# A Dialogue on Diversity: Workshop with Professor Pamela Palanque North

By Aimee Garn

Diversity, this year's NYC-Parents in Action theme, was the topic explored at a luncheon for NYC-PIA representatives in an interactive workshop with Prof. Pamela Palanque North, an innovator in the area of organizational psychology and development. Prof. Palanque North is currently a professor at American University School of Public Affairs and works with executives, managers and others in leadership positions.

At this gathering, which included Parents in Action representatives as well as several educators from member schools, Prof. Palanque North explored the challenge of making diversity a reality, a challenge for many schools and colleges, as well as our society.

The process of examining diversity begins with a simple acknowledgement: each of us has had the experience of, and feelings about, being different. Whether we experienced our "difference" when our family moved to a foreign country, when we changed schools or joined a new company, we have all at some time experienced being, or feeling, different from the larger group to which we belong. We can perceive ourselves as different when we are dismissed, not seen, or given mixed signals. "Our first task is to recall our own experience of being different, and to explore our feelings about it," said Prof. Palanque North. "We can then put those feelings to rest, and work with the differences in our world."

The next step is to see ourselves in relation to the group, a school or another organization, and to examine the differences among people within it. In any organization, people share common characteristics and have differences. "In an independent school, for example, we might share values such as responsive parenting, an interest in education and in children," Prof. Palanque North explained. Our differences, both acknowledged and unacknowledged, could include race, religion, economic resources, and status.

After acknowledging our own differences, and seeing them in relation to others, we can begin to consider the value we place on diversity. "When we value diversity, we need to communicate with others using 'active listening.' We have to keep an open mind to hear another person's point of view. We have to learn from each other, and suspend judgement."

Our ultimate goal is to focus on the positive value of differences, rather than seeing difference as divisive. While this may seem reasonable and logical, putting it into practice is a challenge. Part of the process of becoming social beings is learning to put ourselves in the other person's shoes, but for adults it may be increasingly complex to see things from another's point of view. Face-to-face communication, with flexibility and an interest in others' viewpoints, is a key to creating diversity. ●

## TEEN SCENE AT SEVENTEEN

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student advised: "There has to be a trust factor between the parent and teenager, that the kid will use judgement. Keeping a dialogue open is important." One panelist, perhaps noticing stricken faces of parents in the audience, offered reassurance: "Not every single kid does drugs. If parents talk to their kids about it, and are sincere, then kids will respect their views."

Several of the panelists observed that many kids still smoke. "Kids smoke mostly in 11th and 12th grade," said one panelist. "It's a cool thing to do. Cigarettes are social."

Asked what they wanted their parents to hear the most, the teens offered: "Accept your kids and praise them. Trust that your kid has a sense of right and wrong, and give him space to make his own decisions. When he does that, say 'I'm proud of you, you made a good decision.' And accept your child for who he or she is." ●

## COPING WITH DIFFERENCES

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"It's important to speak to your children about their learning issues, and your concerns about them," said Ms. Mercer-White. "If your child is having a difficulty, address it with him as a problem to be solved, one that you can work on together."

She also believes that children need their parents most in their older years. She emphasizes the importance of staying in touch with the parents of your child's peers, who can give you another reading on the events of your own child's life.

The panelists answered many questions from the audience, and left us with two important thoughts. First, the parents' relationship with their child's disability is key. "Parenthood is narcissistic and protective," said Mr. Davison. "Parental involvement is crucial when a difference is diagnosed, and yet parents can get stuck in a classic cycle of grief. Getting a parent through this quickly is key to getting help to the child quickly." And second, there is progress being made in changing environments to better serve the differences occurring in all children. "This will be a challenge for years to come, but the real victory is our acceptance of the idea that the kids we are talking about today are good kids who weren't dealt a perfect hand," Mr. Davison added. "We have to find a way to make it work for them." ●

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Effective Parenting is
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# Coping with Social and Learning Differences

By Maureen Sherry-Klinsky

NYC-Parents in Action and KiDS of NYU, an organization of parents and physicians who support children's services at NYU Medical Center, presented a spring panel discussion entitled "Learning Differences — How Children Cope With Their Own and Others'" at the 92nd Street Y on April 11, 2003. Lucy Martin-Gianino of NYC-Parents in Action introduced the four panelists, who spoke on the topic from their points of view as educators, physicians and parents of children with learning differences.

