

Friendships, Peer Influence, and Peer Pressure During the Teen Years

Maria R. T. de Guzman, Extension Adolescent Specialist

Friendships are very much an important aspect of the teen years. Understanding the nature of peer influence can help support youth as they enter into this period and follow the path towards close friendships that are hallmarks of adolescence.

Adolescence is a time when peers play an increasingly important role in the lives of youth. Teens begin to develop friendships that are more intimate, exclusive, and more constant than in earlier years. In many ways, these friendships are an essential component of development. They provide safe venues where youth can explore their identities, where they can feel accepted and where they can develop a sense of belongingness. Friendships also allow youth to practice and foster social skills necessary for future success.

Nonetheless, parents and other adults can become concerned when they see their teens becoming preoccupied with their friends. Many parents worry that their teens might fall under negative peer influence or reject their families' values and beliefs, as well as be pressured to engage in high-risk and other negative behaviors.

In actuality, peer influence is more complex than our stereotype of the negative influences from friends. First, peer influence can be both positive and negative. While we tend to think that peer influence leads teens to engage in unhealthy and unsafe behaviors, it can actually motivate youth to study harder in school, volunteer for community and social services, and participate in sports and other productive endeavors. In fact, most teens report that their peers pressure them not to engage in drug use and sexual activity.

Second, peer influence is not a simple process where youth are passive recipients of influence from others. In fact, peers who become friends tend to already have a lot of things in common. Peers with similar interests, similar academic standing, and enjoy doing the same things tend to gravitate towards each other. So while it seems that teens and their friends become very similar to each other through peer influence, much of that similarity was present to begin with.

Facts About Friendships, Peers, and Adolescence

Friendships that emerge during adolescence tend to be more complex, more exclusive, and more consistent than during earlier childhood. New types (e.g., opposite sex, romantic ties) and levels (e.g., best friends, cliques, and “crowds”) of relationships emerge, and teens begin to develop the capacity for very close, intimate, and deep friendships.

The adult perception of peers as having one culture or a unified front of dangerous influence is inaccurate. More often than not, peers reinforce family values, but they have the potential to encourage problem behaviors as well. Although the negative peer influence is overemphasized, more can be done to help teenagers experience the family and the peer group as mutually constructive environments.

Facts about the teen-parent relationship during the teen years:

- **Parent relationships are not necessarily undermined by peer relationships.** During adolescence, relationships between parents and teens are more often re-negotiated rather than rejected. During adolescence, teens become increasingly autonomous and take on more adult roles. They also develop their own ideas and start mapping their own lives. They begin to spend more time with and value their friends more than they used to. Thus, it might seem as if they are starting to cut ties with parents and reject their ideals. In fact, rather than cutting off ties, teens are just renegotiating the parent-child relationship. What this means is that they are beginning to shift the relationship to incorporate their increasing independence and maturity. As teens become more mature, the type of relationship they have with their parents naturally begin to shift as the teen begins to mature.
- **While it seems that teens are influenced by their peers, parents continue to be the most influential factor in their lives.** Despite fears parents have about their teens rejecting their values and beliefs, parents continue to be of significant influence. Teens report having political,

religious, and general beliefs similar to their parents, and consider their parents as being highly significant and influential in their lives. Positive relationships between parents and teens also equip youth to have healthy relationships with friends. Teens who have high quality relationships with parents also report having a positive relationship with their peers.

- **Parent-adolescent conflict increases between childhood and early adolescence; although in most families, its frequency and intensity remain low.** Typically, conflicts are the result of relationship negotiation and continuing attempts by parents to socialize their adolescents, and do not signal the breakdown of parent-adolescent relations. Parents need to include adolescents in decision-making and rule-setting that affects their lives.
- **Parents who continue to communicate with their teens, even when there are conflicts, actually maintain closer relationships.** While it might seem futile to talk to teens when it leads to conflicts and disagreements, most teens continue to report having a close relationship with their parents, and as mentioned earlier, they still report parents as being a significant influence on their lives. So parents need to continue talking to their teens and maintaining an open line of communication, rather than simply trying to avoid disagreements.

