What is PACT?

PACT is an acronym that stands for Parents Ask Call Talk. The mission of PACT is to foster a culture of open communication - communication between parents and their children, among the parent community, and between parents and the school. This culture of open communication allows our adolescent children to grow and exercise their independent decision-making skills while also maintaining a safe network of caring and responsible adults to guide them.

At SAR High School, we believe that parent-child communication is a developmental imperative. Ongoing dialogue between parents and their children should be open and honest surrounding such developmentally vital topics as drugs and alcohol, sexuality, and decision-making in general. This dialogue should include frank discussion of potentially risky behaviors and their consequences, as well as parents’ values, expectations and limits.

Open communication among parents will often push parents beyond their comfortable limits. This type of parent-to-parent communication entails reaching out to other parents who you may not know well (yet), often despite protests from your children.

Lastly, when parents communicate openly with the school, this creates a mutually trusting and supportive partnership.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPARENCY IN BUILDING A HEALTHY SCHOOL CULTURE

By: Rabbi Tully Harcsztark, Principal

Our very being is comprised of thousands of decisions that each of us makes, decisions that direct and give shape to the lives that, with God’s help, we build for ourselves and our families. These decisions range from the inconsequential to the extremely significant. And there is thought - of ranging degrees, to be sure - that goes into each of those decisions. But it is impossible to fully anticipate the impact of our decisions on the lives of others. The greater the number of people affected by the decision, the more likely that someone will disagree with or be negatively affected by the decision.

And that is certainly so in schools. A school day is comprised of hundreds of policy,
IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPARENCY

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educational and disciplinary decisions that directly impact the members of the school community. Think about a time when you were negatively impacted by the decision of another. Such moments can be experienced as an act of violence - although not physical, it still can result in a feeling of being violated or victimized. Words, statements, policies or decisions that are communicated as fact, as conclusion, have blunt edges and cause pain on contact.

But hopefully, those decisions were in fact grounded in careful deliberation; a deliberation that considered, with honesty and integrity, the various sides of the question, the possible responses to the circumstance, the values that are in conflict in the particular instance or the possible educational message one might want to deliver. When a teacher, administrator, colleague or friend shares the thought process that led to the decision or conclusion, he or she has the opportunity to explain the many and varied people, options and values that one needed to consider in making the decision. In sharing the deliberation along with the decision, two things happen. 1) The student or colleague understands that the decision came from a place of deep concern for all of the parties involved and 2) that difficult questions have many sides that need to be brought into discussion with each other. The person is able to see that not liking or disagreeing with a decision does not mean that it is uncaring or insensitive. In fact, when the parties engage difficult situations with transparency, such situations can become deep learning experiences for all involved.

I am often asked by a faculty member how to deal with a challenging situation involving a student, parent or colleague. “What are you struggling with?” The faculty member shares the various sides of the dilemma. And I respond, “Say that. All of it!” Communicating the fullness of your thought process is an essential part of the decision making process.

We do not make the correct call one hundred percent of the time. But we can communicate thoughtfulness, caring, honesty and integrity in every exchange, if it is important to us. And that is the key to building a healthy school culture.

BUILD
TRUST
THROUGH
TRANSPARENCY

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSPARENCY

By: Dr. Michelle Humi, School Psychologist

In this article, I would like to address two topics in psychological transparency — mental health transparency and transparency about our emotions.

Mental Health Transparency

When a family feels stigmatized by mental illness, family members will often times be too ashamed to obtain the full support they may need in coping with their various issues. This is especially concerning where an adolescent struggles with his/her thoughts, feelings and/or emotions and is unable to receive the support and empathy he/she may need. Transparency and openness regarding the adolescent’s struggles will thereby enable the individual to obtain support from his/her parents, community, school, and possibly outside providers.

As a parent, you can create an open and transparent environment by sharing with your children your own emotional ups and downs or by discussing other family members who may be struggling with their own mental health issue. By doing so, you can create a space for your child to talk about their feelings and what they might be struggling with. One of the best ways to get help for your child’s mental health issues is to first talk with them about how they are feeling and what they feel they are struggling with.

As parents, we realize that talking with our children may not be enough. We know that sometimes outside

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DIVERSITY AND TRANSPARENCY

By: Michael Courtney, Director of College Counseling

In a co-educational Modern Orthodox Jewish day school, with over 500 students hailing from three states, four boroughs, and eight counties, there is inevitable variation in how families practice Modern Orthodoxy. While SAR High School has expectations of how parents and children observe specific mitzvot that are at the core of our religion, undoubtedly there is heterogeneity in how families interpret halakha. As PACT committee leaders, we are hoping to instill the principle that our community is a diverse one and even if people disagree with the practices and beliefs of others, students and parents should act in a respectful way.

