

## Brave New World: Medication and the Culture of Drugs Today

BY VERONICA BENNETT

NYC-Parents in Action's first lecture of the season offered a candid look at medication and the culture of drugs. The symposium was co-sponsored by NYC-Parents in Action, the Parents League of New York, Resources for Children with Special Needs and the Hunter College Department of Special Education and featured a panel of experts in medicine, education and drug prevention. From the treatment of learning issues, psychological disorders and depression to mood and performance enhancement, we have entered a new phase of drug availability and acceptance. Although this may seem new to parents, it is the only playing field our children know.

The decision to medicate a child for attention, emotional or behavioral issues must be made with a complete understanding of all factors affecting the child—at home and in school. Dr. Alan Wachtel, the Director of Familyhealth Associates and a professor of psychiatry, stressed the importance of establishing a clear medical diagnosis. Once a diagnosis is made, it is still necessary to consider whether the problem is negatively impacting the child's growth and development as a person, explained Dr. Wachtel.

If there is no negative impact, other interventions should be tried. Dr. Ralph Lopez, a renowned pediatrician specializing in adolescent medicine, agreed that other alternatives to medication must be explored, including whether there is a good match between the school and the child. "The fact that you respond to medication doesn't mean that you need it," he said. Steven Nelson, Head of The Calhoun School, also recommends looking at whether the school environment is contributing to the problem. Communication among the school, the parents and the doctors is

important, and forgoing treatment when it is warranted puts a child at risk of self-medication. Dr. Lopez stated plainly, "They will find something to make themselves feel better."

Dr. Wachtel dispelled the notion that children who are medically treated will be more likely to abuse medications—if you successfully treat and monitor a child, his risk of substance abuse is about the same as anyone else's. If you don't treat, however, his risk of abuse increases by 100%. Because many children are treated for attention issues with stimulants, these medications are readily available to those inclined to abuse them as a quick pick-me-up or to cram for an exam. Dr. Wachtel noted that children who are properly treated with stimulants generally do not abuse them because they are respectful of the help the medication provides. On the other hand, friends of the medicated child may be a different story.

**Statistics show that adolescents increasingly abuse prescription and over-the-counter drugs instead of illicit drugs.**

That children are abusing their friends' drugs demonstrates the reality that drugs are accepted and available. Kevin McEneaney, Executive Vice President of Phoenix House, said, "Access is a very important part of why people take drugs." Statistics show that adolescents increasingly abuse prescription and over-the-counter drugs instead of illicit drugs. Mr. McEneaney reported that 18% of 12-to-17 year olds have abused the prescription painkiller Vicodin, and 10% of such children have abused OxyContin. In addition, 2.3 million teens (approximately 1 in

*Continued on page 4*

# PRESIDENT'S Letter

## Winter 2006

“High school kids in New York drink.”

I've heard this four times in the past two weeks: from a mother whose daughter brought home a friend who was so drunk that she had to be taken to the emergency room; from a father who served his son's friends alcohol at home, believing that kids are safer learning to drink there than out at a club; from a mother who was shocked to learn that her daughter and other eighth graders had been served drinks in a neighborhood restaurant; from a pediatrician who sees kids in his practice who drink routinely on the weekends. These people spoke with expressions ranging from distress to acceptance and resignation, and all had first-hand knowledge.

We know from headlines and such books as *Binge* by Barrett Seaman (Wiley & Sons, 2005), that heavy drinking is rampant on college campuses. We can hope that the high school kids who drink are a smaller part of the population—the easy-to-spot “fast kids” who have the precocious sophistication, freedom and money to obtain alcohol. But it is likely that teenage drinking has spread beyond that group. Statistics from government research support the picture of widespread underage alcohol use: half of high school seniors polled report that they have had a drink in the past month, and a third admit to having had five drinks at a time in the past two weeks.

