

Girls: Practical Thinking About Real-Life Issues

BY MEG SHERIDAN AND AIMEE GARN

On Tuesday, March 13, 2001, NYC-Parents in Action and KiDs of NYU Medical Center co-sponsored a town hall seminar on the issues facing parents of girls. Lucy Martin-Gianino of NYC-Parents in Action moderated questions for Dr. Harold Koplewicz, the Director of the NYU Child Study Center, and Dr. Rachel Klein, Professor of Psychiatry, NYU School of Medicine, from an audience of about 400 parents. Following are composites of questions from the audience.

■ *Are there risks to girls' self-esteem from stereotypical portrayals of women in the media?*

Many of the distinctions between the roles of girls and boys are not valid anymore, but stereotypes still persist. The effect of some media images on self-perception can be exaggerated. The stereotypical sitcom characters of the late Fifties and Sixties didn't influence the baby boomer generation, and we can assume that most stereotypes of women in the media today will have little lasting effect on this generation.

Girls may be vulnerable, however, to the many images of women in magazines, on television and in films that portray them as "thin and pretty." The media dictates fashions that give pre-teen girls a precocious look, and girls may feel compelled to fit into that ideal body image.

■ *How do you deal with weight issues in a young girl?*

If you have an overweight 8-year-old, you can deal with the problem through nutrition, but you don't want to judge the child's appearance or make her overly concerned with eating. A pre-adolescent girl may go through a phase in which she puts on weight. A parent should tell the child that she looks good. Someday she may want to lose weight

on her own. Obesity is related to inactivity as well as food intake, so a parent can help a girl hold her weight steady until she grows taller by increasing activity as well as by decreasing consumption. Any activity is helpful— walking, running, tennis. It may take two to three years to resolve the issue.

The more a parent tries to influence the child, the more likely that she will become a chronic dieter and have food issues. Parents should delegate the discussion of eating and nutrition to the pediatrician, try to provide healthy food choices, then move on and not make an issue out of it. You want girls to feel that eating is a pleasurable experience, and not to be obsessed with food or weight issues. Remember that there is a genetic component to obesity and body type.

■ *Is it unrealistic to encourage your child to choose different friends?*

Parents sometimes try to steer their children to friends they feel are more appropriate and try to diversify friendships. While this can work when the parents are the ones arranging playdates, it rarely works as the children reach middle school. Sometimes parents perceive other parents — celebrities, for instance — as cool, and want to claim that family as a friend. Dr. Koplewicz urges parents to leave the kids alone, and step in only if they see that the kids are excluding others from a group.

■ *Cliques are a big problem at our school. Parents can only do so much. What can the schools do?*

Schools should have a zero-tolerance policy on cliques and bullying; the administration can't be passive and just say "girls will be girls." Sometimes parents are the problem; they take vicarious pleasure in their kids' reaching the social heights. It is better when parents of an "in" kid remind the child to be responsive to others, because kids who are

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Teen Scene 2001

BY AIMEE GARN

At the fifteenth annual Teen Scene on February 12, 2001, the Trinity School auditorium was filled with over six hundred parents of independent school students. Drawn by invitations from NYC-Parents in Action and the Parents League of New York, the crowd was eager to hear what the assembled panel of experts had to say about a difficult and frightening time (even for those who've survived it): adolescence. While most parents who attended Teen Scene had children in seventh grade or above, many had younger children as well. For parents who are still reading picture books to little ones and tucking them into bed at night, hearing about no-ID clubs and experimentation with Ecstasy felt like being suddenly catapulted into the future.

Lucy Martin-Gianino, the moderator from NYC-PIA, introduced the thirteen teenagers, six boys and seven girls. All students at independent day or boarding schools, they had volunteered, in the words of Ms. Gianino, to help parents make sense of the four “exciting, frightening, delicious” years of high school. The students, accomplished and active, were members of many clubs (Poetry, Debate, Choral, Young Republican Clubs), editors of school newspapers and yearbooks, and players of varsity sports, including a top-ranked wrestler. They were teachers at Sunday Schools; musicians; interns in law, accounting, and design firms. Two of the seniors on the panel had been admitted early decision to Harvard and Amherst.

