

Dr. Mel Levine on Preparing Kids for Adult Life

BY MAUREEN SHERRY-KLINSKY

“Each grade level in our educational system prepares children for the next grade level,” says Dr. Mel Levine. “This leaves a vacuum at the end of the tunnel. Billing a school as ‘college-prep’ is seen as a good thing, but the real challenge is prepping a child for life.” To an audience of 1200 parents and educators, Dr. Levine spoke about preparing children for adulthood and about some special support needed by the child whose brain seems wired differently from those of his peers, the one with learning difficulties, with an inability to organize, plan or meet goals, or who seems lazy or unteachable.

Dr. Levine uses the term “Output Failure” to describe people who have a hard time producing the work expected in a traditional education system. All people want to be productive, but when synapses aren’t firing as is the norm, they feel constant frustration. There are so many variations of human learning patterns that Levine doesn’t “waste time” with such labels as ADD, ADHD, or LD when describing a child, but prefers to list a child’s strengths and weaknesses.

Children need to develop an “armor of words,” or a clear description of what their special abilities and inabilities are. Being able to say “I have a hard time remembering things unless I file them with something else” empowers a child; he knows he must take a moment to associate related things, before he can handle hearing more.

Levine feels that schools can help foster more creative thinking. “We need to teach our children to be top-down processors with original ideas; we need to have them write the words ‘in my opinion’ on term papers; we need to be sure that subjects being taught have connections to other things in life. We need to help

our children understand sameness and differences, and especially to appreciate each other’s differences and value them.”

Our educational system traditionally emphasizes the use of memory, more than any career does. Schools and parents further expect that all children should be “well-rounded.” These requirements don’t serve the needs of all children. “Certain minds are highly specialized,” Levine says. “Can we spend more time on creative and critical thinking now that we have hard drives on our desks? Can we accept that a child only thrives in the woodshop at school, if his destiny is to be a carpenter?”

Dr. Levine had several concrete suggestions on how we, as parents, can help prepare our children for the adult world that lies ahead:

Seek authentic affinities

Children should have some definable interests and affinities. If a child is naturally attracted to bugs, and wants to study them, let her embrace what she loves. Don’t worry if she’s not as enthusiastic about English literature. Levine calls this “a brain crying out to show you the path.”

Feed a hungry mind

If your child is an avid sports statistician, encourage him to pursue his interest in statistics in other applications. “There is a natural hunger in the growing mind. Keep feeding that through a true intellectual life at home.”

Support risk-taking

Children tend to be conservative, and are afraid to be ambitious. They don’t want failure, because we haven’t let them fail in the past. But they need to feel that they can control their destiny, and that they are free to take calculated risks.

[Continued on page 4](#)



Coping with Learning Differences: How Social and Emotional Education Can Help

BY CAROLINE JOHNSON

Exercise self-control. Be self-aware. Be a problem-solver. Advocate for yourself even when — especially when — your peers put pressure on you.

These are some of the most important qualities of character that parents desire for their children. Whatever our different hopes and dreams, we all want our kids to be able to think independently and act responsibly in a world full of challenges and temptations.

“Social and emotional education is pervasive throughout this school,” says Scott Bezsylo, headmaster of Winston Preparatory School, who has developed and continues to refine a program that puts these abilities at the core of the learning program. What Bezsylo has put in place in a small, specialized school has profound implications for educators and parents, as well as for every type of learner.

Winston Prep is a school for middle and high school aged children with learning disabilities. The 134 students are grouped by learning ability, and the pace and content of the curriculum is driven by the individual needs within that group. Every student also meets for Focus, a one-on-one instructional time. The component of social and emotional education comprises “a system of reflection, awareness, goal setting and self discovery/improvement [that] is modeled wherever possible in daily problem-solving situations.” It is based on an explicit curriculum as well as on each student’s individual experience.

