

## Teen Scene, 2011

BY LISA HUFFINES

The 14-teen panel that took the stage for Teen Scene XXV on February 7, delivered, as expected, a few alarming anecdotes. But it also offered advice for parents, much of it quite sound. And though the teens urged parents to trust and give them space, they also counseled — repeatedly — that the surest recipe for real trouble is disengagement.

**This year's panelists... were articulate, outspoken and thoughtful.**

For 25 years, Parents In Action has invited parents and teens to come together for a frank discussion of what goes on in New York City teens' lives. Panelists, boys and girls identified by first name and grade in school, respond to questions from long-time moderator (and PIA board member) Lucy Martin Gianino, as well as from parents in the audience. This year's panelists, ninth- through twelfth-graders at New York City independent schools, were articulate, outspoken and thoughtful.

The first topic was pressure. The panelists all agreed that social and academic pressure increases a lot in the jump from middle to upper school. College applications are clearly at the forefront of city teens' concerns. One boy knew kids who started SAT prep in ninth grade, and another spoke of the "teams, clubs, etc." that teens feel they must add to their schedules. They complained that many parents lose focus on the wide choice of paths other than prestigious colleges that can lead to a happy and successful life. That said, they agreed that some parental pressure is a good thing and that limits and standards are essential ("you need to know you can't mess up").

As for parental involvement in their day-to-day lives, the panelists said different kids have different needs. Some seem to want parents "on top of them and being

there to help them make decisions," while others prefer more space. The panelists seemed to think either arrangement is fine, as long as parent and child are on the same page. They have seen parents they perceive as living vicariously through their children, and said those children often rebel. All kids, they said, need parents who are aware. As one boy put it, parents "should know where your child is — where they are on a Friday night and how they are doing in math." It's the teens whose parents blithely assume everything is fine in their kids' lives, and don't bother to inquire, who get into serious trouble, they said.

All this pressure is balanced by fun, and all agreed New York is a great place to be a teen. Weekend activities vary — from ninth graders still playing World of Warcraft to gatherings in friends' homes, dinners out, house parties, and clubbing downtown. All agreed that, after middle school, it is "untrusting" of parents to insist on speaking to an adult when their child visits a friend's home, though they acknowledged that parents are not always present and that "you see it as a limit" when they are. The group as a whole seemed dismissive of "the club kids," a small set who "pretend like they're a lot older than they are." One girl said clubbing is "more of a single-sex-school thing"; students at coed schools, she said, prefer to organize "fests" by renting out a club, hiring a deejay and charging admission. No alcohol is served at a fest, but there is plenty of "pre-gaming" (getting intoxicated before arrival) and the hired door staff "don't care" when kids show up drunk.

Drinking starts before high school. Each school seems to have a small group that starts in eighth grade (one girl said her eighth grade class felt pressure from kids at other schools, who called them "prudes" because they hadn't started yet). All agreed drinking becomes "pervasive" in ninth grade. One boy said the kids with older siblings are usually first to start. Illegality is apparently no impediment: in addition to older

## TEEN SCENE, 2011 CONTINUED

siblings, panelists cited bodegas and Asian restaurants as easy sources of alcohol. The panel looked almost puzzled when asked about fake IDs, and a girl who had moved to the city from Long Island explained that, while IDs were a concern there, “I don’t think it’s a necessity in New York City.”

For kids who really don’t want to drink, the panelists insisted there is no pressure. And there is some counter-pressure: “You don’t want to be the guy or the girl who everyone always has to take care of,” one boy said. Several panelists had seen kids “fake” intoxication to be part of the group.

The teens offered a number of reasons for the culture of drinking. “It’s fun to be rowdy,” one girl said; alcohol makes kids less inhibited and more fun. One boy said kids feel they should have “experience” drinking before they get to college. Another offered that perhaps high school may be viewed as a “healthy time of experimentation” with parents still available as a safety net. All agreed they still rely on parents when things go too far.

Drugs, especially pot, appear just as readily available as alcohol (“there’s a dealer in every school”), though somewhat less pervasive. There was no firm agreement on what percentage of their peers smokes pot regularly, though all agreed it was less than half, and one boy estimated just ten percent. An even smaller percentage of teens use cocaine, prescription drugs (especially Adderall), acid or salvia. Salvia, currently legal in New York although a ban has been proposed, was described as “a sort of hallucinogenic pot.” Panelists said the group that uses salvia is small, but avid. Also mentioned was Four Loko, a highly caffeinated, and sweet alcoholic beverage known as “blackout-in-a-can” and banned in a number of states. Panelists also said both girls and boys are still smoking cigarettes.

Drug use, too, starts earlier than parents might expect. One boy saw marijuana at bar mitzvah parties when he was in seventh grade. Another surmised that all the media buzz about teen drug use can have a perverse effect on middle schoolers who “want to

get it on in their own way.” At his school, he said, a group of seventh and eighth graders experimented recreationally with human growth hormone.

Parental attitudes toward drug and alcohol use vary widely. A tenth grader said that, while most parents show “little or no tolerance,” some clearly choose to look the other way, even leaving alcohol available in the house and allowing unsupervised parties in their homes. A senior knew of at least one family who got into legal trouble as a result. Asked whether they had attended parties that resulted in serious destruction of property, the teens said that was largely “a middle school thing.”

