

Parents TOGETHER

A Newsletter for Greenwich Parents of Adolescents ©
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I Just Couldn't Say "No" Understanding Peer Pressure by Polly Park Hyman

RECENTLY I HAD A CONVERSATION with a mother who has a teenage daughter in 11th grade. She described a situation that had arisen with her daughter, Jane, (not her real name) and a group of friends. Determined to watch the finals of a high school soccer match, the five girls arranged to go and cheer on the team. My friend asked her daughter whose parents had offered to drive the 25 miles to the venue, since none of the girls were eligible to drive their friends yet. Jane assured her mother that Sarah's mother was driving. Knowing that a parent was taking the girls, my friend cheerfully said goodbye to her daughter.

At 10 PM that evening, Jane called her mother and asked her to pick her up from another friend's house in town. After a brief conversation about the match, my friend asked whether Sarah's mother had sat with them at the game. Jane was silent for a few seconds and then she said, "Mom, I can't lie to you. Sarah drove us there and back." Sarah had had her driver's license for two weeks.

My friend was upset that the girls had taken the risk of getting into the car with an inexperienced driver and driven miles away on I-95 on a Friday night. She explained to me that she was torn between being angry with her daughter for not being honest in the first place, and being pleased that Jane had

subsequently told the truth. She decided to wait until the following morning to discuss it with her.

The discussion focused on why Jane thought it was acceptable to lie in the first place and, secondly, why she took the risk. Jane's answer to both was, "This was the plan. It was what we wanted to do. We knew some parents, including you, wouldn't agree to it so we decided not to tell that no parents were going and I just couldn't say 'no'".

Around the same time, I got a call from a mother in a neighboring town who had to cancel a dinner arrangement because she had to stay home with her 8th grade son. He had been grounded. While at a sleepover, he and his friends decided to leave the house and bike around town at 1 o'clock in the morning. The local police brought her son back home at 2 AM after the group was discovered "getting up to no good". When she asked her son why he thought it was OK to sneak out in the middle of the night, he answered that they all thought it would be fun, that everyone wanted to do it and that he just couldn't say "no".

These are just two examples of how friends can influence friends - peer pressure, or the influence of the social group on an individual. In both cases, the teens are basically intelligent, independent, good

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To our readers

Wishing you a joyful holiday season surrounded by family and friends. We look forward to seeing you in the New Year. If you have any questions about our programs or newsletters, please contact the delegate at your school.

Upcoming Parents Together Programs

February 11, 2008 "Successful: How to Support Your Family Through Divorce, Single Parenthood, Remarriage and Other Transitions."

March 3, 2008 "Underweight, Overweight, Body Image"

April 7, 2008 "The Essence of Adolescence"

May 12, 2008 "How to Raise Your Parents. . . A Teen Girl's Survival Guide"

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adolescents, who chose to do what their friends were doing, to be part of the group. They knew they weren't making the best decisions but were influenced by the lure, the pull and the strength of their friends.

Peers are the individuals with whom a child or adolescent identifies and who are usually of the same age group. Peer pressure

occurs when the individual experiences implicit or explicit persuasion, sometimes amounting to coercion, to adopt similar values, beliefs, and goals, or to participate in the same activities as those in the peer group. Usually conceived as having primarily a negative influence, peer pressure can be a positive influence as well. Some characteristics that peer groups offer are a strong belief system, a clear system of rules, communication and discussion about "taboo" subjects such as drugs, sex and religion. Peer pressure is a part of almost all children's lives and all children experience **and** give in to it at one time or another.

Peer pressure is strongly associated with the level of academic success, drug and substance use, and gender conformity. The degree of influence increases with age, and resistance to peer pressure often declines as the child gains independence from the parents but has not yet formed their own

identity. Ideally a teen should make decisions based on a combination of values internalized from the family, values derived from thinking independently, and values derived from friends and other role models. To achieve this balance, parents should provide strong alternative beliefs, patterns of behavior, and encourage their

teen to get involved in groups that engage in positive activities. While parents can't protect their

children from experiencing peer pressure, there are steps you can take to minimize its effects.

