

Teen Scene XXI: Learning from the *Experts*

BY VERONICA BENNETT

Teen Scene XXI offered a thoughtful and intimate picture of the lives of New York City teens today. The NYC-PIA evening was co-sponsored with the Parents League of New York and moderated by PIA board member Lucy Martin-Gianino. It featured a panel of students from independent day and boarding schools telling it “like it is.” Over the course of the evening, the teens talked about school, social pressures, communication and various positive and negative influences. The teens’ opinions seemed to mirror the differing viewpoints that emerge when parents discuss parenting styles and tough issues. Here’s what this year’s panel of 15 teens had to say.

Teens Communicating with Teens

Ms. Martin-Gianino plunged in with the hot topic of social networking sites. After explaining the merits of Facebook over MySpace, the teens said that most high school kids have Facebook accounts and that

...the teens talked about school, social pressures, communication and various positive and negative influences.

most parents are ignorant of what they are doing with them. One senior boy said Facebook was “not dangerous,” but worried about the impact it would have on younger kids now that it seems to be trickling down to middle school. A sophomore countered that she “doesn’t use it,” noting that her school monitors the site. A junior girl cautioned parents who are “out of tune” with social networking sites that they risk leaving a door open for their kids to get into trouble. Parents should learn how Facebook works and view their teen’s profile, she said. The teens also warned of

the lasting repercussions of posting inappropriate pictures or humiliating peers, and recounted the story of a student expelled for using racial slurs online. When asked whether the sites replace face-to-face contact, the responses were mixed. One junior said that she used it to reestablish ties with old friends who have moved to other schools, while a freshman said that it enables her to stay connected with many acquaintances in a “less personal” way. “When I catch myself spending too much time online, I remind myself that I have to be in the real world,” she said.

“Hanging Out” and Socializing

When it’s time to relax and go out, teen activities include hanging out with friends, going to a movie and dinner, going to teen clubs, and, for some, finding places “where parents aren’t.” Teen clubs seem to be a popular alcohol-free alternative for teens, though teens may get “hammered beforehand.” Downtown clubs appeal to girls wanting to hang out with “investment bankers,” reported one teen. A few agreed that hookah bars were “huge.” (What’s a hookah bar? See box on page 4.) A junior girl said that some teens “get totally wasted” to relieve stress and that kids are not taking advantage of all the social opportunities that New York City offers. A junior boy argued that hanging out with friends is healthy and that simply going to a dinner and movie is a way of socializing that leaves less room for getting into trouble.

Alcohol

The teens presented a range of opinions on alcohol and drinking, with some saying that it’s appropriate for parents to have a “no drinking” policy and others arguing that it’s more helpful for parents to teach kids how to drink responsibly. The teens tossed the issue around, and most believe parents should be empathetic but not too much like a “friend.” At some

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PRESIDENT'S Letter

Spring 2007

In our living room, on a console table, there is a framed photo of a baby. She seems to float on a dark background, reaching up and out of the picture. On the piano she is a toddler in a blue smocked dress, sitting back to back with her younger sister. In one picture she is a third grader, curled up in an armchair, reading. In a photo taken when she was about thirteen, she leans against a fountain, burdened with braces and glasses and the expression of one whose body is defeating a desire to remain in a less complicated phase of life. The most recent portrait shows a young woman with a confident smile in a formal pose for her yearbook, because this year the baby will graduate from high school.

Like many parents who arrive at this momentous occasion, I'm both shocked at how quickly we've gone through eighteen years together and keenly aware of the great distance we've covered. It's a cliché of motherhood that we forget the particulars of the earlier stages: when the baby first ate solid food and what she liked, how long it took to "Ferberize." (That would be six months, plums and carrots, and it seemed like years.) For better or worse, the milestones from babyhood through school years remain vivid to me, even without the photos.

Thank you

Thank you to NYC-PIA Board Members for their dedicated volunteer work. Together, we have produced several facilitator training sessions and 250 discussion groups; a program of nine seminars and luncheons; three newsletters and a growing Web site; several Access Sales and our benefit screening of *Shrek the Third*. Because of our volunteers and generous supporters, we are able to keep our services free of charge to parents of the independent school community. To each of you, thank you for your interest, attendance and support.



