

schoolies' week: information for parents

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Schoolies Week: information for parents

Although 'Schoolies Week' (or 'Leavers Week' as it is known in WA), in its current form, has only been around for a comparatively short time, students have long celebrated the end of their high school experience in one way or another. In the past it may have involved a weekend camping trip with a few classmates, or be as simple as having a big night out with close friends but the idea is always the same – celebrate a major life achievement with your peers.

Schoolies Week, as it has become known, has become a major event and, as a result, receives a great deal of media attention. Every year reporters will venture to Schoolies Week destinations to try to capture the most sensational footage they possibly can. Without fail they usually manage to find some young people who agree to be interviewed on national television and talk about their alcohol (or even better, drug)-fuelled week at Schoolies, thus reinforcing many parent's belief that it is an event that is out of control and one without any merit.

It has also become a highly commercialised event, with promoters making a large amount of money organising travel and accommodation for Schoolies. Students are bombarded with promotional material at an earlier and earlier age telling them that they need to book early to ensure their place and this can put great pressure on parents who are often not prepared for the 'Schoolies Week conversation'.

Should you try to stop them from attending Schoolies?

It is important to remember that trying to prevent your son or daughter from attending this type of event could damage the relationship you have with them.

Young people attending Schoolies are not in their early teens, they are usually very close to the legal drinking age or in some cases, have just turned 18 years of age. That is where many of the problems lie. If they have recently had their eighteenth birthday that can often mean that they want to celebrate in a big way and

as a result, their younger friends get carried along in the undertow. Young people wanting to attend these events are at the age where they are going to have to make decisions on their own and trying to prevent them from doing so is not recommended.

Regardless of that, you are still the parent and you are still allowed to voice your concerns about what they are doing and the potential risks they may encounter. That part of being a parent is never going to stop and you wouldn't be doing your job if you didn't do it.

So what can you do before they book their holiday?

In recent years there has been growing social pressure on young people to attend these events. Some students in Year 10 are already discussing their plans for Schoolies Week and many have already booked and paid for their holiday by the end of the first term in Year 11. Friendships may change in the next 12 months, and others may decide that they simply do not want to go anymore. This can create great problems – bonds have been paid – and as a result, the pressure on young people to attend, even if they don't really want to, can be very real.

Make sure they really want to go and that they do not feel pressured to do something they are uncomfortable with. Let them know that if they want an 'out' they can use you as the 'bad guy'. In addition, many parents are now offering an alternative to their child. Some of the more creative options that have been used include a 'mother-daughter' weekend away shopping, a down payment for a car and a family trip to Disneyland.

Have a discussion with your son or daughter about the destination they are considering booking. There are growing numbers of young people who are choosing to travel overseas to celebrate Schoolies. Some parents believe that this may be a safer option due to the negative media coverage that places like the Gold Coast have received over the years, particularly in

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regards to violence. Some young people who choose places like Bali and Fiji do so to avoid the restrictions that exist in Australia, particularly around underage drinking. Make sure your child knows that travelling overseas to 'party hard' entails great risks and the decision to choose these destinations should be made carefully.

If your child is not 18 years old when they travel to Schoolies, there are a range of issues to consider. As has already been discussed, there are growing numbers of underage Schoolies who are going overseas to avoid Australian laws around underage drinking. If they are planning to travel within Australia they need to know the laws that exist in the state or territory they are visiting and how their drinking alcohol can affect them and the people they are travelling with (i.e., issues around 'secondary supply').

Most importantly you need to know who they are planning to travel with and who they will be staying with. This needs to be done in a non-judgemental way. If you are not comfortable with one or more of the friends, you should certainly express your concerns, but criticising peers that are important to them is certainly not going to be received well. Make clear why you are concerned but they are young adults – it is their decision.

Most young people are not able to pay for their Schoolies Week experience themselves. If parents simply do not feel comfortable about their child's travel plans they may choose not to cover the costs. This is always an option but it is a difficult one for any parent to make.

What do you do once they have booked?

Often bookings are made more than 12 months before Schoolies Week takes place. Instead of leaving preparations to the last minute, parents can take some basic steps to help ease their mind about the upcoming event.

Firstly, get to know who they are travelling and staying with. Hopefully, for most parents, this won't be an issue as they will already know their teen's friends. If you don't, or your child has decided to travel with a new group, it will be important for you to at least meet as many of them as possible. These are the young people that your child will need to depend on if

something goes wrong when they are away, they need to be aware that you can be contacted anytime and that they can do that without judgement. Even if you don't necessarily like the friends, any effort made here will pay dividends should something happen when they are away.