Some teens have one or two "bad companions" who are a consistently negative influence, rather than experiencing the normal peer pressure that occurs with most children. Children choose these companions for a number of different reasons: some choose them for the attention they get, both from parents and other children, while others choose them for companionship. Children may also choose bad companions for the excitement that accompanies getting into trouble, or to rebel against parents, or because they suffer from low self-esteem and/or little self-confidence. As with peer pressure, there are steps you can take to minimize the effects of bad companions.

What Parents Can Do

Develop a close relationship with your child. If you haven't already done so, you can work on

developing an open, honest and close relationship with your child. Children who have close relationships with their parents are more likely to identify with and work to please their parents. Children who have close relationships with their parents are also much more likely to come to their parents when they are in trouble or are having problems.

Help children understand peer pressure. Children will be much better able to resist peer pressure and the suggestions of bad companions, if they have an understanding of the process. Make sure your teen knows that peer pressure is something that everyone, even adults, experiences at one time or another. You can also explain that it is normal for teens to want to fit in and go along with their peers, and thus give in to peer pressure. When children have an understanding of the process and the feelings involved with peer pressure, they are less likely to give in to it.

Plan regular and frequent family activities. It is important for you to work hard to participate in regular, frequent family activities, starting when your child is young. Look for activities that the whole family can participate in, such as picnics, hikes in the woods, sports, etc. Parents who spend regularly scheduled time with their children participating in fun activities have the opportunity to develop close relationships with their children. Teens who spend a lot of quality time with their families are less likely to give in to peer pressure.

Encourage friendships with positive role models. Encourage your teen to develop and maintain

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friendships with peers who have positive qualities. You can do this by suggesting to your teen that he invite these friends over and encouraging them to invite the friend to join your family for an outing.

Get to know your children’s friends and their parents. Try to make an effort to spend even just a little time with your teen’s friends and get to know them. Also make an attempt to get to know your child’s friends’ parents. When you do this, you are able to see whether the friends are positive influences, and whether friends’ families have values similar to your own.

Know where your teen is and what she is doing. When your child is at home, you should have a sense of what your teen is doing. When your child is not at home, make an effort to know where your child is, who she is with, and what she is doing.

Don’t criticize your children’s friends. If your teen has friends who are a bad influence, it is not a good idea for you to criticize these friends. In many cases, your child will become defensive and will continue to see such friends out of a sense of loyalty or to rebel against his parents. Instead of criticizing bad companions, however, you can, and should, discuss specific behaviors and/or actions. For example, you can say, “It seems that every time Johnny comes over, you break a house rule.”

Try to figure out the reason, then address it. Children give in to peer pressure and develop friendships with bad companions for many different reasons. Try to find the

reasons and then attempt to solve the problem. For example, if your child gives in to peer pressure because he or she lacks the self-confidence necessary to stand up to peers, then you can take steps to improve self-confidence in your child.

Encourage a wide variety of friends. Encourage your teen to have different friends. This will expose your child to other children who have different interests and ideas. This helps to promote individuality, and will make it less likely for your child to give in to peer pressure from any one group.

Encourage individuality and independence. One of the best ways to do this is for you to model or demonstrate these behaviors. Parents who resist pressure from their own peers are teaching their children a valuable lesson. Parents who express their individuality are doing the same. You should also discuss independence with your child. Stress the importance of being your own person and doing what you feel is right.

Teach assertiveness. Teach your child how to stand up for what he believes in. You can do this by using role-playing. Role-playing involves practicing different responses to various situations. This gives children a chance to practice saying “no” to their peers. You can also teach your child how to problem solve when she is faced with peer pressure, perhaps by suggesting alternative activities, or by explaining why she refuses to participate in a certain activity.

Praise assertiveness. Behavior that is praised is more likely to be repeated so provide lots of praise when your child acts in an

assertive manner.

Provide discipline. When your child gives in to peer pressure and does something inappropriate, or gets into trouble with a bad companion, apply natural consequences or another form of punishment. Lecturing will probably not be enough to discourage such behavior in the future. Natural consequences can be restricting privileges, not allowing the child to spend time with the group or friend with whom he or she got into trouble, or requiring that the child make restitution for the wrong he or she has done.

Seek help. If a child is consistently giving in to peer pressure, or chronically getting into trouble with bad companions, a mental health professional should be consulted.

