



Parent Cafes in Lunenburg County

Background

The idea of Parent Cafes has come out of a number of conversations through the Be the Peace Project, (www.bethepeace.ca), a project to build community-based responses to the significant issue of violence against women and girls in Lunenburg County. From the beginning of the project, we have heard over and over again that 'we must get to youth,' 'we need to reach children at younger ages' to talk about and teach them about respectful and non-violent relationships.

In our conversations with school board staff and principals, teachers and guidance counselors at many schools in Lunenburg County, we know that the challenges of meeting all the needs of students, plus curriculum requirements, addressing behaviour issues and all the social pressures of developing young people into self-respecting, contributing citizens is a monumental task that schools alone cannot do. There is a desire and need to engage with parents and families more meaningfully in meeting these demands affecting children and youth, whether it's bullying, drug awareness, alcohol, mental health, behaviour issues, dating relationships, etc., however when schools offer programs for parents related to these issues, attendance is typically very low, ie., "It's hard to get parents to come."

Likewise, many parents we have spoken to have identified a desire to be more involved in their children's school with varying degrees of success. Many parents do not feel welcome at school, or they may be reluctant because of their own traumatic school experiences as youngsters, or any number of other reasons why they 'stay away,' including work-life demands, or barriers that may include social, economic, literacy or transportation, to name just a few.

The Need

Be the Peace has become increasingly concerned that the information most dramatically influencing young people and their perspectives about gender roles, intimate relationships, sexuality and sexual consent, and substance use, is less so from parents and schools, and increasingly through highly sexualized mass media, music and music videos, video games, social media experiences and readily available hard-core pornography. The incidents of bullying, rise in cyberbullying, mental health issues, random and indiscriminate sexual activity, sexual assault among youth with its connection with alcohol and substance use, is outpacing our ability as adults to address these challenges effectively and keep our young people safe.

So in this context, it is increasingly and critically important that all the adults in a young person's life work together, learn together, and brainstorm together about how to match these dynamics with effective guidance, information and support for healthy choices and decisions. Parents cannot do it alone. Teachers and schools cannot do it alone. We need to bridge the gap between school communities and parents, on a whole range of issues if we want to see better outcomes for our kids.

Parent Cafés - - Parents as Partners

A Parent Café is a way of engaging parents, teachers, school administrators and other school/health staff together as partners in our children's healthy development. A Parent Cafe can be used in so many different ways, depending on the topic, the purpose and the desires of a group of people.

The critical element is that it uses a World Café format, (www.theworldcafe.com/method.html ; www.theworldcafe.com/pdfs/cafetogo.pdf), a method for gathering people to have open, honest

conversations about what matters to them. No one is required to speak, but everyone is invited to offer their voice, views, perspectives, ideas, in a non-judgmental environment where everyone is equal. Because people sit at small tables, in small groups, in an informal atmosphere, no one has to speak in front of a big group, there is time to think and reflect as well as share, and everyone chooses their own level of involvement. This is a much more inviting space than either being 'talked at' by the 'expert' in front of the room, or having to walk to a microphone or stand up in front of others. It assumes that in any group of people there is great wisdom that can surface if people are given the chance and a listening ear.

The Café is facilitated by someone who knows the format and is also tuned in to what the people in the room want. This minimizes any arguing or trying to convince anyone of anything; there is no blame, shame or finger-pointing; only good conversation about what matters most to each person. The result is that people feel heard, valued and honoured for what they bring to the topic. Lots of ideas can be generated and people can decide whether and how they want to turn those ideas into reality... together.

The first Parent Café was held at Bluenose Academy in May, 2013, with 33 people participating (parents, teachers, principal/vice principals, guidance counselors). Together they determined what was needed for the school to be a welcoming community for everyone. In the new school year, September 2013, they have already enacted a number of the ideas and are keeping the conversations going.

The Opportunity

The Parent Café approach may be one that engages more parents in their school communities so we can all, as adults, work in partnership to help our young people meet the demands and challenges of this developing time in their lives. It is the time when so much of how they will be as adults is formed, shaped and moulded, by both 'good' and 'bad' influences. If we come together as partners we have a much better chance of setting up the supports, guidance, and modelling that young people need to think critically about the world around them and what comes at them from so many sources.

Parents can also come together to talk about the challenges of parenting, in an open and welcoming atmosphere, where there is no blame, guilt or shame, but acceptance that parenting is probably the most important and challenging job we face, and we all need support, ideas, resources and conversation to do the best we can at it. It is the job of a lifetime, and as we turn to one another we can figure out a lot.

There is also the opportunity for community members, parents, teachers, even youth, to learn skills in hosting Cafes so that anyone in your community can, at any time, call a gathering and host meaningful conversation about topics of concern.

Ultimately if adults (parents, school staff, etc.) can partner with youth in navigating what they need and want, to develop into caring, compassionate, self-respecting adults, we will have done our best.

For more information, please contact:

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