

Holding On, Letting Go

Graduation Season Brings Risk and Reward

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

High school seniors everywhere will soon embrace a graduation season marked by pomp and circumstance, risk and reward. Staying safe means balancing freedom with responsibility and communicating honestly with parents. For many teens, those aren't easy assignments.

Young people venturing closer to true independence yearn for the freedom that parents extend based on assurances that nurture trust. But, something funny often happens on the way to commencement.

At graduation time, even clear-thinking teens may suddenly feel unburdened by the strictures of law and once open channels of communication between parent and child become clogged with issues of trust and truth.

A successful transformation of the parent-teen relationship from caretaker to caregiver, coach to consultant, requires confidence in the decisions young people will make. Unfortunately, a reality gap separating the behavior of teens from the perceptions of parents points to a "false trust" in many families, particularly at the intersection of decision-making about underage drinking and drug use.

False trust is perpetuated by ignorance and complacency on one side and, often, dishonesty on the other.

Many adults are simply unaware of the choices that teens face every day and, more important, of the decisions they make. Others simply look the other way, unwilling to put a stake in a ground they neither understand nor seem particularly concerned about.

Either way, their children lose. Absent parents truly connected to their world, or with ones abdicating authority over it, teens are forced to traverse the path toward independence unaided by the communication, expectations, and consequences they say they want. The liberating milestone of graduation aside, parental responsibility ends neither at the end of high school nor at the beginning of college.

To be fair, teens don't always make it easy for parents to keep up. For example, a new *Teens Today* report from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Group, one of the nation's largest auto and home insurers, reveals that while almost all high school students say that it's important that their parents trust them, less than half are completely honest about where they go and what they do. Staggeringly high rates of adolescent drinking and drug use often result.

Maintaining parental prerogatives when it comes to adolescent health and safety requires communicating with teens about important issues, establishing expectations for their behavior, and enforcing consequences when they violate the rules – even at graduation time.

In an Open Letter to Parents, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and partners say, “Your teen may be graduating soon, but that doesn’t mean it’s time to let go.” These groups, including SADD, offer this advice to parents.

- Reinforce your expectations. Throughout their high school years, you’ve set rules and established the consequences for breaking them. Perhaps you’ve loosened up on a few rules, like curfew. But be clear – drinking or drug use remains unacceptable. Being an upperclassman has privileges, but it also has responsibilities.
- Encourage your teens to make each moment count. They only get one senior year. Let them know you don’t want them to miss out on things because of bad choices, like drinking or drug use. One bad choice could change their lives forever.
- Provide safe alternatives. Parties abound during senior year. Plan chaperoned alcohol-free parties around graduation.

ONDCP also warns parents against allowing drinking at home, saying it sends the wrong message and may lead to other bad choices. In fact, according *Teens Today*, young people who drink at home are significantly more likely to drink with their friends.

For example:

- Among high school teens, those who tend to avoid alcohol are more than twice as likely as those who repeatedly use alcohol to say their parents never let them drink at home (84 percent vs. 40 percent).
- More than half (57 percent) of high school teens who report their parents allow them to drink at home, even just on special occasions, say they drink with their friends, as compared to just 14 percent of teens who say their parents don’t let them drink.

The fact is that teens don’t need – or want – their parents to be simply bigger versions of their friends. They need their parents to be parents – especially during the waning days of high school when opportunities to stray from well-established norms regarding personal behavior abound.

Bridging the reality gap by promoting dialogue, establishing parameters, and requiring accountability represents a meaningful step toward letting go.

Hold on.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions), has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. For more information about SADD, call toll-free 877-SADD-INC. The SADD/Liberty Mutual Teens Today research report can be found at www.sadd.org and www.libertymutualinsurance.com.

© Summit Communications Management Corporation
2006 All Rights Reserved