In addition to these landmarks, I remember the bumps in the road, the transitions from one phase to the next, and the changes and adaptations we made. When the drama on the gym bus and in the cafeteria made fourth grade difficult, we found a city-wide chorus that provided a chance to make new friends,

Dealing with transitions is an important part of parenting, and NYC-PIA is planning an exciting line-up of programs that will explore this topic...

develop singing talent and begin a musical education. The change to a new high school revealed a world of greater diversity, and helped foster an interest in physics and engineering. The struggles with a long research paper led to the choice of a poetry class, and the discovery of a new affinity.

Dealing with transitions is an important part of parenting, and NYC-PIA is planning an exciting line-up of programs that will explore this topic as our annual theme for 2007-2008: "Parenting for Resilience: Mastering Change, Challenge and Transitions with Your Child." A detailed calendar of events will appear in our Fall newsletter; please look out for it there, and on our Web site, www.parentsinaction.org.

In the meantime, we're all getting ready for summer—a season of different rhythms, more freedom, new experiences. One suggestion that we hear from experts time and again—whether the topic is young children or teens, dating or media—is that it is important for families to find time to have dinner together. This can be difficult during the school year, when schedules for sports and after-school activities make it hard to coordinate one dinnertime. We hope that this summer will bring all of us the chance to have more family meals, shared adventures, and time to prepare for the transitions that next year will bring—including, for the class of 2007, that very important transition to life in college.

— AIMEE GARN

How Do We Relate? Mapping Out the Boy/Girl Scene

BY MARY BETH HARVEY

The teen “dating” world has changed since most of us were in the thick of it in the 60’s, 70’s, 80’s or even 90’s. A different culture exists between the genders and how they interact, socialize, and communicate. Charlene Giannetti, the author of six books on adolescents and a frequent speaker on children’s issues, spoke to NYC-PIA parents on the boy/girl scene and several reasons for the cultural change.

Ms. Giannetti points to three strong and concerning cultural influences affecting our children and their relationships today.

- The influence of the media through movies, music and videos is powerful. Often the portrayal of relationships is not positive and encourages a culture of meanness. There has been a dramatic decrease in “feel good” movies. Do you remember watching them? These movies not only made the viewer feel good, but taught valuable lessons about interpersonal relationships and romance.
- The existence of the culture of mean girls is a very aggressive force that both girls and boys have to deal with today. This aggression can be heard in some music lyrics, TV sitcoms and reality shows, celebrity promotion, and social interactions with one another and over the Internet. Giannetti recommends reminding our kids that celebrity is hype. She encourages parents to validate nurturing feelings. Media can be so coarse and raw—let’s attempt to influence a change.
- Younger children increasingly use the Internet and social networking sites. Although there are benefits to staying connected with the people you may not see often, this form of communication is often taking the place of a real “relationship” and “conversation.” Because it’s less personal, there is a sense that one can say whatever one wants. There isn’t time for processing one’s thoughts before speaking online, and, as Giannetti reminds us, it can be used to tease

and torment. Everyone’s information is suddenly public—who broke up with whom, who doesn’t like whom. Public discourse is the norm and private feelings are exhibited for hundreds to read. It only takes a brief look at Facebook profiles to see who’s dating whom or if their relationship is off.

So what can we as parents do to help our children understand what a healthy relationship is, what intimacy really means, and to appreciate privacy?

- There is no substitute for modeling a healthy relationship, states Giannetti. Kids observe family relationships and model that behavior. They watch and listen to how we treat our spouses and partners and do the same. Help your child to understand what a meaningful relationship looks like and feels like by talking with them. Take them to a “feel good” movie and talk about the positive messages and how they compare to the negative images of relationships shown in other movies or on TV.

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- Ms. Giannetti also suggests that moms take sons on a practice date to rehearse how it should go—the art of conversation, holding the door. She suggests parents should give teens money beforehand for dinner and the taxi or bus so they can really rehearse. Likewise, dads can take out their daughters—show them how they should be treated with respect and practice conversation. Similarly, provide the girls with money to teach them how to handle the financial aspects as well. When I read this article to my eldest son he chuckled and said that the practice dinner date would never work. But we’re on for Saturday night!
- Never discount your child’s romantic feelings. The “group date” that the kids talk about may be how they are socializing. But getting to know one person and building a rapport and friendship are practice for grown-up relationships and life.

