



How To Be a “Go-To” Parent

BY VERONICA BENNETT

Do you sometimes feel as though your kids are growing up in their own “adult-free” zone? Dr. Catherine Steiner-Adair, Ed.D., noted psychologist, school consultant and author, offers reasons for your concern and concrete advice for staying connected to your kids. At Freedom Institute’s Independent School Program lecture, co-sponsored by NYC-Parents in Action and the Parents League of New York, Dr. Steiner-Adair presented her lecture “How to be a ‘Go-To’ Parent: Raising Kids of Character.” She stated that the biggest shift in parenting today is a real disappearance of childhood for some of today’s kids—they are growing up faster and doing things sooner. While parents used to say “she’s only 5..., 13..., 17...” as a way of acknowledging that a girl was not ready to dress, act or do things that an adult does, we now seem to accept that many kids will behave much as adults. Contributing to this development is that by the time they are 9 or 10 years old, children have shifted their focus from the family to the media for obtaining cultural cues. Another significant, but related, factor is that peer culture now functions as a second family by the time children are in middle school. Cell phones allow kids to communicate without parental input and break the connection between parents in different families. There is no central phone in the home, and parents don’t know who is calling. With cell phones, IM and video chat, kids

can be in touch with each other any time of the day or night. All this diminishes our presence as parents and a family.

While we may not like this reality, said Dr. Steiner-Adair, we need to accept it. The goal is to relate to our kids in ways that make them want to come to us when they have a problem, and not the Internet, a 16- or 18-year-old friend or a stranger. This approach means that parents must be prepared to have painful conversations early on, she noted. She also stressed acknowledging to your child that he is out there mak-

Kids describe three general types of parents that are off-putting: scary parents, crazy parents and clueless parents.

ing choices, but stating that you want to be the person he comes to for advice. Try not to panic if your child makes a bad choice, she advised, but don’t be afraid to explain why you didn’t like the action or behavior. Be compelling as a source of calm advice and support.

How can you tell if you are being effective as a “Go-To Parent?” Dr. Steiner-Adair said that kids describe three general types of parents that are off-putting: scary parents, crazy parents and clueless parents. Scary parents are judgmental and typically label their children according to what they do or accomplish, rather than who they are. They place too much emphasis on grades and performance, exert too much control over their kids’ social circle and activities and punish too severely. They scare their children simply by the intensity of their involvement in their kids’ lives, she said.

Crazy parents can also be described as “fix-it” parents—they move in quickly to solve problems without looking for alternatives or ways their children can

CONTENTS

President’s Letter	2
Allowing Your Teen to Taste: The Risks of Introducing Alcohol at Home	3
Ready, Set, Go: Preparing for Transitions in Childhood and the ‘Tween Years	4

PRESIDENT'S Letter

Fall 2008

A lot of television air time this year has been devoted to New York family life, but not a life to which very many New York families can actually relate. On “Real Housewives of New York City,” we see parents striving, spending, gossiping, excluding, and sometimes engaging in misguided parental moments. The hyper-reality of that show is tame beside the extravagant treatment of elite high school life on “Gossip Girl,” in which parents look, remarkably, five years older than their “juniors in high school,” and the adults and kids keep pace in drinking and drug use, cheating, breaking laws, and facing few consequences for their irresponsible choices.

As a counterpoint to the media version, NYC-Parents in Action will explore “Family Matters: Connecting and Communicating With Your Kids” as a theme this year.

The picture of the New York family in the media is a spectacle, but it's not ours. More than ever, the media shows us extremes, and the extremes don't have much to do with the concerns of most people. The New York

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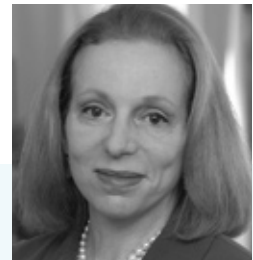
BILLY ELLIOT
THE MUSICAL

Sunday,
January 11, 2009

3 pm

Imperial Theater, 249 West 45th St.

