

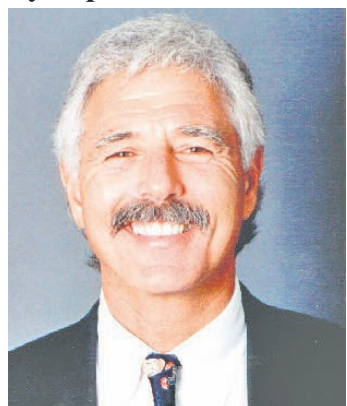
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Rick Phillips – Empowering Teens to Make Healthy Decisions

By Sophie Braccini



Rick Phillips Photo provided

members his younger years, "My neighborhood raised me. There always was a neighbor who would see us getting into trouble and wouldn't be afraid to step in, or there were grandparents or other relatives close by to lend an ear. Nowadays, we live in a culture of bystanders who do not want to mix in. Families are scattered and parents who are themselves under socio-economic pressures, have not enough sit-down time with their kids."

Phillips is big on explaining the debilitating impact of the bystanders' culture. We mind our own business; we don't want to get involved. But Phillips believes the best way to bring up healthy children is to create a community circle around them, which will support them and empower them to make good decisions. "I remember one of the scariest moments in my life as a father," Phillips recalls, "when I handed my car keys to my oldest child, praying he would make the right decisions and not put himself or others at risk."

During the morning conference, Phillips will share the tools he teaches to parents who want to empower their offspring. He will share communication tools such as how to encourage young people to talk by inviting a conversation but not inter-

rogate and explain how to develop communication strategies for each situation, gender and age group. He will discuss the kind of skills the kids need to say no, while maintaining their status; how to teach them to stop and think under pressure, in situation where alcohol, drugs or sexual pressure might be involved.

In the afternoon, Phillips will address the issue of bullying and violence in schools. "There have been five shootings in our schools in February, this is unbelievable," says a devastated Phillips, "in most cases other students had information about the shooter's desire or plan, but had not reported it. In most cases as well, the violent student had been harassed and bullied prior to the incident, sometimes for years, without the necessary adult support." Here again, Phillips battles the bystander culture. His non-profit group has intervened in more than 500 schools to enact the "School Ambassadors" program. The strategy is to identify student-leaders who are trained to speak up and intervene in situations that usually go under adults' radar.

"The power to create a safe and nurturing school is in the hands of our children," explains Phillips, "we identify the leaders in each social circle and teach them the language of non-violence, and give them the competence to speak up. They begin to be role models for the whole school. It takes time to change, but we've shown that a school can become a community where students care for each other." The program, costing about \$4,000, has been implemented all over the nation.

The conference will include a teen panel moderated by Phillips in the morning and other parenting workshops for parents of children grade 6 to 12. To register, go to: <http://www.acalanes.k12.ca.us/parents/TeenConference2008.pdf>

Family Focus

The Dangers of Gossip in Our Schools

By Margie Ryerson

"It's just harmless gossip!" But is it really? There is a vast difference between sharing information that is helpful or newsworthy ("Pete is in the hospital," or "Kristen got engaged") and gossiping, ("Did you hear that Gina is having an affair?") Often gossip is not based on factual information, and like the game "telephone," it can easily be distorted when it is passed on to others. And it can be very hurtful.

In our community, school gossip is a serious issue that flares up at times. As we know all too well, gossip and rumors at school or online can cause its intended victims much despair. Suicide is the chief concern, and symptoms such as depression, cutting, drug use, and eating disorders can arise in response to emotional pain.

Middle schools are particularly fertile grounds for rumor and innuendo. Children at this stage tend to be impulsive, naïve, and suggestible. They are in the developmental phase of forming their identities in relation to their peers, and it is a self-conscious and self-absorbed time. And because they are so preoccupied with what their peers think of them, they are extremely vulnerable to the malicious effects of gossip.

Typically, people gossip in order to relieve boredom and create excitement, or to feel more powerful and to align themselves with others in power. Gossip spreads quickly because it only takes a moment of indiscretion or poor judgment to participate. While adults usually have control over their impulses and can censor themselves, young adolescents are especially susceptible to the lure of gossip as they compete for social standing among their peers.

Many parents feel helpless if their child becomes the object of nasty rumors. It is especially difficult to combat this type of viciousness when the perpetrators are anonymous. School personnel can help and need to be notified. Your child can learn to speak up for herself, briefly and unemotionally, if she is confronted with hurtful accusations. A few possible responses are: "That's ridiculous," "Why would someone say such garbage?" or "You don't actually believe that, do you?" Then she can change the subject or walk away. By maintaining control, she will deny others the payoff from their gossip and help dispel it more quickly. Trying to ignore

There is so much good in the worst of us And so much bad in the best of us, That it hardly behooves any of us To talk about the rest of us.
Edward Wallis Hoch,
newspaper editor & former governor of Kansas (1849 - 1925)

hurtful words is also a possibility, but students' body language often gives them away when they flinch or look sad or angry.

