

The Bipolar Child Newsletter

Fall 2001 Vol. 9

The First School for Bipolar/ADHD Children: The Austin Harvard School

--Janice Papolos and Demitri F. Papolos, M.D.

We can't open up this newsletter without first acknowledging the devastating events of September 11th. The magnitude of this disaster is almost beyond comprehension and we hope you and your children are weathering the multiple traumas that began so unexpectedly that late summer morning.

New York City is a very changed place now: No horns honking, the pace has slowed, and the grief is palpable. Everywhere you go, people are reaching out to each other. Even riding an elevator is a different experience. No one stares up at the floor buttons anymore; people are engaging each other instead. The other day a New York City fire truck careened down Broadway with five firemen on board and half the street froze. If it's possible to silently telegraph a message of profound sympathy and respect to human beings passing by, than we all surely did.

One of the ways we're hoping to move forward from this tragedy is to concentrate on people who are builders, not destroyers. This edition of the newsletter will focus on two parents and the school that they founded to serve the needs of children with bipolar disorder and their families. Four years ago, Glad and Richard Curlee opened the Austin Harvard School, in Austin, Texas, the first school in the country with this specialty. Demitri was invited to speak there the first week in October, and--based on his visit, the written correspondence of the parents whose kids attend there and notes from the children themselves, and extensive interviews with Glad and Richard--what they're doing there seems to work. The children have very high attendance records (they rarely miss school unless they are physically ill) and they are happy and learning.

Glad and Richard graciously shared their experience and expertise with us, as parents and educators in other parts of the country could use this as a model or adapt a few of their techniques and philosophies in the schools their children are attending.

School: A Child's World Beyond Home

No part of a bipolar child's life is more difficult to fathom than the piece called "School." Parents are never sure how much to reveal to a school system, they are spending inordinate amounts of time learning the laws of IDEA and trying to perfect IEPs, and the phone becomes an instrument to be feared as it rings too often with the school personnel calling to say "Please come pick up your child. He's having a problem and we can't control him." Almost all parents anxiously scan the faces of their children each morning to assess whether the day is going to be a bad one and whether it might be wiser to let the child stay home. Exposing the child to stress is risky and he or she might end up in trouble and reveal problems to classmates and teachers. Yet the child must get an education, and certainly wants to be like all the other kids.

Glad and Richard had this problem with their two children who were diagnosed with ADHD and possible bipolar disorder early-on. Her mornings were spent trying to peel her son off the inside handle of the car (and then from the outside handle immediately after) in order to get him into the school building. She and Richard thought about home schooling, but since Glad is a licensed marriage and family therapist, she decided to start a school because, as she said: "I wanted my children to succeed in life and I wanted others to succeed with mine."

In December of 1996, her school became a 501(C)3 organization and opened its doors with 11 children (the school is K-9). "That first year, we thought we were an ADHD school, but the majority of the kids had mood swings and were actually undiagnosed but truly bipolar," Glad told us. Although they initially started with certified teachers, they found out that the children seemed to learn better with a CD-ROM program called Switched-On Schoolhouse. I asked her why.

This kind of curriculum focuses them. Each student has a carol and a computer with headphones, and the curriculum is visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and allows each child to progress at his or her own speed. Because the curriculum is rich and

comprehensive, our teachers don't have to spend as much time doing lesson planning and grading and they can deal with each child's behavioral and emotional issues.

Switched-on Schoolhouse is a Christian values program, and each grade level comes bundled with a Bible study section (Austin Harvard doesn't use this and has children of all religions in the school). There is no proselytizing as that their mission is to teach children with bipolar disorder to learn and to fulfill their potential. Period. "It's simply the best program out there," said Glad.

I called Alpha Omega, the producers of Switched-On Schoolhouse in Phoenix, Arizona and spoke with Nancy Halle. I asked her to explain their curriculum and tell me something about it. Her discussion and the demo materials she sent us showed that Switched-on Schoolhouse's curriculum is an advanced multi-media-based learning environment. It incorporates video clips, sound files, animations, computer games, drills and tests. Nancy said that they've heard that ADHD kids do well with the program because they can see it, hear it, and touch it, and it focuses learning. The student can turn it on and off as attention waxes and wanes, but any work that the student skips or fails to answer correctly comes up at the end so he or she can't move on until the lesson is mastered. This way, no child's lack of learning "slips through the cracks."

