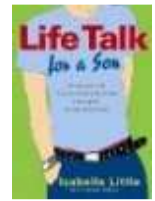


Life Talk Forum

Parents' News 1



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This issue is long, due to the amount of information requested, so skip to articles of interest to you, or print out for a complete record.

WHAT'S THE FORUM ABOUT?

The Parents' Forum is a free, confidential platform established in response to requests from parents and counsellors. The objective is to provide parents of teenagers with information and with the opportunity to discuss issues and challenges that affect teens' lives, as well as providing a mechanism to enhance communication between parents and adolescents.

Author of the *Life Talk* books, Izabella Little, has been asked to co-ordinate the Forum, and the format is primarily by email and an electronic newsletter. Input comes from parents, teenagers, and a network of experts comprising counsellors, psychologists, principals, teachers, career guidance specialists, experts in drugs and alcohol, and any other expertise that may be required. (See panel members below)

ISSUES RAISED BY PARENTS & COUNSELLORS

Many of us parents sometimes feel as if we're in need of a white stick to guide us through the teenage years. We all love our children beyond words, we want to do the best job possible, and yet the combination of different personalities and circumstances can drive us to question our ability and sometimes our sanity.

The world today is indeed a different one to when we grew up. The dangers faced by our youth are far more real, and the influences of the electronic and material age bring dimensions our parents never had to worry about. We're also seeing tremendous positives and a generation growing up with greater confidence and expressiveness, expanded choices, opportunities, and great communication options.

Our parental roller-coaster ride often leads us through times of joy followed by some scary patches. The Forum provides us with the opportunity to share tips and information that could make our ride smoother.

Many of the emails we receive highlight specific areas of concern which worry parents and schools. Here we summarise some of them:

1. TEENAGE DRINKING

The reality is that adolescents' alcohol consumption is increasing alarmingly (particularly among girls). Parties/social events from the age of 13 (and younger) very often include alcohol. It is smuggled in, delivered to the gate, and quite often even supplied by the parents/hosts. At school, kids arrive with alcohol-laced juice bottles.

Parents say that if they try to ban alcohol from a party they're told that "no-one will come", that they're forcing their child to commit "social suicide", and that "everyone drinks wherever we go, it's the norm".

School counsellors report a distressing increase in teen alcohol-related problems including sexual abuse and rape; drug use; sexual experimentation (plus resulting trauma through disease, pregnancy or regret); declining school marks; theft of valuables; and alcoholism. A great number of the problems expressed by teenagers have their roots in alcohol abuse. Heavy drinking by girls is also causing medical concerns about the future impact on health and fertility.

When questioned about why they drink, teens say: “it gives me confidence; lets me fit in; makes me feel grown-up; tastes good; dulls the pain; everyone’s drinking”.

Thomas Burkhalter comments: “This is a very complex topic that involves many aspects: Protecting the child from exposure; education; building self-esteem; acknowledging vulnerabilities etc. I would like to illustrate one point in this regard, and that is parental involvement. Given that it is unavoidable that our children will come into contact with alcohol, and drugs for that matter, it is crucial for us to think about how we can help them negotiate this reality, safely and realistically.

We would hope that our children would abstain until older, but not all children will. You need to be interested and involved in your child’s life. Have a sense of what they are thinking, care about where they are and what they are doing, and open up the issue of drugs and alcohol. In so doing do not make alcohol bad (because you presumably drink, as do their friends), but talk about why we drink, what purpose it serves, what purpose it may serve for them. Talk about the function of drinking in their peer groups and what it means not to drink. These are realities to them that we need to acknowledge and respect. If the adolescent feels that the parent is out of touch with his/her reality, that they don’t understand the pressures on the ground, whatever advice they have to offer will seem irrelevant even if wise. Further, remember that our children watch us and model on us, and our relationship to alcohol will be noted by them.”

Counsellors also ask that parents: enforce “no-booze” at parties; adhere to clubs’ age restrictions; and communicate with other parents to avoid being pressured to give in “because everyone else is allowed”. Requests have also been received for the Forum to be used, once it’s large enough, to address concerns with alcohol distributors, clubs, media and other influential bodies. What are your thoughts?

