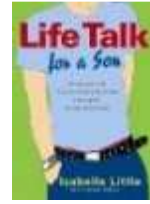


Life Talk™ Forum Parents' News6



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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.

ISSUES RAISED:

Newsletters 1 – 5 covered: clubs; drugs; cell phones; teenage drinking; porn; 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; Facebook; MXit; divorce; and helpful reading. (If you didn't get the newsletter/s, [email us](#) for a copy.)

Today we cover some very serious issues which are causing great concern.

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO OUR TEENAGERS?

In recent weeks the Forum has been inundated with concerned emails. Some of the issues we've been covering over the last year seem to be escalating rapidly and many parents and schools say that we've reached a crisis in some areas.

DRINKING, VIOLENCE & DEATH

A number of tragic incidents and deaths have occurred in recent weeks, most of them as a result of drink-spiking, drunken fights, and stabbings at parties, clubs and schools. Emails pouring in (as well as newspaper articles and radio programmes) describe an abundance of out-of-control teen parties where alcohol flows freely, parental supervision is often inadequate, and behaviour is wild.

Of the heartbreak the Forum hears of, about 70% of the tragedies have their roots in alcohol use. Teens who have been drinking are far more likely to try drugs, sex or some other risky behaviour. Under alcohol's influence joints of "weed" are tried, as are other drugs. Girls lose their inhibitions and engage in sexual activity they would not otherwise have considered. Unprotected sex occurs. Aggression increases and boys get into fights where punch-ups and stabbings with knives or broken bottles occur, and guns are sometimes pulled. Car accidents claim young lives and families are broken.

In the last week, all of the above stories have been reported in a range of private as well as government schools. Many parents feel that the risks are lower within their particular schools and environments, but it's becoming increasingly apparent that these issues occur across all income, cultural and social groups, and they often occur in the 'top' schools too.

Schools report that many parents are unaware of the extent and seriousness, are in denial or simply don't care, with some saying "we drank as teens, still do, and yet we're OK, so how serious can it be?". The age heavy drinking now starts and quantities involved are different to what happened "when we were young".

Most parties for 13s up involve alcohol (with or without the parents' knowledge), school juice bottles often contain alcohol, children as young as 9 (or younger) are drinking, the "drinking culture" continues to grow – and an ever-increasing number of teenagers drink when they go out. The stories from

universities are also increasingly frightening, particularly where students are in res. Somehow alcohol (and being drunk) is such a necessity among so many and alcoholism is growing.

At the Forum we are being implored to address this issue aggressively, hence our ongoing and passionate awareness-building initiatives. Right now “alcohol and drugs pose as great a threat to our youth as do global warming or carcinogens”.

SEXUAL ACTIVITY: CAMERAS, BULLYING & ABUSE

Another topic of emails received is the increase in sexual activity and abuse among teenagers. Stories abound of promiscuity, of sex in cloakrooms and at parties, of ‘blowjobs’ given in the playground and even in the back row in class with the teacher unaware of what’s happening.

The press has also recently exposed some schools where sexual behaviour is reaching crisis levels. Boys of 16 are bullying and sexually abusing girls who are unable to defend themselves. Articles (The Star’s 22 Sep 07 “Schools’ sex shame”) and subscribers’ stories describe incidents where boys push girls over and hold them down while their mates gather for an intimate “look”. One parent says her daughter is so traumatized following such an incident, she doesn’t want to go back to school, her marks have plummeted and she is in a deep depression.

In many other cases teens are videoing their sexual acts and are forwarding these to a wide audience. In many circles there seems to be no sense of privacy or meaning, no feelings of shame. Teens brag, compare, demonstrate their ‘skills’, and mock those who want no part of it. We are increasingly hearing of “group sex scenes”, photos and videos – and the traumatic after-effects for many youngsters.

We also hear of the traumatised youth who don’t want to be a part of the action, and the subsequent bullying and ostracizing that they endure. And once again, this behaviour also occurs in the ‘best’ schools.

