more," Fox explained. "Parents used to use fear, but that doesn't work anymore ... Now kids have more rights, but they also want structure." Structure is important, she added, because if children don't learn to accept some limitations early in life, they won't be able to reject such adolescent temptations as drugs or promiscuity.

By sharing their experiences, parents can help one another identify, solve and even prevent problems. "Sometimes you can tackle behaviors before they become problems," Fox said.

Snyder called the gatherings "good parent therapy."

"Even if you don't have a lot of problems, it's good to know that other children go through certain stages, too," she said.

This year, when 79 students registered for St. Joseph's preschool, Fox, Snyder and other members of the parenting group decided that perhaps they should try to spread that therapy around.

Mary Biggee, a teacher at St. Joseph's had attended a class on the teaching component of the EPIC program. She suggested that members of the group explore EPIC's component for parents. Impressed by what they learned, Fox, Snyder and four other parents attended two all-day training sessions in September at Monroe Community College



Because today's children are tomorrow's parents, proponents of the EPIC program view parenting as a profession. Above, Kathy Snyder, facilitator of a new EPIC program for parents of Wayland preschoolers, captures the interest of future parents Autumn Fox and Cristie Snyder, both 3, and Tara Fox and Bryan Snyder, both 6.

to become certified as EPIC facilitators.

Through the training sessions, Fox quickly realized that she had the wrong idea about the program. "I thought somebody would get up there and teach, when actually all you're teaching people is how to get together and communicate on a certain topic," she said.

EPIC offers two parenting programs — one for parents of young children and another for parents of adolescents. Earlier this month, three different groups of preschoolers' parents began meeting each Wednesday at St. Joseph's.

Although they are based at a Catholic parish, neither the groups nor the EPIC programs are affiliated with any religious denomination. Parents of any faith are welcome.

So far, the Wayland groups consist mostly of at-home mothers and a couple of fathers. But since gatherings are scheduled in the evening as well as during morning and afternoon preschool sessions, facilitators hope that word of mouth will draw more working mothers and fathers.

Discussion topics include sexuality, single parenting and fostering self-esteem. Otherwise, the formats of the two-hour gatherings remain flexible.

One EPIC session, for instance, con-

centrates on "saying what you mean." Parents who in the heat of anger tell their children "I could kill you when you do that" or "I can't believe how stupid you are" aren't usually speaking literally. But the sting of their words can remain with the child long after the parent's anger has cooled.

"You have to remember to yell at the action and not to demean the child," Fox said. "There are so many positive and negative things you don't realize you're passing on to them. You can talk till you're blue in the face, but they learn what you live."

There are almost as many parenting styles as there are parents. EPIC doesn't advocate one style over another. "You have different ideas thrown out and you decide what works for you," Fox said.

"Parents are the experts — they have the answers," Snyder added.

Sometimes all they lack is confidence. "EPIC is getting together and sharing information you already have," Fox said. "Most parents have more parenting information than they think."

For more information about the EPIC program call (716)546-5040. To find out more about the parent sessions in Wayland, call St. Joseph's rectory at (716)728-2228.

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