2. DRUGS

As highlighted in recent media features, drugs are becoming ever-easier to obtain. On school playgrounds, at shopping malls, clubs and parties, most kids know where they’re available. And they’re affordable.

Alcohol and smoking are often the entry points. Whilst tipsy, a teenager is offered a joint and the slide begins. Smoking “green stuff” is seen as cool by many kids and they don’t realise the danger they’re playing with. Nowadays, it’s often laced with stronger drugs, such as heroin, and addiction grips fast.

Discussions with teens can prove quite hair-raising. Many of them don’t classify dagga as a drug and many plan to one day try “weed”. This includes disciplined, informed teenagers, not just rebellious kids with wild backgrounds.

In reality, none of us can ever assume that our kids are totally immune to the danger of drugs – it’s in most of the places they frequent, and it cuts across all income, cultural, religious and schooling spheres. (The Q & A section has additional info.)

3. CLUBS AND CLUBBING

“But Mom, everyone else is going...” These frequently-heard words can create a dilemma for parents. Especially when it comes to clubs and our under-age teenagers.

Clubs serve alcohol. Drugs are available. Drinks get spiked. Schools implore us not to let our children go. And yet so many kids (from 14 and younger) regularly go to clubs. Many clubs don’t enforce the age restriction. Fake IDs are used to get into those that do. Sadly many parents help their children make the fake IDs. And they let their kids stay out till the early hours.

Peer pressure reigns supreme when it comes to clubbing. Pressure on teenagers and on parents. If we say “no”, we’re made to feel as if we’re depriving our child. We struggle between what our consciences and schools advise, and what our teens and other parents pressure us for.

Parental dilemmas and emails include decisions about when it’s time to let go. Do we hold on strictly till school ends, and watch our kids go wild after school? Do we let the rope out slowly from Gr 12, 11 or 10? If our child really is the only one not going, what effects might it have?

Counsellors suggest that if all parents stood together there would be no dilemma. If we jointly encouraged other forms of entertainment supervised activities parties and

excursions – the clubbing pressure would ease. And the drinking would reduce. Is this not something we should all discuss and implement?

4. CELL PHONES

In recent months, cell phones have become a major concern for many parents. Time spent on the phone and potential health hazards aside, kids are increasingly spending time sms'ing, mms'ing and now MXit'ing.

Schools and some surveys are finding that extensive sms'ing reduces concentration ability and even IQ levels by providing a constant distraction. If they're not typing an sms they're waiting for a reply, and there is little time to focus on a task, conversation or lesson.

The introduction of MXit which provides a cheap cellular "chatroom" brings a whole range of concerns. Margaret Logan comments: "It's scary to watch how quickly teens are becoming addicted to Mxit, to the point of not being able to stop."

Liz Norman says: "A valid concern is that both the cell-phone and the internet open a portal to the wider world of advertising/pornography etc. While children are able to communicate with each other in this impersonal way, strangers 'out there' are also able to communicate with them. Many parents have absolutely no idea what sort of faceless (or not so faceless if they use the video-cam) dialogues their children are engaging in and what information is sent to them.

"The camera attachment on these devices has also opened a world our generation never had. Photos are taken and within seconds sent to someone else. No adult is in the 'loop' of processing and developing, so there is no risk of anyone seeing the pictures. The adolescent is by nature rather secretive and withdrawn from parental contact, making it even less likely that he or she will talk about this. Parents who have poor relationships with their children have even less chance of discovering what their child is communicating/learning about.

"One way of dealing with this is for parents to tell their children that while they may have access to cell-phones and the internet, this access is NOT confidential. The younger the child, the less privacy they get. In terms of the law (Child Care Act) until adulthood is attained at 18, the parent is legally responsible to protect the child from all kinds of harm (including lewd photography etc). Parents need to explain all this, including the real risks of adult predators who use these forms of communication as a way of contacting children.

