

PARENTING/FAMILY MANAGEMENT

PAT Program for Parents of Teens Evolves to Serve Families

A PEPS program provides help for parents in the
teen trenches

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Everybody knows that being a new parent is terrifying, but parents of adolescents still need empowering support, research-driven information and resources to navigate the difficult teen years. For families raising teenagers, PEPS' Parents of Adolescents and Teens (PAT) (<https://www.peps.org/programs/parents-of-adolescents-and-teens>) program continues to evolve, becoming even more helpful and accessible. PEPS has been supporting new parents (<https://www.peps.org/>) in the Puget Sound region for 40 years. Just a couple years ago, they launched PAT to offer the same opportunity to find community and knowledge for parents of teens.

“PEPS is basically about parents supporting other parents through a very difficult transitional time,” said Melanie Roper, program director at PEPS. “The adolescent period is surprisingly difficult for some folks. Parents experience a lot of conflicting emotions about their kids’ increasing autonomy. The brain is under construction during adolescence, which impacts kids’ self-control, their emotions, risk-taking behaviors — everything. A lot of parents feel ill-equipped to navigate these big changes.”

The PEPS philosophy of parents finding community and supporting each other is the foundation for PAT. And like other PEPS programs, PAT is constantly adjusting in response to feedback to better serve the needs of caregivers.

Parents of Adolescents and Teens program

The PAT program is open to solo parents, caregivers, couples, and co-parents who have children ages 10–19 years, i.e., anyone who is responsible for a teenager is welcome at PAT. Each PAT Group is led by a Group Leader trained in adolescent development and group facilitation who guides weekly discussions on more than 15 topics. The group learns alongside one another and resources are shared on each topic.

“We provide more research and theory in PAT than the regular PEPS Groups, but parents have their own experiences and they learn from each other. That’s something really valuable and that’s why the PAT Groups are adjustable and really flexible in the way that we are focusing the activities and the curriculum,” says Gloria Martinez, who started with PEPS as a Group Leader nearly a decade ago and now serves as the bilingual PAT outreach manager.

Flexibility is key

Flexibility is a major theme of the PAT program. The time crunch faced by teens’ caregivers, for whom ferrying multiple children to sports and other activities can be almost a second job, means that physically attending weekly meetings isn’t possible for a lot of them. PAT launched as an online-only program that meets for two hours each week for nine consecutive weeks. In the first month, groups cover four core topics. Each group can choose their own topics for the remaining four weeks.

“Parents of teenagers are supremely busy as we all know and it’s literally harder to commit to a schedule and stick with it for a time frame of nine weeks,” says Martinez. They also discovered that many PAT participants were more interested in learning about specific topics than building long-term connections with other parents.

To address both of these issues, “We came up with the concept of four-week thematic groups,” says Swarnima Aswinkumar, program innovation and expansion manager at PEPS. “What we’re offering for the four-week thematic groups is, for example, a group around communicating with teens. The four weeks are centered around overcoming barriers, active listening, how do I manage conversations; another four-week group is on adolescent identity development where we talk about social identity, gender identity, sexual identity and those topics; another group could talk about adolescent mental health.”

Now, parents can choose whether they want to join a four-week themed group or a more comprehensive nine-week group. The nine-week groups still meet virtually; in addition to virtual options, this fall, they are introducing three in-person PAT Groups: one in West Seattle, one on the Eastside and one in North Seattle. Parents are free to attend any region’s group.

Tailored community

Some PAT Groups are offered through community partners who serve diverse families. For example, Sistema Escolar hosts PAT groups with a transcultural curriculum in Spanish. Martinez explains that transcultural (as opposed to translation) is important because offering a Spanish-language group is about more than just ease of communication. Spanish speakers have specific concerns and needs that are unlikely to arise in a group of English speakers.

“Sometimes there are differences in culture. Something that I have been seeing in the groups, for example, is that their kids are immersed more in English than in Spanish. Sometimes that’s a barrier in communication with your own kid. The difference between cultures, traditions, beliefs, that’s something that always has been very helpful to be with parents that are experiencing the same thing,” says Martinez.

Spanish language groups are offered through partnerships with ChildStrive and Sistema Escolar. Although the PEPS website is only available in English, these partners can provide information in Spanish about the available programs.

“Another kind of group we have started offering in the past year is what we are calling customized groups,” says Aswinkumar. For groups of parents who are already in community with each other and want to learn together, PEPS offers customized PAT Groups. Customized groups can be organized by nonprofit partners, neighborhood organizations or parents at a school, church or sports team. To form a customized group, email programs@peps.org (mailto:programs@peps.org) (in English or Spanish) and request any of the PAT program’s options.

Early feedback indicates that partner and customized groups form a greater sense of commitment and community.

“Just having that added shared affinity made people enjoy the PAT Group more because they were able to connect and speak about their concerns about their adolescents and teens to a different extent with different details,” says Aswinkumar.

Practical support

“We are receiving a lot of information on how to deal with specific situations, but the PAT Groups help really to find people that are living in similar situations. I think that’s the secret of our groups – normalizing things, knowing that you are not alone and that other parents are in the same situations, exchanging ideas about how to deal with it,” says Martinez. That exchange of practical ideas is critical to the program’s success. “The PAT program provides not only the theory but really grounds that theory in the daily reality with our teens. I think that’s the most important part.”

For parents who are interested in joining a PAT Group, its first in-person community event, “[Raising Resilient Teens: Practical Skills for Parents](https://www.peps.org/ParentResources/community-events/raising-resilient-teens-practical-skills-for-parents) (<https://www.peps.org/ParentResources/community-events/raising-resilient-teens-practical-skills-for-parents>),” on Oct. 23, 2024 at the University of Washington will give attendees a taste of what it’s like to be part of a PAT Group.

Learn more about the PEPS PAT program and [register for a PAT Group online](https://www.peps.org/programs/parents-of-adolescents-and-teens) (<https://www.peps.org/programs/parents-of-adolescents-and-teens>). Groups are available in English and Spanish, in-person or online, with weekday and weeknight options. [Flexible Pricing program](https://www.peps.org/programs/flexible-pricing) (<https://www.peps.org/programs/flexible-pricing>) fee options and financial assistance are available for all programs. PEPS is [recruiting PAT Group Leaders](https://www.peps.org/about/jobs/pat-group-leader) (<https://www.peps.org/about/jobs/pat-group-leader>); training is available.

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