Following is some of the fascinating and provocative information that the panelists shared.

The Challenges of High School

An obvious question arose from the teenagers' biographies: How do they do heavy loads of homework, many extra-curricular activities, and grow up at the same time? The answer: they're exhausted! One freshman said that his most difficult task was

learning how to manage time; a sophomore said that the hardest thing was to get a good night's sleep. When faced with a choice between completing school work, going to a party, or getting enough rest, the “two out of three” that most teens choose are doing their work and going to parties. Sleep suffers. To cope with their busy schedules, the teens unwind by spending time alone, watching television, smoking marijuana, and doing sports, although some said that competitive sports contribute to rather than relieve stress.

One girl felt that her greatest challenge was “fitting in socially and finding people she could trust.” The hardest task for others was finding out “who they are.” A senior reported that having college applications pending is “terrifying.”

Social pressures include those to try drugs, alcohol and cigarettes. Most of the teenagers agreed that the strongest pressure to drink or use drugs occurs in freshman and sophomore years of high school; after that the teenagers who choose to drink or use drugs do so because they like it, and not in response to peer pressure.

Drugs

One senior cited drinking and smoking pot on the weekends as a “stress reliever,” but most of the kids said that they tried drugs mainly in the course of experimentation, or because of social pressure. The athletes don't have time to use drugs, and tend to avoid substances because they are in training and don't want to harm their bodies. In freshman year, many kids sample several drugs, including marijuana, Ecstasy, cocaine and hallucinogens (mushrooms and LSD.) Drug costs are high, approximately \$40-\$70 for a single use of cocaine, \$15-\$20 for Ecstasy.

High school students may obtain drugs from friends who are in college and have access to drug dealers. Occasionally a high school student will

Social Identity: Where Do I Fit In?

During the 2001-2002 school year,
New York City Parents in Action will explore the issues of sex, drugs, the media
and the never-ending quest for “cool.”

have a dealer’s pager number. The supply of drugs for girls almost always comes from boys. One parent asked, somewhat plaintively, if there were groups of kids who were on the straight-and-narrow and declined to use drugs — the goody-goodies of yesteryear. No such luck, according to the panelists. “Everyone” today tries drugs and/or alcohol during high school. But most kids, having experimented, decide that they don’t like the way drugs make them feel, lose interest, or don’t have time for regular use. A few learn the hard way, with a bad or frightening reaction to a drug. The threat of physical harm from drug use doesn’t occur to most teenagers, who consider themselves invincible.

Alcohol

Alcohol is widely used, and, according to the panelists, easy to obtain at the corner deli with no identification. Sometimes kids will drink before going to a party at a home or a club where alcohol is not going to be served. Parents should talk with other parents and agree to measures to prohibit drinking, and should not serve alcohol in their homes, but they should “understand that kids will experiment.” One girl pointed out that parents should not be too restrictive, because it forces kids to lie about what they do. If a parent is more understanding, the teenager will feel that he or she can call and ask to be taken home from a party, for example.

Sex

All the panelists agreed that sex is the area where parents “have the least to worry about.” Early in high school kids “try everything” and then become older and wiser. The term “hooking up” is used to refer to a wide variety of sexual activities, including casual sex among friends, French kissing, and oral sex. These activities may begin in middle school and continue through high school. The antiquated term “dating” has been replaced by “friends with benefits,” as the trend seems to be toward pleasure without commitment.

The panelists assured the anxious audience that teens are very aware of the need for safe sex. Having been educated in the age of AIDS, they have attended comprehensive health classes. There was some debate about whether or not girls are taken advantage of by older boys, but most of the panelists agreed that that seems not to be the case. Most of the teenagers felt that their parents could talk to them more about sex and sexually transmitted diseases, but they sensed that their parents were embarrassed about the subject.

Smoking

Parents asked why kids in high school, who are aware of the health risks of smoking, continue to try it. The panelists felt that the media does a good job of brainwashing kids to see smoking as “cool” by frequently showing characters smoking in movies and on television. Ironically, children of parents who smoke often choose not to do so.