This system even grades tests and records them on the student's file and lets the teacher know how long the student spent on each subject, so the teacher can see how quickly or slowly the student is grasping that subject. An extensive diagnostic test which is part of the program tells the teacher the child's true level and identifies strengths and weaknesses the child may have, or where the holes in the child's education are at that particular point in time.

One mother explained one of the values of a computer curriculum for bipolar children and how Austin Harvard uses this program to accommodate her son's illness. She said:

He missed the first two weeks of school due to his illness. When he came back, they simply rearranged his planner and let him get started like he hadn't missed anything. That is another advantage of the computer-based curriculum for these kids: It can be self-paced and tailored to the needs of the child. The child is not allowed to slack off, however. The teachers decide where he or she is supposed to be at in the curriculum and that is put into the child's daily planner. The student is expected to keep up with this plan, but it can be modified according to need.

More than one million children are home schooled and using home schooling books, CD-ROMs, Internet sites, etc. We searched for other curriculums and found that William Bennet's K12 program offers only grades one and two, and we looked at a few other programs, but nothing came close to the excitement and richness of Switched-On Schoolhouse. We are, however, sensitive to the fact that the religious content woven sporadically through the text may be an issue for some parents. However, after reading an October 12th Wall Street Journal article about Christian children attending Jewish Day Schools and Jesuit Academies observing Yom Kippur, we'll mention the fact and leave it there.

A Day At Austin Harvard

Austin Harvard has a dress code of sorts--one uniquely suited to children with bipolar disorder and their sensory issues. Glad decided that since these children are difficult to get up in the morning and often have difficulty deciding what to wear, she would keep things simple: There is a teal Austin Harvard collared shirt. For those kids who cannot tolerate collars, there is a teal Austin Harvard T-shirt. (The kids voted on the color.) They can wear jeans, shorts, pants or skirts with the shirts. Because Glad understands that some kids cannot stand "nubbies" on socks, socks are not required except on days they have gym.

The day begins with a half hour "Devotion" which is a practical lesson about life. It typically is a story with a point about a good choice or an inappropriate choice. This is an interactive discussion that goes on for 30 minutes. "This time lets them wake up or calm down," Glad told us. "At 8:30 they go to class."

There are two classrooms: the five-to 11-year-olds are in one classroom; and the 12-15-year-olds

are in the other. There are two teachers, and Glad and Richard, and the school's outstanding Principal, Kim Belknap, travel between the classrooms. Parents come in to help also. When I questioned Glad about the age span of the kids in the same room, she said: "Many of our children are somewhat immature and they feel comfortable with younger children. Also, the older children feel competent and help out the younger ones. It fosters a sense of community."

Each child has a carol/work station and each child has an ongoing planner. Usually they start out with math, but if a child has language problems, he or she starts with that. The children tape record all their lessons and answer questions about the lessons on paper so that they learn writing skills. Each student is assigned a partner and the two monitor one another. When they are at their computers, the kids can only talk if they raise their hands. Each academic class runs for 40 minutes, and there is a warning given ten minutes prior to the end of each class to prepare the students for a transition.

If a student finishes all of the work, there is no homework (unless he or she has blown off the school day). The only after school assignment is studying for quizzes and tests. One of the parents at the school wrote us and said: "If our son applies himself during his work day, homework is basically test prep. If he chooses to 'blow off' a day, he'll have to work at home. I do think the school is sensitive to the issues which occur in the late afternoon when stimulants wear off."

There is a Social Skills class taught two times a week by a licensed professional counselor where various subjects are discussed. When I asked Glad for an example she answered: "We'll discuss lying. Why do people choose to lie? The children are always being taught that there are inclinations and choices; good choices and bad choices. We also spend a lot of time talking about anger. She expanded on this:

When we're scared, we often get angry, but when we get angry, we give away our personal power to someone else. We go through a process that helps them identify what they're angry about and what they can do to win? How can they maintain control but still get their point across to the other person? We suggest ideas such as talking calmly or taking a time out for a few minutes and then re-approaching the situation and telling the person how he or she feels. I always tell them I want them to feel appropriate control of themselves in a situation. The children offer solutions to each other and thus they learn the tools themselves.