For further information please contact
administrator@parentsinaction.org



AIMEE GARN

parents I know are diverse—and more involved with their children, occupied with work, busy with volunteer commitments—than these shows suggest. As much as the shows focus on realms of affluence, our lives are more concerned with maintaining a continuity of values and priorities even in a world of affluence.

As a counterpoint to the media version, NYC-Parents in Action will explore “Family Matters: Connecting and Communicating With Your Kids” as a theme this year. Members of our Advisory Board, among them heads of school, therapists, and pediatricians, agree that strong family communication is vital to a child's healthy emotional development. We begin the year with a benefit lecture by Bruce Breimer, Principal Emeritus and Retired College Guidance Director of The Collegiate School, on the topic of *Preparing For College: The Real Deal For Our Kids*. We will offer a seminar in November in collaboration with the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center; our annual Teen Scene in February; and a seminar on learning differences co-sponsored with the NYU Child Study Center in May. In addition to our seminars, we offer a luncheon speaker series for School Representatives, to which parents may be invited. For details on these events, please consult our calendar on page 6.

In the beginning of 2009, we will celebrate NYC-Parents in Action's Thirtieth Anniversary. In 1979-1980, founders Lynn Manger, Charlotte Weber, Joyce Hearst and Christine Sarazen met around a dining room table to discuss how they could support parents with information to help prevent teenage substance use. The group's founders, then parents of teenagers and now grandparents, focused on the concept that effective parenting in early childhood is a first step toward the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse. That mission has remained constant, and has inspired the educational programs and discussion groups which NYC-PIA has offered for three decades. We hope you'll join us this year for some of our programs, and help us celebrate their value to the community of REAL New York City parents. ●

Allowing Your Teen to Taste: The Risks of Introducing Alcohol at Home

BY CHARLANNE ZEPF, L.C.S.W.,
Director of the Independent School Program,
and TESSA KLEEMAN, L.M.H.C.,
Supervisor of the Independent School Program

In the “Dining and Wine” section of the New York Times on March 26, 2008, writer Eric Asimov asked the question: Can Sips at Home Prevent Binges? The following statement appeared after the title: “Little guidance is offered to parents on teaching teenagers about the pleasures of wine with a meal without endorsing reckless behavior.” As Substance Abuse Prevention Counselors, we are asked this question at almost every parent presentation we conduct in schools. We can empathize with this challenging parenting question! We want to emphasize a few points from the perspective of counselors who not only give lectures to parents but who provide alcohol/drug prevention workshops for students in over 50 New York City independent schools.

One of our most important reminders to parents who allow their teenagers to have “a few sips” of wine occasionally with a meal, religious occasion, or celebration is that just because your teens may be learning to appreciate a good Cabernet Sauvignon with you at home, does not ensure they will drink “responsibly” when they are with their peer group. Teens repeatedly tell our counselors, when they are with their friends, they drink to get drunk, to get “wasted.” A teen with a tolerance developed at home is more likely to drink more when with friends, in order to feel alcohol’s effects.

The reasons adolescents “drink to get drunk” and abuse alcohol, are varied. The two we hear most often are social anxiety and stress. Teens use the effects of alcohol to mitigate the normal social anxiety that accompanies spending time with their peers and to de-stress from the pressures of a rigorous academic work week focused on getting into top colleges.

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

Adolescents often binge drink, defined as five or more drinks in one sitting, in anticipation of an event where alcohol will not be served such as a school dance, an evening at a club, or a chaperoned party. Teens will binge drink or “pre-game” before the event so that they will feel drunk throughout the evening at their destination.

Even while sober, teens struggle to make healthy choices and have difficulty thinking through to the consequences of their actions.

The part of the adolescent brain responsible for judgment is not fully developed until about age 25. Even while sober, teens struggle to make healthy choices and have difficulty thinking through to the consequences of their actions. Adding alcohol to the mix with a group of teens only raises the risk for messy, high-risk situations: unprotected sex, date rape, fights, alcohol poisoning and DWI (driving while intoxicated) to name a few.

