

Parents@TOGETHER

A Newsletter for Greenwich Parents of Children Birth through High School
www.parentstogetherct.org

Parents Together Programs

Tuesday, January 12, 2010 at 7 PM
Old Greenwich School (snow date 1/14)
Elementary Years Cyber Smarts: Internet Safety and Cyberbullying
Co-sponsored by Old Greenwich School
Monica Vila, www.TheOnlineMom.com, will teach us how to encourage responsible behavior and help our kids safely harness the power of technology.

Tuesday, February 2, 2010 at 7 PM
Eastern Gr. Civic Ctr. (snow date 2/23)
Adults & Children in Organized Youth Sports: Who Wins, Who Loses?
Co-sponsored by OGRCC
Bob Bigelow, former NBA and UPenn basketball player, helps parents put the "youth" back in youth sports and find a balance both at home and on the field.

Monday, March 1, 2010 at 9:15 AM
Greenwich Town Hall Cone Room
Avoiding Bullying, Cliques and Exclusion
Meg Domino, MPH, New Canaan Cares, will provide a strategy session on how, why and what to do when physical and emotional aggression begins in elementary school and peaks in middle school.

We've Gone Green!

The newly consolidated **Parents Together Newsletter** is published and posted on our website three times per year. You can receive Parents Together Newsletter and program notices electronically at no cost by registering at www.parentstogetherct.org.

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In This Issue

- Teaching Compassion
- Be Involved in Your Child's Education
- Young Children and Anger
- Why You Should Do Less for Kids
- Internet Safety: A Digital Dilemma
- Sexting: Not for Your Eyes Only
- Teens & Dating
- Family Fire Safety
- Lock Your Meds

Teaching Compassion *The Right Thing to Do*

by Stuart Adelberg

From their very first days of life, children learn *right* from *wrong* by discovering that some acts are beneficial while others are not. A child learns to behave correctly because the *right* behavior may bring a material reward, a new privilege, or at the very least, the positive reinforcement of a caring adult. Inappropriate or *wrong* behaviors, such as touching the hot stove or hitting a sibling may result in harm, the unpleasant

consternation of a parent, or in some cases, an actual punishment or loss of something valued. These lessons stay with us throughout our entire lives. "Work hard to get ahead; earn a good living; be good to your body and it will be good to you," are just a few of the messages we pass on to our children that teach them that the *right* actions bring the most desirable reactions, while we engage in the *wrong* actions at our peril.

Test the above supposition by asking your child to do something "because I said so" and see how well that works out for you. When it doesn't elicit the desired response, understand that our children are not necessarily being difficult, but simply responding to what we've taught them. "Why?" may not be a child's way of challenging us but rather an appropriate question, when he or

she has consistently been taught that every action is driven by a good reason.

How do we teach our children to be compassionate and charitable? Our government provides adults with a tax incentive for philanthropy. Volunteers regularly note that they "get more than they give," and it is not uncommon for a contributor to speak of the "good feeling they get from helping others."

Medical studies have shown that there are actually physiological benefits to charity and volunteerism. While these are incentives to volunteer, I believe that our children can and should be taught that compassion, volunteerism and

philanthropy are among the few acts in which we engage, not because they are supported by reason or come with rewards, but simply because they are *the right thing to do*.

One of the greatest pleasures derived through my work with the Greenwich United Way is the opportunity to work with and get to know many people who give time, talent and resources to improve the lives of others. While these good people may receive the benefits cited above, I know for a certainty that those benefits are not what lead them to act. When I express gratitude to

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My experience has shown time and again that a true act of compassion is not done for any reason other than a sense that it is *the right thing to do*.

some of our community's remarkable volunteers and contributors, some show discomfort or even occasional embarrassment. Though the exact words vary, the message I often get is fairly consistent, "Those of us who are able, have a responsibility to help those who need us." My experience has shown time and

again that a true act of compassion is not done for any reason other than a sense that it is *the right thing to do*.

I did not set out to write this piece to state the obvious or to preach to the

many in our community who already live by these words. I write this because I believe that those of us who are blessed with children need to recognize that compassion, and a desire to be charitable, are not characteristics that we can expect our children to develop without our assistance.

Additionally, I believe that one of the very few benefits of the economic challenges we have all experienced over the past year is a truly teachable moment that can make a tremendous difference both to our children and to the world.

As a parent, my natural instinct is to protect my son from everything unpleasant. The day that I became a parent was the day that every one of my personal desires and needs took a backseat to the needs and desires of another. This was not a conscious decision and I am certainly not a selfless person. However, something extraordinary happens when you are presented with a small life that is completely dependent on you. My son is now fourteen and his teenage attitude doesn't always make it easy for me to feel this way, but nevertheless, I do.

This desire to do all that we can for our children naturally means that we don't want to concern them with life's most

difficult and unpleasant circumstances. But shielding our children from today's grim realities may be robbing them of the opportunity to learn the great lessons of compassion.

There has never been a better time to talk to our children about the fact that not all people share our blessings.

Shielding our children from today's grim realities may rob them of the opportunity to learn compassion.

