

# Learning Differences: Evaluating, Managing and Collaborating to Keep Your Children on Track

BY SALLY SHERWOOD

## NYU Specialists Underscore the Need for Partnership and Communication

A lifestyle magazine aimed at the general public recently featured a brief quiz entitled “Does Your Child Have ADHD?” If readers answered ten questions in the affirmative, they were advised to consult a professional. Would that all parents could diagnose learning and behavioral issues after a five-minute read.

While parents, professionals and educators may closely scrutinize children who repeatedly evince certain behaviors, not every easily distractible child has ADHD.\* Addressing an audience at the April 21, 2009, Parents in Action luncheon, pediatric cognitive development specialists and colleagues Benard Dreyer, M.D., and David Salsberg, Psy.D., attempted to allay confusion and encourage conversation about learning differences. Presented by PIA, NYU Kids and the NYC Child Study Center, the discussion considered effective ways to recognize, evaluate and treat the often puzzling constellation of symptoms constituting ADHD and related learning differences; the impact of diagnoses on families; and the need for partnership among parents, teachers and professionals in working with each other and affected children.

Hyped, hyperbolized, over-diagnosed or over-treated, ADHD has assumed a life of its own, depending upon who is doing the observing. Dr. Dreyer contends that ADHD is over-diagnosed and under-diagnosed. “We know the symptoms,” he explained “How we treat them depends upon the problem.”

\*“ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) is a term once used to describe easily distractible but not necessarily hyperactive children with difficulty focusing. ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) is a newer, preferred term that includes as a subset those children who are primarily hyperactive. The term ADD is used periodically to refer to children — even those with hyperactivity — who, in fact, would be better described with the more proper term, ADHD.” — Benard Dreyer, M.D.

Parents usually first hear about their children’s learning issues from the school. The manner in which this information is conveyed may dictate the family’s ongoing relationship with the school, the parents’ willingness to consult outside professionals and, of course, the long-term academic success and psychological health of the child.

Dr. Dreyer generally encounters a family in one of two ways: after a school has counseled parents to consider an evaluation for a child with learning difficulties or troubling behavior, or when the parents are frustrated with a school’s inability to effectively teach the child. Before rendering a diagnosis, doctors should consider multiple factors, from sleep disorders to peer interaction, which may provoke or exacerbate behavior that mimics ADHD. In any case, Dr. Dreyer believes that no medication or treatment should be prescribed or administered until a comprehensive evaluation has revealed the nature and extent of a child’s learning problems.

### Evaluation

Dr. Salsberg explained that the purpose of an evaluation is not simply to diagnose and label but to gather more information about a child. An evaluation will disclose a range of intellectual strengths and weaknesses; an overview of learning styles; an assessment of memory, attention and organization skills; and an appraisal of social and emotional wellbeing.

Evaluations may be conducted privately or at no expense through the Department of Education’s Committee on Pre-school Education (CPSE) or Committee on Special Education (CSE). These evaluations are available to all children, regardless of their public or private school status. However, a privately engaged evaluator must conform to the department’s testing requirements.

Evaluation results can help the schools or, in some cases, the Department of Education, recommend or

## LEARNING DIFFERENCES CONTINUED

provide tutoring, therapy services, special education placement and/or class accommodations to address the needs of the individual child.

“Many children are diagnosed and medicated early on for what appears to be an attention deficit, only to be evaluated in middle school with learning style differences,” said Dr. Salsberg. “These children don’t know what to pay attention *to* because they don’t know how to organize themselves.” An evaluation allows a qualified clinician to assess concurrent or underlying learning issues and to develop a more comprehensive strategy that can be implemented by parents, schools and medical professionals. Once the results are interpreted, parents should have the tools to make critical, thoughtful decisions that will affect their child’s school career.

**Communication between parents, educators and professionals remains a critical component of every child’s ongoing academic life.**

Regardless of whether a child is evaluated by a private practitioner or one selected by the Department of Education, school bureaucracies can be daunting. Both panelists encouraged parents to enlist a psychologist, pediatrician, parent advocate or developmental behavioral specialist to help interpret the evaluation results and assist in navigating the school system. An evaluation may expose ADHD, dyslexia, reading disabilities, auditory processing problems and a host of learning differences; however, intervention must be tailored to the individual child.

