

Are Tri-Town children over-booked?

Photos



Wicked local photo by Kathryn O'Brien

Stephanie Meegan, left, and Gail Kauranen Jones, facilitated a discussion after a showing of the movie 'Race to Nowhere' and offered several tips on parenting.

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Topsfield — Are today's Tri-Town parents and teachers over-programming youngsters, loading up daily schedules with sports practices, piano lessons, drama rehearsals, volunteer jobs and hours of homework?

This question was seriously discussed by Tri-Town parents, teachers and school administrators, who gathered at the St. Rose of Lima Function Hall last Thursday and Friday nights to view the movie "Race to Nowhere."

The movie "Race to Nowhere" was dedicated to an 8th grade California girl, who committed suicide after she could not cope with failure on a high-level math test. It was a shock to her family, school and friends when this high-achieving 13-year-old took her own life due to the pressures that she apparently felt at school and home.

Kicking off the program last week, Tri-Town Council's Lisa Teichner said, "We want to start a dialog with parents, teachers, coaches and administrators."

The "Race to Nowhere" initiative questions how a community can best prepare all children to become lifelong learners who are happy, motivated, creative human beings by showing what is happening in schools across the country.

Following the powerful documentary film, the Tri-Town Council hosted a discussion of the movie, which was led by two local life coach experts — Stephanie Meegan of Boxford and Gail Kauranen Jones of Topsfield.

'The Race to Nowhere'

Produced and directed by a California parent whose own children were experiencing headaches, stomach aches and a general sense of failing to keep up in "the race to nowhere," the film explores the lives of several youngsters and families who are feeling the pressures of today's academic/sports system and quest for college admission.

"I can't remember the last time I went out to the backyard to run around," said the first child interviewed, and another parent added, "I don't think that seeing my kids for just 20 minutes at dinner time is enough."

"I'm afraid our children will sue us for stealing their childhoods," stated Wendy Mogel, PhD., who noted that parents are inadvertently guilty of pressuring youngsters even though they just want the best for them.

Headaches, stomach aches, anorexia, bulimia, cutting and sleeplessness are all signs that a child is over-stressed, said the counselors in the movie who pointed out that girls will become depressed and boys will act out.

Sara Bennett, author of the book "The Case Against Homework", believes that "the schools have kids for seven hours. That should be enough." She pointed out that many children today spend their only down time on a computer. "The kids are not able to find their passion . . . to find what they like to do."

The amount of homework has been on the rise since the 1980s when the "No Child Left Behind" initiatives pressured teachers to get results, sometimes to earn bonus checks, the movie pointed out.

"We are teaching the majority of kids as if they are all in the highest achieving top two percent. We're missing developmental tasks all along the way," said clinical psychologist Madeline Levine who made the point that many "C" students are running the world today..

While one admissions director at University of California-Berkeley admitted that she tells students to complete as many AP classes as possible, another study shows that 50 percent of the students who attend the University of California have to take remediation courses in math and English to catch up to the college level.

Parents discuss the movie

First to speak at the end of the compelling movie was Boxford's Tom Mathers who urged parents to get involved, whether at the elementary or high school level. "There are many pressures on our educational system," said Mathers, a Masco SC member who encourages parents to attend the local school committee meetings.

Marie Perkins, a mother of three, urged parents to "look into your kid's face and see if there is stress, then ask yourself if you are causing it."

Noting that she is also a school nurse, Perkins added, "I see stomachaches and headaches all the time. A child will have one bad math test if often afraid to go home and tell his parents."

On a positive note, another parent praised her child's education experience at the Waldorf School in Beverly. "They don't focus on what they achieve in school. There are no tests in the elementary schools. These kids are learning how to think for themselves, to be confident, well-rounded people," she said.

Facilitator Stephanie Meegan stressed, "An SAT test and a college rejection are just freckles on the face of life and will not mean anything. Parents need to ask children 'what really gets you excited?' Ask them, what was the best part of your day, and the worst part . . . don't ask them about test grades."

Meegan suggested, "They need to see us make mistakes. Nobody is a star all the time."

When parent Michelle Mathers commented that much of this race is "a result of the consequences of Wall Street" which have led to youngsters and families "running on the treadmill", Meegan responded, "Families have to make choices based on values. Make sure your values correspond to the calendar. Meegan, who has two grown children, said that Sundays were always "sacrosanct" in her home — a day for church and family activities . . . it's all about balance."

Life coach Gail Jones wrapped up the discussion, urging the audience to "take back the power as parents."

She strongly urged parents to help build a child's "inner-directed self" as opposed to an outer-directed philosophy.

If a child is willing to take risks, make mistakes and has a strong sense of support from family and friends, he/she has that inner-directed and will likely be accepting of themselves and have the courage to be who they are.

But if a youngster is always attempting to please others, lives by "should have dones" and is dependent on one person, then he or she is more likely to feel anxious, confused, trapped and resentful, said Jones.

Offering a few quick tips, Jones said, "Increase the amount of downtime for youngsters with play and rest — enjoy walks, music or play board games alone or with them."

The Tri-Town Council will be communicating via e-mail (their newsletter) as well as other means to get the word out about follow-up meetings.

To view the parental tips that were distributed at this event, visit the Tri-Town Council website at tritowncouncil.org and then click on Resources.

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