

## Notes

### Vienna-Madison Forum Series; Realities of Teen Drinking: Accidents, Deaths, and Parent-Battles

A parent-teen dialogue with three experts.  
Madison High School  
Nov. 18, 2008 at 7:00 pm.

**Mark Merrell**, the Principal of James Madison High School gave the opening remarks, saying that he readily admits that Madison has a drug and alcohol problem. Other neighboring high schools do to, but principals are often loath to admit this. At Madison HS, they try to educate the kids and he thinks this has had some effect. Mr. Merrell is quick to say that it's not bad kids, but good kids making bad choices. That being said, principals have no grey area, when a child is caught with drugs, drug residues, or alcohol, in school, it's mandatory that he recommend them for expulsion and that means they will not ever be back at Madison High School. Each year there are 10-12 expulsions, 90% of which are due to marijuana possession or residue. Students have been educated by the schools to know what the rules and the consequences are. We need to help our kids make better choices.

**Diane Eckert** was the moderator of the panel and she mentioned that a year and a half ago, the Surgeon General said that underage drinking is of epidemic proportions in our country, and he places the responsibility on all in the community to change our behavior and that of our teenagers. Looking at national student questionnaires we see that drinking has gone down a little, but that binge drinking has remained the same as it was. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade one quarter of the classes are binge drinking. The prefrontal lobe of the brain doesn't finish developing until the mid 20's and drinking in adolescence and early adulthood can disrupt or retard the development of this region, causing diminished ability to reason and make good choices. Studies show that teens are riding with drunk drivers more and driving under the influence more as well.

The first speaker was **Lt. Colonel Suzanne Devlin**, Chief of Police. Suzanne showed a map with dots locating all the recent juvenile auto accidents in Fairfax County, and said we have a drinking problem here in affluent Fairfax County. Years ago, police didn't do much about youth drinking and driving. Now Virginia has a No Tolerance Law which prohibits anyone under the age of 21 from possessing alcohol. The alcohol they have in their blood can be considered alcohol possession.

She said, though it's hard to lay down laws, when you have an 18 year old adult living in your house, we need to meet the challenge. Parents have to be the safety net for their kids by looking for ways to keep the police out of their lives.

1. Talk to your kids, before trouble starts.

2. Talk to them about alcohol and about the laws of Virginia. They need to know their rights and responsibilities under the law and how not to break it. If Law enforcement stops them for speeding, or any traffic violation, they can exercise “plain view” searches of vehicles. If an officer sees alcohol, drugs or tobacco products, they can enter the car and this could result in a possession charge.
3. Lay down punishments for certain behaviors in advance so they are not shocked, and stick to them.
4. Share your expectations with them and expect them to obey the law.
5. Model good behavior for your kids. Parents who drink too much, drink and drive or do drugs are going to have kids who do all those things.

Lt. Colonel Devlin said, our society has prisons and alternative schools, institutions to deal with kids who make bad choices, but that doesn't help you much as the parent. You want to prevent your child from having to enter these institutions. The Police have programs to help with underage drinking and driving under the influence.

- A. Public Education
- B. Shoulder Tap Program. They have underage cadets tap strangers on the shoulder and ask them to buy them alcohol for them. Adults who will do this are arrested. Often these are young adults, so she recommends you warn your older offspring of this program.
- C. Enforcement via SAFE November and SAFE December campaigns, where they are out on the streets stopping drivers and checking for alcohol and drugs.
- D. They also partner with the new Underage Initiative the county has begun called *Parents Who Host, Lose The Most*. There is a fact card put out by this program which states the Virginia State Laws regarding underage drinking. And they have created a hot-line (the non-emergency Fairfax County Police phone number) where people can call in anonymously letting the police know where underage drinking parties are going to occur. This can give the police a chance to talk the parents out of it or inform them of the potential use of their house. See the fact card summarizing the underage drinking laws at <http://www.preventioncoalition.org>.

One last note she offered was that young people who make bad choices which lead to suspension from school or a court record, often are not emotionally resilient enough to cope with their life spinning out of control and are increasingly involved in suicide ideation. If your child gets involved in life changing circumstances, seek treatment and counseling EARLY. Your young person is already struggling, their behavior is a “symptom” of their depression and negative self esteem. Piling on more punishment may be overwhelming. It may be a time to offer support, guidance, conversation, forgiveness and above all LOVE, because young people who fear they will lose their family's love and social status often resort to suicidal tendencies during a crisis.