This can be seen in the classroom or the SAR hallways, where a political debate should allow for respectful discourse and patience in hearing the opposing person’s viewpoints. One may have passionately-held and strongly-argued views, but the opposing viewpoint should still be heard with respect.

On a religious level, students need to be equally compassionate with their peers and their private ways of practicing. It is easy to judge another student if their particular observance differs; contrarily, it can be difficult to respect another person’s level of religiosity yet it is absolutely necessary to avoid being disparaging in order to maintain a strong, considerate, and open-minded SAR community. However, without passing judgment on other families’ practices, parents should also feel comfortable asking other parents about particular practices before their children visit or stay with another family. Scenario: SAR Parent A should not feel abashed to ask SAR Parent B if their family goes to shul Friday night if that is how their son or daughter is raised. If the answer is no, it is fine for Parent A to request, non-judgmentally, that their children go to shul together on that particular Friday night. It might get trickier on Shabbat afternoon if a hosting family engages in recreational activity that the guest’s family doesn’t participate in on Shabbat; in that case, the host family should modify their activities so that the guest does not have to be put in a compromising situation. There are, of course, plenty of other wholesome ways to spend Shabbat afternoon when friends gather together and thus the guest should not feel that they infringed on the host’s fun. These questions can arise in many situations, but when in doubt, it is better to act on the more strictly-observant side of the issue. And in concert with observing halakhot to the fullest, the family whose practice is more stringent should not be judgmental of the family whose observance is less so. Neither family should feel that their religiosity and observance is a barrier to friendship within the Modern Orthodox sphere. It is important for parents to ask other parents, with whom they are not familiar, about their religious standards. SAR community members should feel comfortable with one another; picking up the telephone to become acquainted with the parents of your daughters’/sons’ friends is a major value that we encourage. We hope this routine becomes accepted by our hundreds of families so that we can develop a unified high school community that transcends geographic borders.
CLARIFYING YOUR VALUES, AND OTHER CORE PARENTING PRINCIPLES

By: Dr. Russell Hoffman, School Psychologist

In her excellent formulation of how parents can best meet their children’s developmental needs, Deborah Roffman lists five core elements of effective parenting: (1) affirmation, (2) information, (3) values clarification, (4) limit setting, and (5) anticipatory guidance. These five elements represent five core needs that children and adolescents need their parents to satisfy. While all five are vital to meeting the nurturance needs of our kids, I would like to highlight one of them that is especially important - and particularly challenging - for adolescents: values clarification. Part of the developmental trajectory of adolescence involves critically reassessing and, sometimes, challenging the values of one’s parents. As teenagers mature and grow into adults, they often adopt these familiar values and own them in a newly autonomous, adult manner. Sometimes, they reject or amend the values of their upbringing. Because of this developmental reality, expressing, clarifying and enforcing our values as parents can often be a difficult and contentious aspect of parenting our teenage children.

Despite the challenging nature of values clarification, it is a crucial element of parenting. Indeed, as Ms. Roffman indicates, it is a core need of our adolescent children. However much teenagers might challenge the values and limits of their parents (and teachers), they need us to have those values and to share, clarify and personalize them. Even though most teenagers will never admit it (or at least won’t admit it until they’re adults themselves and are parenting their own kids), their parents’ values contribute to the substance and stability of their world view. Hence, even if it occasionally foments some conflict, parents must convey their values to their children.

Of course, before parents can clarify their values for their children, they must first clarify their values for themselves. This means analyzing their own values and belief systems and thinking about how best to articulate them for an adolescent audience. It often means collaborating with your co-parent (or, in the true spirit of PACT, with other parents in your community) to refine your message. It also means proactively anticipating their children’s questions and challenges and being prepared to explain, clarify and defend their values in a calm and non-reactive manner. One important element of calmly clarifying and reinforcing your values comes from another one of Ms. Roffman’s core parenting components, namely validation. When parents remember that it is developmentally appropriate for their teenage children to challenge their values, they can validate and accept this impulse of their children. This can help parents to remain objective, to not take their children’s challenging stance too personally, and to calmly stay true to their values.

Another important consideration for parents to take into account is the difference between beliefs and behaviors.

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BEING TRANSPARENT WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT YOUR VALUES

By: Cari Cohen, Assistant Director of College Counseling

As parents, we want our kids to be happy, to be successful—but most fundamentally, we want our children to learn, internalize, and practice our values. And yet we don’t always find ways to address that which is most important to us. We talk to our teenagers every day, but the reality of the rhythms of our lives is that many of those conversations are purely transactional—”what time do I have to pick you up?” “where are my sneakers?” Even when we have conversations that address more substantive issues, our day-to-day conversations don’t necessarily get to the deepest questions of our values as parents and families. And yet without our expressing those values clearly, we can’t expect that our children will just pick them up in the air.

