

This edition of the Spring 2013 newsletter takes a less traditional approach to some topics. Our President's letter is an opinion piece and Teen Scene is considered in a more humorous light. We have articles covering the Fathers Only Seminar and another about our children's safety. Finally, we have a guest writer who offers valuable information about anorexia. Let us know what you think. We're interested in your feedback and look forward to including some of your comments in our September issue.

— THE EDITORS

Helicopter Fathers? Tips for Dads in a High-Pressure Culture

BY LISA HUFFINES

Protective boundaries are hard to determine and easy to cross, as fathers learned at PIA's second annual Fathers Only panel discussion, "The Line Between Protection and Over-Protection." On a cold January night, a lively group posed challenging questions to panelists Chauncey Parker, Executive Assistant District Attorney for Crime Prevention Strategies in Manhattan; psychiatrist Ned Hallowell, founder of The Hallowell Centers in Massachusetts and New York and author of a number of best-selling books on child development; and Michael Noth, chief clinical officer at Freedom Institute, a New York substance abuse treatment center. As moderator John Merrow, education correspondent for PBS *News Hour*, pointed out, the panelists all deal in their professional lives with people who have crossed the boundaries parents strive so hard to set.

The term "helicopter parent" appears in many discussions of over-protective parenting, and a number of fathers said they didn't fully understand the meaning behind the term. The panelists explained that a helicopter parent is a micromanager who becomes so involved in a child's life that the child's independence is stifled. A "social helicopter parent," for example, is the mom who calls to complain whenever another child is unfriendly to her child. Setting firm rules, all the panelists emphasized, is *not* helicopter parenting.

Dr. Hallowell said mothers tend to be the classic helicopter parents, and that he worries less about helicopter dads than about dads who "don't realize how important they are." Noth agreed; in his clinical substance abuse practice, he said, he sees a lot of absent fathers. "They're out making money," Noth said. All three panelists emphasized the importance of simply putting in time with one's children. Parker suggested trying to find a moment each day to connect; Noth advised getting involved in their interests and getting to know their friends; and Hallowell counseled dads simply to enjoy their children.

The panelists all felt strongly that our demographic is radically over-focused on college admissions, to the detriment of our children.

The line between connection and over-involvement, however, can be tricky. In the competitive world we inhabit, children feel a lot of pressure to achieve. Many parents amplify this pressure when they should be trying to ease it. The panelists all felt strongly that our demographic is radically over-focused on college admissions, to the detriment of our children. The problem, Hallowell explained, is that by focusing on the narrow goal of achieving admission to a prestigious school, we send a false message to those who succeed that they now "have it made." Equally false, he said, is the discouraging message to those who don't attend a prestigious university that they are somehow handicapped in life. In fact, he said,

HELICOPTER FATHERS? CONTINUED

the measures of success and happiness in life are “confidence, optimism, and grit.”

A number of fathers challenged the panelists’ implication that the college one attends is unimportant, and the panelists acknowledged that an Ivy League degree might open a few doors. “The point,” Hallowell said, “is that it’s not worth sacrificing childhood for.”

Eloquently capturing the anxiety in the room over this topic, one father asked how one becomes a confident and relaxed parent when parenthood raises so many fears and anxieties, particularly in our achievement-oriented culture Parker said he had the advantage of a very slow academic start himself; he

hit his stride only during law school. Thus, he said, he knows from experience that “it’s a very long horse race.” For Hallowell, confident parenting came largely from his own deep study of data, which proved to him that objective achievements are not the path to happiness.

Asked if there is anything dads should say to their children every day, each panelist offered thoughts. Hallowell advised parents to teach their children “never to worry alone.” Worrying alone, he said, leads to bad decision-making. Noth said dads should say, “I love you” every day, even to adult children. Parker added, “And do love them.” He said that simple piece of advice was the best he ever got as a parent. ●

Be Involved, Be Informed, Be Connected!

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Our Web site is a great source of information on our programs, upcoming events and other parenting resources.

NYC-Parents in Action, Inc. invites speakers to present their own opinions and expertise on specific topics. Their opinions and comments are not necessarily those of NYC-PIA.

