

Life Skills 101: Mastering Transitions in Middle and Upper School

BY VERONICA BENNETT

While a mother bird knows that she must coax her young out of the nest to one great swoop towards independence, human parents tend to approach the task with less confidence. We nudge along and pull back in steps, each time checking to see that the dangers to our children aren't too great and that the safety nets are still in place. Sometimes a reaction to protect our children inhibits their path to self-sufficiency. These were some of the messages offered at NYC-PIA's Fall Seminar on "Life Skills 101," co-sponsored with KiDS of NYU. Moderated by NYC-PIA board member Lucy Martin Gianino, a stellar panel of educators and physicians shared perspectives and offered practical advice for helping children at two significant times of growth—middle school and upper school. The panel included Benard Dreyer, M.D., NYU Professor of Pediatrics and Interim Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics; Kimberly Williams, Psy.D., a clinical neuropsychologist at the NYU Child Study Center; Edes Gilbert, long-time educator and former Head of the Spence School and currently the President of Resource Group 175; and Bruce Breimer, Principal Emeritus of Collegiate School.

In discussing the transition from elementary to middle school, Ms. Gilbert noted that greater independence must be coupled with greater personal responsibility. Schools recognize this, and the very structure of middle school is designed to foster both. Parents too can support the process by acknowledging that being an autonomous person is desirable, but that autonomy comes with responsibility. Like the nestlings, some children will jump and fly with ease while

others will creep slowly to the edge of the nest and need that little push.

There is no formula for success, but parents should feel as though they are granting independence "in a systematic way," said Ms. Gilbert. For example, she suggested that a 5th or 6th grader might have a weekly allowance for snacks and small items, while

Greater independence must be coupled with greater personal responsibility.

an 8th grader's allowance may cover larger items such as clothing. The parents can discuss a budget with the child and review the adequacy of the allowance after it has been in place. The end of 5th grade or 6th grade might also be the right time to give a child use of a cell phone or to allow him to navigate a simple commute to school with a friend. Other things that middle school students will need to handle on their own include managing class schedules, adapting to the styles of different teachers, initiating discussions with teachers and working out issues with their peers. Ms. Gilbert offered that home responsibilities can include making beds and keeping bedrooms relatively neat, organizing homework, writing thank you notes, choosing clothes from a designated array of items and adhering to parents' Internet rules.

Dr. Williams also noted that middle school students desire independence, but need to be part of a group of peers. They may experiment with going to friends instead of parents for advice, and even hold back on academic performance to fit with a certain social group. Dr. Williams said that an increase in bullying

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PRESIDENT'S Letter

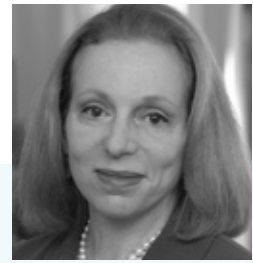
Winter 2008

Starting with Thanksgiving and on through the holidays and the New Year, we have many occasions to be grateful—for our families and friends, our work, good health, and the many things we love about New York. We at NYC-Parents in Action believe that one of our great gifts is the opportunity we have to work with so many wonderful volunteers, professionals and advisors, and to share our work with the parents of the NYC independent school community.

NYC-PIA was founded twenty-eight years ago by parents who wanted to help themselves and other parents prepare their children to cope with social pressures and make sound choices toward a future free of alcohol and drug abuse. At the time, support for preventing teen substance use was not universally available. NYC-PIA developed a communications network of facilitated discussion groups at independent schools, and enhanced its program over time through seminars, newsletters, *FOCUS: A Practical Parenting Guide* and a Web site. These services are all free of charge—a gift of time and commitment from our volunteers to families in the independent school community. I'd like to tell you a little about the people who make this happen.

The NYC-PIA Board of Directors is fortunate to have as active members one of the founders, Lynn Manger, and the originator of the facilitation program, Lucy Martin Gianino. Having Lynn and Lucy remain active as board members has ensured that the values of the founding generation are being actively passed to successive generations of parents; both of them, having raised children in the independent school community, are now grandparents. We also appreciate the wisdom and experience of the many past officers of NYC-PIA who have served on our President's Council.

NYC-PIA has tremendous support from the members of our Advisory Board, a group that includes physicians with specialties in pediatrics, adolescent medicine, and infectious diseases; psychologists;



AIMEE GARN

psychiatrists; parenting experts; authors; heads of school; and business advisors. We are grateful to these individuals for speaking on our panels, providing interviews for our newsletter, and guiding us at an annual planning meeting.