**Teens need to feel their parents trust them to navigate their own lives, and they need to trust their parents to be there to help when they make mistakes.**

So, how is a parent to control or slow down substance abuse? Several panelists said there is not much a parent can do or say to stop it. Better, they said, to “focus on safety.” The word “trust” came up a lot. Teens need to feel their parents trust them to navigate their own lives, and they need to trust their parents to be there to help when they make mistakes. They counseled against establishing consequences for bad behavior in advance; one girl said that “says you are expecting that behavior” and “breaks the trust.” Limits are important, though, and a teen does not need to go out “every night of every weekend.” Curfews ranged widely, from 11:00 p.m. for a ninth grader, to “1:30 or sometimes 2:00 a.m.” for a senior, to “just keep in touch” for a sophomore.

Contrary to popular belief, all teenagers are not having sex. One panelist had taken a poll at her school and found that 15 of 60 juniors had lost their virginity. The term “hooking up” does not necessarily connote sex; “it’s just making out — but, of course, it can escalate.” Some kids still date; one boy said he and his group of friends had all entered and exited long-term relationships at roughly the same time.

## TEEN SCENE, 2011 CONTINUED

The girls said they feel pressure to perform oral sex; one said “it’s expected” and another knew girls whose boyfriends had broken up with them when they declined. Everyone agreed that protection is available and used. Pornography, the boys all agreed, is “a universal part of the teenage experience,” while the girls said it is “definitely not talked about at the lunch table” among girls. While none of the panelists said he or she was gay, all described a social atmosphere that was inclusive regardless of sexual orientation.

The panel seemed rather dismissive of adults’ fears about Facebook and other technology; they feel they are well aware of all its dangers. The new technologies, especially anonymous social Web sites like Formspring, definitely facilitate bullying, but that, too, they saw mostly as a middle-school problem. They see how the public nature of Facebook affects their social relationships: one noted that she readily forms judgments of kids she’s never met based

on Facebook pages; another said she was amazed at how many strangers at parties knew her by her Facebook name. And they said they know kids who “over-rely” on Facebook and use it in place of face-to-face interactions. They urged parents to teach their kids to “go offline” when conflicts arise. There was consensus that sixth grade is perhaps too young for Facebook but that by eighth grade Facebook is pretty integral to their social world.

**The last thing [teens] want is for the grown-ups to disappear.**

If there was a pattern to the panel’s responses, it was this: like teens of all times and places, these teens showed enormous confidence in their ability to navigate their world, with a corresponding insistence on adults’ trust. But the last thing they want is for the grown-ups to disappear. ●

## After Teen Scene: What's A Parent To Do?

BY THE NEW YORK CENTER FOR LIVING

The goal of Parents in Action's recent "Teen Scene" evening was to offer parents insight on the lives of New York City's independent school teens — how they manage busy schedules; maintain academic success; and handle peer pressure, substance abusing peers and the challenges of raging hormones. Questions from the audience made it abundantly clear there is huge anxiety among parents who, without a "blueprint" to manage today's modern parenting challenges, feel adrift when it comes to setting appropriate boundaries, enacting rules and managing appropriate expectations for their teenagers. Here is advice to help parents handle these challenges with greater confidence.

### Why does parenting a teen today seem to be more stress inducing than 20 years ago?

First, why does parenting a teen today seem to be more stress inducing than 20 years ago? What important issues should parents be aware of when dealing with teenagers? What, if anything, can parents do to prevent problems from occurring, and how can they get help if they suspect their child has a problem? A combination of several factors contribute to the challenges of parenting a teenager today:

**Technology:** Advances in technology (almost always initially embraced by young people), have far out-paced society's ability to keep up with the social risks involved. In our era of Facebook and Twitter, teenagers face an uncharted social venue for experimentation. While certain aspects of technology are useful (many parents feel better knowing they can be in "real-time" contact with their child), much rebellious behavior by teenagers manifests itself online, in chat-rooms, via email and on social networking sites. The generation gap in online knowledge is wide between parents and adolescents, and kids can easily evade online parental limits. Today's technology allows adolescents

worldwide communication. Teens can be targeted in unprecedented ways by entertainment media, the press, advertisers or sexual predators.

No teenager is immune from bullying, and much of it now occurs online, out of adult sight. Internet access allows teens to see what their friends are doing and where they are going. For example, teens may look at pictures from a party online and become upset if they were not invited. These teens may then look towards drugs and alcohol to score an invitation to the next party. In addition, teens can search the Internet to learn about medications and their effects. Taken together, these factors can lead to an increase in teen vulnerability to drug use and abuse.

**Changes in Drug Use Trends:** There is a different flavor to adolescent drug use behavior today from as recently as a decade ago. Since the 1960's, the most consistent drugs of experimentation have been marijuana, alcohol, and cigarettes. While many teenagers experimented with other so-called "hard-drugs" like cocaine and heroin, it was the exception then for kids to develop real drug problems, not the rule. Today, many parents are unaware how different the landscape of teenage substance use looks.

While marijuana and alcohol are still by far the most popular "gateway drugs," today's teenagers commonly experiment with, abuse or develop significant problems with many others. Studies show painkillers and stimulants, once considered a problem only for kids with severe substance use disorders, are finding their way into the repertoire of common experimentation. It is not unusual for adolescents to report first trying a prescription drug like Oxycontin, a powerful opiate analgesic that is fatal in overdose, or Adderall, a powerful stimulant used to treat patients with attention deficit disorder which, when crushed and snorted, closely mimics the effects of cocaine and crystal meth. Today's teens seldom understand how dangerous this "new" drug-use behavior can be. Kids often think abusing pre-

**WHAT'S A PARENT TO DO? CONTINUED**

scription drugs is safer for their having been legitimately prescribed by doctors to treat real disorders.

