

## Talking About Bullying

BY AIMEE GARN

NYC-Parents in Action and KiDs of NYU presented a modified “town hall” panel discussion on the subject of bullying on April 22nd at the 92nd Street Y. Speakers Dr. Harold Koplewicz and Dr. Rachel Klein each gave an overview on the subject, and then answered questions collected from the audience and moderated by Lucy Martin-Gianino of NYC-PIA. Dr. Koplewicz, who is Director of the NYU Child Study Center and the Arnold and Debbie Simon Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Dr. Klein, Professor of Psychiatry, both at the NYU School of Medicine, offered many insights into a phenomenon that concerns both parents and educators.

### How do you define bullying?

“Bullying occurs when a child is intimidated or harassed by another child, either verbally or physically,” said Dr. Koplewicz. “The intimidation can be direct, in the form of a threat, or indirect, where a child is excluded from activities or given the silent treatment.” What differentiates bullying from other discord at school is its chronic nature; there is a constant imbalance of power in which one child suffers at the hands of peers. At least 20% of school age children have some experience of bullying, and most takes place at school—in bathrooms, corridors, or the lunchroom. “Every dog is entitled to one bite,” said Dr. Klein. “We don’t look at the isolated instance of one child’s aggression toward another, but rather at the chronic, repeated pattern.”

### What type of kid is likely to be a bully?

Bullies are generally kids who are anti-social, disrespectful of others’ rights and well-being. That’s the extreme, though; many kids are capable of being mean once in a while, and a school culture

can encourage kids to create cliques and to become special by wielding power over others. Kids who bully continuously usually have other problems, and may be victims of parental abuse. A kid who is harassing others should have intervention as soon as possible; he is much more likely to have serious problems (such as drug use or criminal behavior) in adulthood.

### What’s the difference between bullying and being bossy? Can teasing be bullying? Is low self-esteem a factor for the bully? Is depression a factor?

Bossy kids can be unpleasant, but they don’t add the ingredient of intimidation. Teasing can be a form of bullying if it’s used to diminish others and assert power. But teasing can also occur in the context of a positive relationship, and if there’s no imbalance of power or intimidation, it doesn’t qualify as bullying.

Some people observe that a bully needs to define himself and become more powerful by dominating others, which would indicate low self-esteem. “Self-esteem has been overrated lately as a determinant of behavior,” said Dr. Klein. “You can have high self-esteem, and still want to initiate conflict and pick on a weaker person.” A bully may be touchy, and have a chip on his shoulder, but depression is not a common issue.

### Do girls and boys who bully others behave differently?

“In general, girls are more covert, and they bully in a relational rather than in a physically aggressive way,” said Dr. Klein. “They usually bully through the threat of slander or exclusion, or by starting rumors.”

There has been a lot of talk about the “alpha” girl, a concept that comes from the animal kingdom,

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## Environmental Toxins and Children— Post 9/11

BY MAUREEN SHERRY-KLINSKY

“Children aren’t little adults — we cannot assume that chemicals safe for adult exposure are safe for our kids,” said Dr. Philip Landrigan, M.D., beginning his speech on the environmental aftermath of September 11th and its effect on our children. Dr. Landrigan, Professor of Pediatrics, Chair of Community and Preventive Medicine and Director of the Center for Children’s Health and the Environment at Mount Sinai, spoke to an NYC-Parents in Action audience on February 25, 2002.

Dr. Landrigan bemoaned the lack of data on how our heavily chemical world affects our children. There are now over 80,000 chemicals being used in commerce, most of which didn’t exist forty to fifty years ago. Testing for toxicity has not kept pace with the creation of chemicals. The biggest losers of this imbalance are children. Children are especially vulnerable to environmental toxins because they are less able to detoxify, or to excrete the chemicals from their bodies. Because they are young, toxins have many more years in which to wreak havoc on their bodies, often seven to eight decades of life in which a disease contracted by chemical exposure has time to develop. Dr. Landrigan pointed out, in a startling example, that pesticide usage in New York City is the highest of any county in New York State — a surprising fact given that there is hardly any agriculture here.

The impact of this is a changed pattern of disease in America. Infectious disease used to be the most common killer of children. Presently chronic diseases such as asthma, as well as cancer, birth defects, and neurodevelopment disorders have taken over that role. The root of the problem lies in what we eat, drink and breathe. Dr. Landrigan feels that pesticides play a role in the rising incidence of cancer, although death rates from childhood cancers have decreased with improved treatments. Endocrine disrupting chemicals in the air and water have made their mark through birth

defects and developmental disabilities, most notably autism, dyslexia, ADHD and mental retardation. Family history or genes explain a small part of these conditions, but environmental hazards play a part as the culprit.