There has never been a better time to teach our children to appreciate and value our comforts and understand that they cannot be taken for granted. More importantly, there has never been a better time to share the

experience of reaching out to one of our community's extraordinary agencies and offering to serve a meal, visit a lonely senior, read to a child, or help provide holiday gifts to a less fortunate family. Finally, for those who are able, this is perhaps the best time to engage in a conversation about charitable giving and suggest that your child consider sharing some of what he or she possesses in order to improve the circumstances challenging someone else.

You may take the above suggestions and reason that they are worthwhile because you and your child will benefit from them. You will undoubtedly enhance your relationship and feel good in the process. You will certainly enjoy the experience and might even earn a tax deduction. These are benefits, but not the real reasons why we should do this. The unfortunate reality is that the current environment has resulted in more people and more organizations needing our help today than at almost any time in our history. Each of us needs to do what we can for those who cannot do for themselves for one very important reason: it is truly *the right thing to do*.

Stuart Adelberg, President and CEO of the Greenwich United Way, resides in Old Greenwich with his wife, Marilyn, and son, Jesse.

Get Involved in Your Children's Education

By Sidney A. Freund

There is a growing body of research that supports the positive correlation between parental involvement in schools and student achievement. Students whose parents set clear expectations and are more involved in decision making related to their child's education are likely to have a child who gets higher grades and demonstrates more positive attitudes and behaviors in school.

Meaningful involvement in your child's education can take many forms. As a child's perception that he or she can impact their educational outcomes increases so does their academic achievement. Studies show that the greater an individual's internal locus of control – the idea that an individual believes that outcomes are guided by personal decisions and efforts rather than outside forces beyond their control – the more self-determined and achievement oriented they are. If parents model for their children the ability to impact outcomes positively through expectations, advocacy, involvement, and communication, the child's perception of their own ability to control outcomes increases.

Many studies show that the aspects of parental involvement that have the greatest impact on student achievement are reading and communicating with your child, and having clear and explicit expectations around education and education-related topics. From birth through the secondary school years, parent involvement is important. Here are some things that you can do to support your child's education at all levels:

Advocate

Be an advocate for your child – help your child understand what is expected in school and at home and help your teacher understand your child’s strengths and areas of challenge. Model positive, proactive advocacy; show your child that you can impact outcomes through involvement, communication, hard work, etc.; and then teach your child to be an advocate for him/herself.

Have Explicit Expectations

Think about what your expectations are for your child and his/her education and make them clear. A Research Digest on the Harvard Family Research Project web site noted, “Parents who hold high expectations for their [children], communicate them clearly, and encourage their [children] to work hard in order to attain them, can make a difference in students’ success.” And, “the further in school parents believed their adolescents would go, the higher the adolescents’ academic achievement.”

Communicate

Keep lines of communication open between you and your child. Involve them in discussions and decision-making, empower them in developmentally and age-appropriate ways to set the direction for their learning. Listen, ask questions and encourage them to share their ideas and experiences.

Read

Read to your child early and often, and let them see you reading – model for them that reading is an enjoyable and important part of everyday life. When they begin to read, set expectations and carve out time for them to read at home; continue to read to them and model

reading. When they tell you that they are too old for you to read to them anymore, continue to model reading and, understanding that they will have required reading for school, try to help them find the time for pleasure reading.

Attend School Meetings and Stay Informed

Parent/teacher conferences, open house, PTA meetings, Principal coffees and Board of Education meetings, newsletters, web sites and email blasts are all important opportunities to understand what is happening with your child’s academic and social-emotional progress, your school and your school system. Meetings, forums, emails, surveys, etc. are also important opportunities for you to ask questions and to share your views with your child’s teacher, the school principal, and/or District administrators and policy-makers.

Participate/Get Involved

Not everyone has the time or inclination to be President of their school’s PTA, chair a PTA committee, or serve on the school board. However, teachers, schools and parent organizations offer numerous ways that you can be involved in supporting your child’s class, school and/or District. Getting involved not only provides valuable resources for your school and community, it models for your child their ability to have an impact if they participate and are proactively involved in their own education.

Involvement at the Secondary Level

Opportunities for parental involvement become more challenging as your child moves

from the elementary to the secondary level. The issue isn’t lack of opportunity, but rather the fact that as your child develops a greater sense of independence, parental involvement is perceived as interference and an “embarrassment” for most children. It’s a real paradox, particularly for middle age school children, as they transition to adolescence. As a parent you’ll get mixed messages about your involvement or lack thereof. It’s as confusing for you as it is for your child. It’s a process that every child and parent experience. Behind the protestations is a deep caring and underlying desire for your involvement. Rather than a plea for parents to “back off,” these protestations simply suggest a desire for a different form of involvement. Parents can remain interested in schoolwork and activities, maintain high expectations, keep lines of communication open, and shift toward a supporting and guiding role for their children in solving problems, advocating and making decisions for themselves as developmentally appropriate.