In November a group of us from NYC-PIA attended a panel discussion on underage drinking sponsored by The Health Alliance on Alcohol ([www.healthalliance-onalcohol.com](http://www.healthalliance-onalcohol.com)). The program was notable for excellent presentations by the speakers, and also because, in an auditorium that could hold 400, there were about 20 people in the room. “Where are all the parents who should be here?” asked one parent, during the Q and A. “Is everyone in denial about teenage drinking?”

I don't know if parents are in denial, or if teenage alcohol use is a “situational” parenting concern that remains an abstract until we encounter it directly. One teenage girl I know told me that her father had questioned her this fall about her walks in Central



AIMEE GARN

Park with her friends: Was she going there to walk around, he asked, or were they doing any experimental drinking? She replied with some indignation that she didn't do things like that, and she wouldn't. “That's what I thought,” her father said, “but it's my job to ask.”

He said it perfectly: it is our job to ask. Even if we think it's unlikely that our own kids will drink, we should consider the issue and talk to them about it. In one of our recent seminars, Jeanette Friedman, CSW, a therapist and substance abuse counselor and a member of our Advisory Board, presented vital medical information for parents:

“There is drinking beginning as early as sixth or seventh grades. Some high-risk teens report that they started using alcohol as early as fourth grade. Many parents are confused about how to address drinking, and are not sure how to deliver a clear, no-use message. Public attitudes toward underage drinking are mixed as well. However, the teenage drinker is still maturing physically and psychologically, and thus any mood-altering substance compromises the young brain's healthy development. Teenagers don't drink moderately; they drink to get drunk. Girls, with a lower body weight, are affected more quickly by alcohol, and are more at risk of being provoked into unwanted sexual activity. Kids who have undiagnosed or untreated mental health or learning problems, such as anxiety, ADHD or depression, may be using alcohol to self-medicate. They are especially vulnerable, as are those with a family history of substance abuse. Early use of alcohol is linked with later reliance; kids who drink before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence later than those who begin drinking at age 20. In fact, according to a recent CASA study, those who are able to postpone substance use until age 20 are far less likely to ever develop an addiction.”

Those facts are compelling. But in a big city, among people with many viewpoints, teenagers may encounter

*Continued on next page*

“Independence: Holding On and Letting Go”

**SEMINARS**

**“Teen Scene XX”**

February 6, 2006, 6:00-8:00 pm  
Trinity School, 101 West 91 Street

Co-sponsored with Parents League

*Panelists: Independent school teenagers*  
*Moderated by Lucy Martin-Gianino*  
*RSVP to Parents League, 212 737-7385*

**“The Parents of ‘Teen Scene’: Aftershock”**

February 16, 2006, 6:00-8:00 pm  
Temple Israel, 112 East 75 Street

*Discussion led by Dr. Ralph Lopez and Lucy Martin-Gianino*

**“Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood”**

February 28, 2006, Time TBA  
Temple Israel, 112 East 75 Street

Co-sponsored with WNET-Channel 13/  
WLIW-Channel 21

*Speaker: Ms. Koren Zailckas, author*  
*For parents and older teenagers*

**Seminar with Mel Levine**

May 10, 2006, 8:30-10:00 am  
92nd Street Y, 92 St. and Lexington Ave.

Co-sponsored with Mount Sinai Children’s  
Center Foundation

*Space is limited—reserve early*

**LUNCHEONS**

*These luncheon seminars are for School Representatives and other NYC-PIA volunteers, but are open to parents by invitation. If one of the subjects interests you, please contact your School Rep, and s/he will arrange for you to attend.*

**The Internet Is a Wild Place: How to Keep Kids Safe Online**

January 31, 2006, 12:00-2:00 pm  
Temple Israel, 112 East 75 Street

*Speaker: Secret Service Agent Kent McCarthy*

**What Kids Need to Know About Managing Money**

May 2, 2006, 12:00-2:00 pm  
Temple Israel, 112 East 75 Street

*Speaker: TBA*

*To place a seminar reservation for “Aftershock,” “Smashed” or Mel Levine, call us at 212 987-9629 or email seminars@parentsinaction.org*

