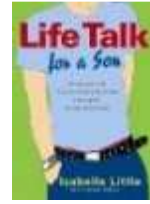


Life Talk Forum Parents' News4



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(Suggestion: print for a complete record.)

FORUM BACKGROUND

The **PARENTS' FORUM** provides parents with information and the opportunity to discuss issues and challenges that affect teenagers' lives. Author of the *Life Talk* books, Izabella Little, co-ordinates the Forum, the format is primarily electronic and input comes from parents, teens, and the panel of experts listed on the last page. We also have the **TEEN FORUM**, with a newsletter addressing teens' issues.

FORUM TALKS & FEEDBACK SESSIONS

Izabella has been giving talks at a number of schools (to parents and teens), and covers: Feedback on the reality and challenges of the teenagers' world, tips for enhancing parent-teen communication, and raising awareness of key issues. Much enthusiasm has been generated, and many interesting points come up.

Boundaries. One thought-provoking comment made by many parents is "thank you for giving me permission to enforce boundaries". It seems that so many of us face great pressure from our children to be allowed to: go clubbing; buy all the latest iPods, cell phones and designer gear; go to parties and sleep-over at people we don't know; and to stay out till the early hours – and many of us end up feeling bullied into saying "yes" against our better judgement.

As the saying goes: "it's a parent's role to set and enforce boundaries, and it's the teenagers' role to push against them". And sometimes the realisation that we're quite justified to insist on boundaries comes as quite a relief!

Divorce. Ever on the increase, divorce causes more prolonged heartache than is often admitted. It happens for so many reasons, and ranges from unmet needs, incompatibility and communication breakdown, to infidelity and many other factors. But so often the scars remain painful, for parents and for children, for a long time.

Many parents share their stories with us, and recurring comments include: "divorce is a lot harder than it appears – the grass is seldom greener on the other side – kids often seem OK outwardly, but inside they cry for a long time – if I could turn back the clock I wouldn't do it again – you first need to exhaust, with total dedication, all other solutions". Guilt, regret and "if only's" abound, and single parenting provides some truly tough challenges. There are also happy stories of freedom and release from unhappy situations, but where children are involved most of the messages we hear tend to be very cautionary.

We've received many emails and questions relating to divorce, we address some issues in the Q & A below, and will also pick up on it in the next newsletter.

ISSUES RAISED:

Newsletters 1 – 3 covered issues such as: teenage drinking; clubs; drugs; cell phones; porn; pocket money; communication; discipline & boundaries; depression; Grade 8 hiccups; sexual activity; self-mutilation; eating disorders; self-esteem; bullying; sexual abuse; ADHD; subject choices; matric rave week; and helpful reading. (If you didn't get the newsletter/s, [email us](#) for a copy.)

In this issue, specific questions are answered under Q&A, whilst general topics requested are summarised as follows:

TIPS TO ENHANCE COMMUNICATION WITH TEENAGERS

Liz Dooley from FAMSA has some valuable tips on communicating with teenagers: "Many parents are surprised by the radical changes from a previously compliant, happy, loving, open child to an emotional, withdrawn or rebellious half-adult.

"These changes can happen quite suddenly – common signs are the answers we are given which go like this "fine", "stuff", "you don't know them", "don't be so over-protective". The phone, landline or cell, becomes extremely important – and should one come into the room during a conversation it will stop, ending with "call you back later". This behaviour and other things like moodiness, vibing-out attitude, and challenging, can leave parents feeling worried, hurt and rejected.

"With good intentions parents can find themselves constantly complaining and criticising – believing that the teenager must learn certain things. In fact teenagers already know many of those things, like tidiness, and are trying to assert themselves by pushing the boundaries. Sometimes parents need to overlook the small offences and give more attention and energy to what the teenager is doing that's positive, or even just alright.

"It helps to know that this process of emotional separation from parents is normal and necessary. The teenagers are trying to discover who they are and what their value system is. They are testing and challenging their parents' world. Parents also need to learn to manage their own fears about their teenagers.

"Teenagers don't read their parents' reactions as coming from fear or from love, but rather that they are over-restrictive, that they don't listen to how they feel, that they are not trusted, in fact that the teenager has no voice at home.

