

Teen Scene XVIII

BY SALLY SHERWOOD

Whether they are hanging out, cramming for tests or competing in sports, teenagers today can squeeze more into one day than most people fit into a week. The eighteenth annual Teen Scene, presented by NYC-Parents in Action and the Parents League of New York in the Trinity School auditorium on February 9, 2004, attracted a full house of adults eager to hear teens discuss the challenges that they encounter on the sometimes-bumpy-but-never-dull road to adulthood.

Fondly dubbed a “Lifer for Parents in Action,” Lucy Martin-Gianino has moderated Teen Scene since its inception in 1986. Each year she selects a teen panel, all volunteers who are eager to “tell it like it is.” They represent a cross-section of upper school students from independent schools: athletes, peer leaders, tour guides, community service activists, choral singers, drama club members, tutors, filmmakers, and sailing instructors. All the panelists contribute first-hand knowledge of the life of an urban teenager.

School Pressures

Most panelists agreed that each year of upper school carries its own set of challenges. Freshman and Sophomore years are times of social trial and error, when teens grapple with their identities, attempting to be “cool” in order to fit into the social scene. Juniors and Seniors, on the other hand, are more actively engaged in the rigors of schoolwork as they prepare for college and the many tests and papers that accompany that process.

Social Scene

Depending on their age and crowd, young people may socialize in clubs, at friends’ homes, in bars, at the movies — wherever their friends choose to congregate. Parents should be certain that their kids know how to handle emergencies among friends,

whether that involves a call to parents or to the police, or a trip to the hospital.

Clubs

Many clubs sponsor teen nights, where IDs are not required for people under 18. For those seeking a more “mature” venue, however, fake IDs are widely available in school, tattoo parlors or “downtown” shops. Panelists agreed that Freshmen are most vulnerable to the lure of “questionable” clubs with “mediocre music and sketchy people.” According to one teen, “You can put yourself into any situation and find danger. You must know the club, the crowd, and your values.”

Parties

Panelists urged parents to supervise house parties, or “open houses,” where one teen with a cell phone can trigger an invitation chain resulting in as many as 90 young people crowded into one person’s home. Teenagers should know their hosts and guests, and parents should be familiar with their alcohol inventory.

Alcohol and Drugs

While panelists agreed that most teens enjoy alcohol (beer and vodka top the list), they indicated that Freshmen “will drink whatever they can.” Alcohol is attractive to many teens because it can transform a quiet, shy person into an extrovert. Teens also find weekend relaxation in marijuana and cocaine. The panelists considered pot more acceptable and less dangerous than cigarette-smoking, estimating that 60% of teenagers experiment with it. If those substances are unavailable, resourceful teenagers may turn to alternatives such as painkillers, Ecstasy, Ritalin, mushrooms or prescription drugs. Drugs can be purchased from classmates or neighborhood dealers, who are generally older than their adolescent customers.

Continued on page 2

TEEN SCENE XVIII

Continued from page 1

Drugs are costly, and can run \$40–\$70 for a single use of cocaine, \$15–\$20 for Ecstasy. Limiting weekly allowances may help curb a teen’s interest in using drugs. While drug dealers and club owners take credit cards and offer ATM access, a young person with limited funds may think twice before spending it all on drugs and alcohol.

Sex

Most kids agreed that alcohol and drugs can lead to unwanted, unplanned sexual activity among teens. Traditional notions of “couples-dating” has evolved to “hooking-up.” Hooking-up can cover a range of activities, from casual sex among friends to kissing and oral sex.

The double-standard, however, is still alive. One young man cautioned that girls who are sexually experienced are regarded as “sluts,” while boys simply reap “rewards.” While younger teens seem clear about the dangers of sexually transmitted disease, many older kids see themselves as immune and suffer the consequences of denial.

Panelists suggested that parents advise rather than lecture their children about sex. “Look, it’s really tough to talk about sex with a parent,” explained one teen. “No one wants to hear about their parents’ sex lives, but it’s important to talk about this stuff. We may not want to hear about sex from parents, but the conversations sink in.”