**PRESIDENT’S LETTER**

*Continued*

alcohol in a social situation. Doctors recommend that parents give kids clear instruction: “If you or a friend is ever in danger because of drinking, call me or another adult and call 911 immediately. Don’t worry about punishment; think about safety.” The signs of danger, such as alcohol poisoning, can be subtle: shallow breathing precedes loss of consciousness. Once a person is unconscious, there is the danger of death by asphyxiation. While city teens are less likely to drive than those in the suburbs, kids should know not to get into a car with anyone who has been drinking. Parents who feel that their teenagers are susceptible to peer pressure may want to suggest that their kids send them a text message if they need an adult to intervene, or if they want to be picked up from a party.

NYC-Parents in Action offers lectures, luncheon seminars and facilitated discussion groups for parents who

want to learn about and discuss teenage use of alcohol and drugs and other parenting concerns. In this issue, Veronica Bennett’s cover story “Brave New World: Medication and the Culture of Drugs Today” reveals that our kids are dealing with risk-taking and “rites of passage” far more dangerous than those we knew twenty or thirty years ago. We have two pieces on independence: (“Holding On And Letting Go,” and “A Familiar Equation: Independence + Separation = Anxiety?”). In our Q and A column, Advisory Board member Charlene Giannetti advises parents on how to cultivate independence beginning in middle school, so that children are truly prepared for the challenge of being on their own in college.

We are pleased to welcome two new member schools to our group: Claremont Prep and the United Nations International School. They join our community in utilizing up-to-date information and good communication to meet the challenges of parenting today.

—AIMEE GARN

# FIRST

## AN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM IN ROBOTICS

Are your kids intrigued by the world of robotics? Are they looking for a challenge in science and technology? FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) may just be the after-school program for them.

Working with teachers and engineering mentors, teams of high school students in the FIRST Robotics Competition (FRC) and middle-schoolers participating in FIRST LEGO League (FLL) create their robotic competitors from scratch while applying math and science knowledge and learning how engineers think and work.

*For more information about these free events, visit [www.usfirst.org](http://www.usfirst.org) or contact Grace Hennessey, New York City FIRST! at [gracehennessey@aol.com](mailto:gracehennessey@aol.com).*

Teams compete at high-energy, exciting tournaments for trophies, scholarships and the chance to attend the FIRST world championship at Georgia Dome in Atlanta.

To see what all the excitement is about, come to Riverbank State Park to attend one of this year's competitions:

**NYC FIRST LEGO League Tournaments**  
January 28 & 29, 2006

**NYC FIRST Robotics Competition**  
March 23-25, 2006

### BRAVE NEW WORLD

*Continued from page 1*

11) have taken a prescription stimulant without a prescription and 2.2 million teens have abused an over-the-counter cough medicine to become intoxicated.

Fueling this national trend of abuse is that we have become a drug dependent culture. "Drugs manage all the discomforts of our lives—social, emotional and physical," Mr. McEneaney stated. We need to teach children how to live within this culture because they don't understand the dangers, he said. They assume that if a drug is in their house or sold over the counter it can't be that harmful. Yet, he stressed, many of the drugs that children abuse are extremely addictive.

Mr. McEneaney offered several reasons why teens abuse drugs: performance enhancement, self-medication, stress relief and social use. Dr. Wachtel added that performance enhancement is evident not only in the abuse of prescription stimulants but also in children's everyday use of highly caffeinated drinks such as "Red Bull." He warned that, "we have become a culture that is encouraging people to outperform themselves rather than be themselves."

Stress can cause some children to self-medicate, but eliminating stress is not necessarily the answer. Dr. Lopez cautions that "stress is not bad" and can

lead to learning; it depends on how much is put on a child. Likewise, Mr. Nelson asks us to consider how we as parents and schools may be complicit in creating too much pressure on our children. Parents must give their children real experiences and allow feelings of frustration and unhappiness. "If you are too quick to fix problems for your children, you do them a disservice because they are not having the growth experiences they need to make them fully emotionally developed," Nelson stated.