In Jane’s case, my friend had a conversation with her about trust and honesty. Understanding that peer pressure is part of growing up, Jane and her mother discussed the influence of friends and the group dynamic. She pointed out the positive qualities that these girls have and suggested to Jane that she think about any negative consequences before going along with the group. In the case of the 8th grade boy, the episode of being grounded worked for a few months but, the last I heard, he has a couple of new “bad companions”.



Back to the Woods

Connecting With Nature

by Michael Brosnan

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE I let myself get deeply caught up in human events. I'll read the newspapers, listen to the news on NPR or TV. I'll formulate my views and debate the issues with friends. I'll get worked up—indeed, almost consumed—by the issue. And then something outside my window will catch my attention.

It may be one of those nights when a barred owl perches on a branch in my backyard and startles me with its deep call. It may be a V of southbound geese flying low overhead, or a bud opening into bloom.

When this happens, I stop what I'm doing and remember that there's a big, remarkable, complex world of nature out there.

And I'll remember that we live in a time when it's all too easy to get distracted by human affairs.

Of course it's important for us to be engaged members of our communities, large and small, but research reminds us that we need to get outside on occasion. We need to connect with nature. This is true for adults, but the need is even greater for children, many of whom suffer from a disconnect with the natural world.

In his book *Last Child in the Woods: Out Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin, 2005), Richard Louv encapsulates the concern. "Our society is teaching young people to avoid direct experiences with nature," he writes. We do this in all sorts of ways, through a narrow notion of education and an overreliance on homework for learning, through

excess focus on organized sports as the primary way to play, through fear of litigation, through restrictive park rules and neighborhood covenants, through an almost obsessive emphasis on consumerism and interaction with one form of media technology or another.

Louv points out that today's adults are more inclined to teach children all the ways to fear nature rather than the ways to enjoy it and learn from it. Most schoolchildren today know about threatened tropical rain forests, endangered species, and global warming, but they know next to nothing about the woods in their communities. It's all trouble, little joy.

This "nature-deficit disorder," as

Louv terms it, describes the human costs of alienation from nature, including, "diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and high rates of

physical and emotional illnesses." Louv argues that this disorder affects not only children, but also families and communities. In our cities, there is evidence that "the absence, or inaccessibility of parks and open space [correlates] with high crime rates, depression, and other urban maladies," he writes.

It turns out that a direct exposure to nature is essential for physical and emotional health. On a personal level, most of us understand the value of nature in our own lives. Yet we are also just starting to fully realize the ways in which the machinery of modern society has allowed us to do significant damage to nature over the

last 50 years. And the destruction of habitat, loss of biodiversity through an accelerated rate of extinction, reduction of precious natural resources, introduction of invasive species, etc., not only are bad for the overall health of the planet, they are bad for our own health and happiness.

Perhaps it's best not to weigh down our children with the knowledge of all we've done wrong. In time, the next generation will need to be better stewards of the natural world. But we can start that process simply by exposing them often to the natural world. As research points out, outdoor play helps children develop their sense of wonder and optimism about life.

Although our primary focus in schools still lies elsewhere, we're starting to see nature's role in quality education. Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard University known for his pioneering work on the various forms of intelligence, includes "naturalist intelligence" in his list of eight kinds. Of late, there has been a fast-growing "green" movement in education, with many schools building sustainable campuses with the most energy-efficient technology available and then using these campuses for much of their studies. Even in urban areas, schools have planted vegetable gardens, established wilderness programs, and connected environmental sustainability to community outreach through environmental monitoring.

As writer and farmer Michael Ableman points out in an address at the Center for Ecoliteracy, the land is as good a teacher as any. "Every time I plant a seed and see it emerge," he said to the gathered educators, "it

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slows me down and allows me to experience one of the great mysteries of life, and each time I cannot help but be renewed."

My experience with my own children bears all this out. While there was certainly value in much of their formal schooling — arithmetic, writing, reading, understanding history — it was always the nature-related lessons that brightened their days most. With all my children, our small vegetable garden has been as engaging as any class in school. While we might have fought over homework, we never fought over garden "lessons." They would ask questions, explore with their hands, fall in love with the dirt and all the strange and remarkable life teeming within. All my children have known what it is like to grow peas, pick them fresh from the vine, and eat them right there barefoot in the garden.

