

HOUSE PARTIES and SOCIAL HOST LIABILITY

It can happen in the blink of an eye – or the flick of a finger, as a text message goes out to dozens of kids

...PARTY AT 100 SMITH ROAD!...

Experts advise parents never to leave teens at home alone overnight and to be careful when leaving a house unattended for the weekend. Even when a child is staying with neighbors, if he/she still has access to the unattended home, the opportunity to socialize without adult supervision can be tempting. There have also been instances when a teen's friend appropriated a house via spare key or unlocked window when the teen and his/her parents were out of town. Whatever the scenario, even the smallest of gatherings among close friends can quickly escalate to an out-of-control party when the word gets out. What should adults be doing? The following is an interview with Mary Minott, LICSW, Coordinator of Brookline's Substance Abuse Prevention Program (BSAPP).

What should I do if?

***I need to leave my teen for a few days while I go out of town?**

It is never a good idea to leave your teen home alone when you are out of town. Arrange for your child to stay with a friend who has a responsible parent you can count on to provide supervision or arrange for a house sitter. As parents, we are inclined to trust our children as long as they have not given us reason to think otherwise. But when we are leaving our home unsupervised, it is not just our own children that we need to worry about. Every year we hear stories of houses that are trashed by a student's friends when the student was away with their parents. Sometimes students might break in through a window, or they know where a key is stashed, or maybe even gotten access to a key from their friend.

Safeguarding your home and your teen -- Even if you trust that the last thing your child wants to do is to throw a ripper party at your home, you still need to safeguard your home when you go away. Ask a neighbor to be on the look-out. Also, the Norfolk District Attorney's office recommends ***"If you are going to be away from home overnight, consider calling your Police Department to ask that they check your home daily for unwanted parties. This may help take the pressure off your teenager when uninvited friends show up wanting to party because they heard you were out of town."*** And if you tell your child ahead of time that your house is being watched, the message will usually get across that it is not a safe place to party.

***I hear of a party being planned with alcohol?**

Better safe than sorry still holds true. Use common sense, and take whatever steps you can to prevent the party from happening. This could include calling the parents of the prospective home, an anonymous call to the police department, and talking to your own child about the planned party and giving him/her the chance to make better plans with their friends that do not include alcohol. As much as possible, try to share your legitimate worries with your child and include him/her in coming up with better alternatives for both of you. Teens need to know that their actions impact others.

***I suspect the get-together next door involves underage drinking?**

How you respond to this situation depends on your relationship with your neighbor. If you know them well enough to reach them, you can call and plan together how to intervene in the party. If there is any question as to whether students have been drinking, you should help insure that they leave the party only with a parent or

guardian. If the "get-together" is actually a much larger party, it may be more than you can handle and you should probably call the police.

***I think one of my teen's friends is sneaking alcohol into our home?**

So many of these decisions depend upon our relationship and prior experiences with our teens, Throughout high school, your teen is growing increasingly responsible, and you and your teen are in a process of building mutual trust. You want to support this process whenever possible. If you think your teen is old enough and responsible enough to handle the situation, you can share your concern and ask him/her to take responsibility for ensuring that no one brings alcohol into your home. Explain how you are personally liable if this happens, especially if someone gets hurt. If you do not think that your child is ready to handle this level of responsibility, you need to step in. Check in regularly on the teen gathering. Check up on what they are drinking by offering to provide food and beverages. Check bags, and confiscate any alcohol you find, following up with a phone call to the parents to let them know what happened.

***I think my teen is sneaking an occasional beer or bottle of alcohol from our liquor cabinet?**

You probably should not be leaving bottles of alcohol available for your teen, or any other teen, to take from your liquor cabinet. It is your responsibility to keep access to alcohol to a minimum in your house -- it is simply too tempting for most teens. Take the opportunity to reaffirm your values and expectations about underage drinking.

***What are the current social host liability laws in Massachusetts?**

The legal drinking age in Massachusetts is 21. Period. Before 2002, adults could turn a blind eye to underage drinking as long as they were not providing the alcohol. However, recent changes in social host laws now put increased **responsibility on adults** to help teens make good decisions regarding alcohol.

As an adult, you are accountable if you:

- serve or provide alcohol to someone under the age of 21.
- allow them to drink or possess alcohol in your home or on any property you control (including a rented hotel room). This means that if your child hosts a party while you are away, you could be held criminally responsible for the "disorderly home."
- knowingly or negligently allow underage drinking at your home or on your property, and someone gets hurt -- alcohol poisoning, accidental injury, violence, sexual assault, etc.

Criminal penalties for basic infractions can include a **fine up to \$2,000 or imprisonment for up to a year or both**. Minors convicted of providing alcohol to other minors in any situation can face a fine and the loss of their driver's license for a year. Adults are at further risk of a civil suit as well.

Parents need to **share this information** with their children so they understand the consequences parents and teens can face.

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B-PEN (Brookline Parent Education Network) works with school administrators and PTOs to help parents navigate the common social, emotional and developmental challenges of adolescence via parent network meetings, presentations, print/electronic materials, and resource information.

For more information, visit www.B-PEN.org or contact coordinators June Harris June_Harris@psbma.org or Karen Campbell kcampbell@brooklinema.gov

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