

The Price of Perfection Are We Losing the Real Child in the Race for Success?

BY SALLY SHERWOOD

The resilience of young people is tested daily by schoolwork, peer group pressure, fluctuating family dynamics, a relentless assault of media images and a virulent drug landscape that makes the sixties look like amateur hour. Parents attuned to their children can assist them in safely navigating the often stressful challenges of daily living.

To launch its association with the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, on October 14 NYC-Parents in Action presented the first seminar in the 2004-2005 Lynn Manger Lecture Series, "Looking for Relief: Stress and Its Fallout." Panelists Dr. Ralph I. Lopez, specialist in adolescent medicine; Dr. Stephen Rudin, founder of Individual U.; Jeanette Friedman, director of Adolescent Services of the Caron Foundation of NY; and Ginna Marston, founding member and director of program development of the Partnership for Drug-Free America, discussed the family's role in appreciating the causes, effects and fallout from stress among children.

Stress as part of the maturing process

According to Dr. Lopez, every human being experiences similar internal stresses on the road to adulthood. Growing up, we seek to define who we are as individuals, discover who we are sexually, and achieve independence. "Stress is part of this process. The problem," says Lopez, "is what we overlay on the kids." Academic difficulties, family strife or peer pressure can overwhelm young people, who may turn to drugs to relieve their anxiety.

While parents cannot shield children from stress, they can gauge its intensity, identify its sources and monitor its potential consequences. Parents who suspect that their child is abusing substances should confront

the child together and seek outside intervention. Experimenting with drugs is "frightening"—one marijuana cigarette today is equivalent in strength to 10 or 12 joints in 1960.

Monitoring academic stress

An educator, Dr. Rudin is familiar with the stress of academic pressure stemming from undiagnosed learning disorders and unrealistic expectations imposed by schools and families. Parents are in the best position to detect learning differences in their children and should seek help as soon as a child presents symptoms of emotional anxiety that may be related to academic struggles. Noting that 7th and 8th graders are expected to "morph into Leonardo da Vinci for four years"—becoming experts in all subjects—he urges parents to "recognize their children for who they are and respect their special needs and efforts. Children who have learning differences need to be reassured that they are okay. Doing 'better' isn't about trying harder; it's about working differently."

By acknowledging stress and putting it into perspective, parents can mitigate the pressures placed upon youngsters. Rudin suggests that parents calibrate their own expectations and resist projecting them upon their children. The very school that enthalls the parents may be a source of unending stress for a child. In that case, it may be time for a change.

Substance abuse and acting out

Exploding the notion of drug use as a "rite of passage," Jeanette Friedman, an educator and family therapist, warns parents that "early cigarette-smoking is often a precursor of depression and anxiety with adolescents." Once young people experience a mood change from substance inhalation, they may turn to more potent drugs to medicate their depression.

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Alliance with The Partnership for a Drug-Free America

BY MARY BETH HARVEY

NYC-Parents in Action is thrilled to establish a relationship with Partnership for a Drug-Free America. As Stephen Pasierb, President & Chief Executive Officer of the Partnership has emphasized, our two organizations have a great deal to share with one another and you. The Partnership is a resource for NYC-PIA and together we can help spread the word on drug use.

From early childhood on, children are presented with a confusing picture of the world when it comes to drugs. While all drugs carry risks, some are legal (alcohol and tobacco); some are “medicines”; others are illegal. Parents need to help children understand the differences and the risks they all carry.

Parental involvement is critical. One time conversations about drugs are not enough, on-going communication is the key. The Partnership and NYC-PIA recognize that drugs can be an overwhelming issue to deal with—but it does not have to be. The Partnership offers the following 23 tips for you and your child. Please see the Partnership website for a wealth of information specific to all your questions: www.drugfree.org.

Help for Parents

23 Tips to Keep in Mind and Put to Use

Kids and drugs. It can be an overwhelming issue to deal with—but it does not have to be. All you really need to begin are the 23 easy tips on this page. Put them into practice and your kids will reap the rewards of healthy, drug-free lives.