Two committees bring over 250 facilitated discussion groups to independent schools each year. The Facilitation Committee works to recruit, train, and monitor facilitators. The team represents a lot of parenting experience, with members' children ranging in age from first graders through "married with children." We are very grateful to the 50 facilitators who contribute generously of their time to hold discussion groups. The School Liaisons communicate with representatives of each school to schedule discussion groups and make our programs known to parents. We thank the school representatives—almost 60 members of the independent school community who volunteer or are appointed to bring our programs to their schools.

Our Seminars Committee creates and implements a speaking program each year and works with the institutions who partner with us. Any of you who have attended our annual seminar with Dr. Mel Levine, which is held in the spring at the 92nd Street Y and attended by close to 1000 people, can imagine the preparation that leads up to that day.

Members of our Publications team write articles and interviews based on our seminars, and oversee the publishing of paper and online editions of our newsletter three times a year. We are also thankful for the volunteer writers who are not members of our Board, but who share their writing talents with us each year. The professional design firm Carpenter Group contributes the design of our newsletter, flyers and publications "pro bono." This year we have also produced a revised edition of *FOCUS: A Practical Parenting Guide*. Members of our Web team have brought our communications into the "digital age" by developing our site and working with schools to provide online information.

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Understanding and Overcoming Rejection Sensitivity

BY SUSAN FISHER

Dr. Geraldine Downey, Ph.D., Chair of the Psychology Dept. and Director of the Social Relations Laboratory at Columbia University, enlightened parents at NYC-PIA's fall Speaker Series Luncheon on the subject of "Rejection Sensitivity." Dr. Downey and her colleagues have focused on Rejection Sensitivity as a dynamic whereby individuals are led to expect and see rejection from others. Dr. Downey's work in this area began 15 years ago and originally looked at the long-term effects of abuse and neglect on children: Do these children recreate the same problems as adults that they suffered as children? After examining these issues of abuse and neglect, Dr. Downey's research segued into work with middle school and college students. Her focus of inquiry broadened to become an overall quest to explain why some people cope poorly with rejection while others are able to overcome it, having fulfilling relationships, successful careers and resilient personalities.

One of the important aspects of rejection that Dr. Downey explored is the difference between "active rejection" and "passive rejection." Active rejection is the experience of seeking something that one is not necessarily entitled to, so that the rejection is not actually an injustice. For example, asking out a friend for a date and getting turned down is disappointing, but not an injustice. On the other hand, being excluded from a party to which all others from the same peer group are invited is passive rejection, and has more serious long-term consequences, creating a greater sense of isolation.

The "Catch-22" is that the more we experience rejection, the more we create rejection through self-fulfilling prophecy. Dr. Downey's research with college students established that people who have a higher level of Rejection Sensitivity are quicker to see negative cues from others and overlook the positive cues, which can then actually create a real rejection. For example, those who anticipate rejection when entering into a group situation are likely to be less

forthcoming with a friendly smile and opening greeting. Hence, they are less likely to receive the positive feedback that comes from a fellow greeting, and may concurrently overlook a timid smile offered in their direction. And thus a cycle persists in creating an environment where one feels rejected.

Rejection Sensitivity [is] a dynamic whereby individuals are led to expect and see rejection from others.

Parents should be aware of two strategies that students with high Rejection Sensitivity use to protect themselves. The first is simply the avoidance of social situations out of fear. The second, more serious strategy is known as over-accommodation, or changing oneself in order to be "more acceptable." In high school, this can be seen in the trend for girls to give away sexual favors in a one-sided exchange, or for kids to get involved in cliques that stretch propriety—such as drugs, clubbing or gangs.

How does a parent recognize high Rejection Sensitivity? Two notable symptoms are extreme anxiety and excessive anger, both of which may show up through such behaviors as sleep problems, bulimia, self-mutilation, authority problems with teachers, and even suicidal thoughts. Low self-esteem is also a factor that makes it harder to overcome Rejection Sensitivity and complicates friendships. When one partner overvalues the relationship, it creates a platform for greater conflicts and greater reactivity to the normal dips in friendships.

