MEL LEVINE ON SOCIAL COGNITION DURING CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

The Never-Ending Struggle to Perform for Peers

BY AIMEE GARN

The NYC-Parents in Action Fall lecture, co-hosted with *Child Magazine*, was given by Mel Levine, M.D. on December 13, 2001, on the subject of "Social Cognition During Childhood and Adolescence: The Never-ending Struggle to Perform for Peers." Dr. Levine, Professor of Pediatrics at the University of North Carolina Medical School, the Director of The Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning and the Co-Chairman of the Board of All Kinds of Minds, is a well-known expert on learning differences who illuminates not only our children's experiences but also our own.

Dr. Levine has expanded his research focus to include social cognition, clarifying what we know through our own experience and from war stories from the trenches of middle school. If we understand the factors and skills involved in navigating the social sphere, he suggests, we can give our children strategies to succeed.

Rather than label children with classifications such as A.D.D. (Attention Deficit Disorder) or L.D. (Learning Disability), a process that he calls "deifying the D's," Dr. Levine prefers to evaluate each child as an individual with a range of strengths and weaknesses. He measures children's social cognition — their ways of thinking, communicating and behaving — according to how their strategies work in the environment.

For many children, social pressure is far more challenging than academic pressure and, indeed, often impacts their school performance. Children feel tested all day, by their teachers, coaches and other children. They are exposed to scrutiny and evaluation. The child's daunting daily mission

is to have friends, to be popular, and to avoid failure and humiliation.

By early middle school, society is clearly stratified and every child wants to know where he fits in. Dr. Levine defines subgroups: the popular kids; the amiable kids, who have good social skills and are well-liked but not really popular; the controversial kids; the neglected kids; and the rejected kids. Rejected kids are often ridiculed or bullied; they are the ones no one wants to sit next to in the cafeteria, and they can be truly isolated. When asked which group he fit into as a child, Dr. Levine added another category. "I was a 'loner-by-choice," he said wryly. "These are kids with good social skills who are happy with their social position, but who prefer to spend a fair amount of time by themselves, pursuing their own interests."

Children who are in the "popular" and "amiable" groups tend to have predictable strengths. They know how to make other kids feel good; they don't boast too much; they use appropriate forms of speech, varying their vocabularies for peers and for adults; they know how to dress correctly for their environment. In addition, they have the ability to share with and to trust others, and are not tough or aggressive. In one family, siblings can have very different social abilities and styles, just as one child may have a talent for music and another for sports.

There are three main components of social cognition: verbal pragmatics, social behaviors, and political acumen. Verbal pragmatics include all the ways that we use language to express feelings and to understand the feelings of others. Dr. Levine breaks down verbal skills into several components. These include affective matching (making words

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Friendship and Popularity: Not the Same

BY MEG SHERIDAN

Michael Thompson, author of Best Friends, Worst Enemies; Raising Cain; and Speaking of Boys, addressed a group of parents at the Saint David's School this fall. His latest book focuses on the thorny issues of friendship and popularity, and how the subject can be the cause of intense pressure for elementary and middle school children.

"Friendship and popularity are not the same thing," said Mr. Thompson. Children will define a friend as someone you can rely on, tell secrets to, someone who likes you for yourself, and shares common interests. A friend is someone who doesn't tease you when the group teases you. Children will go on to define popular as being cool. A popular student is well known by a lot of kids, but they may not be liked. Cool kids have money and are athletic. They don't have friends, but they do have followers.

Mr. Thompson said, "In grades 4 through 8, popularity wars rage in every school." For a girl, the top three reasons she might be considered popular are looks, clothes, and charisma. For boys, the top three reasons are athletic achievement, height and build, and humor. For both boys and girls, the fourth reason is money. "Kids always mention this, adults never do," said Mr. Thompson. The media — *People Magazine*, *Entertainment Tonight*, soap operas, reinforce all these criteria.

"Modern parents think advocacy is an important part of parenting," said Mr. Thompson. "But kids think their parents are going to mess it up for

them." His advice is not to get too involved in your child's popularity: there are life lessons that can only be learned from peers. Effective kid-to-kid communication, modulated aggression, and moral values are part of this education. Kids have a separate world and a separate language from adults. Kids who do not "speak the language" are at a disadvantage. It's little secret that the possibilities for kid-on-kid aggression are endless. There are constant nudges, trips and falls that are the invisible norms of controlled group aggression. If your child crosses the line, he will be marginalized from the group. The group will bring him down. Children are natural parliamentarians. They have lots of rules, and debate the exceptions. They enjoy talking about what is right, and what is fair. Parents can compliment a child, but it does not have the same impact as a compliment from a peer.

