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IMPACT REPORT

“Are we
doing the
right thing?”

BY ADELAIDE VALLEY



It’s a question that many parents can’t help but ask themselves. When difficulty arises, parents are tasked with making decisions that will best support their child. But for parents of a child with emotional, mental, or behavioral health concerns, this question is all the more consuming. Trying to navigate a complex mental health system while both advocating and caring for your child or youth is a real challenge, and one that often leaves parents wondering where they should even start. Yet, even on this long, seemingly lonely road, there is hope, and it starts with G.E.A.R. Parent Network.

The G.E.A.R. Parent Network is a program focused on authentic parent-to-parent support, and where Gaining Empowerment Allows Results. For parents who have a child with emotional and behavioral health needs, G.E.A.R. Parent Network is a lifeline—they offer no cost support and family peer mentoring so that parents are better equipped to provide for their families.

Recently, I had the chance to sit down with parents involved in G.E.A.R. Parent Network and ask about how the program has benefited them. Although every story is different, one thing seems to ring true: G.E.A.R. Parent Network is more than parent-to-parent interaction. It is a source of unwavering support, guidance, and reassurance in moments when it is needed most. Above all, it means that someone is walking the road alongside you.



Yet the path to feeling heard and encouraged is not always an easy one. Every parent that I spoke with shared a similar sentiment: at some point in their journey, before G.E.A.R. Parent Network, they had reached a point of desperation, disappointment, and frustration. No matter how many times they asked for help or direction, no one was there to answer their call. Over and over, blame was placed on parenting, fires were put out constantly, and needs were dismissed, leaving parents with no choice but to slowly lose hope.

A parent of two and someone who experienced these feelings herself, Lorissa is no stranger to feeling left in the dark.

At a time when she didn't yet have the knowledge or resources to best support her child, Lorissa recalls feeling that her family was entirely at a loss for help. "We had to look for support on our own, and it was painfully slow. In the meantime, things just continued to get worse, and there wasn't enough help for us to be able to come up for air and breathe, especially when you have a child that is having crisis after crisis." When we talked, Lorissa also brought attention to her own emotional stability during that time, explaining that it was difficult to show up for her family and be her best self when her family was floundering.

Lorissa is not alone in wondering how her family would stay afloat. Parents Christie and Cynthia also expressed that finding help, or even just a response of some sort, was incredibly challenging. Cynthia, a mother of two and staunch advocate for G.E.A.R. Parent Network, said the following in our interview: "I don't think that there is enough awareness whatsoever about support services that exist for families. It was very hard on us to figure out what we were doing to help our child. Did we do the right thing? Why wasn't there someone in the emergency room saying 'if you need support, here is someone you can talk to?'"

For Cynthia and so many others who have struggled to find a listening ear and a helping hand, G.E.A.R. Parent Network represents a



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complete 180, a glimmer of hope, and the end of an often isolated, lonely experience. G.E.A.R. Parent Network prides itself in being present at every stage of a family's journey, providing parents with the tools they need to build their confidence in order to better advocate for their child's needs. Not only has G.E.A.R. Parent Network exceeded many parents' expectations in terms of assistance, but the program has been praised for always offering accessible, judgment-free support. Parents repeatedly emphasize that they not only feel seen, but they feel comfortable reaching out to any staff member of G.E.A.R. Parent Network, no matter the situation. Parents know that G.E.A.R. Parent Network is there for them, from 1:1 peer support to family-centered training, to advocacy and increased awareness of available services. Even if the answer is not clear, G.E.A.R. Parent Network works with families to navigate challenges they may face, reinforcing the notion that parents are never alone.

Two integral aspects of G.E.A.R. Parent Network that a majority of parents identified as the most helpful were peer support groups and the 1:1 relationships formed with a G.E.A.R. Parent Network staff member. Parents echoed that peer encouragement, validation, vulnerability, and advice were important takeaways in support groups that they attended. Mallory, a mom to four boys, believes the support groups and parenting classes offered were huge in fostering a

sense of community and belonging. "I feel like someone has my back every time. I feel empowered, and that I am doing the best I can." Other parents also felt affirmed that they had "what it takes" to fight for their child's best interest and could rely on their peers to offer solutions to some of their challenges. In addition to family peer support, Mallory notes that her 1:1 with Sue, a G.E.A.R. Parent Network staff member, has given her the confidence she needs. "Sue has kept me on track at times when I felt I couldn't do it anymore. The hits kept coming, and when I was on the brink of giving up, she really pushed me."