What can a parent do? Perhaps the most valuable thing that Dr. Downey emphasized is that it is important to be valued by someone—parents (of course) but at least one other peer. As Michael Thompson, another noted psychologist, has written, it is critical to know that in the cafeteria there is one friend, one safe seat. Dr. Downey suggests that if school is not a safe place, there are outside peer groups for seeking acceptance, such as a chess club, a swim team, a camp friend, a social service activity, or other extracurricular interests. ●



The Great Transition to College

BY CAROL SCHATZ PAPPER

Coping with academic transitions is a necessary, sometimes stressful and seemingly endless part of parenting. It begins with preschool, continues in the elementary, middle and high school years, and culminates in the greatest transition of all, college. NYC-PIA newsletter writer Carol Schatz Papper talked with Ernesto Ferran, Jr., M.D. about parents' role in helping kids off to college. Dr. Ferran is Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at New York University Medical Center and the former Executive Director of Student Health at New York University. He has a private practice specializing in child, adolescent and adult psychiatry in Greenwich Village and has served on numerous boards.

Q NYC-PIA: How big a transition is college for most students?

A DR. FERRAN: It really depends on the family. If they have had moves, career shifts, or other developmental crises, college can actually come as a big relief! Otherwise, college is a big step. It is really the only formal rite of passage we have left in our society to separate children from another, more adult phase of life.

Q NYC-PIA: What is happening with teens developmentally at that time?

A DR. FERRAN: They are in the phase of "late adolescence." They should have formed some meaningful friendships as opposed to trying friends out for size, and while they don't have to have a definite sense of their career, they have an idea of how far they want to go in life. They should be past the point of floating between celebrity, music or cultural role models. At eighteen, they have a better capacity for abstract thinking and can make more mature informed judgments. Yet, we may be surprised at the regressions of many college freshmen.

Q NYC-PIA: What are some familiar pitfalls for freshmen?

A DR. FERRAN: In a new environment, it is likely they have lost their familiar sounding boards and have yet to develop new ones. Students may still email or text their old friends, or even family members, but since they are not physically present in real time, it's different. The relative absence of structure can also be unnerving for

many kids, especially high-performing ones. High school routines are gone now. Students have much more input into their schedules and may have to contend with a new form of time management. In addition, their professors may not be giving them as much feedback on their progress. So students may have to learn how to self-gauge their time, their progress, and whether they are working at an appropriate pace. And, of course, this is just in the academic area. Students also have greater social independence, and no one is going to question whether they have been socializing too much or spending too much time on the computer. Many colleges provide workshops for students on time management.

Q NYC-PIA: What can parents do to help their children navigate freshman year successfully?

A DR. FERRAN: Parents should be familiar with school counseling resources, and be able to assist their child in contacting the service and negotiating entry into it. It's not enough for parents to say, "If anything happens, make sure you go to your student counselor." Even with the best student health service money can buy, and even with the best marketing to students, schools still find that juniors and even seniors will say, "I didn't know there was such a thing here," or "I didn't know where it was."

Q NYC-PIA: What are some of the personal issues kids struggle with freshman year?

A DR. FERRAN: Fitting in. Finding like minds. Continuing questions of their own sexual identity, preferences and activity. Keeping up with academics. Holding true to their own convictions about drugs, alcohol, sex and class attendance in the face of peer pressure to do otherwise. And, it still exists, missing home.

Q NYC-PIA: What should parents do to help a homesick student?

A DR. FERRAN: If a child is homesick and it's easy to get home, let him come home for the weekends. Students usually know when to tail off. Or, some parents say, "Goodbye, and we'll see you at Thanksgiving," and they make it a marker as the earliest time a child can come home. If distance is an issue and a homesick student's school responsibilities keep him from coming back, parents can ask: is he homesick for his friends and hangouts, or is it home? If it's home, parents might visit or at least let their child know that they're available to come out and spend time. Many colleges have a Parents' Weekend early in the fall for this reason.

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Q&A: THE GREAT TRANSITION

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Q NYC-PIA: How can parents identify kids at risk for trouble?

A DR. FERRAN: If there has been no high school history indicating risk, such as a serious behavioral or psychological disorder, I think parents can relax. Most of the things kids on average run into will work themselves out. This doesn't mean that a child won't experience disappointments, failure, isolation, separation from home, and that those stressors won't engender any set of thoughts, emotions or behaviors that lead to problems. But if a child tells you she is in trouble, pay attention! If the child tells you he needs to talk with you or somebody, pay attention and listen! Early intervention is vital to good outcomes.

Q NYC-PIA: How much can parents really know about what's truly going on, anyway?

A DR. FERRAN: In this era of privacy, colleges are grappling with what they can and can't tell parents. Disclosure is a hot topic. A kid can go through an entire college career and a parent might never know what his grades are or whether he even attended classes regularly. Parents must educate themselves on the policies of the particular school, and ask specific questions such as: If one of your students gets in trouble with the law or gets sent to the emergency room because he's intoxicated, do you inform the parents? In which situations do you or don't you? If a student is having academic problems, how do you identify them? The responses will vary from school to school.