Parents don't have to watch helplessly from the sidelines while their child wages the popularity wars. Support your child's friendships instead — let your child invite friends over and make your home welcoming. "Don't be a white-rug mother," said Mr. Thompson. Coach your child on social skills if necessary. Out of school, find opportunities for him to experience those things that break down the rules of cool. Take a ropes course, a trip with Outward Bound, or a trip to Europe, where everyone may be uncomfortable getting by with a different language.

"A good social life is more highly correlated with a good adult outcome than IQ or grades." Mr. Thompson told the audience. "It's friendship that saves your life."

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.

Mediating the Media: How Parents Can Use the Media to Teach Values

BY EVA POMICE

As parents, we often feel that the much of the media is at best mind-numbing and, at worst, destructive to our children. TV shows and and films often glamorize sex and drugs, and everything from music videos to fashion ads encourages kids to aspire to shallow images of beauty, power and materialism. But parents can use even the worst media to their advantage. NYC-PIA's Eva Pomice spoke with Robert Selverstone, Ph.D., about how to use the media to convey our values to our children. Selverstone, a Westport, Connecticut-based psychologist who conducts workshops on family issues, explained that by watching with your children, parents not only learn what their kids are exposed to but can use the drama on screen to talk about real life issues.

- NYC-PIA: You urge parents to use media to teach values.
 What's the first step in the process?
- A SELVERSTONE: We parents need to be clear about our own values on a whole range of issues and to remind ourselves, in the words of Parker Palmer, who wrote *The Courage to Teach*, "We teach who we are." Parents are the most critical teachers in children's lives, not just by what we say but what we do. We need to be clear about what we believe and if we're living according to those values.
- **Q** NYC-PIA: What are some examples of this?
- A SELVERSTONE: Two of the clearest values indicators are how we spend time and how we spend money. If I say "My family is important to me" and I leave for work before they wake up and get home after they are sleeping, what does that tell my children? We lie if we say we can have it all. What we do with money if we got a large bequest would we give it to charity or spend it on ourselves demonstrates our values to our children.
- NYC-PIA: Most parents want our children to be better than our own flawed selves. What's wrong with that?
- A SELVERSTONE: Our reach will exceed our grasp. But our kids should see we're trying to do it, that there is congruence between what we say and what we do. If you're constantly on diets and then try to teach your kid good eating habits, you have to expect they will go on diets all the time too. If you aren't honest, how can you expect your child to develop a sense of trust?

- NYC-PIA: The media is often seen as one big negative by parents. How can they use it as a tool?
- A SELVERSTONE: Parents can use the media for "teachable moments," to point out both positive and negative stuff. Take stuff we disapprove of and say "You see this ad, this is how I feel about it." It's a three step process: you point out what you think is happening in the show, express your perspective on it, and, most critical, explain why you feel the way you do. It's crucial not just to express our values, but to indicate the process by which we came to that value; our approach to decision-making. That's particularly critical with adolescents because they are struggling to declare their independence and their kneejerk reaction is to be oppositional. As parents, we want to develop an approach that demonstrates good decision-making, since that's one of the things we are trying to teach.
- NYC-PIA: What are some examples of media that can be used?
- A SELVERSTONE: I would let a teenager watch *Traffic* because it would give you a chance to talk about drugs. There are aspects of it that are very scary, because they are real and involve teenagers. You can look at fashion images with your kids and point out that you think stickthin bodies are unattractive. With ads, you need to point out that people who get sucked into this are silly, that companies are trying to fool us, have people believe "If you chew this gum, you will be popular."

Even in apparently benign media, there are things to talk about. Many sitcoms' depictions of families shows siblings treating each other with sarcasm. It's worth repeating that members of our family don't treat each other that way. In *The Little Mermaid*, when the mermaid falls in love with the prince, she is willing to give up her voice to become human. What an interesting message for girls who often metaphorically swallow their voices. The video can be a jumping off point for a serious discussion.

- NYC-PIA: Should parents try to solicit their child's feelings about what they are watching or listening to?
- A **SELVERSTONE:** Take the opportunity to get kids to open up: "Let me hear what you think, what your friends think." Parents need to sit and listen to what the child believes, why the child believes it. Respect what they say, because that helps them claim their voice.

