

Alcohol, Drugs, Parties and Teenagers: Good Times, Bad Times

Practical Advice

**Prepared by: Larry Grand
Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
1005 Grist Mill Rd.,
Eganville ON, K0J 1T0
613-628-9264
613-628-9263 (fax)
Larry_Grand@camh.net**

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FOREWORD

In 1994, the Addiction Research Foundation produced a Best Advice statement titled "Teens, Alcohol and Bush Parties: A Lethal Combination". This new Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) Best Advice statement moves the discussion from bush parties in particular, to teen parties in general, an approach that encompasses several types of parties. This statement also provides advice to parents, educators, police, health professionals and young people about safer partying.

The Key Issues

The Current Situation

Teenagers "party" with alcohol and other drugs in all kinds of settings. They gather outdoors, often in large numbers, in the bush, fields, "pits" or quarries, on beaches and parkland, or indoors, in family homes or licensed-to-sell alcohol venues where, for example, a community dance is taking place.

For the most part, these parties are unsupervised. Generally, no one among the teenage partygoers takes responsibility for the party, which includes the behaviour and safety of the other partygoers. Parental or other adult supervision is also absent.

At these unsupervised parties, some intoxicated adolescents too often engage in behaviours that are dangerous to themselves and others. Here are a few examples:

In Amprior, Ontario, a teenager was drinking one evening with friends at her friend's house. While attempting to walk across the Trans Canada highway on her way home, she was killed by an oncoming car. Her friend was badly injured but recovered (*The Ottawa Citizen*, June 17, 2001).

A "pit" party in the Eastern Townships of Quebec ended in tragedy. An intoxicated teenage partygoer lost control of his car, which ended up in the quarry where his five passengers died but he did not (*The Ottawa Citizen*, June 11, 2001).

In Calgary, at a house party, a teenager shot another teenager with a gun after a fight broke out. The owners of the house, parents of the host, were away (*National Post*, March 5, 2001).

In Burlington, Ontario, a popular high school graduate was murdered by other teens who had been turned away from the party earlier (*The Ottawa Citizen*, May 22, 2001).

Six teens were returning from an all-night graduation party near Pakenham in two cars. According to police, they had been consuming drugs at the party. On the way home, one driver tried to pass the car with the other partygoers. A horrible crash ensued. Five died. Cannabis was the suspected drug of choice by the partygoers (*The Ottawa Citizen*, August 27, 1999).

Parents who gave their 14-year-old daughter permission to hold a pyjama party with a few friends returned to find more than \$20,000 damage to their home. The house "trashing" was the work of 40 teenagers, most of whom were not invited to the party. Many were drunk (*The Ottawa Citizen*, December 9, 2000).

In Lethbridge, teenagers obtained a liquor permit and then rented a hall for a return-to-school party. Police, responding to complaints from the community, arrived on the scene to find many underage drinkers who "were becoming drunk and passing out." Several teenagers were arrested. Charges included obstructing police and public mischief (*Calgary Herald*, September 10, 2002).

A teenage partygoer attended a bush party near London Ontario. One of nearly 300 in attendance, he got drunk and started a fight. The brawl left him a quadriplegic. He sued the owner of the land. This was not the first party the owner had allowed on his property that had resulted in problems. The owner's insurer settled out of court for \$700,000 (MADD Canada brochure, "Being Sued Can Ruin a Good Party", 2000).

The deaths and injuries and damage to property that are reported in these news stories are not isolated incidents. The Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse (Roberts et al., 2001) reports that "Causing damage to property and causing injury to oneself, are among the most common problems associated with substance use reported by students". And "Because heavier use is more common among out-of-the-mainstream youth, more problems can be expected."

What makes these deaths and injuries so tragic is that they are preventable. Common sense, foresight, prevention planning, and the implementation of safer party practices and controls could make the difference between injured or dead teenagers and those who avoid the risks and continue on with the rest of their lives. Safer party practices would also reduce the risk of vandalism and property damage, arrests, criminal convictions and liability.