You can guarantee that your child knows what party is on and what the weather is like at the destination they have chosen but that is not going to give you any peace of mind while they are away. Make sure you do your homework about the place they are travelling to – find out what type of accommodation they are staying in and exactly where it is located. This is important as if there is a tragedy and you are concerned for your child, you will instantly know much more about where they are and their situation, e.g., if there has been a fire in a high-rise hotel and you know your child is staying in a two storey apartment building, your anxiety levels will be not be as great.

There are many young people who change their mind regarding their travel plans. As money has been paid to reserve their place and will not be refunded they often feel guilty about their change of heart. In addition, if one person pulls out of the booking, the remaining teens have to pay more to cover the costs. The pressure to travel can be immense. Make sure your child is aware that if they choose not to travel that they have your full support and that the money is not important.

What should you do before they leave?

Choose a good time, take a moment and sit down with your child and talk through the concerns you have. Then after you have finished, give them the opportunity to let you know how they intend to deal with the potential problems you have raised. What many parents discover during conversations like this is that we have a generation of young people to be proud of, with many of them doing their very best to look after themselves and their friends. Young people of today definitely don't know it all, but they do try to reduce the risk of something going wrong the best way they can.

Always remember to end any conversation like this by letting your child know that they can call you at any time and you will be there for them.

It may be a good idea to run through the checklist below with your teen to help ensure that they really are aware of what they are getting into. Some of them may sound a little strange ('Do you know where you are staying?'), but if one person has been organising the trip, it is not unusual for others to have no idea of accommodation details.

	YES	NO
Do you know where you are staying?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you know who you are staying with?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you have any under 18s staying with you?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you know how you are getting there?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you know how you are getting back?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you know whose name is on the accommodation contract?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you know what the contract says about alcohol use?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you know what the contract says about parties and noise?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you organised travel insurance?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If you are going to an 'official' Schoolies' Week event, do you know how to get accredited and get a wristband to attend events?		

If your son or daughter is planning to go overseas to celebrate Schoolies, consider the following questions:

Do you know the legal drinking age in that country?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you registered with DFAT to let them know you are travelling to another country?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have you organised travel insurance?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Most importantly, every conversation with your child involving Schoolies Week celebrations needs to end with a reinforcement of the message that you can be called at anytime and you will be there. It doesn't matter what they have done, you love them unconditionally and you will be there for them. There may be consequences, but that's down the track, all that's important is that they are safe and you love them.

Make sure an 'Emergency Plan' has been put together, or at least discussed

No matter what age you are, things can go wrong when you travel and it is important to plan ahead. Although most of the warnings we give Schoolies are around drinking, drugs and partying, there are so many other things that could go wrong when you are travelling overseas. A simple accident, such as falling over and cutting your arm, or falling off a motorbike can become a major incident in a foreign country.

The only thing that Schoolies will be thinking about is 'having a good time'. The way their brains work means that they understand that risks exist but, put simply, they're not going to happen to them. It is important that an 'emergency plan' is put together, just in case.

This plan, preferably written, with copies kept with both the young people, family at home and maybe even one of the others travelling with them, should include the following

- travel and accommodation details, including the address and phone numbers of where they are staying
- contact details (mobile number and email address) of at least one of the friends they are travelling with
- ensure that at least one person they are travelling with has the contact details of family members
- ensure that at least one person they are travelling with is aware of any medical conditions that may be important
- details of travel insurance policy

In addition, if your son or daughter is travelling overseas, the emergency plan should also include:

- the emergency services number for that country, if they have one. If they don't, try to find the contact details for an English-speaking hospital in the area they are staying
- the **24-hour Consular Emergency Centre** in Canberra number – **+61 2 6261 3305**

A positive note to end on ...

One of the best things about all the attention is that the promoters of Schoolies' events have been forced to 'up the ante' in terms of organisation and must now do their very best to provide a safe environment as possible for the young people attending their event. You only have to do a search on the internet and type in 'Schoolies' and you will find a range of sites that are dedicated to provide information to young people and their parents about the events and how to keep as safe as possible.

For all the hype and the media sensationalism, the vast majority of Schoolies travel to the destination of their choice and celebrate reasonably responsibly. No media outlet is going to be interested in running a story on a group of Schoolies who travel to the Gold Coast and have one or two drinks and then go to bed at 1am in the morning! It's always the outrageous ones that are going to attract attention – but that doesn't mean that everyone is like that!

All parents want is for their teen to come home safely. Although many Schoolies are 18 and now legally an adult, they are still your child. Keeping a positive dialogue happening throughout the whole Schoolies' process, highlighting the potential risks and providing ways of reducing these without being judgemental, is most probably the best way to begin the next stage of your parent-child relationship.