

Building Social Survival Skills

By Susan Wels, Parent, Convent of the Sacred Heart High School

Friendships help kids stay afloat in the social whirl

For many teens, school is a place to see friends and measure self-worth in interactions with peers and social groups. It's a world, observes psychologist Michael Thompson, PhD, that most kids want their parents to stay out of.

"Our role as parents," he explains, "is mainly to watch and understand what's going on with our kids' social lives. It's a lot like being a lifeguard," he adds. "You need to watch the pool and tell kids, 'walk, don't run,' but for the most part, you don't have to jump in and save lives."

Thompson, coauthor of the book *Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children*, spoke to Bay Area parents at a Coalition forum held September 17 at San Francisco Day School.

Friendship vs. popularity

From an early age, he notes, many kids clearly grasp the difference between friendship and popularity. Friendship is an intimate bond that grows between two kids. As one fifth grader explained it, a friend is "someone you trust, who you like to spend a lot of time with, and who doesn't tease you when the group teases you, even if he can't stand up for you just then." Popularity, on the other hand, can be a two-edged sword. "You're popular if you're considered cool by kids with style; it's a group consensus that you have attractive traits," Thompson

explains. Although most kids crave popularity, it has a price. As a seventh grader said to him, "popular kids can't be sure of any of their friends."

For most kids, popularity is simply out of reach. Popular girls, Thompson's research has found, often have traits like good looks, cool clothes, money and social charisma. For boys, popularity often depends on qualities like sports ability, large height and build, money and a sense of humor. Many parents hope their sons or daughters will be popular, but what's much more important, says Thompson, is having a friend or two. "If your child has a friend," he explains, "the group won't attack her, and it won't matter whether she's in the popular group or not."

Helping kids at risk

By the end of elementary school, most kids, he says, have found a friend and are relatively socially secure. Some 10 percent, however, have no friends and risk being rejected by their peers. Parents of children in this group need to "jump in the pool" and help their kids make friends. Thompson offers these suggestions:

- Support your child's friendships. Invite other kids along for weekend activities and get to know their parents.
- Make your home a hospitable place where your child feels comfortable inviting friends.
- Don't talk negatively about your

child's friends. Criticize behaviors, not kids or friendships.

- Ask teachers whether your child is at the bottom of the social heap. If so, enlist their help in making school a safe place where your child can feel good about his or her other abilities and contributions.
- Get your child counseling help—or even better, enroll him in a social skills group that will coach him in making friends successfully.
- Involve your child in activities outside of school where she has a chance to meet new kids and develop self-esteem.

Popularity isn't very important, Thompson says, but friendship is. A level of social acceptance that's "good enough" is a better predictor of adult mental health than school grades or IQ. In the end, he adds, "peers give you a sense of self-worth that nothing else can match."

Pushing the Edge

continued from page 1

older. When you turn 18, you become aware of the actual legal responsibility you have for yourself. That by itself changes your perception of risk.

- I took a lot of risks freshman year, because it seemed so fun and new. But as I got older, I got more comfortable with who I am and who my friends are. I understand why I do things.

How can parents help their kids make good decisions?

- When parents are too strict, kids can get out of hand. Part of growing up is learning from your mistakes. If you keep your kids locked up, it won't help at all.
- My dad has told me about risks that he's taken and the consequences, like

friends who've died in car crashes. It's helped me learn the consequences of risks and decide which ones I'm willing to take.

- Parents need to realize that they're modeling behavior. Sometimes I worry when my parents go to a party. I know they'll be drinking socially, and my mom's going to drive home from that party. Even if they're not seriously intoxicated, it's a risk.
- Stay in contact. Know where your kid is. But don't come down on kids for taking a risk. It won't teach them anything. Instead, talk it out with them so they know why it was a bad idea.

The Coalition Mission

To support, educate, and inspire parents of adolescents in order to promote the health and safety of our youth.

If you or your school would like to be involved or if you have comments or questions, please call Lynne Myers at (415) 668-0895.

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To subscribe to *Parenteen*, call Victoria Legg at (415) 641-1528.

To learn more about the Parents' Coalition, check out our web site: www.ParentsCoalition.net

VERY IMPORTANT DATES

Parents' Coalition meetings

The Coalition meets once a month, September–June, from 7:30–9:00 p.m. at San Francisco Day School, 350 Masonic Ave., (at Golden Gate Avenue). All parents are welcome. For more information call 415/389-9441.

Monday, January 14 — Student Panel: *Teens and Trust*

Monday, February 11 — Forum: Sheldon Norberg, *Just Say Know*

(to substance abuse)





Pushing the Edge

By Susan Wels, Parent, Convent of the Sacred Heart High School

Knowing how to balance risks and consequences is an important part of growing up

Parents spend a lot of time worrying about risks their teenagers may be taking. Even if they understand that risk taking is part of adolescence, they may know very little about the kinds of risky choices kids are making.