The Dangers

The above examples demonstrate that there are many potential dangers (risks) for teenagers associated with unsafe partying. These include:

- Drunkenness and/or overdosing on other drugs often leading to sickness and/or personal injuries. Being sick and/or injured in a manner that could be temporary but permanent disability is also possible. Repeated intoxication could lead to a lifetime of alcohol and other drug use problems including dependence (i.e., addiction).
- Scuffles, altercations, fighting, shootings and other acts of violence

- Unwanted or unintended sexual activity, possibly leading to unplanned pregnancy or the risk of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases;
- Damage to personal and/or public property;
- Drinking/drugging and driving and associated crashes, injury and/or death. The driver is at risk but so are the passengers, pedestrians, cyclists and other drivers;
- Accidental or intended fire-setting;
- Social host liability, i.e., if a partygoer is injured or injures another partygoer or someone who was not at the party, the injured person can sue the party host.

The Data

CAMH conducts a survey of grade 7 to 12 students in Ontario every two years. Some relevant findings from Drug Use Among Ontario Students, 1977-2003 (Adlaf et al., 2003) are noted below:

1. Alcohol
 - 23.9% of the total sample reported becoming drunk at least once during the past four weeks prior to the survey.
 - 39.5% of drinkers reported binge drinking at least once four weeks prior to the survey. (Binge drinking is defined as having five or more standard drinks on a single occasion).
 - 30.5% of grade 10 student drinkers, 36.2% in grade 11 student drinkers and 39.2% in grade 12 student drinkers, reported hazardous drinking. (Hazardous drinking refers to a pattern of drinking that increases the likelihood of future medical and physical problems).
2. Drinking, drugging and driving:
 - 13.8% of all the grade 10 to 12 students in the survey with a driver's licence reported driving within one hour of having two or more drinks.
 - 29.2% of all the students surveyed had been a passenger in a vehicle driven by someone who had been drinking.
 - 20.1% of all the students used cannabis and drove after consuming this drug.
 - Males compared to females were more likely to drink and drive (19.5% vs. 7.8%).

3. Cannabis:

- 29.6% of the students had used cannabis at least once in the previous 12 months
- Of the cannabis users, 9.1% used 20 to 39 times in the past 12 months and 24.6% used 40 or more times.

4. Other drug use:

- 4.1% of the students used ecstasy at least once in the previous 12 months.
- 2.9% used LSD at least once in the previous 12 months.
- 4.8% used cocaine at least once in the previous 12 months.
- 2.7% used crack at least once in the previous 12 months.

The authors of this survey concluded, “problem use of alcohol and drugs, such as cannabis, are not rare among youth.” They also stated that “potentially harmful consequences, such as binge drinking and becoming drunk, driving while intoxicated and being a passenger with an intoxicated driver, are not uncommon occurrences.”

Another relevant study conducted by CAMH is entitled "Drinking Locations, Drinking and Driving with a Drinking Driver Among Underage Drinkers" (Stoduto and Mann, 2000). The study yielded important information about where teenagers have their parties. Here are some noteworthy findings:

1. Where underage drinking takes place:

- 80% of the underage drinkers (all from grade 11 and 12) reported drinking at someone else's home.
- 71% reported drinking in their own home.
- 67% reported drinking at a house party.
- 49% reported drinking at a wedding reception.
- 39% reported drinking at a dance.

2. Of underage partygoers who drove after drinking:

- 13% were at someone else's home.
- 11% were at a house party.
- 8% were at their own home.
- 7% were at a bush party.

3. Of underage partygoers who rode with a drinking driver:

- 12% were at someone else's home.
- 12% were at a house party.
- 8% were at a bush party.

Not surprisingly, the authors of this study stated that “the locations in which (underage) drinking is most likely to occur (i.e. one’s home or someone else’s home) are also the locations in which drinking-driving and riding with a drinking driver are most likely to occur.” The authors also noted that “bush parties hold considerable potential for harm.”

Related to where underage youth drink alcohol, Anglin et al. (2002) report that 16% of legal drinking age respondents had served alcohol to an underage drinker or allowed an underage person (other than their own child) to drink in their home.

The Reality

The reality in Ontario is that a person must be 19 years old to consume alcohol legally (Ontario Liquor Licence Act 1990, section 30). The only exception is that parents have the legal right to serve alcohol to their own children in their own home or temporary home, e.g., a campsite (Ontario Liquor Licence Act, 1990, section 30, subsection 13).

CAMH supports the laws on underage alcohol use and we recommend that youth, parents and other adult persons voluntarily respect the law.

