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The M.D.

A teen's friends are a powerful influence

Behavior is almost contagious among teenagers. Good behavior by peers can spread through the group. But bad behavior can also be modeled.

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My parents had it pretty easy with me when I was a teenager. I was a bit of a nerd. I earned straight A's in school, ran for student government and spent much of my free time watching reruns of "Little House on the Prairie." And they had little to complain about when it came to my friends — most of them were as straight as I was. My mom and dad considered them a positive influence.

Many parents aren't nearly this lucky. Their teens run with kids who prefer partying to homework or fistfights to team sports. It's only natural for these parents to worry about the way their children are being influenced. And it's only logical for them to wonder: Should I allow my child to spend time with these kids at all?

"It's a tricky issue," says Mitch Prinstein, director of clinical psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and editor of the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*. "It's a fair and appropriate question for parents to be asking themselves."

The influence that friends exert over one another as teenagers is clearly powerful and, far too often, undesirable. Unhealthy behaviors can be almost contagious among kids this age. Teens whose friends smoke, drink or use drugs, for example, are more likely to indulge in these behaviors themselves. Aggressive, illegal or self-injurious behaviors also have a tendency to cluster among friend groups, as do concerns about body image and eating.

A study published in February in the *Journal of Early Adolescence* showed that friendships can also make the difference between good and bad grades at school. Researchers at the University of Oregon surveyed more than 1,200 middle school students and asked them to identify their three best friends. They found that students whose friends were prone to misbehave didn't do as well in school as kids whose friends were socially active in positive ways, such as participating in sports at school or completing their homework on time.

Even though it's easy for parents to blame their children's bad behavior on peers and assume that other kids coerce them into doing things like drinking, smoking, stealing or cheating, poor decision-making among teens isn't all about *pressure*. Kids actively want to emulate their peers. During adolescence, they are looking for ways to separate from their families and begin to define themselves as individuals. To that end, they turn to friends for guidance and direction. They tend to mimic their peers' behaviors and adopt the same attitudes. Conforming to social norms helps them redefine themselves while earning them acceptance and approval. Fitting in simply feels good.

Parents, discouraged by the changes they see in their children, naturally try to intervene. They may encourage their kids to spend less time with friends they perceive as troublemakers or forbid these friendships entirely. But interfering in a teenager's life too much, particularly with friendships, can make matters worse. "Meddling with children's relationships has a high potential for backfiring," Prinstein says. "It can actually fuel rebellion."

There are things parents can do, however, to temper the influence that teenagers have on one another. "Helping your child develop a sense of identity and feel secure in that identity is probably the best antidote," Prinstein says. That's not easy. Adolescents can no longer be told what to believe or how to behave. They have to be allowed to develop their own sense of what's important.

Teens require a certain amount of independence. But that doesn't mean they should have free rein. Adolescents aren't exactly known for their good decision-making, and parents need to impose some boundaries. When rules are broken and friends are involved, there need to be consequences — reasonable ones. Rather than trying to break up a friendship, parents might want to "ground" a teen's social life, allowing the child to see friends at home under watchful parental eyes but not to go out with them.

The good news is that adolescence doesn't last forever. Kids are most susceptible to their peers' influence during middle school, around the age of 13 or 14. By high school, there's already a dramatic shift in the way their brains are working, and the sway that other kids hold over them isn't nearly as strong.

I have two teenage daughters, and both have wonderful friends. The girls they choose to spend time with are hard-working and bright, and I can count on them to make good choices most of the time. It's my 9-year-old son I worry most about at this point. Though with him, I'm not sure what I'm most afraid of: The influence his friends will have over him or the naughty behavior he'll model for his pals.

