

## Boys: Practical Thinking About Real-Life Issues

On October 12, 2000 NYC-Parents In Action and the NYU Child Study Center sponsored a “town hall” meeting to discuss *Boys: Practical Thinking About Real-Life Issues*. Susan Fisher, of NYC-Parents In Action, and Alice Tisch, of NYU Child Study Center, introduced the panel for their respective organizations. The panel was moderated by Lucy Martin-Gianino, of NYC-Parents In Action, who took questions from the audience for Dr. Harold Koplewicz and Dr. Rochelle Klein, of the NYU Child Study Center.

Four main areas were discussed: work, play, relationships, and ethics. Dr. Koplewicz set the audience at ease by his opening statement: “While it’s true that boys are more vulnerable, have more trouble focusing, and are physically aggressive, the good news is, adolescence is easier. There is less moodiness, less depression, and competition is more often seen on the playing field.” Dr. Rochelle Klein concurred. “The middle years are the hardest period. It’s where values get established. If you do your job completely here, you can coast in adolescence.”

### Boys Behaving Badly

- *Is it true “boys will be boys?”*
- *Can you have a “high-testosterone” kid?*

These two questions focused on bad or impulsive behavior — is it a symptom, or a stage? How do we as parents correct the behavior without breaking the spirit?

The panelists agreed that parents should have overarching standards of behavior, then allow room for normal boyish activity. Make a distinction between what is irritating you and what is normal behavior. There are kids who are always into something, but we want to set certain guidelines so a child is successful both socially and in school. A child should be happy. If a child is unhappy in three key areas — play, work, love — then we must help him recog-

nize that he has a problem. A child may deny that he has a problem, but if his behavior is inappropriate we must give him the tools he needs to make life easier. If the cause is testosterone or something else, it must be addressed.

### The In Crowd

- *My child is hanging out with the wrong crowd. How can I get him to change?*

With a younger child, you can try to arrange playdates, or get him involved in an activity that will introduce him to a new set of friends. It’s not so easy with older children. Trying to break up a friendship can easily backfire. Ask your child: “What do you get out of this friendship? Is this positive?” That gets the child to participate in the judgement.

- *How do you teach a mild-mannered boy to stand up to a bully?*

If your child says that he is the victim of a bully who taunts him, you should first be sure to figure out the dynamics between the two boys. Go to the school and assess the situation in a private way; is your child hypersensitive, a scapegoat, or truly bullied? If he is being bullied, tell your child that he mustn’t stand for it. He should not hit back, but he must speak up and tell the bully to get lost. When we tell our child to ignore the bully, we are setting him up; the bully will up the ante. Give your child a tool that works.

- *What should you do about the child who is a loner, who doesn’t interact?*

Is your child flourishing? Some kids are happy being alone. Look for a balance; if it’s part of many things a child does, it’s fine. In that case, don’t impart disappointment or be overly critical. Consult a professional if you can’t tell whether choosing to

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## Resources: Expert Eating

Maybe your twelve-year-old is overweight, and you want to help him stabilize his weight as he grows. Perhaps your teenager eats only pizza and French fries, and you're sure that her diet is not meeting nutritional needs. Or maybe you have a family history of heart disease and you know that the whole family should follow a heart healthy diet, but you need help in changing eating habits. In all of these cases a nutritionist can provide helpful advice. The first step is usually to consult your pediatrician for a referral.

"It is helpful when your pediatrician chooses or endorses the nutritionist," advises Dr. Ralph Lopez, a specialist in adolescent medicine. "A good nutritionist works with the child's physician in a coordinated effort, and will provide regular reports on his patient." Dr. Lopez says that he refers his patients to a nutritionist for a number of specific issues. "A child who has an elevated cholesterol level and a family history of heart disease is a candidate for nutritional consultation. Or one in puberty who is a practicing vegetarian and has to learn to eat properly to insure that nutritional needs for protein and iron are being met. In the case of a child who has developed an eating disorder, I would put together a team, with a psychiatrist or psychologist and a nutritionist, to work with the child. The most important thing in any case is that the child has to be a willing patient— nothing is going to happen if he's not."