"With this in mind the following can help to ease the tension in the home:

1. Parents should come from a united front – having sorted out in private any conflict they may have between them.
2. Try to remain constant and avoid giving a mixed message – body language, tone of voice and content should all be conveying the same message.
3. Parents don't need to give an answer immediately – they can say "I'd like to think about this". This gives time to do just that or chat it over with someone whose opinion you trust. But be sure to come back to the teen within a relatively short time and don't leave the question unanswered, hoping it will go away.
4. Listen to the teenager's opinion and views. You don't have to agree with them, but they should be given consideration and respect. This makes the teenager feel worthwhile.
5. Use the same words and stance that you'd use with a friend or colleague you respect. I believe that we sometimes talk to members of our close family in a way we wouldn't talk to anyone else! Be careful not to put your teenager down.
6. I often use the word acute to describe teenagers – acutely sad, happy, bored, bold, insecure. It's important to remember how strongly they feel about issues we might brush off.
7. Friendships can cause many problems. As they move away from the family, friends assume more importance. These friendships can cause great upset and sadness. Young people can be extremely cruel to one another. There is quite a bit of friendship swapping in the early teen years and confusion and conflict around which group to belong to. "Best friends" and confidences are broken.
8. Try not to take on your teenager's pain. Parents sometimes get involved in the friendship issues with disastrous effects. Teenagers need to learn to sort these problems out for themselves. Don't run down friends, rather say you don't feel comfortable with them – the next day the enemy could become the best friend (again). If bullying is suspected go through the correct channels at the school. You harm your child further by becoming involved personally.
9. Give age appropriate freedom within boundaries. For instance let them go out with a group of, say, four friends. Discuss up front what the contract is. For example: you go where you say you are going, the group stays together the entire time, and so on. Discuss what the consequences will be if the contract is broken. Negotiate respectfully about times, places, and so on.

10. Children are like blotting paper, so if parents want them to be polite, well mannered, honest and have personal dignity, parents need to behave like that themselves. Remember our children do what we do and not what we say!
11. Beware of messages around breaking the law when it suits the parent – such as serving alcohol to underage teenagers as a feel good for the parent. Some parents are proud to be seen as a cool parent and the teenager's friend. We need to stay in the parent role, have our own friends and let them have theirs.
12. By the time children become teenagers they should be self-motivated at school. They shouldn't be doing sport or work for the parents' satisfaction, but for their own. We can't force them to work, only set the scene for them. For instance they might decide that they don't need to be an 'A' grade student – and that they are perfectly happy with a 'B'."

DEVELOPING VALUES FOR TEENS

Values are like a life-jacket with a GPS. They help to keep us afloat and heading in the right direction. Without them, some time, there's a good chance we could sink.

Jenny Shain writes: "Developing values for teens is a process starting much earlier on with parents setting limits & establishing boundaries. A sense of what is & is not allowed should be inculcated from as early as a year of age, children will learn that they're not in charge, and this is the normal way of the world. Expectations of younger children, such as bath, eating, sleeping & homework routines should be established. Expectations such as speaking with respect, helping with certain household chores should be enforced.

"If the above has not been achieved, parents may be 'disappointed' in their children's attitudes & behaviour, and they may have a harder time in setting limits. Nevertheless it is never too late! Persevere and state your expectations, also understand how you have contributed to the problem.

"Values in teens will also be affected by the role models in their lives, or lack thereof. If the parents or other adult figures are responsible, reliable, conscientious and caring people, this will positively impact on the younger generation, they will also be worthy of respect in their children's eyes, and their guidance will be sought. In a similar vein, older siblings' behaviour and attitudes will positively or negatively impact on younger family members.

"Emotional upheaval adversely affects the adolescents' ability to resist peer pressure. Teenagers who have experienced stressors such as trauma, family breakdown & lack of emotional support, abuse or addiction in family members, will be more emotionally needy and will look to the peer group to fulfill these unmet needs. They will also have a lower sense of self esteem & will be needing approval and acceptance from peers. This will make it more difficult to resist getting involved in risky behaviours.

"Unrestricted exposure to media violence and sexuality will certainly also adversely affect teenager's values.

"Despite all of the above, teenagers in even the best of circumstances, will tend to experiment & push the boundaries – this is normal & comes with the territory of being an adolescent. Also certain personality types are more prone to acting out, eg very adventurous, fun loving kids who get bored quickly and need high levels of stimulation – these children are more at risk for substance abuse. Creative, artistic personality types may be more prone to experimentation. In addition, highly sensitive personality types who tend to experience their emotions very intensely, such as anger, depression & anxiety, may use drugs & alcohol to lift or soothe themselves. (Yes this does cover most of the population!).

