

Keep Calm and Carry On: Advice for Pressured Families

BY MEG SHERIDAN

Wendy Grolnick, author of *Pressured Parents, Stressed Out Kids: Dealing with Competition While Raising a Successful Child*, has spent two decades researching the influence parents have on their child's intrinsic motivation – that's the energy that propels individuals to pursue activities purely for their own satisfaction and pleasure, without need for a carrot or stick. At Parents In Action's School Relations lunch on October 12, Dr. Grolnick shared the theory she has developed through her experiments with mothers and children: that the more a parent encourages a child's autonomy, the greater the child's self motivation and success. She observed that when a mother helped her child, for example by steadying a toy he was playing with, the child was more motivated to figure out how the toy worked by him or herself. Conversely, when mothers took control ("do it this way"), their children tended to lose interest and give up when on their own. With these results, it seemed the researchers were heading towards a breakthrough in determining how children learn and thrive. The researchers concluded it would be effective (and relatively easy!) for parents to support their children's autonomy.

The more a parent encourages a child's autonomy, the greater the child's self motivation and success.

"And then I became a parent," said Dr. Grolnick, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at Clark University, "and I experienced very visceral, very real, competitive feelings that I thought I was immune to." Dr. Grolnick described these feelings as a pattern of anxiety, pressure and control that are rooted in our evolutionary hardwiring and that lead parents to push and pressure their children. "People who push and control their kids to excel almost always have

good intentions," she said, giving examples of parents controlling their children from the sidelines of swim meets or parents who orchestrate their child's social life. "These feelings can take you by surprise," she said, telling the audience that it's not uncommon for parents to cry at parent-teacher conferences.

Dr. Grolnick's suggestions for channeling this rich stew of emotions into positive parenting include a three-pronged framework of autonomy, structure and support. Promote your child's feelings of **autonomy** by taking your child's perspective, she says, and providing empathy when there's a setback. She advises creating an open exchange of information by allowing the child to disagree with you, and giving him or her choices. She also cautions parents to avoid controlling language like "should" and "must." Parents can provide **structure** by setting clear expectations and ground rules with predictable consequences. Providing rationales for your decisions and giving and soliciting feedback encourages a connection with your child who experiences you as trying to follow, rather than lead.

Finally, offer **support**: tune into your child's interests, make yourself available, and intervene when necessary. Pressured parents need not have stressed out kids: keep calm and carry on! ●