



Collective wisdom for fostering a healthy social life in our teenagers.

The following collective wisdom was compiled by a pilot gathering of parents of secondary students who came together to discuss approaches to fostering a healthy social life in teenage school years.

In the group there was **a very strong consensus on a number of issues:**

- The boys and girls need regular opportunities to mix, and so make friends, with their own age.
- The parents in each family need to be able to judge what is right for their own son or daughter at his or her stage of development, therefore social activities are best not organised “en masse”.
- Natural social experiences that link friends and families, rather than larger, contrived, one-off, social experiences are better.
- Home should be the preferred venue for social life and social activities.
- Families with children from Year 2 onwards do well to give ongoing priority to frequent get-togethers with other families with boys and girls their own children’s ages. Our aim is to ensure that the children grow into adolescence knowing and having mixed often with many boys and girls their own age in a most natural way.

The group spent some time discussing **the trend in society to indulge ourselves and our children** and saw this as a major obstacle to effective parenting of teenagers. The consensus was that it can sneak under our parenting guard if we are not careful.

Some manifestations of this indulgent culture can be:

- giving children and teenagers too much money to spend;
- allowing virtually unrestricted access to phones, chatlines, etc;
- allowing to develop patterns of social activities that lack moderation (frequent movies or nights out, late returns, etc) and which are probably not in the best interests of the young people involved;
- allowing too much latitude and then having to come down too hard, thus risking alienating children, etc.

The group saw the need to help young people think much more creatively in their social life so they do not fall back constantly on parties and movies (which, of course, can bring their own problems).

There is a need to foster a much wider range of social activities.

With respect to **parties**, the group stressed the following practices, asking all families to “hold the line” on these guidelines:

- Keep the scale small: numbers capped at around 20. Small parties also put less peer pressure on class members to go, making it easier for parents to have greater management of what is best for their own son.
- We need to watch the frequency of parties. When possible keep parties to holidays. Prefer smaller numbers and a “vertical” (families getting together) approach. The essential thing is to avoid successive parties for the same children within a short span of time. It is interesting that some of the bigger independent schools issue their own guidelines on parties. One recommends parties be held only in holidays, another no more than once a month... we are not alone on this.
- In pre-teen years parents do well to avoid creating precedents of large parties, of sleep overs, of excessive frequency of parties, of parties in the weeks prior to exams, etc.
- Prefer a natural and inclusive family approach whenever possible... invite families and their children.

The group suggested **input to parents** on the following themes would be helpful:

- To younger parents to help them lay effective and natural foundations for the social life of their children when those children are younger.
- To parents in Years 7 and 8, to consolidate the Year 6 Key Parent Function theme “Laying the foundations for a Healthy Social Life”.

As we need to help parents teach their teenagers to be masters of themselves, to be *self possessed*, **an important aim for parents is to talk deeply with their teenage and pre teenage children**, explaining:

- there was agreement that our young people need to understand the good reasons, before it becomes an emotionally charged issue, for not pairing off in mid teen years. The aim of social life cannot simply be to find one girlfriend/boyfriend, but rather to know lots of boys and girls their own age.
- about how emotions, passions, and attachments can “turn on” with frequent meeting, with physical contact or with one-on-one situations;
- what behaviour and interaction is proper and what is improper in friendships between boys and girls (be specific);
- how certain uninhibited social venues and behaviours make it much harder for a person to maintain self possession... raves, some discos and clubs particularly because the behaviour of others there sets a poor tone, etc;
- realities of how sexual relationships are meant to be bonding for life and therefore why it is wrong to cross this line without the lifelong commitment of marriage;
- why excessive alcohol, or any marijuana, ecstasy tablets, or amphetamines are bad news, and how these can affect a person in a social setting.

It was seen as important to raise these issues before emotions are involved.

The **class parents** asked that the school to publicize these agreed guidelines and undertook themselves to talk them up so that parents in each year group work together, and have consistent approaches for the benefit of their children. They observed that all parents in a given year group need to make a real effort to be “in the loop” as parents with little contact with their fellow parents are at a distinct disadvantage in fostering a positive social life for their children.