

True Love Not Tough Love – CND thematic intersessional Oct. 2019 Vienna

Imagine you are a loving mother whose child struggles with a chronic relapsing illness – such as diabetes.

Now imagine your child continues to eat cookies – against doctor’s advice – so he is chastised as being of weak moral character

And, your friends & neighbors shame and blame **you** for their disorder.

Imagine that healthcare providers label you a co-dependent enabler, and encourage you to let them hit bottom...that they are arrested, criminalized and incarcerated for grabbing a forbidden candy bar...that police, health care professionals and the community at large shun you for “loving too much”...

So, besides the real fear for your child’s health & happiness, mothers must also grapple with the concept that it is somehow their fault because they were too involved... while they watch...helplessly and hopelessly as their child’s health and futures diminish...

I am Gretchen Burns Bergman, co-founder and executive director of A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment & Healing) and lead organizer of our national Moms United to End the War on Drugs campaign, now in 35 states with partnerships in 6 countries. We work to end the stigmatization and criminalization of people who use drugs and people who have a substance use disorder.

Mothers have been told by healthcare professionals for decades to use “tough love” paternalistic approaches in handling children who struggle with substance use disorders. This has added to the stigma, and too many lives are being lost.

Both of my sons struggled with heroin addiction for decades, and our family experienced not only the nightmare of addiction and incarceration, but also the devastation of stigma and shame. Somehow they both found their way to long-term recovery.

I’m a mother who believes in true love, not tough love, and I’m leading a movement of moms who reject the whole premise of co-dependency.

We propose a philosophy based on the power of parental guidance and love.

Maternal love is empowering and everlasting. I’m glad that I never gave up hope, that I never stopped offering them lifelines during their hellish journeys - that I rejected bad advice about “co-dependency.” The words “tough” and “love” don’t resonate together and are a jolting and contradictory concept.

Parents of people who struggle with an addiction to opioids know that their child is in critical danger of losing their life.

It is almost impossible to navigate these murky waters alone, especially when you add the challenges and roadblocks that are created by criminal justice involvement. Adding shame and stigma with a system of punishment, abandonment and retribution is counter-productive at best and highly destructive in most cases. Instead of shunning and expecting the impossible of them, we need to try to help, without judging. It is important that they know they are loved and have something to return to when they find their way to recovery.

We reject the non-scientific philosophy of co-dependency that has been pushed on us, making us believe that we are parenting wrong, when we simply refuse to stop trying to save the lives and futures of our adolescent & adult children.

We encourage mothers to trust their basic maternal intuition when it comes to loving, protecting and caregiving, while creating those difficult boundaries that you truly believe are in the best interest of you, your child and your family.

We demand an end to the war on drugs. Prohibitionist drug policies have led to mass arrest and incarceration, and have devastated families worldwide.

So, moms say: stop criminalizing our children who use drugs.

We call for education around a compassionate, public health, family centered approach to substance use rather than a criminal justice approach.

We advocate for drug policy reform including decriminalization of drugs for personal use.

And we promote maternal values, reject tough love and the war on drugs, which is a war waged on our loved ones.

One person dies every 7 minutes of an overdose in the United States today. We propose humanistic approaches to address the opioid overdose crisis.

We need:

Adequate funding to provide an array of treatment & recovery services.

A healthcare system of treatment on demand

Therapeutic services – not criminalization and mass incarceration

Medication assisted treatment – in community and behind bars

Community-based harm reduction services: syringe exchanges, safe consumption spaces & naloxone.

Through our Ask Mom How to Save a Life campaign, moms are conducting overdose prevention trainings and distributing naloxone, a safe drug that can quickly reverse an opioid overdose. Parents are often the first 1st responder, so they should have naloxone readily available – because every second counts.

The Tough Love model is not based on fact or science...and it has created needless pain and suffering, without producing positive outcomes.

We offer a new philosophy: True Love. It is based on nurturing, maternal instincts, compassion, tolerance, and the power of parental love.