2016 Parent Speak
November 15, 2016
National Presbyterian School

Approximately 30 people attended Parents Council of Washington's (PCW) fourth Parent Speak Program for member school parents on Wednesday, November 15, 2016 at the National Presbyterian School.

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Head of School, Malcolm Lester welcomed attendees and noted that National Presbyterian School was thrilled to host the PCW and Parent Speak. As a PCW member for 26 years, National Presbyterian has benefitted from PCW forums and welcomes the opportunity to support parents.

PCW Board Member Jennifer Heimert thanked Mr. Lester and National Presbyterian School and welcomed attendees on behalf of the PCW. Jennifer challenged all participants to think broadly and share freely, and then introduced Parent Speak moderator Mary Cohen, a former PCW Board member.

Topics/Themes

After surveying the audience, Ms. Cohen determined that attendees represented families with college, upper school, middle school and lower school-aged children, and that the most common age group was middle and lower school children. Ms. Cohen noted that PCW allows parents to exchange information in order to improve their parenting choices.

Discussion topics that were written on flip charts as attendees arrived were consolidated and prioritized by a show of hands:

1. Social Media/Role of Technology & Cell Phones/Screen Time
2. Cultivating Manners/Civility, especially with Technology
3. Stress
4. Risky Behaviors (e.g., drugs, sex, and clothing decisions)

1. **Social Media / Role of Technology & Cell Phones / Screen Time**

An overwhelming majority of attendees had children with cell phones and/or their own electronic devices. Electronic devices are part of our lives and we are all raising digitally fluent children.

Topics that were discussed included:

1. The tension or balance around these devices
2. Modeling of behaviors around technology
3. Communication between parents and child and the implications of "forwarding" of texts/thoughts/pictures that were not meant to be shared with others
4. Ideas for parental control around screen time
5. Social Media addiction

It was abundantly clear that a phone is no longer used for verbal discussions but is a tool for broader communications. Parents agreed that modeling behavior and continuing communication with your children about screen time is an important way to control screen time.

Audience members agreed that while technology use is difficult to navigate, the older the child, the easier it was to manage (e.g., a 17 year-old vs. a 12 year-old).

Some suggested that parents should model proper use of technology, showing children the right balance between technology and face-to-face contact. There was debate about whether or not the phone is a piece of technology to aid schoolwork or to be used for social media for communication and self-promotional purposes. The group felt that the utilization of these devices for all things blurred the lines between simply a technological device and social media portal. It is everything to all.

Parental controls for all devices were discussed. Many products were mentioned as parental control tools (Fortigate, Net Nanny and even the basic settings on your AT&T account) to help navigate these waters. Additionally the Common Sense Media website was recommended.

Families are concerned about the amount of time spent on technology and the familial tension that surrounds it. Ideas mentioned to control screen time:

- a "check-in" policy
- not allowing screen time during the week
- focus on what is missing due to screen time (e.g., outside play), and
- a cell phone "contract" with your child

Some have noted that children today have difficulty maintaining eye contact during conversations. This is attributed to the increased time they spend communicating via text and email.

Studies show that increased screen time leads to a reduction of dopamine in the brain. As parents, we need to understand the effects of technology on the brain, especially because we are the first generation of parents to deal with so many hand-held devices. There is very little in the way of long-term research on the effects of screen time.

Parents seemed to feel that it would be helpful for schools to provide a set of guidelines on social media. One member school requires that all parents who allow their students to have a device have a contract for technological use with their child. It allowed flexibility for each family but was really meant to facilitate a family discussion and mindfulness of the device/utilization/time on line and guidelines within the home.

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.

2. **Cultivating Manners/Fear Of Missing Out with Technology**

A useful social media rule is not to say anything on a device that you wouldn't say face-to-face. The challenge the audience felt was how to cultivate manners and kindness when, honestly, parents might not understand the platform that is being used for communications (no one calls the house phone anymore…).

One parent shared that they had "rules of engagement" and did not allow children to copy and send texts to others. Additionally, they banned all devices from the dinner table so that the parents could lead by example.

