



Brookline PARENT EDUCATION NETWORK

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PARENT NETWORK UPDATE

MARCH 2015

SPECIAL ISSUE:

An Evening with Peer Leaders on

NAVIGATING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF FRESHMAN YEAR

When students “leave the nest” of their small elementary schools for Brookline High School, it’s an exciting time for both teens and their parents. It’s also a challenging transition, as families learn to navigate new friends, new situations, new pressures, new expectations, etc. The Freshman PTO, B-PEN (Brookline Parent Education Network) and BHS Peer Leaders teamed up for a recent interactive meeting exploring some of the challenges of freshman year, focusing on five main themes – stress, family communication, social media, marijuana, and alcohol. Peer Leaders offered insight to parents about each, then joined parents for round-table discussions. Here’s brief summary of insight, ideas, tips and advice that arose from the evening’s conversation...

STRESS

Peer Leaders shared information about teen stress and advice on how to handle it. It can be academic, social, extracurricular or a combination of all three. It can be different things at different times. Stress can be especially hard for freshmen because everything is new. It’s a huge social change, as kids navigate new friend groups and move on from old relationships. Kids need to find healthy ways to deal with stress – exercise, fun activities, clubs, hanging out, TV, free time, etc., and parents need to respect that they may need an hour to relax before tackling homework. Sometimes just having one buddy can help a freshman get motivated to do something outside his/her comfort zone – take a yoga class, try out for a team, etc.

A lot of freshmen struggle with time management. Some students need help and support to learn to plan their time. Peer Leaders suggested parents can help students put schoolwork in perspective and take time out to have fun and relax. College is already on their radar, so parents needn’t add to the stress by bringing it up. Joking can be a good way to lighten stress and make inroads in relating to teens. Sometimes talking about your own experiences as a teen can be a helpful way to relate. Some kids turn to substance use and alcohol to alleviate stress. Partying a lot can be a warning sign, as can withdrawing if things get too overwhelming.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is not all bad. School and team information are often conveyed this way. However, over use can be a problem, especially with time management, and it is reasonable to limit screen usage. Kids with self-discipline can learn to find ways to periodically disconnect, but there are also apps and timers that do that for you to insure periods of non-interrupted focus. Ask your kid to share passwords (though this may be too strict for really responsible kids) and show you what they are interested in doing online. If homework is getting done on time, consider relaxing limits on internet use.

Popular apps include Instagram (pictures, captions), Twitter (140 characters or less), Snapchat (pictures, videos viewed for a very brief amount of time), and Tinder (a way to see who is geographically close to you at the moment, often used for “romantic” set-ups). Teens often send inappropriate photos via Snapchat not realizing that they don’t always disappear – someone can take a screenshot and pass it on to others. Twitter is sometimes used for bullying by targeting someone indirectly (sub-tweeting). Yik Yak, which is based on location, can be used for bullying, since it is all anonymous. Talk to your teen about responsible cyber citizenship and warn about the dangers of

misuse. One of the best sources of up-to-date information on social media issues is

www.common sense media.org.

FYI - Parents are welcome to use the [student portal X2](#), accessible through the [BHS website](#). [CANVAS](#) is intended for students and their teachers, but parents can ask for access if there seems to be a real issue with a student getting homework done.

FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Be available when your kids want to communicate, but don't force the issue when they don't. Pay attention to mood. Try to find ways to talk without being "up in their space" and consider low-key times (maybe Sundays?) Avoid too many questions or heavy topics in the car, where kids can feel trapped. Talk about silly things occasionally. If there is a real issue that needs to be addressed, suggest that you talk later, when the teen is more relaxed.

Find some regular times to do something together – watch a TV show, play a game, go to a movie, have a family dinner. Structure and routine can be comforting. Students themselves are confused about a lot of things, so don't assume no communication is withholding. Sometimes kids just need a little privacy and quiet time. Give them some independence, let them try new things and fail – it's a way to learn. Communicate trust and don't expect perfection. Encourage them to teach themselves. Being strict sometimes backfires, but do set realistic limits and communicate expectations. (Freshman curfew times that were suggested were 9-9:30 if kids are hanging out outside, 10 – 1 if you know they are safe in someone's house or at an event – stay awake until they come home.) It's OK to call the parents of new friends to check on plans. Be an anchor and safety net.

Some parents initially feel a little disconnected from the school and the teachers. But that's normal -- BHS maintains "With freedom comes responsibility," encouraging students to take ownership of their education and talk directly to teachers/staff about any issues. BHS also has math and writing centers where students can go in before and after school for extra help. However, if needed, parents can email all teachers and/or guidance directly.

Help kids realize the importance of getting enough sleep, that trying to do work beyond a certain fatigue point is not productive. Encourage the whole family to turn electronics OFF at night. Spend spontaneous time together without an agenda – go get ice cream, a slice of pizza, etc. Give students an occasional break from chores. Do something nice for your teen. Offer to help with the logistics of scheduling something or getting from place to place. Tell your teens that they can call you and be picked up from anywhere, anytime, no matter what.

ALCOHOL

There's a big change in alcohol exposure during freshman year, usually starting when someone shows up to a friend's house with hidden alcohol or is already inebriated. Often, teens get alcohol from upper classmen, older siblings, or parents' liquor cabinets. As freshmen, teens often don't know how to deal with aspects of alcohol use -- blackouts, throwing up, [the warning signs of alcohol poisoning](#) -- and they are hesitant to "snitch" on their peers and get them in trouble, which can leave a friend in a health crisis. All freshmen will be taught about alcohol in Health Education, but it is only two days a week for one semester, and there is a lot of other material to cover as well, so parents need to weigh in – often and decisively. School deterrents include the chemical health policy for those involved in performing arts productions and/or team sports -- if a teen is found in the presence of alcohol, they can get suspended for 25% of the season. Depending on one's friend group, alcohol use usually increases as students move through the grades.

MARIJUANA

Marijuana is everywhere, very accessible, so parents should have a conversation NOW about their values and expectations. Don't freak out, but sit down and have an open discussion – persistence and consistent messages are important. Keep your own experiences in mind for perspective. Explain the [legal and health ramifications](#) of early marijuana use – kids who try marijuana young often go on to smoke heavily as they get older, which leads to other riskier experimentation. (According to the most recent BHS survey, of the 40% of students who try marijuana, 10% end up with a heavy use habit.) The cigarette buffer zone at BHS has greatly decreased marijuana use at/near school, so it isn't prevalent

during the school day.

RESOURCES

Brookline is blessed with a wealth of resources, starting with BHS deans, guidance counselors and social workers. In addition to the [BHS website](#), one of the best resources for BHS parents is the Brookline Parent Education Network website – www.B-PEN.org. There you can find a wealth of helpful information, ranging from parenting tips and fact sheets on a variety of issues to links for local and national resources. B-PEN coordinators June Harris and Karen Campbell can also help organize and/or facilitate [Parent Networks](#) for further discussion of social, emotional and developmental concerns. Two tip sheets directly relating to the freshman challenges discussion are:

[SETTING REASONABLE LIMITS FOR YOUR TEENS](#)

[ADVICE TO FRESHMAN PARENTS FROM SENIOR PARENTS](#)

For specific concerns about your child, confidential guidance and support is offered through BHS's Prevention/Intervention Team:

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