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PARENTING, RISK TAKING AND PARTIES

Background of Shared Concern Amongst South Australian Independent School Heads
I am privileged to be a member of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA). This organisation has a membership of around 400 Heads of Independent Schools from Australia and New Zealand. The association represents a broad cross-section of schools; low and high fee, single gender and coeducational, rural and city, denominational or non-denominational. As a group we meet regularly. We discuss important educational issues which include developments in curriculum, pastoral care, information technology and social issues.

As Heads, we are continually concerned about two serious issues, binge drinking and party supervision. Heads from the South Australian branch of AHISA have assisted in providing the following guidance to assist parents in what can be a very difficult area with adolescent children.

Parenting
As a father of two children myself, I know parenting has never been easy. Most of our parents did their best with the skills and resources they had, often under some challenging circumstances. With the wisdom of hindsight and us now experiencing the challenges of parenthood first hand, most of us appreciate what our parents did for us.

Is parenting getting harder? I think so. We have the communications revolution to deal with. Students make connection via the web, email, mobile phone and text messaging. They are more materially wealthy than any previous generation, are probably more demanding, more willing to challenge authority and want far greater freedom.

I firmly believe compassion and understanding, rather than judgement and accusation, are the secrets to success in both education and parenting. Likewise, structure, routine and discipline are vital, even though at times the exchanges with a teenager can be frustrating.

Firm but fair parenting
Most young people do the right thing most of the time but your leadership as a parent is crucial. Be confident to exercise good judgement and do not be afraid of your child. He or she may appear to be physically large and mature, but this is not necessarily matched by maturity and responsibility of behaviour. It is possible for the best young person to be carried away by peers and the euphoria of the moment.

Don’t believe the line that, “everyone who is 15 or 16 is allowed to do this or that” or, “go when or where they please”. Don’t fall for the argument accompanied by a tantrum or the sulking phrase: “Don’t you trust me Mum/Dad?”

The most successful students are usually those who have been encouraged in the right ways and display habits which have been provided by the strong leadership of good parenting and schooling.

Parenting and parties that go horribly wrong
One common battlefield is the issue of teenage parties. Whilst Christian Brothers College is concerned about the welfare of staff and students at all times, its legal responsibility does not extend to private parties including before and after parties around the School Formal and parties following official school club and society functions. However, when things go wrong, invariably the School extends its care to those who are affected. In speaking to parents regularly about this issue, we know they appreciate guidance from the School.
An ultimate parenting aim in raising teenagers is for them to be independently responsible. This cannot be achieved by over management or by allowing teenagers to get into situations for which they are underprepared. Teenagers need practice thinking for themselves, but because of their inexperience, they also need guidelines.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that parties are an important social outlet for teenagers. Under the right circumstances they should be encouraged. In the vast majority of cases, Christian Brothers College families hold successful and enjoyable parties.

However, a friendly and often-repeated warning: large parties for our young people can go horribly wrong. Where is the value in a birthday party which gets gate-crashed, where guests are physically assaulted, alcohol misuse arises, illicit drugs are present, the house is damaged, neighbours are disturbed and the police are required to intervene?

For many parties, whilst there has been no disaster, cigarettes and alcohol have been present. Inquiries sometimes reveal some naivety on the part of our young students who seem to have little idea of the possible consequences of their behaviour. Sometimes the type and style of supervision, by otherwise sensible adults, are a contributing factor. Therefore, at this stage, I think it is appropriate that I reiterate again some beliefs of mine, Christian Brothers College and other South Australian Independent School Heads in relation to such matters:

- I believe that school students should not smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol. Like voting, they are rights of adults over 18, who should then accept the consequences. The laws of South Australia support this view and also make other drugs, such as marijuana or amphetamines, illegal.

- I believe students should be taught and shown sensible approaches to alcohol not just at school but also in the home. Just remember that recent research confirms that adolescent brains have not fully developed and copious quantities of alcohol or any drugs are not recommended. Liberal quantities of alcohol and illegal drugs are often available at teenage parties and informal gatherings. There would be very few 16 year olds who have not attended a gathering and been directly exposed to such substances. Many say no, some do not.