To combat the temptation to use drugs, parents should throw out old medications, count current medications, and know their school's policy on dispensing drugs. Signs of abuse include insomnia, behavioral changes, empty bottles, or missing medications. Mr. McEneaney urges parents to err on the side of caution because it "doesn't take long for a child to go down a slippery slope."

Dr. Lopez agreed that parents must take action if they see signs of drug use. Both parents—even parents living apart—must sit down with the teen and talk things over. If drug testing is under consideration, parents should agree on an approach and discuss it openly with the teen and his doctors. Dr. Wachtel added that, if he or she protests, parents may have to say, "I am willing to have you angry at me tonight

*Continued on page 10*

# Holding On and Letting Go: Experts Weigh in on an Age-old Dilemma

BY SALLY SHERWOOD

An old but true cliché: children grow up fast. By the time we've figured out how to deal with one stage of our children's development, they've gone on to the next one. Whether we are currently negotiating bedtimes or curfews, supervising play-dates or teen parties, or limiting computer games or Instant Messaging, as parents we are our child's most effective role models. The values we impart at home will help our families effectively navigate the various ages and stages of childhood.

To launch the first in a series of seminars in the 2005-2006 Lynn Manger Lecture series entitled "Holding On and Letting Go," Parents in Action presented a panel of experts who offered thoughtful insights for parents. The challenges that parents face as they help their children attain independence and self-reliance were discussed by Dr. George Lazarus, pediatrician, professor and school physician; Jeanette Friedman, clinical social worker and consultant on addictive behaviors; Julie Ross, parenting expert/educator and executive director of Parenting Horizons; and George Davison, Head of Grace Church School.

## Setting Limits by Example

Dr. Lazarus highlighted four topics that provoke anxiety in parents of 21st century teens: lack of supervision, alcohol, sexual activity and marijuana. While curfews will not forestall certain behavior ("you can do at 10 p.m. what you can do at midnight"), establishing a curfew and asking where and with whom a child is spending time shows youngsters that we care.

According to Dr. Lazarus, most teens drink alcohol with their peers but do not know how to drink responsibly, resulting in potentially risky sexual behavior and lethal conduct behind the steering wheel. Noting that 50% of teens are sexually active by the age of 17, Dr. Lazarus urged parents to continually communicate with their children about the concept of mutual feelings in relationships. Ongoing dialogue (which all too

frequently resembles a monologue) can be especially potent in fending off drug abuse. "Let kids know how you feel," he said. "Marijuana is bad for you, bad for your schoolwork and can lead to expulsion."

**"We can't pick and choose which kid will be okay... It requires a real policy on the part of families."**

In their quest for autonomy, teens may initially argue with their parents. However, as children grow to adulthood it may surprise parents to hear their own values echoed by the very children who confronted them. It is never too late to reinforce those values. "An adolescent is a young tree whose growth can still be directed," said Dr. Lazarus.

## The Realities of Substance Abuse

As a social worker and consultant, Jeanette Friedman has witnessed first-hand the ravages of alcohol and drugs on young people. Her clinical experience informs her philosophy about the origins and development of substance abuse: "While initially it's curiosity that gets a kid involved with [substances], it is a deeper psychological issue that will keep him involved.... We can't pick and choose which kid will be okay... It requires a real policy on the part of families," states Ms. Friedman.

While many veterans of the '60s drug culture may dismiss the dangers of marijuana, the statistics speak for themselves:

- The average age for first-time alcohol and marijuana use has declined in the last decade and a half from age 15 to age 10-12
- From 1992 – 2001, the number of teens in treatment for marijuana dependence jumped 142%
- Since 2002, the proportion of youngsters attending middle schools where drugs are used, kept or sold has increased 47%

Continued on page 6

## HOLDING ON AND LETTING GO

Continued from page 5

Ms. Friedman pointed out that kids have different motivations for substance abuse. Not every child, she cautioned, is inhaling or imbibing simply to get high. Some may find that drugs calm them; others find that drugs lessen their anger; and still other children find that drugs ease social discomfort. Whatever the motivation, she emphasizes that parents should intervene if they suspect drug abuse.