However, the other reality, as the Key Issues and Data demonstrate, is that unsupervised and uncontrolled teen parties are unlikely to go away. Teenagers will continue to seek out social opportunities to engage in drinking and drug taking with friends and associates in numerous settings. And, although most parents and other adults who care about teenagers would like them to refrain from illegal and problem- laden substance use, it is unrealistic to expect all teenagers to do this.

Not only do underage teenagers consume alcohol in defiance of the law, as indicated previously, but such drinking also carries significant risks. In the Alcohol Alert of April 2003, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) reports “Underage alcohol use is more likely to kill young people than all illegal drugs combined.” The most serious and widespread problems among underage drinkers cited by the NIAAA include:

- Drinking and driving
- Suicide
- Sexual assault
- High risk sexual activity
- Impaired brain development (e.g., learning difficulties, short-term memory deficits) and
- Greater risk of developing alcoholism

Further to the NIAAA assertion, a United States study noted that the two legal drugs, namely alcohol and tobacco, pose the greatest dangers to adolescents (Strasburger, 2002). Others have concluded that adolescents use alcohol more frequently than all other illicit drugs combined (Knight, 2001).

Alcohol Harm Among Youth: The Global Prevention Context

Because alcohol use causes so many problems and so much harm for teenagers it is important to identify the range of prevention strategies that have been proposed or tried for addressing teenage alcohol consumption. Although few of these strategies focus directly on teenage parties involving alcohol and other drugs, it is likely that if they were vigorously applied, they might have a bearing on drinking among youth at parties.

Alcohol Policies:

Policies that reduce access to alcohol are effective at reducing drinking-related harm (Babor et al., 2003). Such policies include increased alcohol taxation (Donath, 2002); controlling alcohol outlet density (i.e., controlling the number of alcohol sales outlets within a given geographic area) (Treno et al., 2003); municipal government alcohol policies (i.e., municipal government rules regarding alcohol consumption on municipal property) (Gliksman et al., 1995); responsible hospitality policies (i.e., written policies for bar customers and staff) (Daly et al., 2002).

Risk of liability and police intervention:

Some studies have shown that increased police intervention and concern over being sued for being responsible for alcohol-related injuries decrease the acceptability of underage drinking (Glanz et al., 2003). However, other studies, for example Hart and Willner (2001), found that police intervention did not provide a deterrent effect for sales to minors.

Prevention Education:

Educational strategies designed exclusively to educate young people about alcohol and other drugs, their use and consequences are often promoted as the best intervention prevention strategy. However, as Babor et al. (2003) have pointed out, the positive impact of such education strategies are short-lived or minimal.

Overview of the prevention context:

No one prevention strategy can adequately address the problems associated with teenage drinking. Effective government alcohol legislation and policies combined with prevention education, police intervention, the risk of being sued for alcohol injuries and responsible hospitality policies offer the best chance of curbing alcohol consumption and related problems.

The following recommendations to make teenage parties safer fit within this prevention context.

The Partial Solution

If teenage parties involving high-risk substance use are here to stay, then a realistic approach to these parties is to take a careful harm reduction position (see “CAMH Position on Harm Reduction”, 2003 and CCSA “Harm Reduction Overview”, website 2004). The goal is to encourage teen party planners including the teenage host, his/her friends, parents and other adults who may be associated with organizing the event, to make the parties safer. This is accomplished by anticipating the risk of harm and implementing harm-reducing party rules, practices and controls to keep partygoers safer.

Concern for teenage drinking, especially that which occurs in the context of teenage parties is shared across Canada in other countries as well. Government ministries, health and social agencies, volunteer organizations and advocacy groups have waded into the discussion of the need to make and how to make teenage parties safer. These organizations include but are not exclusive to:

CAMH as represented by the “Having a Party”, “Take Action, Other Drug Problems” and “Alcohol, Other Drugs and Impaired Driving” brochures, the “Municipal Alcohol Policy Guide” (CAMH, 2003) and snowmobile club alcohol policy guide “Blazing New Trails” (CAMH, 1997);

