



SADD Op-Ed:

Running for Cover

Scarsdale High School's homecoming scramble

By Stephen G. Wallace

Duck and cover, the defensive drill deployed of late by everyone from corporate CEOs to entertainers and athletes, has found its way to Westchester County, New York, where some moms and dads of teens recently busted for bad behavior seem to be seeking asylum from parenthood. According to the New York Times, here's how the drama unfolded:

- **Act One:** Nearly 200 Scarsdale High School students, some as young as 14, show up for a homecoming dance intoxicated, apparent victims of overzealous servers at a succession of house parties along the way. Five such students require medical attention (stomach pumping) and transport to a local hospital. Others merely vomit in the principal's wastebasket and pass out on his floor. [It almost makes Animal House's Bluto Blutarsky's shenanigans in the office of Dean Wormer look tame.]
- **Act Two:** School officials call a halt to the festivities, summon parents (one sends the housekeeper) and dole out the punishment, including 27 three-day suspensions. [Yup, three days.]
- **Act Three:** Some parents contact the principal to request immunity for their offspring, lest a (more than generous) consequence dampen the enthusiasm of a college admissions counselor. Others apparently solicit advice on how to enforce their own rules. [Huh?]

And so it goes in one well-heeled American suburb. A surprise? Hardly. As one Scarsdale senior told me the other day, "It's pretty simple ... kids drink."

Indeed, adolescent drinking and drug use are well documented. A soon-to-be-released *Teens Today* report from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) and Liberty Mutual Group reveals that by 12th grade more than three in four teens are drinking and almost half report using drugs. And Scarsdale seems to fit the geographic and socioeconomic profile detailed by Columbia University Professor Suniya Luthar in her research detailing the pressures, and subsequent substance abuse, experienced by many teens in affluent Northeast communities.

What is surprising is the reaction, if not the complicity, of a lot of parents in times like these. At best, they don't know. At worst, they don't care.

Many of the adults surveyed in earlier *Teens Today* research seemed unaware of the prevalence of adolescent alcohol and drug use, while more than half said they believe that drinking by high-schoolers is "just part of growing up" and that their teens will drink "no matter what." Frankly, they're wrong.

Parents have – or can have – a significant impact on adolescent decision-making. But as Geraldine Greene, executive director of the Scarsdale Family Counseling Service, points out, that takes time. And time is money, as the saying goes. Is it worth the investment? Let's take a look.

- Young people who report regular, open and honest communication with their parents regarding decision-making are much less likely to drink, use drugs or have sex (*Teens Today*).
- Teenagers with "absentee" parents are four times more likely to abuse substances than are children in highly structured, "hands on" homes (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse).



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- Children who have dinner with their parents five nights a week are far more likely to avoid smoking, drinking, violence, suicide and drugs (White House Conference on Teens).

Time aside, adults who advocate a "get out of jail free" response to teenage indiscretion miss important opportunities to teach right from wrong and deny children the important lessons of responsibility, accountability and consequence. The result in Scarsdale: "Nobody is taking this seriously," according to a first-year student.

No doubt, many well-meaning parents have difficulty summoning up the courage to confront such hard-to-talk-about subjects as alcohol and drug use. Let's face it: it's easier to remain blissfully unaware. (Only about half of the Scarsdale High School parents even bothered to show up for a community meeting to address the aftermath.) But not engaging children in meaningful dialogue about critical issues, through commission or omission, enables poor decision-making and destructive behaviors.

And no doubt other parents fear being labeled hypocrites ... because they either drank then or drink now. Neither behavior is necessarily a relevant factor in the equation, but it could be. As the Scarsdale senior bluntly explained, "Parents need to look at themselves and see what kind of example they are setting. For any solution to come, both parents and kids need to be willing to give up something and talk to each other more about it or the problem will just continue to get worse." While there are important differences between adult and adolescent alcohol consumption, he may have a point. Parents can't have it both ways. But someone's got to step up to the plate.

So, how about a trade? Kids for parents. Let's lock up the adults and see how long the house parties last. Providing alcohol to minors is a crime. So, too, should be watching TV upstairs while kids party below. After all, what gives the parents of one child the right to determine for the parents of another child the appropriateness – or acceptability – of illegal, and often dangerous behavior?

Greene is right to make the case that underage drinking is an adult failure. But it is a failure of youth as well. And Scarsdale students are right to decry being held out by the media as aberrational. They are not. They're the norm, and so are their parents. Changing those standards will require the sustained effort of caring kids and responsible adults because, truth be told, we're all in this together.

Scarsdale is as good a place as any to start. Maybe better.

Stephen Wallace is the national chairman/chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. He has extensive experience working with youth as a school psychologist, camp director, and public speaker in addition to his many years with SADD. SADD sponsors school-based education and prevention programs. Toll-free: 877-SADD-INC. For more information on the SADD/Liberty Mutual *Teens Today* research, visit www.saddonline.com or www.libertymutualinsurance.com.

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