

The Keys to Teen Safety

Parents urged to 'circle their wagons' to protect kids

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Jan 9, 2007

John and Carter Bryan naively assumed their three children were safely insulated from potentially lethal teenage temptations. So, when they discovered the triple threat of alcohol, drugs and sex had crept into their kids' peer group, they were caught off-guard.

They eventually turned to something quite old-fashioned to combat changing cultural norms and the high technology their fast-paced teens use to communicate: They invited the parents of their children's friends to a Sunday afternoon meeting in their living room.

They talked about their values and their concerns and ultimately agreed on a curfew for their children, depending on their ages (10 p.m. for eighth-graders, for example, and midnight for 12th-graders). They also agreed to contact one another if they learned a child was drinking alcohol or taking drugs or was in a situation where that behavior was going on.

"I want the eyes of the community on my child," said Carter Bryan. "I can't keep my three children safe all by myself."

The meeting four years ago went so well that Bryan told the gathering they should meet again the following month. "And bring a friend," she said.

Denise Miller, a parent of two teenagers, was one of the friends who came to the next meeting. Now, she and Bryan work together to preach to other parents the importance of diligence, collaboration and instilling a sense of responsibility in their children.

"What we're trying to do is go straight to the child's core," said Miller, past president of the Parents Council of Richmond, an association representing private and parochial schools. "The stronger that is, the more resilient they are." Said Bryan, "Part of what Denise and I have been doing is getting parents . . . to circle their wagons."

As they spoke Sunday afternoon, Bryan and Miller sat in the chapel of St. Christopher's School, where they had come to speak about underage drinking and other issues to parents of 10th-graders at the private boys' school. Both have sons at the school. The meeting had an undercurrent of grim timeliness in the wake of a fatal traffic wreck in western Henrico County involving a teen who faces several charges including manslaughter and driving under the influence.

Police are investigating whether the 16-year-old Deep Run High School student charged in the collision early Jan. 1 in Short Pump had attended a New Year's Eve party where teenagers were drinking alcohol while the host's parents were gone.

ONLINE

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www.commonwealthparenting.org
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Not exactly new is the phenomenon in which teens learn of a house where the parents are away and spread word of an impromptu party. Cell phones, instant messaging and social Web sites enable teens to communicate quickly and, in some cases, swarm a location.

Bryan and Miller have heard horror stories about such parties. Bryan, whose children are now in 10th, 11th and 12th grades, said her loose network of parents has derailed a few such bashes over the years simply by calling one another as soon as they heard any rumors. Parents should use the tools preferred by their children: cell phones, text messages and e-mails -- to alert one another, said Bryan, a member of the board of Commonwealth Parenting Center, a nonprofit education and resource organization.

Sharyl Adams, a substance-abuse prevention specialist with Chesterfield County who works with the Substance Abuse Free Environment Inc., a community coalition, said the issue of underage drinking is just as much an adult issue.

Parents should check where their kids are and who they're with, she said. They also should send the proper messages to their children regarding alcohol through their words and their actions. "Chesterfield did a survey and one of the interesting things that came out was on a question about alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana . . . that kids think their parents disapprove of them less for using alcohol," said Adams. "That is, they think they'd be in more trouble if they smoked a cigarette. That reflects the kind of messages we're sending to our kids."

On the other hand, she said, the survey also indicated the majority of students in the 12th grade -- almost 60 percent -- had not consumed any alcohol within a month of the survey. "They're still the majority, and they need to be empowered that it's OK to say 'no' and still be a cool kid," Adams said. "You don't hear about the kids doing the right things." Adams said the New Year's Eve wreck opened the door for parents to discuss the issue of underage drinking with their children.

"Parents need to know who their kids' friends are and who they're hanging out with," Adams said. "They need to make sure their kids don't have a lot of free time that's unsupervised. Paying more attention and getting those conversations started are things parents can do immediately."

From that first meeting of a dozen parents in her living room, Bryan's group doubled by the next gathering. Eventually, the number grew so large they began meeting in a church. Bryan estimates 200 parents have gotten together at one time or another over the past few years to discuss raising their children and keeping them safe. She set up a Web site: www.parentawareness.org.

"There's no magic bullet here," Bryan said. "Teenagers are going to make bad decisions." It's how parents prepare them for that -- and handle their indiscretions -- that will make the difference in the long run, she said. "It begins and ends," she said, "at home."

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