Another parent discussed the necessity to cultivate gratitude on a daily basis. The book *How to Raise an Adult* was mentioned and the understanding that being a part of a family and doing things for the whole family (and not just yourself) is an important way to cultivate a culture of helping others and perspective of adolescents.

Parents should model kindness and gratitude. Our children see and mirror our behaviors. Parents can also discuss family values and expectations of good behavior to provide children a roadmap for how to behave.

Lastly, we discussed the incredibly important concept of permanency online. Our children are the first generation to experience all their collective mistakes shared and saved on multiple hard drives, clouds and elsewhere as a life-long reminder of their flaws, shortcomings and mistakes. What a difficult world in which they live – and in which we parent them.

3. **Stress**

Topics that were discussed included:

- How do we help our children manage stress?
- Keeping perspective
- Keeping stress out of school

A number of schools represented have Yoga and Mindfulness programs which can help younger children learn to center themselves when they are feeling out of control. Additionally, these programs teach children to identify the signs of stress and strategies for coping with stress.

We noted that independent school families tend to have significant economic resources. The children are well fed, clothed, have homes and warmth. However, some children still experience stress. Empathy, perspective, and comfort for each individual are key.

There is significant stress in schools. The continual comparisons of students, Facebook pages, Instagram likes and Snapchat Chat Strings have become incredibly competitive. PCW Fall Speaker, Tina Payne Bryson, has helpful resources on making connections and brain functioning. We need to remember to connect with our children, not simply "solve" the issue at hand. The brain functions differently in times of stress or depression. By first connecting with a child, we allow them to express their feelings and then, when they are calm, they can identify solutions. As parents, we are the ones to drive the competitiveness, activity levels, and resulting stress , and it is up to us to model the correct balance for our families.

4. **Risky Behaviors**

Topics that were discussed:

1. Drugs
2. Behavior
3. Clothing for females

The group discussed how parents can help teens navigate risky behavior. Drugs are a significant problem. There is no real "age" that drugs and alcohol start making an appearance as it depends on the school atmosphere and the children themselves. 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.

How much do you tell other parents about what you know their children are doing? Ms. Cohen suggested that we all do our best to be open, honest and willing to be approached (even good kids can make bad choices). When we are this way, we can help foster conversations with fellow parents.

Parents should seek out friends with similar values, recognizing that different families have different rules. Parents should know where children are going, with whom children are being social and meet the parents of their children's friends.

Additionally, it is important to discuss the values that your family has around "risky behavior" subjects. The goal is to help children make good choices when you are not there. 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 also should provide kids with intrinsic motivation not to drink – current research shows that children who drink early in their lives are at greater risk, statistically, for substance abuse issues later in life. Alcohol affects brain development.

One parents shared the idea of enabling children to call parents anytime by agreeing on a predetermined "code word" for children to use 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."

If you, as a parent, suspect that your child is engaged in risky behavior, it is important to acknowledge it and to deal with it. If you can help deal with their reaction to it, it will help them to make better choices (hopefully).

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 and parent from there. Ms. Cohen said that the number one reason that kids choose to not drink is fear of parent disappointment.

Many attendees spoke about the dress of young girls. Clothing marketed and available to younger girls today is more and more risky. The age-old question of how to deal with "everybody is doing it, why can't I?" was discussed – it is recommended not to negotiate, to remember as the parent, you have the final word.

We concluded our discussion with a very mature discussion on what is happening with high school crowds. There is concern about where high school students go on weekends and what they do there. Parents wonder how they can provide a safe haven for children to hang out and enjoy their teen years. Many attendees had concerns about teenagers going to music concerts, and preferred students to instead engage in wholesome activities like ice skating, movies, etc.

Another challenging topic is the issue of teens exploring sexual relationships. Parents wish for students to display respectful and age-appropriate behaviors when showing interest in the opposite sex. Additionally, students need strategies for responding when they are treated inappropriately in a dating relationship. Parents should have multiple conversations with their children about these topics before children leave home.

Conclusion

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 thanked Ms. Cohen for facilitating our discussion and for her ongoing support of PCW events. Attendees were reminded that the PCW has 60 member schools which encompass approximately 25,000 students – and the more the community shares, the stronger the community will be.

An online survey was emailed to the participants, and they were encouraged participants to complete the survey.