### Creating an Environment for Growth

Even parenting experts experience moments of panic: Julie Ross, recalling a summer when her teen-aged daughter was seriously injured far away from home, said she instinctively wanted to rush to her hospital bedside 3,000 miles away. On the verge of packing, she was surprised, then secretly delighted, when her child begged her by phone not to run to the rescue. Her daughter had achieved a milestone in self-reliance.

According to Ms. Ross, a parent's job is to teach children to independently "handle love, heartbreak, anger and death." Adults should offer kids an opportunity to achieve that independence through "real accomplishments." They can contribute to the family and learn time-management skills by balancing homework, sports and household chores. They can learn money-management skills—even experience buyer's remorse—with an allowance that is not tied to chores.

Ms. Ross's blend of common-sense advice and appreciation of the adolescent psyche prompted her to concede that while a child may stumble en route to adulthood, the mistakes will lead to maturity and competence.

### Allowing Kids to Move Through Life

Like many of his fellow panelists, Grace Church Head George Davison has experienced parenthood as both participant and observer. He asked audience members what their objectives were as parents. Confessing that "I love being a parent...[it is] the most fulfilling role in my life," Mr. Davison has to remind himself occasionally that parenting is not about the parents; it is about getting children to a point where they can live happily without us.

Using driving lessons as a metaphor for learning independence—whether on city streets or in life—Mr. Davison stressed that children gain proficiency by doing things themselves rather than being lectured on them. As children show mastery of skill levels, more independence can be granted. Whether they're navigating homework, relationships or the city subways, children are best served by parents who thoughtfully allow them independence. Parents have to know their children, evaluate their maturity, and thereby determine when they are ready for that next step to autonomy. ●

## NYC-PIA Family Benefit a Success — *Thank You*

On Saturday, November 19th, NYC-Parents in Action held our annual Family Benefit with a private screening of Warner Brothers new smash movie *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* at the Loews IMAX theater at Lincoln Center. About 600 guests enjoyed watching the latest of Harry's exploits with a box breakfast and concession treats.

Many thanks to all the attendees and supporters who contributed to the success of this event. A special thanks to Diane Chernoff-Rosen for donating her book, *Living with Kids in Manhattan: The Grownup's Guide*, and to Warner Music Group for its donation of the film's soundtrack CD.

Look on our website ([www.parentsinaction.org](http://www.parentsinaction.org)) for other interesting new PIA events and for the announcement of next year's Family Benefit!

# Q&A WITH CHARLENE GIANNETTI



CHARLENE GIANNETTI

## College Prep

BY EVA POMICE TIMERMAN

It's a college dean's worst nightmare: Parents showing up at registration, decorating their child's dorm room and complaining about their son's roommate or their daughter's philosophy professor. But over-involved parents of college students didn't get that way overnight. They started micromanaging their children's lives in grade school. NYC-PIA writer Eva Pomice Timerman talked with parenting expert Charlene Giannetti about how parents can begin to loosen the ties that bind, starting in middle school. Specializing in adolescents, Giannetti has written ten books on parenting, including the upcoming *Boy Crazy: Keeping Your Daughter's Feet on the Ground When Her Head is in the Clouds* (Broadway Books), with co-author Margaret Sagarese.

**Q NYC-PIA:** Colleges all over the country report that parents are meddling in their children's day to day lives while they're at college, engaging in so-called "helicopter parenting." Why is this happening?

**A GIANNETTI:** One reason we have helicopter parents is that they don't feel confident their children can make it on their own, because they haven't allowed them any real independence. It leads to failure in college and a lack of coping skills that can trigger depression. If you make a concerted effort to pull back in middle school and in high school, by the time your kids are in college you'll believe they can succeed independently and so will they.