Privacy

Privacy is as important to a teenager as it is to a parent. A panelist said she used good judgment about her private activity at home, but that she felt parents should not violate the sanctity of a closed bedroom door. “You live with your parents, and you date other people. There are certain things I’m not going to do in my own home. Still, I would appreciate a knock on the door.”

Over the course of her eighteen years as Teen Scene moderator, Lucy Martin-Gianino has seen and heard much from her adolescent panelists. While some issues have remained constant, she sees a significant change in the way kids talk about sex. “About six years ago, teens began talking much more openly about sex. The explicit commentary blew parents away.” Over the years, standard definitions have changed in the adolescent world. Oral sex is not necessarily “sex,” and pot is not considered a drug.

Recently, the Internet has surfaced as a serious concern among families. Despite anxiety about hackers, abusers and predators, parents were rather surprised that this year’s panelists seemed to downplay the prevalence of Internet abuse.

As questions of safety have evolved over the years, the emergence of the cell phone has served to allay some anxiety about the whereabouts of urban teenagers. While not every teenager chooses to answer his or her cell phone, parents take comfort in knowing that someone in their teen’s crowd is probably responding to calls.

Adolescents have made it clearer over the years that parents should trust more and lecture less frequently. According to Ms. Martin-Gianino, “Kids are now explaining why they behave as they do, and parents are more willing to listen.”

Trust

Panelists agreed that young people should know their companions and inform parents of their whereabouts. While cell phones have extended the reach of communication between parents and children, many teenagers characterize the technology as an “electronic leash.” In fact, some teens choose to ignore the many voice messages from parents that accumulate during their absence from home.

In setting limits, parents should be sensible, honest, and wise. Kids want their folks to maintain a structure on the home front, to keep an open mind, to choose their battles and avoid defining a child by his or her academic accomplishments.

Continued on page 3

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

Parents Can Help Teens Stay Healthy

BY ADELE MALPASS

“The adolescent years don’t have to be fraught with conflict and stress for parents or children,” says Andrea Marks, M.D., a practicing adolescent medicine specialist on the Upper East side who is an expert in eating disorders and the co-author with Betty Rothbart of *Healthy Teens, Body and Soul: A Parent’s Complete Guide to Adolescent Health* (Simon and Schuster). Dr. Marks believes that the adolescent years can be enjoyable if the lines of communication between parent and child are open, and if parents know how to guide their teens to make smart decisions.

Dr. Marks’s focus, at a NYC-Parents in Action luncheon for school representatives, was guiding parents into being their child’s “health partner” through the adolescent years. Marks breaks down those years into a three-stage process — early adolescence (ages 10–14), middle (ages 15–18) and late adolescence (ages 18–21). Throughout these stages, she believes children must work on gaining

independence, figuring out their sexual identity and thinking about their place in the world.

As a doctor, Marks looks at the physical side of adolescence and believes that the primary elements of health for teens are good nutrition, ample sleep and exercise. “One of the most common complaints from teenagers is fatigue,” says Marks. “It’s all interactive. If a child is overly tired, then it’s hard to exercise, and he may end up napping through dinner.”

Marks emphasized that weight gain is important for children during adolescence to allow their bodies to go through rapid changes. For example, the average 10-year-old girl weighs 75 pounds, and by age 15 weighs 125 pounds, which is a 50 pound increase. Boys more than double their weight, from an average of 70 pounds at age 10 to 150 pounds at age 15. Parents need to communicate to their teenagers that these changes are normal and necessary for developing healthy bodies. “Constant dieting to a low weight in girls can compromise growth in height, and lead to low estrogen levels, and the interruption of pubertal development and menstruation,” says Marks. Boys, as well, will stop growing and developing if they do not gain the expected amount of weight. Not eating enough also leads to irritability, depression and poor concentration.

“Parents need to stay on top of the weight issue because two-thirds of adolescent girls are dissatisfied with their bodies,” said Marks, “Parents need to teach their children that calories are needed for energy, and that they should be proportional to exercise.”

