

Peer pressure

Peer groups are important for young people as they prepare for the adult world. They help them learn how to get along with others, work out their own values and identity, and develop skills to become independent.

When parents start early to help children understand the values that are important in their family, to make decisions for themselves and have good self-esteem, it helps them form positive peer groups and resist negative peer influence.

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Why are peer groups important?

Belonging to peer groups can be a great benefit for young people. It helps them:

- learn to communicate with people their own age
- make new friends who like similar activities
- develop a sense of belonging
- feel understood by others who are going through many of the same life experiences
- test out their ideas and values
- work out what they like by trying out different things such as ways of dressing, music choices, activities and interests
- become more confident as they expand their range of experiences
- improve their ability to make their own choices and trust their own judgement
- learn about dating and forming relationships
- increase skills in becoming independent.



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Things you might worry about

Losing your influence

It's normal for young people to seek the views and advice of peers, particularly for things that are sensitive or embarrassing. If you are used to your children coming to you for advice it may seem they don't value your views any more. However, if they know you will listen and help them work out their own solutions they are more likely to talk to you about what is happening for them.

Risk taking

The teenage brain is 'hard-wired' for risk. It prompts them to experience things for themselves as they prepare to become independent adults. While involvement in peer groups can sometimes result in young people taking negative risks, peer groups can also bring positive new experiences.

These positive risks help build confidence and expand a young person's skills and interests. For example, a peer group may have high expectations about doing well at school, about showing leadership or being active and healthy. They might take up a new activity such as indoor rock climbing, or form a band and perform in front of their peers. When parents encourage and provide opportunities for positive and healthy risk-taking, young people have less need to take negative risks.

Parents are the most important influence in children's lives, even in adolescence. A strong, loving relationship and staying connected with your teen can help protect them from any negative effect of peer pressure.

Negative influence

Parents often worry about the negative influence of peer groups particularly when it comes to risky behaviour such as drinking or drug taking. However, peer groups don't usually force or directly pressure someone to do something against their will. It is more about the person choosing to do something because they want acceptance by the group, to belong and feel valued. Young people with poor self-esteem are more likely to respond to negative peer influence.

Teens not saying 'no'

Even adults who have more experience and confidence find it hard to go against their peers. Studies show that only 1 in 3 adults speak out when they are not happy with something in their peer group. A young person is more



able to say 'no' if they are confident in making their own decisions and know their own limits e.g. they know when something is 'going too far' for them.

Your family values being lost

Young people are exploring the values of friends and role models as well as developing values from their own independent thinking. For a while it may seem they've thrown out the important values you taught them, but they are really just testing these values out.

Young people will form their own individual identity and take on values from a mix of all they have learned.

What you can do

When parents are involved and interested, when they stay tuned in and emotionally connected, teens tend to make better choices for themselves.

It can help to:

- start early to help children understand the values that are important in your family
- encourage them to make day-to-day decisions at each stage of their development and to think about consequences as they get older
- support them to develop friendship skills e.g. communication, sharing and taking turns, empathy, flexibility, considering others' point of view, self-control and 'making up' when things go wrong. It is also important to help them choose friends who share their interests rather than choosing friends just because they are popular
- be a good role model. Teens are more likely to take harmful risks if they see their parents doing this. They will copy what you do rather than do what you say
- talk often. Be interested in what they do, ask questions that show your interest and listen without interrupting to give advice
- strengthen your teen's self-esteem and belief in themselves by praising effort rather than results e.g. when they get a good school report you could say "You worked really hard to get those grades" rather than "You're so clever". When young people have good self-esteem it helps them form positive peer groups and be true to themselves when experiencing negative peer influence
- encourage them to develop a wide social network by spending time with different people and groups
- talk with them about the pressure they might feel to fit in with a group. Support them to think about ways to say 'no' when a group is doing something they are not comfortable with. Let them know they can blame you if needed e.g. "I have to have the car home by 10pm because mum/dad needs it"
- make sure they have access to good information about safer sex, drugs and alcohol, sexuality and relationships
- be open to discussing any issue, no matter how sensitive. This can balance information provided by a peer group
- have rules about safe and appropriate mobile phone and social media use
- get to know the friends and groups that are important to your teen. Invite them over so they get to know you and your family. Get to know their parents too.

Help your teen understand the pressure they might feel to have certain things to fit in with their peers or what they see in the media e.g. a particular mobile phone, or designer clothes that their favourite celebrity wears. Help them explore what it would mean to have/not have these items. You may be happy for your teen to have them but it is important they understand their self-esteem does not rely on it.

Help children and young people understand that self-worth comes from the inside rather than from 'things' or the opinions of others.

Peer pressure

Getting help

If you are worried about your teen and negative peer influence you could:

- help them find groups that have similar interests e.g. hobby clubs
- encourage them to talk with another safe adult such as a relative, family friend or school counsellor if they don't want to talk with you. You could also help them find mentors who can expand their horizons and bring new experiences into their life
- talk to someone who can help. Your doctor, a health professional or the services in this Guide are good places to find information and support.



When you are worried about a peer group

You may not be comfortable with your teen's choice of peer groups. This may be because a group is into risky things such as using alcohol or drugs, missing school, shoplifting or vandalising property.

Some parents try to enforce rules and monitor activities to stop their teen mixing with the 'wrong' groups. If you do this, you could risk them lying to you or becoming more determined to be part of the group.

It might help to:

- think about whether your concerns about their friends are really important. Don't get caught up in minor things such as how they dress
- talk to your teen about the behaviour in the group that worries you rather than criticising their friends. This is like criticising them and it is likely you will lose some of your influence. Help them think about potential

consequences of the behaviour and how this might affect their future e.g. negative images on social media

- keep communicating. Be willing to listen rather than tell them what to do. Help them problem-solve if there are difficulties
- show your trust. If they break your trust, ask them to suggest ways they could rebuild it. Don't dwell on their error in judgement — we all make the wrong decision at times. It is more important to help them learn from their mistakes.



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