

PARTIES OVERVIEW

"Let's party," is the celebrative cry of youth. Birthday parties are little kids' celebrations. Teenagers and university students celebrate graduation, the coming of spring, the end of summer, the end of a week, often beginning Thursday night.... Well, almost anything can demand a party.

Google "teen parties" or "youth party" and you may end up in politics—one definition of party is a group acting together, a political organization. But from a youthful perspective, a party is a "social gathering for fun, a social gathering to which people are invited (formally or informally and sometimes crash without invitation) in order to enjoy themselves and often to celebrate something." (Encarta World English Dictionary)

Party life, like many aspects of youth culture, may rise and fall in waves. Parties sometimes, in some places, become passé. Then, what do we call "anti-parties" among such youth. And if just hanging out becomes exciting and people begin to have unusual fun, maybe dancing, when does hanging out cross a line and become a party?

Sleepovers are a party scene among preteens and some early teens. Parents are divided as to whether they are good idea or not, and if so, how they should be regulated.

What older teens have picked up on are co-ed sleepovers. At first blush, free sex might be imagined. But according to a Newsweek article ("Sleepovers," 4Nov96) some feel it safer to know where and with whom their children spend a night.

Savvy parents are happy to take advantage of the theory of safety in numbers by covering every inch of floor with teenagers. For her daughter Meredith's junior prom, Barbara Ostrom packed 50 of her classmates into the family's vacation house in Ocean Grove, N.J. "Nowhere was there a kid alone in a space," she says. "There wasn't any place a couple could be alone in a room. There was no sex in our house, I'll tell you that." This statement, definitive as it is, does not specifically cover the adjoining beach, to which guests occasionally repaired for walks. "I didn't see that many couple things going on," Meredith says, "though a few of those happened." Several teenagers interviewed echoed the fact that sleepovers "are not an orgy, nothing of the sort."

Some experts see sleepovers as a natural outgrowth of the trend toward semi-platonic "group dating," an activity formerly known as "hanging out." Others attribute it to parents' natural preference to keep their children off the roads in the dangerous post-midnight hours after fall homecoming and spring prom parties.

We know (from research and documentaries like Frontline's "The Lost Children of Rockdale County") that sex parties or co-ed sexual orgies can and do go on—at least in the U.S. and parts of Europe. Such activities are not usually broadly announced, and adults are carefully kept in the dark.

Another huge issue with high school parties is whether or not drinking should be allowed. Many teenagers wouldn't consider it a party without drinking. And if high school-aged youth are going to drink one way or another, is it better for parents to control that drinking, and subsequent driving, in one way or other?

It was late June (2005) in our North Shore Boston community. June signifies graduation and the beginning of summer vacation. It's time to party. With parents upstairs, a 14-year-old invited his friends over as he had several times before. This time, however, they and his friends wanted to get really drunk. An 18-year-old and recent graduate was recruited; she got a 21-year-old friend to buy the liquor, which she delivered to the party. After some heavy binging, a 15-year-old girl passed out. They couldn't wake her up and didn't know what to do! Finally someone called the cops—the parents upstairs had not yet been notified nor had they come down to check. When the police arrived, they found a couple of 15-year-old boys in back drinking and eating pizza. "Where's the girl," they inquired. "Oh, she's inside; she won't wake up," the seemingly unconcerned kids replied! Hours later the hospital medical staff was able to bring her out of the coma. It might have been much worse. At a terrible rate, teenagers are killing themselves and others, driving after parties and drinking.

When school board member Edgar Allen Beem III (of Yarmouth, Maine) heard that a group of high school students were going to throw a big party after the junior-senior prom, he took matters into his own hands: He went with a friend to the field where it was held and stood vigil at the end of the driveway until dawn, stopping anyone from driving drunk.

Beem and his friend, Neil Shankman, who is co-chairman of the school's alcohol-free Project Graduation party, say they got many warm thanks from students, some of whom had, indeed emerged from the party too wobbly to handle the wheel.

But when word got around town, Beem and Shankman were caught off guard. Many charged that their effort to act responsibly was nothing of the kind, and demanded to know why the two men hadn't put a stop to the party.

The town became divided over the issue. Many insisted there had been no violence, no vandalism, no complaints, and were grateful to the two men. But others believed these men or the police ought to have put a stop to this illegal

drinking. Ken Murphy, superintendent of the town's schools added his conclusion:

Anyone who has parented a teenager knows the dilemma the two men were in, and we as educators have a great deal of empathy. But we don't agree with it. Society has passed underage drinking laws for a reason. If we start ignoring them three or four days a year, it is a slippery slope. ("Father puts partying teens' life above law," Meadow Rue Merril, The Boston Globe, 16 June 99, B1,8.)

In the late 1990s, the California party scene was analyzed this way, and the study concluded that teen partying centers around drugs, alcohol, music, and sex. Different expressions of party life, however, appear in a variety of sizes and locations. The following five types and main social settings for parties reveals a complex world of youth parties.