What’s happening – and why? What’s driving our teenagers’ behaviour? What’s happened to values? To restraint and meaning and privacy? What are we as parents doing (or not doing) that’s fuelling this behaviour? Are we somehow setting the wrong example? Is it the breakdown in family structure and family activity and discussion time? In value-systems? Communication? Is it due to reduced discipline, boundaries and consequences? Is it because we’re so busy and stressed with our own lives that we have less time for parenting? Are schools right when they say that parents are abdicating their responsibilities to the schools? Is it our world’s materialistic drive, combined with the pressures of “making more to have more” whilst losing so much more than we realize?

What can we do? What can parents do? What can schools do? What can the media do? Government? Business? If we don’t wake up and urgently address the key issues, we’ll increasingly be wondering why our children’s lives are falling apart – or even being lost. **Is that a risk ever worth taking?**

We know the symptoms – we need to identify the causes – and the solutions – and then we need to act. Soon, without delay.

“SPOILT BRAT”: A NEW KIND OF BULLY?

We’ve recently been hearing from schools about a new kind of bully. Previously, bullies often had issues, low self-esteem, or an unresolved anger. Now we’re increasingly hearing about bullies from affluent, indulged backgrounds, who are bullying others because of their own inflated perception.

An article from London’s Daily Mail was quoted in The Star and sums up what we’re seeing in SA:

“Middle-class parents are raising a generation of ‘spoilt brats’ who are so cosseted that they struggle to cope in the workplace, psychologists warned last week. Experts believe a rise in child-centred parenting is to blame. Mothers and fathers are said to be lavishing expensive clothes and gadgets on their children both to keep up with the Joneses and ease their guilt at working long hours.

“But too much pampering is making many children bossy, demanding and nasty to classmates. experts warn. Meanwhile. Prof Carv Cooper. Lancaster

University, warned that cosseted home lives can leave children ill-equipped for life in the adult world. 'Some young people have been so pampered they can't stick to a job when things get tough' Cooper said.

"Michele Elliott, director of Kidscape, highlighted the emergence of middle-class 'brat bullies'. "Before, you could say bullies often came from dysfunctional families, were miserable themselves and were acting out their anger on the people around them. But some of them now come from what you might call 'good homes', they are well cared for and their parents love them. The problem is these children increasingly think they have an entitlement to everything and are almost like royalty 'move out of the way, here comes the prince/ess" she said.

Bullying of all kinds is becoming increasingly widespread and many parents feel that schools are not taking adequate action. Commitment is required, schools and parents need to work together, plans are required for both school and home, and monitoring is needed to ensure the effectiveness of the plans.

“TALKING SEX TO YOUR CHILDREN”

Izabella takes part in various media discussions about teen and parenting issues and in the last month she's been on SAFM, Radio 2000 and 702. Listeners came up with some particularly interesting points during a debate on SAFM's programme on "talking about sex to kids".

Opinions differed greatly, with heated and varying viewpoints expressed by teens and parents from a cross-section of cultures. Some of the points include:

- Even though it's the 21st century, "talking sex" still causes discomfort to many parents and teens. (Many parents avoid discussion and leave it to the schools.)
- Teens felt that parents don't adequately discuss sex with their children. The teen boys in the studio wished that their parents had discussed more with them as this would have helped them in their relationships and decision-making.
- Many fathers feel very uncomfortable talking about sex to their children. Some were vehemently against any discussion and felt that boys "should just learn from school and experimenting". (The boys in the studio were quite gob-smacked about this and vehemently disagreed.)
- Mothers seem to find it easier to answer questions from both girls and boys.
- Open communication and accurate information from parents increases the chances of teens postponing sex, and of using birth-control when necessary.
- If left to schools only, a big opportunity is missed in terms of conveying values, the meaning of sex, and other dimensions.
- For many parents it's hard to admit that our children are sexual beings.
- Using scare tactics doesn't stop children having sex. Information and values have a much better chance.
- Despite the very sexual world of TV, radio, Internet, magazines and music, children don't receive much useful information about sex from these sources.
- Many young people are pressured into sex because of ignorance & confusion.
- In response to questions, give accurate, short, simple answers, appropriate for the age group. Admit if you don't know something and then help children find a book with the answers.

MEDIA'S IMPACT ON BODY IMAGE & SELF-ESTEEM:

Sally Thorp looks at the media's impact: "Adolescence is a time of experimentation and managing the "in between" stage. They experiment with beliefs, images, experiences and relationships. Having left childhood behind, but not yet having reached adulthood, there is a period when loss of identity can occur, thus making them more impressionable and vulnerable to influence.