Parents David and Brant are also quick to say that the 1:1s are extremely beneficial to their families. Both fathers acknowledge that having someone to offer a listening ear and help process their thoughts has changed the way they have been able to provide for their children. Receiving actual guidance and having someone standing beside you at all times was pivotal in ensuring their child's needs were addressed. When it comes to 1:1s, every parent interviewed expressed that they valued G.E.A.R. Parent Network's emphasis on family-driven and child-focused care. Most highlighted the fact that G.E.A.R. Parent Network aided them in understanding their rights within their child's care by breaking down specific language and policies. The result is that these parents feel confident in using their voices to advocate, and therefore feel some relief. Several parents also point out that because of G.E.A.R. Parent Network, they are able to better comprehend the way that their child views the world, and consider their perspective as well as their own. As a parent of four, Trista can speak well to the benefits of 1:1s. "It felt like having a friend, a temporary friend. But at the same time, I knew I could text Heather, and she would get to it, and she would address it." During our interview, Trista emphasized the feeling of assurance in knowing that her 1:1 support involved talking with someone who had also navigated various challenges in the world of parenting.



In addition to learning the skills necessary for caring for a child with behavioral and mental health needs, it is clear that G.E.A.R. Parent Network has done its part to address the family as a whole. It wasn't uncommon for parents to stress how important it was for them to learn about self-care, as well as ways in which to change their family dynamic for the better. Ally, a mother to two kids, reflects on the ways in which G.E.A.R. Parent Network has touched on both her mental health and the needs of her family. "G.E.A.R. Parent Network helps me look at the other side of the situation, the bigger picture, and focuses on how my family can benefit as a whole." David, mentioned above, was especially thankful for G.E.A.R. Parent Network's commitment to getting him connected to the people and places he needed most. "I actually saw a dentist for the first time ever



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because of G.E.A.R. Parent Network. In the past, I had asked for help from my case managers with both doctors and dentists, but I didn't even get that help. So this was a big improvement."

I ended each interview with the following question: what is one thing you want other families to know about G.E.A.R. Parent Network? When asked, every single parent said something along these lines: "I want them to know that G.E.A.R. Parent Network exists. Help is closer than it may seem." It didn't take long to realize that there was a collective plea among all parents for G.E.A.R. Parent Network to more effectively promote its program throughout the community. For many parents, this means having flyers in doctors offices, schools, daycares, emergency rooms, and even just public places. Some parents revealed that they would have never found G.E.A.R. Parent Network if it weren't for an accidental search or an eventual referral from a friend. A few parents proposed the idea of hosting a tent with G.E.A.R. Parent Network staff at seasonal community events. Most importantly, though, parents want others to know that support is out there, and it is easier to access than you may think. It takes a village to raise and support children, but there is a village ready and willing to lend a hand, all the while reminding you that you are in fact doing the right thing. ⚙️



Adelaide Valley Bio

Adelaide Valley is a recent graduate of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts and has a Bachelor's degree in English and Psychology. She served as a Public Media and Relations Intern at Crisis and Counseling Centers during the spring of her senior year and worked alongside staff to shine a light on the diverse behavioral health needs of those in Maine. Adelaide is currently working in Boston, Massachusetts as a Mental Health Counselor at The Renfrew Center, an outpatient facility specializing in the treatment of eating disorders in adolescent girls and women. She plans to continue her education within the eating disorder field and pursue a Master's degree in therapy or dietetics.



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Let parents know that they are not alone in their parenting journey!

Crisis and Counseling Centers' G.E.A.R. Parent Network is a program focused on authentic parent-to-parent support, and where Gaining Empowerment Allows Results. For parents who have a child age 0–21 with emotional and behavioral health needs, G.E.A.R. Parent Network is a lifeline—they offer **no-cost support** and family peer mentoring so that parents are better equipped to provide for their families.

Supports include:

Emotional support by phone

Training to increase knowledge and skills

Advocacy to empower families to learn how to use their voice

Navigation support for child serving systems of care

Individualized one-on-one in-home family peer specialist support

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to call **(800) 264-9224** to request support and to learn more about help that is available.



Visit
www.gearparentnetwork.org
to learn more.