

Hosting a teenage party

Hosting a party for teenagers is a huge responsibility. You want those attending to have fun but, at the same time, it is your responsibility to provide a safe environment for that to take place. Things can go wrong. It is important to consider all the possible risks and put things into place to ensure the safety of not only your guests and your family, but also your neighbours and the wider community. The greater the planning, the more likely it is that things will run smoothly.

There are four key stages to hosting a party that need to be considered:

- **review your responsibilities as the host**

- **decide what type of party you are going to host**
- **plan the party**
- **run the party – the set-up and on the night**

It is important that **you involve your child in all stages of the planning, as well as the actual hosting of the party**. This not only provides a great opportunity for you to strengthen your relationship with your child, but also helps them be more aware of the time and effort it takes to help ensure the night runs smoothly.

Teenage parties provide young people with valuable opportunities to develop a range of social skills they need to relate effectively with their peers. In recent years, fewer parents are prepared to host these events, in part due to media stories of teenage parties ‘gone wrong’. It is important to remember, however, that that is not the norm. In fact, hundreds of parties are held every weekend that run smoothly with few, if any, significant problems.

Certainly, things can go wrong, particularly when alcohol is involved. Some parties and gatherings do get out of control and tragedies do occur. With that in mind, there are a range of issues that a parent thinking about holding a party for their teenage child needs to consider.

Hosting a party can be a great opportunity for you to strengthen your relationship with your child, get to know their friends and become more involved in their life. As such, it is important that **you involve your child in all stages of hosting the party**. As much as it is important to have your child’s input to ensure a successful event, it is also helpful for them to be aware of all the planning and hard work that needs to be done to ensure that the night runs smoothly. They are then much more likely to appreciate the efforts that have been made by all involved and work co-operatively to resolve challenging issues. As much as your child will benefit from the socializing aspect of attending a party with their friends, they will also learn a great deal by helping to organize an event.

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Review your responsibilities as the host

As the parent of a teenager having a party you are legally considered the ‘host’ of the party. As such, it is important that you are aware of your legal obligations in this area. As the host you have a ‘duty of care’ to provide a safe environment and if something goes wrong at the party and there is evidence that you did not take sufficient care to prevent it, you could be held liable and prosecuted or sued.

Some of the issues that should be considered include:

- **what are the laws around underage drinking and parties in your state?** These laws vary across the country, although most jurisdictions now have ‘secondary supply’ laws in place
- **find out about acceptable noise levels and whether limits apply at certain times**
- **contact your insurer and find out whether your policy covers a party held at your home.**

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Some of the things you may want to find out include what is excluded and who is covered under the policy, e.g., are the guest covered?

As well as being important in its own right, registering your party with the local police also provides a valuable opportunity to discuss any questions you may have in this area with an officer.

Decide what type of party you are going to host

Once you are aware of your responsibilities as a host and have discussed these with your child, it is time to decide what type of event it will be. As the adult, the decision on what happens on the night is ultimately yours, but if you can agree on some key points, the night is going to run far more smoothly. Your teen will almost certainly have a long list of demands outlining what they believe makes a successful evening. Start the discussion by getting them to tell you all the things they want and negotiate from there. Together you will need to make many decisions about a wide range of issues, including the provision of alcohol.

Make it clear to them what your 'non-negotiables' are, i.e., those areas where there will be no compromise, but ensure them that you're willing to listen and work with them when it comes to everything else. Try to make sure you don't have too many 'non-negotiables' – if you find that you do, it's most probably not the time for you to be hosting a teenage party!

Some of the decisions that should be made include the following:

- **how many guests will be invited?** Young people today expect far larger parties than in the past, with many parents now hosting events with 100 or more invitees. When thinking about the size of the party consider your budget, where it is being held and, most importantly, the amount of help (and potentially security) you will need to manage it
- **who will be invited?** This is a key question and one that many parents do not ask and are then surprised on the night when 18- and 19-year-old partners of 16-year-old invitees turn up at the door. What social group does your teen want to invite? Will it be a 'plus one' party where invitees can bring a partner or will it be restricted to only people your child knows?