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The Toxic Side of Hookah Lounges

“Hookah is huge,” said a Teen Scene panelist. Hookah bars and lounges have become increasingly popular with groups of teens in Manhattan, but what is hookah and is it harmful? Hookah smoking, which started in Asia and the Middle East, consists of burning tobacco mixed with honey or dried fruit in a water pipe and inhaling the flavored smoke. A traditional hookah pipe operates by water filtration and indirect heat, and can have a single hose and mouthpiece or multiple hoses.

Teens are attracted to hookah smoking partly because of the sweet flavored tobacco and partly because of its social nature. Smokers pass the pipe among themselves while conversing. Hookah bars and lounges are exotic and enticing. They tend to be lax about serving minors and typically don’t card.

Teens believe smoking hookah is safer than cigarettes because of the water filtration of the hookah pipe. This is a dangerous misconception. The water is a poor filter, and significant amounts of carbon monoxide, tar, nicotine, arsenic, lead, nickel and other cancer-causing toxins remain in hookah smoke. A typical one-hour session of hookah smoking exposes the user to 100 to 200 times the volume of smoke inhaled from a single cigarette, according to a 2005 World Health Organization advisory. Hookah smoking has been linked to several kinds of cancer, gum disease and such infectious diseases as tuberculosis and hepatitis.

Please discuss with your teenagers the misconceptions and serious health hazards associated with hookah smoking.

— SUSAN WINSTON

TEEN SCENE XXI

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point, you must be willing to say “enough is enough, and these are your boundaries,” one said. At the same time, teens who get into trouble need to feel that they can call their parents “without getting destroyed.” They also disagreed about what parents should do if a teen brought home a friend who was drunk. Some kids argued that it’s okay to call the other parent, both from the point of view of liability and respect for the other parent. Other kids suggested that it would depend on what kind of reaction might be expected from the other parent. Still others argued that calling would make it less likely that the kids would come to your house the next time.

As a parent, it might be easy to think about making the call, but what about receiving it? Perhaps it means deciding whether you’d rather have your teen drunk at someone else’s house or whether you’d like the opportunity to bring him home yourself—how your teen thinks you would react to a call may determine the outcome. One senior boy said that the kids who don’t have trust and open communication with their parents are the ones who often binge drink until they get sick. Another said, “Parents who wait up for kids are effective merely by showing that they care enough to stay up that late.” A sophomore girl echoed, “Be a daily presence in your kid’s life.”

Drugs

The vast majority of teens appear not to be doing illegal drugs. At the same time, the teens warned parents that New York City kids can get anything they want. One teen explained, “It’s all out there—pot, cocaine, prescription drugs, acid and ’shrooms.” Cocaine has made a “huge comeback” among girls, who use it to control weight, to impress older girls and to bolster an “It Girl” persona. When asked where they get drugs, one boy suggested older friends and older brothers. Another said that there were “student-friendly drug dealers” who are very approachable, nice and not scary looking.

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TEEN SCENE XXI

Continued from page 4

Whether teens face pressure to do drugs or drink alcohol depends on the situation and the child. Boys seem to be able to refuse alcohol and drugs without suffering from any stigma in the peer group, whereas girls seem to be subject to more pressure to use a substance in order to fit in. One senior boy said, “Pressure exists, but the easy answer is ‘no thanks.’” He also suggested using humor—lamenting, for example, that smoking pot “will kill your Presidential campaign.” Many teens acknowledged that much of the pressure comes from within, and that the more comfortable a person is with herself, the easier it will be to say “no.” A sophomore boy said that teens also have to think about “how, why and for what reasons do you choose your friends?”

Sex, Rap and Rock ‘n Roll

Ms. Martin-Gianino introduced the topic of sex by noting that teens today seem exposed to more sophisticated issues at a younger age through music and media. When she asked if crude and sexual lyrics affect the way teens think about sex, one senior boy dismissed the notion by saying “It’s music, it’s what gets played.” Interestingly, he then went on to say that he generally listens to his parents’ music. A junior girl added that she listens to music to relax and that she didn’t find “those songs” calming. Another girl agreed that some lyrics are very sexual and can “give the impression that sex is okay.” For parents who wonder what the lyrics even mean, the teens suggested going to www.urbandictionary.com for an education.