Every trip to a remote pond or lake or to the shore has also been rich in lessons and joy. My back would ache from the hours I'd spend in tidal pools with my seven-year-old son, as we flipped over "just one more rock" to see what life squiggled beneath.

Last summer, my older daughter, now 22, hiked the Vermont Long Trail with a friend. When I went to pick them up in a small town near the Canadian border 18 days after they began their trip, I found them sitting on a bench in front of the general store eating breakfast, dirty, happy and so clearly at peace with the world that I wished I could bottle that peace, knowing she would need it later in life.

Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard biologist and author, believes we all have an innate love of nature, which he calls "biophilia." Indeed, our evolution has infused us with this love because it is so important to our survival. Evolutionary biologists can tell you more precisely why this is so, but I'm not sure I need to question it. With my children, all I need to do is look into their eyes and see that they

are curious about the world, comfortable in their own skin, and less susceptible to the power of modern media than they might otherwise be. My sense is that a strong connection to nature may be the best legacy we can leave our children.

This inherent desire to be close to nature explains why Americans spend more time in zoos than at professional sporting events, or why, on vacation, so many of us seek out national and state parks and other wildlands. Some of our national heroes are the great defenders of nature: Theodore Roosevelt, Henry David Thoreau, John James Audubon, Rachel Carson, and others. Even in our major urban areas, nature plays a central role. Try to imagine New York City without Central Park at its core.

"From the freedom to explore comes the joy of learning," Wilson writes in *The Creation* (W.W. Norton, 2006). "From knowledge acquired by personal initiative arises the desire for more knowledge. And from mastery of the novel and beautiful world awaiting every child comes self-confidence. The growth of a naturalist is like the growth of a musician or athlete: excellence for the talented, lifelong enjoyment for the rest of us, benefit for humanity."

We don't need to be fancy about this. Take your child into the woods or the city park regularly. Start a small vegetable garden in your yard or in a community plot. Explore any patch of wilderness. Go bird watching. Get to know the trees in your yard or neighborhood. Watch the stars. Collect rocks. Buy a microscope and explore the micro-world. Your children will be happier for it — more connected, more engaged, more at peace—and that's good for all of us, and for the planet.



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Exploring in Greenwich

Audubon of Greenwich

285 acres and 7 miles of walking trails located at 613 Riversville Road, Greenwich. The Audubon opened in 1942 as the National Audubon Society's first environmental education center in the U.S. The trails lead to a hardwood forest, old fields, lake, streams and vernal ponds. Reminders of the past are the stone walls, an old apple orchard and original New England homestead buildings. For more information call 869-5272 or check out www.greenwichaudubon.org.

Babcock Preserve

Approximately 100 acres of woodlands and trails. Directions: US 1 to North Maple Avenue to North Street. Continue on North Street past North Street Elementary School on left. Continue approximately 2 miles; entrance on left just past the reservoir. Open to the public during daylight hours for hiking, walking, jogging, nature study, picnicking. Use of trail bikes prohibited. Trails range in length from 1 to 3.5 miles.

Greenwich Point, Tod's Point, Old Greenwich

147.3 acres. From 6 AM until sunset the Point can be used for jogging, walking, cycling, and nature study, etc. A network of trails leads along the changing coastline and weaves among the woods, marshes, groves and gardens.

Mianus River Park

109.7 acres. There are two trails of note on the Greenwich portion of the Mianus Park property, the Pond trail and Oak trail. The Pond trail begins at the Cognewaugh Road entrance. It skirts the lowland area, which during the wet seasons may be readily identified as swamp. There is a wide variety of vegetation and wildlife habitat indigenous to soggy wetlands.

Teen Dating

Keep the Conversations Going

WHEN YOUR TEEN begins to show an interest in dating, you'll need to process how you feel about it. Parents often joke that their teen will not date until he is thirty but you should spend some time thinking about how you would like to see the dating arrangement work out. Even though it may not work out according to plan, it is always good to have some idea of your expectations. Starting as early as middle school you can approach your teen to talk about dating. Make it a natural part of growing up by adding it to your conversations.

