

University of Chicago Laboratory Schools

Parents' Association

November 8, 2010 Meeting

President Peri Altan called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Ms. Altan provided an overview of the role of the Parents' Association, noting that it:

- builds community among parents,
- supports the school with person power on the ground,
- represents the parent perspective and
- educates parents on how best to support their kids.

Ms. Altan then introduced Lisa Vahey, Charles Young and Jacqueline Griesdorn, who are the parent representatives on the Lower School Principal Search Committee.

Ms. Altan then introduced the four panelists for a panel discussion on "How to help your child be emotionally intelligent":

- Sharon Hirsch, Section Chief, Child/Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Chicago
- Erika Schmidt, Director of the Center for Child/Adolescent Psychotherapy, the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis
- Ken James, Director of Student Services, Lab
- Kathy Gruber, Lower School Counselor, Lab

Erika Schmidt described emotional intelligence as the ability to monitor one's own feelings and others' feelings, to discriminate among feelings, and to read feelings to guide actions most effectively. She described key characteristics of a person with high emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, the ability to tolerate strong feelings and the ability to manage moods effectively.

Sharon Hirsch noted that Freud described physical, cognitive, sexual, social and emotional areas of development and that if these different areas are not at the same level, problems can arise. Emotional development for very young children focuses on parents and family and developing the courage to go out into the world, but an overabundance of such courage can cause problems. For children ages 7-12, the focus of emotional development is discriminating between right and wrong, but an overreliance on rules can manifest itself as rigidity. For teens, the focus of emotional development is to separate from the family and run with peers. Dr. Hirsch noted that the brain is still developing in teens and that experiences of children affect their physical brain development. There are critical periods of development, and

it can be very difficult to make up developmental progress if it is not attained during the critical period.

In response to a question posed by Ms. Altan regarding practical actions parents can take to support their children's emotional development, Erika Schmidt explained that parents can and do model feelings. They should listen carefully to their children in a respectful way. Ms. Schmidt suggested that parents should not try to argue their children out of feelings but should take them at face value and ask the children to tell them more about their feelings. Parents should provide emotional oversight that kids can't provide themselves, recognizing when they are over-stimulated, for example, and redirecting them to quieter tasks. Parents should talk to their children about their own feelings and demonstrate how to fix difficult feeling situations.

Dr. Hirsch added that emotional intelligence does not mean eliminating emotions but rather managing them. Small children may say that they have a tummy ache rather than express their emotions because they do not have the ability to recognize and verbalize their emotional state. A child age 7-12 may get rigid in times of emotional turmoil, while a teen may retreat to friends.

Ms. Altan posed a question to Ms. Schmidt and Dr. Hirsch regarding bullying and the roles of the bullies, the victims and the bystanders. In response, they noted that bullies often have been bullied and are feeling ashamed and humiliated. Bullying requires a culture to support it. If your child describes an incident of bullying, it is important for parents to go over the event very carefully and talk about options available to the child in the moment and subsequently. It is helpful to rehearse what to do if a similar situation arises again.

Ms. Altan asked Ken James what the term "bullying" connotes. He responded that it is important to look at the specifics of the situation because it occurs in a relational field. One must look at the unconscious determinants of the situation. The dynamic of aggression and victimization is archetypical and is rendered in many forms. Often, the determinants are not readily visible. We must find ways in the community to support the bully and the victim.

Kathy Gruber noted that third and fourth grade girls often get entangled in an aggressive relational style that is not physical but involves eye rolling and verbal sniping. Kids at this age are experiencing a lot of pain and joy, power and helplessness. They are learning and experimenting with what it means to have and to be a friend. Often, there is a "magnet girl" who the other girls want to be close to, but the "magnet girl" is often not happy with this role. She noted that parents care as much about social development as they do about academic development and often react strongly to their children's experiences, as they touch upon their own memories. She recommended that parents understand and empathize but not get in the middle of a conflict between children. Parents should listen, back their children up, and help to maintain a sense of calm.

Ms. Altan asked Ken James and Kathy Gruber whether one parent should call another parent when their respective children have a conflict. Ken James recommended that the parent thinking of making such a call first talk to him or a member of the counseling staff, in order to put the matter in perspective and diffuse some of the associated energy. Kathy Gruber noted that

the counseling staff appreciates being informed of conflicts between students so that they can watch for patterns and help.

Ms. Altan asked Sharon Hirsch and Erika Schmidt about differences between boys and girls as they relate to emotional intelligence. Dr. Hirsch noted that for boys, bullying is more physical, while for girls, it tends to involve more verbal sniping. Both styles can be equally dangerous. A girl as a victim is more likely to talk to her parents about the situation. Parents should strive to stay involved with their kids, even when the kids are not forthcoming with information. Books and TV can provide a good jumping-off point in this regard.

Ms. Schmidt suggested that parents participate in the car pool in order to stay connected. She noted that boys are more likely to become grandiose and omnipotent in their behaviors, but in each case the issues involved relate to identity.

Ms. Altan then opened the floor for questions from parents to the panel.

Following the conclusion of the panel discussion, Ms. Altan called upon the principals to provide an update for their respective schools.

Mr. Horvat noted that the faculty has recently received training regarding the ongoing brain development in high school students as it relates to their behavior and emotions. He noted that parent-teacher conferences have been completed and that Labscares, a program to discuss issues of diversity, is next Friday. Fall sports have finished, and winter sports are beginning. Model UN and debate are in full swing. The fall production of a series of one-act plays was recently completed.

Mr. Reed noted that parent-to-parent meetings are being restructured to help support parents, and principal chats provide another opportunity for dialogue between parents and principals. Fall fest has concluded, and parent-advisor conferences are underway, as are music concerts. Grades will be available starting Monday, November 15 at 9:00 a.m. ERB tests begin on December 7 with the eighth graders, with other grades to follow next year. The tests are being administered online this year. Spring parent-teacher conferences have been moved from January to February. The eighth graders are starting to think about high school and are participating in a program with Mr. Horvat to prepare.

Ms. Anglin noted that the faculty participated in Friday in an ISACS conference downtown. The keynote speech of Sir Ken Robinson (which can be viewed at www.tedtalks.com) was particularly inspiring, as was Rachel Simmons, the author of "Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Aggression of Girls." Tomorrow, Phyllis Herzog will be speaking on phonics. The writing curriculum committee, which includes representatives from kindergarten through fourth grade, plus a reading specialist, Carla Young and Sylvie Anglin, is progressing with its work.

Ms. Young also commented on the ISACS conference attended by the entire faculty the preceding Friday.

Lisa Vahey and Jacqueline Griesdorn of the Lower School Principal Search Committee explained that the committee consists of 12 people, the same people who participated in the

committee last year, and that its function is to make a recommendation regarding the lower school principal selection. Parents who have comments or concerns about the search should feel free to contact Ms. Vahey, Ms. Griesdorn, Mr. Young or any other member of the committee.

Evan Zemil then provided a review of the Bizaarnival, which was successful despite the last-minute date change. He noted that the proceeds of the event on Sunday, October 31 were \$3,100, as compared to \$2,600 last year. Apple and pretzel sales were also very successful, netting approximately \$4,200. The theme was Greek mythology. Several slides of the festivities were presented. Mr. Zemil noted that he has served as co-chair of Bizaarnival for the past seven years and that a replacement for him will be needed next year.

Ms. Altan noted that interested parents can sign up to be part of a book club to discuss books relating to emotional intelligence.

Upon motion from Lauren Polite, seconded by Liisa Thomas, the meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Nancy Laethem Stern
Secretary