- Not all teenagers tell the truth, nor do all adults either. Sometimes assurances provided by teenagers to their parents, or by host parents to other parents, are inaccurate or untrue. There are many parents who have no idea where their children are in the evenings, especially at weekends, because they either do not check the arrangements made or feel there is no need to do so.

Therefore, my fellow independent school Heads and I offer a few suggestions to try to minimise potential hazards. These suggestions concur with a parent information evening I aim to hold later in the year on this topic.

**Planning Parties**

- Parties should be planned with your child well ahead of time. Good communication and ownership of the party by child are important. There will be areas of agreement and others you will need to negotiate. It is important that you both understand and stick to the plan that you have devised together.

- Try and keep the party invitation list small. Smaller parties of around 20 guests are easier to supervise without feeling you are the policeman, which can undermine the trust between the parent and teenager.

- Consider the timing of the party. Parties during holidays are preferable, whilst it is not advisable to hold a party immediately prior to or following examinations, before or after the School Formal or successive parties for the same children within the span of a few weeks. Consider other activities apart from parties which provide social interaction.

- To minimise the possibility of gate-crashers, establish a guest list and issue individual written invitations. Information on the invitations should include the address and contact phone number of the host parents, starting and finishing times, information about alcohol and a RSVP via telephone. Avoid invitations and RSVP’s being transmitted by SMS or email. There should be a responsible adult at all points of entry throughout the night, equipped with the guest list.

- Check guest lists off at your door. Never permit gate-crashers or others that you have not specifically invited to join in. The use of mobile phones and text messaging has made the problem of gate-crashing
even worse. For any function it is wise to have the assistance of friends and the services of a security firm for the purpose of supervision. Ask parents of other students attending to assist and willingly volunteer when other parents are hosting a party. The adults should move among the guests from time to time. As hosts, parents are responsible for the welfare and safety of other people’s sons and daughters. Never leave younger people in a house unsupervised.

- Make your “no illegal drugs and alcohol” position clear (No alcohol for anyone under the age of 18). Work out how to manage the use of illicit drugs or excessive use of alcohol at your home. Your plans should include what is to be done in the event someone becomes sick or intoxicated.

We do this at CBC and as my last correspondence to you indicated I am not hesitant about authorizing SA Police to conduct random searches of lockers and work areas to ensure CBC stays drug free and that you are provided with peace of mind which will counter baseless rumours that often surrounds drugs in schools. You have a duty of care and may be liable if alcohol and drugs are served at your home.

- Define the party area. Ensure adequate lighting.

- Be careful about the moral and legal implications of selling alcohol, which includes the requirement to hold a liquor licence. It is an offence to sell alcohol to minors (young people under the age of 18 years), supply alcohol to minors in a public place or serve alcohol to minors where they have paid an entrance fee. Minors cannot buy alcohol or drink alcohol in public places.

- When hosting a party for your child never allow BYO alcohol. It is unwise to serve alcohol at young peoples’ parties and, as mentioned above, there are legal issues in relation to the sale and supply of alcohol, as well as the well-being of those consuming it. Parents must be the judge of that, taking into account the age of the guests, the size of the group and knowledge of their child’s friends. In any event, limit the amount of alcohol and make the fact widely known. Make sure you have a responsible person in charge of the alcohol. Avoid open punch bowls.

- Do not allow backpacks into the party. Never allow guests to leave the party and then return later. These guests may be using you and your function to disguise errant behaviour elsewhere.

- Negotiate rules about tobacco. It is illegal to supply cigarettes or tobacco to people under the age of 18 years. It is also illegal for someone under 18 years to smoke tobacco. If the whole party is not smoke-free, then ensure you have smoke free areas.

- There are provisions under the criminal code relating to sexual offences and age restrictions. Parents must be mindful that when young people consume alcohol, their inhibitions decrease and the likelihood of them engaging in sexual activity, with or without consent, might increase. As such, supervision of all areas of the premises is important.

- Advise neighbours and the local police of the date, time, supervision arrangements and that there may be some loud music and general noise. Check the regulations regarding permitted noise levels in your area.