"Parents also need to explain that in 'face-to-face' relationships behaviour and communication is socially modified by the audience and by social norms and values. These boundaries are not present on a cell-phone or the internet, and so responsible parents need to find a new way of putting protective boundaries in place. Children can be taught not to answer their phones unless it has caller ID and they can see who is calling them. They can be taught not to reply to 'Call me' sms's or video clips until a parent has read the message. And parents need to learn how to use cell-phones so that they can understand what it is their children are using them for. Perhaps also sign up for itemised billing so that there is a way of tracking all calls made."

5. POCKET MONEY

A number of queries have been received concerning pocket money. Some parents are uncertain about what amounts are deemed reasonable, whilst some counsellors express concern about the excessive amounts some teenagers get. Some pupils receive hundreds of rand on a Saturday night and others use their parent's credit card to spend thousands in jewellery and other stores. It's a very subjective topic, but excessive amounts are often the cause of long-lasting problems for the recipient, and sometimes for the peers too. What do you think?

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.)

Q1: I found porn on my 14yr old son's PC, sent by his girlfriend. What do I do?

A: THOMAS BURKHALTER: With pornography, the kind of porn is relevant to the issue at hand. 14yr old boys have long entered puberty and are in the depths of the developmental phase we call adolescence. During this period, children are actively experiencing sexuality and are exploring issues around that. To a certain degree, viewing pornography is part of that process. As parents, we come from a generation that did not generally have access to pornography, and as a result, it is somewhat alien and perhaps threatening to us. In Europe and in parts of the USA, teenage access to pornography was not seen as particularly strange or deviant. Now I am not suggesting that pornography is without its problems, and that it is not potentially destructive, but I would caution about overreacting and becoming too anxious. Our children will have access, and will see pornography whether we like it or not.

So how can we constructively engage the issue? I'm assuming that the porn in question is 'soft porn'. More hardcore and socially deviant forms of porn are easily accessible and a child who is interested in such pornography is reflecting other deeper troubling issues that should be more actively addressed. In this case I would recommend not reporting the girlfriend to her parents, but suggest that you confront your son on the issue of sexuality and sexual relationships, acknowledging his sexual interest and trying to talk about it in a way that informs him and helps him negotiate this period in his life. I would also suggest that both he and his girlfriend seem to be on a similar page in that regard, and a mature discussion about the appropriateness of sexual relationships, emotional maturity, responsibility etc. be entered into. Importantly, the child should not be left feeling that he is deviant or bad.

Q2: My 14-year old son's girlfriend mms'd him a semi-pornographic photo of herself. How should I handle it?

A: THOMAS BURKHALTER: It matters that the girl sent pictures of herself, but I would be loathe to judge that or comment specifically without knowing the girl better. It is concerning that she did that, but how one goes about dealing with the issue requires sensitivity. Above all, you must take care not to alienate your son in your attempt to protect him. What is important is the level of communication between you and your son, so that the issues can be discussed. Teenagers can do odd and impulsive things, such as take photographs of themselves and send them. It suggests an insecure and overly-sexualised girl, but may not be more than that. (See the answer to Q1 for more thoughts.)

A: MARGARET LOGAN: It is fairly common today for girlfriends to be put under pressure to send these sorts of pictures to their boyfriends. It would be a very rare case where they were sent by her unsolicited. In both instances I would imagine there to be a low self-worth and desire for acceptance despite a high cost. Both actions devalue the good of their gender with a poor understanding of their masculine and feminine image and roles. The long term issue to resolve is to teach them that they are both worth so much more. Children learn about the good of their gender from their same-sex parent and learn how to relate to the opposite gender from their opposite-sex parent.

Q3: My son downloads porn on his bedroom PC. How can I stop him?

A: MARGARET LOGAN: In addition to the above, you could move the computer from his bedroom to a more public place; you could install one of the available programmes/blocks that prevent the sending of porn, and you could even take out a contract with an organisation in the US called Covenant Eyes which will monitor him.