She believes one of the best ways for parents to promote positive body image is to “emphasize kindness, humor, and creativity over thinness.” “Try not to comment on your own weight or on other children’s thinness or fatness,” she recommends. “And make sure to tell your children that they are beautiful or handsome for just being themselves.” ●

TEEN SCENE XVIII

Continued from page 2

In closing, Ms. Martin-Gianino read from a piece by radio commentator Paul Harvey. In a short letter dedicated to his grandchildren, he extolled the value of experiencing life through challenge and old-fashioned hard knocks, concluding:

“May you skin your knee climbing a mountain, burn your hand on a stove and stick your tongue on a frozen flagpole....

“These things I wish for you: tough times and disappointment, hard work and happiness. To me, it’s the only way to appreciate life.” ●

But Will He Be Ready for Life After School?

BY MEG SHERIDAN

And you thought your job was done, now that he's in a competitive school with good resources and a solid group of friends. But wait...have we put our kids on the fast track to an Ivy, only to see them flounder in their 20s? Must the painful process of "finding oneself" be a necessary step to adulthood?

According to Mel Levine, M.D., CEO of All Kinds of Minds, who addressed 1,000 parents at the 92nd St. Y on April 15, 2004, schools are doing an excellent job of preparing students for college, but a poor one of preparing them for life. He feels parents and educators are obligated to prepare young people to find their niche in the adult world.

There are four common patterns of unreadiness. The first belongs to students who never developed compensation strategies for learning differences or weaknesses in attention, organization, or written and verbal communication. Others may have been superstars in school, but are unable to function in a world that does not measure success in report cards. Some are still rooted in adolescence, holding firm to being cool and unable to move beyond teenage mores and values. Still others have not invested time in matching interests and abilities, and find themselves on the wrong career path.

WANTED:

Articulate, welcoming and supportive men and women who are interested in learning how to facilitate NYC-Parents in Action discussion groups. You will be professionally trained in group dynamics in order to guide parents through lively, productive meetings on a variety of parenting topics. This is your chance to give back to your community with a very flexible time commitment. Most meetings are held in Manhattan. However, we are in special need of facilitators who live in Brooklyn or are willing to travel to Brooklyn.

Training sessions begin in September.
Please call (212) 426-0240 for more information
as soon as possible.

"We are doing a poor job of preparing our children, and we have it in our grasp to do a more effective job," said Dr. Levine. He stressed that the focus should be on "life prep" rather than "college prep."

While personal characteristics of motivation, ambition and risk-taking, and external factors of our culture and economy are significant forces, Dr. Levine feels schools are preparing students for college admissions, rather than for college or careers. He argues that college preparation is not really necessary, and that all schools should be vocational to a certain extent. "College is a biographical cul-de-sac," he said. "Most undergraduate programs fail to prepare students for the world beyond the campus."

Rather than building a path to the Ivys, parents and educators should help students build an inventory of their strengths, weaknesses, and interests, and help them consider which careers might make a good fit. Parents can help by talking about adults they know in business, and sharing stories about the path that an individual took to career satisfaction. Biographies and case studies are worth reading to recognize that the path is not always direct, and rarely easy.

Encourage kids to get a part-time job. Support that lemonade stand. Every child should experience the thrill of being an entrepreneur, and should learn that every job has routine or unpleasant tasks that can't be delegated. Tell your child about the stages of career: preparation, "boot camp," mid-career, the "main act," tapering off, and retirement.

Some kids feel they will never be able to match their parents' level of success. Help them chart their own path by showing them they don't need to be perfect at everything — they need to figure out how they can make a contribution to the world by matching their talents with their interests. Every child should know where his or her competitive edge lies. Still, ambitions can collide with reality. "Everyone should have a plan B," said Dr. Levine. ●

Anxiety: Doctors Discuss Childhood Fears

BY MEG SHERIDAN

Children worry. Often, fears are transient responses to external stimuli, but sometimes they are symptoms of something more significant that requires professional intervention. The topic of children's anxiety was discussed in a town hall meeting at the 92nd St. Y on December 3, 2003, in a panel co-sponsored by NYC-Parents In Action and KiDS of NYU Foundation Inc. Melvin Oatis, M.D., and Lori Evans, Ph.D., of the NYU Child Study Center were joined by Larry Hess, Psy.D., a psychologist in private practice who specializes in learning and attention issues.