Children need to learn from an early age that gossiping is wrong and harmful, and that they will experience strict consequences for engaging in it. Of course we also need to "do as we say." If our children hear us participating in gossip, they will learn to do it as well. Even if you think you are speaking in private, children have a way of listening the most attentively when you least want them to.

It is especially important that we avoid encouraging or repeating gossip that our children may bring home from school or elsewhere. It's not easy being a role model, but it serves our kids well if we show them it is important to avoid the temptation to gossip about others.

Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or www.margieryersson.com

On March 8th, Rick Phillips will be the keynote speaker at the parenting conference "Living With Your Teenager" organized by the Acalanes High School District. Phillips is the Founder and Executive Director of "Community Matters", a Sonoma County based non-profit that has offered help to more than 500 schools around the nation. On the 8th, Phillips will discuss practical tools with parents who want their young people to make healthy decisions.

"Students today are constantly bombarded with all kinds of challenging messages and have to make daily decisions about where to go in their lives," says Phillips, "they are under increased pressure at a younger age, while their support system is getting thinner." Phillips re-

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Saklan Gets Ready for Winter Concert

By Andrea A. Firth



Caption: Saklan first-graders rehearse for the Winter Concert

Photo Andrea Firth

Circles are the theme of Saklan Valley School's upcoming Winter Concert entitled *Circles Around Saklan*. "The circle of life, circles in communities, circles as physical shapes, circles in a broad sense," explains Margot Casey, Music Specialist at Saklan and the concert coordinator, as she describes how the theme will tie in with the performance. About 140 students spanning preschool through 8th grade will perform in the concert that is a long time tradition at the school.

"The concert brings a lot of excitement and spirit to the school," notes Casey. "And it also serves as a way for kids to show-

case their talents." Casey who teaches music to all the grade schoolers and preschoolers at Saklan started working with her songbirds on the concert tunes back in October. The younger students will also play instruments such as xylophones, recorders and metalophones (like a xylophone but made with metal versus wood) during the concert while some of the older students will provide accompaniment with clarinets, and electric guitars and drums.

Casey composes or arranges the songs to be performed and often rewrites the lyrics to fit the theme. "The language teachers also play a big part in Saklan's concerts" notes Casey. Language

teachers Amy Sullivan, Carmen Ryken, and Diana Kong have worked long and hard with the students who will sing songs in French and Spanish in addition to English—there is even a Swahili chant.

Given the theme, the hour and a half concert will, of course, include a rendition of *The Circle of Life* from the musical *The Lion King*, along with a humorous number called *Nuts* by some of Casey's favorite composers John Jacobson and John Higgins, and an all-school number that is choreographed with a square dance. The concert will be held at 4:30 on March 12th at the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek.

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Teen Scene column

By Sarah Henningsen Campolindo

100 million.
It's a pretty big number. I struggle to believe that 100 million children around the globe lack access to books and libraries, yet the statistics rings true.

Most statistics are irreversible: the number of deaths in a war, the number of homicides in a given year. The upside to illiteracy however is that, over time, it's something that we can CHANGE. The problem is far from permanent.

Thanks to a local organization called Room to Read, steps are being made to eradicate child illiteracy. The charity, based in San Francisco, has built over 5,000 libraries in developing countries like Nepal, South Africa, and Laos since its inception eight years ago.

After reading about Room to Read in John Wood's book, *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*, I felt inspired to contribute to such a great cause because of my own passion for reading that I've fostered since childhood.

Since a young age, books have been the gateway to the world for me, illustrating places and cultures that I can't experience first-hand. I've developed many dreams of travel that I can attribute almost entirely to books that gave me insight into the world and the people who share it.

Unfortunately, over 100 million children don't have that same magical access to books that you and I have been blessed with. It's not

their fault or lack of desire to learn, but the lack of resources in such impoverished communities. In Nepal, where most families earn less than \$2 a day, children don't have the opportunity to jump on opportunity because it simply doesn't exist.

I want to continue sharing my love of reading with the world; Room to Read seems like the perfect avenue to do so. My goal for this project is \$20,000, which is definitely lofty. But with that money, an entire school can be built in Nepal for a rural community. When I meet with CEO John Wood next month, my hope is to present him with a substantial check that can be immediately directed towards the building of a spanking-new Nepalese school room.

To contribute to this project, please send a check made out to Room to Read to 2180 Sky View Court, Moraga 94556. If we reach the \$20,000 goal, I'll be able to share information in the Lamorinda Weekly about the new school once production starts—in turn, a piece of you will be invested in the project, not just your money.

We've all had our room to read throughout childhood and adult life. It's time to pass the gift of education along to hundreds of Nepalese children who want, and deserve, that gateway to the world. A world of hope and opportunities, not of poverty and illiteracy.