

## “DID YOU KNOW . . .”

That holiday time can be an especially dangerous time for children, especially pre-teens and teenagers? The culprit--parties! Yes, those gatherings that are meant to be a celebration of the most precious times we share as families and communities can lead to dangers for children, if parents are unaware. For that matter, any party can be a risky event for a minor, but the holiday time is a perfect time to talk about safety for our children, especially since the greatest celebration of all is about the birth of the Holy Child.

When we think of the holidays, most people think of family times, where all are gathered around the dining room table or the Christmas tree. But in today's fast-paced world, those idyllic moments are just a small part of the weeks of holiday partying that can occur. During those hectic holiday weeks, parents can become distracted by all of the demands placed upon them and by the need to host or attend their own parties. Without meaning to, specifics about children's activities can get overlooked, and over-taxed parents can get so busy trying to do it all that they lose sight of all that may be happening with a child. How many of us have tried to host a party for teens while baking cookies, wrapping presents, or engaging in any of the other myriad of activities that are part of holiday preparations? At such a busy time, even the most diligent parent can assume that all is well and miss important preparations for such parties. Even when home parties are monitored, behavioral warning signs can be overlooked as the holiday blues or just another typical phase of a teenager's life.

The following parents' guide was prepared by Adelia Rocha of the Dorchester Substance Abuse Coalition:

### PARENTS' GUIDE TO TEENAGE PARTIES

#### If Your Teen is *Giving* a Party:

1. **Plan in advance.** Go over party plans with your teen. Encourage your teen to plan some organized group activities or games.
2. **Keep parties small.** Ten to 15 teens for each adult is a good ratio. Make sure at least one adult is present at all times. Ask other parents to come over to help you if you need it.
3. **Set a guest list.** The party should be for invited guests only. No "crashers" allowed. This will help avoid the "open party" situation.
4. **Set a time limit.** Set starting and ending times for the party. Check local curfew laws to determine an ending time.
5. **Set party "rules."** Discuss them with your teen before the party. Rules should include the following:
  - No tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs;
  - No one can leave the party and then return;
  - Lights are left on at all times; and
  - Certain rooms of the house are off-limits.

- 6. Know your responsibilities.** Remember, you are legally responsible for anything that happens to a minor who has been served alcohol or other drugs in your home. Help your child feel responsible for this as well. Guests who bring tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs to the party should be asked to leave. Be ready to call the parents of anyone who comes to the party intoxicated to make sure they get safely home.
- 7. Be there, but not square.** Pick out a spot where you can see what is going on without being in the way. You can also help serve snacks and beverages.

### **If Your Teen Is Going to a Party**

- 1. Call the host's parent** to verify the party and offer any help. Make sure a parent will be at the party and that tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs will not be allowed.
- 2. Know where your child is going.** Have the phone number and address of the party. Ask your teen to call you if the location of the party changes. Be sure to let your child know where you will be during the party.
- 3. Make sure your teen has a way to get home from the party.** Make it easy for your child to leave a party by making it clear that he can call at any time for a ride home. Discuss why he might need to make such a call. Remind your teen NEVER to ride home with a driver who has been drinking.
- 4. Be up to greet your child when he comes home.** This can be a good way to check the time and talk about the evening.

### **Talk to Your Teen About Safe Partying**

Maybe your teen has been to parties where there were tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. Maybe he tried them. Maybe after using them your teen did something stupid; something he wouldn't normally do.

It's hard for people to stay safe when they aren't thinking clearly. How can teens keep a clear head and still have fun? **Give them the following suggestions for staying safe while having a good time:**

- Hang out with people who don't smoke, drink, or use other drugs.
- Plan *not* to smoke, drink, or use other drugs. Do whatever it takes to help you remember.
- Use the "buddy system" -- team up with a friend. Use a code word to remind each other when it's time to leave a party.
- If your teen likes to meet new people, suggest trying some of the following activities instead of parties:
  - free concerts
  - dances
  - espresso bars
  - museums
  - extra-curricular "anythings"
  - community centers
  - libraries
  - sports events

- religious activities
- film festivals
- athletic clubs
- volunteer work
- Substance Abuse Prevention work