Q NYC-PIA: Is there anything parents need to make sure boys or girls know about college partying?

A DR. FERRAN: There is general confusion among young people about what is consensual sex when either of the persons involved is intoxicated and his or her ability to make a rational decision is impaired. College students need to know that a willing sex partner who says "yes" while drunk is not legally giving permission. The overwhelming majority of date rape cases on campuses involve alcohol use by one or more parties.

Q NYC-PIA: Can parents help prevent drinking on campus?

A DR. FERRAN: If parents know that their child has problems with alcohol or has had one or more episodes of binge drinking, they can reasonably assume that the drinking will continue in college unless interventions have already taken place. Some colleges have mandatory educational forums, drug and alcohol programs, and

affiliations with treatment centers. Parents can help by knowing what campus resources are available. They should let kids know that their intent is not to react in a punitive fashion, but to be there for support and guidance.

Q NYC-PIA: What are the signs that your child is having difficulty even when she is telling you everything is fine?

A DR. FERRAN: Follow your instinct. Ask yourself, what's making your antenna go up? What's informing you about the feeling? Without rushing to judgment, perhaps you might want to increase the frequency of contact with your child. It can be a good idea for parents to try to have some kind of relationship with the child's roommates, or even the roommates' parents. Parents sensing that something is amiss should contact a school official.

More and more colleges are doing their own public health education campaigns on campus and are encouraging students to inform somebody if one of their classmates is in some kind of trouble. The emphasis is that students shouldn't wait until it's too late because the health and safety of the person they're concerned about is much more important and much more at risk than any friendship code or school rule. For instance, students may fear that if they are all on a drinking binge and one student starts to look ill, they will also get in trouble if they take that student to the emergency room. Some colleges are creating a "hold harmless" provision for this situation.

Q NYC-PIA: Can parents hope to parent effectively at a distance?

A DR. FERRAN: Parents are at a crossroads. They want to let the kids know that they are on their own now, that they're independent and have to make their own decisions—while knowing that may not be entirely true or desirable. Even with all the technology we have today for staying connected to each other, it would be helpful for parents to reflect on how available they really are. An adolescent may feel at one particular time in a particular moment, I desperately need to reach my father or mother. If the parent is not available then, an hour later that wish to communicate may be gone because a friend has come by or they have changed their mind. While immediate 24-hour a day access is probably an ideal that can't or shouldn't be reached, parents should anticipate how their college student will contact them. A parent may not like text messaging, but if a child favors text or instant messaging, then the parent should learn. ●

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through the Internet, instant messaging, cell phones and digital photos is a new problem for students. Recognize that your child may have jitters and talk about them calmly. In general, coach problem solving skills that the child can use himself. Dr. Williams also noted that children may need a little extra support and care from the family.

As students move towards independence, Ms. Gilbert said that there will be frustrations and setbacks. Parents can prepare for them by remembering that kids must experience frustration and failure in order to learn and develop resiliency. Dr. Williams agreed that parents should tolerate frustration and intervene only as a last resort. Ms. Gilbert also observed that

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children may complain about being stressed, but that most students thrive on a full offering of activities. If your child suffers from being over-scheduled, she suggested focusing on a couple of activities during the current school year and saving a few for the next. Ms. Gilbert's closing advice evidences many years as an educator, parent and grandparent—keep your sense of humor, don't laugh at your kids but remember to laugh with them.

When it comes to parenting high school students, Dr. Dreyer, a practicing Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrician, noted that adolescence involves the most dramatic growth in human development outside of infancy. Areas of challenge include increased expectations at home and in school, rapid processing of schoolwork, the larger environment of high school, a potential drop in self-esteem, accelerated body changes, deeper abstract thinking that affects the way they perceive world issues, and a desire for independence that leads to pulling away from parents. Layered on top of this are the parents' own feelings of loss or anger as their teens demand independence, as well as lingering baggage from their own adolescence.

Adolescence involves the most dramatic growth in human development outside of infancy.

A complex scenario under the best of circumstances, Dr. Dreyer reminded parents that it's normal to feel that "any sense of control is a fantasy."