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) Canada, “Sobering Thoughts on Safe Partying: A Guide to Avoiding Legal Liability” (MADD, 2003), “Alcohol, Teens and Catastrophe” (MADD 2003), “Keeping Good Company: An Employer’s Guide to Understanding and Avoiding Legal Liability” (MADD, 2003) “Being Sued Can Ruin a Good Party” (MADD, 2003);

The Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO), “LCBO’s 10 Prom Tips for Parents” (LCBO, 2003), “LCBO’s 10 Prom Tips for Students” (LCBO, 2003);

The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC), “The Responsible Host” (AADAC website January 2004);

The Australian Drug Foundation (ADF), “Hosting Teenage Parties” and Making Decisions about Teenage Parties” (ADF Website, January 2004);

The Toronto Public Health Department, “Party in the Right Spirit” (Toronto Health Department website, January 2004) ;

The Renfrew County and District Health Unit, “Party Smart” (Renfrew County Health Unit, 2003);

The Ottawa Health Department, “Hosting a Party” and Plan Ahead.Drive Sober” brochures (Ottawa Health Department website January 2004);

The Party Alcohol Liability Insurance Brokers Ltd., “Liability Insurance for Graduation Parties” (PAL website January 2004);

The Kingston Safe and Sober Alliance, “The Smart Party Planner” (Safe and Sober Alliance November 2001);

Driving Under the Influence (DUTI)– Optimist Club of Red Deer, “The Safe Grad Manual” (DUTI, 1993);

Smart Serve Ontario, “Communication is the Key to Hosting a Safe Event” (Smart Serve Newsletter, June 2003) and “It’s Smart to have Risk Management Strategies” (September 2000);

The Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO), “Liability, More to Lose than Your Licence” (AGCO website, Responsible Service brochure. January 2004);

New Zealand Ministry of Health, “Guidelines for Dance Parties” (NZ Ministry of Health October 1997).

Another source of ideas for safer parties comes from Canada’s newspapers. Journalists (e.g., Jan Wong, “Party Animals”, The Globe and Mail, July 16, 2003) who report on teenage parties that result in injuries to partygoers, vandalism and/or mischief and DWI often include statements from local officials about what went wrong and how the party ought to have been conducted.

It is important to acknowledge that except for suggestions concerning preventing driving while impaired and the value of food intake to slow down the rate of alcohol absorption into the bloodstream, the following recommendations have not been scientifically evaluated to prove their efficacy. They are based on common sense and practices that are widely accepted. A clear example would be the importance of the teen party host remaining alcohol-free during the party.

Specific Recommendations To Make Teen Parties Safer

For Teen Party Planners:

- Develop a party invitation list and do not let anyone else in; do not advertise the party;
- Turn "gate crashers", (uninvited party-goers), away; do not let them in; they are more likely to cause trouble than your real friends; have one entrance/exit, staff it with reliable people. (This can be difficult to do alone. Develop a plan and enlist the help of other people like friends and family members);
- Given the risks, problems and illegality of teenager drinking, consider the option of making your party alcohol-free. It makes sense to do this. If you decide to let your guests drink alcohol, it is very important to try to prevent your guests from getting

drunk; limit the amount of alcohol guests can bring into the party; serve the drinks yourself or have a sober volunteer do this; cut people off if they have had too much; tell your guests of your determination to control the use of alcohol before the party; encourage your guests to be responsible drinkers; post your party rules;

- Serve food to slow the rate of alcohol intoxication;
- Prevent drinking and driving and even drinking and walking; take keys, keep guests overnight; arrange for volunteer drivers to take people to and from the party; if necessary, call the police;
- Drinking alcohol and taking other drugs can be a dangerous mix; if your guests are drinking and taking drugs, the risk of harm increases; if you can, ban drug-taking at your party; if you cannot eliminate all drug use, supervise the drug-takers carefully; be prepared to cut them off all substances; keep them safe until they sober up;
- Supervise the party; have others help out; stay sober; keep your guests safe, e.g., if drinking is allowed, do not let them drink too much; discourage drug use; try to prevent them from engaging in other behaviour that could harm themselves or others (e.g. fighting; sexual assault, uninvited sex); try to keep partygoers in a physical area where you can keep an eye on them; have one party supervisor who knows first aid; have a list of services and people to call in case problems arise;
- If the party is on your parent's property and home (and even if it's not), tell them about your intention to host a party for friends and ask for their assistance in organizing the party so everyone is safer;
- Serve non-alcoholic drinks and food;
- Avoid potentially dangerous activities that could result in injury to intoxicated persons e.g. swimming, trampolining; skateboarding, climbing;
- Organize fun activities that can turn people away from only drinking and using drugs (e.g. group games; sports like volleyball or bocchi; karaoke.);
- Ensure that the location is relatively safe (e.g. away from water, quarries, cliffs);
- Remove guns and other articles that could be used as weapons.

