



PROGRAM SUMMARY

2015 Parent Speak

Holton-Arms School

November 18, 2015

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) hosted its third Parent Speak Program for member school parent communities on Wednesday, November 2015 at The Holton-Arms School. Fifty-five attendees were welcomed to the event by PCW board members and encouraged to write discussion topics on white boards as they signed in.

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

Board member Cal Daggit welcomed attendees and noted that Parent Speak is unique in that it provides a forum for parents to initiate discussion topics. She then thanked Mary Cohen, former PCW Board member, for returning to moderate the morning's discussion. Ms. Cohen has moderated Parent Speak for the last two years and also moderates PCW's student leader breakfasts. She is a parent of two graduates from Holton-Arms and currently works at the school. Ms. Daggit then thanked Holton-Arms for hosting the event for the second time, singling out Danielle Aronson and introduced Susanna Jones, Holton Head of School. Mrs. Jones who welcomed attendees and noted that she recently learned that the PCW was founded at Holton 50 years ago. She added that it is heartening to know that the topics listed are the same topics that school administrators and faculty discuss. As an example, she said that she recently wrote about sleep and balance in her piece "Recipe for Good Sleep" (<https://www.holton-arms.edu/about/heads-notes>).

TOPICS/THEMES

After surveying the audience, Ms. Cohen determined that attendees represented families of college, upper school, middle school or lower school aged children, with middle school represented most. She continued that Parent Speak is an opportunity to learn from each other. She said that one of the challenges of parenting is that there is no single “right” way to parent. Good parents talk to other parents to collect information and share solutions to the many challenges of raising children. Ms. Cohen stated that the goal of this morning’s program was for each person to take away one or two parenting “tips.”

Discussion topics that were written on sign-in boards were consolidated around key themes by PCW board member Nancy Lopez. Ms. Cohen shared the themes:

1. Balance
2. Technology
3. Teens
4. Failure and Letting Go
5. Delicate Topics/Tough Conversations – kids, parents, teachers

DISCUSSION

1. Balance

Bringing balance to the lives of our children and reducing their stress is a big challenge today. Parents need to be role models. It is difficult for children to be in balance when parents are not in balance.

Audience recommendations towards balance include:

- Putting limits on the number of activities that children can undertake.
- Being consistent in the messages being sent to children. One participant observed that parents often send mixed messages to their children. On one hand, parents value balance, but on the other hand, they also value achievements in sports, music, and other extra-curricular activities.

- Children want accolades from their parents and are stressed if they can't achieve. Children say that a lot of their stress comes from their parents.
- One attendee commented that college counselors also send mixed messages. Counselors say they don't want to see a student with a plethora of activities but if a student has only one or two interests, he or she may not get in to the "desired" colleges.
- It is the role of the parent to work with the children to decide which messages to heed and which messages to ignore.
- One parent noted that as a community we need to be more open to letting kids try new things, especially at the middle school level. We need to have conversations with kids about being open to explore new things at any age in order to encourage children to become life-long learners.
- Another attendee observed that the loss of the traditional family dinner is another sign of deteriorating balance. How do we get back to regular family dinners?
- One participant mentioned that for younger students, it is harder to have unstructured time because of so many activities. Moreover, friends are not geographically as close in proximity, which drives more scheduled activities and more in-car time, particularly in the independent school community.

It was discussed that parents need to learn how to say "no" – to coaches, dance instructors, music teachers and other who make seek to overschedule their children. Parents need to know their own children and figure out how much each child can handle. Having multiple children makes finding balance even more difficult as parents want each child to have opportunities to do special activities, but this impacts the family schedule. Some families have multiple children enrolled in different schools, which also contributes to the challenge.

Ms. Cohen polled the room and roughly half of attendees indicated that their children have daily "down time." One parent was grateful that her daughter is not athletic as she has more opportunity to get needed down time and sleep. Another commented that schools have been responsive in creating more balance for students – study hall during the day or sports during the school day.

Ms. Cohen then polled the room and determined that few parents felt there was too much homework. Ms. Cohen reflected that this surprised her, and she concluded it must mean that schools have been responsive to a concern about overload and reduced

homework. She said that two or three years ago, “every hand would have gone up.” One attendee observed that the changes in the school schedule to block scheduling (where classes don’t meet every day) have helped reduce the homework load.