Bezsylo attributes his interest in social and emotional education to an experience, early in his career, at a start-up school in Pennsylvania called The Janus School. “Students left Janus with a clear understanding of themselves and their learning profiles,” Bezsylo says. “Intangibles related to self-awareness, rather than academic accomplishments alone, were

the most important factors in their success.” After working with Jonathan Cohen (editor of *Educating Minds and Hearts* and *Caring Classrooms/Intelligent Schools*) Bezsylo was further convinced of the importance of the social component for all children and especially those with learning disabilities.

The self-awareness gained through the social and emotional learning program helps kids with anger management, problem solving and impulse control, and it also helps them cope with the feeling that they are different. “We think of awareness contextually, and we foster the individual’s ability to read self and others,” explains Bezsylo. “We celebrate differences so that students are better able to see the distinctions that define the self, to explore and appreciate their wonderful individuality. Ultimately they gain the awareness that everyone learns differently. The understanding that ‘being different’ is an accepted and profound part of everyone’s life tends to fit well with the adolescent desire to define themselves. It can harness what otherwise can be rebellion and confusion.”

How does the theory translate into individual experience? “The most simple but very profound moments occur when a student struggles with something such as a complicated math problem,” says Bezsylo. “The frustration and internalization of failure transforms over time to a self-reflective approach that allows students to analyze their experiences. Douglas Atkins of the Chartwell School in Monterey, California described this phenomenon with something like a supply-and-demand curve. The goal is to lower a student’s frustration by increasing skills and raising tolerance for frustrations, to reach a level of equilibrium. This balance is then a lasting formula for coping with all kinds of life tasks, including academics.”

Social and emotional learning also contributes to the development of the maturity to resist substance use. In the final analysis, the good judgment that comes with maturity is the strongest defense against substance abuse...and the best preparation for life. ●

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.

Q&A WITH HAROLD KOPLEWICZ, M.D.

Minds in Danger: Teenagers and Depression



Many parents of teens are used to mood swings and occasional hostile outbursts. But when do changes in behavior signal a dangerous slide into depression? Dr. Harold Koplewicz, Director of the NYU Child Study Center, explores this question and others related to teenage depression in his new book, *More Than Moody* (G.P. Putnam's Sons.) NYC-PIA editor Eva Pomice Timerman talked with Dr. Koplewicz about what parents should know regarding the debilitating disorder of depression and the unique ways it affects teenagers.

Q NYC-PIA: What are the biggest myths concerning teens and depression?

A KOPLEWICZ: That depression in teens is normal; that treatments that work for adults won't work for kids; and that kids who threaten suicide won't do it.

Q NYC-PIA: How many teenagers are affected by depression?

A KOPLEWICZ: Three million teenagers in the U.S. have depression. That's 8.3 percent of the adolescent population, compared to five percent of the adult population.

Q NYC-PIA: Does depression affect boys and girls differently?

A KOPLEWICZ: Girls are more at risk for depression — twenty percent more girls get depressed than boys do. But boys are more likely to commit suicide.

Q NYC-PIA: Are teenagers getting the treatment they need?

A KOPLEWICZ: Only one out of five teens with depression gets help. There's a stigma attached to depression. Parents don't want to see it. They want to believe it's just a phase. Teens don't want to be seen as different. And there aren't enough resources — there is a shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists and psychologists in the country, and insurance plans often don't cover treatment.

Q NYC-PIA: What are the dangers of untreated depression in teens?

A KOPLEWICZ: Depression is toxic to the brain. Each depressive episode puts a teenager at a 60 percent increased risk for a second episode. After two episodes, you're at a 90 percent risk for another episode of depression. Depressed teenagers are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors — to drink and drive, to have unpro-

tected sex, to use drugs. And then there's suicide. Two thousand teenagers commit suicide every year. Suicide is directly correlated with depression.

Q NYC-PIA: What signs of depression should parents be aware of?

A KOPLEWICZ: If you see your child's mood change over a prolonged period of time, if she becomes more socially isolated, you should become concerned. And any threats to commit suicide should be taken very seriously.

Q NYC-PIA: But aren't all teenagers moody?

