

PARENT SUPPORT GROUP

Shaker Heights High School Shaker Heights, Ohio

The following assumptions and goals provided the basis for a plan that was submitted to the Shaker Heights High School PTO for a parent support group.

Goals:

Assumption: For many reasons, parents of high school students find themselves isolated from parents of other teens.

Goal: To “reconnect” parents to one another.

To facilitate dialogue among parents.

Assumption: All families and teens are different and there is no absolute solution for a given situation. The key is to analyze all options and perspectives, and then choose the one that is best for the family involved.

Goal: To identify issues of concern to the group and look at the various options available for addressing these issues.

Assumption: A lot of anxiety is created when parents are isolated and have to deal with teenage issues/crisises.

Goal: To ease parental anxiety.

After consulting with the high school principal, we decided to pilot a parent support group with freshman parents. We enclosed the attached letter with the school’s progress reports that were mailed home in December. We asked for a four-week commitment because we wanted the group to bond and yet, we recognized that parents have many demands on their time. We chose an 8:00pm starting time because teens are usually engaged in their evening activities by that time, freeing parents to come to the meeting.

We met in the high school library for which there was no cost. A teacher and two community members volunteered to act as group facilitators. The group took turns bringing refreshments. The two co-chairs provided coffee and tea.

The sessions started after a brief social time. During the first session, the group and facilitators established rules for discussion, which included maintaining group confidentiality, deferring judgment, freedom to pass, respecting others’ right to participate, risking at your own level, etc. Also during the first meeting, issues of concern were identified. They included how to set limits within a peer group where the sky is the limit, where to draw the line between respecting a teen’s privacy and the parent’s “right to know,” how to handle a spouse who insists on participation in sports for a son who is not interested, how to open dialogue when a teen refuses to share, how to connect with other parents within your teen’s peer group, and how to handle the anxiety when your teen is making bad choices. At the beginning of each

session, the group added concerns to the list and then chose which concern(s) would be discussed that evening.

We had 18 parents return postcards stating they could attend the support group. Some parents found that they could not attend because of conflicts. Each session had about 10 participants, most of whom came to two or more sessions.

There was an immediate rapport established within the group. Initially, our concern was that people would not share their real concerns, because they feared it would become the subject of community gossip. Though there were more significant concerns shared as the meetings progressed, the group members said they felt comfortable and did not hesitate to share their concerns. Our intention was to run another four-week session after Spring Break but for several reasons, we decided to focus on the 1999-2000 school year.

We did ask all participants to fill out an evaluation form. Most members ranked our achievement of goals as very effective. The one exception was "easing parental anxiety." Though each parent in the group had a ninth grader, the ninth grader may not have been the oldest child. As we discussed issues, behavior more typical of older teens was introduced. This created some anxiety in the parents whose oldest child was a ninth grader.

Most parents liked the 8:00pm starting time, and most preferred once a week for a set period such as four weeks. Some did think that every other week would be better. Other than logistics, no one offered a suggestion to improve the group.

Most people chose to return because they enjoyed the group, it offered a "release," they wanted to hear more about the identified topics, issues occurred during the week with their own teen that they wanted to discuss with the group, and they liked meeting other freshmen parents.

Several groups are being planned for the 1999-2000 school year. Logistically, the structure will remain about the same, though we may introduce a session to be held during the day.

Our two biggest challenges are diversity and communication. Our parent group was almost all white and female. We are trying to explore avenues of attracting more males and people of color into our group. In addition, how do we explain these groups to a parent population of 3000? We plan to advertise in the high school calendar and a parent newsletter that is published quarterly. We will make announcements at PTO meetings and will try to inform counselors about the group so that they can share the information with other parents. We are all convinced that our best publicity will be "word of mouth," and that will take time.

Mary Mulligan
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December 1, 1998

Dear Freshman Parent,

We hope that you and your freshman are enjoying the high school experience. These years will be filled with many exciting experiences and probably some anxiety for both you and your student!

As we parents watch our children become more independent, we experience many dilemmas involving how to "let go" and allow our children to make their own decisions. What happens if they make a wrong decision? How do we determine where to draw the line? Is there one right answer for everyone?

To address these concerns, the Shaker Heights PTO is starting some support groups for parents. These groups will be led by school/community facilitators. The purpose of these groups is to gather parents together so that they may share their concerns and strategies with one another. There are no absolute answers, but support and perspective can be gained by realizing that you are not the only parent/family trying to address these issues.

If you would like to participate, please return the enclosed postcard by Wednesday, December 16, so that we may do some advanced planning. We would like to ask for a 4-week commitment starting on Thursday, January 14. This beginning session will meet in the high school library at at 8:00pm.

We feel that there is much to be gained by parents supporting one another through these dynamic high school years!

Sincerely,

Sarajane Dolinsky
Co-President

Marsh Grove
Co-President

Linda Lissauer
V.P. Parent Ed.