

## Keeping Kids Safe During Prom and Graduation Season By Cheryl Wittke, Safe Communities

For parents of teenagers, the question of whether our kids are abusing drugs and alcohol is an ongoing concern. But during prom and graduation season these concerns rise to the top, and for good reason. Even one bout of over-consumption of alcohol can put youth at increased risk of everything from involvement in a serious traffic crash to date rape. Even trying a drug once can have serious permanent consequences, and combining drugs (and drugs and alcohol) can lead to potentially deadly effects.

How can parents keep their kids safe during prom and graduation season? One tack NOT to take is to host parties for teenagers where alcohol is served, nor to allow your child to attend one. According to a study by the American Medical Association (AMA) one in 10 parents surveyed believe that it's OK for underage teens to attend prom or graduation parties with alcohol if a parent were present. They believe drinking is a teenage rite of passage, and that creating a supervised environment for youth to drink is a safe, responsible way to go.

However, teen traffic fatality and sexual assault statistics do not support this theory – teenagers who drink are more at risk, regardless of where the drinking takes place. As stated in a recent American Medical Society editorial, “fatal car accidents, injuries and assaults are not rites of passage for any child. Underage drinking is a major factor in the two leading causes of teenage deaths: car accidents and fatal injuries. A 2002 study revealed that 40 percent of teen traffic fatalities during prom and graduation weekends were alcohol-related.

“[Alcohol] is also linked to two-thirds of all sexual assaults and date rapes of teens, and increases the likelihood of contracting HIV or sexually transmitted diseases. And a recent AMA report reveals the long-term, irreversible damage that drinking does to the teen brain, which continues to develop until age 20.”

More to the point, serving alcohol to underage youth is illegal, and increasingly communities are prosecuting parents who host such parties. One example: a 46 year-old woman in Pennsylvania served a prison sentence for throwing a party for her two teenage daughters. A 19 year old in attendance crashed his vehicle after the party, killing himself and two passengers.

A safer strategy to keep your children safe during prom and graduation season:

- Make sure your child has a plan for the evening and that you know it.
- Work with the school to have food served during the prom.
- Take stock of the alcohol in your home
- Know all of the "hot spot" destinations.
- Know who is driving - if it's a limo, check their policy on allowing alcohol in the vehicle.
- Make sure that alcohol is not brought into your home or onto your property by your child's friends.
- Give your child a curfew.
- Communicate with other parents and school officials.
- Encourage seatbelt use - the best accessory!
- Do not rent hotel rooms for prom-goers.
- Refuse to supply alcohol to youth.
- Discuss the school's prom rules with your child and the consequences for violating them.
- Stay up for prom-goer's return home.

(From Partnership for a Drug Free America website)