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Peer Pressure and Drugs

By Meg Sheridan

"You may lose more sleep as a parent of a teenager than of a newborn," said Charlanne Zepf, a Director of the Freedom Institute's Independent Schools Program. Ms. Zepf and two of her colleagues, Tessa Kleeman and Tamar Sheffey, addressed a group of parents at an NYC-Parents in Action luncheon this Fall. Both Charlanne and Tessa spend a great deal of time in the independent schools counseling adolescents on drug experimentation and drug use.

Teenagers are concerned with the issue of their identity — they want to be cool, popular, and sophisticated. They need to become comfortable with themselves and confident in their own abilities. It is a challenge, in the midst of pressure from the peer culture, for them to learn that they can be valued for their own merits, not just for externals like their clothes, friends, or the car they drive.

"There are many reasons why teens say that alcohol and drugs are in their lives," said Tessa Kleeman. "One is that substances are everywhere — alcohol

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can be bought at the store, drugs are around at parties and sleepovers. Another is money — most teens in independent schools can afford to buy whatever they want." Teenagers in school workshops with Ms. Kleeman tell her they would like the schools to take an even stronger stance against drugs than they do, to be more aggressive in enforcing rules prohibiting substance abuse both on and off campus. Teens say they use substances to relax from busy schedules, packed with academic work and extra-curricular activities, and also that they feel social pressure to drink or use a drug rather than be the only one who abstains at a party.

According to Freedom Institute's research, there are specific traits that lead to the risk of drug abuse: children who have a family history of drug abuse, children who are risk-takers by nature, and children who are not able to express themselves, or who do not want to share feelings. In addition, kids who want to be mainstream, but feel that they do not fit in, may be at risk. Getting a "buzz" can be a great equalizer for those who feel different due to a learning disability, a physical abnormality, or a poor body image, for example.

From the student's point of view, the risk of drug dependency appears low. They often see drug use as the norm and believe parents are unnecessarily alarmist about the dangers. To them, drugs provide a way of easing social anxiety, a way of getting up their courage to take social risks, and the ability to explain rejection by saying they were high. Some smoke pot to improve their attention for exams. And, despite all the warnings, they continue to believe that stopping is just a matter of will power: if you are intelligent and an over-achiever, you will be okay.

Ms. Zepf told the audience that teens need to know what the limits are. They need their parents to take a stand. She had some tips for parents on how to deal with the issues surrounding substance use and abuse. Stay up and have a conversation with your child when he returns from a party —

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- NYC-PIA: Why is it important that parents familiarize themselves with media aimed at youth?
- A **SELVERSTONE:** If parents watch one or two nights of Fox, Warner Brothers, and MTV, which have some of the more cutting-edge shows like *Dawson's Creek*, they will probably be surprised at the kinds of things their children are exposed to. They often have no idea.
- NYC-PIA: Some teenagers are even watching shows like Sex and the City. Aren't some things off limits?
- A **SELVERSTONE:** There are things you can presume to censor. We have the obligation to assert our own standards with our own kids. If we don't, who will? But there is a give-and-take with popular culture. We can't isolate our children, we need to respect them, and be periodically open to changing our minds. When we do that, we are role-modeling rational discourse.
- **Q** NYC-PIA: Are our kids getting exposed to more than we think they are?
- A SELVERSTONE: Most kids are getting access to stuff before their parents think they are. I used to teach a class to tenth and eleventh graders. I asked them what their sources were for learning about sexuality. The girls would almost always say a Judy Blume book. She writes many of

her books for sixth graders, but these girls had read them earlier than that. When I asked who had seen an X-rated video, almost all of them answered that they had.

- **Q** NYC-PIA: Why do parents have to be proactive when it comes to the media and their children?
- A SELVERSTONE: We don't wait for kids to ask us "Should I look both ways before crossing a busy intersection?"

 We determine that there are certain things that are inherently dangerous. We need to determine what kinds of things we want our kids to be aware of. We need media literacy, so we can teach our kids to become wise consumers of the media. One of my colleagues will allow her teenage daughter to watch certain R-rated movies as long as they watch them together and talk about them for half an hour afterwards. She's taking the opportunity to teach her child what she thinks.
- NYC-PIA: Media messages seem so overwhelming. Is a parent's voice heard above the din?
- A SELVERSTONE: As a therapist, I'm always impressed by the kinds of things we remember about what adults said. A lot of stuff will filter through. It's our responsibility to give our children our sense of right and wrong, and explain why. To explain that whatever other kids or their parents are doing, our family has it's own rules and beliefs. I remember my mother saying "When I tell you no, don't tell me who." You can let the media rule, or mediate it.