On September 11, 2001 thousands of toxins were released into the air of downtown Manhattan. Dr. Landrigan called the aftermath of the terrorist attacks “the single largest environmental catastrophe to confront New York City.” Dust, smoke and soot only relented in early January. The trucks that carried the debris and steel beams north to the 6th Street ferry were uncovered during their journey, leaving a trail that included asbestos, lead, heavy metals, cement dust, PCB’s, toxic products of combustion such as benzene, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, dioxins, diesel fumes and sulphur dioxide. Since then, Dr. Landrigan’s office has been inundated with questions about how to protect children.

His first suggestion for people with any environmental question is to visit the Mount Sinai website, at [www.MSSN.edu](http://www.MSSN.edu), where links provide information on September 11th specifically and environmental hazards more generally. He also suggests individual steps to minimize the chances for dust and debris to enter the home. These include not wearing shoes in the home, using only area rugs instead of wall-to-wall carpeting, and using a vacuum with a Hepa filter to capture small particles of remaining debris, which are the most troublesome. He also advises sealing homes well and disposing of food residue immediately, so that rodent sprays are needed less often. Dr. Landrigan emphatically warned everyone to avoid contact with lead paint, with special concern for women who are pregnant and young children. He is a proponent of organic food and is vigilant that children live and play in completely smoke-free environments.

Dr. Landrigan’s recently published book on this subject is entitled *Raising Healthy Children in a Toxic World*. ●



## Girls Will Be Girls

NYC-Parents in Action newsletter editor Eva Pomice Timerman talked to parenting expert Charlene Giannetti about girls, cliques and how to help your girls navigate them. Giannetti, a member of NYC-PIA's advisory board, is the author of *Cliques: 8 Steps To Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle* and more recently, *The Patience of a Saint: How Faith Can Sustain You During the Tough Times in Parenting*. (Both Broadway Books).

**Q NYC-PARENTS IN ACTION: What do you think of the book *Odd Girl Out* by Rachel Simmons and the “Mean Girls” cover story in the New York Times magazine? Do you agree with the theory that girls don’t feel comfortable expressing anger directly so they use so-called “alternate” aggression?**

**A GIANNETTI:** I don’t think that’s what’s happening. Looking back twenty years, girls had more reason to hide anger and to act out against peers. Today there are opportunities for girls to display leadership and show anger. With these kinds of theories, we’re creating another stereotype.

**Q NYC-PIA: We all knew mean girls growing up. Is it really any worse today and if so, what’s changed?**

**A GIANNETTI:** The culture has changed. It’s rougher than it used to be. The environment in our schools is crueler than anything we knew when we were kids. They are influenced by what they see on TV, in movies. Look at the way relationships are portrayed. Clique leaders are heroes in the media.

**Q NYC-PIA: At what age do cliques start to form for girls? When are they most intense?**

**A GIANNETTI:** It depends upon the group of girls. Social difficulties start as early as second grade and for many children last through high school. The intense period would be the middle school years from grades 5 through 8 — young adolescence. This is typically the period during which children are trying to answer that question “Who am I?” and they look to their peers for answers, so friends become very important. And adolescence has its own culture: kids want to wear the same clothes, read the same magazines, go to the same movies. The popular group is on the cutting edge of that, the first to have whatever is considered cool. Socioeconomic factors can come into play here.

**Q NYC-PIA: A common trauma for girls seems to be the loss of a best friend. When do these splits usually occur?**

**A GIANNETTI:** In young adolescent development, children are maturing at different rates. At ten, they start out being best friends. At twelve, they may not be interested in the same things and a divide occurs — physical maturity can be a divide, academics can be a divide.

**Q NYC-PIA: What motivates a clique leader to be a bully? Are they misunderstood kids with their own insecurities who are just in it for the power?**

**A GIANNETTI:** Some of these children don’t get enough attention at home. Running a clique is a good way of getting attention at school. But often it’s just about power and controlling other kids. Young adolescents are worried about their own social status, so having many friends around is better than having one friend.

**Q NYC-PIA: Spreading rumors is one of the most destructive of clique activities. Has the use of e-mail made it worse?**

**A GIANNETTI:** Kids have always passed notes. Now they pass a note about someone and it can immediately go to 200 kids. Information in cyberspace has a long life — and can be very damaging to a child’s reputation. Web pages are created that list “hot girls” and other degrading categories. But sometimes relationships start on-line that carry over into the classroom. A girl who is afraid to approach another girl in class may initiate a conversation on line.