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**Train to Be a Discussion
Group Facilitator**

Are you looking to give back the support and shared experience other parents have given you during the child-rearing years? If you are, here’s a way:

VOLUNTEERS WANTED!

NYC-Parents in Action provides facilitated discussion groups free of charge to member schools. To serve an increasing number of requests for discussion groups, we need to train parent volunteers from as many schools as possible. We are looking for parents who are articulate, comfortable speaking in groups, and have an interest in parenting issues. Our goal is to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and concerns among parents and to create a comfortable communications network that will be in place through lower, middle and upper school. Facilitators receive professional training, and become an integral and valued part of the NYC-PIA community. If you would like more information about becoming a discussion group facilitator or about our upcoming training, please call NYC-PIA at 212-426-0240 or e-mail facilitation@parentsinaction.org.

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PRESIDENT'S **Letter****Don't Tell Me, Show Me**

How often have you nodded along with the mantra: “You are your child’s first role model. Model the behavior you want to see.” By now, we get it. But how well do we practice it?

We all want to keep our children safe; it’s the most powerful instinct parents share. At a recent PIA Luncheon, Chauncey Parker of the Manhattan DA’s office riveted his audience with falling crime data (message: our streets are now among the safest in the country) and shared his top practical tips for parents.* But it was his #1 tip — “keep your iPhone out of sight” — that stuck when I later witnessed some parental behaviors.

That day I passed a stroller with an attractive preschooler in it, weeping her heart out. Her mother, equally attractive, stood near, thumbs flying over her iPhone. The now despairing child raised the volume. Mother never glanced down or away from her device. She was glued to the screen, and the sobs were probably just white noise. I watched, appalled, not sure if I should say anything, or try to distract the heartbroken child (I’m betting this mom would not take kindly to interference). I wondered what lesson the child was getting on public iPhone use, and how likely she would be, in six years or so, to keep hers out of sight. I moved on.

As I turned the corner, I saw another well-dressed mother crossing a busy avenue, dragging a toddler by the hand, staring down at HER phone, one thumb flying. If a car had made an unexpected illegal turn, they could have been mowed down before the mother would even have seen it coming.

Could we possibly, for the sake of a child’s comfort and safety, heed Parker’s tip and park our iPhones in a pocket when we’re out in public? Could we at least manage a little self-denial while we have a small child in tow? If only as a modeling exercise, it would send a message to the watching child. Modeling is most effective when it stings a bit — if we give something up, or use restraint where ordinarily we would not.

*For full coverage of Chauncey Parker’s presentation go to “Parents 911: Crime Prevention and Your Children” on page 7.



When I was a teen in the late '60s, my parents always had a cocktail before dinner. My friends were experimenting with pot and my parents — no surprise — had forbidden it. I asked them why, since they liked to relax with a Manhattan. It’s just another version of that, I told them. My mother was silent. Six weeks later she asked to talk. She said she had decided not to have any more pre-dinner cocktails, because she had thought about my analogy, and agreed. And she didn’t want me to smoke. She hoped I’d reflect fully on her decision. She’d still choose a wine with dinner (fine dining mattered to her) and serve cocktails at parties (hospitality was also sacred) but no more nightly cocktail “to relax.” She kept her word. I never saw her have a pre-dinner cocktail again.

Modeling is most effective when it stings a bit.

It’s almost impossible to describe the powerful effect that conversation had on me. It was brief, and she did not extract any promise in return. She simply drew a line of action and stuck to it. She broke with years of custom to create a new model because she thought it might keep me safer. That was her sole motivation and I knew it.

A principled stand, coupled with self-denial, teaches better than a lecture and resonates longer. It says, “I care so much about you that I’ll give something up to prove it.”

The two mothers I saw sent their children a clear message: right now this phone matters more than you, and more than your safety. Chauncey Parker says displaying an iPhone is like flashing four \$100 bills — an invitation to crime and bodily harm. So why not send our kids the message that, when in public, they and their well-being trump phone time — for us and for them?

Before you ask your child to keep his iPhone out of sight, ask it first of yourself.