Setting clear expectations, staying informed, reading, communicating opinions with key stakeholders, attending meetings, volunteering, discussing school-related matters with your child and regular communication with teachers and administrators are effective ways to foster a greater sense of control and self-determination for your child – and ultimately – high achievement in all areas of education which open doors and provide options for the young adults of our future.

Dr. Sidney A. Freund is the Superintendent of Greenwich Public Schools and serves on the Parents Together Community Advisory Board.

Young Children and Anger

by Suzanne Adam

Whether by chance or by choice, by accident or against all odds, when very young or when older – parenthood begins in many different ways. Some parents' stories are beautiful, even miraculous, while others may be painful and laced with loss or anger. The same range of emotion and experience can be found in the stories of parents' relationships with their children. But regardless of your story, you have an opportunity to be a true hero and to have a positive influence that will last throughout your children's lifetime.

If only setting boundaries and dealing with parenting challenges such as anger were as easy to deal with as in a child's tale. You may recall this passage from **The Runaway Bunny** by M.W. Brown:

"If you become a sailboat and sail away from me," said his mother, "I will become the wind and blow you where I want you to go."

Parenting can be a joy, but it can also be challenging and frustrating. Dealing with children's anger often provides us with a dilemma.

- **How do we teach our children to express their feelings without being abusive?**
- **How do we cope with the variety of advice we are offered?**
- **If we respond with anger, will our children learn that such behavior is OK?**

By the time we reach adulthood most of us have developed methods to stop ourselves from exploding with anger. Children need help to learn how to do this. With toddlers and preschoolers, anger may manifest as tantrums. For whatever reason they occur, young children are not reasonable when they are having a tantrum. They may need someone to firmly say "Stop!" or provide a sense of calm that they do not have at the time. As they mature, they

will find that control within themselves. Until they do, however, they will need your help and guidance.

Our children learn from their daily interactions with parents, caregivers, siblings and friends. Like all of us, they learn what they live. As parents, when we respond with anger and retaliation, we teach our children to respond in the same way. Children can be very frightened by the force of their own anger or yours. They need an adult to keep them safe and hold them until the episode is over. They need to learn safe limits to their behaviors for their own security and for the safety of others. When children know that their feelings are understood, they feel validated and develop a healthy sense of self.

Our children learn from their daily interactions with parents, caregivers, siblings and friends. Like all of us, they learn what they live.

When setting limits, we can use "I" statements:

- **"I feel _____ when you _____."**

Or, we can be very direct; which is especially effective for very young children:

- **"We don't hit." or "Hitting hurts."**

To let children know we understand their feelings, we can offer the following:

- **"It sounds like you're angry."**
- **"Wow, you look frustrated!"**
- **"That must be hard," or "Do you want to tell me about it?"**

By naming the emotions we observe in our children, we provide a model for them to identify their feelings and a vocabulary for doing so. Teach small children to *tell* you how they feel without acting out their emotions.

Like adults, children may not think clearly when they are fired up with anger, nor do they listen well. It might be better to say:

- **"We can talk about this when you are feeling calmer."**
- **"I want to talk to you about something important. Where should we go to talk?"**

Then you can use "I" statements to express your feelings about the issue and invite your child to suggest a solution.

Sometimes when children are angry with one another, we can assist them by:

- **Stating what we see:** "I see two children fighting over a ball."
- **Not taking sides:** "I only know what I see in front of me right now."
- **Separating the children if there is a danger of violence:** "I see someone about to hit someone else. Someone will get hurt. You sit there and you sit there."
- **Seeking out the reason for the anger** and talking about it.

We can't always prevent tantrums or organize our day so that our children receive adequate attention and don't get over-tired. However, being clear and consistent with how we handle angry episodes will help them work through and manage their feelings in appropriate ways. While difficult at the time, these teachable moments impart lifetime lessons.

Suzanne Adam is the Director of Domestic Abuse Services at the Greenwich YWCA. For more information, contact her at 203-869-6501 or visit www.ywcagreenwich.org.

Why you should *Do Less* for Your Kids

by Paul J. Donahue, Ph.D.

I meet many extremely successful adults in my practice – people who have risen to the top of their fields through grit and hard work. They often report that they have always had a strong drive to succeed and a level of internal motivation that set them apart from their peers. Many rose from difficult circumstances, and although they may have received some encouragement along the way, they retain a sense that their own diligence and capacity to struggle through challenging times has set them in good stead in life.

So what brings them to my office? Often they are stumped at how to impart the same lessons to their children. Having achieved a level of comfort and success, they are not sure if their kids will have the same ambition and resilience.

One father, whom I'll call Charlie, was frustrated by his 14 year-old son's inability to focus on more challenging school work. Charlie talked of all the ways he tried to inspire his son, including taking him in the basement to see the volumes of extra work he did in high school and college. His son was impressed but couldn't see how his father's experience in school was relevant now. Exasperated, Charlie blurted out, "Sometimes I wish my kids had the same *disadvantages* I had!"