One term that is getting harder to define is “hooking up.” The teens explained that it is an umbrella term for all sorts of physical contact—from holding hands in middle school, to making out, to oral sex and intercourse. The different meanings do sometimes lead to misunderstandings. One boy noted that because girls are generally worried about their reputation, they will not engage in sex unless they are in a long-term relationship. The audience gasped when he described a long-term relationship as two to three months for

juniors and seniors and six months to a year for freshmen and sophomores. Many girls don’t think about early sexual activity beforehand, but afterwards they can’t even talk about it, cautioned a junior girl. The teens on the panel also got into a lively discussion about whether older boys—especially seniors—prey on vulnerable freshman girls. A sophomore girl noted that older boys invite younger girls to parties, get

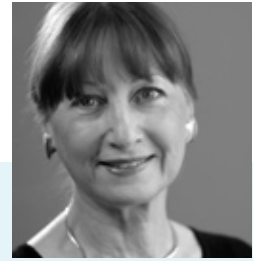
Have an ongoing dialogue with your teens and begin a conversation on the issues before you think you need to...

them drunk and take full advantage. A sophomore boy called it pathetic and a “national pastime” at his school. A senior boy countered that boys looking for an emotional connection with a girl would not seek out younger girls because of the difference in maturity.

“Expert” Advice

The teens—experts as Ms. Martin-Gianino called them—filled Teen Scene XXI with insights for parents. Have an ongoing dialogue with your teens and begin a conversation on the issues before you think you need to, said one. “You guys are allowed to nag us...we do hear you,” offered another. One boy had already discovered that the “way to get through a problem is to go to the parents, not around them.” Yet another girl, a senior who will soon graduate and go off to college, reminded parents that each child is going to have his or her own unique experience going through high school. As the evening’s different viewpoints showed, how true. ●

NYC-Parents in Action, Inc. invites speakers to present their opinions and expertise on specific topics. Their opinions and comments are not necessarily those of NYC-PIA.



Trust and Teens: Starting Early

BY CAROL SCHATZ PAPPER

What can parents of young children do in early childhood to make the teen years go more smoothly? The key, says Dr. Jean Mandelbaum, is to create an ongoing relationship of mutual trust and open communication. NYC-PIA newsletter contributor Carol Schatz Papper talked with Dr. Mandelbaum about the essentials of trust. Dr. Mandelbaum, the Director of All Souls School, has been on the faculties of Bank Street College and the City College of New York. She has been a consultant for the New York State Department of Education and is on the Advisory Boards of ISAAGNY and NYC-PIA. She is also the mother of two grown sons.

Q PIA: What can parents of young children do right now to help protect their teens through the risk-taking years?

A MANDELBAUM: From the minute a child is born, parents are establishing a relationship based on trust and an open line of communication. If the groundwork for trust, truth and honesty has been laid, it carries into the teen years. Teens are engaged in establishing an identity for themselves not unlike their first expressions of autonomy as two and four year olds. If parents have encouraged these demonstrations of individuality when the child is first hatching out, their teenagers will feel more supported and comfortable about establishing an appropriate sense of independence.

Q PIA: What is trust between parent and child and how does it start?

A MANDELBAUM: In infancy, it's gratification upon demand. But as babies get older, and they have learned to trust that they will be fed when they are hungry, postponing gratification for a while can be tolerated. They need to learn that having to wait doesn't mean that their needs won't be met. They must learn to trust their parents to provide for them.

Trust develops as a two-way street. The parents trust the child and provide unconditional love, and the child trusts that the parent will be there to support them and help keep them safe. When important limits are set, they are clear, explained and non-negotiable. The words of adults are trusted, and "no" means "no."

As children get older, parents have to demonstrate trust in their children. One way is by giving them appropriate choices. Parents should give their children reasonable choices and let them decide. If parents feel they have to make all their children's decisions and manage every last detail, they may get away with it during the early years, but they are quickly going to find that teens won't stand for it.

Q PIA: How do you establish good patterns of communication?

