

Common Ground is a coalition of Bay Area schools that have joined together to enhance parent education. The goal of the coalition is to provide opportunities for parents and educators to learn from experts in a variety of fields, to share ideas with others, and to support each other's efforts to enrich our local communities.

The Common Ground Speaker Series features dynamic speakers who are nationally recognized for their expertise in specific areas of parenting, education and/or health. Each year, we strive to present a balanced series that addresses a wide array of issues confronting parents and educators.

### Common Ground Member Schools

The Carey School  
Castilleja School  
Charles Armstrong School  
Crystal Springs Uplands School  
Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School  
The Harker School  
Hillbrook School  
Keys School  
Menlo School  
Mulberry School  
The Nueva School  
Phillips Brooks School  
Pinewood School  
Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School  
Sacred Heart Preparatory School (Atherton)  
Saint Andrew's School  
St. Joseph's School of the Sacred Heart  
St. Matthew's Episcopal Day School  
Stanbridge Academy  
Trinity School  
Woodside Elementary School  
Woodside Priory School  
Yavneh Jewish Day School

## It's So Much Work to be Your Friend

with Richard Lavoie, M.A., M.Ed.

The number one need of human beings is to be liked by other human beings. With this underlying belief, Rick Lavoie shared an evening and morning with Common Ground parents discussing why strong social skills are important for all children and how parents can help their children develop them.

Rick acknowledged that it is tough to be a parent today. We want the best for our children academically, and we work hard to protect them from violent video games, pornography, drugs and other modern concerns. But, while many children are doing fine academically, what's even more important for their long term success is for them to make and keep friends. In this area, our children may not be as successful as they could be. In the end, our children's happiness as adults will be based on their social skills, NOT their academic skills. To support our children most effectively, it's important for parents to look at their children's lives from their perspective. Children –especially middle-schoolers – live in the moment, and the majority of those moments are social. Only 4% of children's time is spent in the classroom; 96% of their time is spent in social situations – on the playground, in the cafeteria, or on the bus.

Rick shared that parents can help children develop the skills that lead to better peer and social relationships. There are simple things that most parents can help their children learn: how to give and receive compliments, how to share, how to take turns and how to work out conflicts. But these skills can be harder for some children, and parents may need to play a more active role to help them succeed in social situations.

### How can we help our children develop their social skills?

If a child is having social problems, Rick advised that first, parents need to shift their perception of their child away from "being" a certain way, to their child "having" certain difficulties. Poor social skills are not intentional – they are out of a child's control and, like many skills, can be improved with attention and practice.

It's also important for parents to understand that children need to learn from other children. Parents need to ensure that each child spends time with other children to practice their social skills and develop relationships. This doesn't just have to be with children of the same age – it can be with older or younger children as well.

Rick shared four categories of skills for developing better social relationships:

#### 1. Timing and Staging

Relationships need time to develop. Parents need to support their children and provide settings and opportunities for them to have time with other children to nurture relationships.

#### 2. Social Memory

If a child has learning issues associated with memory problems, they may also have related social problems, since they need to remember social skills the same way they memorize academic content. If your child has these challenges, things you can do to help include:

- Schedule 1:1 play-dates
- Have your child host the play-date so they feel more comfortable
- Make sure the last 15 minutes of the play-date go well. Children live more "in the moment" and what they remember about their experience will be heavily influenced by how they enjoy the last 15 minutes
- Establish house rules and enforce them consistently
- Put away special toys prior to the play-date to reduce potential sources of conflict

#### 3. Social Prediction

Help your child understand the social impact of his or her actions. Point out things that happened as a result of something else and help them to predict what might happen next.

"Only" children need extra time with other children. Play-dates are key so they don't just hang out with adults, and play needs to be interactive, not merely parallel. Parents of only children should also promote their child's interest in life-long sports that they can play with adults and over the long term – like swimming, golf, tennis or bowling - not sports that end with the school year.

# Mark Your Calendars

## **TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age** with Dan Kindlon, Ph.D.

Do today's parents give their children too much and expect too little? Even the best-intentioned parents may be overdoing it. Join us as Dr. Dan Kindlon addresses the consequences of a generation of children brought up with too much negotiation, protection and entitlement. Dr. Kindlon has taught child psychology at Harvard University for more than 20 years. He is the author of numerous scientific journal articles and several books, including *Raising Cain* (co-authored with Michael Thompson), *Alpha Girls* and *Too Much of a Good Thing*.

### **Tues., February 26, 7:00PM**

The Nueva School  
6565 Skyline Boulevard  
Hillsborough  
650-348-2272

### **Wed., February 27, 7:00PM**

Campbell Center  
Sacred Heart Schools  
150 Valparaiso Avenue  
Atherton  
650-322-1928

### **Thurs., February 28, 8:45AM**

*Morning Session*  
Hillbrook School  
300 Marchmont Drive  
Los Gatos  
408-356-6116

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#### *4. Social contract*

In any social situation, there are unspoken contracts between people as to how they behave and what boundaries they must respect. For example, in an elevator, the person inside knows to hold the door for the person entering, or if they are standing in front of the buttons they offer to select the right button for the floor. In a store setting, customers know not to go behind the counter and they respect that as a boundary. All children need to learn these social norms, and parents have a role to play in observing and pointing them out to their children. Simple things like body language and posture can be overlooked by children. Parents can encourage their children to stop, look and listen to how people are behaving around them to understand more about social relationships.

#### **Gender Roles**

To further complicate social relationships, Rick shared that there are significant differences between what boys and girls value in their friends. Parents need to be aware of these differences to help their children foster relationships with both genders.

Rick shared the results of research that examined what middle school students look for in friends. Boys look for friends who are athletic, honest, and responsible, and those who have good personalities and similar interests. Boys don't like other boys who are trouble-makers, pushy, bossy or dumb. Girls look for friends with good personalities, similar interests, a sense of humor and a friendly demeanor. Girls don't like other girls who act "stuck-up," are unfriendly or are unkempt.

What girls and boys like to talk about with their friends differs as well. Middle school boys like to talk about: girls, sex, sports and "safe," neutral topics. Girls like to talk about: boys, school, gossip and "private stuff." Gossip, rather than being negative, is actually the ability to talk about the lives of other people. It is something that girls need to learn how to do appropriately, and not in a mean-spirited manner. In general, girls view school as their social lives, while boys see school as an interruption of their social lives.

What boys and girls look for in the opposite sex differs by gender as well. Boys look for: attractiveness, loyalty, confidentiality and intelligence. (Yes, they do look for girls who are smart!) Girls like boys who are attractive, kind, attentive, gentle and have a good sense of humor.

Across the board, positive social traits that help children develop friendships and healthy social relationships include the ability to:

- Smile and laugh
- Greet others
- Extend invitations
- Converse
- Share
- Give and receive compliments, and
- Have a good appearance.

As parents, being aware of and understanding these differences and the underlying qualities that promote friendship can allow us to support our children as they develop relationships, now and in the future.

Rick shared one last topic to consider – children's social relationships with their teachers. He shared a short list of actions children can take to have better student-teacher relationships:

- Be punctual
- Make eye contact
- Participate in class
- Use the teacher's name
- Don't slouch or sprawl
- Submit work on time
- Request explanations; don't demand help
- Leave when the period is over, and
- Say "thank you!"