**Q NYC-PIA:** When should parents start moving toward that goal?

**A GIANNETTI:** I certainly think middle school is a good place to start. That's when your role as a parent shifts from being on the field to being a coach. Parents need to prepare their kids for college long before that day arrives. Middle school parents put all their focus on grades, extracurricular activities and managing their child's schedule. Then in high school, emphasis is put on preparing kids for SATs and creating the perfect application. They put so much thought into getting their child into college, but not into how she will handle college once she gets there, how she's going to manage her life.

**Q NYC-PIA:** What are some steps in the right direction?

**A GIANNETTI:** Parents should look upon this as a process. You should grant more freedom and responsibility when your child shows she can handle it. And children need to develop relationships with adults outside the home. By

middle school, children should have an adolescent pediatrician to talk with because they may feel more comfortable discussing difficult topics with them.

**Q NYC-PIA:** One of the trickiest questions for parents is when to let children go places on their own. Is there a right time?

**A GIANNETTI:** Every child is different. Some travel long distances alone, by subway, and manage quite well. But you have to do what you and your child feel comfortable with. By middle school, it's a good idea to start loosening the reins. It might be the time to drop them off at a movie, and pick them up later. You might feel okay putting your seventh grader on the city bus to school with her friends and after she figures out the transportation system, allowing her to travel further by herself. It gives kids an incredible sense of accomplishment to go some place on their own, but they acquire those skills little by little.

**Q NYC-PIA:** We've all heard stories of college kids running up phone and credit card bills they can't pay. Is that simply a right of passage?

**A GIANNETTI:** Giving your child an allowance in middle school can foster a sense of financial responsibility. He can decide what to spend his money on. But it also gives children a sense of what things cost. If there's something they truly want they can save for it: delayed gratification. They're used to parents taking out the credit card. For my daughter who is in high school, I deposit weekly money into a savings account and give her a debit card, a card with a set limit. If she wants to go shopping with her friends and blow what she has in that account, it means she eats lunch in the cafeteria all week and doesn't eat out. She has to make those decisions on her own.

**Q NYC-PIA:** College is often the first time students have total freedom to choose when to study and when to socialize. Is there a way to help them find that balance?

**A GIANNETTI:** Time-management starts in middle school. Kids need to figure out how much time they need to put in to homework. Parents can help them break major projects into small bites and manage all the distractions. Computers and TVs are turned off until homework is completed and books are packed away. It is also a good idea to buy your child an alarm clock in middle school so he can start getting up by himself. Also, parents should help children become more selective about their

Continued on page 8

## COLLEGE PREP

Continued from page 7

extracurricular activities. This is the age to focus on a few interests to pursue in depth. To prepare for college and life, it's important to follow a passion.

**Q NYC-PIA:** But they don't always take their parents' wise advice on managing their time. Isn't failure sometimes the best teacher?

**A GIANNETTI:** It's a painful thing to watch your child suffer. But life is about hitting those bumps and getting over it. Sometimes, we have to allow our children to fail. That said, middle school is a time when some learning disabilities rear their heads. A child who is struggling may have a legitimate reason why he is struggling. Being watchful is important, making sure they are doing their homework and understanding what they are learning. That isn't the same as looking over their shoulders and getting upset with every bad grade.

You should also encourage your child to deal with a difficult teacher on his own. She should negotiate on her own behalf, rather than having a parent who rushes in to fix a problem. Those skills will help later, in managing a professor or an employer.

**Q NYC-PIA:** For some kids, college will be the first time they are living with people from very different backgrounds. How can you encourage them to have a diverse group of friends?

**A GIANNETTI:** Actively teach your child tolerance, and expose him to new and challenging situations in middle school. Take her outside of school to join a sports team or chorus. What does it teach children if they go away for summer camp with their private school friends? Try a camp where they don't know anyone. There are opportunities here in the city to tutor kids in other city neighborhoods.