Rave Parties. Raves most often take place in abandoned buildings or warehouses and depend on gas driven generators for electricity. Participants arrive at a predetermined rendezvous spot and are led to the RAVE via "trains" (a procession of cars led by the "Pied Piper"). A new twist to "training" is called "blind trains." Everyone but the driver in a given car is blindfolded and they try to discover where they are and the destination of the party. Ravers (or Groovers) in most cities find out rendezvous points via a telephone number that answers with recorded RAVE details given by an answering machine. Dancing is a big part of the RAVES, whether it be the "moshing" and "spanking" (jumping, bouncing, and smashing into one another) of the head bangers, or the "popping" and "breaking out" (specific forms of challenge dancing) of rappers.

Flyer Parties. These parties are advertised with professional and sometimes expensive flyers that are either handed out at school or placed on windshields of cars in the targeted parking lots (video arcades, pool halls, etc.). Normally, these fliers specify the music and the sponsor group so that proper sub-culture allegiance can be respected (i.e., A Hessian party for advocates of heavy metal would not be attended by rappers). Many times radio stations capitalize on the youth culture and sponsor elaborate parties with disc jockeys. Most often, flyer parties charge \$5.00 at the door. Both RAVE and Flyer party cover charges usually include unlimited beer as part of the price.

House parties. These parties revolve around parental absenteeism. They are by personal invitation and typically practice a "bring your own alcohol" format. Once the party gets going, separate rooms of the house are set apart for specific activities (specific rooms are assigned for drugs and alcohol, sexual encounters, and R- and X-rated video viewing). The newest form of house parties is called DP (ditching party). These happen during school hours and involve students arriving at school, piling in cars, and going to homes where parents are at work. Drinking, drug, and sex activities take place, and students make it back to school

in time to catch the bus home or be picked up by their rides. "Buy-ins" are a form of DP. The party host sells four "passes" into the DP for \$20.00. (Normally the pass is a type of penny candy like an individual packet of Sweet Tarts or a piece of gum.) This gives you and three other friends entry into the DP. You sell each of your friends a pass for \$5.00, thus making back \$15.00. The host then provides drugs or alcohol for the DP, and the original buyer is ensured that his or her friends attend. This type of party is typical for couples and normally involves long sessions of sex. Another name for a DP is a key party (since kids have a house key to gain entry after school while parents are at work). Some DPs revolve around "hot boxing" (getting high on marijuana in a car with the windows rolled up) and "mallng" (going to hang out at the mall while high on drugs). It is interesting to note that most California school districts are trying to initiate stricter day curfew laws since truancy is at an all-time high. Most school districts allow 18-30 days of absenteeism prior to expulsion for truancy. California's pioneering work with the use of uniforms has slashed levels of truancy, peer pressure, gang activity, and drugs while bolstering self esteem and academic excellence. Many education theorists believe that by 2005, uniforms will be required in most public schools in America. Once again this trend has its inceptions in California.

Shack attacks. Located in boarded-up houses, re-pos, or abandoned shacks, these become secluded locations for couples in search of privacy or small groups of "cracker kids" (the white equivalent to gangsters). Crackers are a new form of gang involvement and are patterned after James Dean (the newest white adolescent male icon.) For this reason "rebels" (from Rebel Without a Cause) or "kids" (a term equivalent to "homie") find shack parties a sort of clubhouse to strategize events and discuss rites of entry and passage to authority levels within the gang. The cracker cigarette of choice is Camel non-filter; since cigar use is surging among teens of both sexes, Swisher Sweets (a brand of cigar popular with the skater subculture) are all the rage. (Since specific clothes are associated with subculture affiliation, it might be noted that a cracker would be dressed in a tucked-in, white t-shirt, plain belt [no N, S, E, or W insignia], jeans [not overly baggy], and Nikes or Filas.)

Clubbing. This form of party life can be described as "bar hopping." Fake identification is easily obtained (borrowing from older friends or purchasing fake Department of Motor Vehicle licenses). Most teens have connections to buy a fake license (about \$35), and many cash checking establishments will give ID cards to patrons without proof of age. The return of the 1970s "disco" crowd is growing, and teens have favorite nightspots that cater to their musical preferences.

It seems that California has been a bit out in front when it comes to youthful parties. The dance scene worldwide, like the youth culture, is constantly

changing. We need more studies on this subject to understand various motivations, peer pressure, fads and trends, and differences of party preferences in different geographical locations, ethnic groups and social classes.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you like to party? How has your attitude toward parties changed over the years (no matter your age)?
2. Do you think partying in some form or other is important to most human beings? Why or why not?
3. What should be the relationship of parents and adults to preteen parties? To high school parties? To college parties? Should university administration have any say in the way its students party? Why or why not?
4. What kind of party would you condemn? What kind of party would you praise?
5. Do we need to think about parties? Should issues about parties be discussed? If so, by whom, where and how?
6. Jesus attends several parties and social occasions as recorded in the four Gospels. What observations do you draw from these and what lessons might be learned?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Human beings do need to celebrate. I think we can say that all social celebrations are parties and that all parties are social celebrations.
2. Besides all their benefits, bad things can and have happened at parties. There is therefore a responsibility to those who plan a party, those who decide to go, parents who allow their children to go, and adults who know that parties, or a party, are (or is) going on.
3. Young people can find forums about party attendance on the Internet—many opinions are there expressed.
4. There is even more information for parents, school administrators, and adults in general. (See our Resource List).

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