MELANIE WELLS
Co-President

Teen Scene 2013: When Does the Fun Start?

BY PAMELA AWAD

On February 11 at Teen Scene this year
The teens said to parents, “you’ve nothing to fear.”
The Trinity School is where they all met,
Parents in Action staged venue and set.
From freshmen to seniors, 16 took the stage
To tell of their lives and their coming of age.

We Instagram, Snapchat, we text and we tweet,
They said, “Our time’s managed,” we know when
to retreat.

And keeping things private, we all will acknowledge
Is of little concern when considering college.
The Admissions committees that determine our fate
Know online behavior, they’re all up-to-date.

Our drugs are prescription, we use weed to relax,
We drink when we party, these just are the facts.
Mistakes, they will happen, parents please don’t
be mad
Give your trust to us freely, take it back when
we’re bad.

Binge drinking and bullying’s for when we
were young
As juniors and seniors we’ve learned that’s not fun.
It’s still going on, Middle School is the place,
But in High School we’re eager to finish the race.
The goal’s a good college, the pressure is keen,
“We get it, we’re working, we’ve learned the
routine.”

So parents may worry about all sorts of things
The need to be perfect, the pressure it brings
Whether to tutor, are there rules you play by?
Teens said to parents, “we’re cool” and we try...

To find our own passion and manage the struggle
It’s not about stress, it’s time that we juggle.
We’ve figured it out; we can handle it all
And frankly on Facebook, it’s Mom who’s
enthralled.

From you we need clarity, keep the message
consistent
On this to their parents, the kids all were insistent.

But when asked about fun, “Are you having it now?”
The kids looked perplexed. Fun? What? When
and how?
*Ah, truth is truth to the end of reckoning**
Whether or not it’s told true to the beckoning.

*Shakespeare: *Measure for Measure Act V, Scene I*

When the Going Gets Tough: Advice from the Far Shore

BY MEG SHERIDAN

NYC-PIA's first-ever Parent Scene was held at the Dalton School on April 24. Donna Wick, Executive Director of the Freedom Institute, moderated the panel discussion, explaining that it would be an opportunity for parents to help parents help their children.

The panelists, parents of children who attended independent schools, had each travelled with a child through substance abuse, eating disorders, ADHD, or learning disorders, while struggling not to short-change the needs of other children, marriages, and jobs. The children each gave their parents permission to share their stories.

"How will I know if something is wrong?"

We have heard it before — if you think there's a substance problem, there probably is. The panelists agreed that parents are keen observers of their children, and should not discount the expertise this observation earns them. Listen to your gut. There will be signs: poor grades, a change in eating and sleeping habits, a new set of friends who don't come over. Call the school and ask if teachers have noticed changes. Connect the data points. Resist the temptation to minimize your concern. Seek help even if you are not sure where to go or if you are not sure you are right. Ask if these changes are something you should act on. "It's the most painful thing on the planet," said one panelist. "You know something is painfully awry but you can't identify it."

The panelists agreed that early intervention is the most important thing in terms of outcomes. Tell your child what's acceptable. Have reasonable, short-term consequences. Don't let your child play one parent against another. You need to find an expert to help

you, but one who values your expertise as a parent. Make sure you listen to your gut, and make sure the expert listens to your gut, too. If not, move on until you find one who respects your input.

The panelists had each travelled with a child through substance abuse, eating disorders, ADHD, or learning disorders.

"How am I going to survive this?"

One panelist referenced the Al-Anon three Cs: "I didn't cause it, I can't control it, I can't cure it." The Panelists agreed that when you find yourself in the thick of it, you need to take time and space for yourself, your marriage, and your other children. Focus on the moment and let go of the frenzy. Replenish depleted resources, or you won't be any good for others. You will be angry at your child and at yourself, and possibly disappointed in the way your family has turned out. Learn to tolerate your own distress. Find a support group, get therapy for yourself, and don't neglect your friends. One panelist found that yoga was the answer. It opened a door to meditation and spirituality and allowed her to see that her child's struggle was part of a cycle and would not last forever. "Never worry alone," said one panelist. "You get crazier."

