



## HELPING TEENS NAVIGATE PEER RELATIONSHIPS

# Research Overview for Facilitators

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### INTRODUCTION

There is extensive research on peer relationships. Following are the highlights of the research that have informed the development of this lesson, including findings on peer pressure, peer relationships from youths' perspective, and the influence of parents and family on peer relationships.

### PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

During adolescence, teens begin to shift their focus from their parents and family to their peers and peer relationships (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). This developmental shift is normal — as a part of teens' growing independence, peers become much more important than they were during childhood. Teens purposefully seek out situations and opportunities to be with their peers, such as after-school activities and spending free time together. Peer relationships are one way that young people learn about developing positive friendships.

Adolescents are actively working to find their place in the peer system and their niche (where they belong) in a peer group (Brown, 1990). This does not mean that parents and other family members are not important or that they do not influence teens; instead, it may mean teens are focusing more on social relationships outside the family than they did during childhood.

Peers also facilitate teens' identity development by providing a supportive environment where teens can negotiate who they are and what they believe. Specifically, peers provide emotional support, companionship, and opportunities for identity development, such as trying new activities and hobbies (Davis, 2012). Peers also contribute to teens' identity development by providing opportunities to share feelings, emotions, and ideas (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995); peers also provide feedback and validation.

During adolescence, teens are developing their individuality and exploring how they are different and separate from their parents. At the same time, teens are negotiating their connection and attachment to parents. The negotiation of becoming separate from parents while at the same time remaining connected to parents occurs internally for teens, but is also facilitated by the relationships that teens have with parents and peers (Koepke, 2012). By defining themselves in relation to their peers and as distinct from their parents, teens experience a feeling of belonging with peers and friends who share their interests and values (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011).

Since peers are typically going through the same things (adjusting to school, figuring out who they are, etc.), they can help each other negotiate the challenges of adolescence, like learning coping



skills and how to interact in healthy and positive ways with others. However, if the crowd a teen settles into is incompatible with their interests and aspirations, peer groups may contribute to negative outcomes for young people (Brown, 1990).

## **PEER PRESSURE**

Peers may pressure each other into negative behaviors or away from positive behaviors, but they also pressure each other into positive behaviors or away from risky behaviors. It is not a question of whether or not teens will experience peer pressure, but rather what kind of peer pressure they will experience (Steinberg & Levine, 1997). For instance, research has consistently found that peer pressure not to smoke has a stronger impact than peer pressure to smoke (Ennett & Bauman, 1994). Research has also found that peers can have a direct positive influence on teens' positive and prosocial behavior (van Hoorn, Dijk, Meuwese, Rieffe, & Crone, 2014).

Peer influence does not operate independent of youths' experiences in other settings. Even among adolescents who are inclined to give in to peer influence, peer pressure does not fully explain their behavior. The degree of friends' influence may vary according to the specific behavior, characteristics of the behavior, and the social setting in which the behavior takes place (Dishion & Owen, 2002; Maxwell, 2002).

For example, a teen may be more susceptible to peer pressure if the behavior has minimal or low risk of negative consequences, such as passing notes in class, but less susceptible to peer pressure that involves high risk of negative consequences, such as theft, using drugs, or breaking laws. Teens may also be more susceptible to peer pressure when there are no other adults or parents around to witness the behavior, than when teachers or parents are present. The amount of influence peers have has been found to be directly related to the friendship dynamics and the amount of unsupervised time friends spend together (Patterson, Dishion, & Yoerger, 2000).

Parents, educators, professionals, and researchers continually ask, "Do youth choose a peer group that is similar to them or do they choose a peer group and then adopt the behaviors of that group?" Unfortunately, the answer to this question is not simple; for most young people, it is some of both. Research shows that teens are more likely to choose like-minded companions who already have similar opinions and feelings than to choose opposite-minded companions who would then influence them to change their minds on issues. Consequently, the peer group cannot be blamed for a teen's behavior; rather, it is critical to consider why a teen chooses those friends in the first place (Brown, 1990; Epstein, 1989). Antisocial peer groups do not redirect teens' behavior patterns but rather reinforce predispositions that predated group membership. In other words, an otherwise healthy teen does not experience negative peer pressure that leads him or her to participate in negative behaviors (Brown, 1990).