"We do refer to nutritionists, and we take care to select one with whom we can work closely to monitor the child's progress," says Dr. Marcia Wishnick, a New York pediatrician. "We try to deal with weight problems, for children who are overweight or underweight, in our office first. We educate the parents, because they are presenting the food to the child. We stress how important it is that the child not be made to feel less worthy because of weight. It's not fair to expect a child to deal with a weight issue until they have a personal desire to do so,

which often occurs when they are between 14 and 16 years of age. In the case of an overweight child, it's up to the parent to present food so that the child can reduce or stabilize his weight without making the child feel liable for the problem."

Dr. Wishnick's point about dealing with weight without creating pressure on the child is reinforced in the work of dietician and author Ellyn Satter, whose book *How to Get Your Kid to Eat...But Not Too Much* deals with many of the issues around food that parents face. She strongly recommends that parents allow leeway for their children to gain weight in middle childhood and as they approach puberty without over-reacting, and without letting others criticize them for it. Encouraging children to adopt a weight loss plan prematurely can help create a preoccupation with weight that persists into adulthood. If parents, after the growth spurt of puberty, consult with their pediatrician and feel that a weight loss program is advisable, they could proceed to consult a professional nutritionist.

Joy Bauer is a nutritionist who sees patients for clinical conditions, such as juvenile diabetes, severe food allergies, metabolic disorders, or lactose intolerance; she also works with children who have weight issues. Pediatricians often refer patients to her in a proactive measure to help the children avoid serious weight or health problems in the future. Formerly the director of Heart Smart Kids, a pediatric cardiology program at Mount Sinai Medical Center, Ms. Bauer lectures on nutrition in private and public schools.

"I don't put children on a scale," says Bauer. "I try to teach them about eating to be healthy, fit and strong." Consultation begins with the parent or child keeping a food and activity log, and documenting height and weight, eating habits and activity level. With that information, Bauer helps the child to see where eating and exercise habits can be improved. Young children are often seen with their

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Professor of Pediatrics, University of North Carolina, Director, Center for Learning and Development  
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THURSDAY, APRIL 5, 2001

*Mount Sinai Hospital, Annenberg Auditorium, Fifth Avenue at 100th Street*

parents; in the case of a preadolescent, the child may prefer to see Ms. Bauer alone after the initial consultation.

“I teach children how the food pyramid works, how to balance their diet to make their bodies work more efficiently, and about portion control,” says Bauer. “Nutrition education here is fun—depending on a child’s age, I may use stickers, computer charts, and other tools to demonstrate the principles and make up a food plan.” Bauer emphasizes that there is never just “a diet.” She tries to minimize a child’s anxiety about food choices by providing several options for each meal and for snacks at school. Children decide with her how to fit their favorite foods, such as pizza or French fries, into their weekly meal plan. Exercise is a vital part of the program when it is appropriate.

Elyse Sosin is another nutritionist who sees private patients and also speaks to school groups on nutrition. According to a questionnaire she circulated recently to a high school group, most say that their preferred foods are sushi and Chinese take-out. Most teenagers’ diets, it would seem, invite nutritional scrutiny.

“Timing is the key with nutritional counseling,” says Sosin. “The important thing in treating a child is whether or not he wants to be here.” She cites the example of a boy who came to her at age fourteen, overweight and with high cholesterol. He was not interested in changing his habits, because the abstract concept of “high cholesterol” didn’t mean much to him. At sixteen he was back, lost weight over time on a food plan and an exercise program, and maintained the weight loss, because he wanted to improve his appearance. Sosin begins by taking a food and activity log, and tries to get a well-rounded picture of the child by learning about his normal daily routine. She emphasizes that she takes a flexible approach with children; she doesn’t insist that

they keep a food log if they feel they can’t do it, and doesn’t weigh a child if it’s embarrassing to him.

“I see people for a wide range of issues beyond weight management,” Sosin says. “Some people are basically fit, but they want to make sure that their diet is as good as possible. Some people who have lost weight need support to shop for food properly, or to deal with the huge portions they encounter when they eat out in a restaurant.”

