

## Seaman Speaks on Campus Life, Binging and Excess

BY PAMELA AWAD

As we collide with different stages of our children's lives, the information we need to know changes. Barrett Seaman, former Time Magazine correspondent, journalist and author of *Binge: Campus Life in an Age of Disconnection and Excess*, spoke at the PIA Spring Lecture Benefit Breakfast on April 20, giving parents the information they need to help their children navigate safe passage through the college years. Gray haired and suitably attired, Mr. Seaman addressed the audience at the University Club with gravitas, belied only somewhat by his "Where's Waldo" tie.

A graduate of Hamilton College, Seaman revisited his alma mater and eleven other colleges over the course of 18 months, living in campus dormitories and acquiring a first hand feel for college life today. He found students to be overextended, isolated by technology, absorbed in drinking, spending too little time studying, involved in casual relationships that often led to 'hooking up,' and, in combination with alcohol and other wrong choices, engaged in sexual experimentation with sometimes tragic consequences. All told, he found college life today to be filled with "a lot of scary things."

Seaman found some aspects of college life vastly improved. Technology has facilitated the learning experience with lap top computer dockets, smart boards and teleconferencing. State of the art fitness centers, apartment style dormitories and increasingly sophisticated teaching facilities have contributed to an enriched living and learning experience. Students have a greater commitment to community service. The wealth of subjects and array of course opportunities have increased dramatically and the food is better too. Seaman marvels at "the wonder of it all" but argues these changes exemplify an "excessiveness," which raises the intensity of college life on a spectrum that begins with intensity and increases to stress and anxiety, resulting in a rise of depression and suicide.

The statistics are alarming. In 1995 less than 5% of incoming freshman at Duke University were on anti-depressants; by 2003 that number had increased to 25%. The spate of suicides at Cornell and NYU has been well documented. While no one knows the reasons why, Seaman theorizes that as life becomes more compartmentalized for this generation the demands are greater and pressures more intense. He quotes the Department Head of Psychiatry at McGill University: "Students think of themselves as products or packages, and if there is some flaw in the packaging the whole thing falls apart; they have an all or nothing sense of themselves." Parents are as invested in the college process as their children.

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When confronted by a senior tutor regarding the psychological instability of their son (a Harvard freshman), the parents refused to have their child withdraw, reportedly saying, "We are not taking our son out of Harvard, we have worked too hard to get this far." Once on campus, drinking practices such as "pre-gaming" (doing shots before a party or event) contribute to social pressure. Binging may be a result of these pressures. Alcohol is used to self medicate when the intensity and anxiety inherent in an atmosphere of excess becomes too great.

Drinking is a complicated issue and binging, coupled with hooking up, a recipe for disaster. Seaman found hospitalizations for alcohol detox to be routine on virtually every campus he visited. In 2003, Dartmouth reported 200 hospitalizations; Middlebury, 100 (out of a total population of 1200); and Harvard, 45 hospitalizations in the months of October and November alone. He considers the 21-year-old drinking age part of the problem, alcohol being the only legal

## SEAMAN ON CAMPUS LIFE CONTINUED

barrier separating 18, 19, 20 and 21 year olds. College begets a separation between adults and young people precisely at the moment they need guidance and as a result, they learn to drink from one another. Hooking up is ubiquitous and has replaced traditional dating partly to avoid the “baggage of relationships.” When combined with alcohol, hooking up can lead to date rape. While colleges have worked hard to warn students about the dangers of date rape, students can find themselves in situations fueled by excess, with disastrous consequences.

**Increased oversight has prevented young people from learning how to make their own decisions.**

Seaman also feels college oversight of student affairs has become excessive. The growth in staff at student affairs offices has resulted in a proliferation of RA’s and activity directors. In his view, this increased oversight has prevented young people from learning how to make their own decisions. One Dartmouth student affairs professional described her office saying: “We don’t drive the student affairs experiences, we’re just guardrails.” Seaman wonders if perhaps the guardrails are so effective they inhibit learning how to drive. Ultimately he believes the increased level of oversight is designed to be a distraction for students, a way of keeping them busy and out of trouble. He cited the almost 600 student activities that exist at UVA and Duke and described his amazement at the 100 plus students engaged in pottery on a Friday night at UW at Madison. And lest we forget helicopter parents, they too contribute to the atmosphere of excess and are seldom out of touch, even from a distance of 2,500 miles.