The second speaker was **Debbie Sausville**, the step-mother of a 16 year old girl who lost her life on Dec. 3, 2004 in a drunk driving accident. Her daughter's friend lost her life the same way, three years later to the day. Mrs. Sausville is a MADD speaker now, because of her concern for all the children in the community. She calls it a crash and not an accident, because when you make that decision to drink and drive and get behind the wheel of a lethal weapon, a car, it's not an accident. A decision, albeit a bad one, was made. Lauren was her step-daughter for 7 years, she'd known her for 9, and she loved her and considered her one of her two bonus-daughters. Lauren was 16, had had her license for 3 weeks, when she went to a friends' house with 2 cases of beer, bought for her by a 27 year old man. (Debbie said as an aside, that when parents think they can let kids drink in their homes as long as they take their keys away from them, they are kidding themselves. Some day those kids will drink and no one will be there to take the keys away and they'll drive drunk.) They drank there for two hours and decided to go to another party. She followed two friends who were racing each other to get there. They chose a long unknown road, it was dark, and though the speed limit was 35, they were going much faster. She fears her bonus-daughter was trying to keep up for fear of getting lost in Clifton, and was going 55 mph when she crested a hill only to find the friend in front of her stopped at a stop sign. He saw her in his rear view mirror, and tried to move, but she veered to miss him, hit an embankment and rolled and the roof of her overturned car hit the back corner of his car, crushing the roof and sending her and her seat into the back seat. The friend in the first car was arrested for drunk driving with a 0.2 alcohol reading.

Debbie and her husband were called later that night by Lauren's mother after fretting about her not being home yet, and were told of her death. She said losing his firstborn child changed her husband forever and it changed her marriage for ever. Her message is for us to talk to our children early and often, starting in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Stop the alcohol supply to children, because they don't have the ability to make good decisions when drunk. Help stop the Amethyst Initiative by some University Presidents to lower the drinking age, it will not stop the binge drinking and the drunk driving. Go to MADD website, <http://www.madd.org>, and sign the pledge. When your children apply to colleges, ask them what their position is and don't send your child to a college that thinks it's easier to have kids drink than to enforce drinking laws.

Our last speaker was **Mary Ann Sprouse**, a Certified Substance Abuse Counselor. She talked about how young brains don't finish developing until the mid twenties, and that the part not fully developed during adolescence, is the pre-frontal cortex. She explained that the pre-frontal cortex is like one's Jiminy Cricket, ones conscience and decision center. Kids have only a half-Cricket, and when they drink, they don't have any Cricket at all. Their ability to make good choices disappears.

Ms. Sprouse said that children in high school are learning to set boundaries, and trying to make and be good friends. Alcohol impairs their abilities to do these

things well, and using alcohol to help make decisions, and be more social, leaves the brain thinking alcohol is the way to deal with social situations. It becomes self-perpetuating.

She thinks sometimes it's not that parents are turning a blind eye, but that when it starts at 12 and 13 years old, it's not even on the radar for a lot of parents. That's why she says to put it on your radar, and start talking to your kids at a young age about expectations, rules, the law, and punishments.

Ms. Sprouse also commented that the misconception that parents can serve minors alcohol in their homes and decrease the risk of accidents and death, leaves out the 50% of alcohol-related deaths in youth. Drunk driving only kills 50% of the alcohol-related youth deaths. The other 50% are the result of falls, fights, and suicide. Taking the keys doesn't eliminate 50% of the problems resulting from letting youth drink alcohol.

### **Tips on talking to your kids;**

1. Respect what they have to say. Listen to understand first. Then you can go on to state your concerns.
2. Use "I" statements, these work best in conversations. "You" statements shut down communication and put the listener on the defensive.
3. Talk often and model healthy communication. Kids don't talk to each other these days...they're so busy texting and emailing, they are not learning the art of communication.
4. Don't just talk to them when they're in trouble. Find unrelated moments to talk and unrelated situations to talk about, TV shows and things you see for example. Use them to discuss situations and reactions and solutions to them.
5. When talking to kids think about the five c's, Communicate, Consequence, Character, Commitment and Cognitive shift. Talk about consequences before the event, so it's not a surprise when punishment is given out, and so they know beforehand what to expect. Cognitive shift entails not always thinking about the negative.....catch your kids doing good things and comment on them.

**Diane Eckert** in summary shared with us that studies show that successful kids have at least three of the following assets;

1. not failing
2. having an adult ask them how they are doing today, every day.
3. having a mentor they talk to regularly.
4. being involved in decision making.
5. being involved in extracurricular activities.
6. being involved in community services.

It's the opinion of many that parents have more influence on their children's choices than they think they have. Talking early and often to them, and setting a good example can make a lot of difference.