One parent mentioned that younger parents – “Millennial” – parents are giving their children more freedom and involving their children in making decisions on their time. It will be interesting to see how their parenting style will evolve in the next 15 years.

2. Technology

Topics of interest to the group included: Facetime, amount of device “plug in time” and the appropriate use of social media. Ms. Cohen polled the room and the majority indicated that their child/children have ready access to electronic device(s). Roughly 65% of attendees have strategies that limit what their children can do with devices at home and roughly 40% then indicated that this is a source of struggle/tension.

Ms. Cohen asked for strategies and consequences for broken rules. Attendees responded:

- One participant offered their family rule that all devices go to a charging station in their kitchen every night by 9 p.m. She said that her 8th grade son will “forget” and get angry when she reminds him to put the device away. She continued that the biggest message for her children is that their parents are checking on them and their device use and that parents are there for them if something comes up that could be hurtful or inappropriate. Parents need to talk to their children and discuss what is right and appropriate for the family.
- Another shared that they have a “one screen” rule at home: children are not allowed to use a device when they watch TV.
- One mom shared that she changed the Netflix password which was not popular but helped a lot. Ms. Cohen suggested changing the WiFi password, and having a conversation with the child about technology use, seeking his or her input into a screen time agreement in order to get the child invested into the solution. She continued that the child needs to take responsibility and ownership for his or her behavior and suggested that consequences be imposed if rules are broken. Consequence recommendations were solicited by a parent but Ms. Cohen suggested that parents figure out what would resonate most with their children

and work off that. If one asks a child to name his or her own consequence, the child is usually harsher on himself/herself.

- Ms. Cohen mentioned there are apps that block social media and that some children install these apps themselves to self-regulate so that they can get their work done. There are apps that provide incentives not to use the phone.
- Ms. Cohen suggested having a “house rule” that when kids come over cell phones need to be turned off. One attendee shared that she has a basket where all cell phones go when friends come over.
- One mom recommended keeping computers in family spaces, not in children’s rooms
- One attendee shared her posting rule of thumb for her daughters: only post/send “anything they can print out and pin on their shirts while having dinner with their grandparents.”
- One parent commented that there is a belief that schools should take more of a lead in teaching children how to be responsible with technology and suggested that attendees encourage their schools to get involved.
- Another participant commented that children don’t realize that technology and social media distract them when they are “studying”

The issue of technology and younger children has gotten more complicated and parenting has become more difficult. Dynamics are definitely changing. Specific concerns included:

- Play dates seem to be computer-driven by Xbox, Playstation and Wii.
- One mom shared that she struggles whether to limit her child’s time on educational apps such as Scratch Jr. One parent shared that children don’t know what to do when devices are turned off.
- One attendee raised that her biggest concern is the interpersonal piece that is getting lost. We are growing a generation of kids that don’t know how to communicate face-to-face.
- Kids are also less considerate and they don’t realize that social media posting can be viewed negatively as “rubbing it in.” One attendee shared that author Sherry Turkle, who published “Alone Together” in 2011, recently published “Reclaiming

the Conversation” which addresses how to reclaim conversations in the digital age.

- One parent questioned the age at which kids are getting cell phones. Ms. Cohen answered that different families and different children have different needs. Cell phone use is a question answered by the parent and the child; it is a family decision and every family is different.

3. Teens

The discussion topic written on the sign-in board read “teens & alcohol” but Ms. Cohen expanded the discussion to “how can we as parents navigate teens and risky behavior.” One attendee observed that schools are addressing this issue more, and at a younger age than in the past. Another parent added that this is more of a community conversation now than it was previously. She suggested that “Community of Concern” provides an effective context for parent-child discussions about risky behavior, and for the development of supportive strategies for teens in difficult situations, including:

- Agreeing on a predetermined “code word” for children to use with parents if they are in an uncomfortable situation. This practice allows a child to confidentially alert their parents that they need to be picked up without letting on to their peers – “no questions asked.”