In my experience there are legions of bright, successful and well intentioned parents with the same dilemma. They want the best for their kids and they spend lots of time and energy fretting over what they should do to help them succeed – in the classroom, on the sports fields and in the social arena. When their plans go awry they are

stumped. Why aren't their kids motivated? Where's their desire to do their best – a fire that burned so bright in their moms and dads?

The answer to those questions lies in a simple paradox: If you *want more* for your kids, *do less* for them.

All the recent research about resilient children, those who overcome hardship and learn to work hard in and out of school, points in the same direction: kids

who are independent and disciplined, and have an internal sense of their own efficacy and abilities, do well in life.

The problem is, many kids today don't get that chance. Early on, they get used to their parents'

help. They think nothing of asking their parents to pick up after them, to chauffeur them all over town, to make multiple dinners, to chip in with their homework and to schedule multiple play dates every week. I hear from many parents who feel guilty whenever their kids are frustrated or unhappy. They worry that they must somehow be "letting them down."

Trying to anticipate all of our children's needs and satisfy their every desire is counter-productive. We risk finding out years later that our kids are still dependent on us, a little entitled, and unable to handle challenges on their own. In some cases, that discovery happens too late. I work with many hovered-over teenagers who are now finding it hard to take on the responsibilities of adolescence and young adulthood.

The "do less" philosophy of parenting assumes that children who are left to their own devices are likely to be more independent and resourceful, and have higher levels of self-esteem. As parents, the best route to helping our kids become more self-sufficient is to hover less and give them more autonomy, allowing them to be the initiators of their actions ("Honey, it's your homework, not *ours*! I've been to fifth grade!").

If we can learn to step back, and give our kids some breathing room, we might just be surprised how much they can accomplish. In the process, parents might also feel less stressed and less responsible for their children's day-to-day level of achievement and happiness.

We can begin while our children are still in preschool. Letting them get dressed on their own and pick up after themselves are good places to start. By elementary and middle school, some parents find that their kids can be independent contributors to the family, "part of the solution," not just the source of more work.

In many ways the prescription for change is a simple one. As parents we can have a few mantras: "Leave them be;" "Don't hover or micro-manage;" "Let kids take care of their own business;" "Less is more."

The examples below are all straightforward methods for giving kids more responsibility and less help. To some, they may suggest an earlier time, when family life was less hectic. I'm not advocating a throwback "Little House on the Prairie" approach to parenting, but I

Sometimes I wish my kids had the same *disadvantages* I had!

Kids who are independent and disciplined have an internal sense of their own efficacy and abilities.

do believe that the basic lessons we want to teach kids – to be independent, to persevere, and to be resilient – haven't changed much over the years.

Here are **10 Ways to Do Less and Accomplish More as a Parent:**

- 1) Let your children learn to play by themselves. Lessons: Self-Reliance & Self-Confidence
- 2) Teach them to clean up their toys and clothes. Lessons: Organization, Personal Responsibility & Self-Discipline
- 3) Don't schedule too many play dates. Lessons: Managing Their Own Lives & Time for Solo Pursuits
- 4) Expect your kids to start their homework on their own. Lessons: Facing Challenges, Learning to Struggle & Focus
- 5) Make just one meal for dinner. Don't be a *Short-Order Cook!* Lessons: Good Eating Habits, Flexibility & Cooperation
- 6) Let your kids learn to entertain themselves. (Without electronics!) Lessons: Self-Motivation, Creativity & Independence
- 7) Give your children real chores. Lessons: Self-discipline, Perseverance & Contributing to a Community
- 8) Buy fewer treats and toys. Let kids earn money and manage their expenses. Lessons: Delayed Gratification & Earned Privileges
- 9) Only sign your kids up for one or two activities. Lessons: Self-Motivation & Generating Their Own Ideas.
- 10) Don't overdo praise – do recognize a job well done! Lessons: Realistic Self-Assessment & Learning to Practice

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Paul J. Donahue, PH.D., is a nationally-recognized child and family psychologist based in Scarsdale, NY. He has authored *Parenting Without Fear* (St. Martins Press, 2007) and co-authored *Mental Health Consultation in Early Childhood*. Dr. Donahue is a frequent lecturer to parents, teachers and professional groups across the country and was a guest lecturer for Parents Together in October. More information is available at www.drpauldohahue.com.

Internet Safety – A Digital Dilemma

by Richard J. Colangelo, Jr.

Is it possible to protect our children when they hang out in “cyberworld”? Every parent has to answer this question at some point. What would you do? You could ban your child from going online, but in today's world this approach isn't realistic. It could affect your child both academically and socially, and is likely to result in their going on line without your supervision. Kids today are computer savvy at a very young age and they use the internet to socialize and keep up with their friends as much as we “hung out” with friends when we were their age.

- 87% of teens aged 12-17 use the internet, 51% on a daily basis
- 75% of online teens use instant messaging programs
- 81% of online teens play games, many with “chat” options
- 61% of 13-17 year-olds have a personal profile on MySpace, Friendster, Xanga or Facebook
- 33% of 13-17 year-olds reported that their parents or guardians know “very little” or “nothing about what they do on the internet”

Online risks

The risks our children face online are not so different than the risks they face offline: predators that want to hurt them, bullies who scare them,

people who want to steal their identity, or viewing inappropriate content or pornography, and all the other things that kids do without thinking about the consequences.