- 1 Be your kids’ greatest fan. Compliment them on all of their efforts, the strength of their character, and their individuality.
- 2 Get your kids involved in adult-supervised after-school activities. Ask them what types of activities they are interested in and contact the school

principal or guidance counselor to find out what activities are available for your child. Sometimes it takes a bit of experimenting to find out which activities your kids are best suited for, but it is worth the effort—feeling competent makes kids much less likely to use drugs.

- 3 Help your kids develop tools they can use to get out of alcohol- or drug-related situations. Let them know they can use you as an excuse: “My mom would kill me if I drank a beer!”
- 4 Get to know your children’s friends and their parents. Set appointments for yourself to call them and check-in to make sure they share your views on alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Steer your kids away from any friends who use drugs.
- 5 Call kids’ parents if their home is to be used for a party. Make sure that the party will be alcohol-free and supervised by adults.
- 6 Set curfews and enforce them. Let kids know the consequences of breaking curfew.
- 7 Encourage open dialogue with your children about their experiences. Make sure your children understand that they can ask you anything—and that you will give them an honest answer.
- 8 Set a no-use rule for alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.
- 9 Sit down for dinner with your children at least once a week. Use the time to talk—do not eat in front of the TV.
- 10 Make, and enforce, clear rules.
- 11 You do not need a lot of rules, but consistently enforce a small number of them with mild, not severe, consequences.
- 12 Show you care enormously about the choices your children make about drugs.

VOLUNTEER AT NYC-PARENTS IN ACTION

The Webteam at NYC-PIA needs volunteers to help keep the website updated and information-packed. Volunteers do not need website experience, but should have good basic computer skills.

For more information, send us an e-mail at website@parentsinaction.org
Or call 212-987-9629

- 13 Plan regular parent-child activities that both of you enjoy.
- 14 Emphasize the things your children do right instead of only focusing on what's wrong.
- 15 If you abuse alcohol or other drugs, seek professional help.
- 16 Talk early and often about drugs, especially about the consequences of using them.
- 17 Talk with your children about the things that are important to them every day.
- 18 Really listen to your children.
- 19 Take advantage of everyday "teachable moments" to discuss drugs.
- 20 Arrange to have your children looked after or involved in activities from 3-6 p.m., the time most trouble occurs.
- 21 Make sure children who are unattended for periods during the day feel your presence by leaving them notes and talking to them on the phone.
- 22 Make it easy for your child to leave a place where drugs are being used by offering to pick him or her up anytime.
- 23 Be involved in your children's lives and make sure to have fun with them.

For more tips and advice visit www.drugfree.org. ●

TEEN SCENE

Monday 7th February 2005

6-7:30 pm

at The Trinity School
101 West 91 Street

THE PRICE OF PERFECTION

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While normal stress can be a powerful motivator, excessive stress may severely debilitate a vulnerable child. "Kids with overloaded systems are likely to act out. If they're not acting out, they're acting inward, punishing themselves through...depression and anxiety."

She advises parents to learn to accept their children for who they are; allow them to learn from life's experiences without overprotecting them; avoid labels that categorize them; and reassure them "that they are capable, that you have faith in their abilities...that you are there for them."

Knowing the facts

"It's not my kid." "It's only sniffing glue." "Kids won't listen to us." "We can handle it as a family." Reviewing the myths surrounding teen drug abuse, Ginna Marston urges parents to learn the facts: sniffing glue is one of 500 to 600 toxic or lethal chemical inhalants commonly found in our homes. Kids who learn the risks of drug use from their parents are less likely to use drugs. As parents, our attitudes and behaviors make us critical role models. Families who seek early intervention can often avoid tragic consequences and heal their families.

Marston notes the recreational drug landscape has changed over the decades from "farming-based" to "pharming-based." Methods of procurement have evolved from hand-to-hand dealing to online and over-the-counter accessibility. Today's household staples: cough medicine, diet pills, and painkillers, may become tomorrow's substance of choice. Teens are more likely to view drugs as an antidote to stress. Marston urges parents to learn about today's drugs, listen to their children, stay involved, maintain consistent boundaries, and "be a parent, not just a pal."