**Q NYC-PIA:** How early should you talk to your kids about drugs and relationships with the opposite sex?

**A GIANNETTI:** When your child enters middle school, I recommend going through your house, locking away liquor and prescription drugs. Take a hard line early. But in the long run the best prevention is to talk about the dangers and temptations so they internalize the message. You can't talk about it too much. Show them web sites that underscore that drug and alcohol abuse is something that can derail a life.

As far as relationships go, unfortunately, the message girls are getting often has to do with sex. When parents talk to their kids, they talk to them about sex, and that's all they are left with. We hear horrible stories about early sex, and we don't want our kids to date so we're not talking to our kids about relationships. Parents prefer their kids to go on group dates and are frantic if their child has a steady boyfriend or girlfriend. But even on group dates, kids still pair up, without learning the skills to form and manage a one-on-one relationship, to set limits and communicate. There's some evidence that kids who have long relationships in high school have more meaningful adult relationships. We need to have these conversations with children.

**Q NYC-PIA:** A cell phone obviously helps ensure the safety of children as they become more independent. But can it also become an umbilical cord to home, turning parents into on-call therapists?

**A GIANNETTI:** When we were in college we called our parents once a week from a pay phone. Now some college kids are calling home five times a day. That's outrageous. Parents are the ones who can set up barriers not to be available all the time. Have a frank conversation about it. We just need to pull back and return to some of the ways we were raised, remember how we got to where we are. We learned life's lessons, without having our parents rescue us.

## Shop at a Discount and Raise Money for Parents in Action

NYC-Parents in Action introduces a new way to take advantage of New York's unique shopping opportunities, and to support our organization at the same time!

You, your family and friends are invited into wonderful showrooms to shop at wholesale or discount prices with a percentage of the proceeds directed to NYC-PIA. We are grateful to those designers who have opened up their showrooms to us for these exciting opportunities.

Please refer to our website for details: [www.parentsinaction.org](http://www.parentsinaction.org)



# A Familiar Equation: Independence + Separation = Anxiety?

BY MARY BETH HARVEY

Whether it's the first day of pre-school or the big send-off to college, children's independence often goes hand in hand with separation. For some, it can also be a great source of anxiety. This November, child psychiatrists Dr. Roy Boorady and Dr. Stanley Turecki suggested strategies for identifying and easing childhood anxiety at a Parents in Action Luncheon Seminar, "Independence and Separation: The Parents' Side of the Process."

Dr. Turecki, an attending psychiatrist at Lenox Hill Hospital and author of *The Difficult Child* (Bantam, 2000), emphasized that parents should identify their child's temperament and their response to it.

Temperament plays a big role in independence and separation, says Dr. Turecki, and parents should adjust their expectations to the child they have—not the child they wish they had. "How the child adapts has a lot to do with how the parent adapts," he said.

The main characteristics of temperament identified by Dr. Turecki are activity level, concentration ability, intensity, regularity, sensitivity, persistence and adaptability to new situations (for a more in-depth look, see *The Difficult Child*).

When parent and child temperaments are at odds, the result is conflict and anxiety. A sensitive child who hates some fabric textures and styles for tactile reasons, for example, is going to have big problems with a conventional parent who forces her out of favorite clothes. And a clingy child who does not want to separate should not be bribed or sneaked away from, he stated, but should instead be prepared before an event with a quiet, detailed conversation that sets limits. In general, he advises parents to have fewer rules but clear boundaries.

Stress magnifies the basic behaviors linked to temperament, and anxiety, of course, is the by-product. Dr. Boorady, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at NYU Child Study Center and assistant professor of psychiatry at NYU School of Medicine, reminded parents that anxiety is a basic emotion and certain levels of stress are predictable and normal.

