



Brookline PARENT EDUCATION NETWORK

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PARENT NETWORK UPDATE

NOVEMBER 2015

SPECIAL ISSUE ON

The Unique Challenges & Opportunities of Freshman Year

On Oct. 27, a special Freshman Parent Meeting in conjunction with B-PEN and BHS Peer Leaders addressed some of the unique challenges and opportunities BHS freshmen commonly face, including changing social pressures, the lure of alcohol and parties, marijuana/drugs, the ins and outs of current social media, and healthy relationships/body image. Roughly 80 parents listened to information from BHS social workers Mary Minott and Jorge Membreno (who are available for any concerns parents might have) as well as insight from BHS Peer Leaders, who helped parents understand just what their freshmen students may be experiencing. These presentations spurred round-table discussions that generated awareness, a sense of community, and a wealth of helpful strategies. Read on for a summary of the event's key points.

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STRESS

Freshman year is a big adjustment, and parents may notice their teens feeling frustrated, angry, overwhelmed, not getting enough sleep. But freshman year is the ideal time for teens to learn how to cope with stress, what works and what doesn't. It's the learning year -- getting used to new teachers, heavier workloads, how the school works. Parents can help enormously with this balancing act.

- Try to be less stressed than your student. Lead by example, show this is how you deal with stress.
- Don't go at children in the car, because they feel they can't escape, and it adds more stress. Find another time or place to talk about issues. Let car conversation be about fun topics.
- When talking, try to be understanding and supportive – they're not necessarily giving you attitude. Give them some slack.
- Appreciate the workload. If you notice they're stressed, help them out.
- Feed them proactively -- go up with a bowl of cereal in the morning or provide snacks during study time.
- It's important to talk when everyone is calm and relaxed, not during homework hours. It's all about timing.
- Facilitate and help them find time for fun and exercise/sports. (Exercise can be a great stress release!)
- Don't encourage AP classes or pressure them to get all A's. Let them make those decisions, but continue the message that they are capable – "You can do it!"

NEW FREEDOMS & SETTING LIMITS

Freshman year is exciting and challenging because students meet so many new people and often are making a lot of new friends. Sometimes kids can get lost in that social fervor.

- Being social can take away from schoolwork, so it's important to have a curfew to make sure they have time for their commitments. (10-10:30 on weekends is common at this age.) Curfew infringements should have consequences.

- If a kid is going to a house where you don't know the parents, call and introduce yourself, see if they're going to be home, get a sense of who they are. That's especially important if sleeping over is involved.
- In order to have a good relationship, it's also important to develop trust. Work to find that balance.
- If your rules are different than other families, explain to your teen that this is what works for us and why. Don't compare.
- Have your teen check in periodically and text when they're out and want to change locations.
- If they're out at night, make sure you know they have a safe way home and are not walking alone after dark. Be available to pick them up if they need you.
- Reinforce appropriate bed times so the whole family is not too tired.
- Consider limiting phone time, designating non-phone hours and putting phones to bed in another room at night. (Sometimes it helps to have a charging station for all electronics in a non-sleeping room.)

ALCOHOL & UNSUPERVISED PARTIES

While most freshmen don't drink alcohol, there is usually a group of more social students who do go to parties and bring alcohol, which is usually taken from the parents' own supply without their knowledge or obtained by an older person who buys it for them.

- Talk about your expectations regarding underage drinking and discuss the possible negative side effects.
- Make clear the consequences they will face at home and at school if caught with alcohol.
- Consider an unconditional "no-questions asked" bailout agreement – if they are in a situation where they are drunk or uncomfortable with the social scene, they can call and you will come get them without questioning or punishment in the moment. Praise them for good judgment in making the smart call, but be clear that you will need talk later about the situation.
- Give them some coping skills to handle peer pressure so they know how to deal with a variety of situations. ("What would you do if...?")
- In all situations, the most helpful and important factor in the parent/teen relationship is good, respectful communication.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Teens are digital natives, and social media is most often a big, very powerful part of their lives, leading them to feel pressured to be connected 24/7 or risk being "left out." It can make kids stay up too late, lose sleep, put off homework, etc. Bullying can also be an issue. Learning to balance the greater demands of high school with the lure of social media, which is often a major distraction and time suck, can be a real challenge, especially for freshmen.