"Generally, if the child can be reassured, he is simply worrying, like most of us do," said Dr. Oatis. If a child needs excessive reassurance, has trouble getting to sleep, or has particular phobias, a visit to a therapist may be in order, to assess the symptoms and determine if the child has a generalized anxiety disorder. A therapist may help the child restructure his thoughts to stop the ruminations that are keeping him up at night, or he may give the child a script he can use against bullies. If necessary, the therapist may recommend a medication such as Prozac, Paxil, or Zoloft, which reduce anxiety by modulating the neurotransmitters in the brain. Dr. Oatis reminded the audience that some kids are predisposed or "hardwired" to develop a generalized anxiety disorder, and that those children can benefit from intervention and treatment.

For the child whose worries are more ephemeral, and seem to be a response to situations in the world around him or her, parents can help to put things in perspective and give the child an age-appropriate sense of control. If a child seems frightened by the evening news, the television should be turned off and adult conversation saved for later. Parents should reflect on the environmental factors that may contribute to a child's anxiety, and provide reassurance where possible.

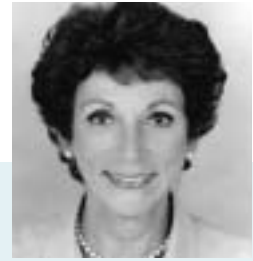
"Competition is part of our lives," said Dr. Evans. "Test anxiety is real. None of us is a stranger to sweaty palms or an upset stomach before the big exam, but test anxiety can affect academic performance." Kids are generally not reassured when parents say, "Don't worry, you'll do fine." Parents can explore their child's feelings of inadequacy and help the child understand why those feelings are misconceived. They can remind a child that a bit of anxiety is healthy, as it helps him be to be ready and alert. They can help him prepare for a test by reviewing the material and making sure he gets a good night's sleep. Parents should send the message that they value the process of learning over the product.

"Most children with learning disorders face at least some issues regarding anxiety, self-esteem, or depression," said Dr. Hess. "Although every child is different, patterns do appear. For example, if a learning disorder goes undiagnosed, a child might feel that teachers and parents do not understand, because they apparently cannot teach him. Neuropsychological evaluation, tutoring, adjustments in classroom teaching, and psychotherapy can be effective ways to support a child with learning issues."

It is often a challenge for parents to sort out symptoms. Headaches may be genuine symptoms of anxiety, but facial ticks may not be significant. Being forgetful may indicate not that a child feels anxiety, but that he needs help organizing his materials. Drs. Oatis, Evans, and Hess all agreed that parents should keep anxiety in perspective. They might also teach children some basic relaxation techniques such as counting to ten slowly, taking deep breaths and using positive imagery. Parents must summon all the tools at their disposal, including positive coping skills and professional support, to help children deal with anxiety. ●

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.

Q&A WITH LUCY MARTIN-GIANINO



Moderation in All Things

BY EVAN POMICE TIMMERMAN

Being a professional stage and television actress has been the perfect training for Lucy Martin-Gianino's twenty-plus year career at NYC-PIA, first as the force behind the organization's work in facilitating parent meetings within independent schools, then as our star moderator, editing questions and reining in speakers at events ranging from panels of parenting experts to Teen Scene. Newsletter editor Eva Pomice Timmerman talked with Lucy about what has changed and stayed the same about New York City children and the parents who worry about them.

Q NYC-PIA: How did you first become involved in NYC-PIA?

A GIANINO: I was involved just about from the beginning. I had been running infant development classes at the Episcopal nursery school, where all three of my children went. The director, Betty Baxter, wanted to start parenting groups there and sent me to study at Bank Street. Parents in Action found out what I was doing, and contacted me about joining the board and getting parents from different schools together to talk.

Q NYC-PIA: Was there anything like this at the time?

A GIANINO: No one was talking about substance abuse in the homes or schools or communities. Our children were nice perfect children. The myth was that it did not happen in our circles.

Q NYC-PIA: Was it difficult at first?

A GIANINO: We started with "let's get all ninth grade parents from the schools together." However, we soon realized people felt protective about their schools. We then figured out that we had to meet with each grade individually within every school, so people would be more willing to talk without feeling defensive or competitive. But it took some time to get the schools to trust us. The schools were concerned that we might come in, criticize, and foment the parent body against them.