A: LIZ NORMAN: Parents also need to know how to access internet "user history" or check for downloaded information so that they can see what sites their children are visiting. Responsible parents in the IT generation **must** become computer-literate themselves. The Star paper recently ran info about other things parents can do to make sure children are safe.

Q4: My teenage daughter is pulling away from me, doesn't want to communicate and isn't open to any advice or input. What should I do?

A: THOMAS BURKHALTER: Again I want to assert a certain normality in this

situation. I keep saying this because one of the 'difficult to avoid pitfalls' of parenting adolescents is that we become overly-anxious and panic. This leaves the adolescent feeling that the parent on which he/she relies is out of control or too out of touch. As parents we know that the nature of adolescence cannot but leave us with anxiety and worry about our children, but we serve them best when we can contain that concern, reflect a realistic degree of trust and believe that despite being rejected, our strength, knowledge and concern are still vital to our children.

If one can accept this and understand the needs of the adolescent, then it should be somewhat easier. Adolescence crucially and fundamentally involves a separation from one's parents, at a time when one's need for dependency is not yet over. This creates confusion for the adolescent (and parent), and then often requires the child to respond drastically. As a result, adolescents need a lot of space, react badly to what they feel is intrusion, and go through periods of rejecting all that their parents stand for. They are often embarrassed by their parents.

This is all of course very painful for parents. But it is necessary (to varying degrees, given the child and situation), to facilitate the child becoming an autonomous individual in their own right. You may want to adjust your expectations of your daughter somewhat, cutting her some slack, but crucially, not disengaging from her.

A word of caution - sometimes this withdrawal can reflect a depression or even drug use. In giving adolescents space it is important to remain involved and interested. If she is depressed it should show in disturbed sleep (too much or too little), loss of appetite, drop in school marks or general apathy or lethargy. (We'll cover depression in our next News.)

Q5: My daughter doesn't listen when I speak, switches off in mid-discussion and often starts to sms instead of answering me. What's going on?

A: LIZ NORMAN: Many teachers and parents complain that today's adolescents are not listening. While it is common knowledge that adolescence is a stage of development where the child is far less communicative with adults, this lack of listening appears to be far worse than traditionally experienced. Teachers struggle to hold discussions with pupils because the pupils appear bored, want rapid solutions to whatever is being discussed and do not spend time listening to anyone, including their peers.

Parents struggle with the same issue, having children clearly "switching off" during conversations (or they sit smsing on their cell-phones while simultaneously holding a conversation). A number of professionals have been doing research on this apparent decrease in attentive listening and it seems the "computer generation", while having many advantages, is producing a generation with very poor listening skills.

One of the real differences between the present parent generation and their children is the rapidity of interpersonal communication. Not only can this generation communicate far quicker with each other, they can do so without ever having face-to-face contact. Cell phones and the internet open up the world of communication in a very impersonal way. Children can send each other letters or pictures that they would never have dreamt about before. They don't need to face anyone while doing this and so have no visual contact with the recipient of their "correspondence". This means the sense of social responsibility necessary in two-way communication is limited. It also means no listening skills are required at all and the ability to read visual social cues is distorted. All the young person needs to do is read and type – in fact, spelling isn't an issue either! (Another headache for the English teachers!) Communication in this manner is very rapid and requires little concern for consequence.

Parents also need to insist on communication time with their children. Time every day where face-to-face discussions take place so that the child can learn **real** communication skills. Busy parents might hate the idea of this as it is going to require effort and **time**. Many children have been raised with the TV or video machine as a baby-sitter, then they move on to cell phones and the internet, so in 'real time' they've had very little actual relationship time. This is incredibly sad and the cost society pays is the breaking down of personal communication skills (as teachers are already describing). We can guess at the consequences of this for future

relationships/marriages etc.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS: Some parents designate “no phone” times where the phone is turned off and kept by the parent. This could be during homework or family time. One dad suggests smsing your child an “I’m trying to talk to you, please listen” to restore attention.

Q6: What are some of the signs of drug addiction?