Most pediatricians agree that a child with an eating disorder such as anorexia, bulimia or compulsive overeating should not be referred to a nutritionist alone; treatment of an eating disorder should be coordinated through the pediatrician with a psychiatrist or psychologist. Dr. Aaron Meislin, a pediatrician affiliated with NYU Medical Center, makes the point that if a nutritional consultation is indicated for weight management, the physician and parents should take care to select a professional who avoids fad diets. “An Atkins-type diet, high protein and high fat, could be harmful for a child, because with that diet you risk kidney damage,” Dr. Meislin cautions. “The best diet for a child is one of balance and moderation, the kind of diet advice that grandmothers always gave. You never want to interfere with optimal linear growth.”

In the process of researching nutritional counseling in New York, and speaking to professionals both at hospital-affiliated programs and in private practice, NYC-Parents In Action has compiled a brief list of sources for information and treatment. As in any circumstance where you seek medical advice, we suggest that you first speak with your child’s physician for guidance.

**Memorial Sloan-Kettering’s Cancer Prevention and Wellness Program**

160 East 53 Street, New York, NY 10022

For appointments: 1 888 MSK-WELL (1 888 675-9355)

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## “Hooking Up”

It’s the lingua franca of the adolescent social scene. It’s the title of Tom Wolfe’s new book. According to Dr. Cynthia Pegler, a doctor who specializes in adolescent medicine, “hooking up” is a widely used phrase that requires a definition each time it’s used.

In her address to NYC-Parents In Action on November 15th, Dr. Pegler attempted a definition. “It involves some kind of intimate activity — kissing, oral sex, or intercourse — while implying no pre-existing relationship.” Even when teens use the phrase, it is not code. If a teen says “I hooked up with Timmy last night,” her friend might respond, “What did you do?” One boy might say he “hooked up,” meaning that he simply got a girl’s phone number, while another boy could use the phrase to indicate sexual activity.

Whatever the definition, parents concede that teens’ attitudes toward sex are franker than even ten years ago. There are external indicators from our culture — witness the explosion of magazines aimed at the teenage market, such as *Teen People*, *Cosmo Girl* and *Seventeen*, which all have cover blurbs that are provocative and instructive. There are also internal changes, evidence that girls are entering puberty at an earlier age than previous generations. There can be a lot of pressure on a girl who looks 16 but is really 12. All this serves to alarm parents.

Dr. Pegler walked her audience through the stages of school-aged interest in sex. To a general sigh of relief, Dr. Pegler stated that there’s “not much going on” in elementary school. By middle school, co-ed parties gain momentum with Bat and Bar Mitzvahs. Although there is not much activity, the ante has been raised. Games like “Spin the Bottle” still exist, perhaps with higher stakes. There is little emotional content to these relationships.

In high school, boys and girls are developmentally ready for a relationship, and may pair off. They

can date for one day, or for a period of weeks or months. By the end of high school, the majority has experimented with alcohol and drugs, and 50% of seniors will have had sex. “Hooking up” goes on through high school, college and beyond. Dr. Pegler observed that college students and young adults may engage in sex with a decreased emotional investment. They will have sex with their best friend, but they are not dating; they are having sex *until* they find a relationship. For many, the emotional investment in intimacy is minimal.

It may be the pressure that girls inflict on one another that is the driving force in this early sexual activity. Girls feel pressure to be smart, pretty, thin, and to have a boyfriend. A girl may feel that she needs to “hook up” to be successful. Dr. Pegler warned that “there is still a double standard,” and a girl needs to keep her sexual activity quiet, or she will be viewed as easy. Further, there is no sense that boys want a real relationship, and a sexual experience can cause a girl to feel true remorse, especially if she was high on drugs or alcohol when the encounter took place.

Parents should aim for an open dialogue with their son or daughter, starting early with age-appropriate messages to teach them to say “no” to peer pressure. “Use what comes your way,” said Dr. Pegler. “Talk about MTV, *Teen People*, a television show. Tell them how you feel and instill your values as ‘the voice in the back of their head.’”

