

What Does the Party Cost?

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A friend called me recently, a bit excited that an old flame had just moved back into town. She was a little nervous about running into him and uncertain how she might react. This came as quite a surprise to me, as I have always known her to be an ethical person who had never been unfaithful to her husband. I was certain she would handle it appropriately.

I was reflecting on this conversation at a soccer game for my seven-year old son. Another parent shared with me that her teenage son's team played poorly the week before. They were the favored team and they didn't even make it to the semi-finals. She found out that several of the boys had been drinking the night before the game. She was clearly shocked. Her son had been given permission to "hang-out" with some of his teammates and she was told that they were just going to kick the ball around and play some video games.

So I asked her, "What did you do?" Her response surprised me. She said, "We didn't do anything," explaining that it didn't matter since the season had ended.

These two stories illustrate an important difference between adult behavior and teen behavior, one based on the physiology of our brains. My friend with the old flame has a brain mature enough to logically think through the positive and negative consequences of her actions, allowing her to control any impulses that might result in undesirable or unintended consequences. The teenager's prefrontal cortex, on the other hand, will not fully develop until his mid-twenties. This part of the brain controls inhibitions, impulses, rewards and punishments, attention span, intuitive emotions and decision making.

Leaving a decision to drink or not drink, with no consequences, to a teenager is not a good idea. One positive way to insure that your teenager makes better decisions is to adopt a Family Policy that sets in place the positive reinforcements for not drinking and negative consequences for drinking. Had the family of the teen had such a policy in place, their son would have already known what to do and what was expected of him and would have fully understood the negative consequences that would result if he chose to drink.

A Family Policy for underage drinking helps protect the teenagers from their own immaturity. Drs. David Hawkins and Richard Catalano are researchers who have identified several protective factors that reduce the risk of teens engaging in risky behaviors. Having a Family Policy concerning alcohol use is one of those.

Often, it is up to parents to reason for our children and make certain decisions for them until they are able to make well thought-out decisions for themselves. With brains that are still developing, a teenager is not always able to put the brakes on and control the impulse to engage in risky behaviors.

In the instance of my soccer friend, the partying cost the team the championship. The greater cost is the harmful impact that alcohol use has on the developing brain. Adopting a Family Policy regarding underage drinking, tobacco and other drug use is one of the Protective Factors a parent can use to reduce their children's risky behaviors.

If you suspect or know your teen is using alcohol or other drugs, you can contact The Prevention Division of Seven Counties Services' Early Intervention Program (EIP), an assessment and educational program for youth 13-17 years of age, at vserrano@sevencounties.org, or call Vicki Serrano, Prevention Specialist, at 502-439-9699.