



Brookline PARENT EDUCATION NETWORK

informed • involved • connected

PARENT NETWORK UPDATE

FALL 2017

SPECIAL ISSUE ON

The Unique Challenges & Opportunities of Freshman Year

Freshman year is a big adjustment for teens as well as their parents. As teens grapple with mounting pressures, increased academic workload, and expanding social circles, it's helpful if parents have thought ahead how they might deal with the wide range of issues they may soon be addressing -- the lure of alcohol and parties, marijuana/drugs, the ins and outs of current social media, healthy relationships/body image.

On Oct.17, a special Freshman Parent Meeting in conjunction with B-PEN and the PTO addressed some of the unique challenges and opportunities BHS freshmen commonly face. BHS social worker Mary Minott presented findings from Brookline's newly collated *Youth Risk Survey*. (She and fellow social worker Kendell Jones are available for any concerns parents might have.) Then nearly 100 parents participated in round-table discussions on each topic, generating awareness, a sense of community, and a wealth of helpful strategies/resources. Read on for a summary of the event's discussion and recommendations.

IN THIS ISSUE:

- * Mental Health & Stress Management
- * Freshman Social Scene; Negotiating Freedom with Responsibility
- * Alcohol & Unsupervised Parties
- * Social Media
- * Marijuana & Other Drugs
- * Healthy Relationships & Making Friends
- * Connecting with Other Parents
- * Resources

MENTAL HEALTH & STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress and anxiety are a normal part of the human experience. However, over 90% of BHS girls in all grades report having experienced "overwhelming stress or anxiety" within the past year (64%-78% among boys). Parents may notice their teens feeling extra frustrated, angry, not getting enough sleep. Freshman year is the ideal time for teens to learn coping mechanisms for managing stress, what works and what doesn't. It's the learning year -- getting used to new teachers, new social groups, heavier workloads, how the school works. Parents can help enormously with this balancing act.

PARENT-TO-PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Try to be less stressed than your student. Lead by example, show positive ways you deal with stress (music, exercise, mediation, etc.) and reinforce keeping things in perspective.
- Don't overreact and add to the drama – stay calm.
- Feed them proactively -- go up with a bowl of cereal in the morning or provide snacks during study time. Keep healthy snacks readily available.
- Acknowledge their fatigue and urge appropriate amounts of sleep and exercise.
- Appreciate the workload. If you notice they're stressed, they may need help with time management and prioritizing. (They or you may need to email a teacher for help.)
- Consider a "mental health day off."
- Consider limiting TV/phone use. Smart phones and social media can very seductive and powerful sources of anxiety – fear of being left out, afraid to miss something, bullying, etc.
- Consider blue light-blocking glasses.
- Keep the lines of communication open. If they are struggling, try to tease out what might be the issue, but be aware that there might be another responsible adult your teen is more comfortable

talking to.

- Unstructured family time can be a source of comfort and recharging.
- Accept that one coping skill for teens may be time alone.

EXPERT & PEER LEADER RECOMMENDATIONS:

- With any issues, find another time and place to talk instead of the car, because teens feel they can't escape, and it adds more stress. Let car conversation be about fun topics.
- When talking, also listen empathetically, try to be understanding and supportive – they're not necessarily giving you attitude. Give them some slack to help them relax and open up.
- 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!"

FRESHMAN SOCIAL SCENE: ALCOHOL & PARTIES & NEGOTIATING FREEDOM WITH RESPONSIBILITY

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. And while less than 20% of freshmen 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. By senior year, more than half the class drinks alcohol.

PARENT-TO-PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Respectful, clear communication is key. Prioritize a good relationship.
- Check in regularly about schedule logistics. Ask questions – *Where will you be? Who will you be with? What will you be doing?*
- Know your teen – how much you can trust them, how they like to socialize, what boundaries and limit setting may be needed. (Keep in mind, teens socialize through their devices.)
- Try to meet your teen's new friends. Have them over to your house, get to know them.
- If your teen 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. (Be aware -- at this age, sleepovers are often a recipe for mischief, and some kids would just as soon not open that door. "My family doesn't allow sleepovers" can be a very effective rule.)
- Calling parents is a good strategy for an upcoming party as well – make sure adults will be on the scene.
- Anticipate situations in advance, and discuss behavior and consequences. Try different scenarios – *What would you do if _____ happened?*
- Talk about being a good friend and not leaving someone you came to a gathering with behind in an unsafe situation.
- Discuss an exit strategy ahead of time a code word your teen can text you if they are in a situation they want a graceful, face-saving excuse to get out of. They text you, you call them, and they can say, "Sorry, my parents say I have to come home."
- Consider the "Find my phone" app for your teen's smartphone.
- In order to have a good relationship, it's important to develop trust. Work to find that balance of freedom and safety – negotiate, compensate. Keep in mind it's important for teens to have unstructured time with friends.

EXPERT & PEER LEADER RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Stress "With freedom comes responsibility."

