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ParentNet helps parents tackle issues through strength in numbers

By **Stephanie Dunnewind***Seattle Times staff reporter*

Tim Johnstone was skeptical when his wife dragged him to his first ParentNet meeting, which brings together parents with children in the same grade to share age-specific concerns, from homework to dating.

"I told my wife, 'Why should I listen to a bunch of amateurs tell me how to raise my kid?' " he admits now.

"What I found was that while these were not psychologists or child therapists, they were truly professionals from the standpoint of having actual experience," said Johnstone, whose three children attended The Overlake School in Redmond. "You get a sense of community with other parents that you wouldn't get from reading [parenting] books."

Started 10 years ago at Overlake School, ParentNet is celebrating its anniversary by encouraging schools to download free materials from its Web site. It hopes to expand beyond the 20 to 25 schools now using the program nationwide.

School gets "in the loop"

Trained parent volunteers lead ParentNet meetings two or three times a year for each grade. Attendees anonymously submit discussion topics, which parents then vote on. Large groups break into smaller ones so participants get more chances to talk. Sometimes a panel of parents with older students will share tips for surviving the transition year moving into junior high or high school.

At an Overlake meeting last month for seventh-grade parents, body image and Internet safety topped the discussion list. Parents wondered what to do with short boys (one mom reassured them with a boy who grew eight inches in a year) and shared tips, such as taking a 12-year-old boy into The Body Shop for grooming advice from the cool older girls who work there. "He'll use what she says, where he'd never listen to me," one mom noted.

Parents complained about the challenges of finding a public-but-quiet spot for a computer used for homework, while others suggested Googling kids' names to see what they'd posted online, especially with MySpace pages.

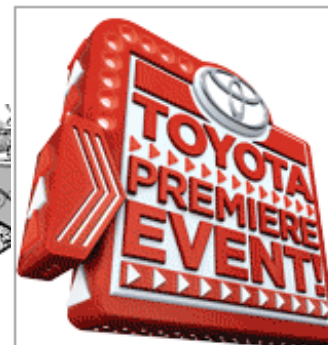
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at ParentNet meetings:

Elementary school: Setting limits for TV and video-game use; learning how and when to discipline a child; getting kids to do chores; knowing how and when to help children with homework; defusing and reducing sibling rivalry.

Middle school: Dealing with an adolescent's emotional ups and downs and emerging sexuality; helping kids cope with cliques, bullying and other social situations; teaching time management and accountability; setting rules for Internet use.

High school: Setting boundaries for dating, curfews and driving privileges; balancing homework with extracurricular activities; redefining parental roles as teens' push for independence; finding strategies to combat teen drug and alcohol use; recognizing depression.

Source: ParentNet

parents say no, kids try to make it sound like they're deprived — but parents know otherwise from ParentNet. "Kids will tell you, 'Everybody, only, always,'" said Sue Petitpas, mom of sixth- and seventh-grade sons. "These meetings give us some ammunition. It helps support what we're doing. I know why I say no, but now I know I'm not alone."

"When you hear other parents are going through the same thing and it's not just your child, it's very reassuring," agreed Salma Jiwani, mom of a 12-year-old son, after the meeting. "It gives you ideas of new strategies to try."

Parents who belonged to PEPS or moms groups when kids were little will recognize the format, which stresses respect for diverse opinions. What makes ParentNet unique is the school-based setting, which includes a faculty liaison who attends meetings. Teachers and administrators receive a meeting summary.

"The school is able to hear what's on the minds of parents," said co-founder Susan Grijalva. "It's important to have them be in the loop."

For example, at Overlake, a private prep school serving about 450 students in grades 5 through 12, concerns from a ParentNet meeting led to an increased number of chaperones at high-school dances.

No griping

While parents can bring up issues, a meeting contract discourages "gripe sessions" with gossip or complaints about specific teachers. The faculty liaison helps parents navigate the school system and suggests positive ways to follow up with administrators.

"As a parent and a teacher, I spent too many years watching people talk in the parking lot about a problem or grievance instead of being part of the solution," said Grijalva, whose children are now adults. Principals must support the program and be committed to a partnership, she said. "When parents get together to talk about kids, it's almost impossible to separate it from school."

The program runs at both elementary and secondary schools, but it's especially welcomed by parents of teens. "Parents need all the support and help they can get in those years," Grijalva said.

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Where parents of younger kids talk at the playground or play date drop-offs, it's harder as teens grow more independent with a wider social circle.

"It's beneficial to have a network of parents who know each other well, especially as you head into the adolescent years," said Lynne Munoz, an Overlake mom of seventh-grade twins and a 10th-grade son. If teens go to a party, it's easier to call the other parent to find out "who, what, when and where," Munoz said.

Johnstone, who describes himself as the "naive dad" whose wife took care of most parenting duties, credits Parent-

Net with helping him become more involved. He's now president of the nonprofit's national advisory board.

"I learned all kinds of things I didn't even know I was supposed to be worried about."

And it was easy: "You don't have to prepare; all you do is show up," he said. "In two hours twice a year, you get tremendous insight into what's going on with your child's life at school and socially."

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