Here's How:

1. Be clear when talking to your teen that just because you are having the conversation with her about dating, it doesn't mean that you are giving your permission to go out on dates or begin dating someone. This does not have to be all one talk. You can break it up into many sessions and you can continue the conversation throughout your teen's adolescence.
2. Help your teen weigh the pros and cons of dating. Try to show him that dating 'just to date' or 'because his friends are dating' is not a good reason to date. Explain how dating can cost money and/or time that he usually would spend doing some other activity that he enjoys.
3. Discuss the responsibility of dating with your teen. Dating involves another person who your teen will need to treat with respect. Share your values and your expectations that your teen display these good values.
4. Ask your teen what she thinks, feels, wants or needs in the way of permission when she begins dating.

Use your active listening skills and make sure you understand what she is asking for.

5. Share your thoughts on what you feel are appropriate rules for dating. If your teen is already dating, you might need to iron out and cement these rules. If not, try not to turn this talk into a debate on rules.
6. Make it clear to your teen, through words and actions, that you will always be there for him should he have any questions or if he needs a sympathetic ear. Dating can be confusing. Although your teen will need to make his own choices, you'll want him to ask your advice.
7. When talking to your teen about dating, be sure to mention the difference between sex and dating. Dating is a time when two people are getting to know each other. Too many times teens think it's a "hall pass" to the other person's body. Your teenager's date may say things like, 'Well, if you don't want to have sex, why are we dating?' It is important to play out situations like this so your teen can be prepared to answer: 'We're dating because I like you and I want to spend some time with you. If you want to have sex, then you are dating the wrong person.' Confidence comes with practice, so be sure to talk with your teen and role-play. Remember to share your expectations and family values.
8. Explain to both your son and daughter that 'no' means 'no'. This isn't just about sexual intercourse, it also is about anything your teen or your teen's date does not want to do. Role playing some scenarios may help get this point across.

9. Tell your teen that dating is meant to be fun. If your teen ever feels threatened, verbally put down or is physically harmed, she should come to you or another trusted adult right away.

10. When your teen does go out on a date, be courteous and friendly when you are introduced. This is not the time to go over the rules and limitations of dating your teen. If your teen is heading out the door with their date right there and then, be sure to have gone over the rules and gotten all of the information before his/her date gets there. Ask a few questions about their interests and/or lives, but do not grill your teenager's date. Try to avoid making him/her any more uncomfortable than he/she is already feeling. Lastly, invite them over so that you can get to know them better at a later time.

11. Remember that your teen is learning about relationships by watching you in your relationships. The more you work on your own and use your own advice, they better your teen will 'hear' you when you talk to him/her about dating. Your teen is watching even when you think he isn't. You are his first role model when it comes to relationships with the opposite sex. Do you and your spouse/significant other have fun together? Do you enjoy each other's company? Do you fight fair? All of these things will influence your teenager's relationships with their dates. The more you work on being happy in your own relationships, the better role model you will be for your teenager. And an added benefit is more fun in your own relationships



Attention Parents of High School Juniors

Five Secrets of Planning and Testing

by Sharon DeNunzio

IF YOU ARE THE PARENT of a junior in high school, and this is your oldest child, beware of the chaos of college preparation time: a menagerie of tests, college visits, counselor visits, and applications. Having worked with numerous families through this period, I have compiled my Five Secrets to make sure that you feel like a pro as you parent your junior through this demanding year.

Secret 1: *Get out your calendar and plan the entire year ahead of you.*

You will need to plan for the PSAT in October, at least one SAT (and possibly one ACT) in the spring, SAT II subject tests, AP tests, guidance or college counselor visits, college tours, and college applications. The SAT months for juniors are late January, March, May and June; the ACT months for juniors are December, February, April and June. Assess your child's busiest seasons and plan the test(s) during the most opportune month(s). Register at least two months in advance. Have your student prep beginning at least two months in advance. Set aside time for college tours in the spring and summer of junior year and make sure that your child completes her major essays for college applications over the summer — before senior year begins.

Secret 2: *Take advantage of the SAT's Question-and-Answer (Q&A) and the ACT's Test Information Release (TIR) Services.*

Most students take the SAT at least twice; the same goes for the ACT. Be aware that both The Collegeboard and the ACT release the actual test booklet and answers for only three tests per year (those are the dates for

which the Q&A and TIR services are available). For this school year, these test dates are 1/26/08 and 5/3/08 for the SAT, and 12/8/07, 4/12/08 and 6/14/08 for the ACT. If one of these months works well for your child's schedule, plan to have him take his first test during one of these months. Receiving the actual test and answers — and not just the scores alone — is extremely beneficial (especially for a tutor!) to assess the best methods of preparing for the second test-taking opportunity.