If parents become aware that a child is engaging in sexual activity, they should figure out what is not happening in their lives. “If your [child’s] goal is to hook up all the time, something is missing,” said Dr. Pegler, “Find out what your child is good at and get him or her busy and involved. If you take an autocratic approach, your child will shut down, or the subject might become ‘forbidden fruit.’” ●

## A Separate Peace: Divorce's Toll on Kids

The perennial debate over divorce and its impact on kids has been reignited as of late. New research has shown that divorce follows children into their adult lives, affecting their ability to form lasting relationships. While many dispute those findings, most experts agree that divorce, at best, complicates the lives of children. With the divorce rate hovering at fifty percent, it's also a reality many children have to live with. An editor of the NYC-PIA newsletter sat down with parenting expert and counselor Julie A. Ross to talk about divorce and its effect on kids. Ross, a member of NYC-PIA's advisory board and the author of *Joint Custody with a Jerk: Raising A Child With an Uncooperative Ex* (St. Martins Press) talked about the stress on kids created by a parental break-up and how to cope with it.

**Q EDITOR:** There's been a lot written recently that challenges the idea that divorce, if handled well, isn't so destructive to children. Is divorce unequivocally bad for kids?

**A ROSS:** Most people getting a divorce enter into the process believing that their life with their children is not going to change. But not only will it change logistically, it changes drastically in an emotional way.

There's no question in my mind that divorce is something that can be devastating for kids. There are ways to handle it so that children come out better, as opposed to worse. However, given the nature of divorce, the reality is that most parents don't handle it well because their own egos are so wrapped up in it that they inadvertently use the child as a pawn and force the child to make a choice. That to me is the most damaging thing parents can do.

**Q EDITOR:** Why is divorce worse for a child than living with a bad marriage?

**A ROSS:** Let's take, for example, two parents who are still married and verbally abusing each other. Is that worse than getting divorced? That depends on what kind of divorce takes place. A congenial divorce would be better for a child than living in a marriage with verbal abuse, but if two people are verbally abusing each other, there's not much chance that the divorce will be congenial, so the effects are probably equal.

**Q EDITOR:** What are the long-term effects of divorce on children?

**A ROSS:** One of the advantages of a non-divorced family is that a child lives in a stable world where anger and other negative feelings are perceived as things that can be

worked through. They learn that anger doesn't damage love, that there are no permanent consequences for anger. When divorce was a social taboo, children wound up seeing how you work through difficulties in a relationship. They saw that relationships are something that have a wide degree of feelings associated with them, that it isn't all rosy.

**Q EDITOR:** Does this affect their capacity to form lasting relationships later on?

**A ROSS:** In order for children to learn to handle their own anger and conflicts, they need to watch adults resolve conflicts. They need to learn conflict resolution techniques, for example the ability to fight fair, as opposed to below the belt. Divorce is so devastating for children because they never learn those skills. They believe that anger and conflict mean the dissolution of the relationship. We're living in a channel-changing culture where people get frustrated if their Internet connection is a second too slow. Patience is a lost virtue. Between being fed the romantic Hollywood version of relationships on the one hand and being surrounded by divorce on the other, many children aren't learning the skills they'll need later in adult relationships.

**Q EDITOR:** Do most kids feel guilty when their parents divorce?

**A ROSS:** When Mom and Dad divorce the child is told that his parents don't love each other anymore, but the child figures out that there are reasons Mommy doesn't love Daddy. He feels compelled to decide who is right and who is wrong. Often parents do that on purpose. But even when they don't, children still take sides and feel torn about it. And even if parents talk themselves blue in the face, children think if they had done their job better as a kid, Mom and Dad would still be married.

**Q EDITOR:** What are some emotional pitfalls divorced parents should avoid?

**A ROSS:** Sometimes a parent engages the child as a peer. They "parentify" the child. Mom gets off phone with Dad, bursts into tears, and the child comforts Mom. It's not that children shouldn't be compassionate, but once the child adopts a parental role, it tends to build and grow over time. She stops being a child. It's way too much responsibility, and the child ends up feeling resentful. It also throws the child into a conflict of loyalties — if she soothes Mom, she's taking sides against Dad — that feels extremely uncomfortable.

