



Teen Scene XXII: Listening to Teens

BY MEG SHERIDAN

NYC-Parents in Action’s annual Teen Scene panel gives parents an intimate look inside the lives of New York City teens. On February 4th NYC-Parents in Action, together with the Parents League of New York, sponsored Teen Scene XXII, where high school students from independent day and boarding schools good-naturedly fielded questions about their social and school lives. The panel was moderated by Dr. Ralph Lopez, a renowned pediatrician specializing in adolescent medicine.

Parties and Alcohol

“Finding an apartment with no parents is key,” said a panelist. With cell phones, e-mail and instant messaging, this “takes about three minutes.” Word can spread quickly, and sometimes what was to be a gathering of friends turns into a large party. The teens said that students in the “fast cliques” at some schools interact with each other, but more common is for teens from one school to socialize with their own classmates. On occasion teens might rent a loft for a larger party, but logistics sometimes make that a hassle. Some students said that they also hang out with friends in Central Park.

Alcohol is not hard to come by. Teens can get a fake ID and use it at restaurants or delis that do not card. It’s also easy to include alcohol in take-out orders.

Dr. Lopez asked if the teens felt they should be drinking to be part of the party scene. “Is it cool to get drunk and pass out?” The panelists had a range of answers. While it may not be cool to pass out yourself, “it means the people you hang out with are cool.” Some teens said they feel pressure—that if you are in high school, you should be drinking. They explained that it can be socially awkward to say “no” and leave the party. It’s easier to stay at the party, said a junior, but then “you can get caught up in the moment and go along.” Others, particularly the girls on the panel, said they didn’t feel as much pressure. “It’s your choice,” said one, “if you don’t drink, there’s more for them. Who cares?” Another girl said, “If you’re not confident enough to say ‘no,’ you’re hanging out with the wrong friends.”

What if things get out of control at the party? Teens related stories of calling ambulances for friends who had passed out, or of friends who had injured themselves while drunk. When asked if they would call the parent of an intoxicated friend, or of a friend who got drunk every weekend, the group demurred. They said they would speak to the friend himself, call an ambulance if necessary, or speak to parents as a group, but they wouldn’t talk to parents alone. Their rationale was that the teen would get in trouble, so “kids try to fix it themselves.” One panelist was quick to reassure the audience: “Kids are not as self-destructive as you think.”

Smoking and Drugs

What about smoking cigarettes? Most on the panel said that only a few people smoke cigarettes and that it was looked down upon. One student attending an all-girls school, however, said the majority of girls at her school smoked. Dr. Lopez said that was consistent with national statistics showing that girls smoke more

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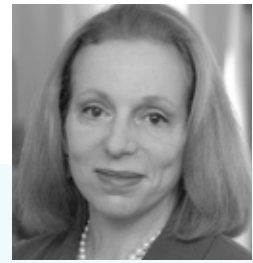
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PRESIDENT'S Letter

Spring 2008

The phrase “teachable moment” describes an opportune time for parents to talk with children about an important, and sometimes difficult, subject. A teachable moment may come up in the course of daily life—the car ride home from a party where there was drinking could be the time to talk with a teenager about ways to make healthy personal choices while dealing with pressure from peers. Often such opportunities present themselves while we’re seeing a movie, or watching television with our kids. For anyone who watches the series “Gossip Girl” with a teenager, there seem to be endless “prompts” for discussion—about cliques and bullying, early sexual experimentation, eating disorders, alcohol and drug use, betrayal, adultery, divorce. I might have left something out here, but I’m pretty sure that the writers don’t.

Recently, news events have not just presented occasions for discussion, but have almost required that we address certain subjects with our children and teenagers, at a level appropriate to their ages. The accidental death of Heath Ledger from a combination of prescription drugs and the teenage pregnancy of Jamie Lynn Spears saturated the media. The substance of the events is not new; in every recent generation there have been tragic, sudden celebrity deaths from substance use and underage sexual experiences. But media coverage today is voluminous and detailed, in print and online, available instantly and treated as entertainment. The explosion of information and its visibility suggests the importance of a kind of parental “simultaneous translation” to put events in the context of our own values, thoughts and feelings.



AIMEE GARN

We’ve grown accustomed to the notions that it takes a village to raise a child, and that we live in a global village, but most of us still hope that our children will move out into the world with judgment and values guided by our own, and our family’s, beliefs.

NYC-Parents in Action has chosen as its theme for next year “Family Matters: Connecting and Communicating with Your Kids.”

