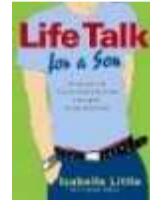


# Life Talk™ Forum Parents' News7



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\* \* \* \*

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## 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.

## ISSUES RAISED:

Newsletters 1 – 6 covered: clubs; drugs; cell phones; teenage drinking; pocket money; communication; discipline & boundaries; depression; Grade 8 hiccups; sexual activity; self-mutilation; eating disorders; self-esteem; bullying; sexual abuse; ADHD; subject choices; teen values; MXit; divorce; and helpful reading. (If you didn't get the newsletter/s, [email us](#) for a copy.)

In this issue we cover topics that have been generating interest or debate in recent weeks.

## NEW BOOK FOR PARENTS: OCTOBER 2008

Izabella has been working around the clock to complete her next book *Life Talk for Parents – feedback on 50 issues faced by teens and their parents* (hence the delay in producing News 7). The good news is that the manuscript is now complete and the books will be launched in October – in English and Afrikaans.

Following on the many enthusiastic requests from parents and schools, the book will provide insight and advice on a number of the key challenges being experienced. It is co-authored with psychologist and Forum panel member Thomas Burkhalter, and contains input from a number of other experts.

## FACEBOOK: FUN OR PROBLEM?

The Forum has recently received plenty of emails expressing concern about social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Interestingly it's not just teens who are avid users, and businesses are increasingly expressing concerns.

Much as these virtual "social environments" provide a wonderful platform for communicating and exchanging up-to-date information, they are introducing previously un-encountered concerns and challenges. In many instances they are becoming all-consuming for an increasing number of users.

Parents report that children come home from school and immediately (before eating or doing homework) access Facebook or MySpace, and many continue to do so late into the night. Counsellors are calling it an "obsession" or "addiction" and many caution parents to introduce strict rules around access and use.

For the uninitiated, users establish an online profile and enter information such as: name, education, marital status, friends, work history, interests, photos and other details. Networks of friends are then established and information is shared and updated, sometimes on an hourly basis.

Some teens (and adults) admit to spending 4 – 6 hours a day on weekdays (and up to 10 hours on weekends) on these sites and they describe "withdrawal symptoms" if unable to access their site whenever so inclined.

Parents' and counsellors' concerns include:

- **The time wasted.** In a world which is already full of distractions for our children and adolescents (eg TV, computer games, Internet, cell phones and MXit), the hours on Facebook result in further reducing time for: physical activity and sport, meals, homework, and interaction with family members.
- **Dangers of placing too much personal data** for access by unknown persons. (Covered in “**Online Dangers**” below.)
- **Reduced concentration.** In addition to the concerns highlighted in previous newsletters (about the effect of cell phones and the distraction caused by constant sms'ing and waiting for responses), Facebook and other such sites create yet another factor that affects concentration. And some parents of children with ADD (attention deficit disorder) are worried that Facebook will further exacerbate some of the related difficulties.
- **Bullying.** Increasingly, incidents of “cyber bullying” are being reported – and these include the posting of malicious comments or compromising photos.
- **Implications for communication ability.** Many people are expressing concerns about the possible impact of a shift away from face-to-face/verbal communication. Hard to measure, this is an area that requires some considerable research and study.
- **Erosion of values.** Much of the teen content extols the “benefits” of heavy partying, drinking, drugging or widespread sexual activity. In addition to the existing exposure via media and peer behaviour, Facebook provides yet another dimension that promotes some questionable or risky behaviour.

This is a topic that will no doubt be debated for some time to come. Facebook and similar sites (much as some parents might wish otherwise) are here to stay – and their popularity continues to grow. Some rules around use (especially for younger children) certainly appear to be necessary, as do ongoing discussions about values and the consequences of certain types of behaviour. And to avoid future blow-ups and heated arguments, parents whose children haven't yet joined the Facebook fraternity should probably define some guidelines/rules ahead of time.

## ONLINE DANGERS

The dangers linked to children's/adolescents' use of the Internet are increasingly being highlighted. Interacting with unknown people who are “met” on the Internet poses risks, as does placing too much personal information for others to access.

A recently launched British site [www.thinkuknow.co.uk/cybercafe](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/cybercafe) has some excellent tips for youngsters on aspects such as:

1. Chatrooms
2. IM (instant messaging)
3. Cell phone use
4. Downloading music (file sharing)
5. Gaming sites (online games)
6. Cyber bullying

The site is well worth looking at, by both parents and teens.

