

Parent Watch

A Free Community Based Model For Parent Support

Parent Watch is a support and information forum where parents and helping professionals can meet in a positive skill development/problem solving process that will create "lived" solutions for family conflicts. Through this process of empowerment, Parent Watch can provide parents with a persistent feeling of confidence in dealing with their children and the difficulties that occur in adolescence.

Rationale for Parent Watch

The teen years can be a time of stress for teens, their families and friends and the community at large. As they enter adolescence, our children are inundated with new pressures and new decisions. Many are confused by peer pressure, the demands of school, careers, the future -even advertizing- at a time when they are least likely to turn to adults for answers. Drugs and alcohol continue to be a provocative debilitating element and are now considered to be a normal part of the adolescent experience. There is evolving an entrenched lack of hope and opportunity for 15-19 year olds. This can influence their ability to delay gratification, plan their lives and sustain their progress toward adulthood. Cutbacks have left dangerous gaps in treatment and support services for adolescents and their families thereby exacerbating the problem while further diminishing hope.

However, despite these negative pressures and lack of service, the prevalence of problems among teens may be as much an indication of their parents just not knowing what to do rather, than a sign that the world is falling apart, or that we are all at the hands of "drug-crazed, adolescent psychopaths". Many parents don't know how to respond effectively to their teenagers. The majority of parents who struggle with these issues are good parents who have become so child focused that they have lost control of their own homes. There are some that would want us to believe that behind every delinquent youth is an abusive and uncaring parent. This is in fact a myth. In their determination to be caring parents they may doubt the value of their experience, compromise their values and rationalize unacceptable situations or behaviours. We do agree that the males of this society must take more responsibility for their children through direct and positive participation in their child's life.

Parent Watch provides an effective, systematic and economical community-based program that assists families in overcoming conflict. The greatest reason for Parent Watch is to remind parents that they are the adults and that they do have the skills to protect themselves, their children and their homes.

Parents are often amazed at the information networks their children have developed, networks that allow kids to provide each other with support, information, places to sleep, news about possible confrontation with other kids or authorities and more. Parent Watch assists parents in creating their own information networks to allow them to provide each other with support strategies, coping skills and understanding. In Parent Watch, parents

reach out to each other with problems and solutions, in a supportive setting with professional guidance. Once parents learn how to identify and cope with crises and unacceptable behaviours they can begin to regain control of their homes and their lives.

Evolution: How Parent Watch Started

Ray Pidzamecky MSW, a high school social worker in Oakville Ontario, created Parent Watch. After responding to a call from a frantic young boy, Pidzamecky enlisted the help of Officer Mike Michalski of the Halton Regional Police Service, to help get the boy out of a gang that he had been a member of. Once they had done this, Pidzamecky and Michalski spent time with the youth to talk things over and to discuss possible sources of help. For Pidzamecki, this incident crystallized the importance of parents and professionals working together to help solve the problems affecting teens and families today. Pidzamecky realized that parents needed to be made aware of the issues affecting teens. More importantly, they needed help in learning new ways to respond to the crisis that affects their families. The impetus for the Parent Watch formula came from Pidzamecky's concern for the adolescents and parents with whom he worked, his understanding of the power of the group process, the need for on-going support for parents and his personal commitment to using the expertise of the people on the front lines, such as the police, social workers and of course, other parents, to solve problems.

Parent Watch was launched in May 1993 in the basement of a restaurant in Oakville Ontario when Pidzamecky met with Officer Michalski and several interested parents. The meetings occurred once a month in the evening. As parents came together they found they had common questions but what they needed was information as well as support. A social worker and police officer could provide the information they needed. Once regular meetings were established, parents realized that they could benefit from a place to go to talk to other parents. Many felt that there were abundant supports available when their children were young but non-existent when their children became teenagers and the parents had more questions than ever.

In 1996, Pidzamecky invited fellow high school social worker Penny Smith MSW, CSW, to co-lead the ever-growing number of Parent Watch groups and help formalize and develop the Parent Watch program.

