***PA CORNER: May 22, 2012***

Make good choices for a good summer

School is out for the summer. This means there will be more time for children of all ages, and in particular teenagers, to make choices of how they fill their hours, days and months before school resumes in the fall.

Teenagers with more time on their hands will choose how to spend their time and these choices can have huge future implications. So I dedicate this column to helping children and young adults make good choices all year but especially during the summer months.

While it would be foolish for me to think that underage drinking is something that a law will stop, it is important to note that times have changed from when I was growing up here in the Troy area. The law now carries a much greater impact for those who decide to break it and make bad choices with regards to drinking and driving. Parents need to take an active role in explaining these consequences and how one bad mistake can overshadow future opportunities.

For example, last May, a 16-year old boy hit and killed two people after a night of drinking. Under the circumstances, he was certified as an adult and now stands trial on a host of offenses, chief among them being involuntary manslaughter. The consequence is that he could spend up to 30 years behind bars in exchange for a few hours of fun on a Saturday night.

As a teenager in Troy, I remember the fun summer parties, and the drinking. What I don’t recall is being disrespectful of the law, and further, getting into cars and making a bad choice even worse by hurting others. While I’m sure it happened, the tolerance for this behavior is no longer there. You will be charged. If you get caught, or worse yet, hurt someone, it could destroy your life. Be smart about your choices.

Facebook and playing on the internet is a social outlet and recreational sport for many teens and summer allows for more time to do this. Social media and the internet also offer ripe opportunities for predators and cyber crimes. It is important for teens not to reveal too much about themselves online, whether in a photo or in the information they provide. A good rule of thumb, share only photos that you would show your grandmother and do not give anyone information about how to get to you, when your house will be empty or any other specifics that could be too personal in nature.

Finally, a word about sexting. If you take a nude or lewd photo of yourself and you are under 18, you can be charged with manufacturing child pornography (a class C Felony.) If you send it to your boyfriend or girlfriend, you can be charged with distributing child pornography (a class C Felony.) If your boyfriend or girlfriend opens the photo, it is now on their phone or computer, and they are now in possession of child pornography. Each of these offenses also requires lifetime registration as a sex offender. Bottom line, don’t do it. The internet can be the gift that keeps giving and these photos will show up in other places. I can almost guarantee it.

Be smart and cautious when dealing with friends on the internet. Your information is one click away from danger if you are not careful. These lessons are good for everyone, but particularly parents and teens.