In most child exploitation cases, we are dealing with a compliant victim in that the child consented to the alleged conduct. This is true for online predators and their victims as well. They take the time to gain the child's trust and offer them the

attention and affection that they may not be getting from us or their peers and the child willingly gets involved.

One chilling aspect of the internet is how

easy it is to be anyone you want to be. There is no way to check someone's age or identity online. This, together with the child's instinct to trust anyone that is nice to them, gives cyber-predators the ability to get close to our kids.

What parents can do

As parents, we need to be involved in all aspects of our children's lives. If they are part of a social network such as Facebook, or use an instant messaging program, we should check their “friends” or “buddy list” regularly. Ask about each one, how they know this person and from where. If they don't have a good

While it may be impossible to parent the internet, we do have the ability to parent our children.

answer, then delete the contact. Some kids just can't say no when asked to be friends – one girl I spoke to had 500 online friends!

Most importantly we have to have open lines of communication with our children. We need to teach them to reach out to a trusted adult (hopefully a parent or guardian) if they feel threatened or confused about anything either on or offline. When they come to talk to us, we need to be prepared to listen. You can't lose your patience, because if you do, your child won't come to you the next time. We need to help them deal with the issues at hand in a way that will keep them safe and allow them to learn from the incident.

The newest cyber-challenge we face as parents is teaching our kids about the long-term effect of what they post online. How will they explain the photo or posting from back in middle school or high school to a college admissions officer or a potential employer? In this instant gratification digital world, cyber-history is becoming an issue for more and more of our youth and has long lasting consequences. We need to make sure they understand that they lose control over things that they or their friends post online. It isn't private and it doesn't go away.

Remember, while it may be impossible to parent the internet, we do have the ability to parent our children. As parents, we sometimes forget that.

Richard J. Colangelo, Jr., is the CT Senior Assistant State's Attorney, Stamford/Norwalk Judicial District. For a summary of his September 2009 Internet Safety lecture for Parents Together, PowerPoint presentation and additional internet safety resources including the *50 Top Texting Acronyms Parents Need to Know*, visit www.parentstogetherct.org.

www.parentstogetherct.org

Sexting – Not for Your Eyes Only

by Jody-Lynn Breakell

Sexting – Not for Your Eyes Only was presented on October 27, 2009 by The Center for Sexual Assault Crisis Counseling and Education as a half-day conference at UConn Stamford. The forum was attended by approximately 150 professionals representing schools, social service agencies and police departments from across the area. With permission, we share some of the highlights of this informative event.

Our children are born digital

According to Debra Berlyn, president of Consumer Policy Solutions and a national voice on the issue of children's online safety, our children are "born digital" or are essentially "digital natives" in the world, while we as adults are "digital immigrants" learning as we go and trying to catch up. To understand the world our children live in, we need to acknowledge that technology plays a major role and is to a great extent their creative palate. Most of us will always be a step behind in navigating and understanding the changing complexities of the digital realm our kids inhabit, but we can take steps to mentor and monitor their behaviors when it comes to cell phones, computers, web cams, digital cameras and/or certain video game systems.

Conference presenters

In addition to Ms. Berlyn, presenters included CT Attorney General Richard Blumenthal; Larry Magid, Co-Director of

ConnectSafely.org; Larry Rosenberg, Ph.D., Clinical Director, Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut; Marsali Hancock, President, iKeepSafe; Dr. Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent, Stamford Public Schools; Richard J. Colangelo, Jr., Senior Assistant State's Attorney; Nancy Gifford, Consultant, Family Online Safety Institute; and, Chris Hansen, Correspondent, Dateline NBC. With their broad depth of knowledge and experience, the presenters acknowledged challenges, provided insight and shared important resources.

We can mentor and monitor our children's behaviors when it comes to cell phones, computers, web cams, digital cameras and video game systems.

So what exactly is Sexting?

Sexting is a new term that defines a specific type of activity involving the *electronic transmission of sexually explicit photos or text*. As parents, we need to understand that this behavior is happening among teens with or without our child's permission.

Long-lasting consequences

Although it may seem innocent to them, the combination of easy transmission of digital photos, the internet and their poor judgment can lead to serious, unintended and long-lasting emotional, social and legal consequences. *Sexting* may be illegal when it involves minors in the production, possession or distribution of what is considered child pornography. Once images or text are sent, the originator has no control over where they end up. "What goes on the internet, stays on the internet," possibly forever.

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How prevalent is *Sexting*?

A 2008 survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy reported:

- 33% of teenage boys and 25% of teenage girls say they have seen nude or semi-nude images on cell phones that were originally meant to be private.
- 20% of teens (age 13-16) and 33% of young adults (age 20 – 26) admit to having posted nude or semi-nude photos of themselves.
- 39% of teens surveyed have sent or posted sexually suggestive messages via text, e-mail or IM.

