



Winter 2005 – 2006

A Newsletter for Greenwich Parents of Adolescents ©

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### Our Heartfelt Thanks!

Your donations are needed to fund the 8 newsletters (4 issues of *Parents Together* and 4 issues of *Primer*) we publish each year, as well as offer parenting workshops and presentations. Our sincere thanks to the contributors below:

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Children's Day School

## Being a Teen Is Stressful

by Kristan Zimmer, Assistant Editor, Greenwich Post

**P**ARENTS WHO ATTENDED a recent seminar on teen stress seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief when it ended.

"I just have to say how refreshing it is to hear everything you have to say," said one woman to a panel of experts during a question and answer period at the end of the night.

Her children are in high school and starting to look at colleges. During one tour a parent asked if it is better for students to have A's in regular classes or B's in AP courses. The tour guide said the school wants A's in AP classes.

"What is going on in our society? It's getting out of control," the woman commented.

The forum, "Good Days — Bad Days: Life of the Adolescent" addressed stress management. It was organized by Families for Greenwich Hospital in collaboration with Greenwich PTA Council and *Parents Together*.

Alan Capasso, headmaster at Greenwich High School, opened up the discussion by sharing his own experience getting his son through high school. His son had the opportunity to take AP statistics and calculus, AP psychology and AP English but he

turned some of those classes down to give himself room in his schedule for hockey.

"Kids need time to be kids," Mr. Capasso said. "That's a discussion you have to have with your child. Many kids are taking a load of courses because they thrive on it. What my son cared about deeply is playing hockey. If we pushed him into English he would have taken it. I'm not sure that would have been good."

Mr. Capasso said when students are teenagers it is the time for them to try different things and parents should communicate to their child that it's not the end of the world if he or she doesn't take every AP course.

He said in talking with college admissions officers, he learned colleges look for overall strength of the program, which means not just students who are strong in academics but also in sports, art, music and community service.

Dr. Jeffrey L. Brown, an author, lecturer and clinical associate professor of pediatrics in the departments of pediatrics and psychiatry at Weill Medical College of Cornell University,

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said, "Parents are as happy as their least happy child."

He provided insight into the teen psyche and gave parents tips on how teens prioritize and how to manage their stress levels. He has a private practice in Rye Brook, N.Y. He said parents should listen to the "experts" but only to those tips that pertain to their own family.

### The big picture

His main advice to parents: Don't take things too seriously.

"Adolescent behavior generally has a negative connotation...

When you think about how many grown-ups don't act in a mature way, what does adolescence really mean?" He said, in a way, it's a mini life cycle.

Dr. Brown said just as a three-year-old takes the remote control and looks at mom or dad to see what they will do, the teen grabs the keys to the car and does the same thing.

"Their thinking is very self-directed," he said of teens and toddlers. "Most three-year-olds don't think about your reaction unless it's scary." Dr.

Brown said teens are impulsive and compulsive and have difficulty putting events in the context

of life. "Any given day is the best or worst day of their life," he said.

The three major elements of a teen's life are home, grades and socializing. He said keeping track of these three components will help parents to figure out how

things are going in their teen's life.

If one of them is not going well, parents can usually work it out with their child on their own, he said. If two of these areas are problematic, he recommended getting help; and if all three are, he said, parents should definitely seek professional help.

His advice for parents:

- ◆ Don't overreact to expected results. When a teen doesn't empty the dishwasher every time, parents tend to relate this to future problems that the teen is not a team player, not responsible, will not have a good job and will not get through school. To the teen, it is not the end of the world because the dishwasher isn't empty. He just forgot.

- ◆ Be consistent and set an example. "Theirs is a very fluid world," said Dr. Brown. They may not agree with your values. It's not important if you are liberal or conservative, he said, just as long as you are consistent in your values so they know where you stand. "Frustration with ambiguity causes a lot of stress," said Dr. Brown.

- ◆ Have a sense of humor. "If you're not angry at them all the time, you find they're really cute," Dr. Brown said. "You need to bring some sense of humor back into your house again."