There are troubling disconnections on college campuses and these, too, are related to excess. Innovations in communications technology have allowed students to converse without speaking. Texting, bbm’s and IM’s have caused students’ communication skills to atrophy, leaving them less

able to read non-verbal cues. Seaman says, “This generation is not that good at arguing out something face to face, they haven’t learned to read people’s faces.” He finds it extraordinary that schools like Berkeley have “peer facilitators” available to arbitrate disputes among roommates and friends. We now have an “institutionalized way of dealing with conflict.” Colleges, he says, have failed to exploit the great strides made in attracting an increasingly diverse student body; they have wasted resources and increased the disconnection among students to the degree that minority students have become protected groups. At Dartmouth there is a separate dean for Latino, African American, and gay and lesbian students who, like minorities in other schools, live in silo-like “affinity” dorms. The number of resources available to alleviate these students’ unease has made interaction with mainstream white students less compelling. With less interaction there has been little learning from diversity. One Duke senior described multiculturalism as “this culture here and this culture here and this culture here.”

The development of athletic centers to facilitate the recruitment and training of athletes has led to a further disconnect. Student athletes can live a completely different life from other students on campus, isolated by training, practices and state of the art facilities built to further their competitive edge. Like minority students they are cocooned from the campus mainstream. But Seaman finds the disconnection between faculty and students the most disconcerting. There is less interaction between professors and undergraduates, faculty is seldom involved in the admissions process and rarely act as undergraduate advisees.

In sum, this atmosphere of excessiveness is increasingly intense and feeds student anxiety. Add this to the fallout from helicopter parenting along with the disengagement inherent in communication technology and you have bingeing, hooking up or a deadly combination of the two: in short, campus life in an age of disconnection and excess.

**SEAMAN ON CAMPUS LIFE CONTINUED**

What is to be done? Seaman offers both solutions and advice. Solutions begin with reinstating Friday classes, thereby reducing the three-day weekend and decreasing available drinking time. The “ubiquitous practice of using student evaluations as part of the tenure ticket” should be abandoned and student opinion should cease affecting teaching strategies. College administrations should concentrate student affairs oversight on incoming freshman classes, academics should then be the driving force. An increased faculty presence among undergraduates would facilitate a smaller student affairs culture and stronger ties between students and faculty.

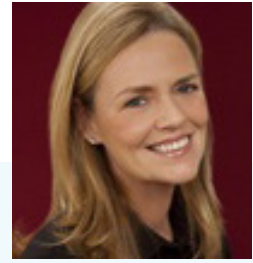
**Treating students like adults will encourage them to behave like adults.**

The drinking age should be lowered, consistent with other indices of majority status, Seaman said. He noted the U.S. is one of at most five countries in the world with a drinking age as high as 21. Treating students like adults will encourage them to behave like adults, indeed they will be less likely to feel unequal to the occasion.

Seaman’s advice for students and parents includes stern warnings. For students: “Don’t do shots and don’t go to bed with someone you don’t know especially if either one of you has been drinking.” He also suggests getting to know one professor well each semester and encourages outreach to those who are of a different color, economic background, religion and nationality. He reminds student athletes: “Your athletic accomplishments will quickly fade into obscurity while your GPA will haunt you.” Above all, he advises students to relax.

