

In This Issue > Monthly Features

Raising healthy teenagers

[Print Page](#)

How to help your kids avoid the land mines of adolescence

By Cathy Herholdt

Published: Tuesday, April 7, 2009 1:45 PM PDT

High school senior Will Bergman is captain of his school's swim team, plays soccer and runs cross-country. He's well known for his positive attitude and is involved in leadership class at Cascade High School, as well as church youth groups. He has a job, snowboards, wakeboards and loves photography. He doesn't drink or do drugs, and he's got goals and plans for the future that include going to college and joining the Navy.

Did his parents just get lucky or is there some secret weapon in the battle against the dangers of today's teen culture?

"I was raised with a little fear and pain and I turned out great," says Will of his upbringing. "My parents have brought me up really well. They value family time and want to know what's going on in my life."

Will says he doesn't join in the rampant drinking that goes on most weekends during the high school years because he knows, "only bad things come from that. A lot of people will go to extremes to be accepted, including drinking, drugs and intimacy. I just stay away from that stuff."

If there is a secret to raising kids like Will, most parents would like to know it. Watching your kids try to navigate adolescence and young adulthood is like sending them into a minefield, hoping and praying they won't step on one of the many potentially deadly threats in their midst.

What all parents need to know about their kids' world

Stephen Wallace, chairman and CEO of SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions), hopes his book, *Reality Gap: Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex — What Parents Don't Know and Teens Aren't Telling*, will encourage parents to take important steps to protect their kids,



starting with opening their eyes, ears and minds to what is really going on in their kids' world.

“More than ever before, there are alarming physical, social, emotional, and legal risks associated with drinking, drugs, sex, as well as spillover effects, involving bullying, violence, depression, suicide, and dangerous driving,” he writes in *Reality Gap*. “Examples are everywhere. Horrific car crashes and drug overdoses. Gang murders and inexplicable suicides. Teen beat-downs on YouTube and put-downs on MySpace. Violence on middle school, high school, and college campuses. And sex on school buses and in classrooms. These examples only scratch the surface of modern teen culture. Only by knowing about, and addressing, the reality gap will we be able to keep our kids safe through the increasingly risk-filled years of adolescence.”

Wallace says the world our kids are growing up in is very different from even just a few years ago. In addition to the myriad of dangers that kids are faced with every day, other factors make this generation particularly at risk for trouble. Advanced technology can isolate kids. The dissolution of the extended family can leave kids unsupervised. “Too often, they are separated literally and figuratively from the adults who are best able to guide them. In this new world, young people are, like us, overscheduled, overtired, and overstressed,” writes Wallace. “These factors can lead them to seek comfort by self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, sex and other potentially destructive choices.”

Parents need to be informed of how serious the problems are. “The first step is to bridge the reality gap between what parents know and what kids tell. There’s a big disparity between what kids report and what their parents report,” said Wallace.

Parent resources

- For tips on how to talk with your kids, visit www.starttalkingnow.org.

- If you have a child who is in trouble, Changes Parent Support Network offers support groups and resources for parents. Support groups meet on Wednesdays from 7 to 9:30 p.m. in Wallingford at Seattle

The trouble with technology

Continuous bombardment from technology leaves little time for the adolescent brain to rest, daydream, or learn new information. Even if the television and computer are off, the constant “vvvb, vvvb” sound of a vibrating cell phone alerting teens to an incoming text message can be heard around many dinner tables across America, much to the chagrin of parents. Kids today have access to near constant communication with each other via cell phones, social networking Web sites, and even online video games through which they can face off against opponents anywhere in the world.

Only in recent years have parents found themselves dealing with issues such as an aggressive teen who’s been confronted about spending too much time playing video games, or discovering an explicit text message or photograph in their daughter’s cell phone. “Sexting” is the new term for the exchange of sexually explicit conversations or inappropriate photos via text messages. Teens are saying things to each other via technology they would never say face to face.

First Church of the Nazarene, 4401 2nd Ave. N.E., Seattle, and on Thursdays from 7 to 9:30 p.m. in Everett at the Family Tree Apartments community room, 10110 – 19th Ave. S.E., Everett. For information about the organization, visit www.cpsn.org.

