

Wilson PTA Parent Education Series, Teens in Crisis: How to Tell, How to Help, February 28th, 2011.

About 60 attendees turned out on February 28th to hear panelists speak on the topic of helping teens in crisis. The panel consisted of Wilson Vice-Principal Maude Lamont, Wilson Counselor Keith Brown, Josh Groesz, Military Helpline Supervisor from Oregon Partnership, and psychologist Shawn Marshall from the Children's Program.

Maude Lamont and Keith Brown began by pointing out that a crisis for a teen can be initiated by a number of causes: conflict with friends or family members, difficult issues at home (illness or death in the family, conflict with parents, etc.), academic pressure, drug and alcohol use. Counselors at Wilson are a resource for students and their families. Wilson students are assigned to the same counselor throughout their four years of high school, allowing counselors the opportunity to get to know their students, build a relationship, and maintain an awareness of changes in a student's behavior, academic performance, and social relationships. Often teachers will contact the counseling staff if they feel that a student may be experiencing a crisis. Lamont and Brown stress the importance of parent communication with counselors and teachers as well and urge parents to contact them immediately if they have mental health or other concerns regarding their child. One of the goals of the Wilson counseling staff is to educate students about how to ask for help if they need it.

Josh Groesz has a masters degree in mental health counseling, is a combat military veteran, and trained as a high school counselor before joining Oregon Partnership, a local non-profit aimed at ending substance abuse and suicide.

Groesz is currently Oregon Partnership's Military Helpline Supervisor. Groesz explained that the pre-frontal cortex of the teen brain is not yet fully developed, resulting in difficulties with impulse control. Because of limited impulse control, teens with depression are especially vulnerable to suicide. Depression in adolescents can be signaled by several warning signs: changes in sleep pattern, either more or less than usual, accompanied by a noticeable negative impact on school performance or family relationships; low confidence or self-esteem; loss of interest in previous activities with no positive replacement. If your teen is experiencing these symptoms and you are concerned, Groesz urges that you seek a professional diagnosis and treatment. Warning signs of suicide include talking about suicide or other self-harm, feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness. If you are concerned that someone you know may be suicidal, Groesz says it's important to ask them if they are considering suicide.

Excessive use of technology such as video games and internet activities can lead to "addiction" as well as signal depression. Shawn Marshall, providing more detail on the physiology of teen brain development, described the explosive rate

of brain growth in 12-16 year-olds and pointed out that new neurological pathways are being forged while at the same time unused pathways are "pruned". Levels of dopamine, a neuro-chemical linked to addiction, rise with excessive gaming/internet use, just as they do in individuals addicted to gambling. Different from gambling, technology is integral to daily life, so teens must learn to interact with it in a healthy way. When to be concerned:

- * Is your teen preoccupied with technology? How fixated is he or she on their last use of technology or on their next use?
- * Is your teen's use of technology always increasing? Does he or she seem to need to spend more and more time gaming or using the internet?
- * Is your teen's reaction to having to stop gaming/internet activity damaging or severe?
- * Does your teen experience an increase in anxiety when he or she can't play or can't use the internet?
- * Is there balance in your teen's life between the video world and the real world? Does he or she get enjoyment from the real world as well as the video world?
- * Is your teen dishonest about his or her technology use? Does he or she lie to family or friends about how much time they spend online or gaming?
- * Has your teen stolen money or used your credit card without your permission to buy or play online?
- * How is your teen's academic and social life? Is he or she doing well in school and spending time with friends offline?

Marshall underlines the importance of talking to teens in an empathetic way about concerns over technology use, rather than lecturing scolding, or threatening. Explain to your teen what you see (poor grades, ongoing conflicts with family members, for example) and why you are concerned. Suggest a thirty-day trial period when you and your teen track their technology use; compare records weekly to see if there is a difference in perception of the amount of time spent on technology. Sometimes a teen will self-correct if they see the impact of their over-use of technology, but if not the parent needs to step in and set boundaries to limit technology use and encourage more real-life interactions to replace technological ones. Many products can help parents limit or monitor computer use.

Marshall counsels that parents should step back by their child's junior year in high school to give them time to learn self-management before college.

If you have concerns that your teen may be suffering from depression or anxiety or suicidal thoughts, contact their school counselor for help in locating the specific resources you need to help them. All communication will be kept confidential according to your wishes and will not affect your student's school record unless you wish to file an IEP or 504 plan.

Watch for future events in the Parent Education Series at Wilson, sponsored by the PTA. If you have suggestions for future topics or other comments, please e-mail Valeurie Friedman at wilsonhighschoolpta@gmail.com.