

## Linking Health to Learning: How to Help Teens Have a Safe Prom

Most of us have not given any thought to prom since we were in high school. But if you are a junior or senior at Essex High School, or the parent of one, you know that Prom is going to be held on May 24<sup>th</sup> this year. This is a big night for many students. A lot of planning, and often a LOT of money, go towards making this a memorable night. There are also a lot of potential dangers facing teens on prom night. Drinking, drugs, and sex may negatively affect the fun they had planned.

There are some practical, straightforward, and easy steps that parents and teens can take to help ensure a safe – and fun – prom that will always be a great memory. Teens who report regular, open communication with their parents about important issues say they are more likely to try to live up to their parents' expectations and less likely to drink, use drugs, or engage in early sexual behavior. Here are some tips that will help parents keep their teens safe on Prom Night (some of these tips are from **Mothers Against Drunk Driving** *Tips for a Safe Prom Night*):

**Discuss rules for the prom: your own rules, the school rules, and the consequences for violating the rules.** Talk with your teen to agree on rules and consequences together, but remember – you're the parent/s, so decide in advance what the bottom line is (leaving some room for negotiation) and stick to it. This is a special night, but it will be a great night if they follow common-sense rules to keep themselves safe. There is a balance here to giving your (almost) adult child room to talk with you to come to an agreement on this without giving in on limits that you know will help protect them.

**Ask questions and gather information.** Find out your teen's agenda for the evening. Be sure to know who their date is and meet them in advance if you can. Get as many phone numbers as possible – your teen's cell phone number (or their date's – loan them yours for the evening if they don't have one), and the home phone number (make sure it is a land line and not a cell) of where they will be if they are going to an after prom party. Call that parent in advance of prom night to double check that they are hosting a party and will be there to monitor it. Make a point to call this number at least once during the post-prom party to ensure that your child is where they said they would be. Remember, calling to check in on your teen is not only reassuring for you, but gives them an important reminder – you care enough to stay awake and call, and they have a reason to be where they said they would (they can't very well ditch a party at a friend's house after prom to do something else that might be risky, because they know you'll be calling the house). Know the home phone number of at least one other parent of your teen's date or friends going to the prom with them.

**Discuss the evening's curfew and what acceptable after-curfew possibilities there might be (an alcohol- and drug-free post-prom party, inviting friends back home to spend the night under your supervision, etc.).** Remind your teen that you must know where they will be after prom in advance. Leaving them room to decide at prom where they will go after is too much room for making an impromptu decision that may turn out to be a bad one. Do not rent hotel rooms for prom-goers. Stay up until your teen returns home (rent some good movies, invite friends over for a dinner party and games – what ever will help you stay awake!).

**Know who is driving.** If a teen is riding in a limo, the parent should be involved in checking out the company's policy on allowing alcohol in the vehicle. On prom night when the limo arrives, a parent should be the first person in the limo to check out what had been stocked in the beverage containers inside the limo and also to speak with the limo driver about the expectations involving alcohol for the evening. Expect and encourage seat belt use.

**Make sure your teen knows that they can call you anytime if they need a ride or help – no questions asked.** You can talk about it later when everyone is calm, but that night, just get them and bring them home if they call. They need to know they won't get in trouble if they make the right choice in a risky situation and call you (even if a bad choice got them there).

Another strategy to help guide your conversation with your teen is to talk about signing a parent-teen contract. There are several different versions available on-line. The idea is that the parent and teen sit down and agree to certain guidelines and actions. For example, the teen agrees not to drink, use drugs, or drive with anyone who has. The parents agree to be available to pick them up if they call with no questions asked, not to drive under the influence, and not to ride with anyone else who is impaired. One example is available online through **Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD)** at <http://www.sadd.org/contract.htm>. Another set of guidelines can be found at [http://www.washington.edu/admin/hr/benefits/forms/worklife/teens/contract\\_with\\_notes.pdf](http://www.washington.edu/admin/hr/benefits/forms/worklife/teens/contract_with_notes.pdf).

Some juniors and seniors at Essex High School, along with a group of very dedicated parents, have planned an After Prom Party, to be held at the Essex Cinemas. Lots of fun activities are planned, and if this year's turnout is anything like it's been in past years, around 200 prom-goers will come, making this the place to go after the Prom! For more information on the EHS After Prom Party, contact Helen Murdock at [hmurd@aol.com](mailto:hmurd@aol.com).