When it comes to the big issues in teenagers’ lives—relationships, sexuality, substances, religious observance—it is vitally important that we make time and space for these conversations to happen. Teenagers need to hear clearly from their parents what their parents’ values around these issues are. We may think that our teenagers aren’t listening to us, but research is clear that parents are the greatest shapers of their children’s values—more

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UN-FRAUGHTING THE FRAUGHT CONVERSATION

By: Dr. Rivka Schwartz, Associate Principal, General Studies

The canonical PACT conversation is one in which a parent calls up another parent to find out about plans for a gathering--what will the kids be doing? Will there be adult supervision? How many kids will be there? Mr. Michael Courtney, in his article in this newsletter, suggests another such conversation, around religious observance and expectations when students visit each other's homes.

Some of you have to be reading this and thinking, “Sure. Easy enough for you to say. Call up another parent, whom you may not know, and ask awkward questions that seem to imply that they might not be doing a good job. How am I supposed to do that?” Indeed, some of us on the PACT committee are parents of teenagers, have made those calls, and know just how awkward they can be. But there are ways we can approach them as a community that can make it easier.

The first is to create a culture that routinizes and normalizes these conversations. The more these calls get made, the more they become just standard, not an implied judgment about someone else’s parenting and religiosity. This is indeed the point of the entire PACT undertaking—to create a culture in which these conversations are expected on both sides, and therefore the awkwardness is dissipated. If everyone calls and asks, then calling and asking means that we’re participants in PACT culture, not that I’m questioning your parenting.

The second is harder, because it requires not just a community of making phone calls, but a community of trust. The caller has to be able to trust that the questions will be received in a generous spirit as being about responsibility, not suspicion. The parent being called has to be able to trust that their answers about their standards and expectations will be used to find appropriate common ground, not to judge their religiosity or parenting. We are different families, with different parenting practices, different values, different behavioral norms, and different halakhic standards. We have to be able to talk about those differences without judging others, and without leaping to assume that we are being judged ourselves.

We can’t dictate that other people trust us this way. But we can engender this trust in others by practicing it ourselves. If another parent makes a “PACT call”, we can make sure that we respond with openness, and indeed appreciation, even if the question is a sensitive one. Don’t assume that someone is judging your decisions or practices—start from the trusting assumption that they’re trying to fulfill the goals of PACT, and proceed from there. If you are the parent placing the call, don’t be hesitant because you’re worried about appearing suspicious or judgmental. Trust that the parent you’re calling is as committed to PACT goals as you are, and will receive your phone call in that spirit.

We all acknowledge that these calls are important, and that this communication helps shape our community in positive ways. It’s just that we’re afraid that they will be awkward and difficult, or not well-received. If we commit to approaching them in a posture of trust to our fellow-parents, operating in confidence that that trust will be reciprocated, we can help create a safer, more transparent SAR community.
help may be necessary. However, we may be hesitant to seek that help from our child’s school or outside providers because of the perceived stigma surrounding the topic. By creating a more transparent environment at home where emotions, feelings and mental health are acknowledged and discussed, we are sending a message that mental health issues are not a sign of weakness or something we should be embarrassed about seeking help for.

Parents would never feel embarrassed or ashamed to take their child to the doctor for a broken leg, or ashamed to call the school nurse to ask for an elevator pass. Parents should feel similarly open when dealing with their child’s mental health struggles. Parents should freely seek out recommendations for psychologists. And parents should be transparent and open with their child’s school regarding their child’s emotional difficulties so the school can appropriately support them.

**Emotional Transparency**

Emotional Transparency concerns acknowledging our emotions and the emotions of our child. Running away or dismissing our feelings, instead of embracing them, is something we as parents may be unconsciously doing. This is true with respect to ourselves and our teenagers.

When discussing this issue, I always mention the old adage of “you get what you get and you don’t get upset”. What we are saying to our children when we use this phrase is that our children should be grateful for what they have and that they should not get upset because they did not get everything they wanted. While this phrase can present a great lesson in gratitude it can also be dismissive of the angry feeling a child may be experiencing because he/she feels slighted. Transparency in this case would include being honest with your child about your feelings in that moment and for the child to acknowledge their feelings about not getting what they wanted. It is not only about allowing our children to be angry and upset but also actually acknowledging and embracing the fact that they may be feeling this way.

Acknowledging your true feelings comes up in varieties of ways when we interact with our children. For example, our child may be scared of getting shots from the doctor. We as parents instinctively tell them that “it won’t hurt”, “it’s a little pinch”, “you won’t even feel it”. Perhaps a better approach is to be more transparent and acknowledge that the shot might hurt. In doing so you will help your child feel validated, more safe and perhaps cause your child’s fright to dissipate. Yet another example of where we can embrace our child’s emotions is where our child earns a bad grade, or fails to get into the college he/she wanted. Acknowledging that they are upset and disappointed may help to lessen the hurt.

