

## Adolescence and Peer Pressure

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As children grow, develop, and move into early adolescence, involvement with one's peers and the attraction of peer identification increases. As pre-adolescents begin rapid physical, emotional and social changes, they begin to question adult standards and the need for parental guidance. They find it reassuring to turn for advice to friends who understand and sympathize - friends who are in the same position themselves. By "trying on" new values and testing their ideas with their peers, there is with less fear of being ridiculed or "shot down". Yet, mention the word "peer pressure" and many adults cringe because the words are laden with negative connotations. The idea that someone, or something, lures our children into learning dangerous and destructive behavior by discarding all parental behaviors and values, scares adults.

The fact is, peer pressure can be positive. It keeps youth participating in religious activities, going to 4-H meetings and playing on sports teams, even when they are not leaders. It keeps adults going to religious services, serving on community committees and supporting worthwhile causes. The peer group is a source of affection, sympathy and understanding; a place for experimentation; and a supportive setting for achieving the two primary developmental tasks of adolescence. These are: (1) identity — finding the answer to the question "Who Am I?" and (2) autonomy - discovering that self as separate and independent from parents. It is no wonder, then, that adolescents like to spend time with their peers.

Peers and Adolescence

At adolescence, peer relations expand to occupy a particularly central role in young people's lives. New types (e.g., opposite sex, romantic ties) and levels (e.g., "crowds") of peer relationships emerge. Peers typically replace the family as the center of a young person's socializing and leisure activities. Teenagers have multiple peer relationships, and they confront multiple "peer" cultures that have remarkably different norms and value systems.

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. Here are some facts about parent, adolescent and peer relations:

During adolescence, parents and adolescents become more physically and psychologically distant from each other. This normal distancing is seen in decreases in emotional closeness and warmth, increases in parent-adolescent conflict and disagreement, and an increase in time adolescents spend with peers. Unfortunately, this sometimes is caused because parents are emotionally unavailable to their teenaged children.

Increases in family strains (economic pressures, divorce, etc.) have prompted teenagers to depend more on peers for emotional support. By the high school years, most teenagers report feeling closer to friends than parents. Stress caused by work, marital dissatisfaction, family break-up caused by divorce, entering a step-family relationship, lower family income or increasing expenses, all produce increased individual and family stress.

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.

In 10 to 20 percent of families, parents and adolescents are in distressed relationships characterized by emotional coldness and frequent outbursts of anger and conflict. Unresolved conflicts produce discouragement and withdrawal from family life. Adolescents in these families are at high risk for various psychological and behavioral problems.

Youth gangs, commonly associated with inner-city neighborhoods, are becoming a recognizable peer group among youth in smaller cities, suburbs, and even rural areas. Gangs are particularly visible in communities with a significant portion of economically disadvantaged families and when the parent is conflictual, distant or unavailable.

Formal dating patterns of two generations ago have been replaced with informal socializing patterns in mixed-sex groups. This may encourage casual sexual relationships that heighten the risk of exposure to AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

As high schools become more culturally diverse environments, ethnicity is replacing individual abilities or interests as the basis for defining peer "crowds." Crowds can be an important source of ethnic identity, but also the center of racial and ethnic tension in schools.

There has been an increase in part-time employment among youth, but it has had little impact on peer relations. To find time for work,

teenagers drop extracurricular activities, reduce time spent on homework, and withdraw from family interactions, but they "protect" time spent with friends.

### Adolescents and the Community

All of these factors may or may not fit a particular community, school or family. However, there is a tendency to deny some of these changes that are taking place. Sometimes communities think it is the family's total responsibility to monitor the negative effects of peer relationships over which they have little control. It is critically important that communities provide a safe, supportive, nurturing environment for adolescents as they grow up. At the same time, families must provide limits and expectations for all members to live by.

The community an adolescent lives in has a major impact on whether she or he will pay more attention to adults or to other young people. Findings from a study of several hundred teenagers in several communities - a rural area, a poor inner-city neighborhood with many minority residents, and an upper-middle class suburb — tell us that we cannot draw sweeping conclusions about teenagers as if they were all alike.

Urban teenagers faced with conflicting standards of family, school and social agencies were apt to reject all these values and create their own, often among peers. Suburban and rural teens, however, were more likely to have values very close to those held by the important adults in their lives - they might question adult values, but they wanted consistent rules and standards they could evaluate.

### Effective Strategies for Coping With Peer Pressure

If the negative effect of peer pressure is to be minimized, 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 (Brown, 1990):

Relinquish the stereotype of peers as a uniformly negative influence on youth. Although some teenage peer groups encourage drug use, delinquent activities and poor school performance, others discourage deviant activity in favor of school achievement and involvement in sports or other extra-curricular activities (e.g., 4-H, music, religious activities).

Nurture teenagers' abilities and self-esteem so they can forge positive peer relationships. The parent, schools and other agencies can be taught how to help develop the adolescent's self-concept and self-worth so he or she is a valued person.

Empower parents and educators to help teenagers pursue and maintain positive peer relationships. They can provide adolescents with the opportunity to succeed in constructive ways which are valued by the teen, the parent and the community alike.

Encourage cross-ethnic and "cross-class" peer interactions and guide teenagers in dealing positively with cultural diversity and individual differences. Parents, teachers, community leaders, and clergy can model appreciation for ethnic differences and support cross-class and cross-ethnic friendships. Schools and youth organizations can assist by encouraging youth from diverse backgrounds to work and play together.

Place sensible restraints on part-time teen employment. This could ease adolescents' compliance with peer pressures to "buy" acceptance into a peer group (i.e., to have enough money for the "right" clothes, the "right" shoes, the "right" CDs, etc.). Increases in

part-time employment among youth have had little impact on the time they spend with peers.

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.

Establish intervention programs for preadolescents with low social skills or aggressive tendencies. Addressing these problems before adolescence will decrease the chances of these youth joining anti-social peer groups that will reinforce their problem behaviors.

### Summary

During adolescence, peers play a large part in a young person's life and typically replace family as the center of a teen's social and leisure activities. But teenagers have various peer relationships, and they interact with many peer groups. Often "peer cultures" have very different values and norms. Thus, the adult perception of peers as a "united 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 influence of peers is 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 must work together because it "takes a whole village to raise a child."