Families may consult the Partnership for a Drug-Free America website, www.drugfree.org, to learn more about drug use, its causes and consequences. ●



Learning for Life

BY EVA POMICE TIMERMAN

Renowned pediatrician Mel Levine thinks schools have some learning to do, especially when it comes to preparing children for success in life as well as school. A Professor of Pediatrics at the University of North Carolina Medical School in Chapel Hill, Dr. Levine founded All Kinds of Minds, a nonprofit institute for the study of learning differences. Dr. Levine recently opened a Student Success Center in New York City, which works with children on an individual basis and will help train 20,000 New York City public schools to observe and address diverse learning patterns and brain functions. Dr. Levine shared his groundbreaking views on educating children with NYC-PIA newsletter writer Eva Pomice Timerman.

- Q NYC-PIA: Do parents and schools try too hard to create children who are good at everything?**
- A LEVINE:** Parents really want their kids to be well-rounded. They worry if there's a particular area that's not excellent. But what matters in life is how strong our strengths are. Parents should be able to say: "My daughter has such amazing math skills, I don't care if she can spell." In many instances, it's the people with highly specialized minds who end up succeeding. I'm not saying to ignore weaknesses. It's a matter of relative emphasis. But we're up against tremendous pressures from college admissions. Colleges stress well-roundedness.
- Q NYC-PIA: Doesn't this emphasis on well-roundedness create a disconnect with life, with the skills needed in the larger world?**
- A LEVINE:** Kids are unprepared because they don't know themselves. They finish college and grad school and don't have the tools they need. They are totally naïve about what work involves, how you treat fellow workers. It's different from what they've been prepared for all their lives.
- Q NYC-PIA: How can schools do a better job of getting students ready for life outside their walls?**
- A LEVINE:** Schools should be providing career education. Children should be reading biographies, case studies, learning how to organize a project. Kids are not looking inside themselves, asking "Who am I, how can I find gratification in life, where am I headed?" Every child should be writing his own autobiography year by year; projecting what he wants the next chapter to look like.

Q NYC-PIA: There are cultural impediments to this as well. Where are the adult role models?

A LEVINE: This is a generation of kids who have no interest in adults, only in themselves and in movie and rock stars, who are useless as role models. When I was a kid and my parents had dinner guests, they were objects of scrutiny for me. People listened to grandparents telling about their lives. Now you have twenty-seven-year-olds acting like adolescents. They won't give up their teenage years and are still focusing on peer acceptance. They are subverting their own development with a tremendous emphasis on immediate gratification and conformity.

Q NYC-PIA: How can parents fight their child's urge to fit in at all costs?

A LEVINE: Parents can influence the extent to which their children capitulate in their drive to be accepted by peers. There's nothing sadder than a kid who wants to play viola and doesn't because it's not considered cool by his friends. Parents have to model their own individuality in front of a child, have their own way of being weird.

Q NYC-PIA: Parents today seem to want to give their children all the experiences they can afford to. What are the risks of that approach?

A LEVINE: Parents have to overcome the compulsion that their children not miss out on anything, from horseback riding to computer camp. Get over the college-prep mentality. There's nothing that requires less prep than college.

Q NYC-PIA: What are your newest areas of research?

A LEVINE: We're looking at nurturing a well-regulated mind. The emphasis here is not on abilities but controls kids have over their thinking; the extent to which they can plan or organize things as opposed to doing them impulsively, and how they approach and improve these skills. For some children, the barrier to learning is inefficiency.

The entertainment available to kids is so easy, and schoolwork so demanding, that there's a large gulf in productivity. Then you see kids who genetically have difficulty organizing and have a tendency to be inefficient. Cultural forces providing these distractions and fragmenting children's attention put these children in double jeopardy. ●

Dr. Mel Levine will speak at the 92nd Street Y on March 10, 2005 at 8 a.m.

