

PROGRAM SUMMARY

2012 Fall Speaker: Annie Fox

National Presbyterian School

November 1, 2012

"Why 21st Century Kids Need 21st Century Parenting" –

**Addressing Social Media, Peer Approval
Addiction and the Culture of Cruelty**



Comments from Attendees

"I thought Annie Fox was terrific and provided very insightful recommendations as to how to manage all sorts of issues not just with children. Thanks for bringing her to DC."

"It was a great talk, great food, and a generous contribution from the Parents' Council."

Annie Fox, M.Ed., is an educator with 30+ years experience, an award-winning author, and a popular online advisor for teens and parents. View [event flyer](#).

Event Summary

Annie offers online advice through her website in response to questions received from teens to parents seeking guidance within an increasing complex world. She has written books on dating and stress for teens, is the author of the Middle School Confidential ™ series on confidence, family and friends and speaks to students, parents and teachers at a variety of events.

Annie began by thanking everyone for attending the evening presentation. She explained that she has been answering email and offering advice to teens, teens and parents from around the world since June 1997 and that it has been fifteen years of interesting email and questions. She personally replies to each email within 24 hours and since she does not advertise, she thinks that most children hear about her through word of mouth and reach out to her out of motivation to talk to an adult who will listen and guide them through difficult waters. In 1997, children were faced with many of the same problems today's parents faced when they were young such as crushes, friendship issues or having parents that do not understand them. Within the last five years however, social media has played a more important role. Children are now with peers 24/7 and this changes the way they think and behave when adults are not around. Annie mentions that with social media acting against our efforts, it is more difficult today to be the person who influences children to be better people and although we cannot change the bigger world, we can change the children that we launch into the 21st century.

Annie shared a few email examples she has received from parents. One concerned mother wrote about how disappointed she was in the way that her younger daughter treated her older daughter who struggled with an intellectual disability. She asked how she could get her younger daughter to be nicer to her sister. Annie responded that this is an example of how there exists a disconnect between the hearts and minds of children. Because of social media and the speed that messages are delivered, children do not

realize how their decisions affect others. Children today lack empathy-they tend to not think about who is on the receiving end of their comments. Annie added that empathy is a teachable skill, that we should not assume our children are empathetic. Children do things they are not proud of-rumors are spread or comments are posted. We need to be having conversations with them to guide them, to make sure that their secret world is less secret. This will not guarantee that they will always do what we want them to do, but they need to have our voice inside their head. For example, parents cannot hand over any technology without providing clear, solid guidelines as to how that technology should be used.

Annie shared another parent email from a father who wrote about his 14 year old son getting into trouble at school, being rude at home and arguing about everything. He asked if his son's behavior could be a combination of school, a phase or being a teenager. Annie responded that it could possibly be all of the above issues. She mentioned that the age of 14 and 15 may be the ugliest time for children. They are often mortified of themselves and morph into something despicable. It can be hard to feel compassion for them.

Annie described that 85% of the emails she receives from teens are signed "Confused." She defined confused as a word meaning the inability to think clearly. These "Help-what should I do" emails are sent to her because the path is not clear to the person writing. Annie sometimes asks the children to give advice to peer conflict and has found that children are generally capable of providing great feedback. Some suggestions included "talk calmly to your parents" or "parents like to be reassured." So she asked herself why don't children know the answer to their own conflict? The answer is because they are caught in the middle of it. When parents or children are caught in the middle of a conflict or in stressful situations, it is very difficult. Nobody, neither parents nor teens, can be in emergency mode and in critical thinking mode at the same time. Parents need to calm down and understand that there is not any urgency. They may not like the situation created, but they need to lead to be more effective in solving the problem and

role model at the same time. If parents do not calm down, the message to children is “this is how adults act when stressed.” We simply cannot parent effectively when we are under stress. Guiding children toward independence means that the choices they make should be choices they are proud of.