Dr. Starr acknowledged the difficulty in trying to teach our kids the rules in a world where we don't necessarily know the rules, as well as the importance of listening to our children. While he has not seen a pervasive problem with cell phone *sexting* in the Stamford schools to date, Dr. Starr reports that assistant principals now need to spend time monitoring YouTube for inappropriate online video postings involving students. "Time," he said, "that could be better spent working directly with students and teachers." When questionable digital issues arise, they are typically turned over to the school resource officers. Several of the speakers acknowledged the importance of, and appreciation for, the local law enforcement officers in addressing *sexting* issues.

"Parents," Dr. Starr said, "have a role as well. They need to listen to what's happening. They can teach values, a sense of self, good judgment and choices, and a vision for the future."

Wise words to parent by

Throughout the day, a projected slide brought the participants back to a simple but universal message from Shel Silverstein that applies to the basics of teaching our children to make good choices in life:

THE VOICE

**There is a voice inside of you
That whispers all day long
"I feel that this is right for me,
I know that this is wrong."**

**No teacher, preacher, parent, friend
Or wise man can decide**

**What's right for you – just listen to
The voice that speaks inside.**

What else can parents do?

- Establish household rules about technology use in and out of the house which may include: taking the cell phone away at bedtime and keeping computers, TV's and gaming systems in a common room, not bedrooms.
 - Talk about your child's "digital reputation" – the permanent record of their online activity that will follow them for years.
- Talk to them about their postings online or on cell phones, especially *sexting* and the serious and long-term consequences once they hit "send."
- Remind them that the minute they send an image or text message they completely lose control of what happens to it next.
- Encourage "digital citizenship" and integrity in their use of technology: protecting themselves and their friends. NEVER take images of themselves or others that they wouldn't want everyone, now and in the future, to see.

It's hard to teach our kids the rules in a world where we don't know the game or the rules!

- Remind them how easy it is for others to take pictures of them on cell phones that they wouldn't want shared with others. In one instance a student was photographed at a weekend party with a beer in his hand. Once posted, it was public record and the consequences included being expelled from the team, losing his college scholarship and ending his college career.
- Encourage them to not delete but immediately REPORT to a trusted adult any nude or semi-nude pictures they receive.
- Emerging technology is becoming available to help monitor cell phone use. Some programs allow parents to monitor all calls to and from cell phones as well as text messages, e-mails and picture messages. Some cell phone providers have parental control options as well.

To learn more:

- www.netsmartz411.org – for more tips on safer cell phone use
- www.consumerprivacyawareness.org, www.iKeepSafe.org, www.fosi.org and www.connectsafely.org – for additional online safety resources.
- www.cybertipline.com – to report a *sexting* message to a minor from an adult or unknown sender.

For additional online safety resources and conference materials and to learn more about their services and educational outreach programs, contact: **The Center for Sexual Assault Crisis Counseling and Education** at www.thecenter-ct.org or call (203)348-9346. The Center provides counseling and support services to victims of sexual violence and strives to eliminate sexual violence through community-wide education programs. Their 24-hour hotlines are: English - (203) 329-2929; Spanish - (888) 568-8332.

Jody-Lynn Breakell is co-publisher of the *Parents Together Newsletter* and co-owner of B&B Consulting – Solutions for Nonprofits.

Teens and Dating Relationships – A Parent Primer

by Suzanne Adam

The concept of dating in today’s world is nothing like it was when we were young. The definitions and rules have changed. Our hushed phone calls behind closed doors and away from parental earshot have been replaced by texting, instant messaging and online posting. While to parents these first relationships may seem cute or like puppy love, to your teenager they can be very intense, all consuming, and the reality is we are often unaware of the underlying tenor of their “dating” relationships.

When talking to your teen about relationships, first and foremost, your goal is to have an open, honest and productive conversation. You want your child to know that you are a good resource and a non-judgmental listener and that they can always turn to you. Secondly, you want to provide your child with realistic strategies for confronting the possibility of relationship problems directly and effectively and, hopefully, before they occur. You will never accomplish the second goal without the first. The following important points to remember were adapted from *Love Is Respect*:

Assess your own values before you talk to your children. How do you expect a dating couple to act toward one another? How should people behave when they disagree? How should decisions be made in a relationship? Make sure that you can explain your reasoning and give examples.

Share your own experiences, as appropriate, especially the ones when you were your child’s age and take the opportunity to learn the new norms of your child’s experiences.

Reveal the unspoken “Rules of Dating.” Give your children clear examples of

what is appropriate in a dating relationship and which behaviors are abusive. Talk to them about the standards of conduct that you expect rather than letting locker room and slumber party talk be their only sources of information.

Be ready to listen when your teenager wants to talk to you.

Make your first question a general one if you suspect there is a relationship problem. If you begin with a question related specifically to dating abuse or violence, you may be putting your teen on the spot and they may get defensive or shut down.