**Stress magnifies the basic behaviors linked to temperament, and anxiety, of course, is the by-product.**

Anxiety disorders are not uncommon in children, he said, and it is critical to treat them early so they don't last into adulthood. Four of the most commonly seen childhood anxiety disorders are separation anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder, social phobic anxiety, and panic disorder. Questions a parent can ask when evaluating the level of a child's anxiety are: Is the worry appropriate for the age of the child? How much distress is he feeling? How much is it interfering with daily functioning? Is there avoidance behavior, and how much of the day is devoted to it? If the answers point to a disorder, parents may decide to seek professional help. The key to successful treatment is to work with both parent and child, he said.

Over-reacting to a child's anxiety can also magnify it, cautioned Dr. Boorady, who suggested that parents encourage children to come up with their own coping strategy. Tempting as it is to step in as a buffer, it is more helpful to be there as a calm support and praise the child for handling things on his own. It is in these moments that children gain strength. ●

## BRAVE NEW WORLD

Continued from page 4

in the service of tomorrow.” When signs of drug use are apparent to parents or teachers, the problem may have already “gone to a dangerous place,” noted Mr. Nelson. “Those who really know who is in trouble are the kids.”

Alcohol is the most common substance abused by teens. Dr. Wachtel said that even middle schoolers pause about marijuana use, but not alcohol. The panelists ask us to examine our own attitudes toward alcohol and the messages we pass along to our children. Mr. McEneaney focuses on one word—intoxication—and stresses that there is nothing “recreational” or acceptable about drinking to become intoxicated. Mr. Nelson added that “astonishing numbers of parents...provide alcohol for kids in and around New York City.” This is particularly disturbing because recent studies show that alcohol use in early years may inhibit brain development and cause permanent impairment. It’s a brave new world, but with parental supervision and expert support we can help our children navigate the course. ●

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.

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

NYC-Parents in Action Administrator: [Penny Spangler](#)  
NYC-Parents in Action website: [parentsinaction.org](http://parentsinaction.org)

### New York City Parents in Action Board of Directors 2005-2006

#### Executive Committee

Lynn Manger, Chairman Emeritus  
Celeste Rault, Chairman  
Aimee Garn, President  
Nancy Hebert, Secretary  
Kathleen Harper, VP School Relations  
Mary Beth Harvey, VP Publications  
Margot Ziegler, VP Seminars and Events  
Lucy Martin-Gianino, Nominating Chair

#### Board

Veronica Bennett, Barbara Brennan,  
Ellie Costa, Denise Crystal, Karen  
Dusenbury, Peggy Ellis, Debbie Feller,  
Laurie Freeman, Nicky Grant, Barbara  
Greene, Carmen Knoepffler, Beth Lee,  
Martha Leitner, Stacy Lippin, Carol  
McNierney, Tessa Namuth, Amelia  
Ogunlesi, Ani Bedrossian Omer, Nancy  
Orenstein, Carol Papper, Fran Poole,  
Kathy Posner, Delia Schulte, Randy  
Smolian, Robin Straus, Eva Pomice  
Timerman

#### Newsletter:

Mary Beth Harvey, Managing Editor  
Carol Papper, Production Editor  
Veronica Bennett, Writer  
Eva Pomice Timerman, Writer

#### Website:

Martha Leitner

#### President’s Council

Holly Blauser, Polly Carpenter,  
Linda Fraser, Fran Laserson,  
Sacha MacNaughton, Susan  
Newton, Erna O’Shea

#### Advisory Board

Mr. George Davison, Dr. Ernesto  
Ferran, Ms. Jeanette Friedman,  
Ms. Charlene Giannetti, Dr. Harold  
Koplewicz, Dr. George Lazarus,  
Dr. Thomas Lickona, Dr. Ralph  
Lopez, Dr. Jean Mandelbaum,  
Ms. Julie Ross, Ms. Charlotte Weber,  
Ms. Paula Zahn, Mr. Sophocles  
Zoullas



NYC-Parents in Action, Inc.  
P.O. Box 287451 – Yorkville Station  
New York, N.Y. 10128-0025

WINTER 2006 ISSUE