The kids have science lab, and art, gym at the nearby Y, and every Friday is a field trip relating to the work they're doing. For instance, the 7th graders in Texas study the history of their state and they make trips to the Alamo, and to the frontier village of Gonzales to watch the reenactment of the Battle of Gonzales.

Because so many of the children have co-morbid learning disabilities, there are methods of remediation customized to each child. Glad explained:

If the child is dyslexic and needs assistance we often take them through the Stevenson Language Program. We also use the clay techniques explained in the Davis "Gift of Dyslexia Program." Since our curriculum is computer based, this helps our dysgraphic students. We do scribing as needed. We use manipulatives and Simple Math. Writing or taping the math steps for a given concept and allowing the students to review them before they begin their lessons is a great help.

The school's philosophy is that each child has a learning style and the teachers want to help the student discover how he or she learns best. One child may discover that he or she can benefit from the use of a "white noise" machine to block out distractions, while another may learn that he or she actually absorbs verbal instructions best while doodling on paper. But once a child discovers his or her personal learning style, the child will be able to effectively use that knowledge to shape the way he or she approaches future educational pursuits. One mother wrote us that: "We have discovered that our son is an auditory learner, but the best part was when he realized it himself last year."

Behavioral Issues

Austin Harvard uses a token system for good behavior and a consequence system for behavior that is not productive. If the student stays on task, has a good recess, or participates in Devotion, then he or she receive tokens. For every subject that is finished, the student gets 10 points. They are each working toward 100 points a day and if the student earns even 50, he or she gets to buy something in the school store and gets free time or an extra art class. A chart is kept on the door each day.

If a child begins to feel anxious or over-stimulated or begins to feel a rage gathering, he or she has several options. There is a lunch room the child can go to; there is a punching bag he or she can use to work out some aggression in a safe, private place. Rarely does a child need to go home. "Unless a child needs hospitalization, we keep them in school. Missing school is not preparing them for the real world," said Glad.

If a child's behavior is not up to the standards set, he or she is typically given a consequence. This is more likely than not an assignment where the student has to write sentences over and over again. "They hate to write," Glad said with a laugh, "so they tend not to go there. Sometimes they're assigned push-ups, but they always learn that certain behaviors are acceptable and certain are not."

Demitri observed the classrooms for a few hours on a Friday morning and he was very impressed with what he saw. He told me:

All the children seemed engaged in the learning process. They seemed able to concentrate and work independently. They raised their hands when they had questions and a teacher or adult in the classroom attended to their questions.

During the time I was there, two or three students disengaged and became a bit disruptive. They were immediately confronted, the disruptive nature of the behavior was explained and they were offered a choice to leave the classroom and calm down in a "safe place," or he or she would be given a consequence (one boy was actually assigned to run up and down the hallway 20 times but it seemed to relieve some tension for him).

The school is well-organized and the authority structure is well-delineated. The children are never allowed to commandeer the situation. At the same time, everything is handled compassionately.

One mother whose son is a student at Austin Harvard wrote us that:

It's the social-emotional child that concerns me. We chose AHS for many reasons, but perhaps the most important would be the constant social skills, consistent approach to discipline, attention to 'people skills' which will help prepare my 14-year-old for the real world. He has (in the past two-and-a-half years) already developed many coping strategies and anger management techniques which give him control. He's being given every opportunity to become a happier, healthier teenager.

The philosophy at Austin Harvard is to work very closely with the parents and the children. The parents report troubles at home to the Curlees instead of hiding them, and--as a team--they attempt to work through the problems. One girl had a rage one night because she didn't like the sandwiches her mother was preparing for her lunch. They discussed it with Richard Curlee who acted as a mediator and he got the student to agree to take responsibility and make her own lunch every day. "We don't want to be an RTC," said Richard Curlee, "because after a child returns home from one, the family hasn't developed skills to cope with the child and the illness. If we work with the family, supporting them and dealing with the many issues, it's a 24-hour learning environment and families eventually get to be families."