While earlier intervention may head off challenges in adolescence, learning disorders do not always present themselves in early childhood. As a child’s education progresses, the school environment changes. Middle school requires youngsters to think more independently, write more fluently, spend extended time on homework, and acquire higher math skills. While even the most accomplished lower schoolers may discover their learning skills inadequate to newly imposed academic demands, those children with pre-

viously undetected learning differences may suddenly find themselves challenged by fifth grade. At this point, the parent-educator-practitioner team should initiate an action plan as quickly as possible.

### Treating ADHD

Treatment for ADHD, often a combination of behavior therapy and medication, may depend upon whether the condition is interfering with a child’s learning and/or self-esteem. Some children with ADHD cannot control their lack of focus, constant fidgeting or impulsivity long enough to change their behavior. In such instances, stimulant medication may precede behavior modification therapy.

“The good news about stimulant medication is that it’s here today and gone tomorrow,” noted Dr. Dreyer. “It acts immediately; it’s gone pretty much immediately.” Parents should be given the opportunity to weigh the potential side effects of medication against the disabling impact of a child’s behavior. Dr. Dreyer reminded parents that no one can force medication upon their children. In every situation, treatment modalities should be discussed with the appropriate professionals and adapted for each child.

While complex learning issues mandate a highly coordinated approach to schooling and treatment, communication between parents, educators and professionals remains a critical component of every child’s ongoing academic life. Recognizing and constructively responding to behavioral signals, articulated anxieties and learning differences of childhood can only ease the path to healthy adulthood. ●

Dr. Benard Dreyer, NYU Professor of Pediatrics and Director of Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrics, is currently co-principal investigator on an NIH multi-year randomized controlled trial of an intervention to improve language development in high-risk young children.

Dr. David Salsberg, a licensed neuropsychologist and private practitioner, is Clinical Instructor, NYU School of Medicine, and Supervisor of Pediatric Psychology at NYU Medical Center’s Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation and The Stephen D. Hassenfeld Children’s Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders.

# PRESIDENT'S Letter

## Fall 2009

As the new president of NYC-Parents in Action I am honored to welcome you back to the 2009-2010 school year. This is an exciting year for us as we celebrate the organization's 30th Anniversary. Thirty years ago our founder, Lynn Manger, along with a small group of women, created NYC-Parents in Action. Their goal was to build a community of individuals who would support each other in meeting the challenges of parenting.

Much has changed in thirty years. With increasing opportunities for women outside the home, the prevalence of mothers balancing a career and family has increased. Technology, which has given us the ability to communicate instantly and globally, affects us in ways we could never have imagined.

The effect of these developments has made NYC-PIA and the premise on which it was founded more relevant than ever. Our new tagline, "Be Involved, Be Informed, Be Connected" captures this philosophy. The need for dialogue and active listening is crucial to understanding the world in which we live and necessary for building healthy relationships. Our community is vital to how we function as individuals and as parents.

Thirty years later, NYC-PIA's mission, and the organization, continue to grow. Over 100 volunteers work with 45 independent schools, providing trained facilitators for over 250 group discussions within these schools. Free seminars throughout the school year offer information on important parenting issues. Coverage of these events can be found in our on-line newsletter and Web site, along with articles on a wide variety of parenting topics.

Our independent school community is vibrant and diverse, made up of parents who are committed to their children, their schools, and their communities. We strive to address a wide range of issues, from learning differences to substance abuse.

We hope you will join us this year for the many events we have planned. Our opening seminar, the evening of November 19, will feature Michael Fertik and Regina Lewis on "The Internet: Ins and Outs of Cyberspace," at the Mount Sinai Medical Center. We are also excited to announce that Anna Quindlen will be the guest speaker at NYC-PIA's fall Benefit Luncheon. Join us on October 21, as Anna talks about parenting in today's world.

