Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

Schoolies/Leavers' week: What parents can do to keep their teenager safe



Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year: Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Drugs (General)

Tags: schoolies, leavers, coasties, school finishers, parties

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Key Messages

- Have a conversation about schoolies before your teenager leaves for their trip and maintain communication while they are away.
- Talk about the effects of alcohol and other drugs and the risks involved.
- Make sure your teen is aware of the law in the location they will be celebrating, particularly around issues such as underage drinking and drug possession.

Set up strong foundations

In the months leading up to schoolies/leavers week, arrange time to spend with your teenager, or together as a family. A close relationship between teen and parent reduces the chance that your child will misuse alcohol. Taking an active role in their lives, especially as they are experiencing change and transitioning to life after school, will encourage them to communicate openly with you.

Start the conversation

Start a conversation about schoolies/leavers and being safe. Think of the best way to talk about this with your child. Staying calm, not lecturing and avoiding conflict can give you a better chance of having a productive talk. See Talking to a young person about alcohol and other drugs for some strategies and advice.

Talk to your teenager about the key reasons why they want to attend schoolies celebrations. For example, these might include spending time with friends, meeting new people or exercising their independence now they have finished school. Discuss some of the activities your teenager might be planning to do while they are away, and encourage them to think of some alcohol-free activities that are aligned with their reasons for attending schoolies. It's also important to ask about any concerns your teenager might have about the celebrations and talk through these concerns with them.

When talking about schoolies/leavers you might want to include the following topics:

Alcohol and Other Drugs

Talk to your teenager about the harms related to alcohol and other drug use. Discuss the possible short-term effects of intoxication, such as aggression and violence, unwanted sexual activity and poor decision-making abilities, which can lead to risk-taking and injury.

You could also talk about the longer-term effects of drinking, including the effects on the brain, which is still developing in adolescence. The video,Under Construction: Alcohol and the teenage brain, may help you or your teenager understand this better.

Remind your teenager that there are ways to drink responsibly and help reduce the risk of harm. Ask them to:

- eat a decent meal before they start drinking. A meal rich in carbohydrates, such as bread, pasta or pizza can help slow down the rate their body absorbs alcohol, lessening intoxication
- never drive or get in a car with a driver who has been drinking
- stay with their friends and don't wander off alone
- don't get involved in activities like swimming, riding a bike and other physical sports
- avoid confrontation and fights
- be wary of drink spiking and always keep their drink with them. If they think their drink or a friend's drink has been spiked they should call an ambulance.
- know how to put friends in the recovery position. This can save lives if a friend is vomiting or unconscious and they need to wait for help to arrive.

Remind your teenager that Australian ambulance officers will not call the police unless they feel there is a risk to their physical safety, someone has been assaulted or someone has died. Teenagers should not delay calling an ambulance because they are afraid of getting into trouble with police.

Providing alcohol for your adolescent to take to schoolies is not recommended. This conveys a positive attitude to alcohol, which increases the likelihood of teenagers starting to use alcohol at an earlier age, as well as having higher levels of alcohol use.

The law

Make sure your teenager is aware of the law that applies in the state/territory or country they will be celebrating in. In Australia, some important reminders for your teenager (and yourself) include:

- If your teen will be driving at schoolies, make sure they are aware that even the next morning they may still have alcohol in their system.
- If your teenager is 18 and buys alcohol for underage friends, this could result in a hefty fine (in some states over $10 000)
- If you supply alcohol for your underage teenager and they will not be responsibly supervised, this is illegal. Penalties in some states can be over $10 000.

If your teenager is heading interstate or overseas, it is important they understand that different laws and penalties may apply around drinking in a public place, underage drinking and drunk and disorderly behaviour. If your teenager is travelling overseas, we recommend reading Smart Traveller's important Schoolies advice ontheir website.

It's also important that your teenager is aware of the rules and regulations of their accommodation provider. Schoolies accommodation often involves an expensive bond deposit, and friendship groups should come to an agreement about keeping their accommodation clean and what will happen if the property is damaged.

Peer pressure

Remind your teenager that it's OK to say no to things they don't want to do. It can be hard to be assertive sometimes, particularly in a group of friends. Positive Choices' factsheet, Making Choices, has tips on being assertive and how teenagers can handle situations in which they might feel pressured to drink alcohol or take drugs.

You may want to remind your teen that although it is sometimes portrayed differently, most young people do not use illicit drugs, and an increasing number of teens are abstaining from alcohol use. See our factsheet how many young people in Australia use alcohol or other drugs.

It can also help to discuss 'ways out' with your child. For example, if your child is not having a good time at schoolies, let them know you don't mind being the "bad parent" asking them to come home if they feel the need to save face in front of their friends.

Sexual peer pressure
It's also very important your teenager understands issues relating to consent and safe sex. Remind your teenager that:

- If they are being pressured to have sex they have the right to say no
- They also cannot pressure someone else to have sex with them
- Intoxication leads to poor decision-making and increased risk-taking, and your teenager should not make decisions about these issues when they are intoxicated. Ask them to think about their boundaries before they leave for schoolies, as well as how they will avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections if they are planning to have sex.

Remind your teenager that real romantic relationships last well beyond schoolies, and young people should not feel the need to rush any relationships with someone they have just met.

Queensland Government has a useful information page for your teenager about sex and relationships.

Safety concerns

Below is a checklist of general safety items to cover before your child travels to their schoolies celebrations.

- Know which friends your child will be travelling with and ask for their contact details.
- Know where your child will be staying and get the phone number at their accommodation.
- Get in touch with your child's friends' parents and exchange contact details. If you can't reach your teenager while they are away, another parent might be able to contact their child and pass on information.
- Recommend your teen make a back-up plan for nights out. This might include planning somewhere to meet their friends if they get separated, knowing the address of their accommodation and what services they can contact to help them if they have any problems. Ask each member of the friendship group to designate someone to call if something happens to them (e.g. a parents or older sibling).
- Remind your teenager to stay part of a group and not wander off alone. If they want to go home, ask a friend or two to walk with them. Alternatively, services such asRed Frogs have volunteers at major schoolies destinations who can walk them home. If they do leave the group, remind your teenager to let someone know where they are going.
- Ask your teenager to read up and get some information before they go on Schoolies/Leavers week. Websites such asSchoolies QLD Government, or Red Frogs' Info for School Leavers have a lot of information and many tips for your teenager. Asking your teen to do their own research suggests you trust them and are handing them more responsibility.

Support your teenager while they are away

- Maintain communication with your teenager while they are away. Arrange a time to speak to them or text every now and then throughout the week. Early afternoon can often be a good time to talk.
- Remind them they can always contact you, for whatever reason, and keep your mobile phone close to you during the week.

After voicing your concerns about schoolies, give your teenager a chance to talk about how they plan to deal with the concerns you've raised. You may find that they have thought about these issues themselves and have sensible plans to keep themselves and their friends safe.

The information in this factsheet is to help you and your child prepare for what to do when things go wrong. However, many young people who attend schoolies celebrations have an enjoyable and safe time with their friends where nothing goes wrong.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney, the National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, and Dr Catherine Quinn at the University of Queensland.

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