



# Two Troubled Fathers

These photos are not of the actual persons written about here, but are close likenesses to the boy we call, "David," and the girl we call, "Sara." I wanted you, the reader, to understand that both the boy and girl are as real as your children.

David's father provided his son's photo, and his letter described some of what we have decided to share about how this teen's alcohol use at a party affected his family. Sara's father also wrote about an experience in their family, but he asked that we keep his and her names anonymous. In either case, we are not identifying any family members. Both letters described the powerful dynamic of growing up safely in America – about youth, alcohol, and mostly about responsibility.

The first perspective comes from the father of a junior in high school – the girl we call, "Sara." Though he had acted in ways that caused them to become somewhat estranged, the father still felt he had done the right thing, and he wanted to explain to others why he did what he did.



Friends enjoying a party.

Sara was invited to an overnight party. Despite her vociferous complaints, her father telephoned the parents who were hosting the party and asked several questions, such as how many were coming, would there be chaperones, etc. Although he mentioned that he was concerned about alcohol, he never actually asked if alcohol would be available.

He was uneasy and even a bit embarrassed asking these questions, but his daughter was beyond embarrassed. She was shocked, hurt and angry that he would "interfere in her life." She was sure he had compromised her social status. Furious with him, she stormed off to the party, humiliated and defiant.

The father began questioning himself about what he had done. He knew his motives were solid but, he wondered, was he being overly protective? Was he undermining her emerging adulthood? He put in a rough night, but so did she.

As soon as everyone arrived at the party, the host parents passed around a basket and asked each of the young people to deposit their car keys. After that, the parents opened a keg of beer, opened the bar, and headed upstairs, making it clear that they were out of the picture. It was scheduled to be an overnight event, although Sara's father did not know it would include both boys and girls.

When Sara returned home, a bit hung over, she explained what had happened and her father went off like a Roman candle. He called the host parents and other parents, and seriously considered contacting the police. Sara begged him to calm down and tried to explain that no one got hurt, no one could drive, and although she didn't feel well that morning, what had happened was, to her, just part of growing up in America.

The family conflict wasn't pretty, and part of the father's response was to write up how he viewed his responsibility. His description of the event made several points:



- When young people are intoxicated and not chaperoned, they make bad decisions. This can involve driving (using an extra set of car keys), making unwise sexual decisions, or rowdiness that can slip out of control and lead to violence.
- One set of parents does not have the right to determine how or if other people's children are exposed to alcohol; they certainly don't have the right to put them at risk.
- A parent has a right and even a responsibility to contact the adult hosts of a teenage party and ask directly about alcohol, chaperones, and who is going to be doing what.

Sara's father listed several suggestions regarding how parents can react in these instances, such as politely offering to chaperone or help with the party in other ways, explaining that you are certain the party will be responsibly planned but that you, as a parent, just want to make certain. Most importantly, tell your children that you trust them, just not the situation in which they may find themselves. Essentially, he was trying to suggest ways to diminish any potential embarrassment for the hosts, the parents, and especially their son or daughter. He felt bad about how others viewed his "interference," but he was resolute that he had done the right thing. He hoped his daughter would come to understand his reasoning before she left for college in a couple of years.

We don't know exactly what occurred in this family after that point, but we're pretty sure they reconciled, and it is likely that it didn't take two years. Eventually, we would like to think that Sara came to appreciate the affection that drove her father's concern and action. ■



David

David was invited to a party on New Year's Eve. He had recently received his driver's license and was still a little awkward driving a car. As with Sara's party, the host parents set some rules before they brought out alcohol. No one was to get "drunk," no one was to leave, and absolutely no one was to drive.

Unfortunately, one of the characteristics of being young and intoxicated is that you don't know how to handle yourself; you haven't learned how much alcohol you can tolerate. Before long, the party David and his friend attended was out of control. The young people who attended had little experience with alcohol and didn't really know when to cut back or how not to drink to the point of serious intoxication. A lot of bad decisions were made, including the decision made by David and his best friend to go for a drive. David's blood alcohol content was over .2. These "new drinkers," too, had limited experience in calibrating intoxication. Smashing into a tree a few blocks from the party, David was killed and his friend was in a coma for nearly two weeks.

To David's father, the survival of David's friend was a blessing, but the personal tragedy of his son's death, he told us, defies description, and the personal guilt he feels at not having checked with the host parents will be permanent.

We hope he learns to forgive himself. What he did or didn't do is common, unfortunately.

Statistically, by the 12th grade, over half of young Americans will have used alcohol within the past year and at least 20% will have been involved in binge drinking. The two stories told here demonstrate some of the reality behind those statistics. Children working on becoming adults aren't accustomed to alcohol and intoxication, which puts a special responsibility on parents to help them safely navigate a world that institutionalizes alcohol use. There is a balance between being overly protective and responsible efforts to protect, but it is difficult to read David's father's letter and not understand that preventing others from furnishing alcohol to your children is responsible parenting in 21st Century America. ■

A second letter came from another father, with his name and his son's name and photograph included, neither of which we thought appropriate to reprint here. We will call the son, "David." David's father describes him as an energetic, athletic 17-year-old who always tried to do the right thing, and who was extremely kind and close to his family. Like most 17-year-olds, what seemed to be the three most important things in David's life were: friends, friends, and friends, but his father knew they would always be a close family.

David was invited to a party on New Year's Eve. He had recently received his