The Coalition asked students from six Bay Area high schools to shed some light on teen perceptions and judgments about risk. Seven teens participated in the panel, moderated by Julie Terraciano and Elsa Rosenberg, MFTs, parents and co-chairs of the Coalition's Issues and Choices Committee. Here is what they had to say.

especially getting through it when you know you could seriously hurt yourself.

Is risky behavior different for boys and girls?

- Guys have a tendency to show off or prove themselves more physically.
- Some girls take risks by being anorexic.
- I know some girls who shoplift. Most of the time, they can afford the things they steal or don't even need them. They shoplift more for the risk or the thrill of it.

- It's a big ordeal when you get caught shoplifting. You get arrested. Kids tend to stop after that. It's not worth it.
- The same thing's true with tagging. One guy I know got caught by the police. His parents had to mortgage the house and move out of San Francisco to pay for the damage that he caused.
- For girls, sex is a big risk. You worry about getting pregnant.
- Sexual activity is risky for everyone. There are staggering statistics about how many teens contract AIDS and

start showing symptoms in their 20s.

- It's especially risky if you've been using alcohol or drugs. People get drunk or high and don't have control over what they do. They're more likely to have sex without a condom.
- Even emotionally, having sexual activity at this age is risky. It can really complicate things and make kids emotionally unstable.

Do your feelings about risk change as you get older?

- You take fewer risks as you grow

continued on page 4

What do you consider risk-taking behavior?

- Anything that has an element of danger to it, where something could go wrong. It's something you don't want to get caught doing, like drinking, doing drugs, sneaking out or cutting class.
- It's something that an authority figure specifically told you not to do.
- It's that moment of indecision when your conscience comes up, when you know there could be consequences.

Why do some kids like to take risks?

- Kids take risks to get attention. They'll brag all the time about being so drunk that they don't remember anything.
- People sometimes take risks to forget about school, stress, college and the SATs. Being a little crazy puts you in a different mindset.
- Recently I've gotten to know skaters who do stupid things that really endanger their bodies—tricks like jumping off staircases. Doing risky things like that gives you a rush,



Risky Business

By Leslie Woodward, Parent, Lowell High School and San Francisco Day School

Research shows teens' comfort with risk is a matter of personal style—and age

Despite the common belief that teens think of themselves as invulnerable, how teens perceive risk has not been well studied, according to UCSF professor Susan G. Millstein, PhD. A research psychologist, Millstein specializes in adolescent risk-taking and serves as an advisor to federal agencies on teen health policy. At a September 10 Parents' Coalition Forum, Millstein described a research project in which she followed a group of young people ranging from fifth graders to young adults to see how their perceptions of risk changed over a two-and-a-half year period.

Risk tolerant or risk averse?

People differ in their tolerance for risk, which is an inborn trait that persists throughout life, according to Millstein. A risk-tolerant person focuses more on the benefits of taking risks than on the potential downside. A risk-averse person is more cautious in new situations and focuses on what he has to lose, rather than gain. "One style is not bet-

ter than the other, or necessarily easier to parent," said Millstein. A risk-averse teen, for example, may not drink and drive, but he may struggle to find the courage to ask someone for a date.

The positive side of risk

Life is fraught with risk, said Millstein, and if you never take any risks you don't grow and learn. Parents need to remember that teens take risks because they think they have something to gain. They must also understand that not having the risk pay off isn't such a bad thing. Experiencing negative outcomes helps teens learn to balance risk and rewards.

Risk and adolescence

Teen risk-taking is fueled by normal pubertal changes, said Millstein. These include physical and sexual maturation, changing social expectations, and psychological growth that increases teens' drive for autonomy. Cognitive changes play a particularly

big role. Added together, these changes make for interesting shifts in how younger and older adolescents view risk.

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Perceptions change with age

Children in the 10 to 13 age group tend to grossly overestimate risk, said Millstein. In these late elementary to middle school years, kids are typically still concrete thinkers. Common approaches to health education paint a dire picture of what will happen if they drink, smoke or have sex.

"They're scared to death because they tend to take these warnings at

face value," said Millstein. Teens' perception of risk starts to drop off in the high school years. "We keep warning them, but they watch their peers take risks and, in most cases, they see no adverse consequences," said Millstein. That's because statistically the risks are small. If a teen drinks and drives, he probably will not be involved in an accident. Acquiring a sexually transmitted disease is statistically the highest risk activity, according to Millstein, but kids don't typically see that consequence and so downplay that risk. High schoolers also start to analyze how they are different from others, and how those differences affect their personal risk. A boy may, for example, decide that because he is a better skateboarder than his friends, he is less likely to have an accident.