Parents, he says, should learn the difference between solving a problem and advising a child on how to solve a problem. He admonishes parents who become actively involved in disputes over grades or disciplinary decisions. He warns parents to recognize any doubts they may have about their child’s ability to “handle the intensity of residential college life” and he champions the benefits of a gap year. While Seaman believes college provides one with some of the most memorable years of life, he says that with “a little bit of moderation, they can be positively memorable.” ●

# PRESIDENT'S Letter



## A Community of Parents

Change is the one constant in our lives and there have been some exciting changes at Parents in Action. As the new president of NYC-Parents in Action, I welcome you all “back to school” and send warmest regards to last year’s president, Mary Beth Harvey, whose unexpected departure to Tokyo with her family has both saddened and inspired us. We wish her and her family great good kouun (fortune).

Like most New York City parents, I juggle several hats. Filling our roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, fathers, sons, brothers, and in many cases, simultaneously managing demanding careers, we often have few hours to devote to volunteer work. After five years with PIA, I have thought long and hard about the work we do, hoping to clarify both why the organization needs my time and exactly who benefits from all those precious hours. Reflecting on the constituency that NYC PIA serves and the continuing relevance of our message, I found myself asking a few key questions: Are we providing information to an already over-served population? Are we creating a need, filling a need, or simply preaching to the choir? Just whom, if anyone, are we helping?

I reached out to a former PIA President and mother of two well-adjusted, grown daughters (evidence she has done something right!) and I confided my worry that parents might grow weary of hearing our message. How much parenting advice can one group absorb? Her response was blunt and to the point: “Talk to a parent of a child who has been caught with alcohol or drugs, kicked out of school, or wrestled with a substance abuse issue,” she told me, “and you will understand that our message will never become stale.”

The constituency we serve is constantly shifting along a continuum that includes those who are “aging out” and those just arriving. Babies become toddlers, become tweens, become adolescents and eventually young adults. You, the parent, ride this trajectory with your child. Each will face the decision of whether to try alcohol, smoke pot, and have sex. Will your

child be able to maneuver successfully through the temptations that surround him or her?

Addiction to drugs and alcohol knows no socio-economic barrier. If anything, access to resources, especially money, may accelerate a child’s experimentation. Ask any 13 year old if kids in her class have tried pot or alcohol and I almost guarantee the answer will be yes. How do we teach our kids to make sound choices — to say no, to walk away? How do we engage them before the crossroads of 13?

NYC-PIA was founded over 30 years ago by a handful of mothers intent on answering that question. Their premise was that simply by talking openly with fellow parents and children about the issues, they could create a safety net for their children. The original core group of six started humbly, with conversations around a dining room table. Over time, more and

**Are we creating a need, filling a need, or simply preaching to the choir? Just whom, if anyone, are we helping?**

more parents were invited into the conversation. Eventually the founders approached schools about hosting such meetings, and after a few years, our ParentTalk sessions were born. If we fast forward from the 70’s to now, many things at NYC PIA have changed, but our core message remains the same: recognize the issues, talk to fellow parents, and engage our children. In other words, “Be Involved, Be Informed, Be Connected.”

Our seminars are attended by scores of parents and our school discussion groups are at an all time high. Have we “saved” anyone? Hard to say, but I am pretty sure our information has been useful, even vital. The answer to my question — whom does NYC-PIA help? — is, simply, “you and me.”

After three decades, our organization continues to serve the community FREE OF CHARGE. We have expanded our mission to include a variety of

**PRESIDENT'S LETTER CONTINUED**

parenting issues and upped the ante when it comes to distributing information. On our Web site, [www.parentsinaction.org](http://www.parentsinaction.org), you will find valuable resources: our new interactive forum, NYC PIA Community blog, invites parents to share personal insights on current topics like puberty, obesity, and the culture of tutoring in our community; and our thrice yearly newsletter features top-notch reporting on our seminars and luncheons.

In this crippled economy, NYC PIA, like many other non-profit groups, is struggling to survive. While the resources we provide are complimentary, the actual cost to our organization is measured in hundreds of volunteer hours and even more real dollars. I hope you will support us with your time and money this year. Our main fundraiser, the Annual Fall Benefit, will be held on October 25th, featuring noted author, pediatrician, mother and New York Times columnist, Perri Klass, M.D., who will provide us with her "Prescriptions for Practical Parenting." We hope you will join us to hear Dr. Klass, a distinct and respected voice in the parenting arena, and support an organization that, through all its changes, is unchanging in its support of YOU. Help us help you!

