

FAMILY

Beach week behavior

Senior rite of passage tests teens and parents



File Photo

Each year, thousands of teens flock to the coasts for Beach Week. While most enjoy the sun and sand, a few make poor decisions when faced with the temptations of alcohol, drugs and sex.

By Susan Nienow
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Just the thought of beach week is enough to light up the eyes of a teenager and send parents scrambling for the answer to dealing with this one.

Teens see sun, sand and fun when they think about attending beach week. Parents see the reality: thousands of teenagers who are on their own for the first time, facing the temptations of alcohol, drugs and sex.

Experts stress that before a teen goes to beach week, both parents and teens should be informed about personal liability, alcohol laws and how alcohol and other substances affect behavior.

While teens might need a safe place to stay during beach week, parents should be aware that whoever signs the lease is exposing themselves to "one of the most vulnerable contractual decisions a parent can make. Renting a condo or house opens you up to incredible liability," said Wayne Frith, executive director of SAFE (Substance Abuse Free Environment), a nonprofit community coalition that addresses alcohol and drug issues in Chesterfield.

Then, there's the issue of maturity and responsibility. Only parents can decide if their teen is ready to handle the freedoms of beach week.

"The specter of sending thousands of young people into a social situation, [and adding] a drug that depresses the ability to make good decisions sounds like a recipe for disaster," said Frith.

Lots of kids go to beach week and don't have any problems. But those prone to risk-taking are put into situations with no boundaries.

A common parental argument is that the teen will be going to college soon and will have to cope with those decisions on campus. Frith counters that in college there are people looking out for the students - places they or their friends can go for help. At beach week, no one is in charge.

Chesterfield County recently presented a workshop for parents and teens called the

Legalities and Realities of Beach Week. It was sponsored by the Regional Drug-Free Alliance, the county's police and health departments, the School Health Advisory Board and SAFE. Hanover and Henrico counties also hold workshops to educate parents and teens about beach week.

"We're caught between telling them [young people] 'just say no' and to make intelligent decisions," said Linda Hancock, Ph.D., a speaker at the workshop. Hancock is a nurse practitioner at Virginia Commonwealth University's Student Health Center and a researcher on social norms. When kids drink, "judgment goes, and there is a cascade of events," she said.

Most teens are pretty health conscious, but there is almost "a sense of entitlement to get drunk at certain times," said Hancock. "Drunks lose the ability to get the warning signs."

Frith recommends that if teens go to beach week, they talk with their parents in advance about making good decisions, stay in groups with people they know and trust, and be aware of the consequences of underage drinking. In Virginia, it is a Class 1 misdemeanor with a fine of up to \$2,500 and a maximum of a year in jail.

A topic few parents discuss with their teens is the risk of sexual assault if their teen engages in the risky behavior of drinking in an unsupervised situation. Rohypnol and GHB, the date rape drugs, can be added to non-alcoholic drinks as well as alcoholic beverages.

Russell Grandersan, a Chesterfield school resource officer, recommends that going to beach week be a parental decision. He pointed out that Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina have similar laws and reciprocal laws concerning underage drinking and the suspension of drivers' licenses.

He added that if a teen is 18 years old and caught with alcohol while he is with a 17-year-old friend, he can be charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Grandersan observed that at events, such as beach week, law enforcement is increased to deal with the crowds.

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