**Q NYC-PIA: How do you talk to your child about clique activity at school?**

**A GIANNETTI:** One way of getting into that topic with a child is to ask what it’s like in the cafeteria: where does everyone sit, do they change tables, etc. You can find out for yourself what role your child is playing — is she a bully, a victim, or a bystander? Parents often minimize the damage clique activity can have. It can be very hurtful and last a lifetime. Many adults say that when they walk into a cocktail party, they relive the moments of walking into the cafeteria and wondering if anyone would talk to them.

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# Nancy Samalin on Parenting: Loving Your Child Is Not Enough

BY AIMEE GARN

**Nancy Samalin**, a parent educator and author, began her talk to a group of NYC-Parents in Action representatives at a meeting on April 10, 2002, with this disarming confession:

“I entered the field of parent education over twenty-five years ago because I was so disappointed in myself as a parent. I had been a teacher, and before I had children I was sure I was going to get the ‘Nobel Prize for Motherhood.’ I would never yell, nag, bribe, threaten or punish. Instead, after having two boys one year apart, I turned into a person who did nothing but yell, nag, bribe, threaten and punish!”

In the process of honing her own parenting skills, Ms. Samalin studied counseling and became an expert on many aspects of child development and parenting. She has written several popular books, including *Loving Your Child Is Not Enough*, *Loving Each One Best*, and *Love and Anger*. Her new book, *Loving Without Spoiling*, is due to be published in September.

## **Words are powerful: use them so that children will respond.**

Ms. Samalin pointed out that family members are often treated to our angriest language. Parents, frustrated by kids who won't listen to them, resort to global criticism. They use phrases like “You always...” or “How many times do I have to...?” or “You'll never...” Loaded language like that defeats the child. You have to find the way to talk to a child so he will listen: simplify what you say, and avoid criticizing too much, because when kids feel criticized, they resist doing what you want.

## **To get kids to listen more, talk less.**

Some kids are completely “mother-deaf,” and will tune out anything the mother says. But most kids will listen to fewer words. As one child said, “By the time my mother gets to the second sentence,

I've forgotten the first.” Instead of a paragraph on the wisdom of brushing teeth to reduce plaque and avoid getting cavities, say: “Teeth.” One mother who simplified what she said to her child was astonished when he quickly noticed the difference. “You always used to be on my back,” he said. “Now you're on my side.”

## **Balance criticism with praise.**

“It helps if you think of your child as ‘challenging’ or ‘spirited’ rather than ‘difficult,’” said Samalin. Make a brag-and-bug list about your child, listing five things that you love, and five that annoy you or make you angry. Decide what's worth going to the mat for, and do something about those. When your child does something positive, reinforce him by praising and complimenting.

## **Learn to listen.**

When a child is upset, or when something has gone wrong, don't use that moment to teach a lesson. That's the time to empathize with his feelings and listen. An important skill in parenting is active listening in a style that Samalin calls “therapeutic grunting.” As your child talks, you can say things like: “Ahh, really, mm, hmm, wow, very interesting.” Or you can repeat what the child says.

## **Get out of the happiness trap: say “no.”**

“Your job as a parent is to say ‘no’ when your child wants you to say ‘yes,’” said Samalin. “Your children will be angry when you say ‘no,’ so you have to be prepared to be unpopular.” Kids may say they don't want you around, but they need you. They need you to be firm, with non-negotiable rules. Stick to the rules — if your child says “I hate you!” once in a while, you're probably doing something right. ●

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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As NYC Parents in Action's discussion group program continues to grow, so does our need for new facilitators. Call 212-426-0240 for more information.

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#### Q&A

**Q NYC-PIA: If your daughter is struggling socially, is there anything you can do?**

**A GIANNETTI:** I know of a girl who was a scapegoat in school. Girls told her the wrong place for the soccer game, so she would show up miles from where the game was taking place. And the girl still wanted to be in the popular group. Wannabes, who hover on the outside of the cool group, may occasionally be included, but are just as quickly cut off. She couldn't give up on the kids who tormented her. In situations like this, parents need to have a discussion with their daughter. Ask her: "What do you look for in a friend?" Parents can't arrange play-dates in middle school, but they can help their daughters think about their friendships.

**Q NYC-PIA: Rejected girls obviously suffer from bullying. But what about the bystanders?**

**A GIANNETTI:** There are more bystanders than victims and bullies. Girls on the sidelines, watching, are damaged by it. They can become depressed, frustrated, and guilty. Followers always fear they may be the next victim, if they stand up to the clique leader. Parents need to give kids tools to intervene positively as a bystander. What do you do when you see a child teased? Do you befriend the victim afterward, invite her to eat lunch with you or get other kids with you to confront the bully? Parents have to be careful in suggesting strategies but there are many ways to influence what's happening safely.

