

Teen Scene XXIII — February 9, 2009

BY MELANIE R. WELLS

Some surprisingly astute teen advice to parents, along with an inside peek at high school social life, was offered at NYC-Parents in Action's 23rd annual Teen Scene panel seminar. Sponsored by NYC-Parents in Action in cooperation with the Parents League of New York, the event presented a dozen friendly, articulate high school students from independent day and boarding schools, who responded to moderator Lucy Martin Gianino's questions with refreshing frankness.

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Discussion was far ranging but the thematic note struck again and again was the value teens place on an open line of communication with their parents. "The biggest punishment for me would be if my parents don't trust me," said one girl, while another advised parents that establishing an "open honest relationship" with "you there to help" is the "best you can do." A third reported that "teaching [parents] how to text and IM" had helped her mother "feel much more confident," and in the loop.

Why is texting so important? Because, as one boy explained, it's "not loud;" kids can discreetly contact parents when out with peers. Others said texting makes it "easier to get the message out quickly" without "interrupting" the social flow. Asked how often kids text parents while out, answers ranged from "every time I change my location" to "every 30-45 minutes," to calling at prearranged "set times."

Is there a downside to the Internet, IM's and texting? Should parents set limits? Most panelists recommended giving kids some freedom. "Let kids experiment with time management instead of just setting rules," said one. Don't force, but do advise, your

teen to control and limit use, especially during exams. "While technology is scary to parents, it's part of our future," said one girl, and "learning to use it responsibly" part of "our high school experience." However, another confessed she had "had to deactivate" Facebook because her SAT tutor had insisted upon it. One teen observed that the lack of "real" face time has led to an increase in teen "awkwardness."

Well then, where DO kids socialize face to face? Favorites were sports events, dinners out with friends, parties at someone's house. Ms. Gianino asked about parties where parents are not home. One girl said it's "comforting" that my mom "won't let me go to a party without a parent," while another insisted she'd "be angry if my parents called ahead" to ask about parental presence. Most agreed it's "about the individual relationship you establish with your child" with trust being the key: "Trusting that your child will behave responsibly" is better than "calling to check up." "If you know your kids and their friends, that's what matters."

What if your parents trust you but not the other kids? One girl acknowledged she'd been warned to "stay away from certain friends" and that the advice had "paid off." Another advised parents to "offer your thoughts in the form of an opinion" rather than just "don't do this or that." "Be honest with your kids" and they'll be "more inclined to call you" when in trouble, urged a third. Said a senior, "I've called my parents to pick me up about 15 times and they never made me feel bad, they always made me feel safe." All agreed parents should let kids know "you're there to help" and it's "okay to make mistakes sometimes."

What about drinking? "If your kid comes home drunk, talk to him or her about it," said several. "Don't be afraid they won't think you're cool," said one panelist, adding "How cool is it if you end up in a hospital drunk?" Some probed the reasons behind abuse: "Kids who turn to drink and drugs have problems from the outset," said one. "Help them feel comfortable." Another noted: "[Teens] feel awkward,

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then they drink and feel better.” Peer pressure can be a “huge catalyst for drinking,” said one boy, but another found most kids are “very accepting” of those who don’t drink. Not everyone drinks, he emphasized: some “don’t drink at all.” At parties, some kids are sober while others “can’t even stand up.” Practical advice was offered: “If your kids drink, remind them to eat first.” On a more serious note was the warning: “Kids mirror the behavior of their parents.”

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Drugs? Most agreed that pot or “weed” is ubiquitous. “Many kids don’t consider pot to be a drug, just something you do when you are stressed out.” One panelist added cocaine, saying it’s more common in “affluent areas,” like “the Upper East Side.” What about prescription drugs? Several mentioned Adderall, an ADD treatment. During exams, said one, “kids look for the kid who has a prescription,” hoping to “get through” the exam period. One girl said Adderall is “more prevalent with girls” because it “suppresses the appetite” as well as “increases focus.”

One girl urged parents to “talk to your kids about drugs and their effects.” Several panelists agreed that ready money facilitates drug use. Stressing that although she was “not about controlling parents,” one girl still advised the audience to “be careful about how much money you give” your kids and “monitor how they spend it.” When asked about allowance size (answer: \$20 is low, with \$35-\$40 the average), one boy noted that a friend with a \$70 allowance was “the first person to buy weed.”

Ms. Gianino asked the panel to explain the term “hooking up.” “My mom asks me [that] on a weekly basis,” said one; another said it is shorthand for “dating in our time,” but the precise meaning is somewhat fluid. One boy said dating was “actually a lot of fun” and regretted more don’t try it – “I think the problem is a confidence thing,” he added. A “one on one date” can be “awkward,” agreed several, citing worries about

appearance. One said some girls are “not comfortable” eating “in front of boys.”

If a couple is dating, parents should “expect sex.” Panelists urged parents to talk openly with their teens in advance: “Talk about [sex] prior to when you think it happens,” they advised; one recommended parents ask questions “bluntly” so the conversation “won’t be so awkward.” Many looked to parents for support: a girl was grateful for talks with mom “about health risks as well as emotional consequences,” while a senior boy appreciated “frequent talks” in which his father, “man to man,” had taught him “to be a gentleman.” He “broke it down for me in 4th or 5th grade,” the boy added, and has “checked up” since.

Ms. Gianino then invited audience questions:

Q Are you using condoms?

A A senior girl reported that in her class of 100 kids, “probably 85” were sexually active and likely “all using them,” adding, “You should expect your kids to use them also.”

Q What punishments worked for you?

A Some said that they hadn’t been “formally punished” or didn’t consider it effective (“grounding is outdated”), although one boy thought there “should be rules, and consequences for breaking them.” Panelists agreed teens should “face the consequences of their actions;” parents were urged to help “find solutions together.” Parents were advised to “punish kids for dishonesty” but not for making a mistake. Loss of money was singled out as the one effective punishment: “Tell them if they don’t want to follow rules, find a way to get their own money,” advised a panelist.

Q Where do kids get liquor?

A Teens can “get a fake ID for \$150 and then can go buy liquor” said several. Where to buy an ID? Senior girl: “I don’t have one, but they can be found.”

Q What are you most afraid of, with respect to sex, drugs, alcohol?

A Loss of control in any form was universally dreaded; listed were “going crazy, throwing up, having to call 911, going to the hospital, wandering the streets and getting lost.” Fear for friends who “get high and start acting out of control” was also cited. One girl noted: “When you should worry is when teens don’t fear any consequences.”

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Q How many of you have dinner with your parents on a regular basis?

A All hands went up. “When we do, things come out, because it’s so relaxed,” said one.

Ms. Gianino concluded with a nod to the panel’s central message: that parental involvement does matter and its effect on our future is great. Quoting from the chapter “Next Generation” in *Teenagers Learn What They Live* by Drs. Dorothy Nolte and Rachel Harris, Ms. Gianino reminded parents that “every teen has a unique perspective” and that as the “next generation to take care of the planet,” teens need parental input to help them “become people who can build a better world.” Our kids are “our greatest contribution to building a better world,” she concluded, and “our expectations will become part of what they are.” ●