

PARENTING

Programs help children read, moms meditate

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

St. Helen's School, Gates, has begun "Family Reading Nights" every six weeks, having inaugurated the program on Oct. 27 and drawn 30 parents and kids to the parish center, according to Mary Beth Sullivan, principal of the pre-kindergarten-to-sixth-grade school.

For 30 minutes, the parents read to their kids. Then for the last half-hour a storyteller regaled those attending with a tale, she said. The next reading night is slated for Dec. 15 at 7:30 p.m.

The reading nights complement St. Helen's student reading program in which students read on their own at home. At the beginning of the school year, parents receive a list from the school of suggested books.

The students must fill in sections of a bookmark whenever they spend 10 minutes reading a book, according to Patty Uttaro, director of the Ogden Farmers' Library. She is the mother of two St. Helen's students, Scott, 8, a third-grader, and Elizabeth, 5, a kindergartner.

Every six weeks, the pupils concentrate on a different theme. "All About Me" emphasized books about children's own interests, and "All about God's Kingdom" emphasized religious books.

Parents do a service for their children by encouraging them to read, Uttaro said. "Literacy begins in the home," she said.

Uttaro helped organize both the reading program and the Family Reading Nights. "There's study after study that shows children who are read to ... grow up to become

more productive members of society," she said.

You can learn more about St. Helen's reading program by visiting the school's Web site at www.sainthelenschool.org.

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Meanwhile, St. Rita's Parish, Webster, is in its fourth year of helping mothers to strengthen their souls through a "Mom's Group," that meets on Tuesdays from 9:30-11 a.m. in the parish center. Such groups have been cropping up throughout the diocese.

Marie Marton, a lawyer who decided to stay at home when her son, James, was born five years ago, is one of the group's coordinators. During the school year, the group meets to pray and meditate together, and to share insights with one another

on various issues, she noted. An offshoot of the group meets regularly during the summer to read and study books, she added.

The 20-member group is made up of stay-at-home moms like herself, she said, noting that they can offer support to one another in a world that doesn't always understand why women would forsake career advancement to watch their kids.

"Being at home is not considered a career," she said.

She added that the women provide valuable reinforcement of each other's Christian spirituality.

"It's wonderful to be with other people who feel that their faith is important to them, and it's a wonderful way to bolster your faith," she said.

Book tells it like it isn't — the 'perfect' home

Parenting with Grace: Guide to Raising (Almost) Perfect Kids, by Gregory and Lisa Popcak; Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division; 367 pages, \$12.95.

Reviewed by Donna M. Marbach
Guest contributor

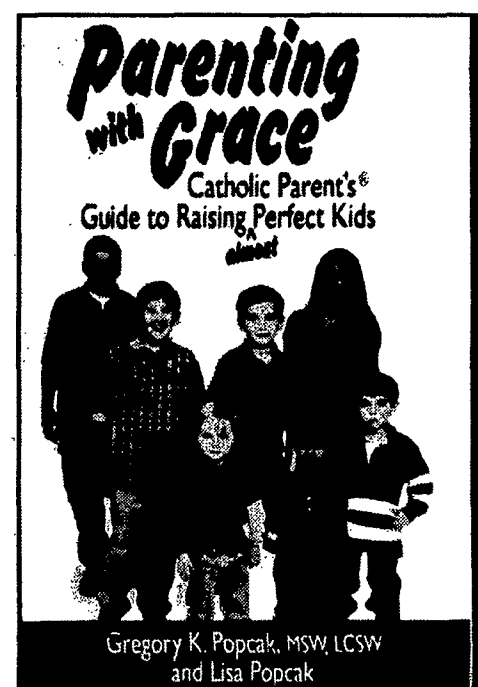
As the mother of five children, I converse with God daily. Sometimes, I give thanks for being so blessed. Other times, I pray for patience, wisdom and strength. Occasionally, I beg for forgiveness — having considered drowning one of them.

Parenting is difficult and I appreciate others' sound advice. Thus, I eagerly read *Parenting with Grace: Guide to Raising (Almost) Perfect Kids*, by Gregory and Lisa Popcak. Since it is written from a "Catholic" perspective, I expected the book would be particularly helpful. In many ways, it was.

