

Social Identity: Where Do I Fit In?

BY AIMEE GARN AND MEG SHERIDAN

School had just opened this year when the tragic events of September 11th unfolded, and our children lost a good measure of their innocence. Now parents and educators are trying to help children to make sense of the incomprehensible and deal with the reverberations of terrorism throughout our world. Many of us find comfort in getting back to routines; for our children, this means focusing on the daily work of growing up, figuring out how to fit in and how to relate to others. NYC-Parents in Action has chosen to explore these subjects through lectures, panel discussions and communications as an annual theme: “Social Identity: Where Do I Fit In? Sex, drugs, the media and the never-ending quest for ‘cool.’”

Most parents place value on academic success and achievement; they want children to acquire good study habits and time management skills, to participate in school sports and community service, to develop a special talent. Parental interest and investment in a child’s social world is less consistent; some parents consider the social sphere to be exclusively the province of the child, some micro-manage the child’s friendships with an adult agenda, some step in only when problems arise. But the question of where a child fits into his world, of how he is perceived by his peers, can eclipse all other concerns. And studies over the past twenty years have shown that social and emotional literacy — the ability to listen to one’s own feelings and to those of others — is as important as intellect and academic strength in determining success in adult life.

Where Do I Fit In?

Mel Levine, M.D., in the first NYC-PIA lecture of the year, co-sponsored with Child Magazine, will address the topic of “Social Cognition in Children:

Why Kids Need Effective Social Thinking to Succeed in School and Life.” As Dr. Levine points out in his book, *Developmental Variation and Learning Disorders*, (Educators Publishing Service, 1999): “Social success with peers is of paramount importance to most schoolchildren. The avoidance of humiliation at all costs is a relentless campaign, as is the quest for friendship and popularity. During waking hours children are preoccupied with evading embarrassment, face saving, and looking good... this quest may well take precedence over academic stardom. Social maneuvering drains attention and energy and demands keen skill.”

Children feel a need to define themselves in relation to their peer group throughout early childhood, the pre-teen and teen years. According to Dr. Levine, the pressure they feel, which is often internally generated, changes over time. In elementary school children compare themselves to their classmates, and there is a drive toward conformity of behavior, values, and image. By middle school social pressure reaches its greatest intensity, and children become vulnerable, self-conscious, aware of stereotyped gender roles, and eager not to deviate from behavioral norms. By high school there is a bit more latitude; students may begin to recognize individuality, and tolerate uniqueness more, but teens still tend to form “subgroups” defined by interests, strengths or style.

During the years when children want most to define themselves in relation to their peer group it is important for parents to communicate their own values, so that the children can judge what of the peer culture is right for them, and what is not. Dr. Robert Selverstone, a psychologist in private practice for over 30 years in Westport, Connecticut, who leads workshops at several independent

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PIA President's Letter



DEAR PARENTS,

It is now late October, and our newsletter is late. Like almost everything else in New York, it was derailed by the terrible events of September 11. While we continue to mourn for the victims and their families, and struggle to cope with the blow to our city, it's clearly time to get on with our lives and re-focus on work that is important to our families and to our community.

There has been considerable debate within NYC-Parents in Action as to how we can best serve parents at this difficult time. In the days immediately following the tragedy, it seemed unthinkable to continue with the program of events we had planned with such enthusiasm last Spring. With the perspective that the passing of a few weeks has given us, we now recognize that it is unthinkable not to go ahead with our plans.

The mission of NYC-PIA is to combat alcohol and substance abuse among the independent school population by providing information and resources that help parents to communicate better with their children and to be more effective parents. This remains an important mission. If anything the cataclysmic events of September have increased its urgency by adding to the pressures on youngsters.

So, with different feelings but the same commitment, NYC-PIA will explore the theme "Social Identity: Where Do I Fit In?" during this 2001-2002 school year. In our newsletter, and in seminars conducted by experts in their field, we will tackle topics such as the impact of the media on how youngsters — girls and boys, second graders and twelfth graders — see themselves and feel about themselves. We will discuss how perceptions of themselves affect our children's behavior, their happiness, and their ability to fulfill their potential.

