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Bellace gets anti-drug message across to Boonton students through laughter



PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT BELLACE
Matt Bellace, comedian and psychologist

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An anti-drug presentation from a psychologist who focuses on adolescent brain development sounds like it would inspire yawns, but when the speaker is Matt Bellace, laughter fills the room.

Bellace, who also is a professional comedian, spoke to a group of parents at John Hill School on June 15, as part of the Boonton Parent Academy, sponsored by the Boonton Municipal Alliance and Boonton Board of Education. Bellace's message was simple: parents need to support their children in words and actions for them to make healthy choices.

Scare tactics do not work. Bellace noted that studies have shown that programs like Scared Straight have no impact because kids can see through it. Bellace's method is to connect with youngsters and teens and make them laugh.

Earlier in the day, Bellace talked to the students at John Hill. He reported that they got his message and engaged with him. For the parents, he had advice on what they could do to steer their kids in the right direction.

"Friends," he told the John Hill parents, "are the number-one predictor of behavior. Show me your friends, I'll show you your future."

Bellace learned about the problems of teenage drug abuse by witnessing his older brother's struggles from marijuana and alcohol use. To make sure that he did not follow the same path, Bellace's parents sent him to the Teen Institute of the Garden State, where he was inspired to get involved with prevention.

At the Teen Institute, Bellace was taught how to deal with life around him. Bellace noted that children are raised to believe any problem can be solved by a pill. Parents worry that their children may experience pain or sadness for even a moment and overprotect them, shielding them from all upsets. This has served to take away the children's independence. Parents do not encourage doing chores. They give rewards for everything. This does not allow for struggle or growth.

Parents need to consider that the brain does not fully develop until age 25. Sadly, 10 years later, it starts to decline. More specifically, the volume of the brain starts to shrink. People who meditate retain brain volume better than those who do not.

Bellace, referring back to his earlier statement about the importance of choosing the right friends, said youngsters need to lean on healthy people for support. They need to surround themselves with positive people. Parents do not have to make teens stop hanging out with their friends, but rather, encourage opportunities for the teen to naturally gravitate towards new friends.

It is during the ages of 14-20 that friends' role in behavior especially comes into play. During these years, people take more risks than at any other time in their lives. This is biology and cannot be helped. Risk-taking skyrockets when with friends, so it is important to have friends who engage in meaningful risk-taking.

He discourages parents from offering alcohol to teens with the belief they should be exposed to drinking before they enter college. Bellace noted that he speaks at about 30 colleges a year and never is it said that the problem is kids showing up who never had a drink. The problem is those with histories of binge drinking.

From a neuropsychological perspective, the earlier the age that a person starts drinking, the higher their dependence upon alcohol. Abuse of alcohol limits memory capacity and it impairs decision making because it suppresses vital areas of the brain.

Bellace's advice is for parents to make it hard for teens to have opportunities to drink and that they themselves should not get "tipsy" in front of their teens.

In the past 10 years, there has been a rise in marijuana use, according to Bellace. Considered the "safest" drug because it does not result in the kinds of deaths associated with other drugs, it does have consequences for the teenage brain. It decreases memory and IQ points. Teens can develop psychotic symptoms, such as paranoia and hallucinations.

The important thing for parents is to heed the warning signs and seek out healthier ways to relax and de-stress.

Bellace, who encouraged people to check out naturalhigh.org, named ways to feel good, like walking in the woods, reading and laughing.

More seriously, Bellace told the parents not to be afraid to take a stand or be proactive. They should make their children work for things and experience consequences, that are quick and felt, for bad behavior. Also, parents who suspect a problem should make an appointment with a mental health professional sooner than later. Appointments can take months to get and a situation can deteriorate during that time.

The last piece of advice was echoed by Boonton Police Officer Scott Gamsby, who works in the Juvenile Division. He joined Bellace at the end for a Q and A session. There were no questions, but Gamsby offered that he hopes Bellace's points "hit home" and suggests that parents listen in on their children's conversations, such as when driving them and their friends someplace. Then check in with the friends' parents.

Gamsby also noted that heroin use is "huge" and starts with prescription drugs. He urged the parents to get rid of pills that are not needed and to supervise their children's prescription drug use, never giving them the bottle.

"It is O.K. to feel pain and sadness," said Gamsby.

Gamsby is available to answer parents' questions and concerns. He can be contacted at sgamsby54@boontonpolice.org or 973-402-9371, ext. 604.

To learn more about Matt Bellace and his programs, visit mattbellace.com.

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