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Lamorinda Schools

Special Needs, Special Families

By Lou Fancher



Kent Grelling and Margie Ryerson Photo Lou Fancher

Close to 40 people gathered at Orinda Books on September 20th to hear two invited guest lecturers speak about the impact of special needs children on marriage, siblings, and family balance.

Parents of Orinda Individuals in Special Education (POISE) sponsored the event. It was the fifth public evening in the organization's 18 month history devoted to the critical issues families with special needs children encounter.

After a brief introduction by Anna Tague, a co-founder and vibrant spokesperson for POISE, Margie Ryerson, a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek, was the first expert to speak.

Ryerson focused on siblings, placing emphasis on open, honest communication. She encouraged parents to offer repeated, deliberate explanations to their typical children about the experiences the special needs sibling is facing. "Don't wait for your children to approach you to talk," she advised.

Ryerson said "siblings often feel they have to make up for the disabled child's disabilities." Sur-

prising many in the audience, she encouraged complaining. "We all complain," she said. "I had one client who had told her typical child, 'Stop complaining, you have a good life.' But siblings of special needs children need to be able to talk about their worries and anxieties too."

Furthermore, she instructed parents to have concrete expectations of their special needs children.

Fighting between siblings is not big news, but when one child is disabled, parents may jump in too early. "Try to let them settle their differences on their own," Ryerson said. "Your special needs child needs to learn how to be strong, to be assertive. The best arena to do that is at home, with their siblings."

True one-on-one time is key to successful parenting in any home, according to Ryerson. "But it's not watching them at piano recitals or at games. You need to get with that child and do something totally devoted to them. That's what they remember later."

If nothing else, Ryerson reminded the audience, siblings of

special needs children must have a full life, too. "They need an escape, just like you do," she said.

Kent Grelling, PhD, currently practices in Orinda and serves as the Director of Counseling and Student Support at Bentley School in Oakland. When POISE asked him to speak, he realized that although he knew a great deal about children with autism and related disorders, he didn't know exactly how autism affected marriage.

Popular, main-stream media has picked up on celebrity statements claiming that 90% of marriages with children in the autism spectrum end in divorce. Like any good researcher, Grelling studied the studies. He was surprised at the lack of studies, but referred to research showing only a 1% difference in divorce rates between two-parent homes with ASD children and those with typical children.

Despite the encouragement his comments provided, Grelling was clear that parenting a special needs child is demanding, stressful, and often leaves parents feeling incompetent. "You can get by parenting by the seat of your pants in standard situations," he said, "but when you have a special needs child, everything requires attention and a lot of forethought."

The biggest problem goes against today's you-can-fix-anything message. "You're faced with a problem that actually isn't solvable," Grelling said. And because parents are dealing with an abundance of conflict on a day-to-day basis, he said some marriages do last, but research indicates they are often less than satisfying.

"Two people can be pushed

to polar opposites by a problem that really can't be solved," he said. Couples blame each other, attributing the struggle to their partner's alternative style, instead of to the less personal, but still painful reality that life with a special needs child offers no "best way" answers.

Grelling did offer suggestions: be respectful in disputes, find time together without the kids, develop outside interests, share the management and care of your special needs child, and have a sense of humor. While the last instruction is a stretch for couples in deep trouble, Grelling says, "Without it, it's going to be hard to cope."

Questions at the end of the meeting ranged from how to be fair, in a family situation that is inherently unfair, to when to seek therapy. Ryerson advised not trying to make it fair. "Kids need to know that's impossible," she said. Calling fairness a "false premise," she said cultivating empathy between siblings is the best way to reduce competitive fighting.

Grelling said reducing the contact works too. "If I had to live with my co-workers day in and day out, I'd have trouble, too," he joked. "Give your child a systematic way to deal with the special needs child, that way, you don't have to rush in and solve every drama."

As often happens at POISE events, the Q and A eventually shifted from the guest experts to a more circular, communal conversation centered in the audience. A strong interest in forming sibling support groups arose, and the evening ended with Tague, and many in attendance, promising to continue the discussion through the network that is POISE.

SCHOOL CALENDAR

Acalanes Union High School District Board Room AUHSD Office 1212 Pleasant Hill Rd, Lafayette Wednesday, October 6, at 7:30pm	Orinda Union School District OUSD Office 8 Altarinda Road, Orinda Monday, October 11, at 4pm
Lafayette School District LAFSD Office 3477 School Street, Lafayette Wednesday, October 13, at 7pm	Moraga School District Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School Auditorium 1010 Camino Pablo, Moraga Tuesday, October 12, at 7:30pm

Special: Orinda School Board Candidates Forum, Thursday, October 7, 7:30pm in the Multi-purpose room at Glorietta Elementary School, 15 Martha Road.