Teen Scene, the panel discussion and Q&A session NYC-PIA presents every year in partnership with

The Parents' League, is scheduled for February 11. This session moderated by Lucy Martin Gianino is always interesting and enlightening. Be sure to put it on your calendar if you have a child in 8th grade or above.

As in the past, NYC-Parents in Action's professionally trained facilitators will be conducting parent discussion sessions. We invite you to join the parents of your child's classmates at one of these sessions to share thoughts and ideas on a subject of common interest — the social development of your children. These sessions differ from the meetings at which parents typically meet "the other parents." There is no pre-set agenda and the focus is not on academic or school issues. (In fact, topics that belong within the purview of the school administration are strictly off limits at NYC-PIA facilitated discussion sessions.) Instead, parents share their thoughts and concerns about what's happening in other areas of their children's lives. The range of subjects is wide. In recent years, some popular topics have been: how to balance safety concerns with the need to help children become more independent; understanding and dealing with the myriad issues surrounding internet usage by children; the difficulties of supervising teens' social lives discretely but effectively. Typically, parents who introduce a subject of current interest in their homes find other parents are struggling with the same questions, and that all learn from the ensuing discussion.

Parent discussion sessions are most valuable when attended by a significant number of the parents in a class — so please make an effort to attend when your child's class has a "Parents in Action meeting."

We look forward to working together with you in this very challenging year.

Sincerely,

Susan Newton

October, 2001



Identity and Independence: Why Parents Count

BY EVA POMICE

As NYC-PIA embarks on a year-long exploration of the issues surrounding children's social identity, newsletter co-editor Eva Pomice talked with Rachel Klein, Ph.D., a Professor of Psychiatry at the NYU Child Study Center who has done extensive research on childhood anxiety disorders. They spoke about the importance of parental involvement as children grow into social beings.

Q NYC-PIA: How does a child develop his identity over time? What is the role of parents in this process?

A DR KLEIN: The parents have an extraordinarily important role in the development of their child's identity. The family is the major socializing agent in a child's life. It teaches the child his standing in the world and what the expectations are.

Q NYC-PIA: When in a child's life does the influence of peers become as strong as or stronger than that of their parents?

A DR KLEIN: In adolescence, the peer group becomes more important in terms of clothing, entertainment, or music. But the investment of the family in their child doesn't disappear even when the peer group becomes more important. It's not erased, even though sometimes it does seem erased temporarily.

Q NYC-PIA: Where are parental values most enduring?

A DR KLEIN: Political values are usually family-determined, as are religious values. As long as the child lives at home, parents are in control. It's a mistake to abandon that role. Parents have to establish the principle that the family has standards. This notion has to become a mantra. Kids do make a distinction between their family's and others' values and understand that the family may maintain them even in the face of peer and media culture.

Q NYC-PIA: How do parents' early emotional investment in their child help her navigate social cruelty and peer pressure later on?

A DR KLEIN: One of the major roles of parents is to build a child's self-esteem. You do it by appreciating and accepting your child. That's the basic principle. You communicate pleasure at a variety of things your children do, little and big, making them feel loved for who they are, not merely how they perform. That will help them get them

through social ups and downs, and make them more likely to be happy, everything else being equal. But it doesn't ensure they will have a smooth ride. Kids experience peer rejection at all ages, even in preschool. We don't know what is the best strategy to protect children against feelings of rejection. It may be that a child of tough parents may be able to put up with social difficulties more easily than a child of gentle parents who is unprepared for unkindness in others. That said, while you can't prevent the pain, adults can help a kid deal with it. The hope is that a child who is being supported and given a model for appropriate assertion can cope with it relatively better.

Q NYC-PIA: Doesn't that task get harder as a child gets older and social life more complicated?

A DR KLEIN: Yes, it does. At the same time, parents can sometimes be too interfering in the social arena, when it's really best left alone or up to teachers. But while parents can't manage their adolescent's social experiences, they can still offer support. If a situation or person is particularly destructive to your child, no matter what age, you may need to take him out of that situation. Unfortunately, there's a misconception that adolescents don't need their parents as much as younger children. They still depend a lot on their parents' approval and need to feel their parents are there. Especially now, when there's a lot of uncertainty and pressure in their world, parents need to be available, a source of security and stability – a safe haven.