Our communication—through teachable moments, parental simulcast, and dialogue—can give children some context for the information all around them. Our values and priorities—how we feel about events in the news, social responsibility, the environment, political activism—provide an important point of reference. It is with this idea that NYC-Parents in Action has chosen as its theme for next year “Family Matters: Connecting and Communicating with Your Kids.”

Communication is, in fact, the essence of all of our programs. This year, our dedicated board members have conducted several facilitator training programs; led over 250 facilitated discussion groups; produced six seminar and luncheon speaker programs; created three newsletters and our revised edition of FOCUS; re-designed our Web site; and produced four fundraising events. Thanks to the generous board members who work as volunteers, and to the parents who have supported us, we keep our services free of charge to the independent school community. Over the summer we will be working on new programs for the coming school year, including a celebration of NYC-PIA’s 30th Anniversary. We wish all of you a summer filled with wonderful adventure, family times, and moments—some of them teachable, and all of them special. ●

Affirming Parenthood: Reducing Teens' Experimentation With Alcohol, Drugs and Sex

BY MAUREEN SHERRY KLINSKY

If you've heard enough terrifying stories of binge drinking, drug use and too-young sexual experiences, Reverend Debra W. Haffner, author of *Beyond the Big Talk, From Diapers to Dating*, and most recently, *What Every 21st-Century Parent Needs to Know*, reports that the news from the parenting front is not all bad. At NYC-PIA's winter luncheon, Rev. Haffner offered today's active parents a pat-on-the-back and advice on how to keep up the good work.

Applauding the results of committed parenting, Rev. Haffner noted that children of involved parents are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and more likely to feel good about themselves. She noted that many kids genuinely like their parents, have more involved fathers than in years past, and feel close to their parents, even as they engage in the developmental dance of pushing parents away.

What parents need to do is to find that sweet spot, to be sure they are parents first, friends second. As Rev. Haffner advised, "Find friends your own age." Parents should work on being nurturing but firm, and strike a balance between being demanding and responsive. Rev. Haffner encouraged every parent to be an "affirming parent," and offered six tools to become one.

1. Be actively involved in your teen's life.

The best way to stay involved is to be physically present. Try to have family dinners three to four nights per week, and keep the focus on the company and conversation. Rev. Haffner recommends using the dinner hour for every member of the household to recharge cell phones and blackberries, and other electronics. By removing distractions, you signal to your child that family life is important, and dinner becomes a time to talk about the day's events and the things that your family values and enjoys.

When it comes to setting rules for acceptable behavior, Rev. Haffner believes that teens need guidance but not lectures. Just saying no—without explanation or guidance—often falls flat on teenage ears. Your messages will be better heard through daily small conversations that she calls "teachable moments" rather than "important" talks that come out of nowhere. It is during these small talks that you and your family can formulate reasonable expectations and guidelines for behavior. You should also discuss the consequences of breaking any rules previously agreed upon.

During the teen years, parents need to be mindful of whether they are putting too much pressure on their children.

During the teen years, parents need to be mindful of whether they are putting too much pressure on their children. Noting that affluent children often have higher rates of depression and drug use than the general teen population, Rev. Haffner said that part of the cause of this trend is subliminal pressure to push children to be as successful as their parents.

2. Remember that "not everyone is doing it."

Rev. Haffner reminded parents that it is possible to graduate high school without delving into dangerous territory, and it is important that teens know this as well. For example, she cited studies showing that by the time they finish high school, 25% of high school seniors have never had a drink and 40% have never been drunk. Sometimes there is comfort in numbers and in your child's knowledge that he/she isn't the only one not engaging in certain behaviors. When teens stop listening to the bragging of their peers, they realize they feel less pressure to engage, she said.

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Cracking Facebook: Essential Reading for Parents Who Want to Get With the Program

BY CAROL SCHATZ PAPPER

My friend D. has no friends. On Facebook, that is. As a New York City mom with a teenager, she decided to register on the wildly popular social networking site so that she could understand her teen's online world. "Parents need to create an account so they know what's going on," she contends. "The kids try to keep things private, but it's just not as easy as they think it is," she adds. "Sooner or later some will end up with friends on their list whom they have never met." A child's Facebook page can potentially be seen around the world by strangers.

Reading *The Missing Manual*, I finally understood why Facebook is so irresistible to kids.