"A parent in touch with his/her child will be aware of each child's vulnerabilities, & will be monitoring the situation. In general, we cannot fully protect our children from the challenges they'll inevitably face, but we can try to build a strong inner core and sense of self in them. Our input in the relationship with each child – from a young age all the way through adolescence & into young adulthood, is one of the strongest predictors of how he will cope in the world. We need to be positive role models for our children, in addition to the investment of time and energy in the relationship, in order that they will value us as a source of guidance in their life."

HOW TO RECOGNISE THE SIGNS OF SEXUAL ABUSE:

In News#3 we discussed child sexual abuse and some of the associated myths. Now Liz Norman, in conjunction with Jane Richardson, continue:

"It is important for children and parents to understand that the signs outlined below do NOT automatically mean a child has been abused. If your child seems to be regularly displaying a number of these signs, take them to see a professional who can help determine the underlying cause/s. The signs are "warnings" that the child is not coping and there may be many reasons for "not coping". If an adult displays many of these signs, see a professional. Sometimes child sexual abuse or other early traumas have been so well "denied" (blocked off) that they surface many years later. **Some signs are:**

- Child becomes fearful about bath-time. All sorts of diversion tactics are used to avoid having to wash/bath/shower. (Avoidance of bathing isn't the same as children who don't want to bath because they're having fun doing other things.)
- Child has mood swings – from elation to depression. Mood changes appear to be uncontrollable and child is unable to explain any "triggering event".
- Child becomes fearful. The fear extends across many areas: fear of being left alone, of new places, of people, of certain foods, of the dark, fear of the future.
- Child becomes "controlled". Might become very neat/tidy/perfectionist, may prefer clear boundaries & order, doesn't like surprises or unplanned events.
- Child becomes disorganised & chaotic, seems unable to focus on anything.
- Child's eating patterns change – either over-eating or under-eating.
- Child's sleep patterns change – may always be tired and wanting to sleep or be unable to fall asleep and have interrupted sleep (nightmares/night sweats).
- Child might display sexual activity inconsistent with age group or seems inappropriate (public masturbation; fascination with sexual books; highly provocative dancing; graphic sexual play).
- Child develops promiscuous behaviour or becomes obsessively anti-sexual.
- Child develops increasing tendency to use alcohol/drugs.
- Child changes friends for a "less acceptable/appropriate" group (indication of loss of self-esteem, may feel she is no longer good enough for old friends).
- Child shows distinct signs of lowering self-worth (change of friends, change of dress code, self-mutilation or self-harming behaviour, change of habits etc.).
- Child displays extreme feelings to general life issues – temper tantrums, rages, suicide attempts, social isolation etc.
- Child develops STD's (sexually transmitted diseases).
- Child has repeated urino-genital infections after all medical factors ruled out.
- Child's toilet training habits regress & all medical factors have been ruled out.

LONG TERM EFFECTS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE (AND OTHER TRAUMAS):

Children never forget any trauma they experience. This refers not only to trauma of sexual abuse, but other traumas such as physical abuse, parental divorce, death of a loved one, living in alcoholic homes, armed robberies etc. Each trauma brings with it a range of subconscious emotional/psychological coping mechanisms (defence mechanisms) and strategies for survival. Equally, each trauma will allow the child an opportunity to grow and consciously learn new skills if appropriate help has been obtained. For children who receive no help, the survival strategies developed may prevent them from long-term psychological growth.

Often it's only when the child reaches adulthood that the ineffectiveness of their "survival skills" becomes evident. It must be remembered that survival is the key – we all may do very strange things in order to survive (beg, borrow, steal, starve, drink, prostitute ourselves etc.) and at the time of the crisis this behaviour may seem appropriate. However, eventually the crisis is over and we need to re-look our survival strategies and perhaps modify them.

Research shows that when children **are** psychologically ready to face the trauma, it will start resurfacing in their lives. Sometimes it resurfaces while they' are children, other times the trauma takes years to resurface, complicating their adult lives.