Q NYC-PIA: How can parents rethink their role in the life of a child reaching toward independence and self-definition?

A DR KLEIN: Some of the things parents get agitated about are trivial: the style of pants their child wears, his hair cuts. Focus on more important issues: the value of being responsible, of being kind.

Q NYC-PIA: That gets harder when the subject changes from clothing and music styles to sex and drugs. What are the biggest mistakes parents make when talking to their children about these issues?

A DR KLEIN: Parents should avoid judging, but instead give an opinion. Judging and criticizing, when done excessively, is the kiss of death, because the message gets blocked out. Parents also tend to give themselves as examples to their kids, "when I was your age," etc. Kids

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schools, helps parents and children talk about values and identity and will address the subject in an NYC-PIA lecture in the spring.

According to Dr. Selverstone, parents and the media often operate at cross-purposes; parents want to preserve the child's sense of individuality, and the media wants to persuade kids to consume—movies, television, and products. But parents can learn to use the media to maintain a dialogue with their children. "I suggest that parents imagine themselves as the 'factory' producing a product — a child. When a factory creates a product, it takes raw materials, processes them, ships them off — but first there is a concept. What is the parents' concept of how they want the child to be? And what do they have to put into this child? If they want the child to have a strong sense of identity, self-esteem, to be responsible, independent, and respectful, they have to model and communicate those values to the child."

Sex, Drugs and the Media...

When we begin to discuss the issues of sex, drugs and the media, we realize that they are inextricably intertwined. Perhaps the media is the place to start, as it reflects our culture. Many child development experts and social commentators have noted that the years of "childhood," especially in the city, are over in a New York minute. By age seven or eight, children are nudged into a "tween" culture, bombarded with messages from the media and marketers, and may even engage in "teen-aged" behavior, like buying clothing, make-up, and listening to rock music by up-to-the-minute icons like Britney Spears. When we consider the 1950's image of Lolita, with her heart-shaped sunglasses and

lollipop, and Britney in her tight, sparkling clothes, it's disconcerting to note that the sexualized adolescent who was once taboo is now virtually a U.S.D.A.-stamped role model for young girls.

Such media role models, and the wearing of provocative clothing styles, set the stage for early sexual experimentation. Catherine Steiner-Adair, Ed. D., Director of Education, Prevention and Outreach at the Harvard Eating Disorders Center, noted in a lecture last year that with the "cultural bleed-through" from teen culture down to younger children, there is increased pressure to experiment sexually, with the result that "boys get turned on, and girls get freaked out." The term used by teens to describe the loosely entered sexual relationship, "friends with benefits," says it all: intimate sexual activity predates even a vague notion about romance or relationship by several years. While last year there was a flurry of press on the increased incidence of oral sex, and it would seem that the pressure falls mainly on girls, there is pressure on everyone. Dr. Rachel Klein of the NYU Child Study Center, who will participate in an NYC-PIA panel, notes: "Boys and girls develop at different rates; at the age when boys are developmentally ready for sex for its own sake, girls are not. Girls may want sex for emotional reasons, which creates conflict all around."

This is the point at which experimentation with drugs intersects with the issue of sex, says NYC-PIA speaker Charlanne Zepf of Freedom Institute. "When kids experiment with substance use, their judgement can be impaired, and they are more likely to engage in high risk sexual behavior," says Ms. Zepf. "Kids will tell you that peer pressure is not the biggest part of using a substance, although they admit that if they refuse to smoke or try a drug at a party, they wonder how their friends will perceive them. They most often use drugs to create an instant bond with friends, over a cigarette,

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.

Facilitators Wanted!

NYC-Parents in Action needs additional volunteers to facilitate parent discussion groups, because requests for meetings from independent schools are greater than ever. NYC-Parents in Action will train you in a series of workshops. Please call 212 426-0240.

alcohol, or marijuana.” Ms. Zepf encourages teens to notice the kids in their circles who manage to be social and well-liked while refusing to use any substances. “Kids need to see that there is an alternative way of coping with social anxiety, and that they can be appreciated for being funny, fun to talk to, for being a good friend.” When teens see others resist the pressure to join the crowd in substance use, and become aware that those who abuse substances get negative attention, they are less likely to feel the need to experiment themselves.

