

"BEFORE I got married I had six theories about raising children. Now I have six children and no theories."

It's refreshing to know even 500 years ago parenting was an enigma - if this quote by famous 17th-century wit John Wilton is anything to go by.

But nowadays, help is at hand. Meet the parents' guru who is changing the "job" of raising little ones for Colchester mums and dads.

Despite its formal-sounding name, the Ministry, based at the Colchester Business Centre, in George Williams Way, has helped more than 600 people over the past four-year- through its relaxed,

friendly and non-judgmental parenting courses.

The not-for-profit company was set up by the Colchester mum-of-two because she wanted all parents in north Essex to have access to a bit of support, without costing them a penny.

Jeanie, 44, says: "I knew how tough it was being a parent and I wanted to get these courses out there for people."

It came up with the name because, at the time, Jeanie Oliver was on the TV with this Ministry of Food, so this was born off that.

"We're not about preaching. We don't say 'you should be doing this or that', it's

about sharing tips and coming together to try to be the best parents we can. It's also a heck of a lot of fun."

The parents who come along also get to make friends and have a lot of laughs.

"What we don't have is a magic wand to end parenting woes. There is no such thing as a perfect parent, but everyone can learn skills to help them cope."

The bottom line is, asking for a bit of guidance does not make you a bad parent!

Among the courses being offered by the Ministry this autumn are its popular "Incredible Years

School Age programme". The 12-week course, divided up into weekly two-hour sessions is for parents with primary school children, aged four to 10.

It's open to anyone who just needs a bit of guidance or who wants to radically re-think their whole approach to parenting.

Jeanie, who takes a lot of her classes herself, along with her team of trained co-workers, says:

"We go back to basics, starting with building up your

relationship with your child through spending time together and praising their good behaviour.

"We also cover setting rules for your family, using rewards effectively and how to say 'no'.

Believe me, that's one of the most common problems that leaves parents exasperated these days."

There's also an specialist course for parents with ten to 16-year-olds, which

offers an insight into "decoding" your teen.

Jeanie adds: "This one also covers key parental concerns for this age group such as drugs, drink, sexual health and aggression in young people."

Trained psychiatric nurse Jeanie, who is married with two daughters, aged 17 and 20, says she feels privileged to run the ministry, which has seen 650 parents complete the grant-funded courses since 2008.

Not surprisingly, the most common problems she sees are everyday issues shared by most parents, including setting boundaries, public tantrums, bullying at school and feeling guilty over a lack of quality time together.

sure to buy expensive laptops and mobile phones for your kids and keeping an eye on their internet activities, are also thrashed out in the group sessions.

So what one bit of advice would Jeanie offer when it comes to the increasingly difficult art of parenting?

She says: "I always say to parents life is hectic and most of us have to work, but whatever you do, try to spend some time every day with your child. It doesn't have to be ages but just quality time. Read a book, go for a walk or just have a cuddle on the sofa."

"Ask yourself how do you want your child to think of you in 20 years?"

The bottom line is, asking for guidance does not make you a bad parent



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