It is during this stage when searching for their identity, the media, through entertainment and advertising, can play a significant role in shaping beliefs, perceptions and behaviour, both negative and positive.

PHYSICAL PERFECTION AND MATERIALISM

Specific focus is often on the **physical**, leading adolescents to strive for a perceived ideal image which suggests will bring about happiness, success, beauty

and popularity, unfortunately resulting in the rejection of self. Millions are spent annually on advertisements depicting what you should 'wear' to be in; where you need to be 'seen' to be popular; what you need to 'drink' to feel good; the car you need to 'drive' to feel successful etc. The models used are generally skinny, good looking and appear to be happy which leaves one begging the question: "what do I need to do to be like that?"

Image manipulation is used widely, creating the belief that physical perfection is the norm. Airbrushing removes wrinkles and blemishes; even cellulite can be removed and teeth whitened and straightened; body shapes are changed! These messages subtly shape our adolescents' thinking and feelings of self-worth, and don't encourage celebration of self, individual uniqueness or indeed being in touch with reality. Are our adolescents being encouraged to pursue the unattainable and if so, what impact does this have on their self-esteem and body image?

Learning to love, appreciate and nurture our bodies is an important aspect of high self-esteem. Being unable to create or sustain this healthy relationship with ourselves can lead us to wishing we looked like somebody else at the cost of self-rejection. Unhappiness in this area may cause one to become obsessed with food, exercise and body image – all in pursuit of that illusive goal of 'perfection'.

VALUES PROMOTED BY ENTERTAINMENT AND ADVERTISING

How often do we see or hear adverts or marketing that suggest the use of problem solving, self-discipline or social support as a solution to a problem? Carl Pickhardt in his book *Keys to Raising a Drug-Free Child* raises "three concerning values promoted by this industry which are of particular concern:-

- Escape from, instead of involvement with the demands of reality.
- Sensational side of reality instead of the ordinary one.
- Quick fix for real problems instead of slow solutions."

Access to fantasy-based entertainment is easy and can consume much of our adolescents' time if left unsupervised. Dr Pickhardt goes on to point out that "often the impression is formed that if something is not exciting, it is not worth responding to and begs the question, to what extent do our adolescents spend time escaping from the challenges of life rather than in learning how to meet them?"

Taking the above into consideration, there **are** opportunities to view TV programmes that place focus on ordinary people achieving extraordinary feats or overcoming remarkable challenges. These are inspirational and encourage one to be the 'best' one can be. In this way, as parents, we can reinforce much needed perspective and reality checks for our adolescents.

TIPS TO COUNTER-BALANCE POSSIBLE NEGATIVE MEDIA IMPACT

- Encourage a realistic view of self through honest, open communication.
- Celebrate individual unique physical attributes in the family.
- Recognise and point out character traits to create balance between internal and external qualities.
- Communicate regarding difference between fantasy and reality.
- Connect to inner beauty and embrace acceptance of physical aspects of self one cannot change e.g. basic body shape.
- Instil and role-model values that support overcoming obstacles using determination, patience, willpower and self-discipline.
- Stay involved and interested!

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: I am the parent of an only child. What tips do you have about possessiveness, lack of independence, and problem solving ?

A: LIZ DOOLEY: Only children may be possessive of their belongings, their parents and their friends as they have not been exposed to sharing. Most children are self involved and have to learn to share which is much easier in the family and with their siblings. Parents need to teach their children through modeling sharing in

a number of ways. One way is sharing time and attention with spouses and friends and gently correcting the child who interrupts or makes demands in any way. An older child has an ability to understand the concept of sharing so talking can help.

As parents we need to understand why the child is possessive. Are they insecure, feel left out, need something more on an emotional level, or are anxious or fearful? A child may lack independence for the same reasons, but as parents we may also be too protective, too caring, too controlling, as well as fearful of letting the child make mistakes as this may be a reflection of our parenting abilities. Children need to be encouraged to fly, to try new things, to be curious and adventurous.

We need to help them develop conflict resolution skills, let them fight their own battles in appropriate ways and be involved in making suggestions for solving their own problems. Parents need to listen to these suggestions and be careful not to dismiss them as childish or nonsense. As parents we often try to solve our children's problems, and while this is kind and loving, we are not helping them develop the skills necessary in the adult world.

