



## Parenting for a Different World – A Call to Action

February 24, 2017 Event Follow Up

PDWorld.org

Thank you for joining us at our inaugural event on February 24. We hope you feel that it was time well spent and that you left with some fresh ideas or perhaps a new way of looking at things for the betterment of your own children and all children within our community. Our call to action was intended to bring awareness to some important issues facing kids today and to begin a new conversation - with our children and one another. We want to recap some of the key points and extend the invitation to get involved and keep a new line of dialog going!

### **A review of *Adolescents Under Pressure*, presented by Dr. Anna Mueller:**

Dr. Mueller, from the University of Chicago, visited us to share her recently published research entitled *Adolescents Under Pressure*. It's true that kids today are under increasing pressure from all directions. However, this pressure is not just in terms of achieving and succeeding, it applies to how children are experiencing everyday life. It turns out, the very nature of communities such as ours contributes to this pressure. While Dr. Mueller did not cite where her research was conducted, those of us in the audience certainly noted similarities:

- A tendency to gossip, be it verbally and/or through high volume of social media. This leads to the idea that everyone is watching all the time; there is little to no privacy.
- The community is homogeneous, and further, there is a narrow idea of what constitutes ideal kids and an ideal family. This is very restrictive – there is no room for error. This leads to fear – of trying things or making a mistake.
- There is a stigma associated with mental health issues or seeking aid for mental wellness, as it is contrary to the ideal of the perfect kid or family.

These characteristics of a community have significant consequences:

- There is an unwillingness to seek help or to be honest about it and this is from both kids and adults; both are fearful that people will find out, and so, too often people go without the professional help they need.
- There is a perception that failure is not an option; and there is also a very narrow definition of what constitutes success. Both create stress.
- There is a disconnect between adults and youth in terms of discussing suicide – the discussion is not happening between the two. Adults want the kids to forget it and move on; and the kids don't know what to make of it.



- There is a passive view of suicide among youth, as though it could “happen” to you; given the lack of discussion and understanding, kids are left thinking suicide is highly possible, even an option.

While neither the characteristics nor the consequences are desirable, the good news is that just as our community fostered this in the first place, we also have the power to bring about change to benefit our children and community as a whole. We can foster a shift in the culture of our community! Dr. Mueller provided some initial suggestions:

- Avoid passive language; remember that metaphors matter and they trigger emotions. Therefore, know that suicide is not contagious and talking about suicide does not increase the risk of suicide. Adults must share in the conversation, especially in the wake of a suicide.
- Remember that youth see and hear things differently; they have limited perspective. Engage them and work to eliminate that disconnect between youth and adults.
- Model failure; it’s ok to make mistakes and get back up – don’t hide this!
- Respect privacy; consider how you share things, the good and the not so good; even too much bragging amplifies the struggle our youth face.
- Challenge the mental health stigma. We would never condemn someone for seeking treatment for anything from the flu to cancer; the same needs to be the case for mental health.
- Acknowledge community problems – be honest about what is good and what needs improvement in our community.
- Empower youth to part of the solution; listen to them.
- Avoid gossip.
- Use evidence-based programs for shifting high pressure (in schools and athletics).

This situation and the need for a community response and commitment to improving these circumstances for our youth have led to the formation of Parenting for a Different World (PDW).

Through this community group we acknowledge that we live in a different time and place from that in which we came of age, and we recognize a need to help our youth to develop coping and help-seeking skills, as well as resiliency. We want to be proactive in our approach so that they can broaden their views of success and forge a balanced path that takes them into adulthood.

To achieve this, PDW seeks to expand the dialog in our community and reach people in four branches: education, faith & service, music & the arts, sports; as it seems that most people in our community spend a good deal of time in at least one of these areas, thus enabling PDW to reach as many within our community to participate in this culture shift.

PDW introduced with four local leaders to represent each branch and each shared a thought toward a community approach for the respective branches. Here’s a glimpse of what PDW is about and what future programming will focus on:

### **Music & The Arts – Phil Kittiver**



A theater major who began his career as an actor, Phil made the switch to corporate America where his acting chops come in handy in the world of telecom sales. Phil is the creative leader and mission writer of the Folger McKinsey School Play, as well as the acting coach for Theater in the Park, Severna Park's local youth workshop for musical theatre.