NYC-Parents in Action, Inc.
in partnership with Child Magazine
invites you to hear

DR. MEL LEVINE

Social Cognition in Children: Why Kids Need Effective Social Thinking For Success in School and Life

Kaye Playhouse Theater
Hunter College
68th Street between Park and Lexington

For reservations, call 212 987-9629

Dr. Mel Levine is a Professor of Pediatrics at the University of North Carolina Medical School and the Director of the Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning. He is also Co-Chairman of the Board of All Kinds of Minds, a Non-Profit Institute for Understanding of Differences in Learning.

Last Spring Dr. Levine spoke on a similar topic at a joint presentation of NYC-Parents in Action and Mount Sinai Children’s Foundation. NYC-Parents in Action has invited him to return to expand on what he describes as “the thorny challenges of friendship and popularity, the overwhelming obsession with avoiding public humiliation, and the elusive quest to be cool.” Dr. Levine will also include tips on coaching, mentoring, and social skills training for those who want to strengthen their emotional intelligence.

The Never-Ending Quest for “Cool”

Inherent in the nature of a fashion, fad, or anything “cool” is change and evolution; at the height of hype and popularity “cool” is hard to resist, although its decline from fashion is inevitable, as can be its return. Among teens, a hair style or clothing choice can be among the most harmless expressions of ephemeral cool. More complicated for them, and for parents, are fashions that may have lasting consequences, which include things like body piercing, tattoos, and the pressure to drink or to try a hot new drug such as Ecstasy. Almost every teenager wants to be, do, or have what is “cool” and popular, if only briefly, and they may be fully willing to sacrifice individuality to achieve it.

Where do parents come into the equation, for a pre-teen or teen who is trying to define himself as “cool?” While parents may no longer be the focus of the child’s attention, it is critical that they maintain a vital role. One way to do so is to establish or maintain the process of communicating with their children. “You want to make communication with kids the best it can be,” says Dr. Selverstone, whose workshops focus on the process of sending messages clearly and listening well. Another way is to encourage a child’s individuality and autonomy; according to Dr. Levine, the nonconformist is “a modern-day juvenile hero.” Any way in which a

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The New York Psychoanalytic Institute, 247 East 82 Street
For reservations, please call 212 987-9629

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Q&A

think that has nothing to do with them. It's like saying, "I'm better than you."

Q NYC-PIA: So how should parents transmit their views?

A DR KLEIN: If a teenager is having sex, saying "don't have sex" is usually pointless. You have to make the message meaningful to the adolescent, such as "It's important to be happy, but at the same time not be destructive. Do what's best for yourself." Emphasize that it's important to maintain control over your life. Say something like "You have to make sure what you're doing isn't damaging. Does this person care for you? Are you happy? It sounds to me like you're not doing what's best for you." At the same time, it is important to structure the adolescent's life in a way that does not facilitate unwanted behavior, such as having reasonable curfews, not allowing certain social settings.

When it comes to drugs, while understanding that in certain social circles all adolescents will experiment (at least with marijuana), parents can take a more unbending view. For one, drug use is illegal, and illegal behavior is not dismissed. More importantly, however, the message should be drilled that drugs mess up your brain, with the corollary message that your brain is your most valuable resource. At times, it may be helpful to indicate to an adolescent that he or she needs to find other means of feeling good, or part of the group. None of this is easy, and when it becomes too difficult, it's time to seek professional help from an expert. Dealing with substance use is a specialty, and it is best to consult a professional with special training in this problem. "What's good for you"... should be the parents' message. "What do you want for yourself, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow?"

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child can "maintain individuality without experiencing retribution from...peers" is an accomplishment. While parents can't control everything a child does, they have to try. "It's a parent's job to set clear limits and a kid's job to push those limits," says Dr. Steiner-Adair. "Begin in the middle years by saying 'no' to inappropriate television and films, which desensitize children, and encourage children to say 'no' to things that don't feel right to them." As hard as it is, holding the line may be a parent's best defense.

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