don't let him pull down his cap and disappear into the bedroom. Help teens make decisions about values independently; don't let them place their self-worth on what others think of them because of their clothes or friends. Help your child develop positive behaviors with statements like: "Your friends will like you because you are a good listener, not because you use drugs." When you are critical of your teenager's friends and their values, avoid overdoing it and including prohibitions such as, "Don't hang out with those kids anymore." Be careful in discussing your own past history, and keep the focus on the teen. And never forget that if you take a stand on these issues and set clear

limits, your teenager will hear you. (They have to have heard your advice in order to reject it!)

Parents should acknowledge the four stages of substance use and abuse: experimentation, use, abuse, and dependency. "You try it once, your experimentation is over. The second time it moves on to use," said Ms. Zepf. "Use moves to abuse quickly. You drink to get drunk." Still, drug addictions happen over time. A strong sense of self can help a teen walk away. The best tools are internal feelings that will allow them to nurse a beer, order a ginger ale, or say "No thanks, I've had enough." As Ms. Zepf reminded the audience, "We want to raise good people, not someone who is good at something."

Your Teenager's Self-Esteem — Is It Challenging Yours?

BY AIMEE GARN

NYC-Parents in Action and The New York Psychoanalytic Institute co-hosted a panel discussion on the subject of "Your Teenager's Self-Esteem — Is It Challenging Yours?" in November, 2001. The panelists were Edes Gilbert, acting president of Independent Educational Services and former Head of The Spence School; Leon Hoffman, M.D., Co-Director of the Parent-Child Center of the New York Psychoanalytic Society and Assistant Lecturer at Mount Sinai School of Medicine; and Salvatore Lomonaco, M.D., Director of Child Psychiatry at Albert Einstein School of Medicine.

Dr. Salvatore Lomonaco spoke about self-esteem as it relates to body image. The "challenge" of a teenager's self-esteem refers to the teen's difficulty in maintaining and developing a sense of self-worth through the tremendous physical changes of puberty.

Self-worth, the fundamental regard for oneself as a human being, begins to develop in infancy and comes from being loved and nurtured by parents. The task of the adolescent is to separate from the parent. By age thirteen, the onset of puberty for most children, kids become more involved with their peers, more influenced by the culture, and start to be acutely aware of our society's great emphasis on appearance. For girls, the goal is to be slim and attractive; boys want the muscular build of an action movie hero. "An adolescent patient told me that, no matter what people say to her, when she doesn't feel good about herself she doesn't feel pretty," said Dr. Lomonaco. This is the challenge for adolescents: to accept themselves as attractive when compared to society's unrealistic ideals.

As teenagers go through this stage, they still need their parents, but the bonds change. Parents can't be totally "hands off"; they need to set standards of behavior and monitor the child's social interaction with the opposite sex. "There has to be give-and-take," said Dr. Lomonaco. "Parents should

feel confident in voicing opinions, but allow the adolescent independence to try things on his own."

Dr. Leon Hoffman spoke about children with learning disabilities, who are particularly challenged by self-esteem issues. Often kids with learning issues have trouble putting their feelings into words. "Self-esteem suffers when you can't perform tasks that you want to perform," said Dr. Hoffman. "Kids want to excel, and feel they don't measure up because they don't achieve. They need to learn coping mechanisms for their deficits." Dr. Hoffman suggests that children with learning issues and their parents need to break out of the cycle of anger, frustration and procrastination that many of them deal with because schoolwork is difficult for them. "Parents suffer, too, because they are invested in the child's achievement. A therapist can help parents separate from the child, and help the child find areas of competence and master challenges."

"We use the word 'self-esteem' a lot, but sometimes we confuse giving our kids self-esteem with never saying 'no' to them," said Edes Gilbert. "Selfesteem is both the most powerful part of a person and the most fragile. It's how we feel about ourselves, mostly the feeling of being loved. It comes from one person, usually a parent but sometimes a substitute, who says by their presence: 'I love you, I believe in you, you are worthy." Ms. Gilbert noted, from her perspective as an educator, that children also need to develop integrity and selfdiscipline, because they can't feel good about themselves if they don't have control. Parents shouldn't tie a child's self-esteem to achievement. "Parents expect 'superstar teens' who can do everything, but that's too much pressure. Keep expectations in proportion. Grades are not the most important thing. Sometimes a child doesn't need a tutor; he just needs to be able to get a B or a C in a subject that is hard for him, and to have a full life with other activities."

