



Questions for Psychoanalysts Kerry Kelly Novick and Jack Novick about their New Book, *Emotional Muscle – Strong Parents, Strong Children*

Photography by Amy Hoga
Interviewed by Bill Zirinsky

Ann Arborites Kerry Kelly Novick and Jack Novick are nationally well-known and respected psychoanalysts. They are the authors of a new book, Emotional Muscle: Strong Parents, Strong Children. They were instrumental in the founding of the Allen Creek Pre-School, which is a laboratory for integrating psychoanalytic insight with early childhood education.

The Novicks first moved to Ann Arbor 34 years ago. Jack Novick had been raised in Montreal. Kelly Novick, the daughter of legendary Hollywood actor, Gene Kelly, was raised in California and around the world. They are the parents of Rebecca, Ben and Anna, all of whom went to Ann Arbor public schools and graduated from the University of Michigan. The three are now adults, living in Berkeley, London and New York City, respectively. The Novicks have four grandchildren.

Kerry Kelly Novick received degrees in Comparative Literature from the University of California at Berkeley and Psychology from University College, London. Kerry is a past President of the international Association for Child Psychoanalysis. Jack Novick received a degree in Literature and Mathematics from McGill University, his MA in Experimental Psychology from the New School for Social Research, and his PhD in Clinical Psychology from New York University.

The Novicks met in London in the 1960's, where they both trained as child psychoanalysts with Anna Freud. Jack went on to do adult training at the British Psycho-Analytic Institute and Kerry at the New York Freudian Society. Long associated with the University of Michigan Medical School, they are both in clinical practice with families, children, adolescents, and adults in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

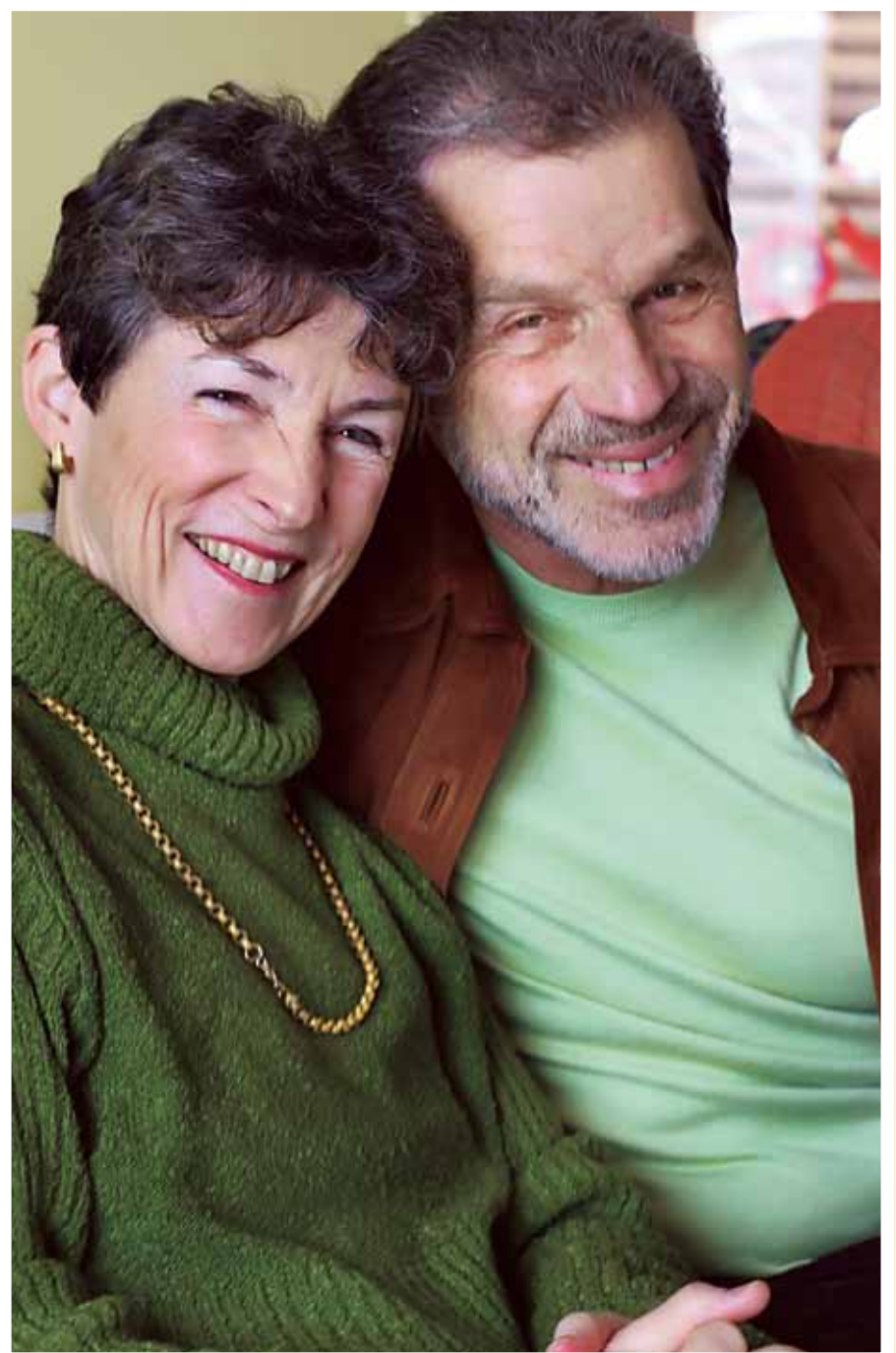
Bill Zirinsky: Your new book, *Emotional Muscle*, is your fourth book. What were your previous books?