- For information on preventing underage drinking, visit www.preventionworksinseattle.org.

- For information on Internet and video game addiction, visit www.icaservices.com.

The danger in all of this, according to Hilarie Cash, PhD, a therapist and founder of Internet/Computer Addiction Services, is that all of these things can set the stage for addictive behavior in kids. Dr. Cash and her business partner Jay Parker run an outpatient program for Internet and video game addicts, as well as a program for sex addicts.

Sex addicts are often exposed to pornography and sexualized at a young age, says Cash. Kids who are surfing the Internet are likely to be exposed to pornography at some point, which separates sexuality from relationships. Further, when online interactions are substituted for dating and learning normal social skills, young people can develop a sexual template that is skewed.

Video game and Internet addiction are very real, says Cash, who co-authored *Video Games and Your Kids: How Parents Stay in Control* with Kim McDaniel. To understand what's happening to their child, parents need to first comprehend the

neurochemistry of addiction.

“[Video games create] the same neurochemical process as with drugs or gambling. The pleasure centers of the brain are lighting up and the body releases chemicals such as dopamine, which create a high,” explained Cash. “If the behavior is sustained over time, in order to prolong the high, the brain makes adjustments.” When the game ends, the brain wants more of those “feel good” neurochemicals and sends the person into withdrawal. “The person experiences a strong craving. It really is biological, not psychological,” said Cash. In withdrawal, the person can become anxious, depressed, irritable and discontent. “You have to go further and have more to get high. Whether it’s a behavior or a chemical, what happens to the brain is the same,” she said.

Both the video game industry and the gambling industry hire psychologists to design games that use intermittent reinforcement, the most powerful form of reinforcement, where rewards come unpredictably, leaving the player wanting more.

So how can parents prevent the dangers of technology from harming their kids? Cash has some suggestions that are expanded upon in her book:

- Cash strongly suggests parents not allow their kids to play video games before the age of 7 or 8. “They need to be doing other things, exploring, interacting with others ... video games confuse them,” she said.

- Elementary school-aged kids should not spend more than an hour a day in front of the television or computer.
- Middle school kids should be limited to two hours per day of screen time.
- High school kids should not be allowed more than three hours a day online, playing video games or watching TV.
- Never allow kids to have televisions or computers in their room, says Cash. Place these things in common areas of the house so they can be monitored.
- Don't let kids have cell phones that have Internet access.
- Don't allow kids to play Internet-based multi-user video games. These are the most addictive, says Cash, because the social aspect adds to the addictive element, and there is no start or finish.
- Encourage kids to use their non-screen time to read or do other activities, which will allow the brain to wire itself for things other than immediate gratification and intermittent rewards.
- If you're concerned your child has a problem, seek professional help.

A closer look at underage drinking

The Washington State Department of Health recently released the results of their 2008 Healthy Youth Survey, which offers health-risk information volunteered anonymously by more than 210,000 public school kids statewide in grades six, eight, 10, and 12. Some of the statistics are alarming and eye opening. Forty-four percent of Snohomish County high school seniors have used alcohol within the past 30 days. Unfortunately, the same number of parents (44 percent) had not talked to their students in the past year about why they should not drink alcohol, according to the survey.

Among Washington's eighth graders, 41 percent who drink alcohol say they get it from home, and about 24 percent say their parents haven't talked with them about alcohol and its risks.

"Parents either don't know, don't want to know about the world their kids live in, or assume that their kids are going to engage in destructive behavior. I call that the myth of inevitability. Parents literally throw up their hands and say, 'My kids are teenagers, they're going to drink, do drugs, have sex and drive like crazy people and there's nothing I can do about it.' Nothing could be further from the truth," said Wallace.

Some parents may wonder, what's the harm in letting kids drink? Some say they'd rather have their kids drink in their home than somewhere else. But research has shown there are plenty of risks for teens who drink, including hindering brain development, being involved in alcohol related car accidents, and an increased risk for addiction later in life.