For parents of children with ADHD and learning disorders, the path is not entirely different. These panelists said they felt they shortchanged their second child because they needed to focus so intently on the child with learning issues. One said she wished she had given more accolades for her other daughter's accomplishments. Another parent said her family created new vacation experiences to "ensure the fit" for her adopted, dyslexic daughter. "All we could do was love her up," she said.

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH CONTINUED

A child's self-esteem usually takes a dive when school becomes a struggle. One panelist said building self-esteem is an "inside job." Children have to build it themselves. Parents can be empathetic, and provide tools, like eyeglasses or medication, to make school manageable. One panelist said her child did well in special education schools but pushed to attend, and succeeded at, a mainstream college. Another panelist said a gap year was a life-changing experience for her child.

Panelists all agreed that they wrestled with issues of control. One said she got to the point where "things weren't going so well with lots of control and they

weren't going so well with less control." Parents had to learn to tolerate their own distress. All agreed that they often underestimated the leverage they had as parents: children want our love and our help. Be honestly vulnerable with a child who is struggling; get right in the gray with her. Look your child in the eye. Let her finish her sentence even though you know what she is going to say.

"Nobody signs up for this stuff," said one panelist. Yet each of the panelists' children is now doing well, even thriving, in his or her respective college and career. ●

Parents 911: Crime Prevention for Your Children

BY LISA HUFFINES

One of New York City's top crime reduction strategists offered reassuring news and practical advice to attendees of PIA's class rep lunch on April 9. Chauncey Parker is the executive assistant district attorney for crime strategies in the Manhattan District Attorney's Office and the father of two Manhattan teenagers. He demonstrated how the city is dramatically safer than it was in the 1980s and 1990s, and told parents which risks they should focus on as their children become more independent.

Parker demonstrated how the city is dramatically safer than it was in the 1980s and 1990s.

First, the good news: between 1990 and 2010, car thefts dropped 95 percent; burglaries, 90 percent; assaults, 95 percent; and murders, 81.6 percent in New York City. Indeed, last year no murders were committed in the 19th precinct of Manhattan, which covers the Upper East Side from 65th to 86th Streets.

Parker attributes the precipitous drop to a number of factors:

- The New York Police Department's adoption, in the mid-1990s, of **CompStat**, a data-based system that tracks, analyzes and assigns accountability for crime statistics. For decades, Parker said, police departments measured success by number of arrests. CompStat forced the police to think more holistically, analyzing, for example, times and places where crime tends to spike and then targeting enforcement accordingly.
- **New laws and technologies.** Today, anyone convicted of any felony has his or her DNA entered into a central database. Similarly, mugshots are now

digitized and placed in a database equipped with face recognition technology, and police cars can be equipped with cameras that automatically scan passing license plates and check them for warrants. All these developments have made it much easier to catch criminals, and at the same time have deterrent effects. Parker also credited stricter gun laws.

- **Community initiatives.** As an example, Parker cited ProHoops, founded by the Manhattan District Attorney's Office after a Harlem police officer pointed out that on Saturdays, the most crime-ridden night of the week, school basketball gyms were closed. The district attorney hired a top-notch basketball coach and began running programs for kids ages 12 to 18. While it is difficult to quantify the program's success in reducing crime, it has been wildly successful and has expanded to include academic advocacy.

Of course, all this wonderful news about crime doesn't mean our children are safe all the time. Parker identified five major risks parents should focus on.

1. Cellphones

iPhone theft is "the number one crime in New York City," Parker said. It takes a thief only ten minutes to swipe an iPhone from an inattentive user's hands and convert it to \$400 cash.

2. Social media

A great number of teenagers get into trouble via social media, either because they post inappropriate content or because a text or photo becomes the means by which they get caught doing something wrong. Parker tells his teenagers to think of every posting as "a tattoo for life."