**Q NYC-PIA: Should parents of popular girls consider themselves blessed?**

**A GIANNETTI:** Parents have to be careful here. We all want our children to be popular. We want our children to have friends. If you know your daughter is in the cool group and has lots of friends, you may think it's okay to relax. But it's very stressful to be on top. You always have to look good. Popular kids will socialize more, experiment more with drugs and sexual activity. Parents of popular children have to be aware that there are risks involved.

**Q NYC-PIA: Is anyone happy in middle school?**

**A GIANNETTI:** The kids who are happiest are ones who are in middle circle friendships that revolve around interests—sports, computers, music. These girls don't strive to be in the cool group and are more open to having other kids join their group.

**Q NYC-PIA: What can schools do to improve the social landscape?**

**A GIANNETTI:** Schools can help children with the mechanics of friendships. Kids are so stressed out about lunchtime—who they're going to sit with. I think there should be more teachers in the lunchroom, more mixing up. If there are kids who don't have anyone to sit with, teachers should arrange for them to sit with someone.

We were at a school in Connecticut that was recognizing random acts of kindness, by posting children's names on the board. Children need more help developing friendship skills.

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#### TALKING ABOUT BULLYING

where the "alpha" is the leader of a pack. With the alpha male there is the more positive connotation of leadership; the alpha girl is often the one who dictates to others what to wear and when to wear it, who to talk to, who to exclude. The matters she deals with may seem petty, but the behavior of an aggressive girl can be devastating.

#### How does bullying fit into the whole social scene at school?

It is helpful to look at bullying in the context of the social world at school. Every school is different; even every class is different. "You wonder what's in the water in some classes, where there are several mean or aggressive kids," said Dr. Koplewicz. "And other classes are basically easy, with many nice kids who are tolerant and show concern for each other."

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## Teen Scene XVI

BY TESSA NAMUTH

The sixteenth annual Teen Scene hosted by NYC-Parents in Action and the Parents League of New York was held at Trinity School in February. The evening's panel discussion presented views of high school students who told concerned parents about their lives.

Lucy Martin-Gianino, the moderator from NYC-PIA, introduced the fifteen teenagers, eight boys and seven girls, saying that they had volunteered, "to help us understand their tumultuous journey and to 'tell it like it is.'" They represented co-ed, single sex and boarding schools.

Parents wanted to know how teens were handling the trauma of September 11th. One junior said that the days of the glamorous club life are gone, and she and her friends "have calmed down a lot." A freshman observed, "It's a whole new world and everything is different," but stopped short of linking it to 9/11.

A senior boy cautioned that there is still a "sub-culture" of people who go to clubs downtown and do drugs, but it's more common for kids to go to a comedy or karaoke club to unwind. Another boy told the parents in the audience that, to see what their kids are doing, they should just walk up and down Park Avenue between 8pm and 3 am, from 96th Street to 72nd Street.

Marijuana, Ecstasy and cocaine are still used, and ninth grade is the time when most teens experiment. Since "there's a lot of money floating around out there," according to one girl, buying isn't much of a challenge. Usually teens purchase them from a friend or someone they observe using at a party.

Alcohol is easier to obtain from corner delis or Second Avenue restaurants that don't ask for identification. Generally speaking, any teen actively involved in sports is reluctant to try drugs and alcohol for fear of harming his or her body. Still,

one senior girl said that the most difficult thing to deal with was sex and drug pressure. "That world will come knocking," she said, "so parents shouldn't avoid talking about it."

The changes in the world since 9/11 haven't dampened high school students' sex lives. "Hooking up," the term used to describe a variety of sexual activities, including casual sex among friends and oral sex, is often part of the high school experience. It begins as experimentation early in high school and generally slows down. According to this panel, oral sex isn't considered sex and happens "a zillion times." Asked by a parent how it was that oral sex wasn't considered sex, one teen explained that oral sex is "a cultural thing, a casual activity." Another said that she was "ready to give sex [oral] but not share sex [intercourse] with another person." Panelists agreed that talking about sex, especially oral sex, with parents was difficult and that most of their knowledge came from Sex Ed classes and friends. One high school girl told parents in the audience that they should teach their sons and daughters about protection, adding that "a lot of boys don't even have condoms" and will even ask the girl if she has a supply. A senior boy asked parents to raise sons to be good to women. "You want strong daughters and respectful sons," he said.

