Parties, Parents and our Precious Young People

“Go for a party for the twenty first and avoid the eighteenth” said my brother earnestly. Experienced father of three post eighteen year olds, he helped me contemplate the next celebration in our family. “They’re more mature by then. You don’t need the plus ones who are only there for the party not for the celebration, avoid the underage drinking and the cost of the security to keep the gate-crashers out.”

Why is it that for a sizeable minority of our young people “getting plastered” is the height of being cool – and why do many parents feel helpless in face of the pressures of offspring to be part of the crowd? Most schools already run drug education program so why is teenage drinking still a problem? How can schools and parents work together to further reduce excessive behaviour, which too often ends in serious consequences to reputation at one end and life at the other?

Alcohol and tobacco industry sales campaigns are pitched pointedly at young people with disposable incomes, many of whom are still of school age but with disposable income and part-time jobs. This “targeting” should be stopped at the legislative level in the health interests of our young people.

School programs that engage students in understanding and accepting the ill effects of excessive alcohol intake certainly make a positive difference and are to be supported. Alone, however, they are not enough to achieve the broad effect required.

Firstly, they need to be supported at school level by additional programs that address the questions of self-worth and confidence that characterise adolescent anxiety. Excellent programs of this sort rest on the principle that it is in making contributions to higher causes than ourselves that our lives, as the respected researcher, Dr Martin Seligman explains, are made more meaningful. Activities that connect young people with others who need support in times of crisis, such as the flood and earthquake victims or who are on the fringe of society because of ill-informed prejudice for instance, mental illness sufferers show them not only their own good fortune, but also teach tolerance and make young people feel good about making a difference.

Broadly inclusive (as regards age and tasks) programs that offer a variety of short and long term leadership opportunities and “give permission” for young people to “take charge” while being supported are another important strategy. They also need recognition of their achievements.
A broad co-curricular program then that is characterised by a range of challenging, interesting and relevant opportunities and which emphasises participation while encouraging excellence provides a fertile seed bed for positive growth.

Underpinning all this should be teaching and learning programs that encourage students to take real responsibility for their learning for this is the core business of schools and models the essence of the growth of independence, self-confidence and self-worth.

Most crucial of all, however, and one which, sadly, few schools manage to achieve despite their best efforts is a close partnership between home and school on alcohol use.

I have spelled out what a school can do. Parents too should become better informed by attending school information evenings, using local resources such as the police Party Safe Program, talk to other parents and work collaboratively with the parents of your child’s friends to help you take the stance you want not what your child wants.

Parents should talk to the school about what they need the school to do to help them in this aspect of their role. They should support related school policies, inform schools of any worrying behaviour they may learn of. Be assured that schools will act confidentially. Ensure that you supervise your school age children – the majority are under-age. Above all know where they are and what they are doing, and expect them home at a reasonable hour.

In these matters as in all others to do with young people it is the school-home partnership that will make the difference.

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