The panelists were Mr. George Davison, Head of Grace Church School and Chairman of the Committee of ISAAGNY Trustees; Dr. Andrea Marks, a specialist in adolescent medicine and a columnist on teen health for *Cosmo Girl;* Ms. Susan Schwartz, the Clinical Coordinator at the Institute for Learning and Academic Achievement at NYU and a specialist in reading, writing, math and non-verbal learning disabilities; and Ms. Rebecca Mercer-White, the parent of twins who attend the Churchill School and a doctoral candidate in Education at NYU whose own business, "First Things First," teaches organizational skills to children with special needs.

## George Davison

"Earlier generations labeled kids with social and learning differences as 'stupid,' 'lazy' or worse, and at independent schools these kids were quickly shown the door. The good news is that things have changed; the bad news is that they haven't changed enough," said Mr. Davison. Most independent schools are able to handle children with moderate learning differences. For more pronounced challenges a special school, one that deals particularly with that child's issues, is the usual path.

Independent schools have built up resource centers staffed by determined professionals to deal with learning differences prudently. Schools make an effort, but they can't completely change the environment. "Children are hardwired to make school competitive, to make sure someone else is last," said Mr. Davison. "So the teacher has the burden of fostering an environment of understanding and tolerance, and not every teacher has the time or resources to accommodate each child. You have to hope for a good personality match between teacher and student."

"There are now more schools focusing on children with learning issues, which is positive," said Mr. Davison. "It is still difficult to be a challenged child in an environment of peers. We have a better understanding of differences in children, but it's hard to put our understanding into practice."

While there is a high degree of empathy for children with classical learning differences, social learning issues are not as widely understood or as accepted. Schools do not necessarily view remediation of social learning as part of their mission. "Sometimes these children are labeled in a negative way as 'weird, angry, rude, or strange,'" said Mr. Davison. "Parents of their peers want them out of the school. Schools are prone to press for medication as a first resort, and it can help, but social skills can also be taught. While medication is useful, some children have as much trouble learning to converse or to develop a relationship as others have learning to read. We cannot medicate social competence any more than we can medicate competent reading."

## Andrea Marks, M. D.

Dr. Marks gets to know a patient by first taking a detailed history, asking questions of both the child

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# Teen Scene at Seventeen

By Aimee Garn

It was a stormy night in February when NYC-Parents in Action and the Parents League presented the seventeenth annual Teen Scene at Trinity School. Teen Scene's date comes at the height of winter bluster, but nature provided a suitably dramatic backdrop to this panel discussion on the tempestuous changes of adolescence.

The dozen teenagers on the panel, introduced by moderator Lucy Martin-Gianino of NYC-Parents in Action, are articulate and accomplished students at single sex and co-ed high schools and boarding schools. Selected to speak for themselves and their peers on a variety of subjects, the teens shared views on their busy lives, their social activities, sex, drinking and drug use.

The students agreed that they get busier every year of high school, and that during the week it's impossible to relax. Their schoolwork is demanding, and by sophomore year they begin to prepare for college applications. When they do relax on the weekends, they generally "hang out" at each other's houses. As one student said: "We're too young to go to clubs, and too old to do what we used to do, so we spend most of the night walking around trying to figure out what to do!" Plans come together around 10:00 p.m., and kids have late curfews of about 1:00 a.m. Clubs aren't as popular as they once were, because they're too expensive, and some require fake ID cards to get in, which can cost about $70.00. In addition to "hanging out," kids enjoy going to movies and concerts, out for coffee or for dinner.