Another point for parents to think about is that teens can develop a tolerance to alcohol (and any drug for that matter) more quickly than an adult. Because their bodies are still developing, alcohol stays in a teen’s blood stream longer than in an adult’s body.

[Continued on page 10](#)

Ready, Set, Go: Preparing for Transitions in Childhood and the 'Tween Years

BY MAUREEN SHERRY

So often parents don't see the parallels between the transitions children make in their early years and those they make in adolescence. In the early years children's needs are so basic that their every milestone is accomplished through a tentative dance of holding on and letting go. Similarly, the 'tween and early adolescent years are filled with parents who encourage and support their children, giving them selective independence and responsibilities through trial and error or supporting baby steps toward greater maturity with unconditional love. The innate talent parents have for giving support to, say, steady a small child on wobbly legs, is the same talent used later in letting the 'tween or adolescent spread his or her wings slowly and carefully under watchful and loving eyes. The key is to know how much support to give at each stage and when and how to let go.

At the May 6 NYC-Parents in Action luncheon, Jean Mandelbaum, Ph.D., Director of All Souls School, noted that "as children move from states of disequilibrium to equilibrium they are developing coping skills and a greater understanding of the world." Using Kierkegaard's description of a parent teaching a child to walk without holding the child's hands, as an analogy for offering intangible support without taking over, Mandelbaum said that Kierkegaard's example "allows the child to walk, supported by arms that do not hold him," thus proving "he can do without" the parent, "as he walks alone." Mandelbaum pointed out five ways to help a child "walk alone," noting that these same skills can be applied to supporting an adolescent or pre-adolescent through times of change:

1. Prepare yourself for transitions

The way you feel will be conveyed to your child, so it's important to commit yourself to your child's success. Try and think one step ahead of your child's current stage of development so you can anticipate his needs in the near future.

2. Prepare your child

Help him connect new experiences to old ones. Go over what will be the same and what will be different. Explain what will happen and use role-play with him so that actual life experiences don't seem quite as surprising.

3. Establish routines

Routines help give kids greater control over their lives. Use little rituals to mark the start of a transition and also to congratulate its completion; this will help your child will feel more control over her world.

4. Be consistent

If expectations are appropriate, there are many ways to meet an objective. Try never to give mixed messages. Include other caregivers in your plan for helping your child. This will keep everyone on the same page.

5. Don't "do" for him

Every child needs to walk alone at some point—help your child to walk alone, don't walk for him. Help your child to help himself. Refrain from doing a task for him because it is unpleasant or awkward for him. There is a little pain in growing and we need to learn to let our children experience for themselves.

Children in the younger years outwardly show their anxiety over physical separation (think back to the first day of preschool). Adolescents, similarly, feel both the danger and excitement of their separateness. We need to encourage them to go and grow, even though we may like them to maintain some dependence on us.

This is where Jeanette Friedman, CSW in a private practice including adolescents, stepped in. She noted that the growth potential in early adolescence is "huge," and compared the brain of an adolescent to "a construction site," with much to build and develop. During the middle school years, the number of new tasks to perform ranks second only to those in the years from birth to age three. Children undergo tremendous change and pressure during both these periods. On a deeper level, said Friedman, times of