We live in a culture that is heavily medicated; both children and adults are prescribed pills for mental and physical health. Attention deficit disorder among teen-agers is diagnosed at rates upwards of 8-12%; practically every adolescent knows someone who has a prescription for a potentially addictive medication like Adderall or Ritalin. Most opiate analgesics, commonly prescribed for chronic back pain, are procured from a parent's medicine cabinet. Parties are held where teens participate in "pharming" — the trading of prescription and even some over-the-counter medications. These "newer" gateway drugs are dangerous, especially in overdose, and make some teen-agers more vulnerable to developing severe addictions because of their high abuse potential.

**We live in a culture that is heavily medicated; both children and adults are prescribed pills for mental and physical health.**

**Changes in Behavioral Signals:** We are seeing changes in the behaviors of teen-agers who develop substance abuse problems. While the classic drug user is often stereotyped as wearing clothing suggesting deviant behavior, or appearing unkempt with a dazed expression and/or glassy red eyes, this is not always the case. Rather than exhibit signs such as failing grades and social withdrawal, teens today may abuse stimulants like Adderall, Ritalin and cocaine to compete academically — a result of increased societal pressure to get into a good college. Adderall and Ritalin allow kids to pull all nighters, increase their energy for sports, and feel they can focus better on exams. Problems associated with stimulant abuse include increased blood pressure, which can lead to heart attack or stroke; severe mood swings that can rise to the level of mania and psychosis; and addiction to other powerful stimulant drugs, like cocaine or crack. Some kids may appear to be doing well (studying a lot, participating in extra-curricular activities, looking energetic and happy), when in reality they are in the midst of a severe drug addiction.

**Tips and Solutions for Concerned Parents****Establish an effective system of communication:**

When parenting a teenager, it is important to establish an effective system of communication. All teenagers want to be listened to and heard. Far from a one-size-fits-all proposition, what works for one family may not work for another. If figuring out what works for your family feels like a daunting task, a good family therapist can be helpful. Remember, the adolescent brain changes rapidly and you will communicate differently with your daughter when she is 14 than when she is 16. Where your child is, developmentally, will determine how best to communicate with him. Some "how-tos" for interacting with your teenager include:

1. Trust your instincts — if you think your child has a problem, chances are he probably does.
2. Timing — pick a convenient and safe time to talk.
3. LISTEN when your child talks. Be open-minded and validate his or her feelings.
4. Be non-judgmental.
5. Talk about how you feel, e.g., "Your use of drugs makes me worried and scared."
6. Set clear expectations and clear consequences, e.g., "Drug use is NOT permitted in this family. If you use drugs, X will be the consequence."
7. Stay away from blame and punishment. Punishing a child for using drugs and/or alcohol is not as effective as getting him or her help.
8. Be a good role model.

To protect your kids from developing problems with drugs, become as technologically savvy as you can. You will be in a better position to set appropriate limits if you understand how, and with whom, your kids spend time online. Research shows that getting good grades, participating in after-school activities, having family dinners and living in a home where the idea of 'rules' are important can protect against teenage substance use problems later on.

You know your child well, and if you think there is a problem, there probably is. Seek professional help early on, before serious issues emerge. It is a myth that a child must hit rock bottom before he or she can

## WHAT'S A PARENT TO DO? CONTINUED

recover; in fact, early intervention is associated with a more successful recovery. It is harder to treat those who have a longer and stronger addiction. Moreover, it is a myth that a person cannot be forced into treatment. Kids who are made to enter treatment for substance abuse are as likely to benefit as those who enter voluntarily.

### Know These Telltale Signs and Symptoms of Substance Abuse:

1. A decrease in grades, skipping classes;
2. Sleep disturbances — sleeping more or less than usual;
3. Appetite changes — weight loss/gain; eating more/less than usual;
4. Bloodshot eyes — pupils larger or smaller than usual — excessive use of eye drops;
5. Deterioration in grooming and physical appearance OR new interest in clothing, music or items that highlight drug use;
6. Heightened secrecy about friends, possessions, activities;
7. Increased demand for privacy — locking doors, avoiding eye contact, sneaking around;
8. Missing money or valuables or unexplained need for increased amounts of money;
9. Odors on body, breath, clothing;
10. Legal issues;
11. Relationship problems or changes with family and/or friends;
12. Abandonment of activities formerly enjoyed;
13. Mood issues including irritability, anger, agitation, giddiness, lack of motivation, lethargy, periods of hyperactivity, isolation, withdrawal or depression;
14. Increased use of incense, perfume, air fresheners.

### Implications for Prevention and Treatment of Substance Abuse

Parents can set positive examples by becoming educated about teenage substance abuse. Parents can control the way in which they communicate with their teens, and should be prepared to discuss substance abuse issues openly and honestly. Create a safe space that welcomes dialogue.

Addiction is a disease and has many faces; it does not discriminate. For those with a history of mental illness or family addiction, the risk is even higher. Unfortunately, the disease of addiction still retains a stigma, although continued efforts at boosting public awareness and parental involvement have lessened that stigma. The “medical model” of treating addiction equates it with other physical diseases for which one should never be ashamed to seek help. If your child suffered from diabetes or cancer, seeking medical intervention for him would be considered proactive and responsible. View substance abuse in much the same way. If you think you see signs of drug use or abuse, seek an expert opinion. Substance abuse and addiction are serious health issues that can be challenging to diagnose. Early intervention is key.