Ms. Cohen shared that her perspective, admittedly controversial, is to assume that all children will drink and to use this assumption when formulating strategies. She mentioned that the denial in the parent community around this issue is “spectacular.” It is imperative to decide what is important to one’s family. Ms. Cohen said that the number one reason that kids choose to not drink is fear of parent disappointment. Not all parents agree with Ms. Cohen on her premise. It is important that parents be vigilant and not give up on monitoring children.

One attendee shared that parents should equip children with a repertoire of skills/techniques to manage their own behavior when alcohol/drugs are presented to them; parents need to be clear on expectations, message delivery and behavior. Parents should also provide kids with an intrinsic motivation to not drink – current research shows that children who drink early in their lives are at greater risk, statistically, for substance abuse issues later in life.

One attendee shared a book written by Lisa Miller from Columbia University entitled “The Spiritual Child.” This book is heavily research-oriented with statistics connecting

early spirituality to lower rates of depression, substance abuse and risk taking. She suggests helping children with their spirituality – talking to kids about nature or religion or something that they can connect with to feel “transcendence” so they can turn to these things instead of turning to alcohol.

Another parent quoted PCW Orientation speaker, Dr. Trish Lyons, who said that the number one way to help prevent kids from getting depressed (a correlate of substance abuse) is to get them to volunteer in the community.

Another attendee reiterated the importance of having a code word for children in case they ever feel unsafe or uncomfortable in any situation. She shared that her family used this code word technique with reference to guns in another’s household when they lived in Texas.

One participant asked a question about sex education and how to talk to her very shy daughter. Ms. Cohen suggested using an “Ask/Answer” journal where conversations take place in a written format. Either mom or daughter could pose questions or write responses in a journal to be shared, removing what can sometimes be a difficult face-to-face interaction. Another attendee recommended the book “It’s So Amazing” and suggested reading the book together with one’s child to tee up relevant questions.

4. Failure and Letting Go

One participant opened the conversation by saying that her twin children are in 7th grade and that she and her husband don’t check their homework anymore with good results. Children are rising to occasion and feel good about taking responsibility for their own work.

Another attendee shared that there is an unfortunate negative association with the word “failure.” There are many beneficial takeaways from failure. Failure needs to be discussed in a positive way in schools.

We live in an “on-demand” world with so much “immediacy” that children no longer have an appreciation for the process. Kids don’t see value in accomplishments that take a long time to complete. One parent shared that it is important to be open with children and discuss times when adults failed but learned from failure. The importance of modeling behavior as parents was reiterated, as was the importance of the process rather than the result.

Ms. Cohen polled the room and a small percentage of attendees indicated that they were willing to let their child fail. Attendees responded that the challenge in this is “child-specific” and dependent on the circumstances. Ms. Cohen shared a story about her daughter’s college freshman roommate who never turned in a paper without sending it to her own mother first.

One attendee shared a quote from PCW Fall Speaker Jessica Lahey who said that “we are not raising children, we are raising adults.” She shared that she took heart from Lahey’s message and stopped stressing about middle school grades. Instead, she focuses on the long term and the end game, which is the life children will lead beyond school. She was really struck by the loss of creativity that comes from an unwillingness to fail. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter where the children go to school but it matters that they “live big” and “creatively” as adults.

Teaching children positive messages about failure can start at a very young age. Kids can become paralyzed and won’t try new things outside of the box if they have never failed. One important life lesson is to learn that you can fail and life will go on. One parent shared a sign in a classroom that said: “Fail. Try again. Fail better.” Another shared a sign in a classroom that said: “Fail – first attempt in learning.”

Trying means a lot, which is a powerful teaching message. One attendee shared how her daughter’s science class experiment taught that life doesn’t always work out as planned. She gave an example of a science experiment where the goal of the activity was to turn a substance green, but doing so was a physical impossibility, a fact that was unknown to the students. What did they learn while trying?

5. Delicate Topics/Tough Conversations – kids, parents, teachers

Ms. Cohen posed two questions:

1) How to talk with other parents about controversial topics, and 2) how to handle conflicts with teachers?

One attendee responded that she is diplomatic, not confrontational in her queries. She will “go through the back door” of the conversation.

