

An Evening with Lisa Medoff

By Angela Blackwell

Lisa Medoff, PhD, is a developmental psychologist specializing in adolescent mental health, and an Education Specialist at Stanford University's School of Medicine. Dr. Medoff spoke to an audience of approximately 220 parents and educators at Drew School on February 2, 2015. Her topic was "Under pressure: helping your teen reduce stress and build resilience."

Dr. Medoff began by reminding us that as a culture, we are confused about adolescents and we often send them mixed messages. We are unsure whether to treat them as children or as adults. Our culture lacks rites of passage that mark the transition to adulthood. In addition, this age group is often used as a scapegoat for stressors that are actually happening in the wider society. It's not easy to be an adolescent!

Teenagers go through profound changes in a short period of time: biological, cognitive, social and emotional. Not all of the changes happen at the same time and not all of them happen for good. Teenagers' social/emotional networks develop faster than their impulse control, which can lead to decisions that they might regret later. Many teens have a "personal fable": a belief that they are special and that nothing can happen to them. This can lead to risky behavior.

Dr. Medoff pointed out that socially, teens are quite segregated from other age groups. As a result, they tend to they look to each other for validation.

Middle and high school students often feel that everyone is watching them. Social media has exacerbated this tendency, because it is so much of a presence in students' lives. It is harder now than at any time in the past for teens to get away from the opinions and judgments of their peers. At the same time, they feel tremendous pressure to succeed in school. As a result, their minds are on high-alert all day, both academically and socially.

This kind of pressure can result in extreme behavior, such as working on overload during the week and drinking on the weekends. Chronic stress also impacts the teen brain, affecting their ability to store and access information, and making it harder to learn. Late bed times have increased in the last thirty years; inadequate sleep is associated with higher levels of depression and lowered school performance.

So what can adults do to help adolescents navigate this difficult time? Dr. Medoff made several suggestions.

- Adolescents often find it hard to express emotions and have intense highs and lows. We need to have direct conversations with teens about how to deal with anger, jealousy, loneliness etc. Teenagers tend to retreat to technology- posting status updates as a way of coping. They need to learn to sit with their emotions rather than broadcasting them via social media, which tends to exaggerate the situation.
- Technology has aggravated other problematic teenage behavior. Texting makes it easier for people to avoid planning ahead, but this is a skill that teens need to learn. She suggests helping teens run through different scenarios and imagining the consequences of different choices. When teens find themselves in social situations that are difficult to handle, Dr. Medoff advises them

to excuse themselves to go to the bathroom. This takes them out of the immediate social situation and buys them some time to think.

Young people need to practice empathy. So much communication happens online that it is harder for some adolescents to read others' facial expressions and to work out what is going on. Teens need lessons about how to use media and social networking. They need to learn specific skills such as how to ask someone to take down a post or a picture that is upsetting. They need to learn how to post responses that are positive and do not attack.

Dr. Medoff advised parents and teachers to be careful how they communicate about success. Parents tend to send their children the message that their entire identity is bound up with success in school, and teens often feel that that they have to be good at everything. But this is unsustainable; most successful people are successful only in one or two areas. Dr. Medoff recommends that parents reconsider what success means to them and make it clear to teenagers that there are many different paths to success. Teens need options to be successful in different ways. Encourage adolescents to develop interests beyond school, and to volunteer for something beyond the college resume. All teenagers should do some chores around the house, and a part time job can give a teenager a different way to feel successful.

Above all, says Dr. Medoff, teenagers need to develop resilience, which can be defined as the ability to cope with stress and bounce back from adverse situations. Perfectionism works against this. If a student is afraid of a bad grade, he or she will not take risks or develop creativity. It is crucial to show teenagers that they can fail and survive.

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Teen Thoughts

Parenteen Interview Exclusive on Dan Siegel's presentation:

Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain at Lick Wilmerding High School in San Francisco, on October 16, 2014.

Averie Kellenberger (class of 2016) interviewed by Beth Ohanneson.