- ◆ Make sure they get some sleep. Sleep deprivation and depression show the same symptoms, said Dr. Brown. He said Sunday nights are the major culprit because many students wait until then to do work and they never have time

to make up for the loss of sleep during the week. He said the average teen needs eight hours.

- ◆ Look at life objectively. Look at what's important, he said. Try to focus on the pleasures as well as the stresses.

### Chasing a dream

Dr. Brenda Friedler, provided insight into how Greenwich High School provides a friendly ear and assistance for high school students preparing for college, managing classes and avoiding stressful situations. She has worked in the district for about 32 years and is a guidance counselor at Greenwich High School and group facilitator for adolescent support groups. Dr. Friedler is also the Greenwich Education Association liaison for the PTA Council. She has a doctorate in human sexuality.

One of Dr. Friedler's main points to the audience of about 150 parents is that students should be wary about getting hung up on a dream.

"It's important to do well. It's another thing for this dream or goal to be the be-all and end-all," said Dr. Friedler. She said teens tend to tell themselves if they don't get into a particular college or program then they will fail, when in actuality there could be a number of routes to his or her goal. As parents, she said, many adults want their children to have a dream and realize it.

"We aren't going to have our sons or daughters be disadvantaged," said Dr. Friedler. She said many parents and students begin to believe myths about what it takes to prepare for college. She said students do not have to begin preparing for college before junior year and it is,

"Any given day is the best or worst day of [a teen's] life."

in fact, harmful for students to take the SATs too many times.

“I do believe children should reach their full potential,” said Dr. Friedler. She said for some students more Advanced Placement (AP) courses are appropriate and for others fewer or no APs are appropriate.

Most parents, said Dr. Friedler, want their children to have more and do better than they did. In a community where many adults have attended good schools and gone on to successful careers, “It may be time to ask ourselves, ‘How much better can it get?’”

### **Sports — forced or fun?**

Dr. Jerome Brodlie, chairman of the department of psychology at Greenwich Hospital spoke to parents about students and the stress of sports in today’s schools. He is a radio talk show host for “Growing Up” on WGCH 1490 AM.

He cited one example of a student whose parents were divorced. His mother lived in Texas. He typically would visit her on spring break but this particular year he could not because his baseball coach told him if he missed practice he would lose his spot at first base. Dr. Brodlie said he believes schools should do away with practices and games during holidays and school vacations. It is something the federal government is reviewing right now, he added.

Another thing he thinks schools should look into more seriously is de-emphasizing varsity sports and encouraging intramurals and club sports - particularly in large school districts like Greenwich where the

varsity team is comprised of a small percentage of students. He recommended parents don’t attend every game their son or daughter plays in.

“I certainly feel you are giving an unhealthy message,” Dr. Brodlie said. He said attending every game increases the pressure on the child and magnifies the importance of his or her participation. He said some children feel that their mothers or fathers care so much about whether he or she wins or loses that the fun of playing the game is lost.

While he said it was a good idea that some schools are prohibiting parents from standing on the sidelines and commenting during games, it does not prevent parents from talking to their child on the drive home.

### **Keeping it real**

He said when he’s asked children how many felt they had “unqualified love” from their parents he was surprised when just a handful rose their hands. Many children said they felt their academic and athletic performance impacted how their parents felt about them.

The pressures seem to be particularly strong in Greenwich, said Dr. Brodlie. He said a few of the girls from New Orleans, La., who began attending school in Greenwich after they lost their homes in Hurricane Katrina, have noticed a lot more pressures in Greenwich.

“They have been telling me how neurotic they think it is around here,” he said. They told him where they grew up, students take after-school activities that they enjoy but in Greenwich, they

take extracurricular activities “just to put on college applications.”

Dr. Brodlie said studies have shown there is no correlation between what college someone attends and their success in life. He said studies have shown the best time to choose a career is four years after graduating from college and he said 17% of working people are working in fields related to their college major.

“We can’t change society but we can put it into realistic terms,” said Dr. Brodlie. Later he said, “Unless your child is in the top 1% of the sport in the state forget any chance of professional sports or Division I schools. Coaches push kids as if they are training future Olympians and they’re not. We have to reign in some of these coaches.”

