



The agony and ecstasy of teenage peer groups

by Michael Grose

Young people generally want to fit into their various social groups so peer approval is a significant driver for their behaviour. For a young person, resisting peer influence can mean isolation or instant ostracism so it sometimes takes great strength of will to refuse to follow the crowd.

Having a group of friends is one of the most important parts of being an adolescent. It is how teenagers learn to get on in the world of their own age group and to gradually become independent. It is important for parents to understand the value of peer groups for young people and also to remember that peers can be positive influences.

Positive peers

Peer groups can give young people a sense of belonging, which gives them an increased sense of self-confidence. These groups also provide safe testing grounds for attitudes and values outside their family at a time when young people are trying to define their identity. By and large, peers can be very supportive of each other. However, they can also be judgemental and can be the cause of heartache when conflict or alienation occurs.

Unwanted peer pressure

While the increased influence of peers is a normal part of a young person's development, they can sometimes use some help to resist any pressure to conform that is placed on them.

The following ideas may assist you to help young people resist unwanted peer pressure:

1. Talk about peer influence with your young person

Be open and frank about the subject. Call peer pressure out for what it is: unwanted pressure to conform to the views or behaviours of others. Let him or her know that while much of the influence of their friends is positive, some is definitely not in their best interests.

2. Help young people say 'no' while still saving face and status among their friends

Ask them how they would refuse an offer of a cigarette, an illegal substance or an invitation to behave in a way that they felt uncomfortable with. How could they say no? What words could they use? How could they react if they were pestered? How can they refuse and still be 'cool' and accepted by others? Be upfront with them – after all, their peers will be.

3. Be the scapegoat that they need

Many young people in the 11 to 14 age group are frequently pressured by early maturers to act older than they are. They are often asked to go to places or behave in ways that make them feel unsafe or uncomfortable. In these situations, kids need a scapegoat and that should be you. Allow them to blame you for not letting them

do something they don't feel comfortable with but can't admit to.

4. Go easy on praise

Parents who use praise like a nervous tic are setting their kids up to be susceptible to peer pressure. When we continually praise kids for their good behaviour, good marks at school and good performance in any of their leisure activities we are inadvertently making their sense of self-esteem dependent on the approval of others. Peers replace parents as the source of approval in adolescence.

5. Teach your young person to shrug

Sometimes an attitude of nonchalance is a young person's best friend, particularly when a peer makes a snide remark about their choice of clothes, their appearance or their friend. An 'I-don't-care-what-you-think' attitude conveyed with a shrug of the shoulders and a 'whatever' look may be the best weapon to use against such unwanted peer pressure.

Peers and parents

Belonging to a peer group is a significant stepping stone away from their family for most teenagers. While friends can never replace family, they help young people start the transition from being a compliant member of their family to eventually starting a family of their own in adulthood. Peers can have their own code of conduct, their own set of rules and their own expectations which maybe different to those experienced in the family. So what's a parent to do? Embrace their young person's friends. Here's how:

- Make them welcome in your home. Take an interest in them and get to know them.
- Set some house rules regarding what's acceptable in your house, but don't be too heavy handed as you want your home to be a welcoming place for young people.
- Provide space and privacy for your teenager and their friends in your home.
- Keep some food available and encourage them to make their own snacks and clean up their own mess.
- Be firm about your views on acceptable videos, alcohol use and sexual activities at home.



Disapproval of friends

It is common for parents to disapprove of their young person's choice of friends, due to those friends' behaviour or poor reputation, or the adverse influence they may have. This is a testing issue for many parents as it very often means they need to trust their young person's judgement. Criticising a young person's choice of friends is like criticising them personally so parents need to be careful how they handle these issues.

Finally

Peer groups are generally a positive influence but it is natural to have concerns about a young person's choice of peers. Get to know your children's friends and make your home a teenager friendly place. Give your young person some skills to recognise and resist adverse peer pressure and display your trust in his or her ability to make smart choices.



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