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Touchpoints of Emotional Development: Foundations for Learning

BY VERONICA BENNETT

Dr. T. Berry Brazelton and Dr. Joshua Sparrow have a simple, but profound, message for parents—real learning occurs in the context of human relationships. Children flourish if their relationships are secure enough to allow them to learn from mistakes. A rainy October 19th evening found an eager audience of parents and educators at a symposium with Dr. Brazelton and Dr. Sparrow of the renowned Brazelton Touchpoints Center at Children's Hospital, Boston. Joint sponsors of the symposium were NYC-Parents in Action, Resources for Children with Special Needs, The Parents League of New York and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center.

Dr. Sparrow stated that “cognitive development is interdependent with social and emotional development.” In a pressured society, it is all too easy to focus on cognitive development at the expense of social and emotional learning. The path to cognitive development is marked with four “touchpoints” of emotional development: attachment, state regulation, mutual regulation and self-esteem. Attachment, or the “capacity to endear,” is brought to mind on the first day of school. It is embodied in a parent's hope that his child will be able to connect with the teachers, said Dr. Sparrow.

The second foundation for learning is “state regulation,” or the ability to put oneself in the state necessary to accomplish a task. Being able to screen out unwanted external stimulation is an essential foundation for learning. In children with learning issues, the ability to regulate this state may take so much effort that there is a cost to social interaction. Whether a child has a learning issue or not, the parent who can help a child observe his state may find that getting things done becomes less of a struggle for the child. Instead of nagging, ask “How much of a break do you need?”

Do you need to run around? Fresh air?” These questions will not only help your child in his discovery, they will make you an ally. “Children respond because they don't expect this from a parent,” says Dr. Sparrow.

The third touchpoint of emotional development is “mutual regulation,” or matching the state of another person. Parent/baby interactions are a good way to observe mutual regulation—smiles or coos from a parent often elicit the same response from the baby. Learning occurs when two people are in different states and trying to reach matching states. A parent who over anticipates the needs of a child actually diminishes the ability of the child to bring about the desired help.

The final touchpoint of emotional development is self-esteem. Rather than being a task-master or cheerleader, Drs. Brazelton and Sparrow ask parents to support the child's discovery of self-gratification. Dr. Brazelton noted that learning a new task involves both internal and external feedback cycles. Internal feedback is the child's own feeling of accomplishment, while external feedback is the verbal encouragement of a parent or caregiver. To foster internal feedback, Dr. Brazelton's advice was to give children tasks or chores that are appropriate for their stage of development. Don't give them a project that is too big, but challenge them to move forward with smaller obstacles. Dr. Sparrow suggests giving children a range of activities to master, such as learning to skate or ride a bike without training wheels. Delay gratification and allow them to tolerate frustration. It is especially important to find opportunities for a special needs child to expand his repertoire, Dr. Brazelton noted.

Both Drs. Brazelton and Sparrow agree that “quality time” does not work for children. What children really need is “hanging out time”—time that allows

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Luncheon Introduces Stephen J. Pasierb to NYC-PIA

BY MARY BETH HARVEY

Stephen J. Pasierb, President and Chief Executive Officer of The Partnership for a Drug-Free America, spoke at a luncheon November 8th for NYC-PIA facilitators and guests. Stephen began by thanking NYC-Parents in Action and emphasizing the tremendous opportunity that this alliance offers to parents. The Partnership is a terrific resource of current trends, information, and how and where to go for help. Together NYC-PIA and the Partnership can get the word out through our network of schools.

Stephen began by addressing the following questions:

- 1 Why is today's teen different from the past?
- 2 Can drug use really be prevented?
- 3 What role does attitude or information play?
- 4 Where is the power of influence?

There has been progress in the 18 years since the Partnership began its work. Statistics on drug use show a downward trend for certain drugs (cocaine and heroin are two examples). However, there is a new drug landscape in our culture that is more potent and more expansive in choice. Children and teens are faced with an ever growing list of self-medicating alternatives. Together, we need to find new ways to decrease drug usage. The answer to this is parents.