Continued on page 7

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Collegiate School.....	<i>Keren Coplan-Ringler</i>
Columbia Grammar & Preparatory School.....	<i>Pat Stockhausen and Lucy Weintraub</i>
Convent of the Sacred Heart.....	<i>Sophia Brenner, Ellen Bellet, Whitney Murphy</i>
Corlears School.....	
Dalton School.....	<i>Linda Heinberg, Connie Rodriguez, Jennifer Green, Sheryl Ostrager Rosen, Oksanna Malan</i>
Dwight School.....	<i>Stefani Langel</i>
Epiphany School.....	
Ethical Culture Fieldston School.....	
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Fieldston Upper.....	<i>Melanie Wymore</i>
Friends Seminary.....	<i>Miriam Mayerson</i>
Gateway School.....	<i>Dana Tedone</i>
Grace Church School.....	<i>Adriadne Platero</i>
Heschel School: Abraham Joshua.....	<i>Merle Wolff, Alison Granowitz</i>
Hewitt School.....	<i>Melissa Stoller, Laura Adam</i>
Horace Mann School.....	<i>Audrey Alton-Seckendorf, Sharyl Bronsky-Lederman, Susan Perelman</i>
La Scuola d'Italia.....	
Little Red Schoolhouse & Elisabeth Irwin High School.....	<i>Carol Pratt</i>
Loyola School.....	<i>Kathleen McAlindon</i>
Lycee Francais.....	
Marymount School.....	<i>Helen Lynch, Ellen DeRocco</i>
Nightingale-Bamford School.....	<i>Angela Furio Hopenhajm</i>
Packer Collegiate Institute.....	<i>Amy Lloyd, Rene Devlin-Weiss</i>
Poly Prep Country Day School.....	<i>Lisa Finstrom</i>
Professional Children's School.....	<i>Maria Checa-Rosen</i>
Ramaz School.....	<i>Judy Kahn</i>
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Saint David's School.....	<i>Nancy Hebert</i>
Spence School.....	<i>Judith Poss, Caroline Beneniste</i>
St. Bernard's School.....	<i>Maureen Sherry Klinsky, Sheila Aresty</i>
Town School.....	<i>Merrill Pavane, Maria Canale</i>
Trevor Day.....	<i>Karen Urban</i>
Trinity School.....	<i>Nancy Smith</i>
United Nations International School.....	<i>Jodi Gumas</i>
Winston Prep.....	<i>Kelly MacNeil</i>
York Preparatory School.....	<i>Sylvia Parab</i>

List as of June 2008. For further information, contact NYC-Parents In Action.

NYC-PARENTS IN ACTION 2008-2009 CALENDAR

“Family Matters: Connecting and Communicating With Your Kids”

SEMINARS

Reservations may be placed for seminars by email to reservations@parentsinaction.org or by phone to NYC-PIA at 212-987-9629 except as noted.

High School/High Stress: Helping Your Adolescent Navigate Stress

Tuesday, November 18, 2008, 6:00-7:30 pm
Goldwurm Auditorium, Mt. Sinai Medical Center, 1425 Madison Avenue

Speaker:

- TBA

Teen Scene XXIII

Tuesday, February 9, 2009, 6:00-8:00 pm
Trinity School, 139 West 91st Street

Co-sponsored with Parents League

Panelists:

- Independent school teenagers

Moderator:

- TBA

7th Annual Adam Katz Memorial Lecture

Wednesday, May 13, 2009
Time and Place TBA

Panelists:

- TBA

Moderator:

- **Dr. Harold Koplewicz, M.D.**
Director, NYU Child Study Center and Chair, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

BENEFIT LUNCHEON

For further information, please contact administrator@parentsinaction.org

Benefit Luncheon Lecture

Thursday, October 2, 2008, 12:00-2:00 pm
The University Club

Speaker:

- **Bruce Breimer**
Principal Emeritus and retired College Guidance Director of The Collegiate School

LUNCHEON SPEAKER SERIES

To reserve a place at a regular PIA Luncheon, please contact your School Representative. Space is limited.