Tell the Whole Truth: Good and Bad. Tweens and teens generally view relationships very romantically. Support these expectations, but also be realistic with them about the bad things that can happen. Let them know that coercion, verbal abuse and violence are never acceptable. Give them a few suggestions or phrases to help them get out of difficult situations: “I am not ready to go that far,” or “I am uncomfortable, can we talk about this?”

Teach Assertiveness, Not Aggressiveness. One of the best skills parents can teach their children is to make their own feelings known by clearly expressing their opinions, emotions and desires. For example, if they do not want to do something, they need to say so. If there is a conflict – if things cannot be settled- encourage them to always take a break and cool down before feelings get hurt, poor decisions are made, or regrettable actions are taken.

Explain the Danger Zone. Thoughts of aggression are signals of frustration that need to be acknowledged and dealt with. Help your child to understand that any incident of violence in a relationship, including verbal or written abuse, is a predictor of very serious problems that are likely to continue and escalate.

Keep No Secrets. Secrecy in a relationship is not acceptable. It can isolate teens from friends and family and can be the first signs of coercion and manipulation. Teach your child that being strong means knowing when to turn to appropriate authorities for help, be it parents, teachers or police.

The reality is we are often unaware of the underlying tenor of our children’s “dating” relationships.

Be the Ultimate Role Model. Young people learn by observing those around them, especially their parents. It is critical that you model healthy relationships by respecting yourself, your partner and other people.

Remember, communication is an ongoing part of your relationship with your child. Revisit these topics with your child and keep checking in with your teenager. Knowing that you are there for them, to listen, talk to, support and accept them as they navigate the challenging experiences of adolescence, can put them way ahead of the game in forming healthy, respectful and non-violent relationships.

For more information, visit the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline at www.loveisrespect.org which provides resources for teens, parents, friends, family, peer advocates, government officials, law enforcement officials and the general public. All communication is confidential and anonymous.

Suzanne Adam is the Director of Domestic Abuse Services at the Greenwich YWCA. For more information, contact her at 203-869-6501 or visit www.ywcagreenwich.org.

Family Fire Safety during the Holidays

by Sheri Frost

The American Red Cross has home safety tips for this winter season. Although winter hasn't officially begun and snow has not yet fallen on our neighborhoods, it's the best time to review these simple safety tips to keep spirits bright and help prevent devastating home fires.

Fires are a major cause of children's death and many fires are started by children playing with matches or lighters.

- Children under the age of 5 are twice as likely to die in a home fire than the rest of the population, and child-playing fires are the leading cause of fire deaths among preschoolers.
- During the winter holiday season, an average of 40 home fires per day are caused by children playing with fire.
- About 300 people each year are killed and \$280 million in property is destroyed in fires attributed to children playing with fire.
- Just over half of child-playing fires in the home start in a bedroom, and bedding material is most often the first item ignited.
- About 2 out of every 3 child-playing fires – and 3 out of every 4 associated deaths and injuries – involve matches or lighters.
- Children also start fires by playing with candles, fireworks, stoves, and cigarettes.
- Only 26% of families have actually developed and practiced a home fire escape plan.

Holiday lights, candles and decorations cause many home fires.

- On average, one of every 22 home fires started by holiday trees results in death.
- Candle fires are 4 times as likely to occur during the winter holidays.
- Inspect holiday lights each year for frayed wires, bare spots, broken or cracked sockets, and excessive kinking or wear.
- Avoid overloading electrical outlets by not linking more than 3 light strands.
- Use decorations that are flame-resistant or flame-retardant.
- Place decorations at least 3 feet away from fireplaces, portable heaters, radiators, heat vents, and candles. Keep candles at least 3 feet away from trees, evergreens, holiday decorations, and other flammable items.
- Use candleholders that are sturdy, won't tip over easily, are made from materials that cannot burn, and are large enough to collect dripping wax. Remember that even glass holders can shatter and explode from the heat of a candle flame.
- Place candles where they cannot be reached or easily knocked over by children and pets.
- Do not leave a room before extinguishing candles. Always extinguish candles and unplug lights before going to bed.
- Never place lit candles on a tree.

Holiday tree care

- Purchase flame retardant metallic or artificial trees.
- If you purchase a real tree, make sure that it has fresh, green needles that are not easily broken. Keep live trees as moist as possible by giving them plenty of water.
- Use a sturdy tree stand designed not to tip over.
- Keep trees at least 3 feet away from heat sources, including fireplaces, portable heaters, radiators, heat vents, and candles. Be careful not to drop or flick cigarette ashes near a tree.
- Never put tree branches or needles in a fireplace or wood burning stove.
- Safely dispose of trees as they become dry and needles begin to drop. Dispose of trees through recycling centers or community pick-up services. Dried-out trees should not be left in a house or garage, or placed against the house or garage.

Preparedness tips

- Keep matches, lighters and other ignitable substances in a secured location out of the reach of children, and only use lighters with child-resistant features.
- Keep anything that can catch on fire—pot holders, oven mitts, wooden utensils, paper or plastic bags, food packaging, and towels or curtains—away from your stove top.
- Designate one person to walk around your home to make sure

that all candles and smoking materials are properly extinguished after guests leave.

