



SADD Op-Ed:

Mixed Messages

Kids need straight talk to stay safe at prom, graduation

By Stephen G. Wallace

With the surety of spring arrive prom night and graduation day ... each causes for celebration and concern. Perhaps more so than at any other time of year, it is critical that safety messages from adults to teens resonate with clarity and conformity, lest even one young person mistake confusion for consent.

While law enforcement officials paint a disturbing portrait of prom and graduation-related injuries, assaults and fatalities, increasingly-common constraints on these events imposed by education and public safety professionals add an exclamation point to narrative suggesting that even the most "responsible" teens may make poor choices come spring. Sadly, these choices are often aided and abetted by adults.

As perplexing as it may seem, a smattering of parents across the land will soon host "alcohol included" events meant to mark their child's big night or honor their child's academic achievements. As one Westchester County, New York, teen put it, "They don't even give us the chance to make the right decisions."

Other parents simply shrug and look the other way, reflecting a rite-of-passage mentality that stokes nascent adolescent feelings of entitlement and indestructibility. Never mind that alcohol use by teens is illegal and inextricably linked to car crashes, drug use, sexual assaults and suicides. Throw in a plethora of media messages portraying adolescent alcohol and drug use as acceptable and you begin to get a sense of America's doublespeak to teens.

This crazy quilt approach to guiding youth undermines their own sense of independence by unnecessarily blurring a developmental propensity to see absolutes where others may see only shades of gray. There need be no shades of gray when it comes to adolescent mortality. Kids need and want clear directives, especially on issues of life and death.

Teens are hard-wired to take risks, positive or negative. Doing so helps them to establish identity and facilitates age-appropriate separation from parents. This inclination, however, is artificially accelerated by event-driven, and usually unfortunate, exceptions to community policies, family rules and common sense. A reporter for USA Today once inquired if I believed that prom night warranted temporary loosening of legally mandated restrictions on young drivers. Quite the contrary. Teen crashes and deaths increase exponentially late at night – especially with lots of kids on the road and in the car.

In a society largely devoid of rituals marking passages from childhood to adolescence and adolescence to adulthood, many kids are left to make up some on their own. Too often, the ones they choose, including those involving alcohol, drugs and sexual behavior, have harmful - even deadly - consequences.

Proms and graduations are two of the meaningful milestones for teens and should be recognized, celebrated and participated in by the important adults in their lives. Such participation must include dialogue about decision-making and the responsibility that comes with independence. It's tough work at a tough time but, as the saying goes, "Someone's got to do it."

That work is made even more difficult by the affected intransigence of teens on the brink of



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adulthood. The fact of the matter is that kids send mixed messages, too. Most common among them is that they don't care what adults think or consider what we say. Nothing could be further from the truth. Research conducted by SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions/Students Against Driving Drunk) and Liberty Mutual Group points out that teens whose parents are influential (read: talk with them regularly about important issues) are significantly less likely to drink and drive on prom night or to ride with someone who has been drinking. The research also makes clear that kids whose parents spend time with them and consistently communicate expectations about drinking, drug use and sex are overwhelmingly more likely to make good decisions about personal behavior. Prom and graduation season is no time to stop ... and as good as any time to start. Parents should:

- Initiate dialogue about decision-making;
- Embrace zero-tolerance for alcohol and other drugs;
- Stay up until kids return home;
- Call friends' parents to ensure supervision;
- Ask teens to "check in" by phone when out;
- Sign a SADD *Contract for Life* with teens; and
- Enforce consequences for misbehavior.

At key decision points, like those synonymous with spring, adults need to be ever more vigilant about the messages we send and the examples we set. That is, if we care enough to take the time.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc., has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. SADD sponsors school-based education and prevention programs nationwide and makes available at no charge the SADD *Contract for Life* and the *Opening Lifesaving Lines* brochure, both designed to facilitate effective parent-child communication. Toll-free: 877-SADD-INC For more information on the SADD/Liberty Mutual *Teens Today* research, visit www.saddonline.com or www.libertymutualinsurance.com.

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