The most effective parenting strategy is to be a positive role model. Don't use drugs or alcohol in front of your children; doing so sends a clear message that this behavior is acceptable and safe. Be mindful of the medicine cabinets in your household and keep them locked! Do not keep bottles of alcohol around the house or in the freezer. Finally, stay educated on issues of teenage addiction and other behaviors. Remember, much like technology, teenage drug-use behavior is continually evolving. While staying current with the most up-to-date information can be challenging, it is a challenge well worth facing. ●

---

The New York Center for Living, located in midtown Manhattan, is an outpatient substance abuse treatment center for adolescents, young adults and their families. CFL offers its clients a comprehensive range of services — from traditional group and family therapies, to DBT, Nutritional Counseling, Vocational, Music, Art and Yoga therapies — all from a certified, professional, multi-disciplinary treatment team.

New York Center for Living  
226 East 52nd Street, New York, NY 10022  
212-712-8800 [www.centerforliving.org](http://www.centerforliving.org)

# PRESIDENT'S Letter

## Feeling Connected

Parents in Action has been offering its popular facilitated parent discussion groups for years, yet the number of bookings just continues to grow. While we do offer professionally trained facilitators (they are required to attend several days of in-depth orientation, and periodic refreshers throughout the year), I suspect the enduring appeal of these meetings stems not just from that, but also from a synergistic mix of factors.

We face big changes throughout the parenting years, and the lessons learned one year do not necessarily immunize us against uncertainty later on. We're buffeted by a changing cultural landscape, changing parental views and most challenging of all, big changes in our kids — as the first child moves from phase to phase, and as we discover how very different that second child may be from the first.

I had my own ParentTalk meeting recently and though I was reluctant to jam my calendar with yet another obligation, I was glad I attended. I found the discussion thought provoking and helpful. We covered typical sixth grade topics, and though I'd been a sixth grade parent before, I still heard fresh information and learned new strategies for dealing with familiar issues: bullying, Internet use and independence.

Parenting involves a steep learning curve with little feedback in the early years. It's hard to figure out what's "right" no matter how hard we try. In the days following the arrival of our first child, I was desperate for expert advice. Should I quell his screaming with a pacifier? Would allowing him to cry himself to sleep (with due respect to Dr. Ferber) be cruel? Should I give him a bottle in the middle of the night? Such topics became huge dilemmas that required hours of research. Making good decisions was an ongoing struggle.

When my daughter was born, I had much more confidence: I had read the books and I knew what would work. The only problem was, what should have worked, didn't: she refused a pacifier, she didn't want a midnight snack, and after nearly two years of trying to "Ferberize" her, I, sleep deprived and exhausted, gave

up — and she slept with me. Whatever good advice I had deployed with my son was of absolutely no use in raising my daughter.

Before I had children, I thought parenting would be similar to other life experiences: the more practice, the easier it would become. I imagined a "right" and "wrong" way and that it would be possible to "master" child rearing. Oh, I anticipated I might hit a few bumps along the way, but figured once I had solved a problem or overcome an obstacle, it would be a lesson learned, with the answers filed neatly away.

**Parenting involves a steep learning curve with little feedback in the early years. It's hard to figure out what's "right" no matter how hard we try.**

Instead, I found the game is always changing. With my own two children I have seen both sides of the bully issue, of pushing the envelope socially, and of impulsive behavior. Even though I have been down this road twice, I often feel as though I am encountering an issue for the first time, and am still a novice at handling some things. With each different child, you view the topics through a different lens.

I find it fascinating that though this was my sixteenth Parents in Action discussion group, there was still much useful information to glean. My fellow parents were supportive of one another and happy to share ideas and advice. Not all meetings are earth shaking but I always seem to take away a nugget of wisdom or a new way of looking at a problem. Even when a meeting isn't warm and fuzzy, the conversation and emotions are real, immediate, and often enlightening. It's easy to say 'been there, done that,' but sometimes it takes hearing something for the umpteenth time for the message to finally sink in, and the lesson to become second nature. So when your class books its next facilitated PIA meeting, do yourself a favor and go. I think you'll find, as I did, that it was well worth the time and effort.

—LIB GOSS



## The Happiness Project

BY PAMELA AWAD

Searching for answers to elusive questions may be part of the human condition but how often is the question as intriguing as, “What makes me happy?” And, more elusive still, how do you go about finding the answer? For Gretchen Rubin, that challenge became the basis of “The Happiness Project” and the subject of a Benefit lunch for Parents in Action at the Cosmopolitan Club the first Wednesday of March 2011.

A slender strawberry blonde, Ms. Rubin spoke earnestly about her quest to “appreciate the things that make me happy.” Disregarding skeptics who doubted the wisdom of investing time and energy on a project to make herself happier (or as she says, “as happy as I should be”), she created a kind of happiness how-to manual based on rational thought and philosophical research. The Happiness Project is comprised of commandments, resolutions, truths and specific goals.

Ms. Rubin chose twelve themes to correspond with each month of the year that would allow her to “translate friendship and marriage into practical, specific resolutions” so she could better “understand and build” on her life. Her Twelve Commandments help her keep her resolutions and include: Be polite and be fair (#5); Enjoy the process (#6); Let it go (#2); and Do it now (#4). Ms. Rubin’s commandments are more *au courant* than those other Ten we hear about and probably just as crucial to good living. As well, they spawned the Secrets to Adulthood, a list that includes such truisms as, “People don’t notice your mistakes as much as you think,” “happiness doesn’t always make you feel happy,” “soap and water remove most stains” and “bring a sweater” (my favorite).

