

PARENT UPDATE ON “THE OTHER TALK”

We work hard to help our teenagers get into college, focusing on all the appropriate course work, the standardized tests. We nag them to complete the dreaded essays and fill out the application forms on time. And we talk about responsible behavior when they leave home – studying hard, eating healthy, getting enough sleep, spending wisely.

But what about “The Other Talk?” Have we effectively prepared them for the changes in social culture and unprecedented freedoms and pressures they are likely to encounter? In many circles, weekend parties, marijuana use, and binge drinking are the norm at college, and impressionable freshman are especially vulnerable to risky behavior. As they struggle to find their new friend groups and fit in, the first two weeks of the school year are the most dangerous for college freshmen. Every fall we read tragic headlines about kids ending up in hospitals from alcohol poisoning, accidental overdoses, substance fueled car wrecks, sexual assaults.

However, the time to start talking to kids about values, behaviors, and strategies for confronting these big changes is not the final two weeks of the summer while kids are packing up to leave home. It’s NOW, when high school seniors and juniors, even sophomores, are living safely at home in the family nest, and parents have unpressured moments to begin and continue important conversations.

Granted, talking about substance use and responsible behavior can be really tough to initiate with teens. That’s where an informative program called “The Other Talk” has proven to be helpful. The recent 90-minute presentation by the Caron Student Assistance Program (with funding from Michael Morrissey, Norfolk County District Attorney, and the Brookline Community Fund) provided guidance to help parents of soon-to-be college students communicate accurate, healthy, and practical messages to their children regarding college alcohol/drug use and other risky behavior.

Dr. Suzanne M. Slattery, a BHS parent and licensed psychologist with 15 years’ experience working in college and university counseling and health centers, introduced the program, providing the following insight:

*The **transition to college** is a stressful period of time for both students and parents. For students, it’s a time to learn how to care for themselves, make new friends, adjust to living in a dorm room with another student or two, figure out what extracurricular activities and clubs they may want to join, and manage a challenging academic course load.*

*For parents, it can be challenging to let go and allow your student to make their own decisions, to know **how to support** them from afar – when to wait and when to step in. I usually advise parents to begin by preparing them and setting expectations before they go away and to remember to say “I love you, I’m proud of you” as you say goodbye.*

If your child has a **pre-existing health or mental health condition**, I recommend that you contact the health and counseling centers in the spring or summer before they go. Find out what services are available. If they take medication, be sure to provide them with a locked box to keep it in and to arrange reminders to take it on their phone or some other means.

Once your student turns 18, the law requires that their educational and health **records are private**. If they chose to use the health and counseling services on campus, their records are **protected by FERPA** (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) not HIPAA which is the law which protects health information in clinics and hospitals. If you need to talk with a health or counseling staff member about your student, you can do so freely, but they won't be able to share information with you unless it is an emergency. You or they can ask your student to sign a release of information form for a specific purpose.

However, I don't encourage parents to arrange a blanket release, as this typically prevents students from using services on campus. If there is a **health crisis or alcohol or drug violation on campus**, most colleges and universities will notify parents of the situation. If you have questions about this, check with the specific schools policy and protocol. Its usually posted on the website or you can call the Dean of Students' office.

Many schools have put safety first with an **amnesty policy**, which enables students to call for medical help for themselves or their friends who are intoxicated without the risk of consequences. This is a policy you might consider now while your student is at home. Safety first.

It's also important to know that the **first 2-6 weeks of college** are when first year students are most vulnerable to the impact of binge drinking and alcohol-related sexual assault. Most colleges have **online courses** as part of their prevention efforts that are mandated for first year students before they arrive on campus. Typically, parents can take the same course or a companion one designed for parents. Be sure to check those out. The research shows they do have an effect during the first semester.

And be sure to attend **parent orientation** in the summer or fall. This is where you will learn about the culture, services, activities and staff at the college. Go to all sessions. Take the materials – especially magnets for your fridge with important phone numbers. Be sure to become familiar with the school's website.

While its important to stay connected to your student during the transition, you want to send the message that you believe in them and their ability to make good decisions for themselves. You can help your student get settled and engaged at college by **cutting your talking, texting and communication in half**. If your student calls you when a problem arises, be emotionally supportive and see if you can direct your student to access the support and help on campus. There are people whose job it is to help them such as the Residence Life staff and the Dean's office.

It's important to note that your **influence as a parent** does have a significant impact on your students' drinking and drug use. Studies show that teen aged college students whose parents talk with them about the risks and their expectations before they start college are more likely to abstain from drinking or to drink only minimally. Waiting to talk with them in the fall of their first year of college may not work as well and may not have any effect on student drinking behaviors.

The Caron presentation offered specific information on drugs and alcohol trends in the college environment, including the impact on overall health and the developing brain, as well as how substance use can effect academic performance and relationships. The presentation also listed resources and a set of questions for starting, and continuing, “The Other Talk” with our teens.

To read a **PDF of the presentation, click here.**

(Or go to http://www.b-pen.org/uploads/2/9/2/9/2929884/the_other_talk_presentation.pdf)

HELPFUL RESOURCES

The new [Brookline High School Web pages](#) have a lot of information. The [BHS Guidance Junior & Senior Year Timelines](#) are a good resource for both parents & students.

[Grown and Flown \(www.grownandflown.com\)](http://www.grownandflown.com) has lots of info, blogs from parents about parenting, the college application process and letting go. Also a blog and guides to what happens when they come from college, etc.

What FERPA means for the parent and the college student -

<https://www.collegeparentcentral.com/2009/06/what-ferpa-means-for-you-and-your-college-student/>

US Department of Education explanation of FERPA, parents & college students -

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/brochures/parents.html>

Three documents every college student/parent may need -

http://support.jvsdet.org/site/DocServer/3_Documents_Every_College_Student_Needs.pdf?docID=2802

Legal documents every college student needs -

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/legal-documents-every-college-student-needs/>

6 tips for what not to do when your teenager leaves for college -

<http://traciemiles.com/how-not-to-stress-out-your-teenager-when-they-leave-for-college/>