As the use of social networking sites spreads, parents of teens and tweens can't ignore that predators, cyber-bullying, embarrassing intimate photos and deadly computer viruses are lurking landmines. There is also the risk that what goes on the Web stays on the Web, and, like a wacky tattoo, a silly lapse in Internet judgment can hinder kids during their college admission and career-advancing years. On the positive side, teens can use sites like Facebook to stay in touch with friends from all over and express their creativity. But, given that kids much younger than Facebook's minimum age (13) are posting profiles surreptitiously, and that a whopping 70 percent of American girls and 57 percent of boys between the ages of 15 to 17 have profiles on some social networking site, parents need to stay in the grapevine.

Founded in 2004 as an online yearbook for college students, Facebook opened its doors to the wider public in 2006. Now it is said to have more than 65 million users, with people 35 and up as its biggest growth area. But for many of us from the "Me," not Wii, generation, Facebook is not only a hot button topic but also intimidating.

Fortunately two witty new books promise to make the whole thing a lot less scary for the uninitiated among us: *Facebook®: The Missing Manual®* by E. A. Vander Veer (O'Reilly Media; 2008) and *Facebook® For Dummies®* by Carolyn Abram and Leah Perlman (Wiley Publishing; 2008). Of the two, I preferred *The Missing Manual*. It was more user-friendly and far less a transparent cheerleader for the site (the *Dummies* book was written by Facebook employees, who often promote the corporate line). On the other hand, the *Dummies* book was pretty exhaustive, and I could imagine it being helpful if I ever wanted to use advanced applications on the site. It also had a clever tear-out "Cheat Sheet" describing typical Facebook activities.

Reading *The Missing Manual*, I finally understood why Facebook is so irresistible to kids. Writes E.A. Vander Veer: "having friends is really the whole point of joining Facebook." Okay—having friends is also one of the main developmental drives of the teenage years. Given that posting last minute party invitations, sharing photos, memorializing events, knowing what your friends are up to, celebrating birthdays, gossiping, flirting and exchanging phone numbers all happen through the Facebook network, it's not surprising that it's steamrolling through the New York City independent middle and high school community, where it's perceived as safer than MySpace. In addition to instant messaging and texting, it's how many kids communicate now.

I easily register on the site (after using *The Missing Manual's* tip of creating a new screen name expressly for my Facebook account so my first choice e-mail account won't be compromised). I apply all the privacy settings available on the site and then read the privacy and safety chapters in both books. *The Missing Manual's* chapter on privacy and safety should be required reading for all teens about to get online.

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CRACKING FACEBOOK

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It points out that Facebook's own privacy policy "clearly states that anything you disclose on the site 'may become publicly available' and that all members agree to use the site 'at their own risk.' Gulp." It alerts me that "folks who are determined to see your Facebook profile can find a way to do so" and that in a British privacy study, "41 percent of Facebook members chose to befriend a plastic frog, thereby granting...access to personal details such as their home addresses, children's names, and family photo albums."

While teens are getting much savvier about protecting themselves from Internet predators, identity theft is a growing concern. Kids can inadvertently disclose enough details in a profile to allow computer criminals to crack their parents' online bank accounts by guessing passwords.

But even if your teen doesn't have a profile, privacy is a real concern because photos of him or her can still show up on a friend's page tagged with a caption. Those photos can start traveling through the friend's network of friends, and so on. "My kid has learned that if someone takes a photo at a party, it can end up on the site," says D. "A friend may need to be asked

to delete a picture from the camera or even remove a picture or caption from the site. It gets tricky."

With privacy restrictions in place and *The Missing Manual* at my side for further exploration, I am shocked to find I am actually having fun on Facebook. It really is not so hard. I plan to get good enough on the site so that when my kids are ready to join

What I learned from my short time online is that one of Facebook's real businesses seems to be collecting valuable marketing information...

Facebook, I will be able to talk about it intelligently and monitor them. I will be able to teach them safety strategies and point out potential pitfalls with the same confidence I had when first showing them how to navigate city sidewalks alone. Or, if I decide to listen to some online experts' advice to delay joining Facebook to 16 or even 18, or even disallow it altogether, I will be able to explain my reasoning to my kids.

