

A Student's Perspective on Berkeley Teenagers: Drinking and Parties

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I am a senior at Berkeley High [Berkeley, California], and feel like I've experienced most of what there is to experience in the "party scene." To begin with, I applaud your diligence in caring about what's going on with your kids. Way too many of my friends' parents seemingly couldn't care less where their kids are on the weekends. First of all, let me lend credence to the idea that most parties have alcohol as a major part of the activities: It is not an exaggeration to say that ninety-five percent (or more) of the parties I've attended since ninth grade have included alcohol-related activities.

While the average teen may seem outgoing, my observation is that this average persona is (if you will allow a generalization) more of a mask, a facade, than anything else. Especially in the younger grades, (and I'm talking from recent experience as well as from observation,) no matter how secure teens seem in themselves, there does exist some twinge of self-doubt, and in order to validate a healthy "self-image," teens must search externally and find validation in the world. We do not, at that point in our development, trust our own impulses, our own value-systems and beliefs, enough to securely combat social pressures and norms. That, combined with the fact that Berkeley High is a huge, relatively impersonal institution, leads to parties that have no real core of similar-interest; as someone already mentioned, parties are generally open-invitation--in other words, anyone who hears about them is welcome to show up. So here you've got this group of kids who don't really know each other very well, who are insecure about who they are, what they think and believe, and everyone wants to be cool and say the right things and act the right way. That's a lot of pressure. So it's easy to turn to drugs and alcohol. They act as "social catalysts," making pleasant interaction possible where it previously would have been prohibitively uncomfortable. This has been my observation.

Just to give you a picture of the amount of people who imbibe, if you will: I'd say that out of all my many different friends at BHS, from many different social groups, different races, both sexes, etc., I would be hard-pressed to find ten people who don't drink. And I really do mean hard-pressed. Virtually everyone at Berkeley High drinks--it's a known fact (among the student body), and one that I gather is not expressed to parents all that frequently. There are the notable exceptions, but those are far and few between.

Parties generally evolve from a relatively small group of somewhat sober kids, to a mob of many drunk and high people, held together namely by the token bond of false social comfort. There's no easy solution. If your child is an upperclassman, chances are they do drink. The "cool" kids on the steps drink. So do the jocks, and the chess players. So do the "nerds" staying in at lunch to do math. (Please excuse all the gross categorizations and generalizations, but I'm trying to paint a picture.) There's virtually no group "immune".

I'm not going to try to tell you what to do, how to parent, because you are surely better equipped than I am to hypothesize on parental methods. I just want to give you the picture, to validate the rumors, to say that yes, there is a major problem that could benefit from intervention. Being a senior, (yes, I know, still a baby to all of you,) I oftentimes look back at my high school career, and for the first time I can see things with a clear perspective. I certainly don't drink now, nor do I feel the need to. But back then, there was this incredibly strong urge to do so, I felt compelled not quite by "peer pressure," but by the need to find some common means of communication, and these catalysts make that communication possible.

As for parents being present during parties: I've been to some parties where parents are present, but generally the parents just don't care about drinking/drugs. (If they did, their kids most likely wouldn't have had the party in the first place, for risk of being thought of as "uncool," etc.) I've been to plenty of parties where parents just go upstairs or downstairs, and just "ignore" what's going on. And then I've been to parties where the parents actually "participate," come outside and talk to all of the drunk kids, take pictures, etc. I've been to parties where the parents actually provide the illicit substances; just a month or so ago I went to a party where the parents were home, and the host (kid) went down into the basement where her parents grow all their pot, and just used all of that for the party. This is Berkeley, folks. You've got to expect a lot of parents, post-hippies or the like, to smoke pot. And how in the world can you expect a kid to stay away from something that's not only considered cool and trendy, and feels good, but also is validated by the action of his/her parents? So as for checking whether parents will be home or not--I'm not sure that's such an effective method for making sure your kid's going to be all right. I'm sure you already know this, but parents can be just as irresponsible as kids sometimes, and oftentimes the irresponsibility of "authority figures" is much more damaging, much more influential, than that of peers.

This letter's already pretty long, but I'd like to cover a few more things, so I'll try to cover them briefly.

Driving: While I realize that the news I'm bringing isn't all that cheerful, I can say that drinking and driving following BHS parties (in my experience) has been much less than one might expect. While the actual parties themselves are hugely irresponsible and relatively dangerous endeavors, we teens seem to have caught on to the fact that "drinking + driving = death". Generally speaking, designated drivers are appointed, and on the chance that the night ends with no sober drivers, people generally find other ways of getting home. (BHS students seem much more responsible in this regard than do many of the prep-school students around the East Bay; once again, this is only my experience talking, and I'm sure exclusions abound.)

Hard drugs: While they are sometimes present, they are much less of an issue, in my experience, than are alcohol and marijuana. I've seen some psychedelics around (psychedelic mushrooms, LSD, etc.), but have only heard of (and never seen) people using cocaine/crack/heroine/amphetamines/etc.

Sex: In a word, Yes. Sex does happen at parties, although the actual deed (spelled out: intercourse) is less frequent than random pairings who make out quite passionately (which is notably juxtaposed with the lack of any kind of emotional passion between the average given pair). Take alcohol and other drugs, and mix in raging hormones, and you're bound to get some sexual situations that occur in the moment, and are regretted later on.

Enough said. I wrote this all really quickly as a response to what I've heard from you all, I hope it's helpful in some manner or fashion. Life is so much better without drugs and alcohol. It's brighter and clearer and more alive. I just wish that so many people didn't have to find that out for themselves through harsh and harmful experiences. If you have the ability to help your kid out, to help them skip these foreseen pitfalls--I would recommend that with all my heart. While a few years ago I might have said, "Let kids alone, what we're doing is not so bad, let us make our own decisions and form our own beliefs from OUR OWN EXPERIENCES," now I have taken on quite a different perspective. Although teens may project an image of mature self-sufficiency, I know from experience, and from observation of my peers, that this is somewhat of a fallacy. Don't be fooled. Keep up the good work in trying to protect your kids. If more parents took a stance, fought for the well-being of their kids, than perhaps this situation, coined the "Party scene", (but actually is more accurately described as the predominant and pervasive social scene,) could be made into a much more beneficial scene, one that actually contributes to the healthy development of the person through this formative stage of our lives, not to the detriment thereof.

--A Student at Berkeley High School