Dan Siegel's research has shown that the teenage brain is designed for social connection, innovation, and a passion for new ideas. He explained how the brain prunes, specializes and thickens during adolescence, in the service of maximizing neural integration. New abilities emerge that are crucial for both the individual teenager and for the survival of our species, including: novelty seeking, social engagement, increased emotional intensity, and creative exploration. Given that these changes have an enormous impact on teens, we are fortunate to have a teen's take on Dr. Siegel's presentation.

Beth: Thank you for taking time to share a few of your impressions about Dan Siegel's talk with us.

Averie: You're welcome.

Beth: Dan Siegel views adolescence as a distinctively vibrant stage of life, rather than as a dreary transition that that teens and parents must suffer through because of social myths like "teenagers are driven by raging hormones and immaturity so they don't think about the consequences of their risky behavior."

Averie: Sure. Why consider adolescence as NOT having any value? That's rude! Otherwise you could just say that as soon as you're born, you're just in a straight transition to your death. Saying adolescence doesn't have value really implies that no stage of life has any value. His ideas felt respectful. I appreciated that.

Beth: What did you like best about Dan Siegel's talk?

Averie: I liked it when he asked the audience to consider how ridiculous it is that kids are pressured to get into the best high schools, so they can get into the best colleges, so they can get into the best graveyards! That was funny, but not really. It is a crazy way to think and it affects me right now. I am a teenager living in a culture that has a crazy preoccupation with college. The truth is, whether you go to a Junior College or you go to Stanford, you're still going to die someday and in the meantime, schools don't determine your humanity.

Beth: Do you feel a lot of academic pressure now, during your junior year in high school?

Averie: Yes.

Beth: Dan Siegel talked about how relationships influence the way our brains and minds develop. Relationships that offer warmth, safety, and a genuine interest in one another's thoughts and feelings, can help stabilize life during stressful times. Do you think your relationships help you manage the pressures you face right now?

Averie: No, they add to it. School is what people talk

about. Parents say, "How was your day at school?" Friends say, "What did you get on that test? Teacher's say, "Here's your homework." Everyone I know works really hard in school. We're expected to get perfect grades, excel at sports, be leaders, contribute locally to save the planet, spend time with family, get enough sleep so we can be really passionate about something, and oh yeah...just be yourself.

Beth: Tall order. Well, would you say that you have any relationships in which you can really just be yourself? Relationships that help buffer some of the pressures you feel?

Averie: Certain people, yes. Some of those people do offer a lot of help and support, like my close friends and my family. But relationships are complicated. No one person always helps. Most people also add some level of pressure, big or small, because everyone has different needs at different times. Like Dan Siegel said, sometimes I'd just like to stay in the Oatmeal House and not have to think about anyone else's needs.

Beth: That's nice! Dan Siegel talked about how childhood is like living in the Oatmeal House: a place from the past (real or longed for) where your mom brings you oatmeal while you watch cartoons and it's Saturday morning and there's no rush and no pressure and you get to stay in your pajamas all day and get cuddles and kisses and you can eat as much oatmeal as you want.

Averie: Yeah, well, don't get too comfortable with the Oatmeal House idea because I will be moving out and going to college at some point.

Beth: Got it.

Averie: Dan Siegel's whole talk was about how we should value adolescence, but I think that adults value teenagers who fulfill a social obligation to rise into adult social circles. That is another part of the pressure.

Beth: So, that's what some adult's value. What do *you* actually value? According to Siegel, part of the "work of adolescence" is to differentiate yourself from other people's ideas of who you should be, while staying connected to the people whom you trust to love and support you. Setting aside what other people think for a minute, what do you really value right now, at this stage of your life?

Averie: Feeling happy. I like to be with my friends. I like taking walks, and generally being outside. It's easy to forget what you actually like to do. There's not much time to think about it. I like being with my friends. The rest, I'm still working on.

Family Stress: It's Not All in Your Head

By Diana Divecha, Ph.D.



For most of my kids' childhoods, I felt that my ability to guide my family faced direct competition from school, and many forces beyond. In elementary school, heavy backpacks bent my kids' soft little backs. Homework intruded into playtime, even though research has shown that play is important for cognitive and social development. In middle school, more homework and big projects hijacked precious family weekends--just when my kids needed more sleep, more time to adjust to their rapidly changing brains, and more healthy time with friends, and when my husband and I needed some rest. By high school, the downward pressure from looming college applications threatened to torque my kids' developmental arc.

