

Peer pressure

Peer groups are groups of friends who are all about the same age. Having a group of friends is an important part of being a teenager. 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. Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager's life. They can also be a challenge for parents.

Peer groups – the positives

Some of the positive things that peer groups offer your teenager include:

- A sense of belonging and feeling valued
- Somewhere to fit in, when they feel neither children nor adults
- Increased self-confidence because they are accepted by the group
- A sense of security and of being understood by others who are going through the same experiences
- A safe place to test values and ideas
- Help in the move towards independence
- Practice in getting along with others
- Ways to meet new people
- Friendships
- Practice in learning to give and take
- Influence in making decisions about their life.

Peer groups and parents

Some of the problems that peer groups may present to parents include:

- Long hours on the telephone
- A home that's overrun with teenagers
- Disruption to 'house rules' – members of the peer group may do things that are unacceptable in your household, such as smoke, swear, drink alcohol or raid your refrigerator
- Serious behaviours, such as shoplifting or drug-taking.

Suggestions for parents

Some practical suggestions to deal with your teenager's peer group include:

- Work out the best solution for your family with regards to telephone use, such as setting time limits or using 'call waiting'.
- Set house rules, but try to be light and humorous about it. Negotiate where possible.
- Try to provide privacy and space for your teenager and their friends by changing the use of your rooms, if necessary.
- Keep low-cost food available, for example fruit in season, breakfast cereals and bread.
- Be clear about what videos are allowed to be watched at your home.
- Make firm rules on alcohol consumption or lock your liquor cabinet, if necessary.
- Talk with your teenager and your partner about your values on sexual activities and about what you are willing to allow in your home.

When parents don't approve

You may not be comfortable about your son or daughter's choice of peer group. This may be because of their behaviour or because of some more serious risk (such as members of the peer group using alcohol or other drugs, skipping school, shoplifting or vandalising property).

Here are some suggestions:

- Remember that criticising your teenager's choice of friends is like attacking them personally.
- Keep the lines of communication open and find out why these friends are important to your teenager.
- Check whether your concerns about their friends are real and important.
- If you believe your concerns are serious, talk to your teenager about the behaviour, not the friends.
- Encourage your teenager to trust their own sense of what is right and discuss ways of saying 'no'.
- You have the right to let your teenager know what your concerns are and to ask how they will cope if pressured to make risky choices.
- Talk with your teenager about the immediate and long-term consequences of whatever behaviour is worrying you.
- Encourage opportunities for them to mix with other young people.
- Support your teenager's self-esteem.
- Show your teenager that you trust them.
- Remember that we all learn valuable lessons from mistakes.

A friend in need

Sometimes, a young person who seems unsuitable will choose your child for a friend because your home gives a feeling of being safe and secure. This is, of course, a compliment to you and your teenager and may be an opportunity to help someone. You may be able to offer friendship and support.

If you are really uncomfortable about the friend's behaviour, you need to talk to your teenager about it. Remember, you are unlikely to be able to break up the friendship if it is strong.

Where to get help

- Other parents
- Parentline Victoria Tel. 132 289
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Kids' Help Line (for people up to 25 years old) Tel. 1800 551 800
- ReachOut.com.

Things to remember

- Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager's life, but they can also be a challenge for parents.
- Criticising your teenager's choice of friends is like attacking them personally – they will take it as a criticism of their ability to make good choices.
- If you believe your concerns are serious, talk to your teenager about the behaviour, not the friends.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Reach Out

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