But I have a lot to learn, and for me privacy is a real concern. What I learned from my short time online is that one of Facebook's real businesses seems to be collecting valuable marketing information about you and selling it to other companies. Using a feature called "Beacon," Facebook tracks your Web purchases with participating retailers. When I buy movie tickets on the Web, I am surprised when the movie ticket site tells me that details of my purchase have just been sent to my Facebook page, where they can be announced to my "friends." Fortunately, like D, I have none. ●

To Learn More Online:

For up-to-date info on Facebook, check out these sites listed in *Facebook: The Missing Manual*: www.insidefacebook.com; www.allfacebook.com; www.getsatisfaction.com/facebook.

A wealth of online safety tips can be found in the articles, resources and research pages of www.childrenonline.org. Our Web site, www.parentsinaction.org also has helpful links about online safety on our Resources page: www.parentsinaction.org/resources.

SAVE THE DATE

**NYC–Parents In Action announces its
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featuring

BRUCE BREIMER, Principal Emeritus and retired
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Mr. Breimer will share his 40 years experience
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**If you would like to serve on the Benefit Committee,
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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 NYC independent 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 in the Fall, please call NYC-PIA at (212) 426-0240 or e-mail facilitation@parentsinaction.org.

AFFIRMING PARENTHOOD

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3. Be clear in communicating your family values.

Values don’t always have to come from faith. Nevertheless, to communicate your family values to your child, you must be crystal clear as to what they are. Rev. Haffner suggested coming up with hypothetical behaviors and trying them on for size. Ask yourself, when is sex okay? When might kissing, touching, drinking, etc. each be considered an acceptable behavior? Whatever your answers—whether defined by a certain age or the status of adulthood or marriage—be able to justify your family rules before arbitrarily laying them at your teen’s feet. Rev. Haffner also recommended discussing various behaviors and expectations with your spouse to discover areas of agreement or difference. Try and think of the nuances involved in teen experimentation and examine where you stand on a particular subject before you agree upon rules.

To reinforce your values, Rev. Haffner advised looking for everyday teachable moments. To open a conversation about sex and relationships, Rev. Haffner suggested the movie “Juno” or the saga of the Spears sisters. With her own teenagers, Rev. Haffner coupled visits to R-rated movies with a 30-minute discussion of how the movie did or did not reflect her family’s values.

If your teen is desperate to watch “Gossip Girl,” watch an episode together and ask questions afterwards about the characters and their behavior. Since it is so hard to shield our children from the world, perhaps experiencing it with them makes it easier for them to feel guided.

4. Set limits together and establish consequences.

The fact is that you want to keep your child safe. Rev. Haffner asserted that communicating this simple fact to your child will result in less resistance to setting limits. When kids have conversations with their parents and understand the reasoning behind a particular rule, they are less likely to delve into risky behavior. That, Rev. Haffner said, is why you want to be an affirming parent.

Rev. Haffner also noted that consequences should make sense to your teen and have some relation to the particular rule that was broken. For example, coming home under the influence of alcohol can result in a loss of social privileges or use of the family car. For some teens and families, it may be enough to require that they still get up early on Sunday morning to attend religious services or fulfill a community service obligation—and being hung-over is no excuse for absence.

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AFFIRMING PARENTHOOD

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5. Teen-proof your home.

Two-thirds of teens report having easy access to alcohol and prescription and over-the-counter medications in their own homes. To reduce availability, Rev. Haffner recommended that parents “tween/teen-proof” their homes. Lock alcohol cabinets and inventory and secure medications. From the circle of your teens’ friends, find parents who will agree to no unchaperoned parties, no homes left empty on the weekend, and no alcohol served at parties. Rev. Haffner also stressed that it is a criminal offense to serve alcohol to a minor in your house, whether you are there or not.

When kids have conversations with their parents and understand the reasoning behind a particular rule, they are less likely to delve into risky behavior.

When a child is invited to a party, call the host parents and determine what kind of chaperoning is planned. Will the parent be in another part of the house or is the parent available to check in on things from time to time? Teens may hate it when parents make this call, but will mind it less if others are doing it too.

6. Love your child extravagantly.

Rev. Haffner acknowledged that no matter how engaged parents are, teens will still make mistakes. The important thing is to let your children know that you will love them no matter what. Stress that being safe is more important than any fear of getting in trouble. Never be so severe in setting consequences that you become unapproachable. Your teen should feel he or she can come to you with a mistake rather than be alone with it.

Remind your children that you are there for them, that you value them, and that you will listen to them and ask their opinion. Being an affirming parent will enable you to balance your own expectations with your teen’s wishes. Spend time with your child and affirm your family’s values. Above all, said Rev. Haffner, love your children extravagantly and remember to tell them how lucky you feel to be their parent. ●

For more information and to read excerpts from Rev. Haffner’s books, see www.21stcenturyparent.com

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Our revised and expanded edition of FOCUS is now available to participating schools in hard copy and online. Please contact your NYC-PIA School Rep for details.