Parents seemed to agree that the pressures in the Greenwich community were great, but many felt that it was difficult to go against the grain.

Suzanne Maggin, adolescent liaison on Families for Greenwich Hospital Advisory Board who came up with the idea for the seminar, said her two daughters do not play sports. They have time for vacations, but she worries about whether colleges will be looking for athletics on their applications.

“The only time being an athlete will help you is if you’re good enough to get on a coach’s list,” Dr. Brodlie said.

“Your vacation matters,” said Dr. Friedler.

Another dad said he has two teens, a senior and a junior at

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# Comfort in Time of Crisis

## Ordinary Kids, Extraordinary Circumstances

By Elisabeth Tullis

**I**MAGINE DRIVING DOWN I-95 on your way to a family gathering for the holidays. Another vehicle cuts across your lane and within seconds you are part of a multi-car accident. You, your spouse and your kids seem okay, and your car is banged up but fixable.

Yet two weeks later, your sixth-grader is having nightmares. Getting him into a car involves a complicated negotiation as he asks if it is possible to avoid going on the highway. Meanwhile, your tenth-grade daughter is going to bed later and later, and says she is having trouble falling asleep because she can't get the picture of the crash out of her mind. You now wonder what to do next.

### What is a Crisis?

It seems almost inevitable that our children will experience traumatic events at some point in their lives. None of us could have foreseen the disasters of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami in Asia or the quakes in India and Pakistan. And we close our eyes in the face of the unthinkable closer to home: a house fire, a car accident, or a death in the family.

When crises happen, they affect you and your children. As a parent, you can take steps to help your child readjust to life after a crisis or trauma.

### Ordinary Kids, Extraordinary Circumstances

A traumatic event is an extraordinary one – something

unexpected and unplanned. These events happen to ordinary people with ordinary skills and coping mechanisms. So remind yourself when your child's behavior changes in response to a trauma that he is trying to handle an extraordinary circumstance with ordinary skills. He will need your help and guidance, and perhaps the help of others, to build the skills to handle this extraordinary experience. Be prepared for your child's struggle and recognize that *how* you respond to him can make a big difference.

### Steps for Helping Children Handle a Crisis

**1. In the moments during and immediately after a crisis, your response will have a significant impact on your children.** If you are sobbing uncontrollably in their presence, it will be harder for them to feel safe and reassured. It is okay for them to see that you may be scared or sad; however it is important that they also see you taking control of the situation as quickly as possible. Your children look to you for security and comfort. Your response to a situation models to a child how he or she should respond. If Mom seems to think the car accident was scary and unsettling but also shows that she will get back in a car and carry on as normal, the kids are more likely to follow suit. Alternately, if Daddy is having trouble leaving the kids in the morning, calls them all the time

from work to see if they are okay and insists that the family needs the largest car possible to protect his family, the kids are more likely to stay agitated and afraid.

**2. Crisis creates unusual situations and often creates a sense of disorder.** Suddenly the routine of life is interrupted and uncertainty reigns. Strive to get your children back into their old routine or into a newly established routine as soon as possible. Routine and consistency create the safe harbors in a child's life. When there is no routine, a child is left to guess when he might eat or where she will sleep. Even in temporary situations, such as living in a hotel after a house fire, it is possible to develop routines. Eat at the same time every night. Make sure the same person drives the kids to school in the morning. Develop rituals around homework and family time.

**3. Help your child talk about what happened.** As hard as it may be for you to relive a trauma, it is even more difficult for your child with her age-limited life experiences. Talking about a crisis often decreases its power in our minds. Let your child know that she can ask questions, then listen and respond calmly. If children don't ask questions of an authority figure, they are more likely to come up with their own scenarios which may be far from accurate. Help your child direct his creative thinking toward more positive, hopeful endeavors.

