

PUTTING PARENTS IN THE PICTURE ON ADOLESCENT ISSUES

Social Development in an Electronic Age

In 2009 Professor Paula Barrett visited Somerville House to discuss internet addiction amongst adolescents. The following article details technological trends, the possible outcome of these trends and what parents and schools can do to work collectively towards a harmonious balance.

Technology is now being used by younger and younger children. This means that technologies shape a child's image and standing within their peer group. It has been posited that social status for teens is largely dictated by technology and the access people have to the latest technologies.

The reality is that pre-teens and teens are now "digital natives", meaning they listen to music, use facebook or twitter and speak on the phone all at the same time. Furthermore, text messaging is viewed by most teens as a second language. Some children thrive with multiple stimuli, but other children may be over-stimulated and discouraged.

Whilst these technologies have multiple benefits, there are also rising costs associated with them. Therefore, essential technologies represent both risk and protective factors for developing children. For example:

- RISKS:**
- Alienation from the wider world can lead to hindered academic performance.
 - Excessive mobile phone use has been linked to poor sleep, fatigue and stress.
 - In one study, researchers expected greater exposure to media would translate to higher incidences of depression due to the prevalence of "perfect" images (especially of women) within the media.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS OR BENEFITS:

Educational. Children have access to the best technologies - these can be a means to teach children to think for themselves (The American state of California is planning to phase out text books in favour of internet based learning). Whilst most internet safety information is based on fear and targets parents (i.e fear of predators), it is imperative that children learn to protect themselves.

This process is about empowering our children to make informed decisions (from sexting, cyberbullying and identity theft).

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Keep computer in a shared area, not tucked away in private bedrooms.
- Establish rules for use as a family and reinforce your children when they do the right thing. Be specific with your praise i.e 'I like how you're looking at those interesting sites about honeybees' versus 'nice work'.
- Bolster social support and increase involvement in outside activities.
- Schools should employ best practice with the internet-internet safety must play a role everyday.
- Give children positive role models regarding technology use.

This means knowing about what they're interested in and knowing what popular youtube clips they'll be seeing. Use any controversial material as a point of discussion, and know pertinent educational sites (for example: www.cliffsnotes.com, www.shmoop.com, www.sparknotes.com).

Safe Party Guidelines

Earlier this year, Somerville House once again opened its doors with a public information session designed to inform parents about parties, gatherings and the adolescent social scene by Adair Donaldson, a lawyer who has seen how such events can ruin young people's lives.

This eye opening seminar used a 16 year old birthday party to show what can occur at teenage gatherings, stopping at various points throughout the party to discuss what is going on and the longer term consequences this can have on teenage girls, boys and their families.

One of the most powerful parts of the evening was seeing the mother presented in the video go to her mailbox six months after the party and receive a notification that she was being sued for \$2.5 million for the sexual assault, assault causing brain injury and traffic accident causing death that had occurred at the party. Because the basic principles of the Safe Party Guidelines referred to in the seminar were not in place at the party, there was every likelihood that the claimants would have been successful in being paid out.