Long term effects of UNRESOLVED sexual abuse trauma could be any

number of the following (**please note that people experiencing these reactions might not have been abused, but suffered some other form of trauma.** That's why it's important to consult a professional to help assess the underlying cause):

- Depression
- Feelings of worthlessness and self-doubt
- Dysthaemia (bipolar mood disorders)
- Eating disorders (anorexia, obesity)
- Inability to sustain relationships, frequent marriages/divorces
- Inability to be part of a sexual relationship (impotence/frigidity) or an obsessive sexual need/promiscuity
- Phobias, unexplained fears and anxieties
- Substance abuse (alcohol, drugs)
- Engaging in physical and or sexual abuse of others or allowing others to be sexually or physically abusive towards oneself
- Self-mutilating behaviour (cutting various body parts, burning with hot objects)
- Mental health problems/mental illness
- Obsessive/compulsive behaviour
- Anti-social behaviour/delinquency

CYCLE OF LOSS:

This cycle is a very important process that all humans go through whenever they experience a psychological loss. When a child is sexually abused they experience a traumatic loss of self, loss of innocence, loss of childhood. Quite often sexual abuse involves a great deal of physical pain and injury, bringing other loss into the experience. Family members may share these feelings of loss when they hear that their child has been sexually abused. It is useful for the adults involved in helping the child heal to allow the child (as well as to allow themselves) the opportunity to experience all the feelings of the loss cycle – to talk about them. These feelings are NORMAL and must not be blocked off. They include the following feelings:

Shame; Anger (towards God, self, family, school, friends, etc); **Guilt** (what did I do, I should have..); **Blame** (if only my mother..., if only I..., if only God..; **Denial** (if we don't talk about it, it will be ok; it wasn't that bad; I'll be ok etc); **Depression** or sadness or mourning; **Bargaining** (I promise I'll never..; I'll pray every day if only..); **Acceptance** – when the experience can be spoken about in a way that is integrated and emotionally healthy.

We can't force anyone to go through this cycle quickly. We all go through it in our own way, in our own time. Some of us might need to go through the cycle many times before we heal. Others might get stuck (and live being angry or denying reality etc). If we get stuck, get HELP! If parents recognise their children working through this cycle, spend time with them and get to understand what the loss is they are dealing with. Loss is a part of all of our lives and is not always connected to abuse or trauma, but to growth and development.

STEPS TO FOLLOW IF YOU THINK YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED: (If you're a child this has happened to, discuss it with a suitable adult).

Take your child to a respected medical doctor for an examination ASAP. Remain with the child in the room AT ALL TIMES because the child will be scared and the examination will be traumatic in itself. If necessary, request that the doctor take photographs of the injuries (for later evidence in court). If the doctor refers you to a District Surgeon, make sure you're comfortable with the person chosen.

Regardless of the medical findings, if you suspect your child has been sexually abused or your child is telling you this, **take your child for therapy.** It is important that you use a therapist that is registered with a professional body (e.g. SA Health Professional Council, SA Council for Social Work, SE Medical and Dental Council). There are many "counsellors" who are NOT trained to work with sexual abuse. Ask the person you are referred to what experience they have and what their professional registration and qualification is. The professionals that tend to deal with sexual abuse are Social Workers and Clinical Psychologists. Very young children will go through a process of play therapy. older children will go through a

process of more traditional talk therapy. The therapist will also advise the family about taking other actions, eg contacting the Police, the Child Protection Unit etc.

Seek professional help for the rest of the family. Sexual abuse of any family member usually results in trauma for the rest of the family. If the abuser is a family member, the trauma is even greater.

For further information or help contact the following in the Joburg area:

Child Welfare CATTs Unit (prev. Liberty Life Sexual Abuse Unit):011-331-0171
RAU Trauma Unit: 011-830-0137;

TMI Children's Hospital Child Abuse Unit: 011-481-5165

Social Workers in Private Practice (for referral to appropriate therapist in area or for statutory/forensic intervention) – 011-887-1968

Bryanwood Therapy and Assessment Centre – 706-2269

For other towns/centres contact your local Child Welfare or Childline office.

Q & A: QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY PANEL MEMBERS

Questions are submitted on the understanding that all advice given is given in good faith and the advisors/panel members take no responsibility for any consequent actions arising therefrom.

1. Q: My 16yr old daughter's friends all drink heavily at parties & clubs. I've tried hard to instil values from young, but now she also returns drunk. We then have angry confrontations. How do we handle this widespread issue?

A: LIZ NORMAN: This question raises two different issues - dealing with one's own child, and dealing with widespread adolescent drinking. Let's start with one's individual child. One very quick (not necessarily easy) solution is to stop her going to parties and clubs. It is not a popular solution and will result in another angry confrontation, but the reality is that going to parties and clubs is not a "right". It is a privilege young people earn as they mature and grow responsibly.