## **How Can I Tell If My Child Is Doing Drugs?**

**Despite your best efforts, your teen may still abuse drugs. Some warning signs of drug use are:**

- Smell of alcohol, smoke, or other chemicals on your child's breath or clothing
- Obvious intoxication, dizziness, or bizarre behavior
- Change in dress, appearance, and grooming
- Change in choice of friends
- Frequent arguments, sudden mood changes, and unexplained violent actions
- Change in eating and sleeping patterns
- Skipping school
- Failing grades
- Runaway and delinquent behavior
- Suicide attempts

## **How Parents Can Help**

As you read this article, you may be worried that your child is using tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs. Before you confront your child, consider talking to friends, relatives, teachers, employers, and others who know your child. Get their impressions as to how she is doing. If others are concerned, this may make you more comfortable in your decision to talk to your child. Always choose a time when your child is awake, alert, and receptive to talking. Avoid interruptions, maintain privacy, and keep your wits about you. Go over the checklist with your child, highlighting those concerns that have you worried.

## **Send loving messages, for example:**

- "I love you too much to let you hurt yourself."
- "I know other people your age use drugs, but I can't let you continue to behave this way."
- "We'll do anything we can to help you. If tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs are part of the problem, we must talk about it right away."
- "If you are sad, upset, or mad, we want to help you. But our family will not permit any use of tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs."

## **Don't be critical (avoid these statements):**

- "There's only one reason you could be acting this way; you must be on drug."
- "Don't think you are fooling me. I know what you are doing."
- "How could you be so stupid as to start using drugs (and/or alcohol)?"
- "How could you do this to our family?"
- "Where did I go wrong? What did I do to make you start using tobacco (and/or alcohol/other drugs)?"

Remember, if your child is using drugs, she needs your help. Don't be afraid to be a strong parent! However, the problem could become too much for you to handle alone. Don't hesitate to seek professional help, such as your pediatrician, a counselor, support group, or treatment program. (Adelia Rocha, 2009)

Sound like a lot to keep track of? It is, but the investment of time and effort is well worth it, given the increased likelihood of keeping your children safe. Parenting is undoubtedly a time-consuming role now more than ever, given all the competing interests your children face every day. The worldly temptations are hitting at earlier and earlier ages, making it more important than ever that parents be attentive and also that they model good behavior. It has been stated several times already in these articles and will continue to be present as a gentle reminder to parents: you are the first teacher your child encounters and one of the strongest role models for your child. If you ask your child to be responsible and then you host parties where adults get out of control, how does that impact your child's perception of right and wrong? If you lecture your child about drinking or smoking, but you smoke and/or use alcohol or drugs irresponsibly, how likely is it that your child will listen to you? One study indicates that children of attentive, watchful parents who clearly state expectations of good behavior are 400 percent more likely to have children who do follow the rules.

It is clear that the first step is to be a good role model of the behavior you want. The second step is to clearly and calmly communicate your expectations and reasons for the rules you set, and the third step is to enforce the rules, regardless of what other parents are purportedly doing. The guidelines set forth in the Parent's Guide above provide an excellent framework for keeping the children and youth in your home safe during any party, and for helping your child to handle situations when at parties away from home.

Of course, despite parents' best efforts, some children do get involved in substance use or abuse anyway, which will be the topic of another article. However, for your convenience, there are resources listed at the bottom of this article that will help you to address those issues if you are facing them now. In such a situation, the most important thing you can do is to be consistent about being available to your child, regardless of the child's attitude. If your child still feels your love despite a bad attitude on the child's part, you have a much better chance of having open communication at some point, when the child is ready. The other important point to remember is to access help immediately. Talk to your child's physician; contact a qualified substance abuse therapist; or contact the Office for Child Protection (508) 674-4681 if you are feeling overwhelmed and need some assistance in getting started. Together, we can find resources to help your child get back on a healthy life path.

May God watch over, bless, and guide every parent and caretaker of His children. You are His hands and heart on this earth and He's counting on you to show His love to all who are in your care. At this holiday season, when we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, let us honor His sacrifice of love for us by going the extra mile for our children. It's an investment that can reap eternal rewards!

Debora Jones

Reference

The source of the lists in this article is as follows:

Adelia Rocha (2009) Email regarding Teenage parties. Agency web site:  
<http://www.mydsac.org>

Websites for more information on teen parties, signs of substance abuse, and strategies for intervention:

<http://www.aap.org/family/subabuse.htm>

<http://privateschool.about.com/cs/forparentsonly/a/teendrinking.htm>

<http://www.adolescent-substance-abuse.com/blog/2009/05/party-house-dramatizes-risks-of-teen.html>

<http://www.hhsi.us>