Kerry Novick and Jack Novick: Our previous books were *Fearful Symmetry: The Development and Treatment of Sadomasochism* (1996, paperback 2007), *Working With Parents Makes Therapy Work* (2005, paperback 2011), and *Good Goodbyes: Knowing How to End in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* (2006). These were all professional books, also translated into German, Italian and Finnish.

Bill Zirinsky: I had never seen the phrase "emotional muscle" before, and I love it. Did you develop the phrase, or had it been in use within an element of the psychoanalytic community or within the child development community?

Kerry Novick and Jack Novick: We invented it. We saw that parents and teachers were asking something of children that takes effort, work, persistence. This is similar to what people are doing when they learn a physical skill, mastering a sport, trade or instrument. So it came to us that people need emotional muscles, too, to be sturdy and fit to face life's challenges and master the steps in development. It's not such a new basic idea, since these qualities have been called by many names in many cultures, like character, virtues and so forth.

BZ: What motivated you to write this particular book? Please tell us what led up to your wanting to write this book about nurturing the development of emotional muscles in the early childhood years.



“Our greatest challenge is to get the word out about the importance of a thoughtful preschool experience as an investment for the rest of one’s life.”

Kerry Novick and Jack Novick: We are psychoanalysts – Freud’s profound insight was that little children have complex minds, that their behavior has meaning. We know that early experience can have a significant impact on the rest of a person’s life, for good or ill. This knowledge ebbs and flows in people’s awareness at different times, with our society currently ignoring the needs of voiceless children. So part of the motivation for the book was to give voice to the potentiality of parent-child (and teacher-child) interactions and relationships.

Work at the various schools in the Alliance for Psychoanalytic Schools (about 14 members, including Allen Creek, across the US and internationally) has had a dramatic impact on the lives of families. We

wanted to find a way to convey what was actually being done, what created that impact. We needed a language to describe, in practical terms, concepts like “attunement,” or “ego strength,” etc.

In the book we don’t only talk about the development of emotional muscle in children, we also try to describe it in *all* parents, regardless of background. No one is trained to be a parent, whether they went to Harvard or dropped out of high school. It’s like being asked to go play in the Super Bowl without being trained to know about first downs or what it’s like to be exhausted after being tackled repeatedly. So everyone needs help to learn what is important and what isn’t; how to think about the job; how to set priorities, and, most importantly, how to find satisfaction and pleasure in the job.



Jack Novick

An Evening with the Novicks

The Novicks will be speaking about their new book, and engaging with the audience, at a Crazy Wisdom Salon on Thursday, May 5th at 7pm.

BZ: Can you give our readers an overview of the book’s content, including a brief synopsis of emotional muscle as it pertains to babies, one-year-olds, two-year-olds, three-year-olds, and five-year-olds?

