

Friends are everything to teens

There is no doubt that friends are very important to teens. Teens often describe their best friends as the ones who “understand exactly how I feel.” Teen’s friendships change as they mature. From a wider circle of friends in middle school or junior high, teens move on to fewer but closer friendships as they get older.

Peers, cliques, and crowds

Understanding a few terms can help parents appreciate their teen’s social world a little bit better.

The peer group is made up of a larger group of friends and acquaintances of roughly the same age who share similar experiences (e.g., other teens in a class). The peer group is needed by teens for support in figuring out talents and interests, social skills, independence from adults, problem solving, and emotional support.

Within the peer group, a teen might belong to a clique or smaller, closer group of friends with common interests (e.g., small group of friends who hang out together regularly on weekends). Parents might think of cliques negatively, but they can be the place where teens go to check out what to say or do, who to hang out with, or what to wear. Cliques provide even more emotional and social support for the teen than the larger group of peers.

A third group in the social structure are crowds which are made up of teens with specific interests and abilities. Parents may want to think about the kinds of crowds that existed when they were growing up (e.g., “brains” for those with academic success). Teens today might have similar crowds but with different names. Today’s crowds are also determined by current pop culture and will vary according to groups within the school population. A teen might be in a clique of close friends, but still belong to one or more crowds



because of interests and abilities. Crowds are not always self-defined; sometimes peers decide which crowd a teen belongs to.

Teens may go to all three groups – peers, cliques, and crowds – to meet different needs.

What parents can do

It is important for parents to support their teen’s friendships and interactions with peers. By doing so, parents will increase the likelihood of keeping a healthy but growing relationship with their teen. This can be hard because as children approach the teen years – teens will want to spend more time with peers. Sometimes parents might feel hurt at the change in their relationship with their child who once chose to spend time with them. Despite this, some of the ways parents can be supportive include:

- Know your teen’s friends. If you show a genuine

and non-intrusive interest, teens are less likely to see their parents and friends as completely separate from each other.

- Form your opinions only after getting to know your teen's friends. Don't rush to a quick judgment based only on first impressions of dress, appearance, or rumors about the friend's behavior.
- Make your home a welcoming place for your teen and their friends. That might include having a gathering spot that's private but still allows you to keep track of what's going on. Having plenty of snacks and drinks on hand will help too.
- Offer to include friends as part of family gatherings. Teens may not be excited about being a part of family events they once enjoyed. Having a friend along will make it more fun for your teen and will also give you the chance to get to know his/her friends.
- For younger teens, you might offer to drive them and their friends.

Concerned about your teen's choice of friends?

Sometimes parents may be concerned about the reputation of their teen's friends or choices the friends have made. Teens seek out those with similar interests and those who do things they think they might want to do. If you are concerned, parents need to keep a close eye on their teen's activities. Tips for parents include:

- Don't encourage friendships you don't approve of. But also, don't openly criticize your teen's friends, your teen will resent this.
- Be clear about the family's bottom line – those non-negotiable rules that involve your teen's health and safety. Reserve rules for those issues most important to you and your family.
- Keep working on the relationship with your teen. As your child grows up, your relationship will need to change, be open to that, and look forward to the opportunities to grow together.

Where you can go for more information:

Families with Teens – University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/

Teen Talk Fact Sheet: But Everybody's Doin' It... – University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/fact-sheets/teen-talk-everybody.pdf

Parent Further: A Search Institute Resource for Families
www.parentfurther.com/parenting/friends

Parenting 24/7 – University of Illinois Extension
<http://parenting247.org/>

The Teen Years – Education.com
www.education.com/age/teen-years/

You may also want to look at:

Wolf, A. E. (2002). *Get out of my life but first could you drive me and Cheryl to the mall? A parent's guide to the new teenager*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Wiseman, R. (2002). *Queen bees & wannabes: Helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends & other realities of adolescence*. New York: Three Rivers Press.