Dr. Dreyer encouraged parents to "step back, and think about how much you love your children, how proud you are of what they've accomplished and tell them that." Recognize that even the things you say in anger are said out of love—taking the next step and telling your child that you love him can be a significant bridge to a better relationship. Dr. Dreyer also said to remember that most kids do not have problems, but be watchful for signs. Areas of concern that

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should be addressed include depression, which can be the beginning of adult mental health issues; isolation; learning issues; and drugs and alcohol. Middle school difficulties can be clues to future issues in high school. Be sure that your child's high school is the right fit,

Residential college life demands that students be able to govern themselves in an appropriate fashion.

and get needed help. In the end, Dr. Dreyer likened the process of parenting teens to “scaffolding your child and then gradually letting go as you see he can handle more independence.”

If entering high school is a challenging proposition for most teens, what about the transition to college and beyond? Mr. Breimer, who has spent almost 40 years counseling students through college admissions, believes that too much emphasis today is placed on getting into college. What has been lost, he says, is real preparation for the experience of being in college from an emotional point of view. Residential

college life demands that students be able to govern themselves in an appropriate fashion. This includes being able to live in a dorm setting, manage academic and extracurricular pursuits, self-regulate in a less-structured environment with fewer safety nets, make daily decisions, maintain a value system and avoid risky behaviors.

Parents can help students prepare for this transition by “empowering adolescents to seize control of their lives,” said Mr. Breimer. While parents should be there to offer support and advice, they must encourage their children to make decisions and to negotiate the practicalities of life. For Mr. Breimer, this includes the college selection process: students must do their own homework about the colleges on their application list and, ideally, visit them on their own before returning for a visit with parents. Mr. Breimer noted that his favorite counseling moments came after a student had made his college selection. It was during these sessions that he could ask, “How are you going to make the best of what the school has to offer?” It's a question worth asking at other times of transition. ●

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I hope you have enjoyed this “behind the scenes” description of NYC-PIA. We are thankful to our volunteers and are equally grateful to you, the parents who support us with contributions, attendance at our seminars, and participation in discussion groups. Please contact us by phone (212 987-9629) or email (administrator@parentsinaction.org) if you are interested in volunteering. We would love to welcome you. ●

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.

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WINTER 2008 ISSUE

Take the “PATs” (Parent Awareness Test)!

Directions: Select the best answer for each question.

1. You have a child in 8th grade. Mark the statement that most resembles what you’ve heard about teens and drinking from high school parents:
 - (A) There is no way to stop teenagers from experimenting with alcohol.
 - (B) Since teens are going to drink, have them drink at home so you can make sure they drink responsibly.
 - (C) Drinking in high school helps teens learn how to handle alcohol when they get to college.
 - (D) If your daughter doesn’t drink, she will not be invited to parties.
 - (E) All of the above.

*We’re guessing that you answered “(E).” Despite so many opinions, you still may not have information that will help **you** decide how to handle the issue. In NYC-PIA’s revised and expanded **FOCUS: A Practical Parenting Guide**, you’ll find facts to guide you, starting with recent findings showing that “Because brain development is not completed until as late as age 25, experimentation during adolescence is more risky to the brain than previously believed.”*

2. A drug dealer in 2007 is most likely to be:
 - (A) The twenty-something guy in the leather jacket who hangs out on the corner near school.
 - (B) The preppy kid who plays basketball and shares a locker with your son.
 - (C) The scruffy guitar player who spends weekend nights in clubs downtown.
 - (D) Your medicine cabinet.

*A drug dealer could resemble any of the stereotypes in (A), (B) or (C). In fact, it is most likely to be (D) Your medicine cabinet. In **FOCUS: A Practical Parenting Guide**, you will learn many facts about the trend toward the abuse of prescription and over-the-counter medications, along with this fact reported by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University: From 1992 to 2002 abuse of prescription opioids among 12- to 17-year-olds increased an astounding 542%. In addition, **FOCUS***

highlights other aspects of today’s drug scene, including gateway drugs, stimulants, hallucinogens, narcotics, designer and club drugs, inhalants and steroids.

3. The Internet in 2007 most resembles:
 - (A) The corner soda fountain of olden days—a place where kids can hang out, meet other kids and socialize.
 - (B) An incredible shopping mall, where you can buy any kind of merchandise easily and conveniently.
 - (C) An encyclopedia and “how to” library, with information on anything and everything.
 - (D) A diary/photo album, where you can record and share personal information and photos.
 - (E) All of the above and MORE.

While the Internet may serve as (E), there are many pitfalls for kids. Unlike the local hangouts of old, you can’t see the other kids, so you don’t know if they’re nice, if they’re bullies, or even if they’re kids. It’s an emporium, not just for clothes but also for illegal and dangerous substances. The words and images kids post are, unlike a diary, visible to many. Boundaries and privacy don’t exist, and posted information may be seen, downloaded and used by anyone.

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