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Sex and peer pressure

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Neil Bernstein, a clinical psychologist writes about how to understand peer pressure, sex and talk to teenagers about it. You can read an excerpt from his book, "How to Keep Your Teenagers Out of Trouble and What to Do if You Can't," below:

Resisting Negative Peer Pressure

No influence in your teenager's life is as powerful as peer pressure. At its best, it can mobilize his energy, motivate him to strive for success, and encourage him to conform to a healthy group norm. At its worst, peer pressure can impair good judgment and fuel risk-taking behavior, drawing a child away from the family and positive influences and luring him into dangerous activities.

No matter what kind of peer pressure your children face, they must learn how to balance the value of going along with the crowd against the importance of making their own decisions. And you must ensure that your teen is comfortable with himself so that he will be able to achieve that balance. I have found in my practice that the more comfortable a teen is with his identity, the less susceptible he will be to negative peer pressure—a force that almost always leads kids to some form of trouble. Don't let anyone, including your teen, tell you that negative peer pressure is not your business. It most definitely is, and you must find a way to teach your teenager how to deal with it maturely and responsibly.

Peer pressure comes in many different forms. I find that when most parents think of peer pressure they imagine variations on the type of situation where a bunch of teens are drinking or smoking something while one abstainer is being taunted that "everyone's doing it." This is only one way in which peer pressure can exert itself.

Peer pressure usually depends on the kind of peer group your child hangs out with—or the one she aspires to. Some teens run with the popular crowd. They may worry that not going along with their friends will make them outcasts or at least less popular. Then there are kids who are not in the popular group but would like to be. These teens are likely to go along with things in the hopes that it will buy them the acceptance and elevated social status they crave. There are other groups where one strong personality dominates and that person uses his or her influence over the others to lead the group into trouble. And there are kids who are not popular per se but have their own cliques. They are usually known by stereotypical labels: punks, geeks, deadheads, burnouts, and so on. Kids who are a part of these groups do not worry about what the mainstream kids think, but they worry intensely what members of their own group do. While they may think (or look like) they are bucking trends, they may be succumbing to a different set of pressures.

Why Peer Pressure Is So Powerful

As I've mentioned before, the very nature of adolescence compels teens to keep a close eye on their peers. They are struggling to define their own identities, and because they're not yet sure who they are, they're self-conscious and curious about how other people behave. It's natural for them to try to understand themselves by looking at their friends to see how others are resolving the same issues.

Even little kids worry about making friends and being liked. But during adolescence, these fears intensify. Adolescence brings with it so much awkwardness and uncertainty, as teens find their bodies, interests, and priorities all changing at once. Belonging to a group of friends affirms their self-worth and supports them as they negotiate the rocky path toward adulthood. As they distance themselves from their parents, they increasingly use their friends as their primary confidants and rely upon their advice and support. Naturally, close friends are well suited to this role because those are the people most likely to rubber-stamp the individual's feelings and patiently listen to his or her ruminations on life. In a normal situation, a close group of friends offers a sounding board as well as camaraderie and solace. But in a bad situation, teens adhere to their friends' bad or ignorant advice and opinions instead of thinking for themselves or seeking a more informed opinion. Some teenagers fail to realize when they have become

excessively dependent on their friends in a way that robs them of their independence and individuality. In these cases their friends have become a crutch—a way for teens to avoid making their own decisions and developing their own personality and tastes.

The Effects of Peer Pressure

It's not surprising that peer pressure has such an impact on your teenager's clothes, language, attitudes, and behavior. Even reasonably independent teens are not immune to the culture of conformity. Whether you like it or not, the opinions of your teenager's peers often carry more weight than yours. After all, who does she spend most of her time with? Trust me: she's not concerned about whether you think she's cool. But if one of her friends should look askance at something she does or says, that could make her crumple in a heap of insecurity.

All teenagers will be exposed to peer pressure at one time or another. Parents may worry about their children's susceptibility to adverse influences, but most teenagers seem to have a sense of when things have gone too far and when they should make their own decision rather than just going along with the crowd. And usually the influence of the peer group gradually subsides as young people mature.