A KOPLEWICZ: Teenagers' symptoms of depression are different from those of adults. When adults get depressed, they get sad. When teens get depressed, they get irritable. You have to know your child: introduce yourself before they're teenagers. Parents can't tell us what their teenagers are feeling or thinking, but they are excellent at observing changes in behavior. That's how parents can save their children.

Q NYC-PIA: What is the link between anxiety and depression?

A KOPLEWICZ: We know that teenagers who get depressed are more likely to be anxious. Fifty percent have anxiety disorders. They're socially self-conscious, not talkative. Often kids who aren't treated for social phobias end up getting depressed.

Q NYC-PIA: How is depression related to drug and alcohol abuse?

A KOPLEWICZ: Some of these anxious kids may start drinking or getting high to feel more comfortable in social situations. When kids self-medicate, they use drugs differently. Teenagers who are depressed wake up and get stoned almost every day, whereas teenagers who use drugs recreationally usually use them only on the weekends or at parties.

Q NYC-PIA: Could a horrific event like September 11th trigger a teenager's depression?

A KOPLEWICZ: Depression is essentially how your brain manages stress. There were kids who were evacuated from schools downtown who were fine, while there were kids with sensitive brains who lived in Connecticut and only watched the events on TV who were deeply affected by it. Some teens become more aggressive when they

Newsletter and Website Volunteers Needed

NYC-PIA is looking for volunteers to work on both the newsletter and the website. If you have interest and skills in the areas of reporting, editing, production or technology, and would like to contribute to our organization, please contact Penny Spangler at 212 987-9629. Training and work would begin in the Spring of 2003.

get anxious. They beat up people wearing turbans to cope with their fear and stress.

Q NYC-PIA: How does behavioral therapy work, and when is it an option?

A KOPLEWICZ: Teenagers view themselves in a distorted way when they're depressed. Cognitive modification — getting teenagers to see those distortions and think more positively about themselves — works in mild to moderate cases. But it doesn't work in severe cases.

Q NYC-PIA: When should medication be considered?

A KOPLEWICZ: Three studies over the last six years have shown that the new generation of antidepressants works significantly better than placebos in treating

teenage depression. These medications, the Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI's) like Prozac and Zoloft, are significantly more effective than older antidepressants in treating depression in teenagers.

Q NYC-PIA: Some critics claim that medications may be used as a quick fix in treating teenagers. How do you respond to those kinds of criticisms?

A KOPLEWICZ: Any physician who works with kids has these concerns. We worry so much about the effects of treatment. But what about the effects of the depression itself, which may not just affect your life but may be damaging your brain? The potential cost to the teenager of not taking the medicine could be, at worst, death and, at best, a real loss in their ability to fully live their lives.

PREPARING KIDS FOR ADULT LIFE

Continued from page 1

Emphasize communication and negotiation

Our culture is increasingly non-verbal, making it difficult for children to express themselves. "Insist on a sentence-speaking home," suggests Dr. Levine. "Stretch language abilities by talking about beloved subjects and areas of expertise." It is also imperative that children master writing skills. "Writing is the biggest orchestra a child will conduct. It has rules (punctuation), requires thought, and the ability to organize thinking. Children need to be great verbal and on-paper communicators."

Help kids plan

Planning helps develop perseverance. "Kids need to think in time and to organize by time. On Sunday night, parents can help make a list of what a child hopes to accomplish during the week. They can teach a child to plan steps that lead to a goal. They can keep their own offices neat, and show a child why things are organized as they are." All this helps a child gain a vision of his future. Parents shouldn't accept "I don't know" as an answer to the question "What do you want to do when you grow up?" Children need to

envision their future adult selves, so adulthood doesn't take them by surprise.

Give kids a preview of adult life

Kids need to understand what is required of certain careers long before they are on an educational path to that career. Children need to learn what adults do all day. They should study more biography in school, and be more aware of adult problems and events. "Kids can prepare to become adults if they're given the chance to study adults."