Q NYC-PIA: How did you win them over?

A GIANINO: At first, everybody on the board would talk to the schools their children attended. And we stuck to some basic rules. Most importantly, we do not talk about school policy. Rather, we remind parents that those types of concerns should be raised with the school administra-

tion. We can talk about how you feel about nutrition, but not what they serve in the school cafeteria. Schools now understand we are not coming in to overthrow them.

Q NYC-PIA: Are the topics discussed completely different now?

A GIANINO: The notes may be different, but the arc of the music remains the same. I remember when Garbage Pail Kids cards were a big concern. Parents were really upset that these trading cards would undermine the moral fiber of their children. Speed that up, to the first hand-held Pac-Man, then to Internet chat rooms, and the issue remains the same: parents wanting to make sure their children keep their values, and trying to protect them. Parents still are not sure what they should feel frightened about, when to be tough, and when to give their kids some freedom.

Q NYC-PIA: Did parents talk as openly as they do today?

A GIANINO: It took a while for parents to loosen up. Now there are support groups everywhere, and people in general are lot more willing to talk about their problems.

Q NYC-PIA: New York City parents can be challenging. What are the tricks of successful facilitation?

A GIANINO: Parents have to have proper expectations. Because we are in an instant gratification society, they think we are there to tell them what to do. But the facilitator's job is to get parents to roll up their sleeves and get down to the business of being a good parent. Parents are there to talk with one another, listen to each other in a non-judgmental way, and make decisions for themselves as to what works in their household. The facilitator then sums it up in a thematic way so people understand what they've discussed.

Q NYC-PIA: You have been moderating Teen Scene for years now. How did it come about?

A GIANINO: A senior at one of the girls' private schools was killed by a hit-and-run driver as she was coming out of a bar at three in the morning. It caused a lot of soul-searching in the independent school community. She was on student council, a nice girl, popular. What was she doing out at a bar so late? One of her peers said, "Why doesn't anyone ask us what's going on?" NYC-PIA and The Parents League formed a panel of educators, parents and teens. No one asked the parents or educators a single thing. So we got rid of everyone but the teens.

Q NYC-PIA: Is it hard to find teens to participate?

A GIANINO: I put out a wide net, but it's always a gamble. We've had some really racy kids — "I sneak out at night" — to mainstream kids. You run a fine line — for the last couple of years, we've had really together, attractive, social kids who are secure in who they are.

Q NYC-PIA: What changes have you noticed in teen attitudes and behaviors over your tenure?

A GIANINO: I think there was a period when there was a greater amount of drug abuse. It is not as bad now as in the past, but the attitude toward it is much more casual, more "so what." It is no big deal to party with drugs. If there are students who use them, there's not much shock about it. No one would avoid friends who do drugs. When I asked about pot this year, one of the panelists said "That's not a drug" and there was a collective gasp from the audience.

Q NYC-PIA: Is there something parents are not talking enough about?

A GIANINO: The question of alcohol. Teens are doing a lot of drinking. Parents seem not to worry about it as much as drugs and they should. Far more people in this community are going to end up as alcoholics than drug addicts, and drinking puts them at risk for other behaviors like sexual promiscuity.

Q NYC-PIA: What do you feel is your biggest accomplishment?

A GIANINO: I am proud of the facilitation program. The facilitators are on the front line, the legionnaires. We

have gone from five facilitators to a rotating group of 100, and we are now a huge part of the independent schools community. I am personally proud of Teen Scene, which now draws around 600 parents, and of all of the speakers and resources we offer to parents. I like to think we have made some difference in parents' willingness to talk to their children and really hear what their children are saying to them. That makes me happy. ●

BOOK NOTES

- **THE BIGGEST JOB WE'LL EVER HAVE:**
The Hyde School Program for Character-Based Education and Parenting
by Malcolm and Laura Gauld
- **CHARACTER MATTERS:**
How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues
by Thomas Lickona
- **THE PATIENCE OF A SAINT:**
How Faith Can Sustain You During Tough Times in Parenting
by Charlene C. Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese
- **TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING:**
Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age
by Daniel J. Kindlon

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

The Return of Parents in Action Family Benefit a Success

On Sunday, February 22, at The New Victory Theater, a sold-out crowd cheered London's famed Tall Stories Theater Company in its award-winning performance of *The Gruffalo*. The show, an adaptation of the popular children's book, explores the friendship between a mouse and a Gruffalo. Both children and adults hailed the show as entertaining, with its original music, slapstick comedy, and fine storytelling.