- **when will it start and finish?**
- **will alcohol be allowed (if there are over 18s attending) or 'tolerated' (if not) and who will serve it if it is?** If you do make the decision to serve alcohol, how are you going to deal with the issue of your underage guests, remembering the potential legal issues around providing alcohol to minors? If a parent contacts you to ask you about alcohol are you prepared to defend your decision? Does your child understand the risks involved? Is there going to be a 'free-for-all', i.e., will it be BYO, allowing guests to get their own alcohol whenever they want or will there be someone serving alcohol, monitoring how much people are drinking?

Most 'successful' parties, particularly for those aged 15-16 years, that do not experience significant issues are those where a decision has been made not to serve alcohol to those attending and not to tolerate any alcohol being brought into the event. Once that decision has been made and the young person has understood and accepted it, the night is usually successful and runs without incident. It is also important to remember that those whose only intent is to get as drunk as possible and cause trouble usually have no interest in attending those gatherings where they know alcohol rules will be policed.

Plan the party

Once you have successfully negotiated an agreement about what type of party you are hosting, it is time to plan the event, once again in consultation with your teen. Things to think through include the following:

- **how will information be communicated to invited guests and their parents about the party?** Will invitations be distributed electronically or will printed copies be made? If electronic, will it be via email or social media more generally? What information will be included on the invitation? Will RSVPs be collected?
- **how will you be supervising and do you have enough adults to assist you? Will you need to hire security?** As a rough guide, the suggested ratio around appropriate supervision is at least one adult to ten guests
- **what food will be available?** Food is incredibly important, particularly if alcohol is going to be served. It slows down the amount of alcohol

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people drink but be careful about having too much salty food which could make people thirstier and then likely to drink more. Your child is more likely to know what food is 'socially acceptable' to their peer group and will be of great assistance here

- **will you be providing any entertainment?**
- **how will the party be set-up?**
- **how will the guests be getting home and what time will the party be finishing?** Unbelievably, this is one aspect of a hosting a teenage party that many parents forget about. It is undoubtedly one of the most difficult to police but it needs to be discussed with your child so that they understand the huge responsibility you have taken on. There is no way that you can know how every guest is going to get home, but if something happens to any of them when they leave your home, particularly if they have been drinking, you would never forgive yourself. Stress the importance of having a strict finishing time for the party and advertise that time widely. This will help to ensure that as many parents as possible are made aware that after that time their children will be asked to leave your home. Hopefully this will reduce the number of teens spilling out onto the street unsupervised and into the parks and other public spaces in your local area after the party has finished
- **what will you do in an emergency?** Parents who host the most well-planned parties can still find themselves trying to handle an emergency of some description. This does not have to be related to alcohol – when a group of people get together, no matter what their age, things can go wrong. Who will be the contact person whose responsibility it will be should something go wrong? Who will make the list of emergency numbers and where will it be kept? Discuss with your teenager the necessity to register your party with the local police and why it is so important. When you do register your party, make sure you do it together so that they can see and understand the process

Run the party – the set-up and on the night

As with any party it will be necessary for you to set-up during the day. This will involve decorating and laying out the venue, as well as ensuring that any equipment that needs to be used through the night is checked. If you are planning on holding the event at your home, there are some additional things you should consider:

- **lock any side fences or gates** – you want to limit the number of access points there are to the party to just one, i.e., the front door, or wherever you have made the entrance. Talk to your neighbours about locking or at least blocking access to their back gardens for the night as well – that may help to reduce any issues that they may experience
- **if possible, lock doors to areas of the house that you do not want accessed** – if there are no locks, use furniture to block access
- **limit the amount of furniture in accessible areas** – there should be seating made available for guests but it is best to use garden furniture (if you don't have enough of your own, borrow or hire some). Host parents often find their furniture damaged, even after the most sedate party
- **remove valuables from areas where guests do have access**
- **ensure that electronic devices such as iPads, smartphones and computers are put away and are not left out, even in areas where guests do not have access**
- **check garden for any hazards that guests could trip over, e.g. hoses, gardening equipment**
- **if you have a pool, check that fencing is locked and secure** – if you are allowing guests to swim, make sure you have a responsible adult in the pool area at all times
- **put your car in the garage and secure it** – if you don't have a lock-up garage or you have more cars than garage-space, drop your car off at a nearby neighbour's house
- **secure your pets or take them somewhere else for the night**
- **make a visit to as many of your neighbours as possible reminding them about the party** – ensure that they have your mobile number so that if they have any concerns through the night, they can call you

Although some of these measures seem extreme, it is better to be safe than sorry. The vast majority of young people would never consider stealing from parents hosting a party, however, uninvited guests do make their way into these events and, as a result, valuable property can sometimes be stolen.

As the host, you are an important role model. As such, it would be wise to not drink alcohol yourself. Not only does it set a good example for

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those attending, it also ensures that you can deal effectively with any incidents that may occur through the night. Make sure you have your mobile on you at all times, ensuring that you can call for assistance should you need it, or your family or neighbours can get in contact with you.

Some of the things that need to be watched through the night include:

- **in addition to employed security or other adult, ensure you always have someone on the door or entrance area to the party that knows many of the invited guests** – the beginning of the party this should be your son or daughter, but as the night progresses, this job should be handed over to one of their close friends who is able to provide advice
- **make yourself available to any parent who wants to meet you when they drop off their child**
- **actively supervise** – if you told other parents that you would be ‘supervising’ the event, make sure that’s what you do. This is not about being intrusive and ruining your child’s life – let your teen know beforehand how you plan to supervise and stick to that – they’ll certainly let you know if you’re stepping over the line!
- **check toilets regularly to ensure that they are working properly and are fully stocked**
- **watch for signs of intoxication and act accordingly**
- **ensure that food is always available**
- **be mindful of noise levels** – not just the music but also around guests arriving and leaving
- **stick to the stated finishing time** – if you said the party was finishing at 11.00pm, it needs to be well and truly finished by that time. Music goes off and someone stands at the door watching the guests as they leave – hopefully being picked up by their parents and not simply walking off down the road

There are three additional issues that may need your attention on the night. All should be thought through carefully beforehand and discussed with your teen as your decision on how to deal with these issues may impact on them. They are as follows:

- **how will you handle gatecrashers?**
Gatecrashers are now a fact of life at teenage parties, particularly if you are providing or tolerating alcohol. In the age of social media,

mobile phones and texting it doesn’t take long for the word to get out that there is a party happening and that it is the place to be. Will you be handing out invitations or will you simply have a guest list? Will you be hiring security to manage the party or do you have a couple of burly relatives that can handle a difficult situation? What responsibility will your teenager have in looking after the door, particularly considering that they are more likely to know who was invited and who wasn’t?

- **if you decide on an alcohol-free party, how will you handle guests who turn up with alcohol?** Your child will undoubtedly not want to be embarrassed by one of their parents taking alcohol off their friends if they arrive with a bottle. If a decision to make a party alcohol-free is made then a solution to this sort of problem needs to be negotiated carefully beforehand. Simply turning a guest away from the party is not a good option. You do not know whether the young person has been dropped off at your home by their parent and how they’re getting home – maybe they are returning in a few hours. Sending them off into the night with a bottle of something is irresponsible and dangerous. Discuss this with your teenager and see if you can come up with some ideas for dealing with this problem together.
- **how will you handle guests who arrive at the party intoxicated?**

There is no handbook on how to be the perfect parent, you can only do the best you can do at the time. The same is true when it comes to holding an incident-free teenage party. There are guidelines that you can follow, some of which have been outlined. Without doubt the best thing you can do to reduce risk is to make the event alcohol-free. If a parent believes that this is not an option for their child at their stage of development, they need to make sure they take every precaution to make the party as safe as possible for all concerned.