Kerry Novick and Jack Novick: We believe that young children are capable of much more than they are given credit for – but the best way to foster growth is by building what we call emotional muscle through thoughtful parenting, not by the harsh treatment many advice books (like *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, for instance) describe. Our book takes parents through the first five years of their child’s life, offering opportunities for emotional muscle-building at every stage. For example:

- Babies learn trust and adaptability;
- One-year-olds develop empathy;
- At age two, they learn resilience and mastery;
- For three-year-olds, it’s about persistence;
- By age four, they’re ready to develop internal controls and realistic standards;
- And at five, at last, it’s time for cooperation and competence.

Each chapter describes the characteristics and challenges of that age group as well as the emotional muscles that parents can work on to guide their

children, with examples drawn from our highly successful preschool. As one mom of two school-age kids told us after reading the book, “I have gotten so much help and a sense of competence in my parenting *this week!*” More detail is available at www.buildemotionalmuscle.com.

BZ: Will you give our readers a sense of what the Allen Creek Preschool is, and what your role at Allen has been? And some history of the school?

Kerry Novick and Jack Novick: Allen Creek Preschool has a super-informative website at www.allencreek.org.

We were part of the group of 12 psychoanalysts, educators and businesses who each put in \$50 to found the non-profit Allen Creek Preschool in 1994. Kerry was the first President of the Board and Child Development Director, as well as being the Parent-Infant and Parent-Toddler teacher for many years. Jack was on the Board and was head of the Program Evaluation committee. We both worked until a couple of years ago as Family Consultants, meeting with teachers and parents regularly to track the children’s development and help parents form a supportive community.

Now we serve as grandparents to the school, available to help when needed for development. We attend staff meetings and do inservices for teachers and community talks on “Thoughtful Parenting.”

A unique feature of Allen Creek among preschools is its extensive scholarship program. This was part of the mission from the beginning, based on our knowledge that everyone gains from participation in a diverse community. In these hard times, the scholarship program is more important than ever in making the school available to families. But it’s also harder to raise money; the school is lucky to have generous donors who have stepped up, for instance at the annual scholarship fundraiser, Dining For Kids (or D4K), every year in May.

“We both feel we have a greater appreciation of how hard parents work and how deeply they want to do a good job.”



Kerry Kelly Novick

BZ: Over your years of working with Allen Creek Preschool, what are you most proud of? And what has been most challenging?

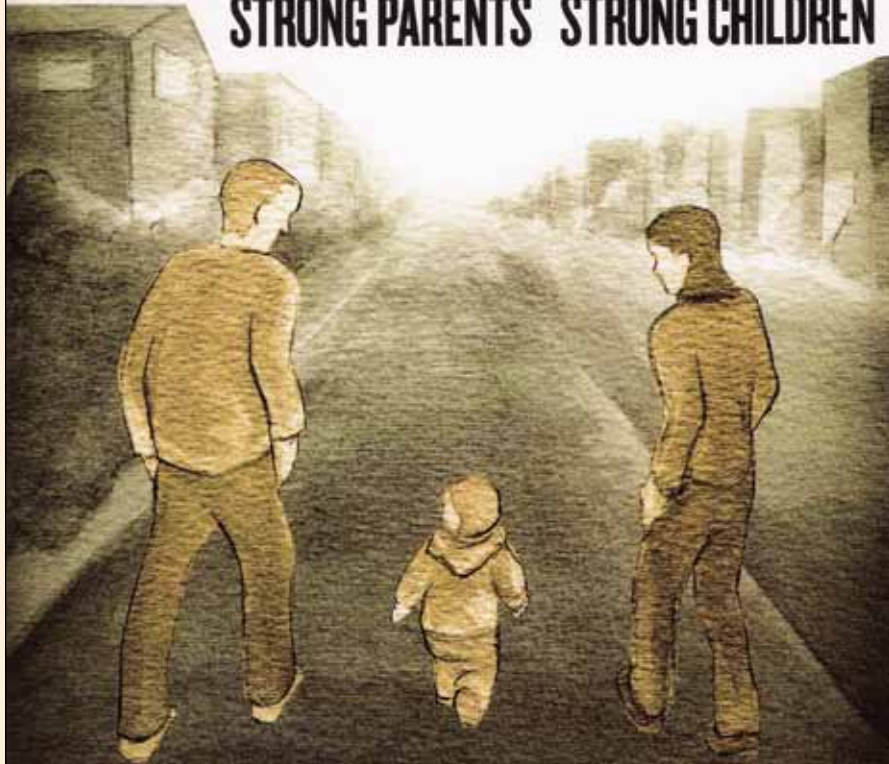
Kerry Novick and Jack Novick: We are most proud of the families willing to engage in the work of becoming thoughtful parents. The effort bears fruit – our first graduates are now halfway through high school. Everyone remarks on their particular kindness, social maturity, inclusiveness, creativity and focus.