By acknowledging negative emotions we can teach adolescents how to become more resilient. This is equally true for positive emotions. For example, a child who rarely gets invited to spend Shabbat at someone else’s home may feel ecstatic when he/she gets invited to spend Shabbat with a friend. As parents, we should be transparent and recognize the good feeling the child is feeling. Being transparent about positive and negative feelings can actually have positive effects and can help adolescents become more resilient.

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**PACT Tenth Grade Parent Program**

On November 1st, more than fifty parents attended a 10th grade PACT parent evening discussing the Beit Midrash and health curricula on sexuality. Beit Midrash discussion groups led by faculty introduced parents to some of the sources used to teach students about Jewish sexual ethics, and encouraged parents to discuss their values around sexuality directly with their children. A presentation by Dr. Russell Hoffman and Dr. Michelle Humi explained the content of the Health curriculum, and shared psychologically- and developmentally-appropriate ways to address positive decision-making with teenagers. Parents were presented with scenarios that frequently arise, and asked to think about how they would address them, which yielded a lively conversation. The PACT evening helped reinforce that school and parents work together to inculcate values in and support healthy behavior by our children.
CLARIFYING YOUR VALUES, AND OTHER CORE PARENTING PRINCIPLES

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Clarifying your values for your teenage children is just that - it’s clarifying your values. That is not the same thing as forcing your teenagers to believe in your values too, or necessarily trying to convince them of the rightness of your values. Your children don’t have to immediately or wholly share your values, but they should understand what they are and what they mean to you. Their behavior, on the other hand, should be guided by the limits you set for them as their parents. (Yes, that’s limit-setting, another of Ms. Roffman’s core parenting principles.) It can help parents to affirm and validate their teenage children’s independent thinking to distinguish between their values and their behavior. When parents can validate their children’s right to their own beliefs, it can open up the lines of communication and create a dialogue rather than a diatribe. It helps teenagers to listen when they feel heard.

Lastly, even when parents and teenagers have a conflict of values, they can still, hopefully, agree on some higher ideals. One concrete example of this is the commonly contested issue of teenage drinking. Let’s consider how Ms. Roffman’s five core principles might inform parents’ approach to this tricky issue. Parents can validate their teenage children’s interest in drinking alcohol and can affirm their desire to socialize with their peers. Parents can provide information about the risks involved in adolescent use of alcohol. Parents can thoughtfully clarify their values on the topic of underage drinking. Parents can set clear, authoritative limits about their expectations of their children’s behavior and the consequences for failing to respect those limits. Parents can proactively coach their children about how to handle potential situations, such as what to do if they find themselves in a situation that involves alcohol. And parents can clarify for their teenagers that if they ever do follow their own values and defy parental limits and find themselves in a situation that is uncomfortable or unsafe, the higher, shared value of protecting their health and welfare should predominate. This means that in such a situation, teenagers can ask for help, and their parents’ immediate response should be to praise and support that gesture and provide the help they need. This approach can convey other parental values, such as honoring when teenagers are wise enough to acknowledge that they have made a mistake and/or need some assistance or guidance.

BEING TRANSPARENT WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT YOUR VALUES

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than peers, school, or media. Even when you think children aren’t listening to you, they are taking in what you say.

That knowledge should give you confidence as a parent to have these conversations. Your guidance to your children is essential because it’s coming from you as the parent. Don’t worry about not being the content expert. If you haven’t worked out all of the answers to some of their questions—"Why is it our religious value to…?" “What’s so bad about…?”—that can be a spur to further conversation.

One particular challenge in having these conversations is teenagers’ perennial question: “What did you do when you were my age?” That can be a question about religious practices, or substances, or sexuality. If the things you did as a teenager don’t align with your values now, or with what you’re trying to teach your child, you can find yourself doing some really fancy footwork. Possible approaches might include explaining to your child why you think now that the choice you made then was a mistake, or what consequences that choice had for you. If your religious commitment has changed over the course of your life, you might want to explain to your child how you came to identify with the values that shape your life now. Since these questions are predictable, you can plan for how you might approach them before having a conversation with your child.

As parents, the most important thing we can convey to our children is our values, and what sort of people we would like them to be. And despite their seeming preoccupied and disengaged, our kids want to connect to us (granted, at their convenience.) Our values are the greatest force in shaping theirs, and that makes it so important that we are transparent in sharing with them what those values are.
### PACT Calendar

- **Tuesday, November 29**  
  Ninth Grade Parent PACT Program

- **Tuesday, December 13**  
  Twelfth Grade Parent PACT Program

- **Thursday, February 23**  
  Eleventh Grade Student & Parent PACT Program

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### GLC Contact Information

<table>
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It's not just what you learn. It's who you become.

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