

TIPS FOR STARTING A PARENT NETWORK

If “it takes a village to raise a child,” then it makes sense for parents to check in with each other occasionally as our children face developmental watersheds. As a parent, some of our best sources of support, insight and guidance on understanding and navigating the common issues our children face can come from other parents, especially the parents of our children’s friends. An ideal way to create an opportunity for connecting with other parents is some form of a Parent Network. These informal gatherings can offer ways to share information and help establish community standards regarding common teen issues, from house parties and drug/alcohol experimentation to school stress.

A Parent Network can be as simple as a few friends meeting casually for coffee in someone’s kitchen or as structured as an open grade-level parent meeting with an expert speaker – or anything in between, perhaps a hybrid format fluid enough to roll with the punches. The important thing is to open the lines of communication – we’re all in this together.

* **Decide on the Basic Concept** – A casual get-together at someone’s home can be organized with a few phone calls and emails. “Want to get together and talk about some of the problems the kids are encountering at school?” For a more inclusive grade-level event, open to all, you’ll want to get school approval for time, room space, and publicizing your event. Guidance counselors are a good place to start.

* **Outline a Basic Format** – If there are specific issues your children are confronting (drinking, promiscuous behavior, etc.) you may want to use that as your initial focus, then open up the conversation to any general concerns, questions. It helps to have at least a minimal agenda to avoid discussion devolving into a free-floating gripe session.

* **Set Some Basic Guidelines** – One of the most helpful aspects of a Parent Network is that by talking to others, we can get a sense of community norms -- What do most parents consider reasonable age-appropriate curfews? How do most families deal with unsupervised houses? How do parents limit-setting vs. independence and deal with infractions? However, it’s also important to accept that each child is different, and everyone parents differently according to trust and comfort levels with certain behavior. The most effective Parent Networks set a non-judgmental tone, accepting that there is no need for overall common agreement. The value is in awareness and communication, knowing what other parents think and how they handle various situations. Confidentiality within the group is important for establishing an environment of trust.

* **Keep in Touch** – While some groups may want to schedule regular meetings, others may want the fluidity to schedule gatherings as needed. In the meantime, it can really help to establish an email list for occasional issues that might arise, so parents can tap the group for advice or send out an alert at a moment’s notice.

* **Use Your Community Resources** – Parent Networks often benefit from some advice and guidance by experts, even if only for someone to facilitate discussion and help in an objective way to keep a gathering on track. Guidance counselors in your school may be a good place to start, but Brookline also has a wealth of other community resources as well that can steer you to the information and help you need.

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For more information on B-PEN or for help starting a Parent Network, visit www.B-PEN.org or contact coordinators June Harris (june_harris@psbma.org) or Karen Campbell (Karen_campbell@psbma.org)