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Expert gives parents tips on keeping teens off drugs

BY LISA BOLIVAR

Being rich and popular is no protection against falling into drug abuse.

On the contrary, it may lead a child to it, celebrity speaker Matt Bellace said during a recent presentation aimed at University School parents of teens.

Bellace spoke to about 80 parents Aug. 16 on how to support teens in making positive choices at Nova Southeastern University's Rose & Alfred Miniaci Performing Arts Center in Davie.

It was part of the Upper School Parent Assembly Celebrity Lecture Series at NSU, with presentations on substance abuse, peer pressure and bullying.

Bellace said the key to keeping teens off drugs is learning to communicate with them and set boundaries that, when broken, result in painful consequences. Bellace, a nationally known comedian and clinical psychologist who gives about 200 lectures a year on substance abuse and teens, also spoke to the Davie school's students.

Bellace told an intent audience that affluent kids are more apt to try drugs, partly because they have few challenges in life that present opportunities to develop self-esteem.

"In wealthy communities, parents are removing the tools that let kids feel empowered," Bellace said. "They say, look, just get good grades and I'll do the rest. But kids need to make it on their own, take an active role and through that build self-esteem."

Add the American culture of excess and you may have a recipe for problems, he said.

"The popular culture has normalized bad behavior of overdoing it," Bellace said.

How do parents battle these situations? Bellace told the group that they had to set boundaries, make rules -- and enforce them. He told the parents assembled that they have to learn how to say no.

He also gave advice on how to speak to a teen.

"It's easy to get into a fight with a teenager. Their hormones already are so high, it's like throwing

gasoline on a fire, so you can't do it," he said. ``You have to remove emotion on your end."

But he also told parents not to dismiss their teen's feelings, not to attack them, and to support their positive choices in life.

Parents sat in the auditorium, jotting down notes on scraps of paper, backs of checkbooks or anything that was handy as Bellace listed his points.

One woman asked Bellace what to do when her child was associating with a girl with substance-abuse and morality problems. Should she call the parent?

"If you don't call the parents, you not only are leaving that child at risk, but you're leaving your child and other children at risk as well," Plantation parent Ron Book said.

"I guess it depends on how well you know the child's parents and how comfortable you are in informing them of it," Bellace answered.

When it comes to confronting your teen about substance abuse, though, Bellace said the sooner a parent gets involved the better.

"Rather than being judgmental, though, you need to meet them at their level," he said. ``Ask how it makes them feel, relate to them on their level."

To learn more about Bellace and his approach to rearing healthy teens, visit <http://www.mattbellace.com/>.

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