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presents a panel discussion

## Girls: Practical Thinking About Real-Life Issues

March 13th, 2001, 8:30 to 10:00 a.m.  
92nd St. Y Auditorium, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St.

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### BOYS: PRACTICAL THINKING

be alone is natural, or the symptom of a problem. Choosing to be alone can mean several things, particularly if it comes on suddenly.

#### ■ *Will a child who is not good at sports be rejected socially?*

Participation in team sports fosters skill development, collaboration, and cooperation. A child learns to work as part of a team to complete a task. If your child is not good at sports, consider practicing with him. Take him to the park, or ask another adult to work with him to reduce his fear of failure. Make it a fun experience, not another round with a tutor. Be playful. If your child is not good at team sports, seek out individual sports like tennis, chess, or karate. What you are looking for is comfortable social interaction.

### The Value System

#### ■ *How do you instill values?*

Kids like to please their parents. Rules are appreciated as long as they are rational. Ask yourself: “What is my goal in setting this rule?” Is it to keep the child safe, to make him feel more secure, or to be vindictive? You both should be aware of the goal. It makes your child understand the purpose of his behavior. When a parent lectures or tries to fix a problem, an automatic switch goes on and kids tune out. First, help the child recognize that there is a problem, then help him consider a solution. You need to give the child the unambivalent message that you are his ally.

### Relationships: Boys and Parents

#### ■ *How do I get my child to tell me about school?*

Be emotionally available to your son. Create opportunities for your child to talk to you. “You need time to have quality time,” says Dr. Koplewicz. Make your time together a conversation, not an interview. If you are overly critical, the child will

presents a panel discussion

## Teen Scene XV

February 12th, 2001, 6:00 to 7:30 p.m.

Trinity School, 149 West 91 Street

feed you what you want to hear, or shut down. Show him that you have an investment in the information he gave you by remembering what he said before.

#### ■ *I understand that boys must separate from their mothers. What do you do about the boy who is “cool,” doesn’t interact, or says “make me,” in order to separate?*

Kids are terrific at setting up power struggles. Figure out which are the no-nonsense points where you won’t back down. Establish certain things that are not permitted. (Cheating, stealing, lying, etc.) Then check your own vocabulary so that you have room to negotiate. Re-frame a question so that you won’t go head-to-head. Try raising questions with your child, such as “How do you feel about that behavior?” If you have a “no discussion” policy, the door will be shut; there must be an open dialogue. The police approach doesn’t work, because adolescents have a perverse pleasure in challenging authority. Drugs and alcohol are exquisite opportunities to challenge. You don’t want to imply consent about an issue but you do want to keep communication open.

#### ■ *Which parent is better to discuss difficult issues with a boy?*

The parent who has the least anxiety about the subject should deal with the problem. If the parent is so invested that it becomes a “thing,” then that parent should stay out of it. This is true for sex education, practice with sports, or studying.

#### ■ *Which parent should explain the facts of life to a boy?*

Before adolescence, it doesn’t matter who talks. As a teen, a boy can be uncomfortable talking to his mother about sex. If you feel uncomfortable with the subject, this will come across to your child. Don’t give more information than is necessary. Having a warm, affectionate relationship with your partner is significant, because children model. ●

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

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New York, NY 10021**

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

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## Q&A

**Q EDITOR: Is divorce easier on older children?**

**A ROSS:** If parents divorce when children are older, the children feel betrayed, as if the life they had been leading was a lie. It can be just as devastating for older, even adult children, as for young children.

**Q EDITOR: Are children of divorce at higher risk for drug and alcohol abuse?**

**A ROSS:** One of the things that makes children at risk for drug or alcohol abuse is a lack of feeling that they belong to a family. So they turn outside to a peer group, because peer groups makes it easy to belong. That implication extends to people in non-divorced families also. It doesn't help to be in a two parent household if you don't have a sense you belong there.