Most teens I talk to don't necessarily see peer pressure as a bad thing; it's just a part of their lives. You've probably been struck by the change in your child's behavior when his friends are around. It's as if he has a special personality reserved for his peer group. Since being cool earns them status, teens devote a lot of their energy to this pursuit.

Types of Peer Pressure

1. Positive peer pressure. Any situation in which peers support and encourage constructive actions for one another is positive peer pressure. This is the type of age-appropriate peer pressure that we want to encourage. For example: team members push one another to get psyched up for a big game, or a friend encourages your teen to stay home and study hard for an upcoming exam.
2. ~~Neutral peer pressure. This is the naturally occurring peer pressure to go along with the crowd in a way that's not harmful to others. This type of pressure occurs frequently in the teenage years and should not be considered a problem. For example: your son's friends encourage him to go with them to the movie they're all dying to see, or a friend tells your daughter that everyone's going to the football game Friday night and asks if she's coming too.~~
3. Negative peer pressure. This undesirable peer pressure to do something that places a teen in danger or is hurtful to others is definitely cause for concern. For example: your daughter's boyfriend encourages her to try using ecstasy and insists it will be fun, or your son's friends ask him to bring his baseball bat when they gather to drive around town so that they can knock down people's mailboxes.

All teenagers will succumb to peer pressure every now and then; it's perfectly normal. But make certain that your child can resist negative influences because consistently taking excessive risks and engaging in hurtful behavior suggests a more serious problem.

What's considered cool and what's uncool varies widely from year to year and from school to school. Cool behavior can range from dressing in trendy styles to being good at a certain sport to being sarcastic to parents; uncool behavior often includes displaying excessive affection and obedience toward parents, reaching out to an unpopular classmate, and expressing interest in schoolwork.

While not all teenagers follow the cool/uncool code of their social set, they're certainly aware of it. Many feel they have to act a certain way because it's expected of them. That explains why they put on a show for their friends, going out of their way to do things that would never be tolerated in their own homes. It's all to gain acceptance from their peer group.

It usually takes some convincing to get your teenager to understand that peer pressure can be dangerous. If you talk to him openly, observe his behavior carefully, and listen to him nonjudgmentally, you'll begin to understand the pressure he's under. He may be coaxed to drink, smoke cigarettes, and use drugs, encouraged to cut school, dared to join his friends in other risky activities, or expected to be cruel to unpopular kids. Teens are able to weather this onslaught if their resolve is strong, but it helps them to know that you understand the enormous pressures they face.

Parents Talk About Peer Pressure

"I can't stand the kids my son hangs out with. They all look suspicious to me. I'm never sure what they're up to, and I'm afraid he'll just go along with anything they say. I don't know what to do about it."

"Our daughter spends most of her time worrying about what her friends will think. The clothes she wears, the food she eats, the movies she sees . . . everything she does seems to be for an audience. We try to talk her out of it sometimes, but she won't listen."

"Peer pressure is probably our greatest fear. We like to think our kid is informed about all the dangers out there, but you never know. It just takes one convincing teenager and a moment of weakness, and boom, he's in trouble."

Do these voices sound familiar? Most of you know very well how susceptible your teenager is to outside influences. You worry a lot about it, and with good reason. There are so many ways for today's youth to get into trouble. Alcohol and drugs are readily available, the pressure to be sexually active is strong, pornography and hate group propaganda are available on the Internet, firearms can be bought by almost anyone, and having fun sometimes lurches consciously or unconsciously into hurting other people. This gives parents a lot to worry about.

You desperately want your children to use restraint and good judgment when they're tempted to do inappropriate or illegal things, but this can be very difficult for a teenager craving acceptance. Therefore you have to take an active role in helping your teen develop a tough skin toward peer pressure. You can't supervise them every hour of the day, so you have to prepare them for making decisions on their own. If you've discussed the risks with them, instilled in them a sense of pride, and raised them with a solid set of values, they'll be more likely to withstand the pressures they'll face and more likely to choose friends who are positive influences. They might even be better off for the experience of resisting challenges.

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