- Create and practice your home fire escape plan with your children several times a year. Make sure you establish a meeting place at a safe distance outside the home in case your family needs to evacuate. Also practice stop, drop, cover and roll and low crawling.
- Familiarize children with the sound of your smoke alarm and what to do when they hear it.
- Teach your children not to be scared of firefighters. Take them to your local fire department to meet them and learn about fire safety.
- Teach your children to tell you or a responsible adult when they find matches or lighters at home or school.
- Smoke alarms save lives. Install a smoke alarm near your kitchen, on each level of your home, near sleeping areas, and inside and outside bedrooms if you sleep with doors closed. Use the test button to check it each month. Replace all batteries at least once a year. Having a working smoke alarm reduces the risk of dying in a home fire by nearly half.

Following these tips will help you be prepared to keep your family and home fire safe this and all seasons of the year. For more information on how to keep your home fire safe and to develop a home fire safety plan, visit www.redcross.org/homefires.

Sources: American Red Cross, U.S. Fire Administration, and the National Fire Protection Association

Sheri Frost, Volunteer COO, American Red Cross Cape Fear (NC) Chapter, was previously Disaster & Emergency Services Director at the Greenwich Chapter.

The Coordinator's Corner

Jenny Byxbee, Greenwich Youth Services Coordinator for the Town of Greenwich and Greenwich United Way

The second annual **National Lock Your Meds Day Campaign**, spearheaded locally by the Greenwich Youth Services Council and the Lower Fairfield County Regional Action Council, took place on October 27, 2009, in Greenwich, Stamford, New Canaan and Darien. The campaign, created by the National Family Partnership (NFP), is designed to raise awareness and provide parents with action steps to prevent children's prescription drug abuse.

Through this campaign and other prevention initiatives, we, as parents, teachers and service providers are learning more and more that prescription drug abuse can be just as dangerous as illegal drugs – the big difference is that kids tend to think prescription drugs are safer and know that they are easier to get.

Experts have found that there is a direct link between perception of harm or lack thereof and the use of a substance or drug. For instance, teens don't have to go to the streets or to a dealer to find prescription drugs; our biggest threat and their easiest source may be an unsecured medicine cabinet in our own homes.

A recent study from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) reports that teens find it easier to get access to prescription drugs than it is to get their hands on beer!

According to the 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH,) 70% of children who abuse prescription drugs admitted getting them from family or friends and often without that person's knowledge.

More than 3.1 million teens report abusing prescription drugs. Every day, 3,300 children begin experimenting with prescription drugs.

Lock Your Meds Day urges parents to talk to their children about prescription drugs, set clear rules for behavior, take inventory, keep track of and lock up all medicines in your household and encourage others to follow the exact same guidelines. Persons 65 years and older account for one-third of all medications prescribed in the US. Accordingly, grandparents should take special efforts to lock meds away from their teen grandchildren.

Here are some tips:

- Lock your prescription medication and prevent abuse or misuse by securing the medication in your home.
- Take inventory of your current medications and periodically check that nothing is missing.
- Educate yourself and your children about the most commonly abused types of prescription medications and communicate the dangers to your child regularly.
- Set clear rules and monitor behavior by expressing your disapproval of using prescription drugs without a prescription.
- Properly dispose of old and unused medications.

For more information on the Lock Your Meds Campaign please visit www.lfcrac.org and select "What's New" which will link you to additional resources on prescription drug awareness. If you would like to get more involved with our town's local prevention initiatives, please contact me at jbyxbee@unitedway-greenwich.com or (203) 869-2221.

Parents@TOGETHER

Parents Together links parents of public and independent schools to address the issues that affect our children and community. Through its network of school liaisons and delegates, Parents Together has supported Greenwich parents for more than thirty years by providing free lectures, a comprehensive website and newsletters. Parents Together is a nonprofit organization in Greenwich, CT, and works in cooperation with the Parent Teacher Associations throughout town.

Parents Together Newsletter, for parents of children from birth through high school, is published three times per year. It combines the *Primer* and *Newsletter* published separately in the past. Parents Together lectures are offered for all parents free of charge.

Parents Together is financially supported by all of the public and independent school PTAs and by Greenwich parents through their generous donations to our annual fundraising appeal.

Distribution: Parents Together Newsletter is going green! We have consolidated to a one newsletter format, reduced the number of print copies, and posted the **Parents Together Newsletter** on our website at www.parentstogetherct.org. Limited print copies are available at numerous Greenwich locations including libraries, community agencies and school offices. For mailed print copies, see below.

Newsletter Subscriptions: We invite parents and all other readers interested in local parenting issues to subscribe to the **Parents Together Newsletter**. For a **mailed annual subscription**, please send your name, address and \$15 by check payable to Parents Together, P.O. Box 4843, Greenwich, CT 06831-0417.

Contact Us: Do you have a story idea, writer suggestion or comment for **Parents Together Newsletter**? You may write to us at Parents Together, P.O. Box 4843, Greenwich, CT 06831-0417 or send us an email at parentstogetherct@gmail.com.

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