If your daughter is not behaving responsibly, she needs to feel the consequences of that behaviour. Explain to her that she will need to earn this privilege once more by proving to you she understands your concerns and can control her own behaviour. She may well tantrum some more, but at the end of the day you need to stand up and be the parent. If her drinking is just part of adolescent experimentation, chat to her about this as well. She may need to learn to say "no" to peer pressure.

Spend time with her finding out why she is ignoring the values you have taught her and if there are things you, as her parent, could do to help. I have learnt over the years that the children who can say no to all sorts of things, are often the ones who can comfortably point to their parents and just say "My mum/dad said NO and I must respect that". It might be easier for her to "blame" you, than to look uncool and have to say no herself. Whatever her thought processes behind this, use this as a time to talk and grow together. A word of caution - do NOT try and have these discussions 5 minutes after she has returned home inebriated! Wait for a more appropriate occasion where both of you are in a calm, cool frame of mind.

The second issue is much harder to deal with. You mention your daughter is 16. In terms of the law, clubs should not be serving alcohol to her at all (nor should people in private families). The reality is though that many clubs are turning a blind eye to this and teenage drinking is escalating. One option is to contact the other parents of your daughters' friends and all make an agreement to not allow them to go to clubs at all. Not a popular decision, but when the clubs start to realise that parents are actually taking a stand and they lose business, they will start enforcing the law.

Many parents have just handed over the social lives of their adolescents to the business sector, allowing these children to be at the mercy of a company trying to make a buck. The club operators truly do not care whether their patrons are 16 or 60! It is up to the PARENTS to act here. As a parent you are also entitled to know what sort of parties your child is going to, who else will be there and whether

alcohol will be served. I am aware of many teenagers who do NOT want to drink and want to host a party, but are then told by friends that no-one will attend their parties unless alcohol is served. These teenagers need parents to help support their decisions and help come up with alternatives. Being blackmailed into having alcohol at parties does not say much about the calibre of friends, but does say quite a lot about the role alcohol has come to play in the lives of adolescents. The adult world has to take a harsh look at itself and take responsibility for creating an "aura" of social coolness and sophistication connected to alcohol.

Finally, it needs to be kept in mind that adolescents across time have experimented with all sorts of things, including alcohol. Most adolescents survive and grow into fairly responsible young adults. Chat to your child about this, about experimenting in ways that will still allow the child to be reasonably safe. And spend sometime looking in the mirror and remember YOUR adolescence.

2. Q: My 15 year old is becoming very cheeky, selfish & rebellious. It's like there's a monster in the house. What's the most effective approach to use?

A: TOM BURKHALTER: Firstly, there is a danger of generalising, and that is what I am doing. There are dynamics particular to your family that are contributing to your child's behaviour, and you may want to consult someone to explore this if it will help. But aside from that, there are things at play here that are normal to adolescence. Adolescence is a period of defining identity, a struggle between dependency needs and autonomous independence strivings. It is a time of change, a time of insecurity, but also of possibility, of facing the prospect of adulthood and letting childhood go – all this full of uncertainty and doubt.

It is a time of physical, hormonal changes that can be very unsettling. Adolescents are trying to adjust to internal changes and the newly emerging demands of their desires and the expectations of the world – Who am I? Where do I fit in? Negotiating this is normal, and essential if your child is to develop into an autonomous, independent thinking adult who can feel secure in relationships. For some children more than others, this requires that they kick out against something (usually their parents), in order to establish the limits of their boundaries and thus define themselves.

Your child knows how she (or he) is like you, now she needs to explore how she is unlike you. You need to think of this as a phase that she needs to go through, and she needs you to love her and support her, not reject her or become too overwhelmed by her. In saying this I am not suggesting that you shouldn't set limits and consequences. It is important to be firm and consistent with her regarding respect for the family rules and culture, but to do so respecting her developmental strivings and understanding that she is not going to necessarily take the easiest or most comfortable route to her destination.

In adolescence, the idea that one has to sometimes attack and undermine something in order to find its value, is applicable. But if in your family, cheeky is unacceptable, then that needs to be firmly communicated, and your authority upheld. With regards her selfishness, choose your battles, and think about it from her point of view too. A certain degree of rebellion is, as stated earlier, a good thing. So stay open and engaged, remain firm and not too punitive, be available if she needs you, but don't be intrusive. Allow her to find her way through, but don't abandon her.

