

# JEWISH LEDGER

AN INDEPENDENT WEEKLY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1929

---

## Do you know where your children are? Parents are key to combatting teen drinking and drug use, say experts

By [Judie Jacobson](#)

Published: Tuesday, May 22, 2007 9:16 PM EDT

When police arrived at the home of Paul and Dawn Baracone one day in March 2006, the arrest of the Farmington couple sent shock waves through the upscale suburban enclaves of central Connecticut.

How could the Baracones have wittingly hosted what apparently amounted to a keg party for dozens of teens n at least one as young as 15 n gathered at their home to celebrate their son's 18th birthday? How could parents enable, let alone encourage, minors to drink?

The highly publicized incident outraged many n and instigated passage of a piece of legislation that had bounced around the Connecticut General Assembly since 2002.

Effective October 1, 2006, the new law makes it illegal for someone to knowingly allow minors to possess alcohol on their private property, and prohibits minors from possessing and drinking alcohol anywhere unless accompanied by their parent or as part of a religious observance. The legislation effectively closed a loophole that previously allowed parents, like the Baracones, to host house parties that served alcohol to their teens and their teens' friends.

Connecticut was not first out of the gate. Since New Jersey became the first state to do so in 1987, a total of 32 states, as well as a slew of local municipalities, have adopted so-called "social host" liability laws that, in one way or another and to varying degrees, attempt to combat the ongoing problem of teen drinking and drug use by getting tough on adults n especially parents.

That trend reflects the thinking of many "experts" n i.e., psychologists, drug counselors, high school guidance counselors and social workers, and law enforcement officials n who are adamant that teen drinking and drug use will only abate when and if the community in general n and parents in particular n get on board.

In other words, it takes a village. But is the village n at the core of which sits the parents -- rising to meet the challenge?

What's the big deal?

While the efficacy of legislation, such as "social host" laws that attempt to force parents to shoulder more of the responsibility for the actions of their children, may be debatable to some, the prevalence of teen drinking and drug use, as well as its unsettling consequences, is tough to dispute.

According to the 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, there are an estimated 11 million underage drinkers in the United States. Nearly 7.2 million are considered binge drinkers n generally

defined as consuming no less than five drinks in one session and more than two million are classified as heavy drinkers. (See sidebar for more statistics.)

What's more, a similar study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University discovered that among youths who already drink, many are drinking greater amounts of alcohol more often.

"Alcohol remains the most heavily abused substance by America's youth," says Acting Surgeon General Dr. Kenneth Moritsugu, who recently issued a six-point Call to Action that attempts "to change the culture and attitudes toward drinking in America."

Closer to home, the story is even more ominous.

According to a report by the state's Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, not only do Connecticut youth drink at rates 26%-28% percent higher than their peers nationally, but the age of initiation in the state is 11-years old and two years earlier than the national average.

Interestingly, while underage consumption of alcohol remains at consistently high levels, overall illicit drug use among teens dropped 23 percent during the past five years, according to a survey conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

But don't release the balloons just yet.

Despite the significant decline in the use of drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin and Ecstasy, the SAMHSA survey found alarming trends in teen use of prescription drugs, especially pain relievers such as OxyContin and Vicodin, as well as cough and cold medicines.

Moreover, a recent White House analysis released by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) reports that one third of all new abusers of prescription drugs in 2005 were 12-17 year olds.

"Parents need to know that teens are turning away from street drugs and increasingly abusing prescription drugs to get high," says Director of National Drug Control Policy John P. Walters. "They should also be aware that suppliers of these drugs might not be sinister characters on the street corner, but are more likely close friends or relatives. Too many young people see popping pills as a painless high."

Using isn't abusing

For many parents, the facts and figures only serve to bolster their belief that teens will be teens...and, as such, it's better that they do what they will do anyway under their parents' watchful eyes.

"There are a few basic mantras these parents have," says "Joan" a Hartford area mom who prefers to remain anonymous and asked that her name be changed. "They say things like: 'We did it and we're fine...it's just experimentation...I'd rather they do it at home than somewhere else...at least we take their car keys away.' It's a form of denial."