**This is an exciting year for us as we celebrate the organization's 30th Anniversary.**

As we "go green" our Web site is more important than ever. Please visit [www.parentsinaction.org](http://www.parentsinaction.org) for updates on speakers and activities as new events are added throughout the year. To assure timely notification of events, please enroll on our site through Constant Contact. Further, this fall we will debut the Parents in Action blog, "PIA Community Forum," to provide a venue for you to share your thoughts on community issues.

It is especially hard to ask for your support in these difficult economic times, but your contributions are needed more than ever as NYC-PIA's dedicated volunteers strive to continue to provide facilitated discussion meetings, seminars, our Newsletter and Web site, all free of charge. We greatly appreciate a gift of any size.

Thirty years ago I was in college studying child development, looking forward to the day I would be a parent. Now, as a mother of four, I know this is the most important and meaningful responsibility of my life. I also know that as parents we are at our best when we have the support of a community we can depend on. At NYC-Parents in Action we hope to be that community for you.

I look forward to seeing you in the coming year.

MARY BETH HARVEY

# Commentary

FROM FREEDOM INSTITUTE

## Talking to Your Children About Financial Changes

BY CHARLANNE ZEPF BAUERLEIN, L.C.S.W.,  
and TESSA KLEEMAN, L.M.H.C.

How do we talk with our children about a topic that terrifies even the bravest of grown-ups? Since the current economic crisis began, many months have come and gone, and if you have been postponing talking with your kids about the recession, this might be a good time to initiate some frank conversation on the subject. Parents in our community face the same daunting tasks of all parents struggling with economic downturn, while simultaneously confronting the complex challenges of their own or a loved one's recovery. At Freedom Institute's Independent School program,

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we experience firsthand the emotional toll of this economic crisis. From sixth graders worrying about their parents' shifts in mood to high school seniors panicking about college tuition to jobless parents strained by pressures to feign some semblance of financial stability, families everywhere are struggling. Many parents are looking for guidance in talking with their kids about a crisis whose resolution may be months—or even years—away.

Anyone who has ever hidden something troubling from a loved one can attest that the temporary fix of keeping a secret actually breeds additional anxiety. Yet when it comes to the topic of money, many parents believe that hiding their worries and pain protects their children. In truth, evading the topic exacerbates children's fears and places superhuman expectations on struggling adults.

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.

Here are five simple tips to help you speak honestly and calmly with your children:

- 1. First things first — don't be afraid to admit uncertainty.** Ambiguity is tough for parents and children alike. None of us knows when this crisis will be over, and the uncertainty is tough for parents and children alike. Do not feel pressure to provide your child with precise answers about your family's financial future. Instead, convey your unconditional love to your children and assure them they are safe. Saying these words in earnest might actually quell your own anxiety as you, too, need to believe your family is secure.
- 2. Express yourself openly.** Acknowledge how you feel and let your child know that sometimes things happen that are beyond our control: "You know, honey, I am feeling stressed and worried right now, and I have to just wait and do my best until things get better for everybody. I'm really glad you asked me how I'm feeling. It makes me know you really care. How are you feeling?" This shows your child that your discomfort is not her fault and models that expressing painful emotions is acceptable and appropriate. These words can open up a dialogue and reduce the pressure to say exactly the right thing.
- 3. Respond.** Kids are perceptive. If they aren't learning about the economic climate in the classroom, they are probably observing changes in spending habits, attitude, and stress level at home and among their friends. If your child asks if your family is

## TALKING ABOUT FINANCIAL CHANGES CONTINUED

struggling, you can answer affirmatively without inciting terror or exposing inappropriate financial details. Tell them, “our family has less money this year than we usually do, so we’ve made some changes like taking fewer vacations and shopping less often for new clothes. I wonder, are there kids in your class whose families are in the same boat as us?” Helping your child see that other families are adapting to changing circumstances is important and, again, lessens some of the pressure for you. Conversely, if your family is struggling less than those around you, encourage your child to think of ways to be supportive to others whose losses are more profound.

**4. Be creative.** Invite your child to join you in scaling back by replacing pricey activities or purchases with more homespun options. If, for example, your child always gets the newest toys before they even hit the shelves, try introducing the idea of saving money so they can purchase the item for themselves. Offer your child a nominal allowance and cheer him/her on in the saving process. Encourage older children to secure a babysitting or tutoring job. Younger children can be encouraged to pitch in with home chores to earn extra money and they, in particular, will view this as empowering, and even fun.