In addition to the “stranger danger” risks of downloading personal information onto the social networking sites (eg Facebook), there's also the aspect of future side-effects of information describing reckless or compromising behaviour. What might seem like “innocent bragging” about wild partying, drug experimentation or sexual exploits, might one day backfire on the individual concerned.

Would-be employers are increasingly trawling the social networking sites for information about candidates, and descriptions of debauched goings-on, or compromising photos of questionable behaviour can all serve to jeopardize potential job opportunities. And teen (and adult) relationships are also reported to be affected by impulsively posted information or photos.

Counsellors suggest: drawing adolescents' attention to the potential pitfalls; locating the PC in a busy part of the house; and parents implementing a policy of checking the computer's contents on a regular basis.

## **RAMPANT DRUG USE**

Following on an article that appeared in The Star (4 Feb 2008), a number of parents have expressed disbelief at some of the contents, and some feel that the drug problem is exaggerated by school counsellors. Based on the feedback that comes into the Life Talk Forum, these reports are unfortunately **not** exaggerated – and the situation is extremely worrying. An excerpt from the article is:

“Six years ago, the average age of a first-time drug user was 19. Today it’s 10. It has become so bad that experts say every school in the country now has a drug problem and that it’s out of control. A member of the drug training and awareness centre at SA Police Service’s Organised Crime Unit, Jan Combrink, who visits schools to teach children about the dangers of drug abuse, has found children as young as 4 using drugs.”

Much as many of us would like to believe that the school our own children attend does not have a drug problem, reality is proving otherwise. The facts are there, the threats are very real, and as counsellors say: “no teen can ever be considered to be 100% immune to the danger of drugs”. This means that as parents, remaining informed, vigilant and involved is an ongoing priority.

## **HUBBLY BUBBLY – A NEW FAD?**

There’s a new “pastime” gaining popularity at parties and teen get-togethers. It’s the smoking of the hubbly-bubbly pipe or “hookah”. Emails from concerned parents describe requests to buy hubbly-bubbles and the necessary tobacco and other ingredients, and the smoking of such pipes is increasingly being heard about.

Many parents haven’t yet heard of this and many are surprised to find out, after asking their teens, that they’ve either been to homes where hubbly pipes are being smoked, or that their teens have also smoked them. And quite a few parents are buying them without being aware of the related concerns.

Some useful information can be found on Google, and many experts express caution about the risks involved. Some of these risks include:

- Smoking hubbly is still “smoking”, contrary to many teens’ perception that it somehow isn’t related to smoking.
- There are no filters present so health risks can be as great as, or greater than those linked to cigarettes.
- It can be addictive.
- It is very easy to lace the tobacco with other ingredients, ie drugs. Much of the “fun” of smoking hubbly involves the different flavours that are added in the form of fruit chips and other ingredients. And given the circumstances under which hubbly pipes are smoked (at parties and often raucous gatherings), it is almost impossible to monitor the addition of unwanted substances. Dagga is often added, and surprisingly the reaction of some otherwise well-informed and seemingly “sensible” teens who were questioned is that “everyone does it, it’s fun and doesn’t harm anyone, and dagga isn’t really a drug”.

## **EMO AND OTHER SUB-CULTURES**

We’ve recently had a number of enquiries about EMO and the growing number of teens who classify themselves accordingly. According to one definition “EMO is one of countless subcultures for teens on a quest for identity. It is a wide-ranging term for a histrionic, emotional punk-type of music style, a style of fashion and a personality type (generally introspective, lonely, misunderstood or depressed).”

Sometimes aligned to Punk or Goth, it often involves wearing tight black jerseys, jeans and scarves. According to some of the teens questioned, it differs to Goth in that make-up doesn’t have to be very pale with black, and personality “issues” differ.

A great deal of the music enjoyed by teens falls into the EMO category and the expressed sentiments tend to be more emotional than those of some of the other genres.

Many parents are alarmed by the various subcultures, but counsellors reassure us that these are often a “normal” part of the adolescence process. It’s

when potentially negative or destructive behaviour, depression or other symptoms become apparent that a cause for concern arises.