It's also misguided, says Moritsugu.

"Too many Americans consider underage drinking a rite of passage to adulthood. Research shows that young people who start drinking before the age of 15 are five times more likely to have alcohol-related problems later in life," says the acting Surgeon General.

Of course, not all teens will develop into substance abusers.

“Most kids do get over this at a certain point in their lives n but not all. So, basically, those who allow this to go on in their home are playing Russian roulette with their kid’s life,” says Joan, whose teenager was an accomplished athlete and a top-notch student until the teen’s life was overtaken by substance abuse.

The fact that abusers suffer from a disease with identifiable dysfunctions and users don’t doesn’t mean that use should be tolerated or taken lightly, says Dr. Yifrah Kaminer, a professor of psychiatry in the Department of Psychiatry & Alcohol Research Center at the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington. “Kids should not use drugs because bad things happen when they do. It’s not because they’re going to become alcoholics or drug addicts n that’s not the case. It happens to very few kids and it’s usually those who have some genetic load. But most cases of morbidity and mortality are associated with use and not with abuse. These are preventable deaths,” says Kaminer, who notes that underage drinking often plays a key role in the top three teen “killers” n car accidents, homicides and suicides n and can also lead to drownings, violence and aggression, unprotected sex, date rape, and other risky and problematic behaviors.

Now, research also indicates that underage drinking can cause permanent and irreversible damage to the adolescent brain, which continues to develop until at least the early 20s. According to the Institute for Public Strategies, even short-term or moderate drinking impairs learning and memory far more among youth than adults, and adolescents need to drink only half as much as adults to suffer the same negative effects.

The fact that the adolescent brain is still in a developmental stage also supports the need for more n not less n parental oversight and input into the choices their teens make, says Kaminer.

“The area of the brain called the pre-frontal cortex is particularly behind in its development compared to adults over 25 years of age,” he explains. “This area is responsible for regulation of inhibitory behaviors n it’s like the breaking system in a car that is not in great shape. That is why youth have difficulty balancing and regulating emotions, relationships, risk-taking behaviors, and responsible decisions -- e. g., drug use, driving, sexual behavior, aggression, suicidal behavior. Some do better than others. Nevertheless, they are all at risk for being impulsive....and they need more guidance and support than think they need and want to accept.”

Do parents get it?

Many parents are concerned with the mountain of research and repeated warnings about the ills of teen drinking and drug use. But not all. Besides, say the experts, parents tend to dramatically underestimate underage drinking generally, and their own children’s drinking in particular.

When Joan tracked down her teen at a “house party” late one Saturday night and found the child reeking of beer, she called the parents of the teen who had driven her child there, for fear the teen might get behind the wheel while under the influence.

The boy’s mother picked up her son and promptly sent Joan an irate e-mail.

According to Joan, the email said: “My son was not drinking. Yes, he smelled like a brewery, but it was because people had spilled beer on him. In the future, I’d ask you not to call me at night.”

In this case, of course, the parent didn’t actually provide her teen with alcohol. Nonetheless, this kind of laissez-faire parental attitude toward drug and alcohol use may explain why, according to a study by the American Medical Association, two out of three teens say it is easy to get alcohol from their homes without their parents’ knowledge; one third say it is easy to obtain alcohol from their own consenting

parents; two out of five say it is easy to get alcohol from a friend's parents; nearly one in four say their own parents have supplied them with alcohol; and one in four has attended a party where minors were drinking in front of parents.

Here at home, the Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking reports that 61 percent of the state's youth say they drink at "house parties," and 77 percent of high school students report obtaining alcohol at home, 30 percent with parental permission.

Curiously, while less than one in 10 parents of teens says they allow their teen and his/her friends to drink with supervision, twice as many teens report attending a party where alcohol was provided by someone else's parents.

Not a good idea, says Kaminer.