An Expert's Guide to Negotiating the Prickly Points of the 'Tween Years

Tuesday, November 11, 2008, 12:00-2:00 pm
Temple Israel, 112 East 75th Street

Speaker:

- **Julie Ross, M.A.**
Executive Director and Founder of Parenting Horizons; Author of Practical Parenting for the 21st Century: The Manual You Wish Had Come With Your Child and How to Hug a Porcupine: Negotiating the Prickly Points of 'Tween Years

Blogs, Chats and Facebook:

Understanding Our Children's Cyber World

Tuesday, January 13, 2009, 12:00-2:00 pm
Temple Israel, 112 East 75th Street

Speaker:

- **Charlene Giannetti**
Author of Boy Crazy: Keeping Our Daughter's Feet on the Ground When Her Head Is in the Clouds

Early Childhood:

Keeping Your Kids on Track

Tuesday, April 21, 2009, 12:00-2:00 pm
Temple Israel, 112 East 75th Street

Speakers:

- **Dr. Bernard Dreyer**
NYU Professor of Pediatrics and Vice Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics
- **Dr. David Salsberg**
Clinical Instructor, NYU School of Medicine and Supervisor of Pediatric Psychology at NYU Medical Center's Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation and Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

PREPARING FOR TRANSITIONS

Continued from page 4

transition are also about separation and loss versus attachment. In addition, social rejection, especially involving bullying and cruelty, is particularly damaging to a young ego and some young people turn to substance abuse as a comfort at this vulnerable time.

Because the years from fifth through eighth grade encompass ages filled with “first-times,” children are particularly vulnerable to forming long-term addictions during this phase. It is imperative in these years to stay totally clear of drug and alcohol use. In fact, Ms. Friedman maintains that (according to Joseph Califano of the Columbia University Center on Addiction & Substance Abuse) if parents can keep experimentation with all substances at bay until after the age of 21, they can help to establish for their children a life likely to be free of addictive disease. It is adolescent use that sets the stage for future addiction.

Ms. Friedman noted in particular some adolescent issues parents should be aware of:

1. Interpersonal factors (outside the child)

Children are very susceptible to peer pressure and have a peripheral awareness that the “cool” people are doing something they don’t know much about. Watch out for signs of social rejection of your child, as it can lead to risky behavior, such as substance experimentation.

2. Parental monitoring

Be aware of what your child is doing and who his friends are. This is most likely to be successful only if you and your child have had a strong bond from the very beginning. Make sure his school is a good fit for him; make sure also that it is nurturing enough for him at a fragile stage of life.

3. Intra-personal factors (within the child)

These are struggles within the self and can be harder to monitor than the interpersonal factors. Be aware of your child’s self-esteem and self-efficacy and encourage her to speak for herself at this point. Try not to do as much for children who hover between being able and unable to do for themselves. Look for signs of

anxiety from your adolescent; if you see such signs, initiate and maintain between the two of you a dialogue that is open and non-judgmental. Depression can seep in at these vulnerable times. Drug experimentation may be evidence of depression in both boys and girls.

Ms. Friedman talked also of the mainstreaming of pot smoking and how experimentation with all substances (even a glass of wine at dinner) can have a lifelong impact. “Substance abuse among youth, regardless of circumstance or rationale, is the single greatest impediment to healthy academic, emotional, social development, with life-long consequences for many,” Ms. Friedman said.

What kids need

To succeed, kids need to feel a sense of control. The more children feel they can control some things in their environment, the more secure they are overall. If they are prepared adequately for transitions through orientation, talk, role-play, etc. they will handle tricky situations with greater confidence and aplomb. Offer as much preparation as possible for “next steps.” In essence, “children get help when the parents are ready.”

Ms. Friedman is a proponent of Life Skills, a curriculum taught at some schools in sixth through eighth grades. The program helps kids learn to make healthy decisions and helps reinforce the basic values of your family, separate from the world.

How do these transitions affect parents?

Often, seeing our children go through the tunnel of adolescence brings up memories of our own life experience. Parents may re-visit the stages their kids are going through and may then project their own baggage on the children. Ms. Friedman urged parents NOT to project their own pasts on their children. Parents may think they know what their child is thinking at different stages of life, but they really don’t. Do not assume for your child—rather, ask your child what he is thinking and feeling. By communicating openly, with a slow trigger on the judgment gun, you are laying the foundation for open dialogue and a stronger relationship going forward. ●

SAVE THE DATE

**NYC–Parents In Action announces its
First Annual Benefit Luncheon Lecture in support of school programs:**

Preparing For College: The Real Deal For Our Kids

featuring

BRUCE BREIMER, Principal Emeritus and retired
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OCTOBER 2, 2008 from 12 pm to 2 pm

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one of the most respected counselors in the business!