"Don't do anything for a college resume," I warned.
"Make choices because they make sense to you."

As the tsunami of outside competition flooded toward us, I felt like a little mushroom field trying to filter toxins out of a roaring river. The competition over messaging added even more pressure: media was saturated with hyper-sexualized images, dysfunctional interactions, unrealistic problemsolving, violence, and more. It was hard to stay on top of it all, to teach my kids the difference between our values inside our family versus values in the outside world. This on top of our own adult pressures to manage childcare, two jobs, meals, paychecks, health care and sick days, quality time, extended family, and maybe a few friends.

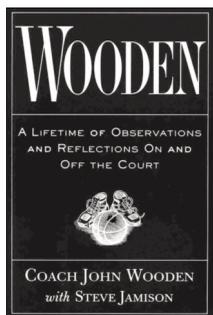
Adults are stressed, but our kids are stressed, too. A recent survey found that in the United States, teens' stress has now surpassed that of adults. Many young people say that they are overwhelmed, depressed, and sad because of the stress that they, themselves, gauge to be unhealthy. And the mental health of teenagers in this country is declining over time. Many parents are frantic, reaching for whatever levers they can put their hands on: hiring therapists, looking to medications, and trying ancient practices to calm everyone down. If only we could find the right key, we parents think, we can unlock the stress, and our child will thrive.

But when the number of kids and families struggling is so large, we have to start asking questions about the systems beyond ourselves. We parents love our children wildly, and ultimately, they're our responsibility. But our ability to care for them successfully also depends in large part on how the wider culture, policies, and values support childrearing.

Diana Divecha, Ph.D. is a developmental psychologist who writes and speaks about children, teens, and family life. This article is reprinted with permission from her website at developmentalscience.com.

BOOK REVIEW

Wooden: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court (McGraw-Hill)



Legendary coach John Wooden whose UCLA basketball dynasty won ten March Madness national championships is considered by many to be the greatest coach in America's history. How he did it and what he viewed as ultimate success on and off the court is the subject of his best-selling memoir *WOODEN: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections* (McGraw-Hill).

For Coach Wooden success at its highest level was defined not by championships, celebrity or money but rather by the quality of effort one puts forth to become the best you are capable of becoming: "Make the effort 100%," he advised, "and the score cannot make you a loser. Do less and the score cannot make you a winner."

His philosophy of success and how to achieve it reflects his deep belief that an individual must not judge himself or herself on what they achieve but rather on what they should have achieved given their potential.

He taught that greatness was within everyone and that it was attained by making the highest effort to fulfill your potential: "Do not compare your results with others. Compare instead the quality of your effort. That's what counts most." How to bring forth your best effort is detailed in *WOODEN: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections*.

Coach John Wooden's official website: www.coachjohnwooden.com

COALITION MISSION

"To support, educate, and inspire parents of adolescents in order to promote the health and safety of our youth."

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Readers are encouraged to submit letters to the editor, ideas for articles or articles themselves.

Please direct your inquiries regarding the Coalition to parentscoalition@gmail.com

And 'Like' our Parents' Coalition Facebook Page!

www.parentscoalition.net



Who We Are

The Coalition began in 1994 as a grassroots response to the challenges of parenting teenagers. We look at both teen and parent relationships. When teenagers struggle, parents and guardians often feel isolated from one another and do not know what would be most helpful for their child. The Coalition offers a variety of platforms to address these concerns.

[READ MORE](#)

Events



2011 - 2012
Annual Calendar of Events

October 3, 2011
Jump Start Your Teen to Make Mature Choices

November 14, 2011
Unlock the Secrets of Facebook

January 9, 2012
Connecting with Your Adolescent

February 13, 2012
Hot Topics Discussion Circles

Mon, April 23, 2012
Annual Teen Panel Discussion

And check out our Parents' Coalition Facebook Page!



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