2. Q: My daughter is an only child and has always had imaginary friends. She is now 13 and still has two such friends she talks to. Is this normal?

A: LIZ DOOLEY: Many children have imaginary friends, and an only child may need her friends as she spends time on her own. If she is aware that they are not real it may not be abnormal. She may need to be encouraged to mix with more people and develop interests which involve her with her own age peer group. It would be important to find out if she can talk to her real friends in the same way that she does to her imaginary friends.

3. Q: My daughter is very angry at her dad for divorcing me and marrying someone else. He tries to be a good father, but she doesn't want to see him and is rude when she speaks to him. Her anger comes out in various ways, but she doesn't want to see a counsellor. How do I help her?

A: THOMAS: My advice would be to go to counselling together, for family therapy, or perhaps your daughter could go together with her father. For her to go alone leaves her feeling that the problem or issue is hers alone to deal with, and I assume she feels that he is the problem, and he is to blame. Failing that, her father should address the issue with her directly, and he should then get some support in order to help him deal with it: he should allow her the space to express her feelings without trying to negate them - she has reason to feel angry, she just needs to find a way to work through the feelings.

4. Q: My 16-year old daughter's boyfriend is 10 years older, has had many girlfriends and I've found out that she is sleeping with him. We've had many rows over him and she refuses to break-up with him. How should we play it?

A: THOMAS: I doubt it would be useful to try get her to break up with him. You should rather try to create a space where she feels comfortable talking about her relationship, and where you can be supportive. She is already in it, and I'm assuming the horse has already bolted, so to speak. But she would benefit from talking about relationships, what she expects, what she is experiencing, what respecting herself might mean etc.

Also to talk about sex and what that may mean for her and her relationship. What the age difference means for her. You may be powerless to persuade her, or to even have these discussions, and you may have to sit back a little and be there for her if and when it comes undone. Children have to make their own mistakes, unfortunately, and the fact that she's already involved means that the lessons learned here may only benefit her in her next relationship. It is obviously very worrying to you as a parent to watch this unfold.

5. Q: How can we help our children cope with all the crime news? In the class I teach a few have been victims of crime.

A: LIZ DOOLEY: Unfortunately we are all hearing too much about the crime in

our country and are suffering from stress as a result. If parents can help to limit their own conversations about the crime and find positive things to talk about we can help our children to regain a better balance in their lives. Often our own feelings and fear are transmitted to the children and we create an unsafe environment for the children.

In terms of those who have experienced crime, a traumatic experience leaves us feeling vulnerable and out of control. We need to regain our sense of safety, control over our lives, let go of the experience and live again. To achieve this takes time, patience and acceptance. We are often left with feelings of sadness, anger and fear. We need to accept these feelings both in ourselves and in our children.

Children may act out or become withdrawn as they struggle to deal with their feelings. We need to accept their feelings and help them to verbalize them. They may need to talk about the experience many times or they may want to shut it out. We all deal with trauma in different ways and we need to gauge where our children are at.

6. Q: My 17-year old son is having sex with one of his young female teachers. What do we do? Speak to the school? Insist he stops or change school?

A: THOMAS: You need to ask yourself what your issue is about this - for me personally, the issue would be that the boundaries between the two relationships get confused ie. teacher/pupil and lovers. I would want to engage him about these issues and the problems that may arise and how that might compromise both of them. If you feel strongly about it, after confronting him about your intentions, you could speak to the teacher and inform her that you are aware of what is going on, and that this boundary confusion actually constitutes an ethical problem for her professionally. I would be reluctant to inform the school as the consequences may not be to your son's advantage.

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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, 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* 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.

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.

Sallv Thorn. 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

PLEASE FORWARD TO ANYONE WHO MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN THIS NEWSLETTER

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

**The Life Talk™ Forum is endorsed by:
FAMSA, the CIE
KHULISA (crime prevention initiative)
Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre**

For more about the *Life Talk*™ books or about the Forum visit:

www.lifetalk.co.za

***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 teenagers.**

They're a great gift and are available at leading bookstores and on www.kalahari.net

***Talk for a Daughter* now also in the UK and on www.amazon.co.uk**

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