"Parents who think they can have control over teens' drinking and drug use are misleading themselves," says Kaminer. "How will these parents 'supervise' unwarranted aggression, sexual encounters" and other negative behaviors that often result from teen drinking and drug use?

Besides, he says, these parents "are exposing other kids who may not have intended to drink or use drugs to drugs and alcohol."

Kaminer is not alone in his thinking.

"Saying 'it's alright to do it in my house' or 'I did it when I was a kid' is a shallow excuse," says Rabbi Howard Herman of the Farmington Valley Jewish Center-Emek Shalom in Simsbury, who serves as Jewish chaplain at the Veterans Administration medical centers in Newington and West Haven where he leads groups in the hospital's substance abuse treatment programs.

"First and foremost, it shows your child a flagrant disregard for the law. It's not the message you want to be sending to your child. Just because you did it and survived doesn't make it better."

And then, there is always the teen with the potential to become a substance abuser to worry about.

"Substance abuse is a disease with biological/psychological/social causes," says Rabbi Richard Eisenberg of B'nai Jacob in Woodbridge, who recently completed studies toward a degree in drug counseling and will soon leave his pulpit to begin clinical training with the goal of opening a private practice. "Thus, if you provide a social environment for this person to drink or do drugs, you are contributing to the disease. If someone has the potential to abuse alcohol, the idea of starting them early and under your own auspices is absurd."

Sidestepping responsibility

One recent night in early spring, the captain of a Hall High School sports team in West Hartford was caught at a teen house party where alcohol was being consumed. In keeping with the town's "zero tolerance" policy, even though, reportedly, the teen was not drinking, he forfeited his spot on the team for the remainder of the season and lost the opportunity to serve as team captain then and anytime in the future.

Soon the e-mails between parents began flying fast and furious.

Is it fair to require that only athletes live up to these standards and not, say, band members, the parents of athletes opined in unison. Is the zero tolerance policy overkill? Is it true the boy wasn't even drinking?

Soon, the school's athletic director was invited to address an open forum hosted by the PTO board.

The upshot, according to PTO President Lisa Feigenbaum, was the formation of a committee to examine the zero tolerance policy and explore possible alternatives.

There was no discussion, it seems, of how parents might help curb the kind of alcohol-infused house parties that led to the incident to begin with.

"Parents are barking up the wrong tree," says Kaminer. "The issue is that drinking should not be tolerated. It doesn't matter if you like or don't like the school's rules. I would like to see parents gang up on alcohol and drug use, which has become an epidemic at our high schools. I know it's difficult to control, but that's the issue every parent needs to deal with."

"Ganging up" might consist of turning in those hosting house parties n but few parents seem willing to take that step.

When parents were summoned by police to pick up their teens from a West Hartford house party where it was suspected that alcohol and drugs were being consumed one recent Friday night, one arriving parent walked up to a police officer and gratefully thanked him for being there.

"We've all known what's going on in this house for ages and it needs to be stopped," the woman, who requested anonymity, reports telling the officer.

But until that night, no one n including that grateful parent n made the call to police, despite the fact that West Hartford, like many other Connecticut towns, has an anonymous tip line for just such purpose.

"I am surprised and frustrated that parents say they know all the people throwing the parties and all the kids who are selling the drugs, but no one is willing to give up the names," says Hall High guidance counselor Steve Boyle. "They should at least make it known to authorities what is going on."

Absolutely, says Rabbi Yitzchok Adler of Beth David Synagogue in West Hartford. But to keep kids safe, parents might also try an additional tactic: Just say no.

"Often, kids are making decisions that kids should not be making. If enough parents put restrictions on their children it begins to have a ripple effect," says Adler, who has been called upon several times to help families with substance abuse issues.

To do that, he says, parents need to stop transferring responsibility.

"Things that used to be addressed at home are now being addressed by schools, or being outsourced by parents to other agencies. Sportsmanship is taught in Little League, sex education is taught in school, etc. The ultimate responsibility for children rests with parents."

