

Life at the party

By Walt Mueller

It's been 20 years since The Beastie Boys burst onto the music scene to boldly trumpet their message to youth worldwide that "you've got to fight for your right to party." Judging from what's happening in today's adolescent world, a generation of teenagers who weren't even born when The Beasties first preached their party gospel have grown up embracing, living and enjoying that right. Like most kids her age, Jenna's online profile tells visitors to her Xanga Web site that her "interests" include "dancing, loud music, weekends and being with friends." It's not surprising that she lists her "expertise" as "partying." When it comes to their right to party, today's teenagers aren't fighting. They've already won.

A staple of the teenage weekend social scene, parties are something that kids love and parents tend to worry about—usually. The fact is that most parents are oblivious to the who's, what's and where's of the teen party scene. Teenagers like it that way as parent meddling stifles their adolescent drive for independence and can also serve to ruin the "fun."

While teen parties aren't a bad thing in and of themselves, there's a growing danger that a teen's "right" to party includes a desire and willingness to engage in illegal, immoral and dangerous behavior. That's what teen marketing experts at Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU) discovered in their study of teens and their parties. TRU reports that 81 percent of today's teens say that partying is "in" as an activity popular not only on weekends, but sometimes during the week as well.

So why do today's teens say they like to get together to "party?" TRU found that first and foremost, they like spending time with their friends. A party also serves as an escape from the adult world. In fact, they cite a "lack of parents" as necessary for the party to "go anywhere." Parties provide them with a place to "let off steam" and "meet new people." It's also a place where kids exercise the freedom to experiment and do things they wouldn't do elsewhere.

What do they do? Not surprisingly, they listen to music, eat, play games and watch TV. At times they dance. Of course, each of these activities might be cause for concern based on what they are listening to, what they're playing, what they're watching and how they're dancing. But what's most alarming is the prevalence of and passion with which they engage in activities that are flat out dangerous and wrong. Drinking is one of the most popular party activities, with kids not only enjoying beer, but frequently mixing hard liquor in fruit drinks. Unfortunately, there are a growing number of parents who actually provide the alcohol and the party site for teenagers. Kids also use drugs, with marijuana being the most popular party staple. A growing number of parties include experimentation with highly dangerous and addictive drugs like heroin and methamphetamines. When drugs and alcohol are added to adolescent impulsivity and their drive for independence at parties void of parental supervision, there's always the danger of sex. Kids say they like to "hook up" at parties. TRU found that this can include anything from talking, to making out, to engaging in sex.

Knowing what many kids do at parties should leave us deeply concerned about their need to be "partying" in a positive, healthy and God-honoring manner. What can we, as parents of teens, do to help our kids make good party decisions?

First, make your home a fun place to be. Create an inviting and fun space where kids can congregate regularly to spend time together. Making your house the place to have a party allows you to be a safeguard and a positive influence on your teen's peers.

Second, develop a parents network in your community. Knowing other parents along with what is and is not allowed at their house will help you rest assured that your teen is safe when they're under someone else's roof.

Third, always expect your kids to tell you where they are. And if they're invited to a party at the home of someone you don't know, call those parents and ask the following questions: "Will you be there? Will you be supervising? Will there be drugs or alcohol at the party?"

Fourth, set high behavioral expectations and limits for your teen, clearly outlining what you allow and do not allow when it comes to parties. Explain that these rules are rooted in your love for God, love for them, and responsibility to protect them from harm and provide for their well being. The fear of getting caught and the threat of discipline are huge deterrents. Let your kids know that parent/teen trust must be guarded, and when that trust is broken, discipline will follow.

Fifth, offer your kids an "out" if they're at a party that's heading in the wrong direction. Tell them they can always tell their friends that they're leaving for fear of the consequences. And, be sure your kids know they can call you to be rescued regardless of where or when.

Finally, teach them a Biblical theology of relationships, sexuality and substance abuse. Modeling and speaking about God's standards speaks loudly when those other tempting voices tell your kids to "come and follow."

It's no secret that when we were teenagers we loved getting together with our friends for a party. And, a good number of teenage parties "back in the day" included getting away with illegal and immoral stuff our parents would have never approved of. But the "hey we did it and we turned out okay!" excuse should never be used to give teens the right to do

wrong. As those entrusted with the task of nurturing our teens spiritually, our goal should be to lead them to learn the importance of glorifying God. Praying for their genuine inner transformation will lead to outward behavior that's the fruit of their growing love for their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That said, let's encourage them to really enjoy a *good* party.

(Note – Peter Zollo, *Getting Wiser To Teens*, New Strategist Publications, Ithaca, New York, 2004, pages 239-244)

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