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Limited Fall Openings

Let's Set the Record Straight about Early College Applications

By Elizabeth LaScala, PhD

Fall is the time of year when the hype about early admissions programs always begins to grow. There is so much confusion, misinformation and misuse of early admission programs that students, counselors and parents can begin to wonder whether it is wise to wait for the regular admission cycle. Let me assure you that applying regular admission is still a viable option and often preferable for the majority of students. My goal in this article is to explain the fundamentals of early programs and offer some suggestions to consider as you decide what is best for you.

There are three types of early admission programs: Early Decision (ED), Early Action (EA), and Restrictive Early Action (Restrictive EA). Most institutions that offer ED permit students to apply to only one ED program. Most schools will allow students to apply EA to other institutions, but with the agreement that if they are offered admission they will accept and withdraw their other applications. Generally, students can

only be released from their commitment if the financial aid package offered by the ED school is not sufficient to attend. One problem students and their families sometimes encounter is an ED offer of admission without a financial aid award. Families are in a bind when they withdraw their other applications only to learn that they are unable to afford the ED school.

Early Action programs allow students to apply during their early admission cycle but are non-binding—EA programs do not require the students to accept admission, and applicants can apply to other schools during regular admission, but rules vary regarding whether or not students may apply to more than one EA school. It is best to carefully review each school's policy.

Restrictive Early Action programs go by various names, but essentially they permit EA applications with limitations. Some restricted EA programs only permit students to apply early to one school, while others allow early

applications to other EA schools, but not ED schools. All restricted EA programs allow students to apply regular admission to other institutions. Students can consider all their admission options and financial aid awards and they have until May 1st to decide what college or university they will attend.

Are There Advantages?

Some institutions maintain that there is a slight advantage in the admission decision if a student applies early. A very desirable applicant may be rewarded for showing an early interest in the college. Desirable candidates exhibit some combination of strong academics and extracurricular activities as well as other qualities that are highly sought after by the institution. These can include legacy, ability to pay, student match with the mission of the university, special talents or abilities. Other institutions have maintained that it is harder to be admitted in the early pool of applicants. The rule of thumb is to know how each school views early applications. Regional admissions officers are

the best sources of information about this issue. Identify this person and ask about your chances for early admission based on your current profile. Then follow the advice you receive.

Other advantages include reduced stress during the senior year by early acceptance to one (or more) institutions and the opportunity to spend more time revisiting schools, and investigating opportunities that exist at schools where you have been admitted.

Are There Disadvantages?

Early admission procedures preclude the advantages of showing an additional full semester of coursework, submitting enhanced test scores from November or December test dates, and demonstrating other recent successes that may strengthen an application (for example, being awarded a team captain position or compiling data and results from a summer internship). Students develop at a rapid rate during the high school years and often show amazing growth in the senior year. That means many students can benefit from the extra

time they need to build successes and consider their options more carefully. No matter how exciting it may seem to envision yourself at a particular university, it is not wise to underestimate the value of this time.

Taking these considerations into account, I strongly recommend that you consider applying early only if you meet the following conditions:

- You are a top student in that school's applicant pool
- Your first senior semester will not enhance your application (think about this carefully—why would highly qualified students not want colleges to see their performance for another semester? What message does this send to your colleges?)
- You and your family are certain you do not need to compare financial aid awards and you can afford to pay the bills

Early programs were originally designed for top students in an applicant pool to hear early from their top choice schools, leading to better, more informed

decision-making in the spring. They were not created with the intent that all applicants would use the option (Boston College, 2010). Bear in mind these recommendations as you consider your application options.



Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D. is an educational consultant and certified college admissions advisor. Her goal is to help students and their families understand the admissions process, research college and career options, create a customized college list and submit a strong and cohesive application. Dr. LaScala is a member of NACAC, WACAC, and HECA and earned a certification in College Admissions and Career Planning from University of California at Berkeley. Contact her at (925) 891-4491 or elizabeth@doingcollege.com.

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Publishers/Owners: Andy Scheck; andy@lamorindaweekly.com, phone 925-330-7916
Wendy Wuerth-Scheck; wendy@lamorindaweekly.com

Editor: Lee Borrowman; lee@lamorindaweekly.com

Advertising: Wendy Wuerth-Scheck; 925-377-0977, wendy@lamorindaweekly.com

Staff Writers: Sophie Braccini; sophie@lamorindaweekly.com
Cathy Tyson; cathy@lamorindaweekly.com
Andrea A. Firth; andrea@lamorindaweekly.com
Sports Editor: Caitlin Graveson

Contributing Writers: Dean Okamura, Cynthia Brian, Linda U. Foley, Conrad Bassett, Susie Iventosch, Moya Stone, Roslynn Aragon Stenzel, Lucy Amaral, Alex Crook, Justine Sgalio, Chuck Nan, Alex Kozela, Bryant West

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