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HOW TO BE A “GO-TO” PARENT

Continued from page 1

handle a situation on their own. The result, said Dr. Steiner-Adair, is that these parents do not foster their children’s ability to take risks. At the same time, these parents may tell a child that he can “be anything he wants” in a way that is inconsistent with the child’s strengths and weaknesses. Dr. Steiner-Adair said that the “clueless parent” is the parent who tries to be a “best friend” and is too involved with the details of the child’s life. This parent typically feels that it’s okay for a parent to remain upset and angry. Clueless parents may allow their children to swear at them, take a laissez-faire attitude towards drugs and alcohol, and fail to follow through with consequences. Ultimately, they become powerless to influence their children.

Parents should strive to achieve two goals: diminish stress and teach your values.

Dr. Steiner-Adair advised parents to strive to achieve two goals: diminish stress and teach your values. Children, she said, want to know that they matter, they can make a difference, and they do not have to change the world in order for their parents to be proud of them. All children, she suggested, like downtime with their parents and want to hang out with them. When parents show an interest in what their children like, it makes the children feel as though they matter. Dr. Steiner-Adair, like so many knowledgeable experts, recommends that families plan fun outings and dinners together. Conversation at dinner should be light and stress-free. Family dinners are not the time to discuss school work, college applications and the like, she noted.

If family dinners and outings are designed to reduce stress, save the hard talks for a trip in the car or a long walk. “There are things that you must tell your children, and that they don’t want you to tell them,” she said. Don’t expect to have just one conversation—be brief and keep them hungry for more, she advised. Be careful what you say when your child relates a story

Creating a “Go-To” Home

- Have teen-friendly “junk food” available.
- Have a place for kids to hang out.
- Create a clear sense that adults are present and in the background.
- Create a sense that there are rules to be respected (i.e., put your dishes in the sink, throw the pizza box away).
- Establish that no alcohol is accessible to kids in your home.
- Be available for kids to talk to you if necessary.

about “a friend”—he may be testing the waters to see how you would react if he did the same. Do not gossip as a form of entertainment—adult rumor mills are scary to children and teens, warned Dr. Steiner-Adair. If your child relays a story, she suggests saying something like, “I hope she’s okay” or “It must be hard for him and his parents.”

Speak to your concerns directly and calmly, advised Dr. Steiner-Adair. Children need clear expectations and realistic limits, but they will push those limits from time to time. Be clear about what is okay and what is not. Remind them that consequences lead to a building of trust, and privileges must be earned. Tell them what you expect, but acknowledge that it’s their choice and destiny. Don’t forget to add, she said, that you love them no matter what, and that you will be there to help. Ultimately, said Dr. Steiner-Adair, children should know they will never be alone in a horrible crisis and they can come to you first. That’s what will make you a family, and a “Go-To Parent.” ●

ALLOWING YOUR TEEN TO TASTE

Continued from page 3

Consequently, given the same amount of alcohol, the teen brain is exposed to higher levels of alcohol than an adult's. This puts teenagers at higher risk for addiction.

We cannot underestimate the powerful influence parents have over their teenager's perception of the effects of alcohol. During a recent Freedom Institute workshop, a middle school student argued that The New York Times says their parents should serve alcohol to them. Her point was that alcohol must not be so bad. It is easy to see how, for all the 7th graders in the room that day, this could have translated into an expectation that parents give them permission to drink. Down the line, it is just this kind of perception that leads teens to justify drinking on their own. What we see as counselors in the schools is that when parents serve alcohol to their teens, or pre-teens, it is understood as a green light to drink whether or not their parents are around. ●

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.

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FALL 2008 ISSUE