A MANDELBAUM: There are children who bubble over and will go on for forty minutes telling you every last detail of their day. Then there are those who are truly taciturn. Disposition plays a large role. Whatever the style, however, good communication happens when a parent is sensitive to what a child is feeling and notices changes in behavior. You can tell when something is bothering your child. If the child doesn't talk to you about it, there's nothing wrong in saying "It seems to me that something is worrying you." It's an opportunity for parents to say, "You know everyone has problems in school. How are things going for you?"

Attentive listening is so important. When parents are really engaged in listening without jumping in at every point, but just listening and then reflecting on what they've heard, children feel respected and understood. One has to understand the child's point of view for meaningful communication to take place.

Q PIA: Do you think cell phones have affected parent-child communication?

A MANDELBAUM: I see too many grown-ups talking on cell phones while they're supposedly with a child. At a precious moment when they could be talking about what they're seeing and interpreting the world, they are on the phone talking about other things. I would suggest that when you're with young children that you just tell people to call you back unless it's an emergency. If a child is old enough to be on his own—a phone doesn't make you old enough—a cell phone is helpful for accessing home and 911 since there are few public phones left on the street. But if a child isn't ready to do it without the phone, he's not ready to do it with the phone. He has to feel safe and confident and know where he's going.

Q PIA: What do you think is the most well-intentioned mistake parents make?

A MANDELBAUM: Mothers and fathers who feel that their child's happiness is completely dependent upon them—that it is their responsibility to see that their child never frowns, cries, or is disappointed in life—do an enormous disservice to themselves and their children. It is natural to feel sad when your child is unhappy, but children need to take responsibility for their own happiness and learn to cope with disappointment. Parents shouldn't feel guilty when their children are struggling. It is not a parent's job to "fix" every problem. It can be more helpful to your child to lend a sympathetic ear, provide perspective on problems, and suggest resources that the child can access to help himself.

Q PIA: How do you teach deferred gratification?

A MANDELBAUM: Giving children perspective is really important. You can give them perspective by not giving them everything they want instantly. Let's say your child is devastated by the color of her sneakers because the "cool kids" wear a different brand. You can say you aren't going to get new sneakers now, but she can put new sneakers on her birthday list. By the time the birthday rolls around, she may not even remember or want the sneakers anymore. You can remind her of how badly she wanted them and ask if sneakers are still preferred over other possible items. Evaluating, prioritizing and choosing will help children to gain perspective.

Q PIA: Are there certain behaviors in young children that foretell trouble?

A MANDELBAUM: It's developmentally appropriate for kids, and teens especially, to want to fit into a peer group. By three, they're learning social skills like taking turns, respecting others' property and communicating. If a child is having difficulties with his or her peer group before the teen years, it's a red flag. They may need help in forming satisfying relationships with their age-mates. Some children have a disposition for risk-taking and a need for a lot of stimulation. They love to live on the edge and are less likely to stay on the safe side of things. It's important to have very strong limits for kids like that, whereas other children may have more of an internal censor or built-in brake.

Then there are children who take risks because they feel they have to prove something. If a child shows early signs of low self-esteem and insecurity, he may find himself doing things against his better judgment in order to gain group acceptance. You can see that coming too.

Q PIA: How are tots and teens alike?

A MANDELBAUM: It's very normal for teenagers to test different things just for the experience of trying something new, just like four-year-olds. It doesn't necessarily mean that they're going down a terrible path if they make some poor judgments or try something they shouldn't. The chances are that this kind of testing of limits, a little bit of pushing back against the parental standard, is really the teenager's way of saying "I am I, you are you, and I'm going to assert my own independence." And it isn't necessarily a bad thing, even though it can sometimes look pretty scary.

Q PIA: Is acceptance a crucial part of trust?

A MANDELBAUM: The idea is to keep modifying your idea of who your child is as he or she is developing. You have to be flexible and allow them to be themselves. Your plans and aspirations may have to change if they are on a collision course with your child's abilities and dreams. To continue to give that unconditional love which was so easy to give to the infant, you have to know and respect the person who is your child. Recognize what's inside, and what your child is trying to accomplish with his or her own life. That is the essence of good communication and also the essence of trust. ●

Inside the World of a Drug Counselor: Strategies for Prevention

BY MELANIE WELLS

Parents seeking to protect their children from a growing culture of substance abuse among teens may feel unsure of where to turn for help, but they are not alone.