**LIB GOSS**

# Commentary

FROM FREEDOM INSTITUTE

## Tough Questions and Situations

When it comes to substance abuse, even if you have communicated directly with your teen about your expectations you may still be caught unawares by unanticipated questions or situations where the rules seem blurred, even to you. To help you respond effectively when you encounter that really tough question, or that murky situation, here are some concrete suggestions from our counselors for consistent and effective parental responses.

The following is an excerpt from an upcoming Freedom Institute parent guide, “Stay Connected: Helping Your Teen Navigate Tough Choices: Drugs, Sexuality, So Much More.”

### *When is it okay to allow my teen to go to a party?*

Parties and plans with other kids need to be evaluated on a case by case basis. We do not recommend that teens through 10th grade attend any social function or home where adults are not present or where there is alcohol or other drugs.

- Contact the parents of the party host to be sure they are chaperoning and that they have the same understanding as you, that supervision means being present with the kids during the entire party. Consider offering to chaperone.
- Take into serious consideration the size of the gathering. If there are more people coming than chaperones can adequately monitor, the risk of drug and alcohol use during the party and of people showing up under the influence will increase.
- Drop off and pick up your child from the event at a designated time.
- Supervise a pre-party gathering with one or two of your child’s friends at your house, such as a dinner, to minimize the risk of “pre-gaming”—a popular practice of drinking or smoking before the party.

Freedom Institute, founded by Mona Mansell in 1976, is a resource center for individuals and families affected by alcohol and drug dependence, providing assessment, intervention, treatment and care. In addition, the Institute provides a comprehensive prevention and education program for young people through their work in independent schools.

### *What if my teen asks me, “Why don’t you trust me?”*

Try these responses:

- “I do trust you and I know that you want to make the right choice for you. I don’t trust the situations that young people find themselves in.”
- “Your brain and your friends’ brains are still developing, especially the part of your brain (the pre-frontal cortex) that makes decisions and thinks through to consequences of your choices. So it’s my job to help keep you safe.”
- “Trust is something that develops with time and experience. It is important that I see that you are able to take care of yourself and stick to my expectations over time.”

### *What if my child says to me, “If I don’t experiment now, I’ll ‘go overboard’ in college?”*

“Experiment,” in teen language, translates to “party.” Research shows that if a child/teen begins using substances in middle or upper school, she is more likely to develop a substance abuse problem or become addicted than if she started later. Teens who abuse substances in upper school and have few or even no limits or consequences, are more likely to enter in-patient treatment during their college years. Furthermore, in our experience working with adolescents, we find the majority of teens who drink harmfully in college are more likely to have built an unhealthy tolerance to alcohol through their middle and upper school years.

## TOUGH QUESTIONS CONTINUED

*If I tell my child to call 911 in a drug or alcohol emergency, isn't that sending a mixed message?*

When we educate our teens to call 911, we are not condoning drinking. The expectation and message must still be clear: "We don't want you drinking alcohol at this stage of your life. You'll have plenty of time when you're older if you choose."

That said, adolescents also need to hear: that alcohol at high levels is a toxin, a poison in the body's system; and that one could die from an overdose. Every year, in the classrooms, we hear alcohol-poisoning stories in which teens are afraid to call 911 in life-threatening situations for fear of getting in trouble.

It's important to let your teens know that you support them to act responsibly in social settings: "If you are ever in a situation where someone has passed out from drinking alcohol and is not responding, you should call 911. We would much rather have you and your friends play it safe, get help, and keep someone alive, than have them die from alcohol poisoning."

"You know what our expectations are and yes, we want you to make healthy choices. But if you ever find yourself in a scary/dangerous situation, always call me, even if you think I'll be disappointed. I'll be much more disappointed if you don't call me for help."

