

Families need to talk about alcohol

Cindy Crebbin/CNS

Parents need to give firm guidelines, send clear messages and keep the dialogue open on alcohol abuse instead of trying to be their teenager's friend, according to school administrators in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

Don Sisler, principal of St. Catherine High School in Racine, Wis., noted that the school, in an effort to promote awareness of drug and alcohol abuse, recently developed a pledge for parents to sign regarding alcohol use at parties.

The 30 to 40 percent of the parents at the 500-student school that signed the pledge agreed not to allow parties in their home when they are away, nor, if they host a party, allow alcohol to be consumed at their home. They also agree to set a definite starting and ending time for such events.

"A main part of the pledge is to get more vehicles so kids and parents can discuss" teen drinking, said Sisler, adding that it also is a catalyst to encourage parents to discuss the issue among themselves.

"Many parents feel powerless in facing pressures from society to allow alcohol at special events," he said.

He said that "some well-intentioned parents," believing their child will drink anyway, would rather have them do it in what they feel is "a controlled situation" where they would not have the need to drive while intoxicated.

Yet, "the problem I see is the situation inherently is out of control," he said. "We just hope people would be more pro-active and realize it's against the law and they're taking a



huge responsibility by assuming liability for other kids."

While agreeing with those who say adults need to model responsible behavior, he stressed that parents also "need to step up and say you don't need to have alcohol at every celebration."

In another effort to deter teens from drinking, St. Catherine's changed the name of its SADD club from "Students Against Drunk Driving" to "Students Against Destructive Decisions." Sisler said the change was made to try to respond to a misunderstanding that having a designated driver "in effect gives permission for a majority of kids to drink to excess."

Brian Van Deun, president of Catholic Memorial High School in Waukesha, Wis., believes some par-

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ents are trying to be pals with their teens rather than parents.

Besides good parents with firm guidelines for teens, Van Deun sees two other types of parents: those who don't have enough information about what parenting is, and those who've given up.

"Sometimes in one instance (parents) can be very good; other times they back down. Kids seeing inconsistencies will try to exploit them," he said.

In 2000, Catholic Memorial created a brochure for parents. Among the guidelines included were the directive that parents should "verify the party will be chaperoned for the

entire time and no alcohol or drugs will be permitted."

For adults hosting a party, rules include: "Guests are not allowed to bring alcohol or drugs to the party. If a teen refuses to cooperate, ask him or her to leave. Be willing to call the police if the unwanted guest refuses."

Van Deun said the school encourages parents to have a signed contract with their children stating that if their teens find themselves in situations where they or their friends are unable to drive they will call their parents for transportation. The parents, by signing the contract, agree to pick them up — no questions asked — with the expectation the issue will be discussed at a later time.

But, he pointed out, "we know policies and programs aren't enough." Policies and programs "won't do anything if we have no support from the family unit," he added.

"I think one key (for parents) is they need to communicate with other parents when their kids are younger. By the time their teens are in high school as juniors and seniors, (teens) may think they're too sophisticated for (parental) rules."

Patrick Farrell, assistant to the president for student life at Catholic Memorial, emphasized the importance of talking with their student children, not preaching at them.

"Although kids may seem they're not listening, they really look to you to bounce questions and thoughts off of you. You have to be secure in your value system and tell them what your feelings are."

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