A: MELINDA FERGUSON: Some of the symptoms and signs of drug addiction are:
Feeling that you need drugs to have fun, relax or deal with your problems.
Giving up family activities like sport, homework or hobbies.
Taking risks such as driving under the influence or participating in sexually risky behaviour.
Outbursts of anger or other uncharacteristic emotions.
Wearing sunglasses or long-sleeved shirts at inappropriate times.
Engaging in secretive or suspicious trips to the bathroom, bottom of the garden etc,
Feeling exhausted, depressed, hopeless or suicidal.
Rambling speech, forgetfulness, dilated pupils, dry mouth and frequent lip-licking.
Slurred speech, hyperactivity, lethargy, scars, tracks on arms, neck or legs.
Argumentative, rule-breaking and withdrawal-type behaviour.
For help contact SANCA 011-482-1070 or Narcotics Anonymous 011-485-5248

Q7: My daughter goes to varsity next year and I've heard scary stories about student problems, drinking, unhappiness and suicides. What contributes to this?

A: ESHA BRIJMOHAN: Based on my experience as a student, some of the challenges that students face at varsity or college include:

Handling freedom. A lot of youngsters feel caged at home and are not given the chance to be exposed to the harsh world. When they enter university where alcohol, drugs and nightclubs are easily accessible, they get caught up and carried away. They don't know or understand where their boundaries are or what their tolerance limits are. Once you get addicted, there's no easy way out.

Peer pressure. At university level, students look for a support base which usually comprises a group of friends. They seek identity in this group and will therefore compromise their beliefs/values just so they can "fit in" and be accepted. It is more difficult to rebel against your friends to stand up for what you believe, than to give in to peer pressure. Sadly, many students take the easy way out for fear of rejection or because they believe they have no other alternative.

Suicide: Tragically, this is common among students. Students who do not deal with failure of some sort at an early age sometimes think it's the end of the world if they don't excel at university level. Pressure from parents and family can also contribute to the problem. When a student fails, he/she feels worthless, with tragic consequences.

My close friend who was studying engineering with me committed suicide. I think her problems stretched back to childhood. She felt extremely pressured to excel, and university life, especially engineering, cannot be compared to school. It's a whole new ball game. When she came to campus, within the first two weeks she became a clubber, and within the first year she was drinking heavily. She had a boyfriend who loved her dearly, but she started becoming obsessed with him and threatened to kill herself if he didn't do whatever she wanted. I was tortured emotionally by her threats and acts of hurting herself for more than two months before she killed herself, and I tried to get her help. Unfortunately, at the end of the day, we can advise others and try our best to help them, but the choice of accepting help is entirely left to the individual.

Q8: I always hear that self-esteem in children is important, but I'm not sure I understand it enough. What insight can you give me?

A: SALLY THORP: The world our adolescents face is far more competitive, complex and uncertain than the one we grew up in. To cope, they need skills and knowledge that will enable them to think critically and creatively, and they need, more than ever, to be self-reliant and confident.

Creating a fertile environment for high self-esteem

It's imperative that from birth we create an environment for our children which nurtures and encourages self-awareness, respect, self-love, appreciation and self-knowledge, based on sound ethical values. This will go a long way to equipping them to deal with many of the challenges they'll face as they grow-up. Why? Because deeply-instilled feelings of self-worth and self-love build high self-esteem, and with these feelings we feel competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and we feel worthy of happiness and love.

The formation of self-esteem

When children are very young, their self-esteem is based primarily on messages and feedback they receive from their parents and other significant adults. These messages, verbal and non-verbal, are either encouraging and nurturing or harsh and critical. As they are too young to be discerning about the truthfulness of the messages, they believe them. Some can be direct, such as "that was a thoughtful thing to do, thank-you!" or "you are a pest!", or subtle, such as not listening to them, or comparing siblings. So begins the perception we have of ourselves as to our worthiness and value in the world.