Facts about peer friendships:

- **Teens often have multiple layers and groups of friendships.** Unlike in childhood, when friendships usually meant two or more close friends, teens often have multiple friends and belong to multiple groups. They might have intimate and close relationships with one or a handful of individuals, and might also belong to one or more ‘cliques’ or groups of friends that have similar demographics (sex, race, socioeconomic status), orientation towards school, and other interests.
- **Peer friendships are dynamic.** This simply means that peer friendships may change. For instance, while teens can have friendships that are long term, they often move from one clique to another, and they might develop new friendships and lose others.
- **Peers tend to choose those who are similar to themselves.** Whether it is gender, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or interests, teens tend to gravitate towards those who are more similar to them.
- **Peer friendships can be a healthy venue for positive youth development.** Peer friendships can be a safe place for youth to explore their identity, learn about social norms, and practice their autonomy. Healthy friendships provide youth with social support for dealing with some of the challenges of adolescence, and can also provide youth with some of the most positive experiences during those years. Many teens report having some of the happiest and most fun moments with their peers, likely due to shared interests as well close relationships.

Effective Strategies for Coping with Peer Pressure

While the point has been made here that peer influence and peer pressure do not necessarily have to be negative, peer pressure can lead youth towards unhealthy and unsafe behaviors. To minimize the negative effects of peer pressure, youth, parents, school and community leaders must come together to establish workable and effective strategies to guide teen behavior and to support their transition from children to mature, responsible adults. Here are several strategies to consider (partly based on Brown, 1990):

1. **Nurture teens’ abilities and self-esteem so that they are equipped to foster positive peer relationships and deflect negative pressures.** Adolescents with positive self-concept and self-worth will be less likely to be easily swayed to follow others’ negative influences. It is essential that these aspects of positive development should be encouraged in youth.
2. **Encourage positive relationships between significant adults and teens.** Parents, teachers, school counselors, other relatives and professionals should try to have constructive and positive relationships with teens. These can serve as good models for healthy relationships, and can be a venue through which the teens can feel valued and where they can develop positive views about themselves. Youth should know that they can go to these caring adults for help or advice about their peer relationships.
3. **Encourage diverse relationships.** Parents, teachers, community leaders, and clergy can model appreciation for ethnic, gender, socioeconomic status, religious, and other differences and support cross-group friendships. Schools and youth organizations can assist by encouraging youth from diverse backgrounds to work and play together.
4. **Support parent education programs for families with teenagers.** Parents need to be better informed about the dynamics of adolescent peer groups and the demands and expectations teenagers face in peer relationships. Information is available through various sources including books, some parenting magazines, and other publications such as this one. Keep your eye out for programs particularly targeted towards families and teen issues that might be available. Seeking information is not a sign of weakness, and showing interest in these issues might actually show your teens that you are concerned about them.
5. **Equip youth with the skills necessary to resist negative behaviors, as well as to make good decisions.** Teens will inevitably be confronted with situations where they will have to make a decision whether or not to engage in certain behaviors, whether to give in to peer pressure, and also to make other difficult decisions. It is essential that youth are given the necessary skills to analyze the situation and make the appropriate decision. This includes helping youth develop the skills for ‘costs vs. benefits’ analysis – teaching them to look at both the negative and positive sides to making a decision. For instance, if being pressured to smoke, the teen should be able to think about what the possible desired outcomes are (e.g., peer ac-

ceptance, looking “cool,” feeling excitement about trying something new) with the possible undesirable outcomes (e.g., becoming hooked, the health issues, smelling bad, the financial costs).

- 6. Teaching youth exit strategies or ways to say ‘no’ to negative pressures.** It is best to try to deal with peer pressure before it even happens. Talk to youth about potential scenarios, and think through strategies together on how to deal with those scenarios if they arise. This could be done by discussing hypothetical scenarios or even role-playing. It is helpful to think about these things ahead of time rather than dealing with situations as they occur or trying to recover after they happen.

Summary

During adolescence, peers play a large part in a young person’s life even while the family continues to be significant. In general, peer friendships offer youth with many positive opportunities despite the negative connotations that peer relationships have to many of us. Peer relationships are actually important for healthy development and essential for youth to develop into healthy adults.

Nonetheless, peer relationships also have the potential to encourage problem behaviors. Although the negative influence of peers is often over-emphasized, more can be done to help teenagers experience the family and the peer group as mutually constructive environments. To accomplish this, families, communities, churches, schools, 4-H and other youth groups can all contribute to helping youth develop positive peer relationships, and deflect negative peer pressures and influences.

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Acknowledgment

This publication is partly based on NebFact 211, “Adolescence and Peer Pressure” by Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Specialist.

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Issued August 2007

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