In just over five years, Parent Watch has emerged as a creative and effective grass roots organization. Its members have initiated several community forums, establishing recommendations and participating in carrying them out. Parent Watch has emerged as a de facto standard in parent support groups. But it's essential to remember that the greatest contributors to the success of Parent Watch have been the parents who have attended diligently, courageously told their stories and made fundamental changes in their lives and those of their children.

Why Parent Watch?

How Does It Work?

The first step in problem solving is identifying the problem. In a complex system like a family this requires shutting down the noise and confusion and guilt without shutting out support and information. Adolescents can suffer multiple problems ranging from poor attendance at school or failing grades to drug use, even criminal charges. Teens can lapse into depression or appear out of control. Teens in trouble or out-of control kids embarrass and frustrate parents who, in turn, become isolated in their frustration. A hostage situation can evolve with parents under the control of their kids and giving into their demands. Extensive damage can occur in the home. Parents often feel they have nowhere to turn and may feel rebuffed by other parents who don't have, or deny having, similar problems. Parents can find themselves and their children in crisis with long waits for counselling or too distrustful to submit to a process they feel will judge their parenting skills and their children. Adults as well can suffer depression and a child may have to be forcibly removed from the home. At best, the balance of power shifts away from the adults and onto the adolescent.

Parent Watch helps parents regain control by providing a structured, non-judgmental forum where they can depend on and use the back up and support of other parents. The Parent Watch facilitators, including a police officer, attend and lead every meeting to help parents learn how and when to use community agencies to assist them in maintaining control. Parent Watch provides a balance between supportive, well-intentioned parents who have the same or similar problems and the accurate information provided by professionals. Progress can then occur as the balance of power shifts away from the kids and back to the parents.

Perhaps a quote from the media sums up Parent Watch best: "Most of all, Parent Watch helps turn anonymous suburbia into an old fashioned village in which adults know kids by name and by sight-and, here's the rub, the kids know that the adults know them" (Burlington Spectator, April 3, 1996).

The Role of Parent Watch Facilitators

The group facilitators are there to keep the focus on you, your issues and your work. Their job is to facilitate, make your learning and information sharing easier and more productive, and encourage you to ask questions and to discuss issues as a group. Although the facilitators will provide some direction and advise at times, they are not there to lead. They will also provide you with access to other professionals' services and sources of information that you request or need. The facilitators' goal is to help you and other parents work toward solutions and to make sure that you get from Parent Watch what it was created to provide: effective solutions for your family.

Confidentiality

Parent Watch groups have a specific format and clear "rules" for the sharing of highly sensitive material. Parents will only share what may be their worst nightmare in a supportive atmosphere that is grounded in mutual trust. Confidentiality must be assured to protect the family's privacy and in extreme cases, its' safety. While rules and guidelines cannot guarantee confidentiality, the importance to all concerned must be reinforced at the beginning of each Parent Watch meeting. Parents, interested others and media representatives must make every effort to avoid revealing any identifying information outside of a Parent Watch meeting.

Past accomplishments:

- Well-attended parent group for 5 years.
- Significant reduction in loitering and vandalism in Bronte due in part to Parent Watch strategies such as "walk abouts" and the "pumpkin patrol". Facilitated the first "Citizens On Patrol" group in Ontario with the assistance of the Halton Regional Police Service.
- Organized comprehensive support for school board professional student services personnel during board cutbacks.
- Parent Watch Co-Director Ray Pidzamecky, Officer Michael Michalski of the Halton Regional Police Service and an adolescent from the community appeared on Terence Young's (M.P.P.) cablenet show to provide information on substance abuse use among youth in Halton and to respond to "phone in" requests for information.
- Regional forum held on drug use among adolescents and a regional presentation co-sponsored with the Halton police and health department on "brush parties".
- Report on "Recommendations for Responding To Halton Youth Drug Abuse"s produced and disseminated throughout the Halton Region.
- Hosted the prevention package "Never Be A Victim" (developed by Officer Jim Byrne And Sony Wonder) in Oakville, Burlington and Georgetown.
- Co-sponsored and co-hosted "Youth Assisting Parents" forum in Burlington. A 10 member senior student panel that informed parents of the issues grades 9's are dealing with today.
- Presentors at the Halton "Victim-less" Community Policing Conference 98.

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