Parent objectives: achieving them and asserting them

Annie showed a picture of her daughter with the caption “When she grows up, I want her to be...” She explained that parents have ideas of what they want their children to be. She asked the audience what their thoughts/wishes were for their children and some mentioned they would like their children to be happy, resilient, a good person/someone involved in the community, comfortable in their own skin, self aware, accepting, confident, a good citizen, a good friend, balanced, self-sufficient, grounded and independent.

Annie observed that we can come up with a long list of wants for our children. Her list included emotionally mature, honest, empathetic, healthy, responsible, money savvy, resourceful, fulfilled in his/her work, resilient, lifelong learner, good parent/partner and person of character. She then asked whether all of these were teachable skills. She explained parents should be thinking about long term parenting objectives. The main goal for parents is to raise an independent, fully functioning adult who can be launched into his/her next chapter with skills. Parents should be thinking about these objectives every day and have a plan to work on each day. It’s not enough to state objectives and not do anything about them. Objectives challenge us to think. We need to take the time to teach, walk the walk and share the knowledge with our children. They need to have our voice in their head guiding them when we are not there with them.

Annie then asked the audience to think about the top 3-5 objectives or teachable skills they would like their child to have by the time they reach 18 and are launched into the world. Next, she asked the audience to think about what they do on a daily basis to reinforce those objectives or teachable skills.

Annie followed by telling the story about a mother who had trouble getting her 15 year old son up in the morning. Because he would not get up on time for school by himself, they were always running late. Annie asked her what her goal was with her son and she mentioned that it was for her son to be self-efficient. Annie then asked her how she has tried to solve the problem and reach her goal. The mother explained that she laundered his clothes, set up three alarms, woke him up, laid his clothes out for the next day, made breakfast, made his lunch and checked that he had his homework in his binder and backpack. Her actions were obviously not working. Children cannot be self-efficient if parents are doing everything for them. Annie suggested a few solutions:

1. The mother should apologize to her son and explain that she dropped the ball; that her job is to teach him self-efficiency. That should grab his attention.
2. She should then state the morning agenda. For example, let him know that from now on she will be pulling out of the driveway by 7:20 a.m., that she would love his company and hopes that he will join her.

Annie went on to say that with this solution, the son will test his mother on the first try. He will be mad with her and blame her when she leaves him behind because he was not ready, but that he will be there on time on the second try. Problem solved. However, the mother will probably not be able to or be willing to try this solution because it's hard to not feel needed as a parent. She will feel like a failure or bad parent if her son misses school and will not trust that he can do make the better change. Annie reinforced that as children become self-sufficient, it's true that they need parents less, but that it has nothing to do with love. By our continuing to overdo, our children look good on paper, but do not have basic life skills. She explained that over-functioning parents raise under-functioning children. This is why it is important to reinforce objectives and encourage our children to meet the objectives. As an example of that, Annie showed a picture of her son sewing his ripped jeans. She had realized before he went to college that she had never taught him how to sew so taught him really fast. Parents must walk the walk and look for opportunities to reinforce the objectives.

The next question Annie asked the audience to think about was what they might be doing to undermine their goals/objectives. She reminded everyone that the goal is to raise fully functioning, independent children. She explained that parents need to avoid “Velcro parenting.” They could be undermining their goals when they are stressed with their children usually because they do not agree, like, trust or understand what their children are doing, feeling, saying or thinking. She stressed that there are things we cannot control or fix and that we cannot rush in, take over and do for our children when we do not like a situation. When we take over something that is our child’s responsibility, we tend to justify it by thinking “if I don’t do it, it won’t get done,” “it’s easier and faster this way,” “she needs me to help her,” “he never does it right” or “they are just kids, they will learn another time.” But we are not fooling anyone. It’s important to see parenting in terms of mentoring. Parents need to ask themselves how their children are supposed to learn otherwise. From clueless peers? That could be in direct conflict with what parents are trying to accomplish with and teach their children about.