Ms. Rubin’s monthly Resolution Chart begins naturally enough with January, and the resolution to “boost energy both physical and mental.” The

physical part, exercise, is self-explanatory; the mental energy boost comes in part by reducing clutter. Rubin keenly observes, “In the context of a happy life, a messy closet is trivial but if you can get control of your closet it will matter more than it should.” In other words, mind over clutter or, “Keep things that should be useful and get rid of the rest.” February reminds her to “Remember love” and calls to mind her spiritual master, St. Therese, the “Little Flower,”

**Ms. Rubin’s commandments are more *au courant* than those other Ten we hear about and probably just as crucial to good living.**

renowned for her “little way” or the manner in which she achieved sanctity through small everyday acts. Even in the absence of praise, appreciation and gold stars for jobs “well done,” Ms. Rubin reminds herself to do things for the benefit of others. She recalls the words of the French poet Pierre Reverdy: “There is no love, there are only proofs of love,” meaning our loved ones only see the outward manifestations of our love, regardless of our depth of feeling. Thus when we love we shouldn’t keep score (underscoring our need for saints like Therese). March, and the resolution “aim higher,” triggered the creation of Ms. Rubin’s monthly newsletter and blog. (Today, the former has a following of some 55,000 people, and her blog has hundreds of thousands of followers each month.) April through September’s resolutions cover issues such as leisure, friendship, money, mindfulness and attitude.

Ms. Rubin has many words of wisdom and often references her Twelve Commandments. She says, “One of the unhappy truths is admitting who we are; [we should] let go of who we wish we could be or what other people want us to be,” thus reminding us to be who we are (in her case, “Be Gretchen,”

## THE HAPPINESS PROJECT CONTINUED

— Commandment #1). She encourages specific resolutions as opposed to ones that are too abstract (replace “get more joy out of life” with “have lunch with friends every Tuesday”). Resolutions should be as concrete as possible, Rubin advises, and when faced with challenges, “Identify the problem” (#8), as this is a crucial part of finding the solution. Join or start a group, aim at a target, laugh out loud, and “lighten up” (#9).

During her quest, Ms. Rubin pondered many of life’s greater questions and eventually devised a formula for happiness consisting of the of the following “splendid truths”:

**First Splendid Truth:** To be happier, think about feeling good, feeling bad and feeling right in an atmosphere of growth.

*Translation:* More joy, fun, friendships and good stuff, less guilt, remorse shame or bad stuff. “Feeling right” means feeling you are living the life you’re supposed to be living. And we are happier when we are growing, i.e., working towards a goal.

**Second Splendid Truth:** One of the best ways to make myself happy is to make other people happy; one of the best ways to make other people happy is to be happy myself.

*Translation:* In the author’s own words, “There is an ‘I’ in happiness.”

**Third Splendid Truth:** The days are long but the years are short.

*Translation:* Stay in the moment.

**Fourth Splendid Truth:** If I think I’m happier, I am happier.

*(No translation necessary.)*

It may not always be possible to be happy but “there are things to do to make yourself happier,” said Ms. Rubin. So, keep a contented heart, sing in the morning and have more fun. As far as keeping resolutions, when asked if she would keep to hers Gretchen Rubin replied, “Yes! I have three times as many resolutions but I’m an exception.” We are all the happier for that. ●

---

Ms. Rubin is the author of several books, the most recent being *The Happiness Project*. Her blog is [www.happiness-project.com](http://www.happiness-project.com).

## Fathers Only Seminar

BY DON KING

No, there was no male-bonding “group hug,” even though speaker John Badalament (jokingly) suggested one. But the all-fathers audience at The Hewitt School did seem to embrace a wide range of “take-away” suggestions offered by Mr. Badalament and Dr. George Lazarus during Parents in Action’s second annual Fathers Only seminar on January 11th. And once again the event was easily summarized: 1. Standing Room Only; and 2. Compelling.

### Myths of Perfection

Dr. Lazarus (a staff pediatrician at New York Presbyterian and Lenox Hill Hospitals and a professor of pediatrics at Columbia University who also spoke at last year’s event) offered the first note of reassurance: “The kind, benevolent, even-tempered ‘Solomon’ from our ‘Leave It To Beaver’ childhood memories doesn’t exist. He never did.” It’s our job “to be the best *real* dads we can be in 2011; but we will never be perfect.” He then explored the myths of perfection:

**Parents never disagree.** Not true, said Dr. Lazarus. Parents will naturally have different takes on different issues and children understand those disagreements. “Respect, however, is essential. A kid knows she’s half of each parent and if there is disrespect between them, she is diminished.”

**“Time together is crucial, and not just ‘quality time.’ Quantity leads to quality.”**

### Dads spend time every day with their kids.

Dr. Lazarus confirmed that schedules in 2011 make that a tough ideal. “But time together is crucial,” he said, “and not just ‘quality time.’ Quantity leads to quality.” Be around as much as you can, Dr. Lazarus recommended. Have breakfast and dinner with your children whenever possible. “You might walk

your son to school for years without any meaningful conversation, but when you’re there that one time he’s ready to ask for a vital piece of advice, those walks will pay off.” Similarly, if it’s your wife who is the only one attending your child’s events — her plays, parent-teacher conferences and field days — it sends the message that your wife’s job is less important than yours.

**Fathers have all the answers.** The “go ask your father” cartoon is a thing of the past, according to Dr. Lazarus. We have no obligation to preach or dictate. But “sharing is contagious. Talk about your own dad,” he suggested. “And live your values. Your children will learn them. You don’t need to expand.”

