

The Village in Mill Valley



From left: Andrea Brandeis, Caron Stapleton, Marianne Shine, Kerri Mills

It Takes a Village helps connect parents with hope and resources.

BY SAMANTHA BRONSON

When Caron Stapleton's first grader was diagnosed with a learning disability several years ago, the Mill Valley mother didn't know where to turn. The Mill Valley School District offered resources within the district, but Stapleton was also looking for community support. She didn't find it.

"I felt like I had nobody to talk to about it, absolutely no one," she recalls.

In time, she learned that another local mother, Andrea Brandeis, also had a child with a learning disability, and the two realized there must be more parents like them. They met with parents of other

special-needs children, and within months 70 people were attending a charter meeting of It Takes a Village, an education and support group for parents of MVSD students with learning challenges.

Since that first meeting two and a half years ago, the group has grown to nearly 300. Included are parents of children with a wide range of learning disabilities, from autism and cerebral palsy to attention disorders and dyslexia. About 11 percent of the district's students qualify for special education assistance of some type, says assistant superintendent Kerri Mills.

It Takes a Village welcomes all parents, regardless of their children's condition (including those of

children without disabilities), and makes sure they know they're not alone. "There's nothing like seeing yourself in another person," says Brandeis, president of the group. "It's validating and makes it real. It brings you comfort and joy."

It Takes a Village strives to provide that reassurance in many ways, including a free monthly speaker series in which experts address issues like reading strategies and how to balance the needs of a child who has a learning disability with those of a sibling who doesn't. The group also organizes playdates at a local park and quarterly coffees where parents can share strategies and concerns. And it works closely with the school district to keep parents apprised of available district resources and help.

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Like all relatively new nonprofits, this one faces financial constraints (its yearly budget is only about \$2,000) and the challenge of publicizing its mission. The latter includes overcoming reactions some parents instinctively have to the term special education—the misperception that it refers only to severe disabilities, the worry that a learning disability stigmatizes a child.

"Some people don't want the public to know their kid has a learning difference," says executive vice president Marianne Shine. "They're so afraid of the label, so they go on this journey on their own."

As the organization expands its reach—it's working on setting up a mentoring program and a learning disability lending library at each district school—members hope its presence promotes much-needed public dialogue as well. "We want to bring special education out of the closet and hopefully provoke conversation in the community instead of it being a dirty little secret that families have to hide," Stapleton says.

For more information, go to itavmv.org.