The Freedom Institute, a not-for-profit resource center for individuals and families affected by alcohol and drug dependency, offers programs designed to guide parents, schools and students through the substance abuse minefield. At a NYC-PIA luncheon this January, four counselors from the Institute, Charlanne Zepf, Tessa Kleeman, Wendy Scharin and Marjorie Terry, offered an in-depth presentation of their programs and advice to parents looking for ways to help their children cope with a culture where substance use and abuse are everywhere. The counselors, known affectionately by New York City independent school students as “the drug ladies,” also offered concrete suggestions for communicating prevention strategies to children. Ms. Zepf acknowledged that parents “play a critical role in substance abuse prevention.” You are “the number one influence in your teen’s life,” she said.

Dramatic changes in usage occur from middle to upper school, shaping differing approaches for the two divisions.

What sets Freedom Institute’s approach apart is a dual emphasis on candid confidential discussion and awareness of the emotional component in drug and alcohol abuse. Working in over 50 schools in New York City, both as guest presenters and in some cases as on-site counselors, the Institute’s clinicians provide a safe place to go with questions. When counselors visit schools to conduct a workshop, teachers leave the classroom so students may ask questions freely. The counselors provide frank information not only on chemical substances, but also on social skills, refusal skills, bullying, stress reduction, safety, body

image and sexual decision-making, all of which may contribute to substance abuse. Because exposure to chemical use and abuse is occurring earlier and earlier, the counselors also visit younger groups, seeking to provide tools to counter unhealthy messages from media, the internet and older children in a timely way. Workshop goals are to *delay* use as long as possible, *validate* and support non-users, *modify* current use, *educate* on the disease of addiction, and *encourage* users to seek help. Through Freedom Institute’s Student Assistance Program counselors are on-site at selected schools and available for consultation with students, families and faculty two or three days a week.

Dramatic changes in usage occur from middle to upper school, shaping differing approaches for the two divisions. In middle school, the emphasis of counselors is on defining terms—substance abuse, tolerance, dependence—and discussing the use of prescription and over-the-counter medications in an era that normalizes drug use. Students learn that “abuse” is use, but in ways that are harmful. Focus is on caffeine, alcohol, marijuana, prescription medicines and cigarettes. Counselors encourage students to identify ways to take care of themselves and to understand how and when using medications may be harmful.

Freedom Institute counselors rely on a discussion format once students are in upper school, touching on alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, inhalants, prescription medications, cocaine, opiates and hallucinogens. Misconceptions such as “cigarettes are worse than marijuana” are dispelled with facts. Counselors explain patterns associated with marijuana use, including dependence, lack of motivation, memory loss and weakening of the immune system. Students learn about alcohol poisoning and when to call 911. Finally, the counselors address the emotional dynamics of anxiety and social awkwardness, so that students may become more adept at protecting themselves. They

are encouraged to give voice to the “inner alarm” they sense when they see their peers getting drunk, getting high, or becoming dependent.

Parental support and education is the final component of the Freedom Institute’s approach to substance abuse prevention. Counselors “work to empower parents to help kids make healthy choices.” Parental intervention is vital, and parents should remember that even when teens are rolling their eyes, they are listening. Ms. Terry explained, “They have to have heard it to reject it.”

The physical immaturity of teen brains points to the importance of delaying drinking until adulthood.

How to intervene effectively? The panel recommended that parents learn to recognize and use “teachable moments.” Talk about health issues early and often in age-appropriate ways. Stress that prescribed medicines must be taken only as determined by a doctor and under parents’ supervision.

