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Parents should question expert advice

by Rosaleen Garneau
Special

Sharon McKay, local resident, author and broadcast editor of Today's Parent magazine, spoke to about 40 parents at the Annual General Meeting of the Holy Cross Parent Teacher Association. McKay presented an informative, yet humorous talk while giving a new slant to the familiar topic of child safety.

She began by saying she was "not in the role of telling you (the parents) how to raise children. It's up to you." She cautioned the listeners to always question people who proclaim expert status on any subject and to be wary of statistics which are often misleading.

McKay used the example of the Missing Children's Registry in Ottawa. It registers a child each time they run away from home, so that a child who leaves home 10 times in one year is registered 10 separate times. The validity of statements such as "60,000 kids in Canada go missing a year" is, therefore, questionable. There is also a tendency to transplant American statistics here which are not accurate in Canada.

She also says the nature of media reports concerning child abduction distorts our notion of what poses the greatest threat to children.

When a child goes missing we learn everything about them yet when children die in fires we only hear things such as: Three children are found dead in the home. These deaths are impersonalized and somehow seem less important than an abduction.

McKay says it is necessary to

"set aside stranger abduction and re-focus". She stated that since 1969 only 36 children in Canada have been stranger abducted and noted that between 1980 and 1990 two thirds of the child murders (54 a year) were committed by parents, 2% by strangers, and that fires and vans are the major causes of injury and death.

Vans are dangerous because it is difficult to see children when backing up and they are often injured at the bottom of driveways.

According to McKay, Canada fluctuates between the highest and second highest fire rate death in the world and that smoke detectors are the "major invention of the 20th century in terms of safety".

When discussing the prevention of sexual abuse and street-proofing McKay made it clear that she considers giving the child the self-confidence and decision making capabilities to resist persuasion, along with open family communication, to be the most important factors in protecting children.

She also suggested to parents that rather than tell their children not to talk to strangers, whom they may need to help them sometime, they should equip the child with the resources to choose whom they will ask for help. McKay recommends parents tell children if they are lost to seek a parent (preferably a mom) with small children.

She said, "In my experience people who already have children don't want another one".

The reason she gives for choosing a mom rather than a dad is to protect men, who are very easily accused of wrongdoing in incidents involving children. For the same reason, she told men in the audience to avoid touching any lost child they may find.

McKay has written two books covering various aspects of child safety. "The New Child Safety Handbook" and "The New Parent Survival Handbook". Both are available locally through Oxbow Books, 102 Main St. S., Georgetown.

She and her husband, Dave Macleod, are parents of two children and in response to their own frustration at finding a reasonably priced gift for children they have created a book, "Chalk Around the Block", which is now in Coles Bookstores and is sold with a package of oversize chalk in various colors - all for about \$10. Soon to be released by this versatile author, is a cookbook called "Picky Eater".

McKay portrayed a real understanding of children and their parents at Wednesday's meeting, which was well-appreciated by the Parent Teacher Association. No doubt, her books will be found to be of equal value.

Holmgren case held over

Heather Holmgren, the Acton babysitter charged April 5 with manslaughter in the death of a six-month-old boy, and the aggravated assault of a 6-1/2 month-old girl, appeared in Ontario Court, provincial division, in Milton Monday afternoon to set a date for her trial. She will appear in court again May 25.

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