In the end, it is helpful for your teen to know that she can always call you in a given situation and you will be there to help. You're not being permissive or a pushover if you express your love and concern when your child is in trouble, even if he has made a bad choice. Your rules and your empathetic response work together. That's what healthy discipline is about. What starts out as a stressful question could turn into a fruitful, timely discussion that both validates your teen's feelings and clearly establishes your expectations. ●

## Strategies for Families:

# Planning for a Successful School Year

BY ALEXANDRA MAYZLER

The beginning of every school year brings great excitement: seeing old pals after a summer apart, buying new supplies for the fresh year, and understanding the expectations and challenges of a new grade. For some students, September brings an opportunity to continue building on a stellar academic record, while for others, it provides a clean slate to improve in subjects that have been difficult in the past. For all students, a new school year ushers in the next step in learning, and with both the anxiety and excitement that brings, students and families

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often forget to take practical, preparatory steps to set and meet goals, and enjoy a successful year. Hopeful promises that “this year will be different” and optimistic expectations of “straight As,” are no substitute for careful planning. When the initial September energy wears off, students find themselves confused about how to accomplish their goals, and parents are at a loss about how to help. Here are some strategies for starting off the academic year prepared and motivated to meet goals:

### 1. Be clear about your expectations.

Children aspire to be like their role models and the first ones they look to are their parents. As a parent, your child’s academic success is a top priority. Your expectations may stem not only from your hopes for your child, but also from family history and values—values that will be the underpinning for your child’s goals for herself. Communicate expectations clearly: when a parent is unclear about expectations, a child may come to her own conclusion about what the

parent expects. Many children set goals that they think will please their parents, without understanding how to achieve them. Help your child learn to strategize. Offer suggestions, and be clear in your purpose so that your child understands why you recommend a particular strategy—such as finding her passion—or why you direct her to a particular resource, such as a book or article. In addition, offer clear reasons for your advice. For example, when you ask your child to check over her paper more closely, her response might be a heavy sigh and an eye roll. Explain that she may have lost points on papers in the past due to grammar mistakes, and you don’t want her hard work to be jeopardized by errors that can easily be fixed. In explaining your reasoning, you let your child see that you are being helpful, not judgmental.

### 2. Practice positive, consistent communication.

Sometimes your communication is clear, while at other times it seems you and your child are speaking different languages. Often you may feel that you have set clear and reachable goals but your child is not responding. Consider when, how often and in what manner you’ve communicated. Did you discuss goals directly and specifically? How did you react to a not-so-good grade? Children respond best when expectations are communicated BEFORE there are additional pressures of exams, papers, or bad grades; otherwise the same expectations may be heard as a form of criticism. Be proactive: give your child something to work toward instead of something to untangle himself

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Alexandra Mayzler’s major areas of interest are learning processes and the development of study skills to encourage critical thinking and academic success. Alexandra is the author of *Tutor in a Book*, a study skills manual for students, parents, and teachers, and is the director of Thinking Caps, in New York. She spends her free time thinking about how to make studying easier, more interesting, and above all, enjoyable for her students.



**A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL YEAR CONTINUED**

from. Use a positive starting point from which he can move toward his goal, drawing attention to strengths or offering a proactive approach to further improvement. For example, if your child learns best with one-on-one review, suggest that he schedule a weekly meeting with his teacher from the start of school. Anticipate trouble spots, and when bumps in the academic year do occur, set aside a calm time to discuss them with your child.

**3. Set goals together.**

You have a good idea of how well your child is capable of performing and you have your expectations, but your child's aspirations are just as important. Before the school year gets into full swing, sit down together to discuss both, and keep in mind there might be some room for negotiation. For example, if you really think your child can get an A- in algebra, but your child expresses a concern for her test-taking skills in math, keep that concern in mind as you identify the semester's goals. If she wants to overcome her test anxiety, incorporate that goal as part of the learning process for the semester. Don't just jot down a list: encourage your child's full participation by making sure he or she understands why each goal is being set. Does she want to pursue medicine in the future? Remind her that a full understanding of math and science is imperative to a medical career. It helps to keep long-term goals in mind—such as college or career choice—in order to stay motivated.