Teach kids to self-monitor

"A child should be able to monitor how he's doing. Try having him write the grade he felt he got on an exam right after the exam. This is a good way to tell if a child is too critical or not critical enough of himself."

Foster a project mentality

Children should engage in some long-term projects, in order to understand that they need to do things in steps and delay gratification. They need to incorporate such skills as creating strategies, organizing, setting priorities, managing their time and materials, and handling complex tasks.

Continued on page 6

THE NYC-PIA BENEFIT

is on Tuesday, February 25, 2003 at Caroline's on Broadway
1626 Broadway (between 49th and 50th Sts.)

This is an evening of great food and comedy!

**Please call Parents in Action at 212 987-9629 with your mailing information,
and we will send you an invitation.**

Embracing Differences: Promoting Diversity in Independent Schools

BY ADELE MALPASS

When Tamar Charles entered 6th grade at Dalton from the Prep for Prep program, she had already gone through a rigorous 14-month academic program, known as “boot camp.” During this period, she attended summer sessions, after-school classes and an all-day Saturday school on top of her regular schoolwork.

“My first two years at Dalton were easy, I was so over-prepared by Prep for Prep,” says Charles. Prep for Prep is the city’s leading organization in placing exceptional middle school and high school students of color in independent schools. Currently there are almost 600 students in independent day schools and more than 200 students in boarding schools. “The rigorous preparatory component helps the children feel confident in the classroom and allows them, in the beginning, to focus more on the social adjustment,” said Aileen Hefferren, Chief Executive of Prep for Prep.

Ms. Hefferren spoke about the program at the Fall Parents In Action luncheon for school representatives. Also featured as a speaker was Jacqueline Pelzer, director of Early Steps, a program that brings children of color into independent schools by assisting parents with the application process for kindergarten and first grade.

Last year, Early Steps placed 127 children in 42 different independent schools. “We guide families of color through the process, not just disadvantaged children,” explained Ms. Pelzer. “We hand-hold families through the paperwork, and make sure that applications are done in a timely manner.” About ten percent of the families in the Early Steps program get no financial aid. “Every family is expected to pay some portion of the tuition, even if it’s \$25 a month.”

Prep for Prep finds super-motivated students in the early years of grade school by doing an extensive

talent search and looking at more than 3,500 children in New York City public schools. Based on tests, parent interviews and IQ scores, the talent search accepts about 200 children. From this, there’s a 20 percent attrition rate for students who cannot handle the boot camp training period. As Hefferren said, “It’s not enough to simply be smart. You have to want to work hard.”

Independent schools commit fully-funded spots to students who complete the training, which totals about \$15 million in scholarships annually. “Eighty-five percent of these students go onto the most selective colleges in the country,” said Hefferren. For the past two years, the valedictorian at Horace Mann has been a Prep for Prep graduate.

For some families of color the social adjustment to independent schools can be dramatic, and the Early Steps program works with the schools to be more welcoming. As Pelzer points out, “No one is born with a multi-cultural outlook. It is a learned perspective.”

Tamar Charles admits that she wasn’t fully prepared for some aspects of the privileged lifestyle many independent school children lead. “At first I couldn’t believe what the bar mitzvahs were like,” she says. “They were over the top. Some people would bring a present like a portable DVD player to every bar mitzvah.”

Prep for Prep prepares students for the social adjustments they will make at new schools, while helping them maintain their unique perspective. “The children know they are different, and in general, they are proud to be different,” says Hefferren. “At most schools Prep for Prep students are school leaders, involved in sports, student government, and strong academically.” ●

PREPARING KIDS FOR ADULT LIFE

Continued from page 4

Point out patterns

Point out patterns, and help your child see similarities and differences. Give him a sense of relativity, which will be helpful in adult life.

Teach kids how to solve problems

Children need to be able to identify a problem, to see examples of others who have solved a similar problem, to come up with feasible solutions. “They need to postpone their first, automatic, emotional response, and figure out how to solve a problem.”

