

Creating a Successful Parent Network

From the moment children are born, most parents naturally “network” with others. New mothers discuss their challenges. Fathers consult with other fathers to assure themselves their child is developing “on time.” Parents walk together with children on the first day of school. Talking and sharing with others helps both inexperienced and more experienced people who are raising children.

Once children are in school, and especially in the pre-adolescent and teen years, there is a need for more formal parent networks. These bring parents together from diverse backgrounds, who may not initially know each other, to create a community environment and expectations which will encourage safe and healthy choices by their children as they achieve independent adulthood.

Formal parent networks are needed because parenting is more complex today than ever before. Parents need to pick up on what is happening in their schools, neighborhood and community. They need a means to compare their ideas and values with those their children are exposed to through others. They need the assistance of others in addressing complex issues and community problems too big for one family to deal with.

Purposes of a formal parent network:

1. To increase communication—parent-to-parent, parent-to-child, and parent-to-school.
2. To establish standards of conduct, including role modeling by adults.
3. To educate parents and share parenting strategies.
4. To improve the environment for children and youth.
5. To create laws and policies, and support their enforcement, which create safe and healthy communities.

Formal parent networks are effective because:

1. They create “ownership” for establishing safe and healthy communities.
2. They develop a unified statement of standards and expectations.
3. They eliminate parent isolation and demonstrate a community’s concern for all its children.
4. They provide the strength in numbers and the public will to assure that all is done to make communities safe, healthy, and nurturing.

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Parent networks are successful when they:

- ▣ organize for the long term. Networks are not a one-time need or a single solution. They are a continuous process for parent involvement and effectiveness and for maintaining safe and healthy communities.
- ▣ are visible and accessible in the community. Many involve parent pledges and directories that can be circulated. They have contact people so newcomers can get involved. They have a process for communicating with every parent, and the community at large.
- ▣ have the support of the school superintendent and principals, and acceptance by teachers.
- ▣ establish goals and determine activities based on accurate understanding of their community's strengths, problems, needs, norms, and resources. Many conduct assessments of behavior, attitudes, and existing assets in the community.
- ▣ involve or maintain communication with the diverse individuals or organizations that provide leadership throughout the community.
- ▣ understand they cannot reach consensus on every parenting issue, but are united in the attempt to create a safe and healthy environment for their children.
- ▣ operate as a means to support parents and youth in making good decisions, not as a force for identifying bad parents or catching kids who may make poor choices.
- ▣ avoid the pitfalls of serving individual needs – for therapy, gossip, a social clique, imposition of values, etc.
- ▣ are pro-active and prevention focused. They may support resources for treatment, and correction, but concentrate on developing assets, a healthy environment, and supportive attitudes and norms.
- ▣ recognize and accept diversity in family makeup, parenting styles, and backgrounds. They believe all children are valuable and all families can parent effectively if they just have the resources and know-how.

**For information about Parent Networks
and Parent Pledge models, connecting with a parent network
near you, or assistance with organizing a parent network,
contact Prevention Network at 800-968-4968 or
see www.preventionnetwork.org**

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