One area parents can control is reinforcing children to disconnect and turn off from technology at times to avoid connectivity addiction. Scientists are finding that the brain changes quickly when exposed to the internet and creates a different way of thinking. The article “iCrazy” in Newsweek mentioned that differences exist in the brains of those who use the internet and those who don’t. Brains were scanned in a study that showed the decision-making section of the brain with a heightened impulsive in those who used the internet. With just five hours of exposure, one hour a day, the brain showed changes where we respond emphatically to people. This discovery may explain a lot about cyber-bullying. Try to offer more family connection, unplug for a while and make children understand that it is not a punishment to unplug. Scheduling a family dinner without any technology three times a week is proven to reduce high risk behavior and improve grades.

Stress in children

Annie discussed the affect stress has on children and how their brains work against them when they are under stress. Even if children do not get into trouble, they feel guilty and have regrets that surface later. They tend to be sorry about dropping a real friend in favor of a “fake” one, telling a secret they swore to keep, lying to parents, always messing up, quitting a sport because friends told them to, starting a fight and seriously injuring someone, punching a wall and breaking two knuckles or bullying another child for no reason. These regrets come from social pressure and children need a quick relaxation technique to de-stress and be able to think. Parents think that high achieving children feel pressure to get into good colleges, but social stress is what is the most pressure for children. Children are not writing to her about academic stress, but rather social stress. They ask how they can even study with so much going on. When reading some of the emails she receives, Annie questioned where the parents are. But parents may not know what their children are feeling since their sons or daughters are not opening up about their problems. In one particular email, Annie shared that a teen felt that her parents needed her life to be perfect and she was afraid of disappointing them. Most children do not want Annie to tell them they need to talk to their parents. They are unable to talk to the people they need help from the most. Annie does suggest they try to talk to people who love them. Children tend to begin thinking they can never get it right if they always hear about what they should have done or what they fail to do. They feel as if their parents are always on them which is why it is important for parents to catch their children in the act of doing something right and tell them that they are doing something right especially if it was not something they were asked to do. Children need to hear that parents love them and that they are doing things right. It can be as simple as thanking them for cleaning up the kitchen after themselves. Everything we do as parents should be a vote of confidence, giving our children a chance. They should be mastering age appropriate life skills and are more capable than we think they are. We should be taking a look at what we think they should be doing on their own, asking ourselves if we can step back and provide an opportunity for them to do on their own and give them plenty of moments to do on their own. Children enjoy that.

Mastering boomerang issues Annie described boomerang issues as issues that keep coming back. For example, she hears from parents complaining about wet towels left on the floor and from teens complaining that their parents are yelling at them for leaving wet towels on the floor. Everyone is tired of boomerang issues. Parents should stop yelling and it will stop.

Annie encouraged the audience to think of a boomerang issue they do not want coming back. She asked several questions for thought:

1. What emotion is typically triggered? Anger and frustration were felt by most audience members.
2. What do you do next? Most expressed that they yell or lecture.
3. Does that create more or less stress in you? More in your child? Everyone felt it was more stress for both. Interpersonal stress means things are not working.

Annie offered that when we are stressed, we “act out” and are unable to ask for what we need. At these times, we need to ask ourselves what our children might actually need. The behavior is not what we should be reacting to, but rather the emotional need. Acting out is a veneer, a decoy. We respond to the acting out. We need to be astute enough to be patient as parents, to peel it back and not react to it. While the behavior is not acceptable, we need to calm down in response to it and everyone will calm down in return. Only then can we find out what is going on for real and fix it. We should be calmly asking “how can I help you?” For example, a child may have a conversation with you where you discover that the bad behavior has an underlying cause. A child may fight with a sibling, but the underlying cause may be because they actually want more attention from a parent. Annie reminded everyone that when children are stressed, they are unable to ask for what they need. That is an invitation for parents to dig deeper. How might we help our children improve or identify what is going on and provide them with what they need? It may take some coaxing, but we need to find the source of the frustration, fear or sadness underneath. The anger expressed is the veneer. In our culture, it’s easier to show anger, but that is a mask.