Another parent commented that it is important to help children make the right choices in difficult situations. Circumstances get more muddled, less “black and white” as children get older. They should be intrinsically motivated to make good choices for themselves.

One attendee asked how far parents go in situations where children are in proximity to alcohol. Would parents send their child to a party where they know alcohol will be served? Ms. Cohen responded that the answer is a family choice. She commented that she is a firm believer that the parent knows what is best for the child. Ms. Cohen further noted that her sense is that kids aren't ostracized if they don't go to drinking parties and that kids who choose not to drink do find each other.

Guidance was sought on "mean girl" situations:

- One attendee recommended partnering with the school for interventions. Another suggested working with one's child to learn how to remove oneself from unhealthy situations:
- Another parent recommended giving children tools of empowerment with their friend and behavior choices rather than focusing on others' behaviors, which they cannot change.
- One mom commented that sometimes parents feel the "hurt" more than the child.
- One attendee shared that she often asks questions of her children: "what do you think your options were?" She wants her kids to hear their inner voices when a parent is not around. The more parents put issues back to the children, the better it will be for them.

The topic then turned to "global awareness" given the recent terrorist attacks in Paris. Participants offered suggestions on how to help young children understand current events:

- When there is a crisis help children focus on helpers and identify positives to counter-balance their fears.
- Answer questions that children raise, but also talk about the goodness in the world.
- Keep in mind that children may be looking for a simpler answer than the one you were preparing to give. It is important to explore their feelings and give perspective.
- It is also important to tell the truth and not say "don't worry, it won't happen again" because the reality is that it could happen again.

- Discuss an emergency plan. It is critical to tell children to be aware of their surroundings (such as in an elevator). They need to know that they have a choice to get themselves out of uncomfortable situations and take ownership of their world.
- Older siblings can be instrumental in difficult discussions with younger siblings.
- It is important to have an on-going dialogue to teach children about compassion and kindness, which can impact an entire generation. It is our responsibility to model kindness for children.
- One attendee shared a new resolution which is to do something to make someone smile or laugh every day.
- Attendees agreed on the need to embrace our special young people, to relish them, and to enjoy our time with them.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Ms. Cohen wrapped up by thanking everyone for participating. She hoped that everyone was leaving with one or two tips to take back to their families. She reminded the audience to visit the PCW website for good resources on parenting.

PCW President D.D. Holcomb thanked Ms. Cohen for the wonderful job and for her on-going support of PCW events, including moderating the Upper School and Middle School student programs which follow a format similar to Parent Speak. Discussion summaries from PCW programs are available on the PCW website. Ms. Holcomb shared that the PCW has 60 member schools which encompass 25,000 students – and she noted that the more the community shares, the stronger the community will be. She thanked participants for attending and bringing meaning to the program’s conversation. She concluded with a quote from Benjamin Spock, “Trust yourself. You know more than you think you know.”

In closing, Nancy Lopez informed participants that an on-line survey would be emailed to them and she encouraged participants to complete the survey.

APPENDIX

List of Discussion Topics Identified by Attendees

Discussion topics identified by participants were:

- Teen parties that serve alcohol
- Recess
- Conflicts with teachers that are important for activities – e.g., director
- How to talk to other parents about controversial topics (e.g. house “rules” re: parties/supervision)
- Homework
- How to talk to young kids under ten about events in France – how to explain it (briefly)
- Consequences for teens when they are disrespectful.
- Play dates with video games – good or bad?
- Cliques based on socio-economics
- Effective time management – tools that work
- Boundaries between letting go and intervention
- Early specialization in extra-curriculars – how to help guide transition to new interests
- Stress of second semester senior years – thoughts of college choice, leaving home, etc.
- How to handle contradictory messages about well-being (e.g., sleep, diet ...)
- How to stop power struggles with your teen
- Parent involvement in the college process – not enough vs. too much
- When one sibling is very social with lots of opportunities vs. sibling who is not but wants to be
- Technology: use of Facetime

- “FOMO:” Fear of Missing Out vs. Balance
- Balance – after school activities/sports and homework/studying (especially Middle School)
- UBER: What age? For what purpose?
- Failure – in a world that values success? How and how much to let go?
- Enhancing kids’ social skills for life success
- Navigating social media and time with access to devices