“None of us will be perfect fathers,” said Dr. Lazarus, but with a balance of “support, love and guidance, the chances are good that our kids are going to turn out just fine.”

### Ways to Connect

Mr. Badalament (author of *The Modern Dad’s Dilemma: How to Stay Connected with Your Kids in a Rapidly Changing World*) continued the night’s theme of commitment and communication. We are all “trying to reshape and redefine what it means to be a dad or an involved father” in an environment that has changed dramatically from the one we knew as kids. But the message we send to our children must still be, “You are important to me.”

He recommended several practical ways of connecting:

**Create your own vision.** “Imagine twenty years from now, in a documentary film about your children’s lives — what do you hope they will say about you?” The things you hope they’ll say: “He allowed me to separate.” “I never questioned that he loved me.” “He was always there.” “He was engaged; he listened.” The thing you don’t want to hear: “Daddy worked all the time.”

## FATHERS ONLY SEMINAR CONTINUED

**Be the bridge between your past and future.** Pass on the “positives” of your family, your history. Protect your children from the negatives. Face and examine the pains in your legacy and find ways to avoid repeating them.

**Be a new kind of provider.** The demands of modern fathering extend far beyond “breadwinning.” And the rewards are much greater, too. Address the difficult task of transitioning from work mode to parent mode. Consider the family dinner to be “super important.”

**“It’s important to know where [your children] are, what they’re doing and who they’re with, but even more important to know *who* they are.”**

**Know your children.** Yes, it’s important to know where they are, what they’re doing and who they’re with, but even more important to know *who* they are. And that knowledge comes from listening to both what is said and what is not said.

He also offered a variety of other fathering tips:

1. Remember to point out qualities in your children that are not stereotypical — “nurturing and caring” traits in boys, for example.
2. Ritualize one-on-one time with your children especially when you have more than one.
3. Take a “Relationship Check-up” with your kids periodically — a formalized set of questions that allows them to address issues outside of a “serious talk.”

“A sense of closeness and connection is the best defense we have against drugs and the negative influences of an increasingly complex world.” ●

# Commentary

FROM FREEDOM INSTITUTE

## When Two Wrongs Make a Right; Or So She Thought

BY KATE MILLER

As the counselor entered the class of 11th grade girls, one of them looked up, huge smile on her face and said, “Freedom Institute! Are we going to talk about drugs and sex?” Asked if there were more interesting things they’d like to talk about, the group unanimously decided no, those were indeed the most exciting discussion topics, and were eager to begin.

Although the primary focus of Freedom Institute’s Independent School Program is Substance Abuse Prevention, with teens there is another layer added, as for them, drugs, alcohol and sex are inextricably linked. In a classroom of 17 girls, the counselor asked for a show of hands if they knew someone who, under the influence of alcohol or another drug,

**The connection between alcohol and regrettable behavior is, among teens, a common pattern.**

had done something they later regretted. All but two raised a hand. When asked to keep hands up if the regrettable action was something sexual, no one put a hand down. The connection between alcohol and regrettable behavior is, among teens, a common pattern. Typically, the role of alcohol may function in one of these three ways:

1. A student gets drunk (probably more so than intended) and ends up making risky decisions and doing things she neither planned nor desired to do.
2. The notion of “courage in a can”: Teens use alcohol both to relieve the social anxiety they feel in a new situation, and to alleviate stress associated with sexual activity that would otherwise make them uncomfortable.

Freedom Institute, founded by Mona Mansell in 1976, is a resource center for individuals and families affected by alcohol and drug dependence, providing assessment, intervention, treatment and care. In addition, the Institute provides a comprehensive prevention and education program for young people through their work in independent schools.

3. Students use alcohol as an excuse for doing things they DO want or intend to do, but would be embarrassed to do when sober. Essentially, “being drunk and easy is better than just being easy,” in the world of adolescent reputations.

All three of the above scenarios are of concern and warrant discussion with teens, but the third presents a particularly worrisome attitude quite prevalent among teenage girls. Although casual “hookups” can and do earn someone a bad reputation by Monday morning, there is an unspoken agreement among teens that these unhealthy decisions can be forgiven and forgotten if the person was drunk or high. Teens are acutely aware that they lose control of their judgment and make unwise decisions while intoxicated. The dangerous effect of this awareness is that drunkenness becomes a completely socially acceptable way to neutralize less socially acceptable behavior.

This makes students more vulnerable to the risks that accompany being drunk or high — especially so when it comes to sexual decisions. “Safer-sex” is a term commonly understood among teens, and is a critical factor in any discussion of teenage sexual behavior. Students have shared with counselors from Freedom Institute that even if they thought to use a condom while having sex when drunk or high, they were unable to use it correctly, thus exposing themselves to the risks of pregnancy and STI’s.

In settings where drinking and “hooking-up” are prevalent, many girls have found themselves in, if not dangerous, then at least regrettable, situations. One

## FREEDOM INSTITUTE COMMENTARY CONTINUED

high school student shared that, “If a girl is drinking, and isn’t alert — if she can’t talk about what she wants or doesn’t want — then the guy will make the decision for her.” Nathalie Bartle, in her book *Venus in Blue Jeans*, highlights a survey stating that 90% of girls between 12 and 19 point to alcohol as a major factor leading to sex (Bartle, 1990).