**5. Reach out.** Remember that you are not alone.

Take comfort in friends, extended family, your child’s schoolteachers and counselors, your house of worship, and other trusted people. Encourage your child to see that he or she, too, is a member of a community where people care for one another apart from income or wealth, and appreciate one another for who they are, not what they have.

In times such as these, when families are struggling to get by, it is often difficult to see the opportunities that struggle can present. Now is every family’s opportunity to show their children that the murky waters of uncertainty may be faced with courage. Model for your child the willingness to do so calmly, with steady hope that a more stable future will eventually arrive. Your family will grow stronger in the process. ●

## Ari Emanuel on the Challenge of Learning Disabilities

Report on the 7th Annual Adam Jeffrey Katz Memorial Lecture Featuring Ari Emanuel in Discussion with Dr. Harold S. Koplewicz, Founder and Director of the NYU Child Study Center

BY SUSAN FISHER

**Dynamic visionaries** rarely have an easy time of it. Ari Emanuel, the creator of the Hollywood powerhouse talent agency Endeavor, which recently merged with William Morris, spoke at Friends Seminary on behalf of the NYU Child Study Center, on May 13.

Also known as the role model for Ari Gold in the popular TV series, “Entourage,” Ari is the youngest brother to both wunderkind White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, and to Dr. Zeke Emanuel, health care policy advisor to President Obama. Growing up did not seem easy, as Emanuel described it. Coming from a competitive environment at home, he suffered through school with severe dyslexia, was stigmatized as a Special Ed student, and in his earliest years, was known as the kid who was sent to the Principal’s office more days than not.

In fourth grade Ari began expressing his frustration with school in ways too visible to ignore, including beating up other children. As is usually the case, having a diagnosis is the first step in identifying strategies for help, and in this case, testing revealed that Ari was very dyslexic. As part of the evaluation, he was asked to describe what he saw when shown a picture of a banana and a mule. He knew what he was seeing, but couldn’t say it aloud. He simply couldn’t find the right words. The tests showed that, in addition to being dyslexic, Ari suffered from ADHD.

Ari credits his mother with having saved him. She took him “endlessly” to see all kinds of reading specialists, worked with him on the various programs prescribed, and perhaps most importantly, made him feel that he was a capable person. She helped him see that his poor performance in school was due to an illness, not a character flaw or deficiency. He would simply have to

work harder, but she and the rest of the family expected that he could, and would, succeed. To paraphrase, failure wasn’t an option, nor did a diagnosis of dyslexia excuse him from his parents’ high expectations.

Perhaps the central theme that Ari was able to convey to the audience at Friends Seminary is that although dyslexia is a challenge, parents need to “keep the faith.” Parents can work with dyslexia, but while doing so, it is both helpful and necessary that they consider their child normal, bolster their child’s confidence in the face of challenges greater than those faced by peers, and hold high standards for the child. “Parents can give love and education,” according to Ari, and if there is struggle involved in attaining that education, it’s fine for a parent to be tough, because that too, is a form of love. Helping one’s child stick to a program by setting and maintaining firm consequences, (i.e., “no homework, no football”), is a form of love that can be challenging for parents.

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Ari both praised his own mother for her dedication, and spoke from his personal experience as the father of two dyslexic sons. He was quite adamant that at the first signs of dyslexia (or any other learning disability), parents should investigate. Because he was reluctant to face that his own son might be suffering as he had, Ari feels he overlooked warning signs until it was late — fourth grade — and blames himself for that.

Ari’s son was so frustrated at school that some of the boy’s anxiety took the form of a physical tic. Luckily the son has outgrown the tic, but he has not outgrown the dyslexia. He has to work very hard to keep up with his classmates. Dyslexia means, among other things, having to take a much longer time than other children to read and comprehend written material. Language skills, also, often lag.