Stephen mentions five myths that parents buy into:

- 1 Not my kid
- 2 It was only pot
- 3 Teens won't listen
- 4 Kids always sniff glue
- 5 We can handle it

The Partnership wants to encourage parents to seek intervention early on, and to move away from waiting for treatment only when there is a full-blown addiction. At this point the cycle is more difficult to treat.

Stephen states that the core messages that are “musts” for parents are:

- 1 **Know the facts.** Substance abuse is the leading adolescent health problem. It is also an issue for middle schoolers. There are many influences on children: music is the #1 non-school activity; videos, movies, and the internet are powerful forms of information and influence. On the internet teens can access sources that teach them how to use and abuse drugs; blogging enables them to read abusers' accounts of their drug use. Kids are multi-taskers and do many of these activities at the same time. “Teen life is a high sensation, multi-media experience,” says Stephen.
- 2 **Stay involved.** Positive communication and a relationship with parents reduces the use of drugs and the amount of sexual experimentation.
- 3 **Be a parent, not a pal.** Praise, monitor closely, talk often, use teachable moments, convey a clear and consistent point of view, set boundaries, and network with other parents.
- 4 **Intervene early.** Drug use is a serious but treatable illness, and there is help.

“Information is power,” states Stephen. That information coupled with attitudes drives behavior. Teens who see anti-drug ads on a regular basis use drugs less often. Although the trend for substance abuse is decreasing, we must use this as an opportunity to accelerate this trend, “The supply of drugs will always be there, but persuasive information can change behavior,” states Stephen.

There is a new drug landscape for kids to navigate, and parents need to educate themselves on the various drugs being used. The Partnership has noted the “emerging drug threats” that they describe as the “Coming Storm”:

1 Inhalants of household substances. This is very dangerous. There can be death resulting from a first time use. 6th graders have the steepest incline of use.

2 Prescription drugs. There is an alarming increase in non-medical use of pain relievers and medicines. This indicates a sea change in drug use, from the farming drugs (coca, poppies and cannabis) to the pharmaceuticals and chemical products. This is the future of the drug issue. Pharmaceutical abuse has seen an increase in ER visits, calls to Poison Control and hospital admissions for treatment. These drugs are available to your children in your and their friends' medicine cabinets. We live in a society of "a pill for every ill," which may normalize drugs for teens. Stephen recommends reading *New York* magazine article entitled: "Generation Rx" (October 4, 2004), available on the Partnership website, www.drugfreeamerica.org.

We must talk about the behavior of getting high. There are now so many different drugs to abuse, so the method of talking about each one and telling of its dangers is less effective. The method of distribution has also changed, from a pusher in the alleys to a friend in the playground, access to prescription drugs on the internet, and your own medicine cabinet.

Our collective role is to reach out, empower and mobilize parents on this issue. Kids who learn about the risks of drugs in the home are half as likely to use. Unfortunately, only a third of kids say they hear about the dangers of drugs from their parents. One conversation is not enough; frequent dialogue with your teen is critical, and don't forget to listen. Personal stories and testimonials from kids and families who have been through the problem and are now out of it are very effective. Even more so are the tragedies. Log on to the Partnership website (www.drugfree.com) for these testimonials and other drug related information. ●

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BOOK NOTES

Some inspirational reads for the new school year —

- **THE PRIMAL TEEN: WHAT THE NEW DISCOVERIES ABOUT THE TEENAGE BRAIN TELL US ABOUT OUR KIDS**
by Barbara Strauch
- **THE PRESSURED CHILD – HELPING YOUR CHILD FIND SUCCESS IN SCHOOL AND LIFE**
by Dr. Michael Thompson
- **THE HURRIED CHILD**
by Dr. David Elkind

To purchase these and our other recommended readings please visit BOOK NOTES at www.parentsinaction.org.

TOUCHPOINTS OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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you to establish closeness with your child. It is often during these casual moments that your child will raise important questions. They also remind us that children need family time and rituals, such as having dinner or breakfast together. There is tremendous passion in parenting, said Dr. Brazelton. He asks us to respect what each child brings to a situation and to look for the positives. ●

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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