FOCUS contains information on a variety of topics, including parent/child communication; media and technology; health and safety; and alcohol and drug use.

TEEN SCENE XXII

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than boys. But one boy said “even people who experiment with drugs think it’s bad.”

Is smoking pot okay, or is it considered worse than alcohol? Most agreed pot was the least dangerous of drugs, but disagreed on whether or not it was a gateway drug. One panelist said, “Coke users are predisposed and they usually wanted to try coke to begin with; they are not moving up from pot. A much higher percentage stays with pot.” When compared with cigarettes, another boy on the panel said that smoking pot did not have the same negative stigma since it’s a “grand social activity.”

A question from the audience prompted a discussion of prescription and over-the-counter drug abuse. One teen said athletes were more likely to use the prescription pain killers Vicodin and Percocet, the tranquilizer Xanax or even Prozac, than illegal drugs, as these were perceived as not as detrimental to ath-

The teens advised that it was better to discuss the overall subject of drugs well in advance, rather than zero in on one specific situation.

letic performance. Others mentioned that grinding up Ritalin to snort (for an effect similar to cocaine), drinking Benadryl and “Robo-tripping,” or drinking Robitussin, are common. Still, prescription drugs were not considered in the same league as pot, and most panelists seemed to agree that someone who abused these drugs needed attention.

Dr. Lopez asked how a parent should respond if he suspects a teen has been experimenting with drugs or alcohol. The teens advised that it was better to discuss the overall subject of drugs well in advance, rather than zero in on one specific situation. “If you find the pipe, it’s not the first time,” said one. They said it was not prudent to be overly strict, because the teen might get defensive and rebel. “It’s really about the trust you have with your kid. We start to realize that there is stuff we know that you don’t.” While trust is impor-

tant, so is a parent’s own use of alcohol and other substances. One girl said that she was glad her parents didn’t “change themselves” with alcohol.

Sex

Dr. Lopez introduced the subject of sex by asking if the definition of “hooking up” had gotten any clearer. It hasn’t. One panelist described it as a word with “500 meanings, from having lunch to anything above or below the waist.” The teens said they could talk about sex with their parents, depending on the circumstance. One girl said that if she raised the subject with her parents, “My dad would freak, but my mom could talk.” Another said, “Some parents are not able to talk about sexuality and seem afraid.”

On the topic of oral sex, one boy remarked that “you’re still a virgin—it’s like kissing.” A girl disagreed, saying “the media portrays that girls enjoy giving, but I don’t know many who do.” Dr. Lopez added statistics from medical research: statistically, oral sex is almost exclusively given girl to boy.

Stress

Dr. Lopez asked about stress: “is college the end point?” Most panelists said yes, but agreed that some pressures come from a particular setting and so it depends on the high school. They acknowledged the pressure is not just for grades, but the need to distinguish oneself. “People want to be their best, and this generates pressure and competition,” said one. Another said “it’s okay—we’re all in the same boat together.” One panelist said the tension in planning for college stems from the need to both “satisfy what you want and what your parent wants.”

Dr. Lopez closed the evening by reading two poems—one on the value of “listening” and another by Diane Loomans, who muses about what she would do differently if she had her child to raise over again. And, as in almost every Teen Scene for the past twenty-two years, at least one teen reached out to the audience of parents and asked them to remember that they were once teenagers themselves. ●

Thank you...

On behalf of NYC-Parents in Action, I would like to thank those directors who are retiring this year. We are grateful that they have chosen to devote their time, talents and energy to the programs that NYC-PIA offers to the independent school community. While many of them will continue their involvement with us as Facilitators and School Reps, we thank them now for their tremendous contributions to our Board of Directors and our community.

Ana-Rosa Aboitiz (Facilitation, 2 years); Carolyn Cohen (School Liaisons, 1 year); Peggy Ellis (Seminars, 13 years); Carmen Knoepffler (Web site, 3 years); Martha Leitner (Web site, 9 years); Marie Marolda (Web site, 1 year); Ani Bedrossian Omer (Seminars, 10 years); Carol Papper (Newsletter Editor, 3 years); Robin Straus (Facilitation, 13 years).

— Aimee Garn, *President*

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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