### Taking back the streets

The point is not that parents are the problem, says Kaminer, but that they are an integral and essential part of the solution.

"We need to reclaim our kids," he says. "Parents are resorting to 'let's try to limit the problem' or 'let's try to contain it.' But they can't limit it and they cannot contain it."

Instead, says Kaminer, parents need to establish expectations and set limits n and the sooner the better, because by the time a child reaches adolescence change is difficult.

“When you change the rules, especially with adolescents, they are going to test you until they realize that you are serious. Adolescents, on the one hand, rely a lot on their parents, and, on the other hand, want to be independent. They are stuck in this interplay. So parents need to be consistent and clear about what they do and how they do it,” says Kaminer.

And keep communication open.

“Constantly talk to your child about the inherent dangers of any kind of abuse or excess n whether it’s drugs and alcohol, or gambling, sex, food, etc.,” says Herman. “And find out where your kids are going. There’s nothing wrong with calling another parent and saying I understand my child is going to be at a party at your house, are you going to be home...and will you be a presence at the party.”

Parents also have to do their “due diligence,” says Boyle.

“It’s amazing to me how few parents know their children’s friends and their parents. Kids have cell phones and computers...parents don’t know where they’re calling you from or who they’re talking with. So there’s a feeling of ‘my kid is fine.’ Parents have to make the effort to know the homes that their kids are spending time at.”

Herman also cautions parents to watch for teens who exhibit signs of an addictive personality.

“You have to at least keep in the back of your mind that there may be some sort of genetic predisposition that will lead the teen to substance abuse or dependence.”

Linking arms to take action

“If we could promise parents that if they kept their teens away from alcohol and drugs their kids would get another 100 points on their SATs, let me tell you, we would have tons of people on board,” remarks Nancy Korobkin, a Greenwich mom who serves as chair of the Greenwich Coalition to Combat Underage Drinking (GCCUD).

Korobkin, of course, can’t make that promise n and that makes it all the more difficult to entice parents to join in the discussion broached by her group.

“It’s a hot topic that gets to the core of people’s value systems,” she says. “If you engage people in a discussion of parenting skills there is the potential to sound judgmental and preachy. So we have to be clear about our message. And our message is keeping our kids safe. It’s not about how you parent your kids. It’s about safety.”

Despite its uphill battle, GCCUD presses on, spreading its message by hosting speakers for both adults and teen groups, disseminating bumper stickers, and sponsoring a teen peer-on-peer advocacy group that operates as a club out of Greenwich High School. The teen group plans alcohol-free events and recently developed a card that offers discounts at local shops to teens who sign off on two “baseline” tenets: that drinking alcohol is risky behavior and that drinking under 21 is illegal.

“We’re not only concerned with our kids getting through high school, because a lot of kids get through high school, but when these kids go on to college you really have to make sure that they have a value system in place.”

Founded four years ago, Korobkin’s group got its start when the local police department received a grant for a program to combat teen substance abuse.

When the programs the police developed proved too law enforcement oriented to be effective, parents suggested using the grant for a parent-driven coalition partnering with different town agencies, including the police.

The notion of communal institutions joining forces with parents appears to be an idea whose time has come. Community of Concern, a national network of partnerships that bring together parents, students, schools and other organizations for the purpose of keeping young people alcohol, tobacco and drug free, now exist in many high schools all across the country.

“If as a school we could fix the problem, we would,” says Boyle. “That’s why the school is so supportive of the Community of Concern. We know we have to work together with parents and community members to come up with strategies to keep our kids safe.”

Adler, who is considering making the topic of teen substance abuse a mandatory one for bar and bat mitzvah families, recognizes a communal imperative.

“We can’t raise a child in a family vacuum,” he says. “This is a contemporary problem that crosses ethnic and economic boundaries. We need to be willing to forge interfaith and inter-socio-economic partnerships to seek solutions.”

Comments? Email [judiejacobson@jewishledger.com](mailto:judiejacobson@jewishledger.com)