Most of the panelists agreed that parents are too protective about sex. "We're more casual," said one teen. "For sex you don't need to be in a relationship. People are not hesitant to experiment." Another panelist said: "Sex is embarrassing to talk about with parents, but we do 'peer education.' Sex education at school is more about sexually transmitted diseases than about birth control. It should be more about self-esteem." The panelists agreed that parents should try to talk with their teens about sex. Sexual identity and rules for safe sex are two important areas to discuss.

Viewpoints on sex seem to divide down gender lines. "When kids have sex, the boy's self-esteem goes up, and the girl's goes down," said one panelist. "Girls are 'sluts,' and the boys are 'big men on campus.' Girls want a relationship, and guys want random encounters with girls." "Oral sex is not as big a deal as when parents were young," observed another teenager. "There's probably more pressure to have oral sex than other kinds, and it's mostly girls on guys rather than the reverse."

Drinking alcohol fits the bill for kids who "want to do what they're not allowed to do, and want to escape from stress." Even good students can turn into "party animals" on the weekend. Alcohol is the easiest substance to obtain, because there are some stores that don't require fake ID's to buy liquor. (The fact that using a fake ID is actually a felony does not seem to be a deterrent.) The amount and type of drinking varies widely. One panelist described a kid who buys liquor, puts it in a water bottle and drinks it during the day. Another teen noted that kids might pretend to be drunk when in reality they aren't; they just want to appear cool.

Marijuana is the most popular drug choice, along with alcohol. Cocaine is not used often, but Ecstasy remains popular. Ritalin is used, and may be obtained from those who have prescriptions. "Some kids have a lot of money to spend, and parents don't know where the money is going — it can go to buy drugs," said one panelist. "Ninth and tenth graders try things, because older kids are using drugs, and there's pressure to be or to act cool." The consequences of being caught using drugs were mentioned; one panelist knew of students who were expelled from school for smoking pot on campus. Those who try drugs have the attitude that "if they're caught and grounded, they'll bounce back and do it again."

What do the teens advise anxious parents to do? "Bottom line, parents should accept that their kids will try drugs," said one student. "The more parents say 'don't,' the more kids want to do it." Another

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# Clashing Values

By Adele Malpass

Most parents of teenagers accept that at some point their child's values will clash with their own. With many children it starts in 6th and 7th grade: a boy will buy an Eminem CD, or a girl will want to wear the midriff-baring styles of a pop star. By high school, though, a teenager's style, attitude, and behavior can seem to be an all-out assault against adults. What can parents do about clashing values? Tom de Zengotita, a professor of anthropology at New York University who has offered a course on ethics at The Dalton School for 17 years and who has written for many national publications, discussed value differences at an April Parents in Action luncheon.

Mr. de Zengotita believes that parents need to accept that teenage children live in a private world that is not about adults. "Everything is about their friends," he said. "The best a parent can hope for is that occasionally he or she will be invited to enter the teenager's world. It's most likely to happen at odd moments. That's why time with your kids is so important — not organized time, but hanging-out time where you co-exist in each other's space." Parents, he suggested, need to "have large chunks of unstructured time with their children where they aren't probing or judging."

From his years of experience with children, he believes it's ineffective to sit teenagers down and talk about values. "Discussions have to be indirect, on the spot. Lecturing doesn't work." He recommends communicating values by telling stories about yourself when you were a child, as children love hearing dramatic stories about when their parents were young.

He also believes that red-in-the-face yelling is ineffective. "Spontaneous eruptions need to be over really big things, and they should be infrequent events, or the words will be dismissed." He believes punishments should be clearly understood and consequences imposed matter-of-factly. "There should be no drama around imposing punishments. A parent should say, 'You know our policy, and here's the consequence.'"