Parenting with Grace is well written. Sprinkled with dry wit and self-check quizzes, it addresses the importance of building rapport with one's children. It proposes a concept of "self-donation," that is, a willingness to freely give time and energy to one's family. The author also argues for using discipline over punishment, and gives practical "how-to" solutions to common problems. (Despite co-authorship and her presumed role of primary caregiver, Lisa Popcak speaks in only one of the book's 21 chapters.)

Popcak is a devout, sincere believer who bases advice on his readings of Catholic theology and doctrine. He maintains firm positions on breast-feeding, working mothers, mental-health medications, day-care providers, home-schooling and more. Sometimes, these strong opinions read more as dictates. I found myself bristling more than occasionally.

Early in his book, Popcak dismisses Protestants (and non-Christians) as inca-



pable of raising an "almost perfect child." According to Popcak, because they believe children "are inherently evil," Protestants have a "strong devotion to corporal punishment as a means of 'beating the devil out' of children."

Popcak also stereotypes beliefs and behaviors in terms of national cultures, condemning the Dutch for their "hands-off" parenting style, the British for their reliance on nannies, and even Americans for favoring family life over social success.

The book also suffers because of its parochialism. It depicts all families as "traditional" — straight out of the 1950s — albeit with a twist. Fathers work, mothers stay at home and the children arrive per-

fectly planned and spaced.

The twist is that Mom, in addition to being the primary caregiver and homemaker, breast-feeds her children until age 3, then home-schools them until they are adults. Dad has a lucrative job that permits him to be the sole support, but is careful not to spend long hours at work. He also devotes time to household chores, diaper changing and bathing children. Dad is also clearly head of the family.

Perhaps the Popcaks are the perfect Catholic family. Unfortunately, this book's limited vision neither sees nor understands the present-day family.

Nowhere does it discuss (or even acknowledge) such various configurations of family as single parents, mixed-religions or race, stepparents with shared custody, and children living with relatives.

Neither does it address the major life issues that impact today's families. Popcak's world has no poverty, crime, prejudice, mental illness, alcoholism, abusive spouses or dependent parents. No one is overly tired, angry, foolish, selfish or even annoyed. No one ever loses control.

There is so much perfection in this book, it does exactly what the author professes not to do — to make parents feel guilty. Yet, how else does a mother feel, when she must work to feed her children and does not have the luxury of staying home to breast-feed and home-school?

Parenting with Grace is worth reading and reflecting upon, but it is not the answer to all parents' prayers.

Marbach is a member of St. Ambrose Parish, Rochester.

Family Events

● SAT, NOV. 18 — Storytime: picture book storytime for ages 5-7; Children's Center, Bausch & Lomb Public Library Building, 115 South Ave., Rochester; 10-10:30 a.m.; 716/428-8150.

● NOV. 18, 19 — Family weekend: "Forces of Nature", part of geography exhibit, Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester; Sat. 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sun. noon-5 p.m.; \$4.6; under 3 free; 716/265-2700.

● SAT, NOV. 25 — Musical dinosaurs: Tyrannosaurus Sax, Flute a Saurus and Princess Susannah; dance and sing along; Kate Gleason Auditorium, Bausch & Lomb Public Library Building, 115 South Ave., Rochester; 2:30 p.m.; 716/428-8150.

● DEC. 2, 3, 9, 10 — Show: "The Four Cinderellas" performed by Rochester Children's Theatre, Nazareth College Arts Center, 4245 East Ave., Rochester; 2 p.m.; \$9; 716/389-2170.

● DEC. 6, 12 — Days for Tot: Dec. 6: "Bubblemania" with Professor Sudo; 9:30-10:30 a.m.; Dec. 12: dance with Bari Destino and Kevin Huber; 9:30 a.m.; Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester; \$4.6; under 3 free; advance tickets recommended; 716/265-2701 ext. 314.

● DEC. 9, 10, 16, 17 — Jolly Holly Days: Santa, train displays, "secret" shopping & Holiday KidShop; Strong Museum, One Manhattan Sq., Rochester; Sat. 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Sun. noon-4:30 p.m.; \$4.6; 716/265-2700.

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Sundays, Dec. 3 & 10 at 2:00 p.m.

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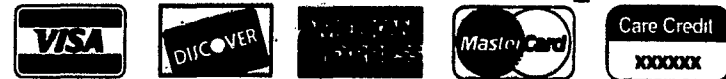
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