The panel listed some important rules of thumb for all parents:

Know your list of non-negotiables and make sure your child knows them. Empathize with your child if the rules appear harsh, but explain they stem from your concern for the child’s safety;

If there are older siblings, be vigilant about **supervision** to guard against the negative influence of an older child’s drug or alcohol use;

Discuss the issues with your spouse/partner so your rules are consistent;

Develop emergency plans. Impart the message that your child can call you no matter what the problem. Establish a code signal for your child to use if he/she is trapped in an uncomfortable situation and needs an out;

Don’t share your use history with your child, unless you have suffered past addiction and must alert your daughter or son to a genetic risk factor;

When you get questions about your use, **shift the focus to your teen.** Say your choices have little to do with what he/she faces now, and suggest you talk about “what is going on for you, now”;

Remember teens seek to normalize substance use and abuse. Teens will usually go “one step beyond perceived permission”: if you said no, they may experiment and be more careful about limiting their use; if you said yes, and give permission (directly or indirectly), a teen is more likely to abuse heavily;

Curfews are best decided upon on a case by case basis, depending on the “event.” Parents need to minimize time spent “wandering around without a destination”;

Be awake when your teen comes home, and assess his/her condition;

Communicate: not just with your child, but with his friends, friends’ parents and teachers;

Listen when he/she mentions drugs, in any context; and

Take action when needed. Not doing so signals permission. Don’t hesitate to call a professional with questions, concerns or red flags.

The good news is that many kids in New York City do not drink or abuse drugs. Fifty percent of juniors in high school may have tried alcohol, but not all drink regularly. What is important is to recognize that when teens gather on weekends, drugs and alcohol are often ubiquitous and figures may be higher in New York City than national averages. The panel also cautioned parents against allowing their own drinking habits to blur the rules they set up for their children. They noted that teens drink differently than adults do—they don’t sip one drink over an hour, but may gulp from two to five drinks with a goal of getting drunk. That behavior, combined with the physical immaturity of teen brains, points to the importance of delaying drinking until adulthood.

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Last Call: What You Don't Know About Teen Drinking

BY MEG SHERIDAN

When it comes to teen drinking, are you on the same page as your parenting partner? If you were to line up a parade of potential teen troubles—your son comes home drunk or your daughter says she's going to the movies but sneaks into a club party instead—would you both respond in the same way? “Every 16-year-old has a law degree and can talk circles around you if you're not ready,” said Dr. Ralph Lopez, a specialist in adolescent medicine. It's okay to wait until the cold light of morning to confront your teen, but you'd better have a unified response.

At a NYC-Parents in Action symposium “Last Call: What You Don't Know About Teen Drinking,” Dr. Lopez spoke along with Julie Rosenbluth, the Director of Adolescent Prevention Services for Phoenix House's American Council for Drug Education; Tessa Vining, the Director of Phoenix House's IMPACT outpatient program for New York City adolescents and their parents; and Luis A. Carrion of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. The panelists shared their perspectives on teen drinking and explained how parents can encourage positive teen behavior through conversation and example.

TRAIN TO BE A DISCUSSION GROUP FACILITATOR

VOLUNTEERS WANTED!

Throughout the year, NYC-Parents in Action sponsors parent discussion groups at member schools. The goal is to strengthen connections among parents and create a communications network that will be in place through lower, middle and upper school. The discussions, led by our trained facilitators, provide a forum for an exchange of ideas and concerns with other parents. We are looking to train new facilitators who are articulate, comfortable speaking in groups and interested in parenting issues.

If you are interested in learning more about facilitator training, please call NYC-PIA at (212) 426-0240

Parents who don't figure out why their teen is drinking are just putting a band-aid on the problem, said Ms. Rosenbluth. She suggested that beyond the wish to experiment, teens may also drink to mask low self-esteem or identity confusion, to blunt the feelings accompanying an underlying condition like depression or to ease the frustration of a learning disability. Some teens drink simply to overcome awkwardness in social situations. Mild experimentation should be short-lived. If your child drinks regularly, it's time to examine why, said Ms. Rosenbluth.

She also dispelled some common myths about drinking, including arguments parents may hear from their budding scholar, such as:

“There's nothing wrong with getting drunk once or twice.”

Research on the adolescent brain in the last five years has shown that the area of the brain responsible for judgment and executive function doesn't fully mature until as late as age 25. This research has indicated that drinking, particularly binge drinking, during adolescence can permanently affect memory and learning.

“All my friends drink.”

A common belief is that peer pressure causes teens to drink. A more accurate explanation may be that a teen will gravitate towards the social group that accepts his behavior. If parents and teens can address the underlying reasons for drinking, a teen's choice of peer group may change as well.