Curfews

Curfews on weekends varied with age; for freshmen 11:30 pm to 12:30 am were common; for older students 12:30 am to 1:30 am were acceptable. One girl earned later curfews by calling her parents to check in with them and let them know where she was.

Parental Involvement

The panelists said that kids want to hear from their parents on the issues that they face. They would like to hear about parents’ experiences, how the parents handled peer pressure, whether or not they experimented with substance use and to what extent. Parents should be clear about whether they are completely opposed to drug use and why, and share their concerns about morals and safety.

One panelist, when asked about factors that might have contributed to instances where a teenager died of a drug overdose or a drunk driving incident, or

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Talking with Parents About On-line Safety

BY MEG SHERIDAN

Dr. Todd Essig, a psychologist and psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City, spoke at a NYC-PIA luncheon on January 24, 2001 on the subject of internet safety. Dr. Essig's work with the psychological and experiential consequences of technological change includes founding and currently directing the Psychoanalytic Connection, an internet-based conference and educational center for mental health professionals.

■ *The Internet is just one more place to be a parent.*

As with anything else, a parent has to make his expectations clear. Acknowledge that your kids will know more about technology, while you know more about the world. Dr. Essig suggested setting up a contract with your child to ensure his well-being. Such a contract might include: the child should agree to immediately exit a website that is pornographic; he should understand that he must never make arrangements to meet in person with someone he met on-line; he should agree that his parents have the right to read his e-mail. Make it clear to your child that he should never give out credit card information or financial data on line.

NYC-Parents in Action Bulletin Board

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We need articulate, welcoming, friendly and supportive men and women who are interested in learning how to facilitate NYC-PIA discussion groups. You'll be professionally trained in group dynamics in order to guide parents through lively, productive meetings on a variety of parenting topics. This is your chance to give back to your community with a very flexible time commitment. Most meetings are held in Manhattan, however we are in special need of facilitators who live in Brooklyn or are willing to travel there for meetings. Training sessions begin in the Fall.

Please call 426-0240 for more information as soon as possible.

Keep stressing your values, even as they relate to the Internet. Kids will be kids on the Internet, too — curious, competitive, and mean. Teach your child to delete messages from strangers without opening them, and to remember that e-mails can be forwarded, sometimes to the chagrin of the author.

■ *When good searches and chats go bad.*

"Always stay with your child when she is surfing the Internet—there's no way around it," said Dr. Essig. Even though you may have installed filtering software, it is only a tool. For example, a student may be researching breast cancer, but if all sites with the word "breast" are blocked to her, she will be frustrated. Conversely, an innocent typo may dump you into a porno site. Whitehouse.com is a porno site; what your child's social studies teacher wants can be found on whitehouse.org. Amazon.com sells books; amazan.com peddles pornography. Teach your child to differentiate between solid information and trash.

Although there are predators out there, they are rare. There are only about two dozen documented cases. You can prevent cyberstalking by never responding to "flames" (hostile attacks) in websites and chat rooms. Use genderless, non-provocative screen names. Encourage kids to log off if they are at all uncomfortable.

■ *Never put anything in an e-mail that you wouldn't want printed in the New York Times.*

The Internet tends to be dis-inhibiting. Children will say things on line they would never say in person. A "flame war" with escalating insults can begin, with very destructive results. Sometimes good judgement goes out the window. But parents have to help children use the Internet wisely. "A child cannot grow up without being cyber-literate," said Dr. Essig. "Parents cannot forbid children to use the Internet. They have to teach them to use it safely and productively."



Inside the In Crowd: Cliques and Your Child

BY EVA POMICE TIMERMAN

With school violence in the headlines, parents are increasingly worried about the social terrain of the schools their children attend. Cliques have always loomed large in the lives of adolescents and teenagers, but they are becoming crueler and more dangerous. Eva Pomice Timerman, an editor of the NYC-PIA newsletter, talked about this social phenomenon with parenting expert Charlene C. Giannetti, co-author with Margaret Sagarese of *Cliques: 8 Steps to Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle* (Broadway Books, 2001) and a member of NYC-PIA's advisory board.