Reaching adolescence

As children reach adolescence, peers begin to play an important role in terms of acceptance and positive feedback. Adolescents with low self-esteem find it important to prove themselves to others and seek ways to compensate for their feelings of inadequacy. These could manifest in many different ways:

- Withdrawal from social interaction; showing-off; or bullying
- Being easily influenced and manipulated by others
- Engaging in behaviour to be popular or experience feelings of temporary happiness such as using alcohol or drugs
- Behaving in a delinquent manner
- Having unsafe sex
- Experiencing feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, negativity or poor self-image

In the next newsletter I can share some ideas and tips on building our children's self-esteem. In the meantime, here are some points to ponder :-

- We love our children, but do they really feel loved?
- We listen to our children, but do they really feel heard?
- We communicate with our children, but do they really feel understood?

TOPICS REQUESTED FOR THE NEXT ISSUE:

- Sexuality and the increasingly young age at which sexual activity starts.
 - Single parenting: challenges; coping; helping children through the trauma of divorce.
 - The role played by family life and values.
 - Career guidance: When should career and study-related thoughts and tests start – is Gr 11 too late?
 - Discipline: How strict or lenient should we be?
 - Depression
 - Why do so many kids try drugs?
 - Helpful books and web-sites
- Email us with any questions, comments or suggestions you may have. Topics already covered are also open for debate.

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If you would like to receive your own copy of the Forum News, go to www.lifetalk.co.za click on the FORUM icon and fill in your name and email. You can also download copies of the newsletter off the website.

If you would like to be involved in the Forum and help in any way, all input is relevant and appreciated.

PANEL MEMBERS

Our panel of contributors includes:

Thomas Burkhalter. A leading psychologist, Thomas has two practices, one focusing on parents and young children, and one involving adult psychotherapy, older adolescents, parent work and couples therapy. He also does private clinical supervision and is case conference consultant at the Parent And Child Counselling Centre, an NGO.

Izabella Little (Gates). Author of *Life Talk for a Daughter* and *Life Talk for a Son* (with P. Wilson). Each book covers 60 topics and is a tool-kit of tips, guidelines and values for teenagers and young adults. Prior to writing, Izabella was in the IT industry where she established and ran a leading resourcing/HR company. She now writes, runs the Forum, handles queries from parents and teenagers, and works on helping the youth to focus on life skills and values.

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.

Sharon Kalinko. Psychologist. Sharon's main fields of expertise include: adult therapy, integrative therapy, hypnotherapy and teaching transactional analysis (TA). Knowledge of TA can be of huge help to parent-teenager communication as it's a theory and method of communication, relationships, education, management and psychotherapy which allows for easy understanding of what is happening between people.

Zak Nel. Professor. Former Head of the Dept of Counselling Psychology at the University of Johannesburg (ex-RAU), current Academic Head of the SA Inst. of Behavioural Finance, Prof. Nel is involved in SA's higher education and specialises in career guidance for school leavers. He covers skills and aptitude profiling; subject choices (Gr 10 & 12); university course selection and entry requirements; how to prepare for a career, drafting a CV and job-hunting skills.

Margaret Logan. Runs a private remedial school in the Cape. Her expertise includes children with emotional and learning problems, addictions, obsessive compulsive disorder, Aspergers Syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, Tourettes and others. She also spent five years as an assistant facilitator with Tough Love, an organisation that attempts to re-empower parents of addicted children.

Sally Thorp. Works with parents and children in the area of building a healthy self-esteem and equipping them with tools to face life with optimism, self-reliance and self-respect. She also runs parent/child workshops where the focus is on equipping parents to become competent parents.

Melinda Ferguson. Author of *Smacked - a harrowing true story of addiction and survival*. Through her own traumatic experience Melinda is able to offer insight and advice on a range of drug-related aspects.

Esha Brijmohan. Former university student and currently a journalist, Esha provides insight into some of the challenges faced by school-leavers and students, and she also raises awareness among her readers regarding important issues.

If you would like to utilise the professional services of any of the panel members, please contact Izabella on the Forum email address for details.

FORWARD TO ANYONE WHO WOULD LIKE THIS NEWSLETTER...

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