Secret 3: *If your child is not a naturally gifted standardized test-taker, advise her to consider taking the ACT.*

The ACT, once primarily a test accepted only at California and Midwestern schools, is now accepted at most universities across the country. The ACT has a different format from the SAT and has a reputation for being more "student-friendly". This test is slightly shorter (3 hours and 25 minutes as opposed to 3 hours and 45 minutes), but instead of containing 10 shorter modules which bounce back-and-forth between math, reading and grammar as in the SAT, the ACT has four longer individual sections (including Science, unlike the SAT) with an optional essay. Based on my experience, a student with a profile of disparate strength on the math section of the SAT may score significantly higher on the ACT. Some colleges also accept the ACT in lieu of required SAT II subject tests. Many students are being counseled to take one SAT and one ACT during the winter or spring semester of junior year, then choose the higher scoring test and prepare intensively for that test only for the second go-round

Secret 4: *The PSAT is a practice test and provides only an indication of what one may score on the real SAT.*

Do not fret if your child's score is lower than hoped for; on the other hand, do not expect your child to score as high on the real SAT without additional preparation and practice. The Practice SAT is a 2-hour, 10-minute test (and does not contain an essay); the real SAT is 3 hours and 45 minutes — almost 75% longer. Use the PSAT scores to assess challenge areas and to plan the best course of preparation for the real SAT.

Secret 5: *The SAT and ACT are highly "practice-able" tests.*

A good classroom course (and/or even better, a skilled tutor) can be invaluable to your child for teaching structure, strategies, practice techniques and accountability. Reviewing content and learning shortcuts and tricks can improve efficiency, effectiveness and pacing. Students who are invested in their success and put in significant practice for the SAT or ACT should improve their scores substantially. Many quality retail books — containing content material, strategies, and numerous full-length practice tests (some with strategic explanations) — are available. Some course providers offer higher-score guarantees; tutors should be selected based on their experience and previous success. SAT score increases of greater than 150 points, and substantially higher, are not uncommon.

Good luck with the process!



Riverside resident Sharon DeNunzio is an SAT/ACT tutor and mother of teens

Who We Are

Parents Together is an independent, nonprofit organization in Greenwich, CT, that offers ongoing opportunities for parents to communicate, share, support and learn together. We work in cooperation with the Parent Teacher Associations of the public, private and parochial schools in town. The *Parents Together* organization and delegates from Greenwich schools plan programs for parents in grades K-12. We also publish two quarterly newsletters: *Parents Together Primer*, for parents of children from birth through fifth grade, and *Parents Together*, for parents of adolescents. **Distribution:** *Parents Together Primer* is distributed to parents through their children's preschools and elementary schools. *Parents Together* is sent to parents of children in grades 6 through 12 in all Greenwich public and independent schools.

Newsletter Subscriptions and Correspondence: We invite parents and all other readers interested in local parenting issues to subscribe to either or both newsletters. For an **annual subscription**, please indicate which newsletter you wish to receive, and send your name, address and \$12 for each subscription with a check payable to *Parents Together*, to P. O. Box 4843, Greenwich, CT 06831-0417. Correspondence may be mailed to the same address.

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Upcoming Programs

All programs are held in the Cone Room at Town Hall and start at 9:15 AM unless otherwise specified. They are free and open to the public.

February 11th: "Successful Parenting: How to Support Your Family Through Divorce, Single Parenthood, Remarriage and Other Transitions" presented by Elizabeth Tullis. Discussion will address separation, divorce, step-parenting, working parents.

March 3rd: "Underweight, Overweight, and Body Image" with Diane Mickley, M.D., founder and director of the Wilkins Center, which specializes in treating people with eating disorders and weight control issues.

April 7th: "The Essence of Adolescence" with Sonya Rencivitz, L.P.S.W.

May 12th: "How to Raise Your Parents: A Teen Girl's Survival Guide." Author Sarah Burningham will address teen/parent relationships.

Our Heartfelt Thanks!

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