**The most important thing you can do is talk to your teen about these issues on a regular, informal basis.**

In their efforts to feel more comfortable in certain social situations, or to justify their actions, teens are unlikely to consider carefully the risks they incur when they place themselves under the control of chemicals and other people. It is important that educators and parents combat the idea that getting drunk or high is a harmless “rite of passage” for adolescents. The following communication tips from the Freedom Institute’s Parent Guide offer helpful ways to start the conversation:

**Use the media.** Reference one of the many movies or TV shows that display (and probably glorify) teenage drinking, partying and sexual behavior. Ask your teen if he knows people who have found themselves in similar situations. This question can act as a springboard to help you gauge your teen’s attitudes about the issue. It may also open the door for you, the adult, to share information in tandem with the values and expectations you hope to impart to your child.

**Acknowledge that the topic is awkward, but nonetheless important.** Emphasize that there is nothing your teen can share or ask about that will change how you feel about her, and that when it comes to issues of safety and health, you would always prefer she come to you. Express that, while you don’t anticipate that your child will put herself in compromising situations, you do expect that if she or a friend does happen to be in trouble, she will contact you.

**Engage and include your parenting partner, if you have one.** This doesn’t necessarily mean that both parents need always be present for a formal conversation, as that could intimidate your teenager. It does mean that you and your partner should be on the same page. You don’t want one parent listing the dangers of adolescent substance use while the other shares college stories about the funny things his or her friends did while drunk or high.

The most important thing you can do is talk to your teen about these issues on a regular, informal basis. Teens are bombarded daily with messages about what is expected of them when it comes to alcohol, drugs, and sex. It is very easy to buy into those expectations if no opposing view is offered. Teens need to be reminded of the risks of such activities. Girls in particular need to hear the counter-message that drinking does not neutralize the negative effects of casual, or “accidental” sexual encounters, even though it may seem to minimize the social stigma.

For the sake of their physical and emotional health, all teens need to understand not only that underage drinking is an inadequate cover for irresponsible sexual behavior, but also that, in most cases it is a sure way to amplify the negative effects of such behavior. ●

## REFERENCES

- Bartle, N. (1999) *Venus in Blue Jeans: Why Mothers & Daughters Need to Talk About Sex*. Dell Publishing: New York, NY.
- CASA (1999) “Dangerous Liasons: Substance Abuse and Sex.” 33-37.
- Rosenbaum, E., & Kandel, D. (1990), “Early Onset of Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Drug Involvement.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 783--798.
- Valles, J.R., Zimmerman, M.A. & Newcomb, M.D. (1998), “Sexual Risk Behavior Among Youth: Modeling the Influence of Pro-social Activities and Socioeconomic Factors.” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 39, 3 237-253.

## Julie Ross Speaks at Parents In Action Luncheon

BY MAUREEN SHERRY KLINSKY

Parents in Action was enlightened during a lunch hour with Julie Ross, Executive Director of Parenting Horizons and author of the tween manual, “How to Hug a Porcupine.” Ms. Ross’ discussion at the School Relations Luncheon on Monday, January 24, focused on how to help tweens make healthy choices while at the same time maintaining a good parent/child relationship.

Ms. Ross made some essential suggestions for parents who wish to influence, but not dictate to, a porcupine-needled tween. “A tween thinks he knows it all and you, the parent, know nothing,” she says, “but understanding the developmental importance of this stage is paramount to both surviving and seeing your child through it.” Embracing a few of Ms. Ross’ techniques allows parents to skillfully influence — rather than control — the choices their children make.

**Embracing a few of Ms. Ross’ techniques allows parents to skillfully influence — rather than control — the choices their children make.**

Holding the switch on your child’s “control panel” is something parents have done since birth. Giving up that control can be confusing, painful and problematic. “This is as much a parent learning stage as a child’s,” Ross states, “and while it is imperative a child learn to pull away and make baby steps towards independence, parents need to let go of total control to allow this to happen.” Once parents understand they are in the midst of a process, the sensation of engaging in a terrible power struggle will subside.

Ms. Ross adheres to certain techniques that help to build tweens’ feelings of confidence and competence and these can aid the act of stepping away. While tweens tend to have ample amounts of hubris, Ms. Ross equates hubris with self-protection, and

she feels it is really self-esteem that is the glue that holds a child’s best qualities together. It is important to “stroke” self-esteem at this stage of development, perhaps more than any other time in childhood. Building a tween’s self-esteem results in that child’s having a better sense of achievement and a greater ability to become responsible. With greater self-esteem also comes a more cooperative child who is able to make good choices.

The language of encouragement is another technique Ms. Ross espouses. Speaking to a child’s heart by using the language of encouragement is imperative, as lessons to the heart outlast lessons to the mind. “To lob words of discouragement” Ms. Ross maintains, “is to take confidence away from a child, and no parent sets out to do that.” To avoid this, parents must be aware of how their words and actions can unintentionally discourage a child.

There are four ways we may unintentionally discourage children:

1. Because we want no harm to come to our children, we discourage any choice we deem risky or dangerous. However, when we do this we send our children the message that we don’t believe they can be successful at their chosen tasks, making our expectations for them negative. When we overuse the words “don’t” and “be careful” we are saying, “I expect you to fail.”
2. We forget to communicate without discouraging. Continually reminding a child to do mundane tasks (brush your teeth, bring your homework to school), says to the child, “You are a baby who cannot possibly accomplish clean teeth and delivered homework without my help.” Tweens often forget tasks, but they remember that mom “told me so.” Repeated reminders may become negative reinforcers, opposite to what a parent wants for his or her child.