Q NYC-PARENTS IN ACTION: At what age do cliques start to form?

A GIANNETTI: Children become aware of friendships at an early age. There are a lot of kids who mature early, so some of the activity starts in third and fourth grade. But it's not until children are in fifth grade, at about age ten, when school work gets more difficult and kids are discovering the opposite sex, that the forming of cliques starts to accelerate. Cliques become an issue then because that's when peers become all important. In early adolescence, children begin to look toward peers to answer the question "Who am I?" rather than to their parents.

Q NYC-PIA: Can cliques be good for children?

A GIANNETTI: There's a lot of insecurity at this age, so belonging to a group can give a child an added measure of self-esteem. Having a group of friends can be very important and positive. Cliques become a negative force when children use them as a way to exclude, tease and torment other children.

Q NYC-PIA: What's the difference between a clique and a group of friends?

A GIANNETTI: What we call "middle friendship circles" usually revolve around common interests—a group of kids who are into skateboarding, band members. These are kids who have a group of friends and other kids are free to flow in and out and aren't excluded or teased. The problem comes with the group at the top, where the goal is to get into the group. The power play becomes excluding those who haven't made the cut.

NYC-Parents in Action, Inc. invites speakers to present their opinions and expertise on specific topics. Their opinions and comments are not necessarily those of NYC-PIA.

Q NYC-PIA: There were always cliques. What's different now?

A GIANNETTI: They are much meaner today, because the culture has changed. The names kids are called today are much worse. The teasing and tormenting is physical, instead of merely verbal. There's a lot of sexual harassment, boys toward girls, and toward other boys. For instance, "swirlies," putting a child's head in the toilet or "pantsing," when they pull a kid's pants down. Thousands of kids don't want to go to school because of what they'll face. They're coming to school not knowing who they'll eat lunch with, worried they'll be targeted that day and humiliated.

Q NYC-PIA: How does this tie in with school violence?

A GIANNETTI: In the past, kids who were teased went into a corner and suffered in silence. Today, we are seeing kids who are the victims, who feel alone, going back home and getting weapons and hurting and killing other children. We are never going to solve problems in our schools until we address the issue of cliques and the climate of cruelty.

Q NYC-PIA: What if you think your child's a bully?

A GIANNETTI: If you don't deal with bully behavior, you're setting your child up for a lifetime of problems. A child who bullies others now will continue that behavior throughout life. That's not a positive blueprint for strong relationships. Teachers can be incredibly helpful in this area if they see the cliques. Make time in conferences to talk about social issues. You have to look at your child objectively: how does he act towards others? It isn't a great experience to be told your child is being mean to other children, but there are ways to deal with it.

Q NYC-PIA: If your kid is neither a bully nor a victim, what do you have to worry about?

A GIANNETTI: A child on the sidelines often feels ashamed, helpless and depressed that they can't do anything to turn the situation around when another child is being picked on. But those bystanders have tremendous power to turn off the influence of cliques.

Q NYC-PIA: What should parents do if they suspect their child is being bullied?

A GIANNETTI: Many parents don't understand what's going on. They will ask "Is everything okay?" and the child won't confess that he has no friends. He's embarrassed by it. And parents often respond with outdated advice: "Of course you have friends. Just ignore it..." Continued on page 7

Thank You

On Wednesday, May 9th, NYC-PIA held its Annual Spring Carnival at Wollman Rink. Thank you to our friends and supporters who helped make it such a resounding success!

And special thanks to our benefit chairmen:
Heather Leeds, Ani Bedrossian Omer, and Kathy Rold.

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GIRLS: PRACTICAL THINKING

popular and attractive can often be bullies. In high school, when these attractive “cool kids” can be the first to experiment with drugs and sexual activity, their parents could be wishing for nerd-dom.

It is better for the parent whose child is being excluded or teased to go to the school rather than to the other parents. The school should address the problem and break up the clique.