Help kids learn to cope

As much as we would like to protect kids from difficulties, they have to be able to deal with stress. “They need to have strategies for dealing with unpleasant times,” says Levine, who notes that often the children who fall apart as young adults were the golden superstars of high school. Perhaps they had too much success early on, and never learned what it felt like to be inadequate. Levine recommends coaching children from the sidelines. “Try not to intervene, to call the teacher or the bully’s parents for your sixth grader. Talk through a strategy so that he can make it fine on his own.”

Help kids understand how they see things

All humans see things in different ways — some see “the big picture,” while others focus on details. A “big picture” kid needs to learn to collaborate with those who like details; the two viewpoints together can produce a successful project.

Support individual values

Have your child make a list of twenty important beliefs that he has, and help him be firm in his opinions. Kids need to have great relationships, but also need to stay themselves. “Don’t let a child’s peers make him mediocre,” advises Dr. Levine. ●

Dr. Mel Levine is Professor of Pediatrics, University of North Carolina; Director, Center for Development and Learning; Co-Chairman of the Board, All Kinds of Minds, A Non-Profit Institution for the Understanding of Differences in Learning.

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

New York City Parents in Action Board of Directors 2002-2003

Executive Committee

Susan Newton, Chairman
Celeste Rault, President
Janie Goodwin, Vice President
Mary Beth Harvey, Vice President
Martha Leitner, Vice President
Sacha MacNaughton, Vice President
Barbara Greene, Secretary
Peggy Ellis, Treasurer
Linda Fraser, Nominating

Board

Holly Blausler, Barbara Brennan,
Jane Brown, Linda Calotta,
Polly Carpenter, Sandra Ferriter,
Susan Fisher, Laurie Freeman,
Aimee Garn, Lucy Martin Gianino,
Barbara Glatt, Nicky Grant,
Kathleen Harper, Nancy Hebert,
Robyn Joseph, Fran Laserson,
Heather Leeds, Ani Bedrossian
Omer, Kathleen Rold, Patty Sacks,
Alison Holtzschue Schloss,
Linda Schwartz, Meg Sheridan,
Randy Smolian, Robin Straus,
Eva Pomice Timerman

Chairman Emeritus

Lynn Manger

Advisory Board

Christine Colligan
George Davison
Dr. Ernesto Ferran
Charlene Giannetti
Dr. Karen Kennedy
Dr. Harold Koplewicz
Dr. George Lazarus
Thomas Lickona, Ph.D.
Maureen Linehan
Dr. Ralph Lopez
Dr. Jean Mandelbaum, Ph.D.
Erna O’Shea
Julie Ross
Nancy Samalin
Paula Zahn
Sophocles Zoullas

Newsletter:

Polly Carpenter
Aimee Garn
Maureen Sherry-Klinsky
Eva Pomice Timerman

Website:

Susan Newton

Ecstasy (Adam Bean, E, Roll, X, XTC)

Because of the recent rise in Ecstasy use, we are providing some current information on this dangerous substance provided by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (www.nida.nih.gov/).

MOMA or Ecstasy (Methylenedioxyamphetamine) is a synthetic drug with amphetamine and hallucinogenic properties. It is very popular among teenagers and college students because it causes a temporary euphoria (a great sense of well-being.) Ecstasy comes in a pill form that is often branded, e.g. Playboy bunnies, Nike swoosh, CK. This pill is taken at “Raves” for energy to keep dancing and for mood enhancement. The short-term effects include psychological difficulties, including confusion, depression, sleep problems, drug craving, severe anxiety, and paranoia. During and sometimes weeks after taking MOMA, physical symptoms develop, such as muscle tension, involuntary teeth clenching, nausea, blurred vision, rapid eye movement, faintness, chills and sweating. Recent research links MOMA to long-term damage to parts of the brain critical to thought and memory. Chronic use of MOMA was found in laboratory animals, and recently in humans, to produce long-lasting and perhaps permanent damage to the neurons that release serotonin. Ecstasy elevates blood pressure and heart rate and is potentially lethal.