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Parents responsible when hosting teen parties

Macomb Daily Illustration by Kevin J. Martin

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By Laura K. Brestovansky, For The Macomb Daily

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1 Comment

Parents of high school seniors face increased tension this time of year. In addition to prom and graduation preparations, college applications and end-of-year ceremonies, there's also the dilemma of senior celebrations -- and the risks that go along with them.

Parents who are planning post-prom and -commencement parties for their teens try to make their gatherings enticing enough to keep the seniors from going elsewhere (i.e., to locations where there could be risky substances and behaviors). But those parents must also keep those substances from being smuggled in by their guests.

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It can be a big problem: According to The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 34 percent of high school students binge drink five or more alcoholic beverages in a row. In addition, 63 percent of high school freshmen and 80 percent of high school seniors have said they have used alcohol.

Dr. Charlene McGunn said teen use of alcohol can be a gateway toward other risky behaviors, including drunken driving, sexual behavior and even teen suicide. Dr. McGunn is the executive director of the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families.

“We are hearing that marijuana is being used more. We are hearing the prescription drugs are being abused more and that they are being accessed from home.”

McGunn said marijuana use is especially problematic since the passage of medical marijuana legislation. “Teens don’t see it as harmful,” she said.

McGunn also noted that “most sexual activity by teens occurs under the influence of alcohol,” including sexual assaults. “Whenever you address alcohol use, you also address sexual assault and suicides.” She said there is a direct link between alcohol use and teen suicides.

The Royal Oak Coalition and the Alliance for Coalitions for Healthy Communities are trying to remind parents of their obligations through a variety of means. They have issued the following “Parent Guide for Teen Parties.” The guide is being circulated to many schools and agencies in Macomb County, including CARE of Southeastern Michigan and the Chippewa Valley Coalition.

“When we asked focus groups of students at Chippewa Valley and Dakota High School, many of the students said, ‘You need to talk to the parents,’” Dr. McGunn said. “There are a lot of parents who are either looking the other way, offering teens alcohol or who perhaps are not in the room where the party is taking place.”

When hosting a party, the guide said parents should:

1. Set the ground rules with their teen when planning the party — specifying attendance and time limits, declaring alcohol, tobacco and other drugs off limits, and adopting security measures, such as “locking in” attendees and limiting them to a specific part of the home. They should also prohibit teens from hosting parties without a parent in attendance.
2. Be present at the party to prevent risky behaviors and offer plenty of non-alcoholic refreshments.
3. Get to know the party attendees and their parents.

4. Know their liability. Parents may face criminal charges and civil lawsuits if they are found to have offered alcohol to those under the age of 21 or allowing drug use in the home.

5. Consider involving neighbors, friends, family and local law enforcement to monitor party activity.

6. "Hold your ground! Don't provide, ignore or excuse the use of alcohol with kids," the hosting guidelines conclude. Check pop and water bottles that guests bring.

Other experts recommend:

1. Invitation-only parties using paper invites, rather than email or social invites (which are easier to go viral). The invitations should include a parent's name and phone number.

2. Host parents should take the keys of all attendees who drive themselves to the party or insist that a responsible adult drop off and pick them up. All uninvited guests should be asked to leave immediately. However, parents should be aware that some attendees will bring a second set of keys or arrange for escapes or deliveries of substances, especially during overnight parties.

3. Watch for unusual behavior, such as frequent trips to the bathroom (where drinks or drugs may be used). If a parent suspects a teen has used alcohol or drugs, the teen's parents or local law enforcement should be called. Take away any alcohol, tobacco or drugs.

4. Before the party, the parents should make sure the party area is well lighted and all alcohol, prescription medications and firearms are secured in a different location.

5. Avoid combining teen and adult parties, which are more difficult to monitor.

6. Serve a variety of food and drinks. Use cans or bottles rather than punch bowls or cups, which are easier to "spike."

The Parent Guide for Teen Parties also includes tips for those whose teens are attending parties elsewhere:

1. Know the time and place of the party as well as address and phone number of the host and insist the teen calls a parent if the location of the party changes. Establish a clear curfew and consequences of violating it.
2. Verify the party information with the host parents. Make sure they intend to keep the party alcohol-, tobacco- and drug-free and that a parent will be in attendance at all times. Verify information about all-night parties as well.
3. Know how the teen will get home after the party or if he or she chooses to leave early.
4. Discuss with teens how to handle situations in which alcohol, drugs or tobacco are available and the parents' expectations in those situations.
5. Create a code phrase that a teen can use to signal he or she needs a way to leave the party gracefully. For example, if the teen calls home and says, "How is Cousin Fred?" it could be the cue to pick him or her up.
6. After the party, talk with the teen to assess his or her condition.

"Parents are key in sending appropriate messages to their children," Dr. McGunn said. "They need to model good behavior — not serve or provide alcohol — and really supervise the party."

In addition to keeping teens safe, parents have another incentive to monitor for substance abuse. As Macomb County Sheriff Anthony Wickersham points out, parents can be charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor (a 90-day misdemeanor). They also can be fined up to \$1,000. He said several communities have ordinances concerning house parties that could mean additional citations.

“Even when uninvited guests come,” Wickersham said. “It’s your responsibility as parents to control what goes on.” He noted that parents can face civil lawsuits if a situation, such as a drunken-driving accident or an injury, occurs because of underage drinking in their home.

In Michigan, drivers under the age of 21 can have their licenses suspended; four points added to their driving record; a fine of up to \$250; 45 days of community service; and higher auto insurance rates if they register a blood alcohol count of 0.02 percent (the equivalent of a 1/2-glass of beer).

McGunn said there is a broad effort to advise parents of their obligations when hosting a party. A postcard is being sent to Chippewa Valley’s families asking them to report problem parties. The postcard lists instructions for reporting such parties anonymously.

“Parents need to be vigilant,” McGunn said.

For more information, contact CARE of Southeastern Michigan, 586-541-003, <http://www.careofsem.com>; or the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families, 586-723-2360, www.cvcoalition.org.