

BBFA PEP Summary

***Odd Kid Out?
When Your Child Marches to a Different Drummer***
Linda Flaga, Ph.D.

Tuesday, April 8, 2008

April's Parent Education Program ***Odd Kid Out? When Your Child Marches to a Different Drummer*** was presented by Linda Flaga, Ph.D., a psychologist at Cranbrook Lower School and Cranbrook Kingswood. A capacity audience attended the morning presentation.

Dr. Flaga began her presentation with some basic premises, including that every child is unique and that there is a broad spectrum of normal development. She emphasized that shyness and social awkwardness are common and normal. Parents should resist labeling children who have difficulty in social situations, she said, because it risks leading a child to believe that his or her social discomfort is an unchangeable character trait rather than a behavior that can be modified. Dr. Flaga then presented a brief overview of the importance and benefits of healthy relationships. Friendship, one of the central relationships in the lives of children, helps them develop empathy, trust, and the ability to share.

Next, Dr. Flaga discussed different types of social awkwardness and their causes. She noted that many socially awkward children have difficulty reading the faces of others, making it difficult for them to fit in with their peers. Others may engage in *behavior* (often unknowingly) that causes other children to avoid or even reject them. Causes of social awkwardness can include simple shyness, attention deficit issues, and other learning disabilities. Some children (and adults) suffer from social anxiety disorder, a significant and persistent fear of social situations that results in physical symptoms. Dr. Flaga said that children Dr. Flaga emphasized that social awkwardness becomes a problem only when children are lonely as a result. It's possible for someone (including a child) to spend time alone, or to have only one or two friends, and not be lonely.

Dr. Flaga noted that social awkwardness is strongly linked to attention and learning issues. She has found that social problems are often what cause parents to seek out treatment to help with these issues. At its extreme, social awkwardness can be diagnosed as Asperger's Syndrome, an impairment characterized by an inability to "read" the emotions of other people, a lack of emotional reciprocity, and a tendency to become obsessed with specific topics and data.

Dr. Flaga outlined some things parents should and should not do when their children exhibit social awkwardness or anxiety. Among the things to avoid are telling children not to cry or that there's nothing to worry about, or becoming angry or forcing your child into social situations. By contrast, things that work include telling children that it's all right to watch before joining a group or event and to sympathize with the situation. By treating shyness or awkwardness as a normal and understandable behavior that children can change, parents can help them overcome the anxiety.

Dr. Flaga also mentioned the use of books, social coaching, and even scripting to help children deal with specific social situations. It's important for parents to help their children become part of some safe group or activity that will help them develop more mature social skills. Children can start with solo activities (such as tennis or art) and then naturally graduate to those that involve other children. Parents can help their children learn what behaviors may be putting off their peers, how to identify desirable social interactions, and to ask for help if they need it.

For children who suffer from more severe forms of social anxiety, Dr. Flaga discussed the benefits of seeking professional help from therapists who specialize in children's issues. She noted that pediatricians and family physicians may not have the training or experience needed to identify or help children suffering

from social awkwardness and anxiety, but that pediatric psychologists and psychiatrists can help parents identify appropriate resources and (if necessary) treatment.

Dr. Flaga concluded her remarks with a reference to “the three C’s”: Competence, Confidence, and Connectedness. She said that all three are necessary for a healthy and happy life, but that they must be in balance. Part of the job of parents is helping their children with the “connectedness” element.

Dr. Flaga can be reached at lflaga@cranbrook.edu.

Further Reading:

Dr. Flaga recommended ***Look Me In the Eye***, an autobiography by John Elder Robison, a young man with Asperger’s Syndrome.