Our greatest challenge is to get the word out about the importance of a thoughtful preschool experience as an investment for the rest of one’s life. Hence, the book and the effort to keep the price affordable, so that people can learn the ideas that have been developed at Allen Creek and other schools.

BZ: My wife and I have a delightful three-year-old daughter, Grace, and the parts of your book about the life and inner world of a three-year-old hit the mark. Could you just as well have continued on, and written about

EMOTIONAL MUSCLE

STRONG PARENTS STRONG CHILDREN



KERRY KELLY NOVICK & JACK NOVICK

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emotional muscle for older school-age kids and for adolescents and for college-age young adults? (If so, I wish you would, as we have a seven-year-old daughter, too...and they're both going to get older, inevitably.)

The Novicks: The basic ideas in the book apply to all ages, since we all revisit the same issue throughout our lives. Some have directly visible application to older ages, like setting realistic limits. We are working on a sequel, to extend the age range to school kids and teenagers. And, working in a university town especially, we think there is important work to be accomplished by older adolescents and their parents to transform their relationship into one between adults.

BZ: Kerry, you've been writing a terrific parenting column for annarbor.com. Do you come by writing an advice column for parents with natural ease, as it would appear, or do you have to work hard to craft those skillfully calibrated answers?

Kerry Novick: The column is work and I love doing it, as it helps me understand what's important to people and clarify my own ideas. For me, it's a living experience of some of the ideas in the book about the interaction of work and pleasure. When a 3-year-old puts three blocks on top of each other, she may feel like she's built the Taj Mahal and feel terrific. But she hasn't really built the Taj Mahal. A parent's appreciation of what she has actually accomplished will validate her good feelings realistically. So I appreciate your kind words about my column in annarbor.com, which can also be found in the blog section of www.buildemotionalmuscle.com.

Jack and I both come from family backgrounds where work was a given and the satisfactions of work were visible and explicit. His parents ran a corner store, open long hours and serving the needs of the neighborhood. My parents were both dancers, who worked constantly to maintain their bodies

and their skills. Jack and I both watched and helped our parents, feeling involved in their achievements. One of the things we talk about in the book is the importance of parents sharing their good feelings about their work with their children – it's an incentive to grow up.

BZ: It seems to me that the questions being posed to you, by Ann Arbor area readers of the annarbor.com column, have a depth and authenticity way beyond the average "Dear Abby" types of questions. Would you agree with that, and would you comment on that?

Kerry Novick: I think parents really care about what they are doing. Perhaps the anonymity of a column allows for greater openness. I try not to choose to answer more superficial questions and select those that speak to more general and important issues. Maybe because parents know I'm a psychoanalyst they go to a deeper place.

BZ: In the book, you wrote, "When there are hard or complex factors in a child's or parent's past – like medical illness, deprivation, abuse, adoption, or upheavals from war, emigration, or natural disasters – each phase of the child's development challenges parents anew to rework and redefine the meaning of the issue. In situations like this, where deep, perhaps unconscious, forces are at work in the personality, we can see the limits of the concept of emotional muscle." How so? Where's the friction between the concept of emotional muscle and the unconscious, complex factors?

The Novicks: It's not so much a question of "friction" as one of level. Suppose someone makes a New Year's resolution to start an exercise program, stop smoking, and lose weight. He does it for two weeks and then stops. And then he does it again the next year and the year after. By that time it will be clear that he needs help to continue his program and/or to address some underlying obstacle to doing what he actually wants to accomplish.

With a child, a parent may be asking too much or the issue may have too many underlying meanings to be dealt with on one level. Emotional muscle can help parents and teachers engage with problems and see how far they can get. Often they can go much further than they thought was possible. But, it can also help them recognize when they need extra help.