PARENTS 911: CRIME PREVENTION CONTINUED

3. Sexual assault.

Parker recounted the recent Steubenville, Ohio case, in which a group of high school football players was accused of raping an intoxicated and unconscious classmate. He believes this could likely happen anywhere. Nationally, statistics show that one in six women have been sexually assaulted. In the vast majority of cases, the victim knows her assailant. Parents can act both by raising awareness and by refusing to tolerate disparaging comments about girls. Only in a culture that devalues women can incidents like the Steubenville rape occur.

4. Driving or texting while intoxicated.

Teen drivers should know that, if they accidentally kill someone while driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, they may spend years in prison. Parker has seen it happen, he said, “in our demographic.” For this reason, he makes this one of very few “sharp lines” when he sets rules for his own teenagers. Forbidding alcohol entirely is unrealistic, he said, and dilutes the more important message that driving is verboten after even having a single drop to drink.

5. Prescription drug abuse.

While deaths from car crashes have fallen steadily since 1980, drug overdose deaths have risen to meet and even surpass them. Parker called it “an epidemic in America” to which the world is “not yet paying attention”. He said kids should know that to give a friend an Adderall for a big test is the same as selling it; money need not change hands for an illegal drug “sale” to be a felony. Again, Parker said, prescription drug abuse or distribution should be a “sharp line” rule for parents of teens. ●

You Look Fabulous!

BY EVELYN SASSOON

This is a line often said innocently and by well meaning friends to a girl who has recently lost some weight. But sometimes weight loss is a sign of trouble. Anorexia is about the drive for thinness and the desire for control. Today's high school seniors may be more sophisticated about anorexia and other eating disorders than we were at their age. But many people don't know that restricting food and controlling one's diet are rooted in the wish to control feelings. Most kids who are driven to thinness experience feelings that are difficult to cope with. They may become attached or addicted to the sense of control they achieve by restricting food intake, purging, obsessively counting calories, or engaging in other disordered eating behaviors.

Typically, the trigger for disordered eating behaviors comes at a transition point in an adolescent's life. It can happen as she is going off to camp or college, or during a major life crisis such as parental divorce. She may be overwhelmed by sad, angry, or anxious feelings. Not knowing how to cope with her feelings, and feeling them intolerable she may find temporary comfort in "dieting." Restricting food intake or purging often gives an adolescent a false sense of control and enables her to take her mind off of her larger problems. Watching the numbers on the scale descend adds to the feeling of power.

Why do I call this the illusion of control? Because the focus on thinness comes at the expense of grappling with difficult issues, risking failure, tolerating difficult feelings, and finding real solutions to problems. These are the experiences that build confidence and help an adolescent learn how to overcome obstacles and survive mistakes. An "at risk" girl needs to develop skills that enable her to make choices, cope with mistakes, and tolerate anxiety and ambiguity.

Ultimately, she must learn to speak up, defend and take care of herself. Parents should remember to:

1. Be available and really listen to your child.~Being listened to builds trust and self-esteem. Parents learn far more by listening than by talking or lecturing. Hearing your responses to her concerns helps your daughter develop her own voice, will enable her to reflect in a new way and may make her more open to hearing what you have to say. When she focuses more on her thoughts and feelings she focuses less on her weight and shape.

2. Use your wisdom by being a parent, not a friend. You possess more life experience and wisdom than your adolescent. Help her develop good judgment by guiding her choices and decisions. Share your thinking process and include her ideas. Help her learn from her mistakes by reviewing what went wrong. Be there to help her pick up the pieces.

3. Encourage a dialogue with your daughter. With your support your daughter can clarify what's important to her and how she can best pursue her goals. Helping your daughter put things into perspective reminds her of her core values. Sharing her thoughts about what matters to her focuses her own thinking and makes her feel important. She will also be more likely to share with you in the future.

4. Seek help.~Sometimes a problem is greater than a family's ability to solve it. In that case, seek the help of a qualified professional. He or she can help you figure out the kind of help you need.

So next time you hear the phrase, "You look fabulous!", stop and ask yourself whether you think this girl feels fabulous inside. ●

Dr. Evelyn Sassoon is a clinical psychologist and specialist in eating disorders and women's mental health. She trained at Harvard, Yeshiva, and Columbia and practices on the Upper East Side.