One of the biggest areas where parents and teenagers clash is over lying. When Mr. de Zengotita asked children why they lie to parents, kids say they are "protecting" the parent from the truth, or that they don't want to disappoint them. "Teenagers don't believe parents can handle the truth, which helps justify their lying." Mr. de Zengotita recommends that parents make it clear to their children that they can handle whatever they have to say, and that lying is not an option. But if parents do this, they must in fact be able to handle what their children say.

Kids whose values may worry parents most are "alternative kids," those who are not part of the "alpha-girl group" or the "in-crowd," but who feel separate from all groups. "Alternative kids try to overturn the standard of what's different. They are the ones taking things to the next level." Parents need not be alarmed: being "alternative" can be a successful coping strategy, and "mainstream" kids are not immune from trouble. But if parents see signs that a child is becoming an alternative kid in middle school, they might intervene to help the child find an interest or a talent to help ground them in something mainstream.

While Mr. de Zengotita believes parents are "outsiders to their kids' lives" and that friends are paramount, he does give parents hope. "Teenagers are watching and listening to parents very closely, to figure out the adult world. They are looking to parents to clarify what's going on, and you can reach them best through your actions." ●

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## COPING WITH DIFFERENCES

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and the parent. She looks at a child's world in three parts: life within the family, life at school and life with peers. "The interesting thing about the responses I get is that a parent's perceptions may be completely in line with the child's perceptions of how he or she is doing, or they may be completely different. A parent may see his child as social and outgoing, while a child sees him or herself as unpopular and awkward. A parent may think his child's grades are horrendous, while a child is satisfied with his performance."

"Children will not explicitly say 'I am sad that I have no friends,' or 'I'm stupid in school.' Kids can't always put their feelings into words until late adolescence," she said. "Kids with social or learning differences have an even harder time describing them. They feel shame, and refuse to talk about their difficulties. Sometimes the only way parents understand is through the language of slammed doors, social withdrawal, irritability, disturbed sleep or aggressive behavior."

"Learning and social differences can also be manifest as somatic symptoms," said Dr. Marks. "Often headaches, stomachaches, shortness of breath and fatigue can reveal the stress of trying hard to keep up." In older teenagers, smoking, breaking curfews and hanging out with the "wrong crowd" can be signs of the stress they are under. "Parents should not hesitate to intervene, even if the school has not notified them of a problem. If a parent senses that something is wrong, most probably there is something wrong."

"Parents have to be tuned in to who the child is, rather than who they want him to be. Whatever his passion is, whether it's playing the tuba, or working in a garden, parents should support that. Academics or an active social life may not be the highest priority for the child." Dr. Marks also recommends listening carefully to what a child says, being considerate of his point of view, and collaborating with him to figure out how things can go better.

### Susan Schwartz

In her practice as a learning specialist, Ms. Schwartz pays specific attention to the mechanics of learning. Does a child have difficulty with math computations? Does he have trouble retaining facts? Does he "study" by re-reading, without remembering what was read the first time around?

"Teachers can give useful information on how a child learns — how they use their memory, how they concentrate, how they understand language relative to their peers. But, as a parent, it is important to ask teachers how your child sees himself. Is he comparing himself unfavorably to others, or does he seem demoralized? Is he sad in school?" Ms. Schwartz recommends including the child in these discussions, and keeping him as a partner in the process of education, with his teachers and parents as his biggest advocates.

"When you de-mystify and label a problem, you can create a strategy for intervening. The object is to strengthen a child's strengths and to help him avoid discouragement."

### Rebecca Mercer-White

Rebecca Mercer-White has twins, a boy and a girl, who were first evaluated for learning disabilities when they were in preschool, and who now attend the Churchill School. From her experiences with her own children she recommends that parents intervene as soon as they sense a problem and that they pursue solutions to a child's learning issues in an all-encompassing approach. Though she has seen parents (especially parents of older children) struggle with diagnosis, not wanting to admit a problem, she emphasizes that a diagnosis doesn't change who the child is. If something inside you as a parent makes you feel the need to pay attention, then pay attention.

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