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match the mood of others, commiserating and empathizing), topic selection and maintenance (knowing what to talk about, to whom, for how long), greeting skill (reading a social scene and entering in a way that fits into it), code switching (knowing how to use different forms of expression for adults and kids), humor regulation (using the right kind of humor for the social context), and lingo credibility (fluently using words approved by the peer group). "Lingo credibility involves very precise definitions," said Dr. Levine. "One kid set me straight on the difference between nerds and geeks — the nerds are smarter, and the geeks don't take showers." Other important skills are conversational effectiveness and reciprocity, or the ability to refrain from doing a monologue and to offer complementary words at the right times, and communication monitoring, which is the ability to perceive how others are receiving you.

Given the complexity of verbal communication, it's a wonder that any of us manage. Most of us do. People with poor social cognition may suffer from a basic weakness in brain sequences, which causes social dysfunction, or may have secondary dysfunctions that stem from other forms of neuro-developmental dysfunction. In a case of traumatic brain injury, for example, the ability to interpret language correctly may be lost, which obviously impacts social cognition. A child with learning issues might lack the ability to fuse meaning with expression; he could use the right words but speak in a hostile tone, and yet have no idea that his way of speaking is alienating.

The second aspect of social cognition is that of behavior. "When I observe students in their school corridors, they remind me of the geese I raise on my farm," said Dr. Levine. "The kids display and strut and pose just like geese do." One of the first challenges for a child is to create and market an "image." In the quest to be "cool," kids try to dress, act and speak in a prescribed way — they may even engage in risk-taking behaviors such as smoking, drinking or substance use to achieve this goal. The old standbys, good looks and athletic ability, still count for a lot in the social sphere, and those without them can suffer.

A child needs several other skills to succeed socially. He needs to be able to view himself as others do, and to change his behavior when appropriate. For instance, he needs to decode social data: to understand other people's motivations, predict reactions to his own actions and figure out how to resolve conflicts without using aggression. Above all, the child has to develop an overview of his social world, to grasp the concept of what a relationship is and what it entails.

The third aspect of social cognition is political acumen. Political skills include knowing how to act with people of influence and how to work with teachers, a skill that translates directly to working with bosses in the future. Students need to figure out the "hidden curriculum," to find out what teachers expect of them and provide it. They need to know how to consolidate their position within the student body.

The environment is a critical element in successful social interaction, and one that is often beyond an individual's control. Some schools, athletic teams or special interest groups foster bullying and unwittingly reward the bullies by suspending children who react in self-defense.

Ironically, there's a negative side to social success. Too much adulation in the social sphere can produce "golden boys" or "golden girls" who lose academic motivation, sacrifice individuality, and have a reckoning later in life. Social success can provide an escape route for children with learning issues. Most important, the child who has overdoses of social gratification can feel invulnerable, and therefore engage in more risk-taking behavior.

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The good news is that children with social difficulties can be helped. Since skills that make up social cognitive function are not completely "hard-wired," coaching can improve many aspects of social cognition, especially verbal pragmatics, which can be learned and rehearsed. Children who are struggling with social cognition should be assessed, their strengths identified and weak functions diagnosed and strengthened. Assessment should include consideration of learning difficulties with attention or language, and complicating factors such as depression, which should be treated before other work is undertaken.

Adults — teachers, parents, coaches — can help a socially-struggling child create a brand for himself, something that gives him unique value in the group. "I worked with a boy starting high school, not athletic and having a hard time," said Dr. Levine. "One of the coaches, knowing that the boy was gifted in math, asked him to work up statistics on the football team's games. The boy became sought-after as a team statistician, and his social status soared."

While some children may need professional help,

important to speak up in the community, promoting the school's commitment to educating teachers and administrators on the subject and to incorporating material on social cognition into the curriculum. And as grown-ups who survived the social jungle themselves, parents can knock the school super-star off his pedestal, at least in their child's eyes. Says Levine: "Point to the most popular kid in the class and tell your child: 'This may well be his finest hour."

You can learn more about this subject at the website for All Kinds of Minds, which is www.allkindsofminds.org.

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parents can support their children in the social arena. First of all, Dr. Levine suggests, parents should take their child's social concerns seriously and refrain from giving glib advice. Instead, they should try to understand their child's strengths and weaknesses, support children who are loners, and offer feedback about specific situations. It's also



WINTER 2002 ISSUE