Phil shared his thoughts about how to set the appropriate vibe for projects involving children. He reinforced that they are indeed children, and we as the adults are providing an experience for them – they are not there for us. He reminded us that these experiences should be fun and enjoyable – an outlet for expression, a chance to try something new, a chance to find something you might like or be good at. It should also be balanced because kids should be able to explore many different things and not have to make too big of a commitment to any one thing at too young an age. He advised that when choosing a group, program or activity, find out what the mission is and make sure it's a fit. If the expectation from the group, for instance, is that this is the only activity the child is involved with and it requires a 30 hour a week commitment, that's important to know before beginning.

He shared that experiences in the arts and theater – or in any area – should be just that, an experience; it's about the journey and the process, not just a focus on the end, a specific achievement or professionalism or perfectionism. He shared a thought that producing art – be it a play, musical, band, chorus or strings concert – can offer a wonderful experience to learn about the value of practice, of teamwork, of playing your part and respecting other's ability to do the same. His work with the Folger elementary play has enabled kids to make a commitment for several months but just one evening – usually 2 hours – per week, allowing them to be involved with other things; it's not all consuming, but age-appropriate and above all, fun.

### **Sports – Jamie Bragg**

Jamie began playing football in high school and, given his dedication and natural ability, progressed to continue playing at the University of Maryland. He is now the VP of Team Sports at Under Armor. His love of sports is woven into his work, as well as family life, as his wife was a fellow Terrapin where she excelled at lacrosse and now, their three children are avid athletes themselves. Jamie's energy and passion are infectious and he promoted the many benefits of sports: maintaining good physical health, teamwork, hard work, working toward a goal.

Jamie, too, said it should be fun – as he reminded us, it's called “play” and a “game”, by definition, this kind of activity should be enjoyable. He admonished, however, that we have gotten further away from that because parents have taken it too far – crazy on the sidelines, screaming and yelling and making it hard for kids to enjoy the experience. He reminded parents not to interfere with the game – too often there's too much noise and the coach is drowned out; it's impossible for the kids to know who or what to listen to and too often, the parents are undoing the work of the coach and teamwork in general.

Jamie was able to share great anecdotes given his experience working with college coaches and professional coaches and athletes. Yes, there are many in our community who volunteer to play the



role of coach; but most of us just try to jump in on that role – Don't do it! Be the parent and enjoy watching your child do something he likes; allow him to keep liking it. Make the car ride home fun; don't jump into coach mode and don't complain about the coach or other players – set the right example of being grateful for the experience. Let kids be kids and let the experience be enjoyable. He also cautioned about specializing too soon. He said college coaches, in fact, always prefer the versatile athlete – they just “get it” and are more coachable and better team players. And specializing too soon can often lead to burn-out and injury.

### **Education – Beth Nolan**

Beth's career in education has run the gamut from teaching middle school, to serving as an assistant principal to mentoring new teachers to her current role as a professor at Johns Hopkins in the school of education. In addition, she has trained in the area of resiliency and she served on the AACPS CAC, Citizens Advisory Council. Beth shared an interesting viewpoint about the rigors of coursework available to our students. So many of our children are loading their schedules with multiple AP classes, far more challenging than the generation prior could have imagined; and double what a college student actually faces. Often, the margin of what separates one student from the next is so miniscule that it begs the question, are students taking the classes that they are most interested in and for which they are best suited, or are they just taking a class for the points they merit? For this reason, AACPS is moving toward adding a cum laude system, in addition to the valedictorian and salutatorian, to recognize the accomplishments of the many, many deserving students. These students should feel pride in their efforts and accomplishments, even though only one student will be first in the class, so many are highly successful.

### **Faith & Community Service – Ron Foster**

Ron is the Pastor at Severna Park United Methodist Church, and offered a view of the value of faith based organizations to provide solace and comfort to youth amidst the fast paced, demanding world in which they live. Churches, synagogues, youth groups and civic groups aimed at providing service, such as Scouts, remind youth of the bigger picture, provide perspective and remove the pressure on self to a connection to something much bigger.

Given these views into the branches of PDW, the goal is to offer programing and resources in each in an effort to begin a shift within our community and strengthen our youth by instilling help-seeking and coping skills and resiliency. The goal is not only an end to suicides, it is the development of self-reliant adults.