**4. Schedule regular check-ins.**

Once you and your child have identified goals and expectations for the school year, schedule times to “check in” and see whether, and how, the goals are being met. Don't schedule check-ins only when your child performs badly on a test; rather, establish, at mutually agreed times, a regular time for discussing both strengths and weaknesses. It is important to address accomplishments as well as struggles. There will be times when your child flounders or doesn't perform her best on a particular test, but there will also be moments of great success; both are important. Remember that check-ins, like goals, are designed to motivate, not inhibit, and if you and your child focus only on the negative, it will be harder for him to stay inspired. When you have a concern, address it at a time when the matter is not urgent in order to keep the stress level low and avoid conflict.

As the year unfolds, encourage your child to maintain the excitement she felt in the fall. Model for her the importance of regularly assessing her struggles, acknowledging her strengths and building upon both as she moves forward in her academic career. ●

## ‘Even a Little’ Drug or Alcohol Use Too Dangerous for High School, Speaker Says

BY LISA HUFFINES

“A little” drug or alcohol use in college may not be cause for alarm, but even a little is too risky in high school, according to Jeannette Friedman, the family therapist who spoke at the April 28 Parent Rep Luncheon at St. James Church. Friedman specializes in adolescence, substance abuse and related family and educational challenges and has worked with teens for over 30 years.

For those who attended the Parent Rep Luncheon on teen emotional health in November, Friedman’s thoughts offered something of a contrast. The speakers there, Drs. Jennifer Havens and Robert Feiguine, while in no way condoning teen drug and alcohol use, said limited experimentation is sometimes (though not always) consistent with sound emotional development, given its pervasiveness in teens’ social world.

Friedman would say that’s a dangerous attitude, and her stance could be summarized in these few words: “If you could see what I’ve seen.” Teen substance abuse tears families apart, she said, noting, “If parents knew just how terrible it was, they’d do a lot more to prevent it.” As for the “experimentation is normal” argument, Friedman counseled parents to look askance at this common statement. Nationwide, half of high school students never even try drugs or alcohol. Those who do, she said, drink to get drunk. Don’t be fooled when your teen has one glass of wine with you at dinner; that’s “not how they use” with their peers. Teens do have strong moral codes, so when your son tells you he drinks but would never try drugs he may be sincere. The problem is that these codes change very quickly during adolescence. And virtually all teens who use drugs and alcohol lie about it.

It’s true that only a small percentage of teens will end up dependent or addicted, and physical addiction is rare before age 20. But for many, drug or alcohol use either signals mental health issues that need attention or leads to high-risk behavior. And when it does lead to addiction, the consequences are dire.

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Drugs and alcohol temporarily alleviate symptoms of anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorders. Anxious kids gravitate toward pot, alcohol and heroin, while depressed teens look for amphetamine-like substances that will give them a jolt. Teens with ADHD say they love the way marijuana makes them feel, Friedman said. In fact, studies show that untreated ADHD increases a child’s risk for drug problems. Treatment needn’t include ADHD medication, but it must come from a mental health professional (not a pediatrician).

High school age students are not equipped to handle the risks that come with “a little” drug use because their brains, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, are undeveloped. This lack leads them to try dangerous combinations, like mixing three Ambien with a few Percocets from the medicine cabinet—just to see how it feels. As self-destructive as this appears, the impulse is simple curiosity, Friedman said, and teen brains are simply not equipped for risk-assessment. The same naivete encourages implicit trust in drug dealers. In short, high school age children are simply too young to “experiment” with substance abuse. The myth that it might be useful to “learn how to drink” before the temptations of college is absurd, Friedman said.

