



## HELPING TEENS NAVIGATE PEER RELATIONSHIPS

# Peers, Cliques, and Crowds – What do they mean for my teen?

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It's natural for teens to focus more on their peers than their parents. Friends are everything to most teens. It is important for families to understand this and not discount the importance of friends and peers to their teens. Families can be supportive and helpful as teens navigate their way through the maze of peers, cliques, and crowds.

### DEFINING TERMS

To help understand teens' interactions with peers, it is useful to look at some terms. Young people distinguish between "peers" and "friends" even though to adults the words may seem interchangeable.

For teens, the **peer group** includes a relatively large group of friends and acquaintances of roughly the same age who share similar experiences. Teens spend twice as much time with peers as with their family or other adults. The peer group provides many things for a teen, including:

- Support for figuring out abilities and interests.
- The chance to learn how to interact with others.
- Independence from adults.
- A way to learn how to deal with problems.
- Emotional support.
- Opportunities to develop friendships.



Within the overall category of peer groups, there are "cliques" and "crowds." A **clique** is a small group in which members feel they know each other well and appreciate each other better than do people outside the clique.

Teens will go to the clique for help in answering questions, for example, what to say and do, who to hang out with, and what to wear. Cliques can include peers the teen chooses or through circumstances that put a group of young people together, such as an after-school club. Cliques can have both positive and



negative influences on teens. Cliques can provide support to teens.

Another type of peer structure is the **crowd**. This term refers to larger, reputation-based groups of teens who may or may not spend time together in school and out of school. Crowds can define the various parts of the social structure within a school based in part on interests, abilities, and values.

One of the crowds usually identified in most schools is the “popular” crowd. Concern over being popular can take up a lot of energy for some teens. There are different ways to look at or define popularity. One perspective that comes to mind immediately is the view of popularity often portrayed in the media.

The “popular” crowd usually consists of the pretty or most handsome people with the best clothing and cars. The media also usually depicts “popular” teens as unkind or cruel people who frequently make life miserable for peers. Some of the “popular” teens also form cliques that wield a lot of power in the school social scene. The power exists in part because other teens don’t challenge that power; they may be envious of the clique members’ status and/or intimidated.

Another view of “popular” crowds comes from parenting expert Dr. Laurence Steinberg. He says truly popular teens are friendly, helpful, enthusiastic, good-natured, humorous, and intelligent. Popular teens also:

- Perceive and respond to others’ needs,
- Are confident and assertive without being cocky,
- Like to have fun in positive ways, and
- Behave in ways peers consider appropriate for their age.

### **HOW PARENTS CAN HELP**

For parents, it is helpful to consider the preceding definitions of terms as they seek to help teens navigate peer relationships and challenging situations. For example, teens may want to join a popular crowd. Parents may need to help teens see the difference between having close friends in a clique they are comfortable in and fits their interests and values and desiring to be in a clique that is unattainable for the teen or a bad fit. The unattainable clique may be the one with some of the popular crowd in it. Parents can help teens sort out the different meanings of “popular” so they can decide for themselves whether it’s worth pursuing friendships in a particular group or not.

Sometimes teens are drawn to a popular group because they are having a hard time finding where they belong. They can get into a clique that doesn’t really fit with who they are. Teens are more susceptible to making poor choices if they are uncomfortable in the clique. Parents of teens struggling to find their niche need to be careful not to push their teen into attempts to be popular. For instance, overindulgence in clothing and other material items to help a teen gain status can do more harm than good if the teen isn’t comfortable in the group, and the group doesn’t reflect their interests and values.

The good news is that as teenagers get older, belonging to a clique or a crowd becomes less important and closer relationships with smaller groups of friends become more important. Ninth



grade is about the time peer pressure peaks and also when teens' desire for identifying with a clique or crowd peaks.

### WHEN CONCERN IS WARRANTED

There are circumstances regarding friendships and peers when parents should be concerned:

- If your teen appears to have no friends, he or she may need some help learning how to make and keep friends.
- If your teen is secretive about his or her friends, it could be because he or she thinks you may not approve of his or her choice of friends.
- If your teen suddenly loses interest in friends and wants to be alone for more than a two week period, he or she may be suffering from depression.
- If all your teen's friends are much older, he or she might be involved in some risky behaviors.



Maintaining a strong parent-teen relationship and keeping the lines of communication open is vital in all of these circumstances. You may need to rebuild that relationship if it has weakened over time. Encourage your teen to share emotions, and talk about ways to handle them. Ask a professional for advice on counseling your teen, if necessary.

### SUMMARY

Although “friends are everything” to most teens, parents still play an important role in teens' lives and can be supportive and helpful as teens navigate the world of peers, cliques, and crowds and figure out where they belong.

### REFERENCES

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