

How to Welcome 100 Teenagers Into Your Home Without Reducing it to Rubble

By Tom Hagy, Radnor

When my daughter asked if she could have some friends over for her 15th birthday, I was tired from work and glad that my daughter *had* friends. Adults and teens often have different definitions of terms. In this case the disparity centered on the word “some.” To me it meant “several,” a “few,” 12 or 15. To her it meant Woodstock. To her, some people went to The Million Man March.

What my wife and I also didn't realize was that in the Internet Age, in which teens visibly shake if not within 10 minutes of a wireless connection, party invitations are sent – and forwarded – with less effort than forgetting to turn off the lights or leaving your clothes on the floor.

Because of the virtual nature of the invitations, the police would tell us, if 10 kids know about a party, 50 know. So when we saw the party list of 100, with an age range of 15 to 17, the reality was that 500 knew, with an age range I don't want to think about. Given teens have no where to go on a Saturday night, the police explained, all 500 see your house as fair game, the hot spot, the place to be. A Hang Palace.

Did I mention the police? Yes; they were involved. No; they did not descend on the rooftops on helicopter cables through shafts of searchlights. When we realized our home would be, for four long hours, Studio 54, we contacted the authorities, consulted the Internet (for irony's sake), interviewed friends, reviewed recommendations provided by ARCH, and attempted to apply commonsense, which friends said had already been abandoned.

ARCH, for those who don't know, is a non-profit group devoted to educating parents and students about drug and alcohol abuse. They are doing good things. Check out their Web site: www.ARCHcares.org.

I am writing to tell you that if you, too, wake up one morning to discover your marbles have spilled onto your pillow during the night, here is how you can have 100 teenagers into your home and live to write about it.

- If nothing else gets your attention here, please note this: by the time we notified the police about our event, the police already knew. The word was out. Contact them. The police very much want to preside over a fun and civilized society, not star in Cops. Have an officer into your home, get their advice, ask every stupid question you can. Make sure they know you are having a party, that you will be home, that there will be limits, rules and crowd control. *A special thanks is owed to the Tredyffrin Police for all their advice and support. They made all the difference in making the party safe and fun.*
- Set a strict time frame. My rule was this: if it is 11:01 p.m. and we don't share DNA or your name doesn't appear in my will, you are trespassing.
- Have one entrance and exit. Anyone entering or leaving the party through any other portal is warned, cast under a very bright light, and ejected. We did not act on my 12-year-old's advice, which was to paintball anyone who stepped out of bounds.
- Have an invitation list. If you aren't on the list, you can't come in. Check off who comes and goes. It's handy when parents call. And they will.
- Distribute wrist bands, stamp their hands, tag their ears. Do something to know who has checked in and checked out.
- Have rules. Here are some suggestions:
 - Rule 1. No drugs or alcohol of any kind.
 - Rule 2. No violence or destruction of any kind.
 - Rule 3. Parents' names and phone numbers are required upon arrival.
 - Rule 4. All bags, backpacks and coats must be checked at the door.
 - Rule 5. If you leave the party, you can't come back to the party.

- Read them the rules. Post the rules. Have them sign to say they read the rules. Give them prizes for knowing the rules. We gave iTunes gift certificates, which went over well.
- Have a breathalyzer on hand. You are permitted to use it. It's your property and your liability. More importantly, it's your responsibility to do everything you can to ensure safety. It's not your responsibility alone, but you definitely share it.
- Listen carefully. You will hear stuff of teen life, wonderful and not so wonderful. Just like yours. You will also hear were Slappy is hiding the rum.
- Designate party areas. Consider recreation rooms, kitchens, family rooms, patios, swimming pools, etc.
- Designate areas that are off limits. Consider boiler rooms, bedrooms, workshops, tool sheds.
- Warn your neighbors. Give them your phone number. Tell them about the rules, the police, the time limit. "The neighborhood will be returned to you at 11 p.m."
- Does someone need to go to their car? No problem, as long as they are accompanied by an adult.
- Make sure someone is monitoring the perimeter, make sure you have a good and natural reason to walk through every party space, e.g. empty all those too-small trash cans, bring snacks. Have plenty of water. Kids actually drink that stuff.
- Get adult help. I have a large, scary brother in law, for example, who helped manage the front door, taking names, parents' numbers and generally being unnervingly serious. Let's just say, he could make Tony Soprano cry. "Man, he makes me nervous," one kid said. I smiled. "You know how some people *look* intimidating but they are really just a big ol' teddy bear?" I asked. "Yeah," the kid smiled back, "is he like that?" "No," I explained, "he's really quite violent."
- Know that a good number of 15 year olds drink, try drugs, and think oral sex is the moral equivalent of holding hands. If they don't do these things, they are under a lot of pressure to do these things.

- Thank, to no end, any parent who calls in advance or comes to the door. Many don't do this, and it's a mistake.
- Know that kids don't like hanging out in a madhouse full of drunks, stoners and belligerents anymore than you do.
- Know that most kids you run into are really, really nice, but each of them has an ounce or two of criminal in them under the right circumstances.

In the end, my wife, our friends, and I, each had a great time. Ninety-five percent of these kids were terrific and their parents should be proud! They were polite, responsible, fun-loving! Several commented how much they actually enjoyed the boundaries. "Too many parties get out of control," one boy volunteered, "with no parents around and everybody drunk."

A few, however, ignored and broke the rules. We ended up with the usual and expected issues, like a cupcake on a rug and cocktail shrimp in the fish pond. A can of Diet Coke was exploded in the outdoor fireplace (even adults enjoyed the spectacle). You might get a little sticky, but no one dies from these things. Some kids aren't welcome back, but 95 of them are. Not bad odds. I don't even like adults that much. Maybe people get more annoying with age. But that's another article.

To the parents of the 95 kids on our good list, they can come back anytime. To the others, note that we confiscated a fifth of gin, a pint of gin, a can of beer, a Gatorade bottle containing Captain Morgan's spiced rum, and a hash pipe. The rest of the stuff is probably at your place.

Bottom line: kids need somewhere to go on Saturday nights. They need to let it rip, but within boundaries of civility, safety and decency. They want that too. They really do. A teen center run by professionals would be wonderful and worth a great deal to parents and kids alike. You should have seen the fun they had, dancing, laughing, taunting our bug-eyed goldfish – *all under control!* I wish that were possible more often.

I don't have all the answers for how to build such a fun and safe establishment, to be sure, but for at least one Saturday night in May my wife and I were delighted to create such a place.