Benefit Chairs Mary Beth Harvey, Barbara Knowlton

and Ali Jennison are grateful for the tremendous support for the benefit. Ticket sales and angel donations totaled \$90,000, which will directly support PIA programming. "We would not be able to provide our newsletter, facilitated discussions, lecture series and speakers without the very generous support of our benefit," stated Harvey. "This allows us to provide educational opportunities which support our mission: effective parenting is a primary means of preventing substance abuse by children and teenagers." ●

Lynn Manger Lecture Series

Contributions raised by NYC-PIA for the Lynn Manger Lecture series help support all our seminars and panel discussions, which are offered to the public free of charge. This year our program, on the theme of “Your Child’s Emotional Life: Nurturing Wellbeing in a Complex World,” included the following events:

- A lecture by Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D., of the Center for Social and Emotional Education
- “Needles in the Haystack,” a panel on identifying learning, attentional and behavioral issues in children, co-sponsored with Resources for Children with Special Needs and the Parents League
- “Anxiety Attack: Tests, Friends, the World and Other Things Your Child Worries About,” a panel discussion co-sponsored with KiDS of NYU Foundation, Inc.
- The 18th annual TEEN SCENE, co-sponsored with the Parents League
- A lecture by Dr. Mel Levine, co-sponsored with Mount Sinai Children’s Center Foundation
- “An Inner Life: Your Child’s Spirituality,” a panel discussion with five religious educators

If you would like to help support future lectures, please use the enclosed donation envelope. We thank you. ●

If you would like to be in touch with NYC-Parents in Action, you can reach us at:

MAILING ADDRESS: NYC-Parents in Action, Inc.
P.O. Box 287451 Yorkville Station
New York, NY 10128-0025

TELEPHONE: 212 987-9629

NYC-Parents in Action Administrator: Penny Spangler
NYC-Parents in Action website: parentsinaction.org

New York City Parents in Action Board of Directors 2003-2004

Executive Committee

Susan Newton, Chairman
Celeste Rault, President
Kathleen Harper, Vice President
Sacha MacNaughton, Vice President
Nancy Hebert, Secretary
Linda Fraser, Nominating Chairman
Susan Fisher, Advisory Board

Board

Marian Bach, Holly Blausler,
Barbara Brennan, Peggy Ellis,
Laurie Freeman, Aimee Garn,
Lucy Martin Gianino, Janie
Goodwin, Barbara Greene,
Mary Beth Harvey, Martha Leitner,
Tessa Namuth, Amelia Ogunlesi,
Ani Bedrossian Omer, Kathleen
Rold, Linda Schwartz, Meg
Sheridan, Randy Smolian, Robin
Straus, Eva Pomice Timerman

Chairman Emeritus

Lynn Manger

Newsletter:

Janie Goodwin—Managing Editor
Adele Malpass
Maureen Sherry-Klinsky
Eva Pomice Timerman

Website:

Susan Newton

Presidents Council

Fran Laserson
Polly Carpenter
Erna O’Shea

Advisory Board

Chris Colligan, George Davison,
Dr. Ernesto Ferran, Charlene
Giannetti., Dr. Karen A. Kennedy,
Dr. Harold Koplewicz, Dr. George
Lazarus, Maureen Lenihan,
Dr. Thomas Lickona, Dr. Ralph I.
Lopez, Dr. Jean Mandelbaum, Julie
Ross, Nancy Samalin, Charlotte
Weber, Paula Zahn, Sophocles
Zoullas



NYC-Parents in Action, Inc.
P.O. Box 287451 – Yorkville Station
New York, N.Y. 10128-0025

SPRING 2004 ISSUE