- 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 your rules are different than other families, explain to your teen that this is what works for us and why. Don't compare.
- 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.)
- 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.
- If you are hosting a party, be clear about expectations and restrictions. (Check out B-PEN's latest *Parent Update* on "[Teens & Parties.](#)")

SOCIAL MEDIA

Parents rarely know exactly what their kids are up to on their devices. But teens are digital natives, and social media is 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. And with so much time spent on screens, is the ability for in-depth reading being compromised?

PARENT-TO-PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consider asking your teen what they do online? Ask them to share their interests.
- Help teens understand the importance of real time, face-to-face connections, that those personal social skills are critical for developing meaningful relationships, not just online friends. Help facilitate ways they can interact apart from screens. (Remind them of times – like summer camp – that they enjoyed being device-free.)
- Model healthy, appropriate use of technology, especially at mealtimes and in the car.
- Remind kids to be smart online. Talk about privacy issues (group chats are not private, and even deleted material leaves a digital footprint) and urge them to be mindful of posting. ["Don't post anything online you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the newspaper." Trying to look cool and inappropriate postings can come back in your face.]
- Explain that multi-tasking diminishes the quality of work being done – the brain can't handle more than one intense focus at a time.
- Don't let teens sleep with their phones – consider a family charging station in a central location.
- Remind them that having a phone is a privilege – if they cannot manage their schoolwork, the phone should be restricted.

EXPERT & PEER LEADER RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 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.

MARIJUANA & OTHER DRUGS

Marijuana use is fairly common at BHS, but not as much among freshmen as upper classmen (more than 40% of seniors). However, some students do begin smoking freshman year, and it can become a serious problem, especially as legalization of marijuana for those 21 and older makes it more accessible and may send the message that it is not harmful. 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. The biggest concern regarding prescription drugs is opioid misuse, as the levels of addiction nationwide are unprecedented, and medications are often readily available in family medicine cabinets.

PARENT-TO-PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Talk to teens early and often about your expectations. Also, listen -- stress that you will honor confidentiality.
- 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. Nip it in the bud and figure out how you can respond in a constructive way.
- If you find drug paraphernalia, make sure there are consequences – talk, and follow through.
- Be leery of talking about your own experiences, given that marijuana is three times stronger now than a generation ago and often laced with other chemicals.
- Be aware that drugs can come from anywhere – a dealer can be the kid next door.
- Be aware of all the forms in which marijuana can be experienced, from joints to gummi bears to vapes.

EXPERT & PEER LEADER RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Tell teens 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.) The [**“Why Not Pot?”**](#) tip sheet is an excellent primer.
- Explain how the brain is not completely developed and physically affects children more than adults, impairing judgment and 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 Team (Mary Minott and Kendell Jones) are always available for information, resources, and counseling - 617-713-5155.)
- 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.

- 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.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS & 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. And with the glut of pornography and risqué media, some parents are concerned teens are getting unhealthy messages about intimacy and what is normal behavior. Sexting is a real concern.

PARENT-TO-PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Talk frequently about the importance of treating people with respect.
- Each student has a different experience, from very social to solitary or struggling with loneliness. If a teen is not coming home with lots of new friends, that may be 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. but be aware, teens who don't make teams or performing groups feel a sense of rejection.
- 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.
- Keep the lines of communication open – ask questions (“What do you think? How do you feel?”) and listen non-judgmentally. Accept and validate their feelings, rather than jump in to “fix” a situation.
- Use the current political/cultural scene to talk about values, limits.
- Though this is a common stage of increased separation and pushing for independence, ask your teen why they are not being frank with you. If you are confronted with secrecy or lying,
- Consider boundaries and limits on social media.
- If you have concerns, talk to a child's pediatrician or school social workers, guidance counselors. Identify another adult to “mentor” a child through issues.

CONNECTING WITH OTHER PARENTS

When our teens leave the smallish communities of their K-8 schools for BHS, it's not just a big transition for students but for parents as well. We lose much of the opportunity to regularly check in with one another, and as our students make new friends, we are often confronted with the diversity of backgrounds and parenting styles/values at play in Brookline.

PARENT-TO-PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reach out and get to know other parents at every opportunity. Find different ways to connect and support one another.
- If you're concerned about an upcoming party, talk first to your child and establish clear expectations. Then reach out to the host parents – introduce yourself and ask, “What can my child bring?”
- If you hear about a child engaged in a troubling situation, try to tease out some of the details from your child. If you are concerned real harm may be involved, reach out to the child's parents. Ask yourself – *If this were my child, would I want to know?*
- If your child develops a strong social group, consider getting parents in on a texting circle to

keep in touch on what's going on. The Freshman Directory is available at <https://www.myschoolanywhere.com/directory-login.a5w>

EXPERT & PEER LEADER RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Attend PTO meetings, sports and performing arts events, and community initiatives to get to know other parents.
- Volunteer – committees and other projects, especially the *After the Prom Party* (ATPP), are fun opportunities to connect with a wide range of parents.
- Consider forming/joining a Parent Network, which offers ongoing opportunities to connect about a range of developmental milestones and common concerns, sharing resources and strategies. (B-PEN's "Parent Networks" page and tip sheets can help – www.B-PEN.org).

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 Kendell Jones) 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

[Brookline PARENT EDUCATION NETWORK](#)

*informed * involved * connected*

www.facebook.com/BrooklineParentEducationNetwork