“If we lived in Europe, we wouldn't be having this discussion.”

Au contraire. Ms. Rosenbluth reported on research from 2005 showing that every nation in Europe except Turkey had higher teen binge-drinking rates than the United States. According to the study, easy access to alcohol seems to allow young people to drink heavily and in a risky fashion regardless of country.

“At least I’m not driving.”

Parents who serve alcohol to teens in their own home reinforce this myth. The argument is that if teens are going to drink anyway, it is safer to do so in the presence of an adult who can be alert to things getting out of control. But the reality is the adult has no idea if a particular teen is drinking on an empty stomach or taking medication that will exaggerate the effects of alcohol. In addition, the parent serving the alcohol is probably going against the express desires of other teens’ parents. Common sense and courtesy aside, serving alcohol to underage teens is illegal and can result in significant liability.

“You drank as a teenager and came out okay.”

Maybe if you had had access to the recent research on drinking and the adolescent brain, you would have done otherwise. The point is to help your teen identify why he is drinking and offer alternative ways to develop social skills or relieve stress. Don’t feel you have to share your war stories; this is about him. Do encourage conversation, be an active listener, and allow your teen to take part in decisions that affect him, like curfews.

The U. S. Drug Enforcement Agency’s Luis Carrion warned parents that drinking may be accompanied by the abuse of prescription drugs, a growing and dangerous problem. Prescription drug abuse is also developing its own set of false myths—most significantly that these drugs, because they are legal, are not harmful or addictive. Teens also fail to recognize that the sale of prescription controlled substances and the possession of certain amounts of these drugs are felonies.

Ms. Vining encourages families to institute rules concerning alcohol. For example, your family may decide on no drinking until age 21, that teens should leave a party if alcohol is being served, and that driving with anyone who has been drinking is strictly off limits. Older teens can promise not to encourage younger siblings to drink. To reinforce the rules, monitor your liquor cabinet, connect with other parents, emphasize

sports and activities, and, most importantly, examine your own drinking habits, said Ms. Vining.

Dr. Lopez noted that “kids drink within the genetic profile of their family.” If a family member has a problem with alcohol, he or she has the same responsibility to share that information as with any other important medical history. A teen at risk for alcoholism should know that he is at risk, cautioned Dr. Lopez.

The panelists agreed that teens should be managing successfully within the context of their family. Barring issues of serious illness or divorce, the teen should be comfortable in his basic spheres of family, school and peer group, said Dr. Lopez. If there is a breakdown, examine where it is occurring. Try to discuss problems in a way that stresses empathy over advice. Finally, look at your own habits—you may be sending a mixed message without realizing it. By talking with teens and modeling healthy behavior, parents can have a positive influence on how teens approach the decision of whether or not to drink. ●

STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTION

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For parents of teens going off to college, there is the worry of greater opportunity for binge drinking with fewer adults on hand to keep behavior in check. The counselors suggested not only giving advice to your teen, but also requesting responsible behavior. Advise teens to spend the first semester at college observing others, rather than being observed, and to avoid rushing into new situations. Most importantly, explain how you have guided and monitored them during their teen years because of the importance you place on their health and safety. Ask them to take the next step and take charge of their own safety, now that they are on their own. ●

MAPPING OUT THE BOY/GIRL SCENE

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- Ms. Giannetti reminds us to never violate our children's confidence. Never minimize their feelings. The joys and hurts of this age are powerful and I am sure all of us remember a time when we felt the way they do. Hurt, disappointment and anger are real feelings—let your son and daughter experience them.
- As for the media and the Internet's influence—provide alternatives for social interaction. The Internet is one of the ways our children are connecting to one another and it has its assets, but we should encourage them to tune out and turn off. Have friends over and get to know your children's friends. Encourage phone calls to the home number. Seek out entertainment with positive messages about people and relationships.

Kids want and should have their private life. There is a fine line between staying involved to advise our teens and asking too many questions. Find the balance. When you think back to your own experiences of dating, what would you want to change, what would you have wanted to know and what can you only learn by experiencing the joy of new-found feelings for someone and the hurt when it doesn't work out? Remember to remind kids that friendships and relationships take time and effort. Be there to embrace and support them through the range of feelings that they are bound to experience in these teen years. ●

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