

Parenting Teens: A Practical Guide to Navigating the Minefields.

A PTSA Parent Education Program Event

By Pat Ravasio, parent.

If you missed Kathleen McShane's discussion about parenting teens at the November 2nd PTSA parent education night, you have some catching up to do. McShane, a former Redwood teacher turned speaker circuit guru, presents some practical, down to earth information about how to help teens avoid the various hazards of the minefields they must traverse in order to reach adulthood.

Kathleen McShane, Ph.D, was formerly known to the Redwood community as Kathy Reinhardt, when she was a human sexuality and peer resource teacher in the late 1990's. She developed innovative district-wide programs to promote social awareness and healthy choices for adolescents, and worked with local health agencies in Marin to develop a master plan for teen wellness services. McShane won a "Marin Teacher of the Year" award for her work, and is now an outspoken leader in teen psychiatry.

McShane's point of view arises from both her academic and clinical background, as well as her hands-on experience with adolescents. She says her most difficult challenge is to fit all the critical information into a 90-minute program. "I want parents to understand what's happening to their child physically, cognitively and emotionally," she said, "And I want to give parents specific strategies for helping them hang on to their parental roles while also letting go where they must."

Long on practical advice and short on sensational headlines, McShane has intimate understanding of what it means to be a young person in Marin County today. "If they're at the top, there's immense pressure to achieve, and if they're not, they need to learn how to cope with that," she said in a phone interview prior to her presentation. "There are also the dangers of the party scene, the competitiveness of athletics, the challenges of dealing with extreme privilege, and the overall precociousness of our community that we all must cope with."

Her advice to parents is pretty straightforward.

"There is never a more important time to keep your head in the game," McShane said. "So many parents are checked out; either gone physically or they just look the other way at issues like the over-the-top party scene in Marin. Parents need to know where their children are, and who's supervising them."

"Parents often 'over attend' to the wrong things," she said. "They never miss one of their child's soccer games, but then they don't make it to the dinner table," she said. (There's that message again, the idea that having regular nightly dinners, and dinnertime conversations with your children is one of the most important things you can do. It's even on the loudspeakers at Safeway these days.)

On the subject of how to cope with the very wealthy upside of life in Marin, she said,

“It’s important to talk to your child about their super wealthy friends, and make sure they know that material possessions do not affect how happy you are.” She suggests “recalibrating what is normal”, and making sure that your kids know that \$5 Jamba Juices and new BMW’s for a 16th birthday are not within the realm of normal life. Then again, she said, “be sure not to demonize people just because they are wealthy”.

About the new varieties of teen sexual behavior we’ve all been reading about? “It’s definitely going on but it’s been overplayed. The activity tends to be one way, with boys on the receiving end,” McShane said. “The girls involved are often those who have a difficult time getting attention from boys in more positive, normal ways.”

Parents should absolutely be discussing this behavior with their children.

What exactly should we say? “It’s important that they know they only get to be young once, and that sexual behavior is an adult behavior with adult consequences,” she explained. “Once you take that step toward sexual activity, you can’t go back, and you give up something special.” It’s so important that teens respect their bodies, and have mutual respect for one another, McShane says.

“Tell your children the truth, that people who were sexually active when they were young almost always regret it, and wish they had waited,” she said. It only makes sense. For romantic relationships to have deep, fulfilling meaning, they simply must be a rare occurrence, not a common one. “Teens need to be told that what is waiting for them now will always be there waiting for them. They need to understand that it is in their own self interest to take care of themselves,” McShane explained.

About marijuana and other drug use? “Cognitive development happens at a later date than was previously thought,” she said. “The best game plan is to stay on top of things to help delay, delay, and delay. Marijuana, alcohol, any substance interferes with capacity of a teen to grow. Those kids who decide they have to use something to help them, for example, to avoid feeling awkward walking into a school dance, may never learn how to do it without the substance.” As far as addiction goes, it’s just as it is with adults; you never know who is going to go too far and who will find their own limits.

“We must help our children develop resilience, and you simply don’t get there by taking the easy way out, either as teens or as parents,” McShane said.

Redwood High School’s PTSA provides speakers like McShane as part of its Parent Education Program, recognizing that parenting today is more complicated and challenging for this generation. McShane’s work recognizes that all parents need some good coaching as we work to “keep our heads in the game”.

For more information on this and other Parent Education Programs, check our website at: www.redwoodptsa.org or the www.redwood.org website and click on the PTSA link. If you have suggestions for programs, contact PTSA Vice President Jeannie Perry.