B. Bradford Brown, Ph.D., a professor of educational psychology, summarizes peer influence this way:

"...peer influences are multidimensional, more often subtle (through modeling behaviors and being supportive or establishing group norms) than direct, and contingent on their impact on the adolescent's willingness to be influenced. Finally, it appears that peer



influence takes different forms in each major arena of peer interaction: close friendship, cliques, membership groups and reference groups” (Brown, 1990, p. 191).

Peer pressure can be direct or indirect. For example, as one teen puts it:

“It’s there if you want it, but nobody gives you a hard time if you don’t. Like, no one comes up and shoves a beer in your hand and says, ‘Here, drink it!’ Of course, if everybody else is drinking you may feel a little weird just sipping a soda” (Brown, 1990, p. 190).

Teens are diverse in their susceptibility to peer influence. Early adolescents are more susceptible to peer pressure than younger children or older adolescents. Specifically, peer pressure increases during early adolescence, peaks in 8th or 9th grade, and then declines (Steinberg & Levine, 1997). Boys are more susceptible to peer pressure than girls, particularly with antisocial behaviors (Brown et al., 1986; Steinberg & Levine, 1997).

According to Steinberg and Levine (1997), parents can help their adolescent navigate peer pressure by:

- Building self-esteem through helping their teen discover strengths and talents;
- Encouraging independence and decision making within the family;
- Talking about challenging social situations the teen might encounter; and
- Encouraging friendships with those who share the teen’s and family’s values.

### **PEER RELATIONSHIPS FROM YOUTHS’ PERSPECTIVE**

To fully understand peer relationships and peer pressure during adolescence, it is essential to consider peer relationships from youths’ perspective. For adolescents, peers provide support and space to figure out abilities and interests, learn how to interact with others, exercise independence from adults, deal with problems, and receive emotional support (Brown, 1990). Giving in to peer pressure may serve as a way to fit in. For teenagers who are still working to identify their values, sticking to undefined ideals can be challenging. Feeling accepted by peers can also promote positive self-esteem and self-efficacy for teens who do not have close, warm relationships with parents (Birkeland, Breivik, & Wold, 2014).

While nearly all teenagers feel some pressure to be involved with peers and conform in some ways to peer group norms, it is critical to consider the youth’s personality, maturity, confidence level, developmental status, gender, and the context or situation. This facilitates understanding of the relationship between peer pressure, misconduct, and involvement with school and family (Brown, 1990).

### **RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEERS AND FAMILY**

At times, teens appear to reject parents and family in favor of peers. However, teens still want parents and family to be present in their lives, but in a different way than when they were younger. Research has found that teens typically accept their parents’ views on long-term, important issues, such as political issues, questions of morality, religious beliefs (Brown, 1990), education, and ethics (Steinberg & Levine, 1997). Parents are still very important in teens’ lives. A close parent-teen relationship is the best predictor of teens choosing friends their parents will like. Peer group norms serve primarily to reinforce behaviors and predispositions for which parents (through



parenting strategies and/or family characteristics) have already contributed and set the groundwork (Brown et al., 1993). On the other hand, teens might choose to follow the peer group in terms of music, dress, hairstyle and other current fashion and media trends (Steinberg & Levine, 1997).

During adolescence, the relationship between parents and their children's peers is bi-directional (goes both ways). This suggests that parents influence peer relationships, but peer relationships also impact parenting practices (Mounts, 2002). Parents might influence peer relationships in three key ways. First, parents may indirectly impact youths' peer relationships through parenting practices, such as enforcing a different curfew than peers', which influences who teens can hang out with and when. Second, parents might directly influence peer relationships by providing support or advice about negotiating these relationships, by supervising or discussing peer relationships, or by getting to know teens' friends. Third, parents might also directly influence peer relationships by "managing" or facilitating opportunities for peer interaction (Parke et al., 1994). For example, parents can encourage their teen to participate in after-school activities with new peers, or encourage their teen to become involved with an activity that their teen's friends are already a part of.

## CONCLUSION

Peers are very important for teens, and it is normal for them to focus less on their parents and family and become more interested in their peers during adolescence. Peers can have both negative and positive influences on teens, and parents can help their adolescent deal with peer pressure in several ways. Parents continue to play an important role in their teens' development throughout adolescence.

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