**4. While the media is a good source for information, it can have a negative impact on children, especially younger children.** Children are inundated and stimulated all day long with sights and sounds that can evoke strong emotions. Try to limit media exposure so that your child isn't at risk of seeing things that may further agitate him or her. A seemingly innocent TV sitcom could have an episode on a car accident or building fire that re-traumatizes your child. When your child does see something horrific on television or a in a headline, use these as opportunities to discuss the situations with him.

**5. Look for signs of distress through physical and behavioral changes.** If your child suddenly has severe headaches or cannot concentrate on homework, he may be distressed and doesn't know how to verbalize it. If this happens, encourage your child to ask questions that will help him verbalize his feelings; most likely, this will lead to a decrease in physical and behavioral symptoms. If it doesn't, then you may wish to seek the advice of a professional.

**6. Don't make promises you cannot keep.** Parents, naturally, want to protect their children physically and emotionally. When a child is fearful of a fire or a car accident, many parents are inclined to make promises such as "that won't happen to us." Making these statements may be unwise, because we cannot always guarantee or predict outcomes. What you can do is tell your child what actions you already take to keep him safe.

**7. Finally, share information with other important people in your child's life.** Teachers, for example, spend tremendous amounts of time with your children. If your child has experienced a loss or a trauma, tell her teacher or guidance counselor so that the school may support your child in healthy and appropriate ways.

### **How to Talk To Your Child**

Many parents are concerned about *how* to talk to their children in a crisis situation. Feeling uncertain, they often avoid conversation rather than engage in it.

Again, there are some helpful practices that can make communicating with your child much easier and smoother – for all of you. As mentioned previously, allow your child to ask questions. Questions may be concrete ("What happened") or more theoretical ("Why?"). A child may also ask the same question numerous times, almost as if previous conversations didn't happen. Answer your child's questions directly, but do not add unnecessary information. Answer only what was asked and be honest.

It can be hard for a parent to simply listen. It is a parent's empathetic nature to comfort and offer support and encouragement. Let your child do the talking. Prompt him with open-ended questions that allow him to evaluate his own thoughts and feelings. It will not only help him, but it will also clue you in to what he's thinking. Then use this information to dispel misunderstandings.

### **When to Get Help**

Regardless of the care and attention a parent gives to a child after a trauma, sometimes people outside the family can offer additional support in an extraordinary circumstance. So when is it time to make that call?

If your child's behaviors following a trauma impact his or your family's normal living activities for an extended length of time, then outside help may be necessary. Some signs that a child might need professional help include persistent feelings of guilt or depression; long-term denial of the event; destructive behaviors; a high level of anxiety for an extended time; and an inability to receive care and comfort from others.

For example, if the daughter who cannot get to sleep after a car accident settles down after a couple of weeks, this behavior is probably not out of the ordinary. On the other hand, if two months later, she is still unable to fall asleep, you may need to talk to a professional about how to help her get back to her previous patterns.

Crises take kids out of their typical cycles and may cause a temporary shift in their behavior. The majority of children will return to their previous patterns relatively quickly. Ultimately, you know your child best. If you sense that your child is not adjusting well, trust your "gut instinct" and seek outside help to hasten his return to healthy development.



*Elisabeth Tullis, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist at Family Centers, a United Way partner agency in Darien, Greenwich, New Canaan and Stamford. Visit [www.familycenters.org](http://www.familycenters.org) or call 869-4848 or 655-0547.*

# Joy to You and Me

## Managing Stress During the Holiday Season

By Polly Park Hyman

**T**HE COUSINS ARE COMING from California to stay for a week. A traditional dinner is being planned and an extensive shopping list has been drawn up and checked. The good china is taken out and the decorations are brought up from the basement and unwrapped. Full of hope and promise, the holiday season arrives.

But all too often joy turns to despair as familiar scenarios unfold: the five year old who can't sit at the Thanksgiving table until desert is served; the ten year old who demands all his Hannukah gifts on the first night; the teenager who storms off to her room as soon as Grandma walks through the door; and the new mother who bursts into tears as she does the dishes.

Whether national, cultural or religious, holidays have special meaning and offer a chance to reflect, rekindle and regroup. However, during the weeks of events, celebrations and special activities routines are disrupted and schedules become overloaded. As the anticipation of good cheer gives way to unrealistic expectations and anxiety, some may be left asking, "Is it worth it?"

