

PARENT UPDATE

9th Grade Parent Meeting 2022: The Unique Challenges of Freshman Year Pt. 2

The most recent Freshman PTO meeting was a special collaboration with B-PEN (Brookline Parent Education Network) to explore some of the special challenges parents are facing this year, from screen time management to marijuana and vaping to socializing while we're still dealing with [pandemic issues](#).

Social workers Mary Minott and Abby Dean provided some context for freshman parent concerns. In addition to counselling, they run BHS's Peer Leadership program, in which students study and develop public health strategies around social/emotional issues affecting Brookline teens. (Freshmen can sign up now for next year via Mary_Minott@psbma.org) Mary says Senior Peer Leaders are expressing concern that many freshmen started using marijuana at a young age as a way to feel part of a group. (In fact, 1 in 4 who use substances before age 16 go on to develop a problem with them.) Students who are just experimenting can hide use pretty well from their parents, but if you find signs of use, that's an indication your child has gone beyond experimentation into more regular use and they need your help. (Mary and Abby can help confidentially - 617.713.5155.)

Abby explained that the goal of the adolescence is to separate from family, with teens forming their own identity as they decide what kind of adult they want to be. Along the way, they form new relationships with parents and family members, and peers take on more importance.

During high school, teens are looking more at themselves and their immediate surroundings than the outside world, and often experiencing a lot of uncertainty. They may start taking school more seriously or less seriously. They may try a new sport or art or they may stop doing most of their usual activities. They will change their friendship groups and as they assert independence, they may do things that make us proud, but also maybe uncomfortable, worried, angry. They may take few risks or huge risks, many using alcohol and/or marijuana products for the first time. They begin to explore sexual and gender identities. They also experience anxiety – according to our last youth survey, 35% feel anxious or worried almost all the time, and 31% report depression. Isolation is still affecting kids, who may have forgotten how to socialize or are getting so distracted by friendships that school work/family balance is suffering.

It's understandable. We are all coming out of a tough two years. Though most are benefitting from in-person school, some are doing worse. They have a new beautiful building but it is still another transition. Abby suggests talking with your teens as much as you can, and REALLY listen. Ask them questions, show interest, but don't be surprised if they are getting more private about their lives at this time. Keep in mind that they are redefining themselves, which can be really difficult for them and you, but in the end, they will graduate from high school as someone different and better.

Simple ways to foster resilience in kids -- and ourselves:

1. Model and advocate real self-care. Do things that are good for you and let go of things that are not.
2. Find ways to connect to with other parents -- share concerns, strategies. You are not alone!
3. Find new ways to connect with your kids – TV, car rides, sharing musical enthusiasms, ask them to show/explain something (software, apps, sports, etc.) that plays to their knowledge or talent.
4. Make a practice every day to share the things you are grateful for.

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Scenario Discussion Takeaways

Screen time/social media - *What are your concerns about social media and technology, and how are you dealing with them?*

- Parents are concerned about the impact of screen use on brain development, in-person socializing, and keeping up with studies/responsibilities.
- [The impact of social media](#) is an ongoing conversation, not a one and done. [Keep reinforcing.](#)
- But keep in mind that screens have become a kind of lifeline for teens, who as new BHS students are often socializing online because of COVID. They are digital natives and this is the way they often interact with the world, especially during the cold weather months. (Some parents felt gaming/interaction with friends was different than mindless screen scrolling.)
- Consider working together as a family to set guidelines, such as limited use during the week, no phones at meals or in bedrooms at night. Parental controls can be useful if a student needs help getting work done because of too much screen distraction. Homework in a central location is good. Stress that it's about balance. Rewards may be helpful.
- Think about what percentage of time your conversation with your teen is about getting off screens, and make sure they have other outlets besides technology.
- Model appropriate tech use.
- Conversations about respect and [responsible behavior](#) online and off is also a continual process. Make sure to discuss the importance of [consent](#).

Mental wellbeing – *We're all struggling these days. How do we keep our families calm and balanced? What do you do for fun? How does your family find joy?*

- Connect at meal times and make extra time on weekends.
- Go out to eat as family.
- Watch TV/movies together, take walks, play wordle together, etc.
- Take interest in what they are doing – sharing music is a good way to connect.
- Ask them to help you do something - learn new software, help with advising another parent, etc.
- Encouraging positive talk and recognizing positive changes (not only negative).
- Encourage/facilitate some level of in-person socializing.

- Encourage activities like sports and clubs.
- If you're concerned, reach out to teachers, doctors, other people working with the student to hear if they have noticed any issues and/or have suggestions.
- Focus on gratitude.

Socializing - *this is an important year for developing social skills for healthy relationships, identity, sexuality – what are your concerns? What helps?*

- Some parents are concerned that their kids are socializing too much, often with teens they don't know, while others worry their teens are too isolated, having trouble making in-person connections. We need to give them time to blossom and explore new friendships, trusting that with time they will find their place.
- Suggestions from other parents, guidance counselor, etc. are often better received than from own parents and can help students navigate the many options at BHS and find their place
- There are a lot of ways for teens to get to know others:
 - volunteer opportunities (Brookline Thrives, Food Pantry, small micro groups in the community)
 - programs like SWS and ACE are a good way to make the HS feel smaller, building community and autonomy
 - student organizations/clubs/activities - it's never too late to join things
 - arts ensembles/programs and sports, including intramural and alternative groups if they don't make a team (e.g. Ultimate Frisbee)
- When students are not able to meet up to do work together they can still learn from their peers by working over facetime together
- Though it's important to let go a bit so they can develop resilience, it's also critical to still maintain limits. Keep in touch with other parents about curfews and rules. Some parents suggested "home before dark" during the week, others suggested 10 or 11 p.m. as generally appropriate.

Marijuana, Alcohol & Nicotine - *this is an age teens commonly start to experiment. How are you talking to them about values and expectations? What are your concerns? Strategies?*

- Parties don't seem to be happening a lot but kids are using the T and often hang out at Dean Park, outside the library, behind the Dunkin Donuts, Lars Anderson Park, etc. Keep track of where your teens are and what they are doing. Parents have heard about numerous freshmen trying substances and being offered weed.
- Be diligent with urging marijuana and alcohol avoidance. Alcohol use usually manifests as binge drinking and risky behavior on weekends. Marijuana is often more casual -- some kids smoke every day, and a lot of parents smoke, which sends a mixed message and can increase access. (Some kids also are accessing through a medical MJ card and sharing with others.) While the majority of students still *DO NOT* smoke, those who do are smart enough to hide it. If you see any paraphernalia, it's a problem. Reach out for help.
- Reinforce family values and expectations as an ongoing process. Rather than forbid behavior, help them learn how to say NO on their own. Focus on consistent messages, open communication, clear expectations and consequences, and keep restating. Here are some [ideas for good communication](#).

- Discuss openly -- ask gentle questions, like, “What do you think about...?” or consider role playing, like, “What would you do if...?”
- Listen and try to remain nonjudgmental. Provide room for honest discussion but balance being the parent and holding rules.
- Some students see a lot of other students who are high at school and are realizing on their own the impact of substance use (e.g. tired, can’t navigate conversations, struggling in class) and this can be a deterrent.

Brookline has great resources for students and parents. Don't hesitate to reach out for help from guidance counselors or Prevention/Intervention Team social workers Mary Minott (mary_minott@psbma.org) and Abby Dean (gabrielle_dean@psbma.org), 617.713.5155

www.B-PEN.org

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