Millstein's data show that the drop in perceived risk continues through late adolescence, the ages of 18 to 21. However, even as adults we tend to overestimate risk, she said.

Teaching the **ABCs** of **RISK**

Millstein suggests that parents use these tips to guide discussions of this important topic with their teens

Acknowledge individual differences in how people perceive risk. You may not feel the same as other parents, and your child's level of risk tolerance may differ from your own.

Respect your child. Teach, don't preach. Try different strategies to reach your "student" with the message you want to convey.

Benefits of engaging in risky behavior need to be discussed. Ask yourself what your child stands to gain from risky behavior. Are there alternative ways to meet those needs?

Implications of risk-taking should be an important focus. Examine what an adverse outcome would mean, rather than the likelihood that it will occur.

Communicate with your child early and often. Listen carefully to what he has to say.

Skills for reducing risk are crucial. Teach your child how to reduce risk in specific situations. You can, for example, have her role-play refusing a ride home with someone who has been drinking heavily.

Know what your child knows. Do not over- or underestimate your child's knowledge. Have him explain his thinking process, and then point out any lack in his knowledge base.



A Survivor's Story

By Chris Unrub, Parent, San Francisco Day School and St. Ignacius

When I first picked up Adair Lara's book, *Hold Me Close, Let Me Go; A Mother, a Daughter, and an Adolescence Survived* (Broadway Books 2001, \$23.95), I was afraid to read it. I could tell from perusing the book jacket that Lara's daughter was a rambunctious teenager. Did I really want to know about the possible risks of being a teen in today's scary world? As a mother of adolescents, wouldn't I rather remain in blissful ignorance?

The *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist describes five years of life with her daughter, Morgan, who became a hellion when she turned thirteen. Morgan smoked, drank, abused drugs, got into trouble at school, disappeared and caroused with the "wrong" crowd, became pregnant—just about every risk-taking behavior imaginable. Lara says that during that time: "Morgan was the tornado, and I was the trailer park in her path."

Lara's brutally honest memoir can inspire all parents of teenagers. She shares her successes and her failures. She acknowledges being angry, but also being afraid.

Tears and fears

Lara attempts to control Morgan in several ways, all without success. She tries being a friend who sets limits inconsistently, but this behavior drives mother and daughter apart. She tries grounding Morgan and putting special locks on the door, but Morgan still manages to sneak out, meeting friends in some of the most dangerous areas of the city. She sends Morgan to therapy, and Morgan refuses to cooperate. She sends Morgan to live outside of San Francisco, but the teen gets wilder. Morgan, essentially, learns how to manipulate her parents and

every other member of her family. For much of the book, she seems much smarter than her parents, who can't stick with a parenting game plan for very long.

Lara's life becomes more complicated when her father reappears after abandoning his family decades earlier. However, his presence enables Lara to reflect on her own difficult adolescence, giving her new strength to deal with her headstrong daughter.

Tough love

After Morgan begins to abuse drugs, her parents send her to a rehabilitation program that involves regular meetings and drug testing. Morgan threatens to quit the program, and at last it's time for Morgan's parents to stop making idle threats. Lara issues the most painful ultimatum possi-

"Parents can't prevent you from making mistakes—they can only make sure you learn from them"

ble—stay in the program or move out of the house. Yet that choice is a turning point in her relationship with her daughter.

"I could see that rocked her," Lara says. "Everything had changed; instead of walking on eggs, trying to keep her from exercising the unspoken threat—running away— I had seized

power. Living at home had become not a sentence, but a privilege. Something you earned."

Lara kicks Morgan out of the house and faces her biggest test yet—standing her ground, no matter how painful. "It had become like a rule: good parenting felt like hell," Lara writes. "If I felt like hell, I was probably doing my job." Morgan's exile is painful for everyone, but it is the one tactic that works for this family. She finally agrees to live by her parents' rules. She becomes drug-free; she finishes high school; she graduates from college; she survives adolescence, and so do her parents. Morgan's comments to Lara at the end of the wild ride offer an important lesson for every parent of a teenager: "Parents can't prevent you from making mistakes—they can only make sure you learn

from them," she tells her mom. "Trying to stop me showed me how much you loved me... I figured if somebody loved me that much, I must be worth something, so I should make some effort to preserve myself."

Risk taking may be a normal, healthy part of adolescence, but *Hold Me Close, Let Me Go* vividly shows how the process can spiral out of control. Although I had trouble seeing myself and my kids in many of the situations Lara describes, I did appreciate the book's central message: that parents need to stand their ground and be consistent, no matter how painful that may be.

