

Can We Talk?

Presentation by Sandy Spring Friends School Counseling Department to the Parent's Association

Jen Cort (Director of Student Support Services), Tim Croft (Lower School Counselor), Lauren Keller (Middle School Counselor), Ilene Lees (Upper School Counselor) and Nancy Preuss (Residential Counselor)

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The counselors identify the following as some of the more common issues presented (by parents and/or students) in their offices:

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| Adoption | Sex | Stranger Danger |
| Discipline | Divorce | Substance Use |
| Bullying | Internet Safety | Allowance |
| Friendships | Autonomy | Control |
| Eating Issues | Birthday Parties | Family Values |
| Protection versus Fear | | |

The group divided into division level groups to talk about the above list, share strategies and develop questions. The following is a summary of what was discussed when the larger group reconvened to share insights.

How many people should we invite to a birthday party and how do we deal with results of not inviting every child?

This is a question often impacted by financial ability and size of home. The School suggested guidelines include when inviting over 50% of a grade, classroom or gender to invite the entire group.

How do we help our children when they are not invited to a party?

- Help children understand that they will not be invited to every thing and assist them in dealing with the hurt feelings which may result
- Discuss with their children your family values and ability when planning a party. When making our own choices, we may need to understand that the feelings of some friends may be hurt
- Call the hosting parent to identify the reason for the decision.
- Role play possible responses to varying situations
- Call the teacher and counselor if the issue presents a concern at school

How much should Middle School parents step in when a social situation is being discussed at home?

- Encourage your child to approach Lauren to fill her in on the concern. If that does not happen within a few days, call Lauren yourself. Lauren can then talk to your child in a subtle manner, gathering the necessary information and providing the needed supports.

At what age should I be concerned about my child's issues and call the School?

- Recognize that problems feel as big to a 4 year old as to a 40 year old and that our job as parents is to provide the support our children need in a given moment.
- Call when issues become a pattern, impede learning, have negative affects on school work, social life and/or life at home. (In the Lower School, parents should call the teacher first and then the counselor.)
- In the Lower School students are introduced to "pebble, rock, stone" to identify the weight of an issue. A pebble can be handled on her, a rock requires the help of a teacher and a stone requires the help of Tim.

Upper School Parties

- Bear in mind that which kids are invited, who attends, and the activities present are concerns in Upper School as in all divisions.
- Call the host parents, offering to help may be one introduction.
- Establish a rule of "we always call". It is generally thought that parents of 9th and 10th graders call but by 11th and 12th grade it tapers off when actually the calls should take place throughout high school especially as students begin driving or being driven by friends
- Be concrete, explain to your child your exact expectations and ask what he/she needs from you
- Establish with your child an agreement that you won't "investigate" the reason he wanted to leave a party. Students have reported that the fear of this investigative tone is enough to cause them to stay in an uncomfortable situation.
- Consider having a rule such as "no questions that night"
- Watch for 'codes' from host parents. If you are told "we take the keys", this is code for that alcohol will most likely be present.

How do I get my child to talk to me?

- Role play responses to difficult situations
- Talk in the car. Your child can not get out and you don't have to face each other
- Remember, you are the best role model for your child. By having a positive outlook on situations you will teach your children to view the world positively. For example, when facing a birthday party that your child was not invited to, you could respond with "I guess she doesn't like my daughter" or "something must have happened for the family to make this decision" each response teaches a very different lesson.
- Use code words. Have an arrangement with your child that you will pick him/her up at any time if they call and say a word or phrase which allows other children who hear the conversation to think he/she wants to stay but lets you know you need to go pick him/her up. For example, "Hi Mom, I am having a terrific time. Can I stay?" You know your child does not use the word "terrific" unless she needs to be picked up so you respond by saying "no, we need you to come home."
- Make an appointment to talk about difficult issues so your daughter can think about what she wants to say and doesn't feel caught off guard.
- Ask your child questions to explore the issue from all angles including his/her role

- Use teachable moments
- Emphasize empathy for others and support recognizing differences
- Call the counselors about any subject without naming the kids involved
- Teach your child the tools needed to be safe, this is the best defense
- Practice, practice, practice!
- Ask your child to name the topic which made him uncomfortable and let him tell you without giving names of those involved rather than asking for all the details of the situation, thus putting your child on the defensive,
- Help your child listen to her inner voice telling her when there is something to be concerned about
- Tell your child the “rules” including that at parties the host parent will come into the room frequently to ensure things are OK
- Highlight possible consequences for rule breakages
- Admit your own vulnerability “this is the first time I have been your parent with you at this age”
- State your values and help your child define her own values, reminding her that while one’s values may change throughout life, what remains consistent is that they should be our guiding principles
- Ask your child to think about and visualize the person he most respects in his life, and then ask him to use the image to guide his decision making considering “what would _____ say if I told her I was going to make this decision?”
- Remind your child you were his age once and remember some of the concerns
- Consider setting yourself up as the “bad guy”, telling your child that you will not allow him/her to get together with certain friends if the rules are not followed.
- Use code phrases allowing your child to call you for help while saving face in front of friends.

How do we teach our children to take care of themselves when friends with someone who doesn’t take care of him/herself?

- Teach your children how to be friends to themselves and to others
- State your family values about friends in distress, will your house welcome them? If so, tell your children and if not, give your children alternative supports

How do I talk with my young children about substance use and abuse?

The conversations about resisting the use of substances can begin very early. We use the following definition “substances are anything causing negative affects or when used over time”.

- Use this definition you can talk about caffeine, sugar, junk food, or any other concern
- Help your child develop a list with you of the things that fall into this definition
- Talk with your children about how you want them to respond if offered soda on playmate or even of candy before dinner
- Give children the responses to use when faced with these issues
- Remind your children of your rules on these matters

I don't know what issues are present for my child... he doesn't tell me much, how can I find out what is relevant at this age?

- Attend these types of PA meetings
- Check the counseling web-pages for timely information
- Talk to each other

What do the counselors want parents to know?

1. Seeing issues from their child's perspective is important but it's also important to understand it is a perspective viewed through the emotions of the moment
2. Help your children with time management, decision making and handling transitions
3. Understand that we live out the Quaker philosophy of "That of God in everyone" so that we recognize that children go through rough patches and they are viewed as just that, rough patches. Our job is to help them learn from these experiences and hopefully help them avoid repetition.
4. Recent research shows that the frontal lobe of the brain, housing judgment, cause and effect and the skills necessary for decision making isn't fully developed until early adulthood therefore, we as the adults in our children's lives may need to step in as the acting frontal lobe.