

## Parenting for the second time

By *CARLOS VILLATORO, Register Staff Writer*

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For about four-and-a-half years, Napa resident Tad Parker has raised her two grandchildren.

After her son checked into a rehabilitation center, she took his two children in for what was supposed to be a three-week period. Taking care of Gracie, 7, and Oscar, 8, has been a challenge for Parker, she said -- both of them are mildly autistic.

"I didn't know my grandparents," she said. "My mother would rise from her grave and slap me in the face if I didn't take care of my grandchildren."

Last weekend, Parker was at the Elks Lodge in Napa, soaking up information -- and looking for support -- on how to tackle the tough issues that come with raising grandchildren who are developmentally disabled.

About 15 grandparents gathered at the Elks Lodge to discuss topics ranging from caring for grandchildren with disabilities to divorce among older couples and the importance of grandparents in family life. The seminar was sponsored by ParentsCAN, a Napa nonprofit dedicated to empowering families of children with disabilities.

In Napa County, as many as 2,700 children have some form of disability, according to ParentsCAN Executive Director Joan Lockhart.

The program was led by Dr. Arthur Kornhaber, an expert on grandparents' role in family life. His mantra: "Every time a child is born, a grandparent is born, too."

The seminar was a nice way to spend some time, said Mary de Young, a Napa grandmother to 12 grandchildren. After raising six of her own children, de Young now faces raising one of her grandchildren, she said.

"My daughter is an alcoholic, and I guess (I came for) support," she said. "(I came) to talk



Tad Parker, a grandmother raising two grandchildren, covers her eyes as she describes her family situation during a workshop on modern grandparenting, hosted by ParentsCAN at the Elks Club Saturday. Lianne Milton/Register

to somebody."

Through the seminar, de Young learned about support groups for grandparents in similar situations.

Kornhaber, a Southern California-based psychiatrist, said that de Young's predicament is just one of the challenges that modern grandparents face.

"Today's modern grandparents are a new breed," he said.

Kornhaber said that grandparents have eight essential roles that they play, such as living ancestor and family historian, mentor and teacher, crony and magical companion and spiritual guide. He also said that problems can arise when grandparents fail to understand that their children are parents, too, and that grandparents must respect the rules their own children establish.

"They have to understand that they are grandparents and their job is to be supportive," he said.

During the 1980s, Kornhaber and his wife Carol spent several years traveling to states such as New Mexico and New York, observing the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. At the seminar, Kornhaber presented some of his findings.

"The grandparent-grandchildren bond is second only to the parent-child relationship," he told the group. "Kids were hard-wired to soak up the grandparents' knowledge. They see no other full form of love and adoration than they do in a grandparent. The worst thing that a grandparent can do is become a police force. You will lose that magical connection."

After Kornhaber spoke to the group a bit, he divided them into four discussion groups.

Groups discussed everything from gay and lesbian grandparents; step-grandparenting; peer support groups; feminism and grandparenting, and personal grandparenting issues. Lockhart, ParentsCAN executive director, said that their group is forming a peer support group for grandparents who raise grandchildren with disabilities in the valley.

ParentsCAN helps families who raise children with autism, emotional disturbance, mental retardation, orthopedic impairment, Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury and other disabilities.

The program helps families by providing support groups, referral services, advocacy and training. For more information, contact ParentsCAN at [www.parentscan.org](http://www.parentscan.org) or 253-7444.