Preparing your teenager (and you) for Schoolies

School leavers’ celebrations, or ‘Schoolies’, have become an accepted part of our culture and an important rite of passage for teenagers as they end 12 years of schooling. Unfortunately, Schoolies celebrations are increasingly associated with high levels of alcohol consumption and other risk-taking behaviours.

Many parents are concerned about the risks that their teenager might face during Schoolies celebrations, but at the same time they want to support their school leaver to attend and celebrate the end of school with their friends.

Talk to your teenager about Schoolies

It is important to talk to your teenager about Schoolies, and for you both to understand each other’s expectations and concerns. The earlier you start this conversation the better; ideally, start talking to your teenager about Schoolies at the beginning of Year 12 or even during Year 11.

You have probably heard lots of stories in the media about school leavers drinking excessively and engaging in risky behaviour during Schoolies celebrations. It is important for you (and your teenager) to know that many school leavers don’t engage in binge drinking as part of their Schoolies celebrations and many of those who do would prefer not to.

It is also important that you encourage your teenager to talk to their friends openly and honestly about what they want to do to celebrate the end of school. Research conducted by the Centre for Health Initiatives in 2010 with 512 NSW Schoolies on the Gold Coast found that the biggest predictor of how much teenagers drank was how much they thought their friends would drink. The research also found that many of these teenagers were worried about the things they thought would happen (like drinking too much or getting into a fight) but believed that these were necessary risks that were associated with celebrating with their friends.

Some of the things to discuss with your teenager, and to make sure you agree on, are:

- Where they are going and who they are going with
- Where they are staying and how you can contact them
- How often they will contact you
- Whether they will be drinking alcohol and, if they will, how much (even if they are over 18)
- What they will say and do if anyone offers them drugs
- What they will do if they or one of their friends drinks too much
• How they will travel while they are away, including what they will do if the driver has been drinking
• How much money they will need and what they will do if they run out of money
• What they will do, and who they will call, if they are in trouble

Set reasonable expectations

Your teenager has a right to celebrate the end of 12 years of hard work, but they also have a responsibility to do this in a way that is consistent with your family values and that minimises the risk of causing harm to themselves or other people. You have a right to know that they are safe, and a responsibility to provide them with appropriate and accurate information to help them minimise these risks.

Teenagers respond well to reasonable expectations and are more likely to behave in a way that keeps them safe and out of trouble if they know what is expected of them. You may not agree with each other on all aspects of the discussion but it is still important that they know what your expectations are. The research conducted at Schoolies in 2010 found that only 7% of teenagers thought their parents would be upset or angry if they found out they were drunk at Schoolies (but research with parents shows that actually most parents would be upset if their teenager was drunk). Give your teenager good reasons not to drink or take drugs, and help your teenager feel comfortable with the idea that it is OK not to drink, smoke or take drugs.

Help them make it a positive experience

Schoolies is an important celebration for teenagers, it is a rite of passage that marks the end of 12 years of schooling and entry into the world of work or tertiary study. However, celebrating the end of school does not have to mean drinking large amounts of alcohol and engaging in risky behaviours.

So, talk to them about the consequences of drinking and potential alcohol-related harm, and encourage them to talk to older siblings and peers about their Schoolies experiences (good and bad). Don’t feel that you can’t, or shouldn’t, tell them your concerns and expectations – they need to know that you are worried and why you are worried so they can take steps to reduce the risks.

Start the conversation early, find out what they want from Schoolies, and help them to think of alternate ways to celebrate that will help them look back on their Schoolies celebrations with happy memories not regrets.

Useful Resources

Victorian Government, Checklist for parents:  
Queensland Government, Parents Guide to a Safer Schoolies:  
Marie Stopes International, Sex Talk Tips for Parents in Time for Schoolies:  