The teens questioned about EMO say that there are various “degrees” of EMO and that some teens only listen to EMO music, whilst others align themselves more strongly with all aspects of the subculture. Some of those who identify strongly with it say they sometimes feel misunderstood, melancholy and (some) possibly depressed, and they enjoy the company of other like-minded individuals.

Counsellors stress that should negative symptoms or depression become apparent then professional help ought to be obtained.

## **DRINK SPIKING**

Reports of drink spiking continue to come in and it's important that all parents continue to reinforce messages about ongoing vigilance when teens attend parties or clubs. **Drinks should NEVER be left unattended**, and if ordering drinks at a bar, cans are better. If drinks have to be poured then it's essential to watch them being poured, but even in spite of this spiking has been reported and must have occurred prior to the bottle being newly “opened”.

## **TEEN STRESS LEVELS: AVOIDABLE OR NOT?**

Counsellors are increasingly reporting high stress levels and cases of post traumatic stress disorder among children and adolescents. Unfortunately, due to all the negative events of recent times, stress and worry are an ever-present companion for many parents and this rubs off on children. In addition, the very real risks, dangers and crime levels necessitate raising our children's awareness and vigilance.

Many counsellors do, however, suggest trying to keep unnecessary stress away from children and adolescents. Much as parents may be stressed by load shedding, traffic congestion, crime, inefficient service providers, uncertain politics and escalating cost of living, by constantly voicing our concerns and stress we might be over-burdening (and unnecessarily stressing) our impressionable children.

Other than in necessary areas (ones that affect our children's safety, health or general well-being), suggestions involve trying to shield our children from stress related to aspects they can do nothing about. During debates about this aspect many parents describe the often-dominating negatives that fill many family discussions nowadays – and some highlight the benefits of actively seeking out positive events, news items and discussion topics.

Most of us could probably do with a dose of uplifting and spirit-lightening activities or discussions – so all suggestions will be greatly welcomed and will be published in our next newsletter!

## **GONZO PORN – AND OTHER CONCERNS**

We've recently had emails from concerned parents who say that their teens are increasingly accessing hard-core pornography, and that they are talking about “Gonzo porn”. They've asked us for a definition and some information about what's out there. We've been liaising with Iyavar Chetty, Senior Executive Officer (Legal Services) for the Film and Publication Board (often quoted as South Africa's foremost expert on child pornography issues) and quote from an article by him:

“South Africa, it would appear, suffers from the reputation of being ‘the dumping ground for the worst kinds of pornography’. I am informed, for instance, that there are two versions of the pornographic magazine, the *Hustler*, produced each month – a ‘soft-core’ version for markets overseas and a ‘hard-core’ *Gold* version for distribution in South Africa.”

“Pornography that is beyond the generally-accepted community level of tolerance in other countries is promptly shipped off to SA. Since June 1998, the Film and Publication Board has approved for distribution in SA in excess of 30,000 ‘hard-core’ pornographic DVDs and video cassettes including a genre of

pornography referred to as Gonzo.”

“Robert Jensen, Professor of Journalism, University of Texas, in a speech to the Second Annual Conference on the College Male, Saint John’s University, said: ‘Gonzo movies have no pretensions to the conventions of a Hollywood film. They are simply a filmed series of ‘sex’ acts, including oral, vaginal and anal penetration, often performed while the men call the women ‘bitch’, c..t’, ‘whore’ and other similar demeaning and degrading names, all the while expecting the women to say how much they like what is being done to them.’

“This genre of pornography has become increasingly normalized, mainstream pornography and constitutes the bigger percentage of the market in SA. And pornographers are pushing the limits of what is acceptable and have turned to using younger and younger ‘porn stars’, blurring the boundaries between a woman who is actually over the age of 18 years but pretending to be younger, and a woman who is actually under 18 and pretending to be an adult. The most popular types of ‘sex’ in Gonzo movies are so demeaning and degrading that it is difficult to describe them without offending a great many people...”

Iyavar Chetty goes on to express concern about “the potential for changes in attitudes, especially in men as the main consumers of pornography, towards women and children, that such demeaning, degrading, and often verbally and physically abusive depictions of younger-looking women encourages.”

