

Family Conversation Starters

Making the Most of Gunn & PALY's PARC Survey Results

In October of 2008, students at Palo Alto and Gunn High Schools took part in the Palo Alto Reality Check Survey (PARCS), a new – and unique – survey that examines student attitudes, perceptions and behaviors relating to alcohol and other drug use.

In recent years, students have asked for improved communication with adults around these issues – and, in particular, have asked adults to be better “listeners”. This year’s survey results reveal a number of intriguing findings and present families, schools and students themselves with rich opportunities for meaningful discussion.

The survey sponsors, Palo Alto Drug & Alcohol Community Collaborative (PADACC), have posted a thorough report of survey results on their web site at www.padacc.org and, based on those results, have generated a list of questions to help initiate critical conversations at home, on campus and for the community-at-large. (see below)

Directions:

1. Please log on to www.padacc.org to locate your school’s survey report.
2. It may be helpful to read the first few pages (Key Findings) of the report before addressing the questions below.

Misperceptions About Teens and Their Health

(Questions 7 – 10, ...)

The survey results show that students overestimate the frequency and degree to which their peers are involved in alcohol and drug use. This misperception persisted for all related behaviors – like drinking and driving, binge drinking and drinking at school dances, etc. – and continued with students underestimating their peers’ attitudes & preferences about these behaviors.

How do you explain the discrepancy between students’ perception and reported behavior?

How, or where, do you think misperceptions like these get formed?

What harm, if any, could come from overestimating (or “normalizing”) the degree of student involvement in risky behaviors? What might the impact be for:

- “non-users”
- Frequent and/or heavy users?
- An entire student body?
- Families?
- A community?

Binge Drinking

(Questions 10 – 14)

Palo Alto teens – in focus groups and community meetings – have emphasized that student, school and community efforts should target binge drinking and driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI) in particular. Survey results at both high schools show that the majority of students would be concerned about friends who engage in this behavior.

What’s your reaction to student responses regarding the # of typical drinks consumed at a party? (Q10, 11)

How would you define “binge drinking” (or, what is your current understanding of “binge drinking” and what “it” is?)?

Legal issues aside, what do you think is a “healthy limit” – for anyone? For adults? For young people? Where do YOU think the “line” falls between healthy and unhealthy, “responsible” and irresponsible use of alcohol? And why?



Riding/Driving Under the Influence of Alcohol or Marijuana

(Questions 15-21 - rates; Questions 26, 27 & 34 – attitudes; Questions 30, 31 – safety strategies; Questions 34 – concern for friends)

What is your family’s plan (policy) to avoid having your child ride with a drinking driver – OR – avoid driving under the influence (DUI)?

How difficult is it to make this kind of decision when you’re actually “out there” at a party? Do friends make it easy or difficult to avoid DUI? How?

A good number of parents state they are confident their child will call them for a ride rather than risk DUI or riding with a driver under the influence. How can we explain the low number of students who said they would call their parents as a safety strategy (Q30)? Or why students said they rode with a drinking driver (or drove after drinking) because they were “afraid to call my parents” (Q31)?

How can family rules about alcohol use affect children’s likelihood of making safer decisions?

What other alternatives can you/we come up with for avoiding DUI or riding with a drinking driver?

While a clear majority of students said they would be concerned if their friends drove under the influence of either alcohol or marijuana, more students expressed concern over DUI & alcohol than DUI & marijuana. What do you think is the reasoning behind this difference? (Q34)



Dating Attitudes - Alcohol, Tobacco & Marijuana

(Questions 22 & 23)

The majority of students say they would rather NOT date someone who smokes cigarettes OR marijuana, but why do you think so many more students said they would rather not date a smoker of cigarettes than a smoker of marijuana?



Student Use of Safety Strategies

(Questions 28, 29, 30 & 31)

These questions asked students to consider a list of strategies commonly used to avoid alcohol at parties, etc. OR to help reduce the likelihood of particular risks associated with alcohol use (riding/driving under the influence/accidents; unintended sexual encounters or assault; drinking to intoxication/alcohol poisoning; violence, etc.).

- The list itself is a valuable tool to use as a launching pad for discussion.
- Beyond that, consider how students responded to their own LIKELY use of these strategies. Why do you think some students found particular strategies more acceptable to employ? Why might they have found other strategies less acceptable?
- What gets in the way of students using particular safety strategies?

Talk about a time where each of you were able to navigate a difficult social situation with your peers. How did that “go”? OR - share a time where you wish you’d been able to make a different decision – & what got in the way. Solicit ideas for problem-solving from each other.

Spend some time talking about how challenging the social scene can be – at any age. Does our family acknowledge and appreciate this skill (or “decision-making”) as much as other skills?



Communicating with Adults – Family, School & Community Rules

Questions 40 & 41 offer some of the most compelling results of the survey and strongly suggest that students want more opportunities for discussions and decision-making with their families, schools and the greater adult community.

Students were asked for their opinion on matters relating to family rules and school or community policies that deal with underage drinking. Their responses suggest that most students and adults share the same underlying values when it comes to:

- Fairness & consistent enforcement of rules
- Drinking at dances
- Drinking and driving,

but differ in their support of particular policies designed to address these same issues.

Where are students and adults aligned in their values? Where and why do they differ? What are students saying through these results? What would happen if student perspectives were incorporated into formal decision- and policy making at home, school or in the community?



Getting Help

What action would you take if you thought your friend needed help with an alcohol or drug issue? Who do you think would be helpful? What, if anything, might make you hesitate to offer help? If you were the person needing help, would you want another student to come forward and help you? (Q42)

Less than half of students said they would go to their parents if they had a problem with alcohol or drugs. What do you think gets in the way?

How can I (as your parent, teacher, friend) be of more help to you (student) in these complicated situations?

*Information provided by the Palo Alto Drug & Alcohol Community Collaborative
Please visit padacc.org for more information and resources.*