Experts at the New York University Child Study Center suggest that the keys to maintaining meaning and managing stress during the holidays lie in four areas:

- ◆ Managing expectations
- ◆ Evaluating traditions
- ◆ Finding personal significance
- ◆ Monitoring stress levels

### Managing Expectations

Although the holiday season seems to be weeks long, starting with Thanksgiving and ending with New Year's Day, it is important to remember

that the actual days of celebration are only a few out of the whole year. A child's behavior *throughout* the year is what matters, not on one particular day. Expecting impeccable behavior from a child during a specific event puts unnecessary pressure on everyone.

Bear in mind that children of different ages have different needs and reactions. Very young children do not have a developed sense of time so it is hard for them to be "good" for a month until Christmas in order to receive a gift. They also tend to get upset when their schedules are disrupted. Keeping to somewhat of a

routine in the midst of holiday activity goes a long way to ease stress levels in both children and parents.

As children get older they become more aware of material aspects of the holidays including the food, parties and gifts. They may start insisting that they "need" certain items and the anticipation can cause excitement and then disappointment if they don't get what they want. The holidays can provide an opportunity for teachable moments regarding money, including saving and charitable giving. It's important to be sensitive to their needs and peer group influence while staying true to your own family values. Parents may also need to be flexible in finding a balance between their teen celebrating with friends and spending time with family.

### Evaluating Traditions

There is a certain comfort and predictability in celebrating events the same way year after year as it reduces the anxiety of planning and making decisions. But as your family changes it is important to reassess activities and gatherings. When children get older, relationships change, people get married and grandparents move away, the original traditions may need to be re-evaluated. It is worthwhile to have a

discussion with the family beforehand what aspects of the traditions work and what aspects may need to be changed.

If there has been a divorce or death in the family, the first

...during the weeks of events, celebrations and special activities routines are disrupted and schedules become overloaded.

holiday can be difficult and the anticipation can be the hardest part. The holidays may be a work in progress as a family adapts to the change, and planning ahead to decide what to keep from the past can be helpful. Families should also talk about the holidays *before* they get under way, being sensitive to the feelings of everyone involved and allowing everyone to help in decisions about new ways of marking the holiday.

### Finding Personal Significance

Holidays are a time for parents to practice and model the teachings of their faith and convictions. They are a time to teach tolerance and respect of those who are different. The joy of giving and sharing can be cultivated during the festive season. Children of all ages can be encouraged to donate

books or toys to a shelter, serve dinner at a soup kitchen, volunteer at a holiday party at a hospital or visit the elderly in a nursing home to experience the gift of selfless giving.

Children cherish the memories of special time spent together with family. Traditions of holiday baking, wrapping gifts together or watching a particular movie help establish traditions that can be passed down to the next generation.

### Monitoring Stress Levels

Excitement can make even the best behaved child disobedient. Preparing children of all ages for a schedule change, describing new events and giving them clear expectations will help them understand how they need to behave. Since holidays are different from every day, it's important to be relaxed and flexible about certain rules. If chores don't get done, extra candy is eaten and bedtime is later than usual, remember that the situation is temporary. Making allowances for change is essential during the busy days and nights. Parents may find themselves stretched thin trying to do everything that the holidays require them to do. In the meantime they need to make sure all the day-to-day activities are attended to. When the pressure starts to build, it is helpful to take a break, decide what is most important and say "no" to some invitations and activities. Quality over quantity of time makes everyone more relaxed and able to enjoy the true spirit of the holidays.

So this holiday season, have the cousins stay at a hotel, ask everyone to bring one of the dishes for dinner, consider using the everyday china and leave most of the decorations in the basement. Less stress means more joy - to you and me.