3. Q: Most of the boys in my son's Gr11 class smoke dagga regularly. I asked him not to mix with such boys, but he says he'll have no friends. What do I do? Report them to the headmaster? Change school?

MARGARET LOGAN: I have mixed feelings about reporting your son's classmates to the headmaster – is he the type of person who will handle this information maturely? Will he keep your son's name confidential? You would not want to jeopardize your son's last 2 yrs at school. I understand that at some level you would like to tell the other parents, so that they can deal with the problem and that perhaps you are feeling some anger towards the headmaster for not dealing or even seeing the problem. Changing schools will not really help – drug taking is

everywhere, and perhaps you can be glad that it's 'just' dagga! At the end of the road, however, your son's well-being is your most important responsibility.

It would be wonderful if your son has adopted for himself, those values that you have taught him and that he can be with his friends and not partake. However, when it comes to drugs, it is really advisable to deal in facts not emotions. You do need to find out for yourself whether he is smoking too. Only a urine or blood test will prove this. Your son will probably moan and groan and say you don't trust him, etc, but it's better to be safe not sorry. You can always tell him that it's so that YOU can sleep at night! One often has to be very clear and firm at this stage because he will probably try to refuse. You need to be ready with a consequence – like, no test, no going out.

It's vital to do supervised urine tests – if you do it at home (kits are available at any pharmacy) or at the doctors. This means that somebody male needs to go into the bathroom with him to check that he doesn't try to sabotage the test in any way, i.e. substitute someone else's urine, dilute the urine with water, put in soap, bath gel, etc. If the test proves negative, you need to tell your son how proud you are of him, but that you want to reserve the right to do the test again at some stage. Dagga will show up on a test up to 14 days after smoking it. If it proves positive, my suggestion is always an out-patient rehab centre for some counseling. Good luck!

A: LIZ NORMAN: This question makes such a sad statement about the realities many of our adolescents face. They would rather (have sex/drink/take drugs/do dagga/steal a car) than have no friends! What a choice - engage in actions that are morally or ethically and/or legally wrong or be isolated socially! Being alone is viewed as the worst possible thing that could happen to a human being (in the minds of adolescents and many adults too.) Mankind is by nature a social being. I work with young people every day who "have no friends" and it is, indeed, a social hell. These children often are very lonely and alone - of that there is no doubt.

However, what the children who are in this "social hell" are saying, is that they value themselves MORE than they value the opinions and acceptance of their friends. They value their own beliefs, their own moral compass MORE than they value those of their peers. This says a great deal about the strength of these isolated children and their tremendous capacity to believe in themselves - perhaps life's most valuable lesson. This says a lot about courage. Ask your son how he wants the world to view HIM?

If he is a young man who, despite all his friends smoking dagga, is still able to say NO to this, to stick to his own values and beliefs, then all credit to him! If he believes their actions will not pressurise him into joining them, congratulate him on his self-control. Being friends with someone who smokes daggs does not mean HE is smoking dagga. However, he will need to be very aware of his own inner values and inner strengths. If he is only with these friends because he fears being alone, chat to him about that too. What scares him about being alone? Does he see other lonely children and fear becoming one of them? Help him see his own innate strengths that do NOT depend on being with other people.

With regards to telling the headmaster? Chances are he already knows, but it may be worth adding your voice of concern. With regards to moving schools - chat to your son. Changing schools does not mean he will avoid this reality. Drugs are everywhere. If the school he is at is generally a good place to be, leave him where he is. It is more important to be able to chat to your son about his fears, concerns, hopes and dreams. If he wishes to change schools because he might be able to make a new group of friends, remind him of the reality of his grade. It can be incredibly hard making new friends towards the end of one's school career. Rather maybe spend time getting to know him and help him work out what sort of friends he wants when he leaves school after matric.

4. Q: My 13 year old went to a sleepover at a friend's and the parents served alcohol to all 6 children. How do I handle it and what do I do?

A: LIZ NORMAN: There are two angles to dealing with this issue and both will need to be addressed. The first thing you need to do is sit down with your child

and explain that the serving of alcohol was a decision you did not agree with. Spend time clarifying to your child what your views are about teenage drinking, what the law says etc. Use this as an opportunity to inform and educate your child.