**DRUG OR ALCOHOL USE CONTINUED**

The consequences of addiction are more extreme than many parents realize. Over time drugs actually replace the body's natural chemistry and become the brain's sole source of dopamine. Eventually, nothing other than drug use provides any pleasure, which is why drug addicts lose interest in everything except drugs. It takes a long time to restart the brain's natural chemistry, making recovery grueling. Young addicts are particularly challenged because they have not yet "had a life," Friedman said. Chances for successful treatment increase when an addict has interests, commitments and goals to draw him back into normal life. Young addicts tend to have few of these.

**Over time drugs actually replace the body's natural chemistry and become the brain's sole source of dopamine.**

What can parents do? A lot, according to Friedman. She outlined a number of risk factors parents can watch for from earliest childhood, as well as protective factors to nurture and develop. "Personality really plays into this," Friedman said. A parent who is "in tune" with her child and has a good sense of what makes him tick at each stage of his development can do a great deal to steer him away from trouble.

Friedman outlined a number of risk factors, which, though not signals that a child is already using, are strong indications that a child may one day be attracted to drugs or alcohol. It is never too early to address these indicators, many of which can be reduced through parental attention and involvement. They fall into three categories:

**Behavioral Risks**

- Very early experimentation with tobacco or alcohol
- Social awkwardness
- Poor commitment to school culture
- Negative, high-risk peers
- Body modification (tattoos, piercings)
- Peer rejection

**Psychological or Emotional Risks**

- Developmental delays
- Depression, anxiety, other mood disorders
- Oppositional and conduct disorders
- Anger, trauma, sleep problems
- Impulsivity or compulsivity
- ADD/ADHD
- Narcissism/grandiosity
- Thrill-seeking personality

Some of the above are largely out of a parent's control, and some may look like ordinary teen behavior, but that does not mean parents should ignore them. Knowing one's child, and which risk factors are most potent for her, is critical. A very social child will unquestionably encounter more temptation to experiment. A natural thrill-seeker needs safe outlets to take physical risks. Narcissistic or impulsive mindsets—what Friedman called "self-focus and now-focus"—lead to bad behaviors. It's up to parents to nip these attitudes in the bud, starting in early childhood.

Girls are especially vulnerable, Friedman said, for several reasons: they have easier access to drugs and alcohol, because they look older; they are targeted by both older boys and advertisers; substance abuse often accompanies the eating disorders to which many girls fall victim; and, biologically, girls become addicted more quickly than boys.

**Family Risk Factors**

- Family history of addiction
- Family mental illness
- Criminality
- Parents' own use
- Parental tolerance of substance use
- Systemic dysfunction, e.g., secrecy, enabling, executive deficits
- Poor parental attachment
- Abuse (verbal, emotional, sexual or physical)
- Older sibling use
- Overindulgence
- Poor supervision/parental involvement

**DRUG OR ALCOHOL USE CONTINUED**

A family history of addiction presents the question of how much information to share. Friedman generally counsels parents who used drugs or alcohol in their youth to keep this information to themselves, because no matter how it is offered, teens will hear it as an endorsement. Where addiction has been battled or overcome, however, sharing may have a beneficial deterrent effect.

Friedman listed seven “protective factors” that insulate teens from serious substance abuse: intelligence (at least when it isn’t arrogant); an easy temperament; competent and responsive caregivers; social support during childhood; a positive educational experience; and, finally, the two most important factors: attachment security and “maternal reflective function.” This last factor—which can come from a mother, father, or anybody who plays a parental role—is an emotional ability to “get” the child and to give her confidence that she is understood. It is “worth gold,” Friedman said, to a child’s emotional health.

Finally, Friedman took aim at the myth that “sometimes a kid has to hit bottom” before he can get help and get better. This should never justify letting a bad situation slide; rather, it is a parent’s job to set “the bottom.” “In some families it’s a C+!” Friedman said. All kids need to know that there are “some things that cannot happen.” ●

## ***Be Involved, Be Informed, Be Connected!***

If you’d like to be in touch with NYC-Parents in Action, you can reach us at:

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