For Parents:

- Develop with your children, a family alcohol and drug use policy; such a policy clearly states your family's rules and regulations concerning alcohol and other drug use and non-use and the penalties that will be imposed for any family member if the rules are broken; for more information see the CAMH brochure "Take Action; Alcohol, Other Drug Problems";
- In your family policy, with your children's participation, set limits on teen parties on family property (e.g., negotiate and determine party controls and supervision governing: the use of alcohol and drugs (*you have the right to insist that the party is alcohol and drug-free*); who can come; transportation; parent and other adult supervision, etc.); pull out the policy whenever your children want to host a party and apply it to the proposed party;
- In your family policy inform your children that teenage parties in your home and on your property are forbidden when you are away;
- Many children observe their parents using psychoactive substances. These substances include alcohol, tobacco, over the counter medications, prescription medications and

even illegal drugs. Children, over time, often adopt the alcohol and other drug-taking behaviours of their parents. If parents want to protect their children from alcohol and other drug problems, it is important for them to set a good example;

- When having an adult party, parents also need to demonstrate to their children how they keep their guests safe and sober. For ideas how to do this, see the CAMH brochure "Having a Party" or the MADD Canada brochure "Being Sued Can Ruin a Good Party", 2000.
- Learn about how party hosts can be sued. The MADD brochure "Alcohol, Teens and Catastrophe: What every parent needs to know about avoiding alcohol liability" (2003) contains useful information.

For Police:

- In some communities, a program exists whereby parents of teens can let the police know when they will be away; the police then conduct house drive by when the parents are away;
- Inform teens about the role the police can play to help out if party problems arise;
- Continue to conduct RIDE driving-while-impaired spot-checks and set up the Last Drink program to find out where impaired drivers had their last drink.
- Work with the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario to enforce the Liquor Licence Act.

For High Schools:

- Conduct workshops and seminars for students on: safer party hosting; safe substance use; liability; driving-while-impaired etc.; (In Renfrew County for example, the FOCUS Community Project operates Party Smart in all county high schools. For more information about Party Smart go to www.frcentre.net/ and then the Renfrew page);
- Conduct community workshops and information sessions for parents and community people on safer parties for teens;
- Conduct information sessions for graduates about the transition from high school to college and university.

For Neighbours:

- Offer to keep an eye on homes when parents of teens in the neighbourhood are away;
- Contact the police when a party spills out on the street and appears to be spinning out of control;
- Offer to help out if a party is known to be planned; be a volunteer driver or someone who can be called upon if help is needed.

For Landowners:

- Deny access to teens who want to use your property for unsupervised parties.
- Learn about liability for parties on your property;

For Municipalities:

- Offer recreation, learning and volunteer activities and opportunities that compete with teenage drinking/drug use;
- Develop and implement municipal alcohol policies governing the use of alcohol on municipal property and at events that take place in municipal facilities.

For Community Services

- Work closely with all the constituencies listed above to make teenager parties safer; implement alcohol and drug-related health promotion and harm reduction programs; contribute to the development of municipal alcohol policies, worksites and school board policies; conduct awareness education sessions.

For Social Scientists

- Conduct research to evaluate strategies about how to make teenager parties safer; Communicate the findings to the public and especially to teenagers.

Conclusion

Drinking and drug use among some teens is illegal and problematic. Ideally, it is in teenagers' best interest to abstain from such illegal use. However, the abstinence message does not interest some teenagers and they will continue to use these substances, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Given this reality, substance use education and awareness programs that promote abstinence, although useful for some teenagers, are unrealistic and inadequate ways of influencing those teenagers who choose a lifestyle of drinking and taking other drugs with their friends. For these young people what is needed are thoughtful and realistic harm reduction strategies, practices and policies that for teenage parties will keep our youth alive, safer and more out of harm's way.

We can do it.

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