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Q&A/Joy G. Dryfoos

Charting a Safe Course for Adolescence

By Donna Greene

AT 72, Joy G. Dryfoos, a longtime resident of Hastings-on-Hudson, still remembers her own crisis of identity as an adolescent. Years later, she watched her son as a teen-ager and wondered how he - and the family - would survive it. But they did.

Not every teen-ager and the family are so fortunate - and Ms. Dryfoos, a self-taught sociologist, has spent more than 17 years trying to change that. She was director of research for the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit research and educational organization in Manhattan, until 1981. An independent researcher for the Carnegie Corporation foundation, she is the author of four books and about 100 articles dealing with those issues. Her most recent book is "Safe Passages: Making It Through Adolescence in a Risky Society" (Oxford University Press).

Ms. Dryfoos's work has drawn the attention of the Westchester Children's Association and the Westchester Council on Crime and Delinquency, which have collaborated with her to form the Westchester Center for School/Community Partnership, which is trying to establish full-service community schools where children and adults can go not only for school but also a myriad of social and health needs. Here are excerpts from a recent conversation with Ms. Dryfoos:

Q. *Is it harder to be an adolescent today than when you were one?*

A. I thought it was pretty hard to be one when I was one, and that was a long time ago. But probably for different reasons. I remember very well and have written about my own sort of identify crisis, knowing who I was and what I wanted to be. I don't think that has changed very much.

But there are a couple of big differences now. One of them is if you have sex without protection you can die. The other is guns. That was certainly not true when I was growing up. And a lot of the drugs have become much more sophisticated and much more available. So there is more risk, but that doesn't mean there wasn't any when I was growing up.

If you talk to people my age, everyone has a story about terrible parents, terrible problems. Things like sexual abuse have been going on for a long time. So I think you can overstate it if you say these are terrible times for kids and before it was so easy. It was never easy, and particularly it was never easy to be poor. And it was never easy to be black.

And now we have new kinds of challenges - an increasing Hispanic population with a language barrier. The population is changing Quite rapidly.

Q. *Is there a need to teach parenting skills more?*

A. Oh, yes, and I think they have to be taught earlier, and I think there is a pretty good body of research on how to do that. There are many successful programs. That's why I wrote the book "Safe Passages" - to make the point that we know what to do. There are wonderful parenting programs in some of the schools, for example. There are parent resource rooms and parent educators, and parents themselves become outreach workers. But a busy parent is not going to be able to get to that very easily. But we know, for example, home visiting for young parents and people with young babies is terribly important.

Q. *So with unlimited resources we could solve the problem?*

A. No. We have more resources than any place else in the world. We just don't use them very wisely. And we tend to proliferate programs. Every time anyone sneezes there is a new program instead of stepping back and putting it all together in some way so you have a comprehensive approach to the children and their families.

I start with one premise - and that may be true of rich kids as well as poor kids - and that is, every child must be attached to a responsible adult. If it's not the parent, it has to be someone else.

Q. *So if a parent is not doing it, find someone else?*

A. Yes. Now, once you think of that, you start thinking of the program implications and then you also bring together the school, the community people, the other parents, everybody. And there are a lot of different ways to do that and it is being done in some places, and it's probably the most successful program intervention there it is. Sometime it's a teacher; it can be anyone, a grandfather, an older sister.

Q. *Describe that ideal school-based community collaboration you are advocating.*

A. In the book I call it a "safe passage school" that is open. It was very much based on the Children's Aid Society model in Washington Heights in Manhattan and another in Philadelphia. They're jointly run by a school

and a community agency, and in many cases the United Way is involved. So the principal of the school and the coordinator of the community school jointly run the program. It is open from early morning till late at night. There is a parent resource center, and it has a health clinic. All those pieces get put together by different agencies in the community. And it has an innovative curriculum. There would be community services provided, and parents would be encouraged to act as volunteers.

Q. *Why are we looking to schools to do this?*

A. We're not looking for schools to do it all; Quite the contrary. What we're looking for are new kinds of institutions, school-community partnerships, where the work is shared between the school and the community agencies. What this does is open up the schools so the community agencies that are out there can come into the schools and have direct contact with the children and their families.

Q. *So the schools are contributing a physical entity?*

A. Yes, that's where the kids are. And the schools need this because they really can't deal with the kinds of problems kids have today. Schools can't educate children who lack human resources, and people who provide human resources are not going to be successful if the children aren't going to get a good education.

Q. *Are we talking mainly about economically disadvantaged children or all children?*

A. My interest is in economically disadvantaged children, and there are plenty of them here in Westchester. But what I find is, People all over are concerned about their kids. So the idea of having schools open after school, for example, is very attractive to everybody because almost everyone works and they don't know what to do with their kids, especially their middle-school kids. But there are the famous latch-key children who are just getting into more and more trouble, and they really need someplace to hang out in the afternoon. So it makes sense for a boys' club or a girls' club to locate right in the school.

A lot of that is happening. Very interesting things are happening all over the country that bring together the resources that are out there in the schools. You can link together what happens after school and what happens in school. The teachers have to be involved, but then they are very happy to have people from the outside come in - some of them are volunteers and others professionals - to really work with the kids so they can catch up.

Q. *On the other end of the spectrum, we hear of economically advantaged children who get into trouble.*

A. I think that is particularly true because of the lack of availability of parents. Some people are working very hard - the double-income family - but that means mom is away working long hours, and everyone is working pretty hard to keep up that high standard of living. There is a cost to all of that, and that's why I say I think suburban schools, more privileged areas, are very interested in these ideas as well because parents need to have their children engaged 24 hours a day with somebody - some responsible adult.

Q. *You are talking about institutional changes. The book "Reviving Ophelia" suggests that all adolescent girls are potentially at risk of eating disorders and other problems. What do you think?*

A. It's almost a different subject. I hesitate to say to parents, Do this, do that. I'm much more comfortable in the policy arena. But my editor at Oxford Press insisted I write a chapter for parents, and I guess one of my resistances was that I felt I wasn't a very good parent when my son was an adolescent. He's now 47, but he definitely was an adolescent and it was definitely difficult. My husband and I had very little confidence that what we were doing was correct. Somehow we lived through it and he grew up and turned into this magnificent human being.

I think when I write about being a good parent and all of that, I trivialize. I don't feel comfortable with it because it's not my natural metier. But the whole thing about communications is really true and keeping the door open, and the same principles that apply to programs - the need for attachments.

If parents feel they're not being successful with their kids, they should find some other adult who can be. That's not as hard as it sounds. Kids really like adults. They just don't necessarily like their own parents at the moment when the parent is telling them they can't do what they really want.