## JULIE ROSS CONTINUED

Discouragement also robs kids of independence. The odd time your child does remember to brush her teeth, praise this behavior. Positive reinforcement has proven to be highly effective, despite what any Tiger mother may maintain. Discouraging messages are also sent when a parent is overprotective, or does things for a child that he is capable of doing for himself. For example, packing a backpack for a tween is years beyond appropriate. While the parent wishes to ensure everything has been included, a completed homework assignment that has been forgotten at home will most likely be the best reminder to ensure that your child never forgets his homework again. If you pack the bag, you are helping the child see himself as incapable.

**Positive reinforcement has proven to be highly effective, despite what any Tiger mother may maintain.**

Do not focus on mistakes. If you walk into your child's room and see the attempt she made to clean it was terrible, Ms. Ross suggests noting out loud the few things that have been cleaned and encouraging the child to continue. Simply focusing on the negative will make the tween feel her parent is highly critical of her. Ninety percent of what kids hear is negative input, so Ms. Ross suggests making a request, noticing any improvement, however slight, and zipping your lip about what hasn't yet happened. If you don't think what you are about to say will enrich your relationship with your tween, don't say it.

3. We overprotect our children. While it is difficult to grant a child increased freedom during adolescence, the alternative is overprotecting and babying, two surefire ways to damage self-esteem. The goal of helping a child get to the place where he doesn't need you anymore is harder for you to accept than it is for your child. Ms. Ross gave some pointers on how to collaborate with your child in the attempt to let go.

4. Finally, we discourage our tweens when we make them feel they must achieve perfection. Ms. Ross offered the following example: A child brings home a report card with three A's and a C. The parent responds by saying something like, "Great job in three subjects BUT — what is with the C?" She recommends exchanging the word "but" for the word "and" — as in, "You have three A's and you are trying hard in your C subject." While some may think a parent isn't being sincere if he or she doesn't speak more harshly about the C, Ms. Ross stresses that nobody is more aware of the C than the child, and this tone demonstrates your acceptance of your child, while acknowledging the good things he has accomplished.

Ms. Ross has developed a visual image, using a pyramid with four levels, to describe the foundations of your child's self-esteem. The base of the pyramid — and largest space — represents the child's sense of self (or positive regard) that stems from parental influence. This space represents the place where the child experiences unconditional love, that is, parental love for who the child is even when parent and child disagree, a parental love that grows with the child. Ms. Ross reminds parents that listening to and being respectful of your child are among the purest acts of love. The more your child experiences this kind of love, the stronger your parental influence will be relative to peer influence.

The next widest level of the pyramid consists of real accomplishments or standards that are measurable in the real world. If there is something your child couldn't do yesterday but can do today, he feels more accomplished. The right environment can strengthen a child by offering the possibility of accomplishment, so for parents, finding the right school or program for their child can be helpful.

The third level of the pyramid, while less important than the first two, is still influential in a child's development. This level consists of parental feedback and the setting of limits, both necessary to help remind a child of his responsibilities and encourage understanding the consequences of his behavior.

[www.parentsinaction.org](http://www.parentsinaction.org)

JULIE ROSS CONTINUED

The tip of the pyramid, and smallest area, includes the influence of peers on self-esteem and choices. The broader the base of parental love and support at the bottom of the pyramid, the smaller effect peer influence will have.

Respectful behavior is a very important component of the broad pyramid base. If a parent wonders if she is treating a child respectfully, Ms. Ross suggests asking three questions:

1. Would I treat my spouse or partner this way?
2. Would I use this tone and body language with my best friend?
3. If I were treated this way by my tween, would I feel respected?

She reminds us that our job is not to cheerlead, as praise does not build self-esteem, but that, rather, we should encourage our children in their struggle through adolescence. The change an adolescent encounters in the tween years is enormous. The closeness between parent and tween must endure bumps and prickly points, because it hurts to grow. Adhering to some of Julie Ross' pointers during this time can ease the process and strengthen relationships for the future. ●

**NYC-Parents in Action Newsletter Staff**  
 Melanie Wells and Pamela Awad, Editors  
 Writers: Pamela Awad, Veronica Bennett, Susan Fisher, Lisa Huffines, Don King, Maureen Sherry Klinsky, Meg Sheridan, Sally Sherwood, Melanie Wells

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.

## Be Involved, Be Informed, Be Connected!

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

- MAILING ADDRESS:** NYC-Parents in Action, Inc.  
P.O. Box 287451 –Yorkville Station  
New York, NY 10128-0025
- TELEPHONE:** 212-987-9629
- BOOKKEEPER:** Hilda Petito
- NYC-PIA WEB SITE:** [www.parentsinaction.org](http://www.parentsinaction.org)
- WEB SITE CHAIR:** Lib Goss
- FACILITATION GROUP COORDINATOR:** Josseline Charas

Our Web site is a great source of information about our programs, upcoming events and other parenting resources.

## Train to Be a Discussion Group Facilitator

Are you looking to give back the support and shared experience other parents have given you during the child-rearing years? If you are, here's a way:

### VOLUNTEERS WANTED!

NYC-Parents in Action provides facilitated discussion groups free of charge to member schools. To serve an increasing number of requests for discussion groups, we need to train parent volunteers from as many schools as possible. We are looking for parents who are articulate, comfortable speaking in groups, and have an interest in parenting issues. Our goal is to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and concerns among parents and to create a comfortable communications network that will be in place through lower, middle and upper school. Facilitators receive professional training, and become an integral and valued part of the NYC-PIA community. If you would like more information about becoming a discussion group facilitator or about our upcoming training, please call NYC-PIA at 212-426-0240 or e-mail [facilitation@parentsinaction.org](mailto:facilitation@parentsinaction.org).

Facilitation Group Coordinator: Josseline Charas