The medical aspects of the child's illness are well-attended to also. As the Principal, Kim Belknap explained:

Before each visit to the psychiatrist, we generate a report covering anything that

needs to be addressed. Our parents have come to rely on and appreciate the importance of our input. When the doctor is unwilling to receive the input from us, the parents use the report information and act as a go between.

She continued:

Our reports help the doctors and therapists who are treating the children get a good picture of the child's functioning at school, and help the doctor assess whether the child is stable or not. He or she can then make changes in medication regimens to increase stability or ward off possible breakthrough episodes.

Tuition and Other Practicalities

The tuition at the Austin Harvard School is \$5500 a year. For some of us who just learned that New York City nursery schools cost \$15,000 a year, this doesn't seem like a lot of money. Richard Curlee did tell us that each parent is expected to help raise \$4500 through fundraising efforts, or pay the difference. They have different kinds of fund raisers throughout the year and all the parents help out.

The parents must spend eight hours a semester helping out in the classroom, and there is a mandatory meeting one evening a month.

The school is a storefront building set up with a waiting room, two classrooms, a lunchroom that doubles as an art room, three offices and a bathroom. The actual square footage is 2300 square feet. (Recess is held at a park nearby.)

Because Austin Harvard is young yet, and because the school requires that children with bipolar disorder be on medications, it is not accredited (with the exception of the ninth grade). When we asked how students do after Austin Harvard, Glad told us that one of their students just went on to eighth grade in a public school and is doing very well. The school is only four-years-old, so each year will see more children making the transition and we'll report outcomes as we learn of them.

How Do Students Feel About Austin Harvard?

One mother answered the question "Is your child happy attending Austin Harvard?" with the statement: "He started last year right after the spring break and really struggled with the discipline, but during the summer all he did was talk about going to school again."

One boy handed Demitri a written account of "Why I Want to go to the Austin Harvard School." In it he explained:

I think they can help me with my frustrations with studying. The teachers also teach you discipline and cooperation with students, they also teach you how to express yourself without hurting anyone. Mr. Curlee, the Dean of the school is very funny but very strict. I like him and respect him very much. I also respect the teachers and the principal, Mrs. Belknap, and the founder of the school Mrs. Curlee.

The nice thing about the school is the teachers teach with computers and audio and visual tools. Instead of writing things down all the time, you get to use a computer and tape recorder.

I expect to learn all kinds of skills at this school--like computer skills, expressing my feelings, learning respect, learning how to help others, learning how to cooperate, learning how to communicate feelings so they can be solved, etc. If I can do these things, I can do anything I want to. I'll just remember the two rules Mr. Curlee explained to me: "I love you and there's nothing you can do about that."

We want to applaud Glad and Richard Curlee for pioneering a way to teach children with bipolar

disorder and for having the vision and the dedication to make a difference in the lives of these children and their entire families. It is hard to believe that they accomplish all this with a budget of \$200,000.

We asked the Curlees if they might consider conducting workshops and showing other motivated parents how they've done all this, and they said they would welcome inquiries. Contact Richard Curlee at the web site of the school <http://www.austinharvardschool.org>.

For more information about the computer program, Switched-On Schoolhouse, visit <http://www.aop.com>. Nancy Halee said she would be happy to answer any questions, also. She can be reached at (602) 438-2717, ext. 7929.

We began this newsletter by discussing a deep desire to move forward from tragedy at a very shaky time. Writing this newsletter helped me more than you can know. Thank you for being out there.

The work continues, and Demitri and I would like to take this opportunity to formally announce the launch of the Juvenile Bipolar Research Foundation. This will be the first charitable foundation to focus its energies and funding solely on research for the causes, treatments, and prevention of childhood-onset bipolar disorder. We are excited about this new venture and would be happy to provide you with more information. Our web site is under construction, so contact us here at <http://www.bipolarchild.com>, or contact our President, Tina Fay, at jbrfinfo@aol.com.

We'll write again soon. In the meantime, may you and your children experience physical and emotional well-being during these very tumultuous days. From our home to yours, we wish you peace.

Janice Papolos and Demitri Papolos, M.D.

The authors wish to thank the parents and students of the Austin Harvard School, Nancy Halle of Alpha Omega Publications, and, most especially, Mary Jane Hatton and Sandi Norelli who composed a list of in-depth questions based on their extensive knowledge of the educational issues for bipolar children.