## ARI EMANUEL CONTINUED

One relevant insight into Ari's life as a dyslexic, probably common to most fellow dyslexics, was that he devised many compensation strategies. With humor, he described how, while in school, he was never sure whether apostrophes went before or after the s. His solution was to place the apostrophes on top of the s. He also positioned himself strategically in the classroom, sitting in the chair in which he felt he was least likely to be called on. On a more serious note, Ari compensated for poor reading skills by developing great people skills and athletic prowess. In this way, he was able to keep up his self-confidence.

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Drug use, both prescribed and recreational, was the last frontier that Ari broached. During his school career, despite terrible stomachaches, Ari used Ritalin. He was able to stop taking it in college, but by then he knew how to work effectively, utilizing his strengths and weaknesses: "Whereas other people would organize on paper, I organized in my head."

When asked if he was drawn towards drinking and recreational drugs as a way to soften the "crying on the inside," Ari once again praised his mother, implying there was a zero tolerance policy at home. He noted that while he "suffered in school" much more than did his two stellar older brothers, it was not as much as he would have suffered "if my mother had found me using drugs or drinking."

Ari sounded clearly and often the theme that parental involvement is crucial: "As parents, we can give our children love and education. Be involved!" Offering greater detail, he stressed the duty of parents to:

1. Be vigilant in looking for early signs of learning disabilities;
2. Help the child stick with a prescribed program even though it might be grueling, frustrating or boring;
3. Identify ways to break up formidable tasks into smaller segments;
4. Support the child in developing other interests, both academic and non-academic;
5. De-stigmatize learning disabilities. (Ari tells his sons about all the "successful people with dyslexia," including the founder of Cisco.)

With Ari Emanuel as spokesperson for dyslexia and ADHD, it isn't hard to imagine learning disabilities de-stigmatized for this entire generation! ●

## PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL REPS 2009-2010

| School                                                    | School Rep                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Alexander Robertson School.....                           | <i>Carrie Schantz (1)</i>                                                      |
| Allen-Stevenson School.....                               | <i>To be announced</i>                                                         |
| Berkeley Carroll School.....                              | <i>To be announced</i>                                                         |
| Birch Wathen Lenox School.....                            | <i>Inge Brafman</i>                                                            |
| Brearley School.....                                      | <i>Eloise Donofrio</i>                                                         |
| Browning School.....                                      | <i>To be announced</i>                                                         |
| Buckley School.....                                       | <i>Jennifer Anderson</i>                                                       |
| Caedmon School.....                                       | <i>Carolyn Lamphier</i>                                                        |
| Calhoun School.....                                       | <i>Debra Haylor</i>                                                            |
| Chapin School.....                                        | <i>Kimberly McLeod</i>                                                         |
| Claremont Preparatory School.....                         | <i>Gwen Dordick</i>                                                            |
| Collegiate School.....                                    | <i>Barb Levison</i>                                                            |
| Columbia Grammar & Preparatory School.....                | <i>Pat Stockhausen</i>                                                         |
| Convent of the Sacred Heart Lower School.....             | <i>To be announced</i>                                                         |
| Convent of the Sacred Heart Middle School.....            | <i>Whitney Murphy (5-7)</i>                                                    |
| Convent of the Sacred Heart Upper School.....             | <i>Sophia Brenner</i>                                                          |
| Dalton School.....                                        | <i>Linda Heinberg (4-12), Jennifer Wideman-Green (K-3),<br/>Ruth Cox (K-3)</i> |
| Dwight School.....                                        | <i>Monica Byrczek</i>                                                          |
| Ethical Culture Fieldston School.....                     | <i>Teri Mendelsohn</i>                                                         |
| Fieldston Lower.....                                      | <i>Stacey Radin</i>                                                            |
| Fieldston Upper.....                                      | <i>Marla Franzese</i>                                                          |
| Friends Seminary.....                                     | <i>Katy Homans c/o Eva</i>                                                     |
| Gateway School.....                                       | <i>To be announced</i>                                                         |
| Grace Church School.....                                  | <i>Beatrice Novabatsky, Stacey Goergen</i>                                     |
| Heschel School: Abraham Joshua.....                       | <i>Alison Granowitz (LS, MS), Shirley Abraham (HS)</i>                         |
| Hewitt School.....                                        | <i>Melissa Stoller, Jacqui Schein</i>                                          |
| Horace Mann School.....                                   | <i>Audrey Alton-Seckendorf</i>                                                 |
| Little Red Schoolhouse & Elisabeth Irwin High School..... | <i>Carol Pratt</i>                                                             |
| Loyola School.....                                        | <i>Judy Choix</i>                                                              |
| Marymount School.....                                     | <i>Elizabeth Young, Sharon Teissonniere</i>                                    |
| Nightingale-Bamford School.....                           | <i>Cathy Lorenz</i>                                                            |
| Packer Collegiate Institute.....                          | <i>Ashley Bernhard (LS), Rene Devlin-Weiss (5-12)</i>                          |
| Poly Prep Country Day School.....                         | <i>To be announced</i>                                                         |
| Professional Children's School.....                       | <i>To be announced</i>                                                         |
| Riverdale Country School.....                             | <i>Roni Berg (MS and US, 6-12),<br/>Amy Glaswand(LS through 5)</i>             |
| Rodeph Sholom School.....                                 | <i>Jane Hearst Sussman</i>                                                     |
| Rudolph Steiner School.....                               | <i>Gloria Mills</i>                                                            |
| Saint Ann's School.....                                   | <i>Rachel Coates</i>                                                           |
| Saint David's School.....                                 | <i>Linda Kelly</i>                                                             |
| Spence School.....                                        | <i>Alice Crandall, Sandra (Sam) Prangley</i>                                   |
| St. Bernard's School.....                                 | <i>Sheila Aresty, Maureen Sherry Klinsky</i>                                   |
| Town School.....                                          | <i>Paula Gendel, Raffaella Palacardo</i>                                       |
| Trevor Day.....                                           | <i>To be announced</i>                                                         |
| Trinity School.....                                       | <i>Karen Ryan</i>                                                              |
| United Nations International School.....                  | <i>Keiko Tase</i>                                                              |
| Winston Prep.....                                         | <i>Kelly MacNeil</i>                                                           |
| Windward.....                                             | <i>To be announced</i>                                                         |
| York Preparatory School.....                              | <i>Stephen Koch</i>                                                            |