If you need extra information to help you here, contact SANCA National office and ask their librarian to send you some information. It is of great importance that your child does not end up feeling guilty and responsible for a decision other ADULTS chose to make. However, it is also important that your child learns he/she has the power to say "NO" to an adult!

13 year olds are definitely able to understand parental views and choices and need to be empowered to be able to stick to those decisions even if their parents are not around. It may be very hard to say no when everyone else is saying YES to something, but once again it is important to discuss this as a hypothetical scenario. What would your child have done if these parents offered everyone a puff of dagga? Or allowed them to stay up all night to watch an adult movie?

Brainstorm possible issues that may surface and help your child come with up options for coping. Some ideas might be: to ask **prior** to going to someone's house what the plans for the day/evening would be? Would alcohol be served? Would all night partying be allowed? Would adult supervision be available at all times etc. Some children need to know that if the situation at another child's house becomes difficult, they can call home and be collected early. Always encourage your child to see what solutions there are and discuss ways of making sure these might be possible. It's no good calling a parent if they happen to be 5 hours away or sitting in a movie house with their phones off! Then you need to have another more suitable option.

The second angle for dealing with this is to discuss this issue with the other family. I would highly recommend you do this and inform your child about this as well. Sometimes the children are more anxious that they may be ostracised "for telling" - discuss this at length with your child. Keeping things like this private, just allows this sort of behaviour to continue to happen. If the other family are good friends, express your concern for what they have condoned and encouraged.

Explain your personal beliefs and views. If they don't understand/ accept your views, it might be worth reconsidering the friendship. If the family is one you really don't know, you need to chat to them anyway. Parents need to be able to **trust** the other adults who have responsibility for their children and in order to do so, you need to get to know each other. Make your values and beliefs very clear. You don't need to apologise for holding them. If the other family believe there was nothing wrong in what they did, you may need to explain that this issue is not about being "right or wrong" - it is about being a responsible adult and not over-riding parental responsibilities and choices of children who do not "belong" to them.

It may also be very worthwhile explaining to this family that their actions have left you little choice but to inform the school and other parents too. If a family cannot see the irresponsibilities and dangers in offering 13 year olds alcohol, perhaps they need to be chatted to by the principal as well.

5. Q: How can I minimise the impact of divorce on my child?

A: JENNY SHAIN: The damage done to children is not only a result of the divorce but of everything that has occurred before. Was there ongoing abuse, conflict, violence? Of course the duration & intensity of this is going to affect the child profoundly. Is the parent's current relationship amicable? Ongoing conflict is going to cause continued stress & trauma for the children. Are the children being used as pawns in the parent's relationship? Are they being controlled, manipulated, held onto to get at the other parent? Are parents speaking to each other through their children, because they are not speaking to each other?

All of the above is abusive & damaging to the children. Their feelings, rights & needs are undermined & perverted. The message to these children is "I don't really love or care about you, your needs & feelings are not important, I care about myself". These messages are internalised by children & this becomes how they see themselves. Parents should be careful not to bring the other parent down in front of children. Even if they are talking to someone else, this should be out of

earshot. This may be difficult to do if the parent is going through a very hard time, but ultimately that parent's relationship with their child may be damaged.

The child will feel torn between his parents & unable to love them both. If he does show love or attachment to the 'bad' parent he will feel that he is being disloyal or betraying the 'good' parent. The child/teenager needs to feel that he/she is fully entitled to love both parents. The level of parents' functionality on their own, will impact on their children. A parent who is highly stressed, anxious, angry or depressed, will obviously impact hugely on the children. This may be easier said than done as parents are trying to adjust to their new status, but whatever they can do to alleviate their own stress, will benefit their children.

Financial difficulties after divorce, often experienced by the mother, are an enormous source of stress. The father may be withholding money to punish the mother, but the children are the ones who suffer, an altogether too common occurrence. A parent (father or mother) may withdraw from the children after the divorce, another common scenario. Children will react by feeling betrayed, abandoned, unworthy, enraged & unlovable. This impact will be continually felt throughout the child's life.

Other support systems, both to the child & the parent, can be very helpful, such as extended family members, friends, a church or other religious/communal organization. Ongoing battles over custody, maintenance & other parenting issues, will continue to harm children, the best they can do in their children's interests is to let go & move on.

6. Q: As a recently divorced parent, when could I start dating again and how do I reduce the trauma of introducing new partners?