The idea of needing to go over things repeatedly stems from a difference between adults and children. Adults often master something pretty fully and move on. Children, on the other hand, because big issues or events take on new meanings with each phase of growth, normally need to work them through all over again, processing the issue at the new level, before integrating it and moving on to the next.

BZ: How do you foster a sense of gratitude in small children, for the daily gifts of health and family love?

The Novicks: Here we think you are talking about values, conveying what's important to you to your children. First one has to live one's values, appreciating those daily gifts and articulating the joy they bring. Too many parents come home from work and complain about their stressful day. You don't have to deny the hard parts, but it's important first to find something to recount that felt good, satisfying, productive, and how pleasurable that is. Kids need us to set an example. We can also teach these things explicitly, by noticing out loud and not just inside when the sun feels so good on our faces, when the pie looks a yummy brown and so forth.

To do this, however, families actually have to spend time together – there has to be a context for conveying these important lessons. That means family meals, activities and sometimes choices among pastimes or events for both adults and children.

BZ: How are the Ann Arbor area parents of 2011 different from the Ann Arbor area parents of ten or twenty years ago? Are their concerns different?

The Novicks: Each era brings its own challenges. We nowadays don't have to cope with the Great Depression as our grandparents or great-grandparents did. Rather than think of it comparatively, however, we look at what the hard things and the advantages of the present are. Given that most families currently have two working parents, a major challenge is how to keep love alive while apart, how to keep each other in mind. There are lots of ways parents and caregivers can support that crucial emotional muscle.

BZ: And how do you each think your own perspective has changed, as you've gotten older and wiser, and become grandparents, as it pertains to helping parents and their small children navigate their family lives?

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The Novicks: We both feel we have a greater appreciation of how hard parents work and how deeply they want to do a good job. A unique aspect we wanted to stress in the book is the growth of parents through the experience of doing the job. Most parenting books tell parents what they should do to their children. Our book is an effort to encompass the parental experience of finding support, finding pleasure, feeling good about the work they are putting in.

BZ: Can you each describe your professional lives currently? I see that you travel and lead workshops and give talks, and that you will be doing some events for your new book in San Francisco and San Diego and New York. Are you each still seeing patients in private practice? Are you still deeply involved with Allen Creek Preschool?

The Novicks: We are both still in private practice with children, adolescents, adults and families in Ann Arbor, and we are very involved in teaching here in town at the two psychoanalytic training organizations, the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute and the Michigan Psychoanalytic Council. We travel to see our children and grandchildren and to teach at many other centers nationally and internationally. A nice thing about the modern world is that we can keep continuity in our work (keeping people in mind) by using Skype or phone to talk to our patients and students. We are both former chairs of MPI’s child analytic training, and continue to supervise at the UM Department of Psychiatry. With Allen Creek, Kerry still leads their Parent-Child Resource Play Center at Peace Neighborhood Center, and we both offer inservices for teachers, attend staff meetings, and give talks for the community on “thoughtful parenting.”

BZ: Jack, what has been most satisfying to you about your professional life and work?

Jack Novick: We both love that our work is never boring; we’re always learning and feeling pleasure in increasing skill and competence. Even if we can’t swim as far as when we were younger, emotional muscle increases with age and practice.

BZ: Kerry, what has been most satisfying to you about your professional life and work?

Kerry Novick: I find it deeply satisfying to see someone grow, to feel I've helped them find a way to use their strengths, skills and experience in new ways. We never leave the past fully behind, since it's part of us and we can't rewrite history, but it can take on new and more constructive meanings. It's an honor to be part of that process. I also find satisfaction in the internal consistency of my values in personal, professional, community and political life, even when that's difficult.

BZ: Jack, our next issue is published in the spring. Tell us what you love about Ann Arbor in the spring?

Jack Novick: I love the magnolia tree in our front yard, which we planted on our son’s fourth birthday – now it’s enormous. All year, the sunshine pours into my south-facing office window. I think Michigan is the sunniest state, and we can even canoe in our town’s own river when the ice melts.

BZ: And, you, Kerry, what do you love to do in Ann Arbor in the spring?

Kerry Novick: I love the days getting longer and the first time I can go barefoot in the grass. We have lots of birds nesting around our house and I watch the cardinals, the woodpeckers, the mourning doves and the turkey vultures with fascination.

BZ: Thank you both.



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