## NYC-PARENTS IN ACTION 2009-2010 BOARD CALENDAR

### “Parenting in Changing Times”

*Please note: All School Rep Luncheons and Facilitator Training sessions will be held at Saint James’ Church, 865 Madison Avenue; 212.774.4200.*

#### SEPTEMBER

Wednesday 30th

##### New Facilitator Training

9:00 am–12:00 pm  
St. James’ Atrium rooms

*Contact PIA at [www.parentsinaction.org](http://www.parentsinaction.org) if interested in training as a facilitator*

#### OCTOBER

Wednesday 21st

##### 30th Anniversary Benefit Luncheon

##### Anna Quindlen’s Insights on Parenting

12:00 pm–2:00 pm  
University Club, 1 West 54th Street

#### NOVEMBER

Wednesday 18th

##### Luncheon

##### The Emotional Well-Being of Our Teenagers

Speakers:

- Jennifer Havens NYULMC
- Dr. Chris Lucas NYU Child Study Center

12:00 pm–2:00 pm  
St. James Church, Coburn Hall

Thursday 19th

##### Seminar

##### The Internet: Ins and Outs of Cyberspace

Co-Sponsor:

- Mt. Sinai Adolescent Health Center

Speakers:

- Michael Fertik
- Regina Lewis AOL

6:00 pm–8:00 pm  
Goldwurm Auditorium, Mount Sinai Medical Center, 1425 Madison Avenue

#### JANUARY

Date to be announced

##### Fathers Only Seminar

Speakers:

- Dr. Ralph Lopez
- Dr. George Lazarus

Time and Location to be announced

#### FEBRUARY

Monday 8th

##### Teen Scene

6:00 pm–8:00 pm  
Trinity School, 139 West 91st Street

#### APRIL

Wednesday 28th

##### School Rep Luncheon

Keynote Speaker:

- Jeanette Friedman

12:00 pm–2:00 pm  
St. James Church, Coburn Hall