- *Everything was fine between my daughter and me until recently. She's thirteen and everything I do is wrong.*

Part of adolescence is the process of separation and differentiation in which a girl becomes critical of her mother. “Your child is trying to detach and move on,” says Dr. Klein. “Part of this detachment is to say ‘I’m not your child. I’m not like you.’” It helps if a mother can accept the changes in the child and her interests without judging her or comparing her to other kids. If the child is criticized, she will feel devalued, she will detach, and she will devalue others in return. Minimizing criticism helps the mother/daughter relationship during adolescence.

- *How does a father's role change at adolescence?*

The role of the father is just as important as that of the mother during adolescence. Parents are a unit; their messages should reinforce each other. A father should continue to spend time with his daughter as she gets older. He should not back away if his daughter starts dressing provocatively. A young girl can look sexual, but still be a little girl inside.

- *What can parents do to help girls who are going through adolescent mood swings; how can you tell what is normal angst and what is depression?*

Puberty is often the time of onset for mood disorders and anxiety. Behavioral changes may be a phase, or the beginning of a problem that needs attention. If a child's appetite or sleep patterns

change, if she is constantly irritable and has no patience, if a good student suddenly does poorly in school, she may have a serious problem that should be treated. The first thing to do is to consult your pediatrician and have an evaluation to rule out depression. If you ignore warning signs, the child may be suffering and may self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. You want to get a proper diagnosis and explore the options for treatment, including therapy and/or medication.

- *I hear so much about early sexual experimentation, especially with oral sex. Is it out there? Will my child feel pressured to do things before she's ready?*

Sexual interest and experimentation is often tied to peer pressure from both boys and girls. Oral sex is now more common among younger teenagers because there is a notion that it is safer, and in the age of AIDS, safe sex is a priority. But oral sex is often not reciprocated, with a girl feeling pressured to perform for a boy.

Parents should talk to their kids about sex early on, and relate the discussion to self-esteem. The message should be: “Sex is something you do for you, not something you do to please someone else.” A parent should share concerns and have discussions with the child on the issue.

- *Given the loss of confidence that some girls suffer at puberty, is single sex education the better option?*

Dr. Koplewicz noted that girls in pre-school, ages 3 to 5, seem to be “a better brand” than boys, as they are more verbal, have better fine motor skills, are less “hyperactive” and more sociable. Later in school, when boys have caught up developmentally, they may overshadow girls in sports and in classroom participation. Parents of girls should stress that it's important for a girl to do her best.

The research that Carol Gilligan is studying finds that girls do better in single sex schools. But there is a social and developmental cost for separating

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If you'd like to be in touch with NYC-Parents in Action, you can reach us at:

Telephone: **212 987 9629**

Mailing address: **NYC-Parents in Action, Inc.
P.O. Box 555—Lenox Hill Station
New York, NY 10021**

NYC-Parents in Action Administrator: **Penny Spangler**
NYC-Parents in Action Website: **parentsinaction.org**

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Q&A

Q NYC-PIA: How can you get your child to open up?

A GIANNETTI: Children will often say that there are no cliques. You may want to sit down with your child and have her or him diagram the cafeteria—a kid can put down to a person who is sitting where. The whole social structure becomes obvious to the child and parent. You can also watch TV or movies and talk about them. There are many movies with the theme of popularity and cliques.

Q NYC-PIA: What strategies can a parent use to help her child?

A GIANNETTI: If you suspect that your child is a victim, you need to look at him objectively to see what is causing your child to be singled out. Some have habits that serve as hot buttons that cause them to be picked on. One kid in our book was always the first to answer a question in class. His mother spoke with him about it, he pulled back and was no longer picked on. Some kids don't focus on hygiene. If your child doesn't shower, you have to get him to do it.

A bully is looking for a reaction. Work with your child to develop comebacks. Role-play. If a bully says to your child, "You're adopted. You don't know who your real parents are," she can say, "Of course I know who my real parents are. I live with them."

Q NYC-PIA: Is there a way to help your child make friends?