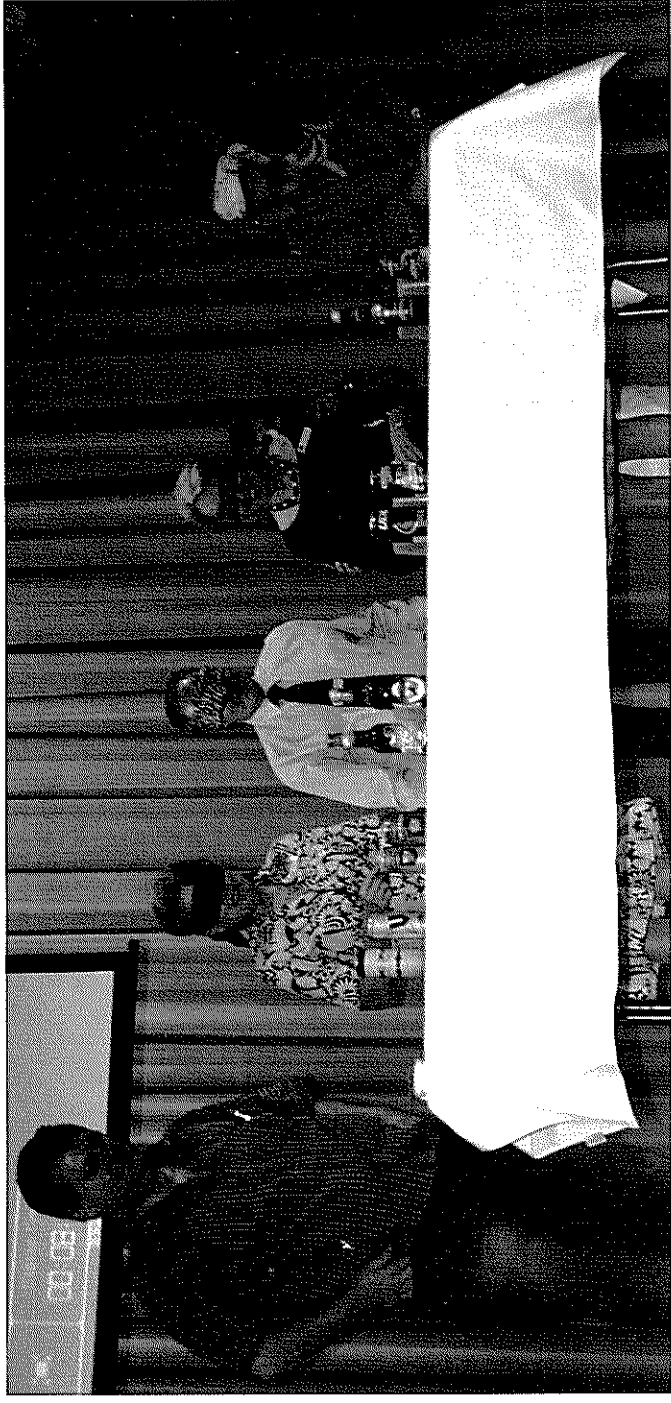
The 300+ audience was testimony to the relevance of this issue for parents of teenagers. After the presentation, Adair spoke to a number of parents who all had stories and ideas to exchange. Adair's goal is for parents to be exchanging these ideas with each other. With no funding support from the government, he cannot keep driving his message out to the community, hence the need for parents to take control in their various communities. To this end, Adair has set up a forum: <http://www.puttingyouthinthepicture.com/forum/index.php> to get parents talking about issues within their community.



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Above: L-R - P&F President, Mr David Coulhard joins Dr Goodwin; Head of Middle School, Dr Kirk Williamson; Head of Boarding, Mrs Alayne McDougall and Senior Chaplain, Ms Chris O'Gorman in a blind taste-testing to highlight the difficulty of distinguishing between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks.

For those who could not attend the seminar, the website for the Queensland Police features many of the 'Safe Party Guidelines' Adair referred to throughout the seminar including how to register your party with the Queensland Police Service at: <http://www.police.qld.gov.au/programs/personalSafety/situationalAdvice/partySafe.htm>.

Adair Donaldson is a passionate lawyer from Toowoomba who says he has seen far too many young people paying a big price for bad decisions. His involvement in 'Putting Youth in the Picture' aims to develop an understanding of issues confronting today's youth and provide a framework to support them to make more informed choices, while building solidarity amongst parents. Adair Donaldson's 'Putting Youth in the Picture' program was developed in consultation with local teachers, police and health professionals and since its launch in October 2008 has received significant acclaim and support throughout Queensland.

Adair embarked on this journey two years ago with his partner Peter Shannon, of Shannon Donaldson Province Lawyers to try to assist parents and youth address some of the issues they face.

This educational program, composing of DVD scenarios and panel discussions, has been used extensively in schools, sporting clubs and the National Rugby League (NRL) to try to curb dangerous behaviour by making young people more responsible for their actions. It aims to achieve this by educating teens of the consequences of behaving in a certain manner and developing strategies and highlighting alternative ways of handling or avoiding situations.

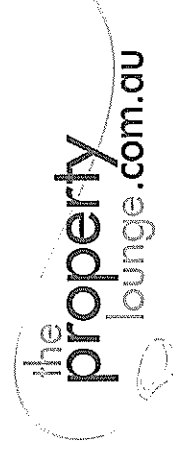
The DVD component of the program shows a series of authentic but confronting scenarios using believable characters, relevant language and everyday situations experienced by today's adolescents to show, in graphic detail, how quickly situations can escalate when drugs and alcohol impair logical decision making. The DVD is accompanied by a panel discussion featuring police officers, hoteliers and lawyers.

"This is an innovative, proactive, unique presentation that makes compelling viewing. All parents should take the opportunity to be involved in this project. It challenges communities to come together to discuss, confront and take action to address the many issues facing our society today."

Wayne Bennett, AM

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