We need to invite our children to talk about what is underneath. This will help us come closer to managing their emotional intelligence and creating effective relationships. This is all in our thoughtful response...

- Figure out what someone really wants, provide some or all of it and maybe...
 - their irritating “childish” behavior becomes less frequent leading to maturity and independence
 - you experience more compassion and love leading to a stronger parent/child bond
 - you respond more effectively to an old problem resulting in the disappearance of boomerang issue and a happier family
- Acknowledge, be understanding, listen sympathetically, encourage and our children will feel heard.

Assumption or Fact?

1. Our children will always need our help.
2. We always know what is best for our children. This comes from “if we do it for them, they will learn to do it for themselves,” “our way of doing things is better,” “if they don’t need us as much, they won’t love us as much.”
3. A good parent does as much as possible for a child. “If I’m too strict, they will hate me,” “children of stay-at-home parents are less independent than those of working parents,” “the way my parents raised me will work just fine for me,” “parents who push their children toward independence do not really love their parents.”

Assumptions Tool Kit

Unreasonable assumptions can keep you from understanding the truth about situations, other people and yourself. Annie asked the audience to name one of their parenting assumptions and then ask themselves:

1. Where did that assumption come from?
2. How does that assumption help me?
3. What problems has that assumption caused?
4. How might things be different if that assumption was wrong?

Parents must decide whether they still want to parent with that assumption.

It's all about...

- making our expectations of children's behavior online and offline crystal clear
- teaching them to take care of themselves and be mindful of the feeling of others
- giving them age appropriate opportunities to use their judgment and help them de-brief after mistakes

If we parent well, children will eventually not need us, but they will always need and use what we have taught them. Children will go to their peer group. Make sure they use their judgment and are good judges of character when they are with their peers.

Questions

The following questions were addressed at the end of Annie's presentation.

Question 1. When is it age appropriate to give a child a cell phone?

Annie suggested to not give a child a cell phone before 6th grade and when given there should be appropriate guidelines. Children should know that cell phones can be weapons, they need to know about text messages. With more maturity, the less likely children will do something silly.

Question 2. How to come up with consequences that are not punishment, but teach a child the lessons needed in terms of turning school assignments in on time? Parent allowed long break after school with homework starting after dinner.

Annie felt that the 1 hour ½ break given the child after school was too long. Parents should renegotiate and ease homework in earlier. She suggested following a schedule:

snack, 30 minute screen time, homework started before dinner. Students have a “contract” with their teachers and if the child does not deliver, the teachers will offer the consequence. Once child has fulfilled the expectations, it could be a good time for parents to offer more screen time in return.

Question 3. How to teach children the difference between real and fake friends?

Annie mentioned that children already know the difference. She suggested to acknowledge the goodness in the child, to talk about the definition of a good friend vs. another kind of friend. Ask child to evaluate his/her friends and determine which category each one falls in. It is important that children not turn off their empathy and that they not feel used, taken advantage of or no longer trusted. Children deserve good friends and should create space from those who are not.

Question 4. Should a child have a computer in the bedroom?

Annie asked the parent what her instinct was. The parent said that it was to not have one. Annie then asked if her child was honest and of good judgment. Annie mentioned that the child could give the parent her best case of why she wants a computer in her room, for the parent to let the child know that the parent has the power to grant the request and ask the child to anticipate what the parent feels.

Question 5. How far do we let a middle school aged child fall?

Annie asked the parent if the teachers were aware and whether they were working with the child. Parent was concerned that teachers are not responding right away. Annie suggested that parents step in as part of the team.

How to reach Annie:

Annie’s books are available on her website: anniefox.com. Her latest book for adults is now available: *Teaching Kids to Be Good People*. She can also be reached by email at

annie@anniefox.com, by facebook on [facebook.com/cruelsnotcool](https://www.facebook.com/cruelsnotcool) and via twitter at [twitter@annie_fox](https://twitter.com/annie_fox).

Handouts from Annie Fox:

- [A Parent's Pledge](#)
- [Broken Kids](#)
- [Doing the Right Thing](#)