“Establishing a ‘cause-and-effect’ connection between pornography and changes in attitudinal behaviour is controversial and any study contemplated will raise serious ethical questions. But that is no reason to ignore the evidence of what is being reported in the daily papers. The Mail & Guardian of April 13-19 2007 reported that an estimated 150 children are raped every day in SA. And that, according to a senior police officer in Cape Town, we are seeing a ‘level of brutality and violence over the past year or two that I don’t understand. The levels of violence men use against small children – and women – are disproportionate. We see sadistic undertones in a lot of these cases...’

“Is it too far-fetched to conclude that sexual liberalism in SA and the easy access to ‘hard-core’ pornography even on the streets of major cities, as well as on the Internet and, now increasingly on mobile cellular phones, is a contributory factor to the almost-visible increase in the sexual abuse of women and children?” asks Iyavar.

## **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: What are the drugs that teens are using nowadays?**

**A: ADRIE VERMEULEN, director of SANCA (Johannesburg):** The SA drug culture is an ever changing market and with the increase of technology and science, new chemical substances are created on a monthly basis. SA is considered to be a transit country for the drug trade in the world. This means that we have all the drugs that are available in every other country due to some of the stock being “left” behind.

The designer drugs are on the increase and new recipes are created for different effects on the body. The most commonly used substances are still tobacco and alcohol. Both these legal drugs have age restrictions and still it doesn’t stop people from using them. This is more socially acceptable by our society and the focus is rather on the illegal drugs for most people.

The illegal drugs used by adolescents are dagga, mandrax, ecstasy, LSD, cat, cocaine, heroin, crack, liquid ecstasy, poppers, magic mushrooms, malpitte, etc.

- **Psychedelics** create an altered state of reality for the adolescent to escape from and cope with life’s difficulties. The drugs found in this category include: LSD, Magic Mushrooms, dagga, inhalants, etc.
- **Stimulants** boost poor self esteem and include: crack/cocaine. cat. diet

tablets and mixtures, nicotine, speed, ecstasy.

- **Depressants** help teens to cope with stress and pressure, and they create a feeling of “what ever”. The drugs that fall into this category are heroin, dagga, Mandrax, tranquillisers, pain killers, sleeping tablets, inhalants, and others.

## 2. Q: Where do teens get hold of drugs?

**A: ADRIE VERMEULEN:** Most parents assume that children are commonly offered these drugs by a stranger who first supplies them for free and lets them get hooked. The truth is that kids sell drugs to kids. It starts with the friendship circle or with an older sibling or friend. It is a case of children not having to ‘look’ for drugs – they are right in front of them. Drugs are available at clubs, bars, garages, pharmacies, in your medicine cupboard, and a host of other places.

Money is also not a problem. Drugs have become cheaper and are more affordable. Children use their monthly allowances and their birthday money, they steal from parents, they sell their own things, and some start becoming involved in criminal activities. It depends on what stage of the dependency process they’re at.

## 3. Q: What easy-to-remember tips re parenting do you have?

**A: SALLY THORP:** Here’s a mnemonic for P A R E N T I N G:

**P** Practice active listening

**A** Accept your children’s weaknesses

**R** Respect your children’s thoughts and feelings

**E** Empower your children by encouraging them to think and problem-solve for themselves

**N** Nurture and love your children unconditionally

**T** Train your children to live effectively in the world by providing them with boundaries and fair, consistent discipline

**I** Instil feelings of self-worth and self-respect in your children

**N** Negotiate and discuss family rules

**G** Grow together

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## PANEL MEMBERS & CONTRIBUTORS

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).** International author of *Life Talk for a Daughter* and *Life Talk for a Son* (with P. Wilson) and the translated *Lewenspraatjies met ‘n Dogter* and *Lewenspraatjies met ‘n Seun*. 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.

**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.** A journalist, Esha raises awareness among her readers and community 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 [forum@lifetalk.co.za](mailto:forum@lifetalk.co.za)*

**PLEASE FORWARD TO ANYONE WHO MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN THIS NEWSLETTER**

The FORUM email address is: [forum@lifetalk.co.za](mailto:forum@lifetalk.co.za)

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FAMSA, the CIE  
KHULISA (crime prevention initiative)  
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***Life Talk for a Daughter, Life Talk for a Son, Lewenspraatjies met 'n Dogter and Lewenspraatjies met 'n Seun* are a tool-kit of life's tips and guidelines for teens**

**They're a great gift and are available at leading bookstores and on [www.kalahari.net](http://www.kalahari.net)**

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**\* \* Proceeds fund the Forum. \* \***

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