According to the *New York Times*, a 2006 survey published in *Archives of Pediatrics &*

Adolescent Medicine stated, “Forty-seven percent of those who begin drinking alcohol before the age of 14 become alcohol dependent at sometime in their lives, compared with 9 percent of those who wait at least until age 21.”

The adolescent brain has a big enough job developing so that kids can eventually master vital processes like judgment, planning, impulse control, abstract thinking, analysis and stress management. Throwing alcohol in the mix threatens brain development.

Research has also shown that there are definite long-term cognitive consequences to heavy drinking in adolescence. The parts of the brain that control emotions, memory, learning, decision-making and self-regulation are not fully developed in teenagers, making those areas vulnerable to the effects of alcohol, according to the American Medical Association. Their research indicates that adolescent drinkers score worse than non-users on vocabulary, general information, memory and memory retrieval. Adolescent heavy drinkers were found to have a hippocampus 10 percent smaller than those who didn’t drink as much.

The earlier kids start to drink, the greater their risk of being in automobile crashes. Starting before age 14 increases risk seven times over waiting until age 21 to start.

Interestingly, again, kids seem to be more aware of this danger, and more concerned about it, than their parents. According to Wallace’s research for *Reality Gap*, 83 percent of teens say they are concerned about drinking and driving, compared to just 48 percent of parents.

There is hope and help for parents of teenagers

Here’s some good news: Kids today report feeling more connected to their parents than those in the last few generations. According to J. David Hawkins, PhD, of the University of Washington Social Development Research Group and developer of *Guiding Good Choices*, parents have a much greater influence on their kids than they think.

“All the research shows that parents really do continue to be a very influential force in kids’ lives all the way through to college,” said Hawkins, who spoke at a March 23 parenting forum called “Keeping Track of Teens” at Eckstein Middle School in North Seattle. He encouraged parents to set clear guidelines about things like underage drinking and make those known to your kids.

His *Guiding Good Choices* curriculum teaches parents the importance of forming strong bonds with their kids by interacting with them on a regular basis, setting clear standards, providing the opportunities and skills to be successful, and recognizing efforts for improvement and achievement.

“[Our kids] will feel emotionally attached and connected to us, which creates the motivation to live by the standards set by our family,” explained Hawkins. “It’s important to keep the bonds strong.”

Carolyn Bernhard is the co-chair of a coalition of parents and community members in Northeast Seattle called Prevention Works in Seattle. The coalition hosted the recent parenting forum at Eckstein, where Bernhard’s 14-year-old daughter attends school. She saw how much a part of the high school culture alcohol was when her 21-year-old daughter was that age. “I’ve been involved [in the coalition] from the beginning. It gave me a way to

try to change that culture,” she said.

The emphasis is on the middle school years. “If we can get parents and kids to understand the benefits of not drinking, we can make a difference at the high school and college level,” she said. “With the work we’re doing in middle school, my hope is that there will be a core group of kids who get to high school and choose not to drink, and still be cool.”

Stephen Wallace agrees that the middle school years are critical for parent influence. “We found that there are big spikes in drinking between sixth and seventh grade ... we need to be talking to kids about alcohol before sixth grade,” he said. “There are also big spikes in drug use between eighth and ninth grade, so if parents are waiting until high school to talk about drugs, it’s too late.”

In talking with teenagers, Wallace had discovered that many of them say they would follow their parents’ guidelines if those rules, and the consequences for breaking them, were made clear to them. He recalled one conversation with a 16-year-old boy who said he drank on the weekends and assumed his parents knew about it. Wallace posed the question, “What if they asked you [if you were drinking]?”

“I’d tell them. I’d never lie to my parents,” he responded.

“What if they said don’t do it?” he asked the teen, who replied matter-of-factly, “I’d stop.”

“Parents just sort of avoid the topic, but if they took the time to have a reasonable conversation and set some expectations, they’d be surprised how often kids will try to meet those expectations,” said Wallace. “Kids are looking for clear, unambiguous guidelines.”

Will Bergman agrees. “My parents are good examples. They work hard and taught me good morals. When they disciplined me, I got the message real well,” he said. “But they’d always tell me they did it because they love me.”

Copyright © 2009 - Journal Newspapers

[x] Close Window