Curfews on weekends varied. For ninth graders, curfew is often 11:30 pm to 12:30 am; for older students, it is 12:30 to 1:30 am. Others said that as long as they checked in with their parents and told them where they were, curfews were flexible. "There's really nothing you can do at 3:00 am that you couldn't do at 10:00 pm," said one student.

The panelists felt that parents should share the experiences they had growing up because "it makes them more human." If a kid comes home obviously stoned or drunk, parents should not yell, but sit down and talk. "It's important to be able to talk about alcohol or drugs, and not fear you'll be grounded or hated forever," observed one girl. If a

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We have to accept that cliques are a natural part of school life. And everyone gets rejected once in a while. Parents should try not to be overly involved in the child's social life. Basically, if a child has friends and is doing well, but has a couple of incidents of being bullied by a classmate, the parent should make the school aware of the problem and step back.

#### **What can a parent do about bullying? When and how should a parent intervene? How can parents help a child deal with a bully?**

"It's a parental instinct to protect the child," said Dr. Koplewicz. "When someone has been cruel or aggressive to one of my kids, I usually want that child removed from school, and banished from the city! But I ignore that first impulse, obviously, because I know that two weeks later the kid could be sleeping over at my house and be my son's best friend again."

The bottom line is that parents can intervene, but they have to proceed with caution. If a parent approaches the parent of a bully directly, the bully might be reprimanded, but could retaliate later. And the parent of a bully could think that his child's bullying behavior is "cool." A parent should also be sensitive to the fact that his child may not want him to get involved, because he feels shame at being a victim.

With young children, parents can usually intervene effectively by bringing the situation to the school's attention. "When the bullying in my grandson's school was discussed with the director, she observed the class and acted quickly to handle the difficult kid," said Dr. Klein.

With older kids, it is more complicated for the parent to become involved. The first step is to discuss the situation with the child. If the situation

warrants professional help, the parent could consult a therapist. "I saw a boy who was being picked on," said Dr. Klein. "The school couldn't or wouldn't do anything about the child who was tormenting him, but I helped my patient develop his own style of retort so he could fight back successfully. And the bully backed off."

Another thing the parent can do is to try to bridge the gap with a difficult child by arranging a social interaction. The one thing parents of a victim of bullying should not do is to tell the child to ignore it. "If the victim doesn't react, the bully ups the ante," said Dr. Koplewicz. "Turning the other cheek doesn't work."

As a last resort, if the bullying goes on and the school refuses to address it, the parent may want to consider removing the child from a noxious environment.

#### **Many of the strategies suggested for parents involve the school's participation. What should parents expect the school to do about bullying?**

"Schools should have a clear policy: zero tolerance for bullies and bullying," said Dr. Koplewicz. "Parents have the right to expect the school to defend the victim. Schools don't deal harshly enough with bullies. They give them too much latitude, sometimes because the parents of a tough kid may be financially prominent. Sometimes administrators hesitate to discipline because they aren't sure if a kid is a bully or a leader — they have to differentiate between the two."

Schools should take steps to educate the parent and student population about bullying; they should be proactive, not reactive. There are a number of prevention programs for parents and educators. But parents have to accept that the teachers' willingness to deal with the issue will vary. Many

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teachers do not feel it should be their role to deal with social problems.

Some schools are willing to tell the parents of a bullying kid: “leave.” It is in the school’s best interest to address bullying. Kids who are bullied don’t want to go to school anymore.

In high school, a peer counseling program can be as effective as having teachers or administrators address the issue. A respected tenth grader can help out younger kids — he shouldn’t have to be a policeman, but he can model behavior.

### What if your child is the bully?

Will the parent of the most popular girl in the class want to know that her daughter is being cruel to others? Not likely. But if a parent realizes that his

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### TEEN SCENE

student is hosting a party, parents should be at home and be seen.

Asked to name one thing each panelist would like their parents do for them, they responded: “Say ‘I love you’ every day. Show respect and trust. Be open-minded. Hang out with your kid; they’ll remember that. Encourage your kids’ passions and tell them you believe in them. Adolescence is a bumpy road that parents can make smoother — laugh with us.” ●

child is chronically mean, nasty or aggressive to others, it is important to intervene early. Often the kid who bullies is in pain — the aggression helps kids not to feel pain — and should be helped.

### Is bullying on the rise in New York?

“We have a competitive atmosphere in the city now, an elite spirit that can be obnoxious,” said Dr. Klein. “All that competition doesn’t make people especially nice.” Bullying may not be on the rise, but in this elitist atmosphere, children often don’t treat each other with great consideration. ●

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