- Setting limits and guidelines for social media use at home makes it easier for teens to navigate in a healthy way. Ask your teen about their media use, what sites they visit, what they do online.
- Freshman year is a good time to experiment and set up good routines, which teens can adapt as they get older. Good work habits will carry over to other parts of life.
- Teens need to figure out how much social media they can handle without it interfering with homework and other commitments. They need to decide what habits work for them, accept personal responsibility. Natural consequences like poor grades, bad health, etc., will be motivating factors.
- However, if they need help with time management, discuss what limits and routines might work for them. Come up with a plan/schedule together, but balance your involvement. Let them make some mistakes. It is ultimately their responsibility.
- Some teens say special apps that lock the internet or specific sites that are distracting (facebook, YouTube, etc.) for a certain period of time can be helpful to keep a student focused on work.
- If the problem is severe, parents can be the "administrator" of the computer to control where it is kept in the house (preferably not the bedroom), what sites are accessible, when the router shuts off, etc.

- Procrastination is often a problem, and the cell phone, computer and TV are the most common ways to put things off, and putting things off can add to stress.
- However, digital devices can also offer relaxation and down time, so there needs to be compromise.
- When it looks like they're fooling around on the computer, they may be studying. Give them the benefit of the doubt until they prove they need your help.
- Remind kids to be smart online and make conscious decisions. "Don't post anything online you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the newspaper." Trying to look cool can come back in your face.

MARIJUANA

Marijuana use is fairly common at BHS, but not so much among freshmen. However, some students do begin smoking freshman year and it can become a serious problem. Your child will probably be offered marijuana sometime in high school, often by older kids, so the time to discuss it with them is NOW. Freshmen also are learning about the risks of marijuana use in health class.

- Talk to teens about your expectations. Consider a written, signed contract.
- Tell them what you know about marijuana's long-term effects, which can lead to other drug use, addiction. They've probably heard stories of teens who've ended up in rehab.
- Explain how the brain is not completely developed and physically affects children more than adults, making it hard to moderate oneself.
- Be aware that one in four teens who smokes marijuana goes on to have a problem and become heavy smokers. If they start as freshmen, they have that much more time to develop a serious problem. (BHS's Prevention/Intervention Coordinator, Mary Minott, 617-713-5155 is always available for information and counseling.)
- However, parental disappointment and the impact on family may be more of a deterrent than science. Encourage them to remember their values and have the strength to say no.
- Remind them of the school policy – there are specific consequences for marijuana use for those involved in athletics and performing arts.
- It's natural for kids to be curious and want to try marijuana. Be prepared to deal with this and come up with an action plan if you find out about a teen's marijuana use. Figure out how you can respond in a constructive way.
- Also talk about prescription drugs, especially painkillers and ADHD meds, which affect people very differently. Make sure your own drugs are monitored and disposed of properly.

MAKING FRIENDS

Coming into a new school and meeting a ton of new kids can make a teen's social circle explode – or implode, as once close friends venture off in new directions. Initially as a freshman, it may seem like everyone is your friend. But it may take awhile for true friendships to shake out, which can be very isolating for some kids.

- If a teen is not coming home with lots of new friends, that's OK. There is a lot to deal with freshman year as teens deal with a new environment. Don't add your worry and expectations to that pressure. By the end of freshman/beginning of sophomore year, special friend groups will often start to come together.
- BHS embraces all kinds of people and welcomes a lot of different clubs and activities -- there is someone for everyone depending on interest.
- Encourage your teen to get involved and try new things, but appreciate how hard that can be.
- Support and facilitate outside activities, sports, etc.
- Accept that not every teen has a million friends.
- School can be exhausting – sometimes it's OK to come home and just crash. Try spending more time together as a family.

RESOURCES

Brookline is blessed with a wealth of resources, starting with BHS deans, guidance counselors and social workers. In addition:

- ❖ BHS's [Prevention/Intervention Team B-SAPP](#) (social workers Mary Minott and Jorge Membreño) can be reached for confidential consultation and counseling in Rm. 149 or by calling 617.714.5155.
- ❖ [BHSPeerLeadership.com](#) offers valuable insight for and about students, including two excellent Peer Leader videos – “The Real Consequences of Smoking Marijuana” and “Freshman Success,” in which BHS upperclassmen offer honest and earnest advice to freshman.
- ❖ [B-PEN.org](#) has a wealth of information on all these topics, and co-coordinators June Harris and Karen Campbell are available to help set up other parent gatherings.

www.B-PEN.org

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