A: JENNY SHAIN: Ideally, custody, maintenance & access issues should be sorted out before new relationships are started. The divorced parent needs to give him/herself time to work through the experience of the marriage. What went wrong? How did each partner contribute to the problem/s? Are there losses, failures that need to be mourned? Was there an abusive situation, which requires time to heal from, emotionally and/or physically? The time needed to recover will certainly be very individual, and counselling is an ideal opportunity to assess this.

Some people may need longer than others. In general, rushing into a new situation could indicate the hope that the external, new situation/person is going to solve the problem. It is preferable to do the necessary inner work, to avoid falling into similar traps & problems of the former situation. Be aware of your motives, are you really wanting a new relationship, or are you getting back at your ex?

Introducing new partners is such a delicate issue. The new couple needs to develop their relationship before meeting respective children. The parent needs to spend some time preparing their child for meeting new partners. Be as real & honest as possible, eg explain how serious the relationship is, if you're not sure, say so. Of course you need to anticipate very strong reactions from your child/ren: shock, rage, withdrawal, manipulation, a sense of total rejection & betrayal & possibly also denial, the child may appear to be accepting of the situation, but may be too hurt or angry with you to admit this, the behaviour may follow later.

If the new partner has been introduced in the appropriate time & manner, children may genuinely feel positive about the new situation. There may be more financial security, less worry about the parent who is no longer alone, a genuinely good connection to the new person. The parent must make sure to spend time with his/her children, to maintain their unique relationship. Don't expect too much too quickly in terms of your children getting on with the new partner. Understand how difficult this is for them & don't punish them for their negative feelings.

Parents have the difficult task of setting boundaries, even though their children may be in pain. Children will try to manipulate parents especially when they sense their parents' guilt. Parents may be tempted to give in to their children's demands to assuage guilt & for the sake of peace. This peace will be short lived & in the end will backfire as children become more & more demanding. The ongoing tasks of parenting of course, continue, with or without a new partner, and the parent will need to work hard at balancing everyone's needs, INCLUDING HIS/HER OWN.

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PANEL MEMBERS

Our panel of contributors includes:

Thomas Burkhalter. A leading psychologist, Thomas has two practices, focuses on: children, adolescents, parents, adult psychotherapy and couples therapy, and is case conference consultant at the Parent And Child Counselling Centre(NGO).

Liz Norman. Clinical social worker with 22 years experience in the field of child and family welfare, specialising in group dynamics and adolescent mental health.

Izabella Little (Gates). Author of *Life Talk for a Daughter* and *Life Talk for a Son* (with P. Wilson) and the translated *Lewenspraatjies met 'n Dogter*. Each book covers 60 topics and is a tool-kit of tips, guidelines and values for teenagers and young adults. She runs the Forum, gives talks and continues to write.

Jenny Shain. Social worker and Deputy Director of JPCCC (Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre, 011-484-1734/5/6)

Liz Dooley. Director and Counsellor at FAMSA (Family Life Centre) - 28 years experience as a social worker/counsellor specializing in family and marital relationships and parenting skills, youth and individual counselling.

Prof Zak Nel. Registered counselling psychologist, he does skills/aptitude profiling, subject choices (Gr 10-12), and university course selection.

Margaret Logan. Many years of running a remedial school, her expertise includes: emotional & learning problems, addictions, and various disorders.

Sally Thorp. Works with parents and children in the area of building healthy self-esteem and equipping them with tools to face life with optimism & self-reliance.

Melinda Ferguson. Author of *Smacked - a harrowing story of addiction and survival*. From her own traumatic experience she offers insight & advice on drugs.

Esha Brijmohan. Former university student and currently a journalist, Esha raises awareness among her readers regarding important parenting/teen issues.

Phillip Lowe. Business consultant and father of teenagers, coordinates involvement from schools, interested organisations & media, as well as Life Talk parent & teen workshops/talks.

To utilise any of the panel member's services, email izabella@lifetalk.co.za

PLEASE FORWARD TO ANYONE WHO MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN THIS NEWSLETTER

The FORUM email address is: forum@lifetalk.co.za

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- UK launch of *Life Talk for a Daughter* May 2007 -

Life Talk for a Daughter, Life Talk for a Son & Lewenspraatjies met 'n Dogter are a tool-kit of life's tips and guidelines for teenagers. They're a great gift and are available at leading bookstores. * * Proceeds fund the Forum. * *