- Accidents can occur, damaging both people and property. Check that you have minimised the risks and that both your public and house and contents insurance is up to date. You have a duty of care to make sure that guests at your home are safe. Failure to fulfill this duty of care can result in legal action being instigated against you.

- Have back-up plans for ways to get your guests safely home. Prevent any person from driving who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Consider that some guests may have to sleep over if transport becomes a problem, or if the party finishes very late.

- Encourage appropriate forms of entertainment which includes music and dancing. Boredom can lead to less desirable activities.

- If drinking and smoking are permitted, restrict them to certain areas.

- Provide a safe and quiet place where young people can slow down away from the action of the party.

- Serve plenty of water as well as soft drink, finger food and lollies which are popular with teenagers.

- Check those who are driving are safe to do so.

- Have readily available a list of emergency numbers and a first aid kit. Act immediately if someone gets violent, or becomes injured or is severely affected by drugs or alcohol.
• After the party discuss what went well and what could have been done differently.

Attending Parties
• Be sensitive about the strength of peer pressure and the desire of your child to be accepted and popular.
• Always check the supervision at the party. You should feel free to ask how the party will be run, what time it starts and finishes. Also ask if there will be alcohol and what plans are in place for dealing with situations such as gate-crashers or intoxication.
• Deliver your son/daughter to the party or event yourself, and always collect him or her at an agreed time. Reserve the right to enter the venue yourself. You won't be popular, but parents are not there to be popular, but to provide parental love, leadership and safe boundaries. Most young people will tell you that they are far more likely to drink or smoke if they think there is a chance they will not see their parents that evening. At the very least, always speak to your child when they get home.
• If you are not able to transport your child to and from the party, encourage your child to go out with trusted friends and to leave the party together. Discuss what venues they intend to visit and which friend will be their buddy to keep them safe.
• Be sure that your child knows the strategies to avoid trouble and is knowledgeable about the risks of substances and situations. Encourage them not to be bullied or pressured into doing things against their will. You should always be immediately available by telephone if your child wishes to leave a difficult situation early. Encourage them to take a mobile phone and to telephone you if they need assistance. Provide them with cab vouchers for emergencies.
• Ask your child to let you know of any changes to their plans whilst out.
• Discuss with your child how the use of excessive alcohol, and the use of illicit drugs such as marijuana, ecstasy tablets and amphetamines can affect people in social settings. Discuss the dangerous affects these substances can cause, both short term and long term. Practice in front of your children what you preach.
• Discuss with your child how some uninhibited venues make it harder for young people to maintain self control eg raves, some discos and clubs and schoolies week.
• If you make the decision that your child is permitted to drink alcohol:
  ~ set a limit to their drinking in terms of types and quantity of alcohol and stick to it,
  ~ do not let them drive,
  ~ allow only trusted people to buy their drinks for them,
  ~ ask them to eat before leaving home,
  ~ space their drinks with non alcoholic drinks and food. Encourage them to avoid shouts or top ups, and
  ~ do not leave drinks unattended.

Further information
Further information can be obtained from the following websites:
www.dasc.sa.gov.au (Drug and Alcohol Services Council)
www.drinkingchoices.gov.au (Hints and tips on safe partying)
www.olgc.sa.gov.au (Information on liquor licensing laws in South Australia)

Christian Brothers Colleges’ commitment to Drug and Alcohol Education
Christian Brothers College has an excellent educational program on drugs and alcohol. The biological and social issues relating to alcohol and drug use are discussed explicitly in RE, Pastoral Care, PE/Health and MITIOG and other classes. Christian Brothers College has firm policies against alcohol, tobacco, drugs and other sources of difficulty for young people of school age.

Our student counsellors and College staff make themselves freely available to our students and their parents to discuss any issues associated with parties, adolescence, peer pressure and drugs and alcohol.
Please do not hesitate to discuss any of these issues with your child’s teacher, College Counselors or Heads of School. Naturally your queries will be treated with respect and confidence.

I ask for all parents to work with us on these matters at all times.

Noel Mifsud
Principal
Christian Brothers College