## Book Shelf

"Binge: What Your College Student Won't Tell You"

by Barrett Seaman

John Wiley and Sons; September 2005. \$25.95

Barrett Seaman, a former reporter and editor at *Time* magazine, spent two years living at 12 colleges in the United States and McGill University in Canada. He immersed himself in the lives of students as he researched how the residential college experience had changed since his student years in the 1960s. During a recent appearance at "Just Books Too" Seaman explained the overline of "Campus Life in an Age of Disconnection and Excess." He believes that technology (specifically IM and email) is partly to blame for students poor interpersonal skills, as they tend to communicate with like-minded individuals who share similar views. He cited the "disconnect" between diversity in marketing and reality and how the majority of athletes are recruited and have an entirely different college experience to that of the non-athlete. The "excess" relates in part to the anxiety that students bring with them to college; a result of the pressures of high school and the college application experience. Drinking is being used as a reward for hard work and it is an intense activity where students drink to get drunk. The author explored options for controlling and managing the alcohol problems on campus and, on a positive note, ended with the fact that after college the rate of alcoholism does not seem to be increasing.

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Greenwich High School. He said 10 years ago his son tested as a special education student and his daughter did shortly after. He said it turned out to be a gift because it took the pressure off him and his wife as parents. Now, they worry more about whether their children are happy and enjoying life rather than how successful they become.

"I think what happens in this area is hideous," he said. "It's too bad we've not been able to say to our kids every year, 'Just have fun, don't worry about it.'"

Another woman said she was relieved to hear her daughter will be OK. She said just that morning she was out with friends at breakfast and they told her that her daughter was not in enough activities and would not get into a good college.

She said she spends time with her daughter, who is a good, but not exceptional student, and does not pack her schedule with extracurriculars. When she came home worried and her daughter asked what was wrong, the mother said, "I don't know. You're supposed to be in tennis and violin and ..." she said, "It's so sad. I was worried I wasn't doing enough."

At the end of the forum one woman suggested that the parents who came to the seminar should form a group to address some of the issues that came up during the discussion. While no official group has formed yet, those parents who would like to get involved can contact their PTA representatives for information.



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## 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 of children in grades K-12. We also publish two 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 \$10 for each subscription in a check payable to *Parents Together*, to P. O. Box 4843, Greenwich, CT 06831-0417. Correspondence may be mailed to the same address.

### Contact Us!

Got a story idea, writer suggestion or comment for the *Parents Together* staff? You may fax it to 698-3376 or Email it to [Togetherparent@aol.com](mailto:Togetherparent@aol.com).

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## Parents Together Upcoming Programs

### February 13, 2006

Angela Chan, M.D., "*Promoting Student Success: Help Your Child Become Self-Aware and Be a Self-Advocate.*" 9:15 AM, Cone Room, Town Hall. For details call 329-2243.

### March 6, 2006

Topic TBA  
9:15 AM, Cone Room, Town Hall

### May 15, 2006

Lucy Hedrick, "*Getting Organized in the Digital Age.*"  
9:15 AM, Cone Room, Town Hall. For details call 329-2243.

Due to budget constraints at the Greenwich High School PTA, funding for the mailing costs of this publication was reconsidered. *Parents Together* thanks the generous anonymous donor for underwriting these costs for GHS families this year so that they can continue to receive this valuable parenting resource.

## GCCUD

The mission of the **Greenwich Coalition to Combat Underage Drinking (GCCUD)** is to reduce underage drinking in Greenwich through advocacy for education, research, and enforcement activities. GCCUD upcoming events:

### Fathers' Forums

#### Saturday, January 7

"*How My Dad Prepared Me for College/Life,*" featuring a panel of college students and recent graduates. Facilitated by family therapist John Hamilton.

Greenwich High School Media Center  
8 AM - 9:30 AM.

#### Saturday, February 11

"*How to Build Youth of Character through Sports,*" featuring a panel of local coaches and family therapists. Greenwich High School Media Center  
8 AM - 9:30 AM

### Parents' Forums

#### Thursday, February 2

#### Friday, February 3

"*National Trends in Substance Abuse,*" featuring Carol Falkowski, Director of Research Communications for the Hazelden Foundation. Location and time TBD

*This issue of Parents Together Newsletter was made possible by the donations of generous supporters.*



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