



"Teens and the Law"
Advice to parents from Al Ross, LCSW
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Note: This document was written by Al Ross, LCSW, Family Service of Glencoe's Youth, Family, and Community Outreach Coordinator. If you would like to talk to Al or another therapist on staff, please call Family Service of Glencoe at 847-835-5111.

WHERE PARENTS ARE COMING FROM

In my experience working with families on the North Shore over the last 20 years, and after holding a focus group of Glencoe parents of teens, this is what I am hearing from parents, and the advice I would give in response.

Parents feel confused:

Many don't understand what the law is or how it is applied.

Although the application of the law is usually decided on a case-by-case basis, depending on the unique circumstances of each incident, parents need to be informed about the general laws on the books regarding youth and the process in which decisions are made. [See the accompanying "Teens and the Law" handout for laws and consequences.]

Parents who are informed can best present reliable information to their kids as well as develop family guidelines and limits, which are congruent with our community's laws.

Parents feel powerless:

Many parents feel their kids don't want to hear what they have to say or that what they say holds little weight.

Teens see kids getting caught and getting off, so they don't "buy" threats of legal consequences. Parents wish legal authority figures and even recovering teen addicts could talk directly to the kids and "get real" with them.

Some parents would rather have more control by hosting their kids' friends in their own home where they can supervise. But then they worry about their liability if anything bad should happen.

It is important for parents to realize that they are NOT powerless and that they have far more influence than they think. In fact, many New Trier High School students who don't drink or do drugs report that they make that choice because they would get into trouble with their parents. (This is according to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a biannual survey in which NTHS students report on their risk-taking behaviors from substance abuse to sex to food.)

When parents react from a place of powerlessness, they give their children several unintended messages. The first one is: "We do not really care what you do." Secondly: "There are no limits that we can provide as parents to impact the decisions you make."

Parents need to get information regarding the legal system and the impact of substance use on the individual. They also need support to develop a reasonable and consistent family position regarding substance use. Further, it is **imperative** that parents also have a system of consequences in place and are ready to use that system in response to their child's behavior. If, at the end of the day, your child ends up believing that the laws of the community and the rules of your house really do not mean anything to them, then they are typically unable to make informed decisions for themselves --- and that is potentially a recipe for disaster.

Parents learn from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey how prevalent drugs and alcohol are at the high school (e.g., drinking amongst students ramps up from steadily from freshman to senior year; 20 percent of frosh reported drinking in the past month, while 80 percent of seniors did). Some worry that telling their kids they can't do it will make their kids want it more. Others believe since they're going to do it anyway, they might as well do it at home where they can keep them safe (parents pour and take away keys and the kids sleep over).

This really speaks to the issue of powerlessness – "It is going to happen and there is nothing we can do about it." You do have control. And know that it's not only kids' lives that get hijacked by substance misuse, so do the lives of parents and siblings.

Research and anecdotal evidence is very clear that, although it may not seem the case, parents' opinions and values are most influential for teens. Parents need to be clear, justify their position with facts, and reinforce their position (both in positive and negative ways) in order to demonstrate that their beliefs and values are important. When your parameters are clear, kids may be more likely to ask themselves "What will my parents think?" or "What will my parents do if they find out?" They develop a conscience that may help them make good decisions. They also develop a trust in you, as parents, that there are limits and boundaries, that you take these boundaries seriously, and that you are willing and able to manage these boundaries.

Parents feel conflicted:

They want to protect their children from long-term consequences (such as a felony conviction, which affects them the rest of their lives) but they want their children to have enough consequences to learn a lesson that will stick.

Parents need to understand that there is a process in the legal system that, under usual circumstances, does not go from 0 to 100 in one incident. There are normally consequences for first-time offenders aimed at teaching a lesson and deterring kids from future offenses, without going right to a felony conviction and long term “record.”

While there may be legal consequences for a young person’s involvement in substance use, there are also potentially life-impairing psychological and physiological consequences as well. By interfering with the legal consequences, you may be protecting your child in one way, but you are putting their mental and physical health at risk.

When a young person develops the perception that the laws do not apply to them, a potentially dangerous precedent has been set. Parents need to support their children and help them negotiate the consequences of bad decisions versus inhibiting the process. Kids cannot learn about making better decisions if they are not allowed to experience the natural consequences of their actions.

It is very important to work **with** law enforcement in ways that would help your child. If you, as a parent, approach law enforcement as the enemy, then your child will perceive them as such.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO:

Educate yourself and your kids

Learn the law as well as your rights and responsibilities. Understand and communicate them to your child. Know that while your child may catch a break for a first offense, at some point they may not. And if they get into the criminal justice system, you won't be able to fix it for them, no matter how much money or clout you have. They will surrender their future to an efficient, impersonal, fallible system. And once they have a felony on their record, it affects their lives forever.

Delay! Delay! Delay!

Years of research back it up: If your child can avoid drugs and alcohol during high school and into college, they will have a much better chance of never developing a substance problem. By college, young adults have a skill set, have seen what happens to others who abuse, and make better decisions.

But, if necessary, get help and get it early

If, at any time, you are questioning your own notions about substance use regarding your child and the impact that use might be having on their life, please get help! You do not have to make decisions, or evaluate the things you are seeing and feeling, on your own. Use the help of other parents, friends, and professionals. The earlier you ask the right questions and get the right help, the sooner you might be able to positively impact your child's emotional, social and physical well-being.

How do you know whether to seek advice? ALWAYS trust your gut; no one will ever know your child like you do. We sometimes watch our kids falter, feeling intuitively that something is wrong. Yet we often get taken hostage by the societal notion that, to some degree, substance use among youth is normal and to be expected. The issues involved in our society regarding experimentation and social use of substances (alcohol, marijuana, prescription drugs, etc.) are very complex and you shouldn't expect that you should understand it all on your own.

Set firm boundaries and set the example

Kids want structure. It's up to them to push the boundaries but you need to stay firm. Spell out your rules and consequences. And remember: Your kids are watching everything you do and listening to everything you say. If you suspect your child is using substances, setting limits may include needing to lock up your alcohol, medication, and taking other steps to create restricted access to substances. Your kids will develop attitudes and beliefs regarding the law based on how you, as parents, position yourself in relation to the law. If you soften the boundaries by getting them out of situations where there should be consequences, they get the message that rules and certain laws do not apply to them. They will not be able to make informed decisions from that attitudinal stance.

Be respectful of law enforcement

It is important that your kids realize that law enforcement personnel have a lot of discretion in terms of how a particular situation is handled. Youth who respond to police officers or other authoritative personnel with disrespect, a sense of entitlement or oppositional behavior will ultimately end up increasing the likelihood that consequences may be more extreme than if they were to be cooperative and respectful.

Parents need to coach their children how they must respond in any situation where they may end up being confronted by public safety, school administrators and/or teachers, or other authoritative people. The advice from Glencoe Public Safety is the following: Tell your children to take responsibility for the current situation; Be respectful; Be apologetic, if appropriate; Be cooperative; Be honest. Although they are not obligated to talk with the police, there are polite and respectful ways to decline to speak with law enforcement until they have had a chance to talk with their parents.

It is also important to realize that, most often, the way that your child reacts to being confronted by the police gets written into the police report and is made available to the judge (if the case ends up going before a judge). Judges will report that often this is the first impression they get as to the nature of your child. There are resounding benefits for your child to understand and appreciate these dynamics and respond accordingly.