

REGION

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Common ground on teen drinking Parents reconnect to share strategies

By John C. Drake, Globe Staff | May 3, 2007

When her 16-year-old son Daniel was younger, Deb Jacob says, she was vigilant about touching base with the other parents when he would visit a friend's house.

But gradually, as the years went by, she did that less often. Now, because of a two-year-old community initiative, she is reconnecting with her parental peers.

Jacob invited several parents to her home for coffee recently, one of two dozen gatherings held in Needham homes since January, to brainstorm about ways to guard against drug and alcohol abuse by the town's teenagers. While Jacob said she does not believe any of the parents at her coffee are hosting wild parties to begin with, they heard a worrisome presentation about the prevalence of teen alcohol abuse.

"It's scary knowing some of these things," Jacob said. "Our kids are always a step ahead of us."

The Needham parent coffees are one of several initiatives in six area communities organized through the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation for its campaign to combat youth substance abuse. Organizers hope efforts in Needham, Wayland, Hopkinton, Framingham, Bellingham, and Milford will help cut down on some of the underage drinking and drug use that accompanies proms, graduations, and summer vacation.

"Parents in particular get nervous this time of year," said Diane Barry, director of the MetroWest Technical Assistance Center, which is running the regional campaign for the foundation.

She said coordinators in each of the communities have been working to warn parents about the dangers of substance abuse, investigate the extent of alcohol and drug abuse among local teens, and develop strategies for combating the problem.

"One of the issues in most communities is parent denial, parents assuming 'It's not my kid,'" Barry said.

Bringing parents of teenagers together has been the first challenge.

"Parents of young children meet each other in playgrounds. They're always connecting with each other," Barry said. "In middle and high school they're pushing parents away. Schools don't welcome parental involvement as much."

In Needham, the parent coffees have caught on. Some 300 parents have attended at least one, said Deborah Engler, the Needham coordinator, who refers to the resulting group of vigilant parents as a "web of safety."

Not only do the parents appreciate the information gathered, they're learning more about the families of their children's friends, Engler said.

Jacob, who decided to host a coffee after attending one herself, said she initially worried mostly about what her son's reaction would be, saying she didn't want him to think she didn't trust him.

"My son used to refer to me as the biggest loser parent in Needham," she said, recounting how she would ring the doorbell before dropping her son off at a friend's house to make sure a parent was home. But she has learned others share her concern. "If I'm the biggest loser parent, it's an awful big club and growing.

"There are a lot of us out there that want to keep our kids safe."

In the end, Daniel Jacob really didn't mind.

"Parents are going to talk anyway," Daniel said. "I actually was kind of happy about it because then there's less rumors. And if rumors start, a parent can squash that."

The coffees begin with a presentation by Engler on the extent of substance-abuse problem among teens, and the dangers for their children, including damage to still-developing brains. The gatherings then proceed to a discussion on such topics as how to approach parents who may have allowed kids to drink at their homes. Finally, she asks each of the parents to commit to doing one thing differently to discourage drug and alcohol use among the teenagers in their community.

Engler has two to three coffees scheduled each week through the end of the school year, and is considering training others to facilitate discussions at parent coffees next year.

In Wayland, a house party involving about 25 freshmen last spring spurred more parents to become involved in the campaign. Within an hour of what many parents believed would be a legitimate, supervised party, a child had alcohol poisoning and the police had to intervene, said Heidi Heilman, who coordinates the campaign in Wayland.

"It was really messy," she said. "It was an awakening for parents."

A group of 40 parents met a handful of times after the incident. Initially, they vented frustration at each other, at the teenagers, at the school and at local law enforcement officials, who some parents believed meted out punishment unfairly.

Eventually, they developed a set of guidelines for hosting a party, which has been distributed throughout the community, Heilman said.

The community has also sought the guidance of a Boston law firm that has built a niche talking to parents about the legal liability they face when they allow kids to host a party. Campbell, Campbell, Edwards & Conroy LLP has offered a multimedia presentation, "Be a Parent, Not a Pal," in numerous area towns. The firm is holding a presentation Monday night in Wayland and Tuesday night in Needham.

While this push to involve parents in combating underage alcohol use is only two years old, students in Wayland have a long history of tackling the problem. The national organization Students Against Destructive Decisions began in Wayland as Students Against Driving Drunk in 1981. Students there are still spreading the message.

The Wayland chapter of SADD installed a sign Tuesday over the seniors' parking lot at Wayland High School that read, "Don't Be Selfish, Think Twice, Somebody Loves You."

Daniel Jacob, the Needham teenager, said he believes students are more aware of the dangers of alcohol, but he hasn't noticed a decrease in its availability.

"I've been at parties where I've chosen not to drink," he said. "If they really want to, they're going to find a place."

Barry said organizers are working with Brandeis University researchers to assess whether the program is working.

In the meantime, they are planning to expand the initiative to five more communities next year.

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