**Q EDITOR: If you are going through a divorce, what are the best ways to minimize stress on the child?**

**A ROSS:** A lot of people get divorced so they can sever ties with their ex. The problem is you're a parent for life. So your marital partnership has been dissolved, but the parental partnership remains intact.

My advice is to treat it like a business relationship. You have a business partner you're not fond of, but for the sake of the corporation you behave appropriately. You're courteous, you don't share personal information. If you have to talk about the business elements of the divorce, set up an appointment to do it in a neutral place, not in front of the child. It's especially important not to talk about the divorce during transitional times, from one parent's house to the other's. That's a child's most vulnerable time.

It's also important to let your child develop an independent relationship with your ex. Avoid talking about your ex in front of the children. You should listen when the child has a problem with the ex, but not get involved by calling the ex, fighting on your child's behalf. It's their relationship.

**Q EDITOR: What kind of custody arrangements tend to work best?**

**A ROSS:** Parents need to consider the individual child's temperament. Some kids are better at transitions than others. Too often, the schedule is more for the convenience of the parents than what's in the child's best interest. Some people think that joint custody, where you evenly share time and decision-making, is the most beneficial of solu-

tions, but I believe it requires too much transition on the part of child. Children are not great with transitions. Rather than thinking "Isn't this great, I have two homes," they feel homeless.

I think that a traditional visitation schedule, where the parent sees the child one evening a week on a weekly basis and every other weekend, for instance, works better. At least then the child has the sense that's there's a stable home, he has his stuff there, can count on that environment.

**Q EDITOR: Some independent New York City schools have support groups for children of divorce. Why is it helpful?**

**A ROSS:** One of the advantages of schools stepping in and running support groups is that it helps the child know she is not alone, that other parents behave in this way. But it also benefits the general population of the school because it helps insure that the child doesn't fall behind because of emotional or social problems.

**Q EDITOR: Should all parents getting a divorce seek counseling for their child?**

**A ROSS:** Parents can't assume that their child is going to be okay, even if the child is showing no overt signs of distress. Get them into a group. Or private counseling. Parents need techniques to deal with such an emotionally charged situation.

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## NYC-Parents In Action Bulletin Board

### ■ SPRING CARNIVAL

May 9, 2001

NYC-Parents In Action Benefit

Wollman Rink, Central Park, 4pm to 8pm

### ■ WANTED: FACILITATORS

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

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

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## RESOURCES: CONSULTING A NUTRITIONIST

This is not a facility for MSK patients, but for the general public. Research has shown that a diet low in fat and high in fruits, vegetables, and fiber may reduce the risk of developing some cancers and other diseases. The Program provides nutritional counseling to people 18 years of age and older, so it is suitable for a parent who wants to assess the family's diet and receive guidance toward healthy eating habits. The Wellness Program is also involved in community outreach, and can work with school representatives to develop special programs for student groups. Contact Helen Miller, Program Director, at 1 800 MSK-WELL for information.

### Nutrition and Wellness Program at Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center

Dr. Stephen Sondike, Director  
312 East 94 Street, New York, NY 10128  
For information and appointments: 423-3000

This is a clinic that provides comprehensive health care including medical, gynecological, health education and mental health services for children 10 to 21 years old. For weight management the program involves modification of diet and exercise. The Center never recommends a calorie counting diet, but uses a "stop light diet," in which "red light" foods are restricted, "green light" foods are unlimited, and "yellow light" foods can be eaten in moderation. Dr. Sondike advises that individual consultation for weight reduction is more effective for teenagers than using a group program, as most are not geared toward teenagers.

### Nutritionists in Private Practice

**Joy Bauer Nutrition, M.S., R.D., C.D.N.**  
116 East 63 Street, New York, NY 10021  
212 759 6999

Joy Bauer and her associates consult with families and individuals for clinical needs and also for weight management. She is recommended by the Pediatric Endocrinology Department at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center.

### Elyse Sosin, R.D.

418 East 71 Street, New York, NY 10021  
212 327-2989

Elyse Sosin sees private patients and speaks with school groups on nutrition. She is recommended by Dr. Ralph Lopez. ●

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