A GIANNETTI: If a child says she doesn't have any friends, it might mean she doesn't have friends in the popular group. A mother can go down a list of classmates who aren't in that clique and say, "We don't know these girls. Let's go to a movie with a few of them, see how it goes." Or if her daughter doesn't want to go to a dance, a mother can encourage her to call a friend to go with.

Q NYC-PIA: Can parents be unwittingly isolating their child from her peers?

A GIANNETTI: You may have your own guidelines on what your child should wear, what kind of movies she can watch. But understand that while you need to share your values, you don't want to cut a child off from youth culture. This is the way they can find a common ground with others. You don't want to throw up your hands and say "Do what you want." But, within limits, allow your child to connect with his peers.

Q NYC-PIA: Under what conditions should a parent go to the school and complain?

A GIANNETTI: At some time, every child will occupy one of these roles. Today's bystander will be tomorrow's bully. As a parent, you don't know how kids move in and out of roles, so you should be concerned about the overall climate. Obviously, you'll be most concerned if your child is victimized. But going on your own to complain to the school may not be the best strategy. First, find out from the parents if this is happening to other kids. If there are others who share your view about the climate in the school, go to the parents association, have a dialogue. Then, go to the administration as a group.

The one situation in which I would absolutely go solo into a school is if a false rumor got started about my child. On the Internet, rumors fly around quickly. About a girl, they are usually of a sexual nature. About a boy, the most devastating rumor is that he's gay.

Q NYC-PIA: If your child is picked on, should you consider changing schools?

A GIANNETTI: It depends on the school. If one or two kids are targeting your daughter and you're pleased with school's reaction, there's no reason for the child to leave. But I've heard of a situation where a girl is really being targeted and the school can't or won't do anything about it. In that case, the best thing to do is switch, start out in new environment.

Q NYC-PIA: What can schools do about bullying?

A GIANNETTI: They can have escorts—children trained to be with a child who is distressed. They can create a safe haven in school for kids who feel victimized—even if it's just a table in the cafeteria where teachers and a few of these escorts sit. I think schools need to talk more with the kids themselves about cliques and follow through on the issue.

Q NYC-PIA: How can we raise kinder children?

A GIANNETTI: By teaching our children tolerance and serving as good role models. So much of our culture teaches children to be mean. You need to talk to them about how other children feel and how important your friendships are to you, that you are tolerant, don't gossip. Parents often have their own cliques, even parents' associations can be cliques, and children see that. Most parents focus on "popular." We want Ralph Lauren kids. What parents of

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TEEN SCENE 2001

was expelled from school, advised parents that the causes of those incidents would have to be “extremely poor parenting.” The teenager cited parents who don’t supervise their children, who give kids a lot of money, and don’t care about their grades.

Asked what they would like to hear from their parents, the panelists said: “We’re proud of you, we’re here for you. We will be here if you need us without judging you. We trust you, will love you even if you screw up.”

Lucy Martin-Gianino closed the evening with a quote from *Night Lights: Bedtime Stories for Parents in the Dark* by Phyllis Theroux: “My children are separate human beings on separate paths, which, like all human beings before them, they inevitably must travel alone.”

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Q&A

popular kids have to realize is that these kids are at risk. It takes a lot to stay popular. Girls have to worry about looks. Boys are under pressure to keep succeeding in athletics or at partying, or in whatever arena they’re in. Popular kids socialize more, and are at greater risk for substance abuse and sexual activity.

Charlene Giannetti will answer your questions at: Askcharl@aol.com, IVillage’s www.parentsoup.com, and www.parenting911.com.

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the sexes. It is a handicap not to be exposed to boys. You can help a girl in a co-ed situation to maintain self-esteem and overcome perfectionism by complimenting her. A parent should say four positive things for every one negative.

■ *So, then, how do we raise self-confident girls?*

A parent’s natural inclination is to want to fix things. Resist this. Set reasonable expectations for your child. If your child can live up to your expectations, she will feel better about herself.

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NYC-Parents in Action, Inc.
P.O. Box 555 – Lenox Hill Station
New York, N.Y. 10021