

## Peer Pressure

As your children grow and develop, their peers become increasingly important in their lives and play a crucial role in their social and emotional development. Peers can be positive and supportive, or they can, at times, be a negative influence, but either way it is natural and important for children to have, and to rely on friends as they grow and mature.

Having a group of friends is important at any age, but particularly as teenagers. Interaction with these friends is how they learn to get on in the world, with other people and to gradually become independent. Strong peer relationships provide your child with a sense of belonging, of being valued and provide ways to meet new people. Within their peer group children meet others with whom they share interests, help each other develop new skills. The peer group can also be a safe place to test values and ideas.

It is the desire to be an accepted member of the peer group that can lead to children behaving in certain ways; to fit in. Peer pressure or peer influence is a normal part of this process. You might notice your child expressing certain opinions or attitudes, wanting to dress a certain way, listen to particular music or wanting to be involved in certain activities because their friends are. This doesn't have to be a bad thing. Friends can be very supportive and encouraging, especially through the emotional roller coaster that is adolescence.

As parents, however, it can be a scary and often challenging time; seeing your children "breaking free" of the mould and becoming their own person with different views and ideas about the world and the people in it. But it can also be a very exciting time as you see your children becoming more independent, their talents and skills blossoming, and their social conscience developing.

The following tips might help you, and your children survive this challenging and potentially tumultuous time:-

- Keep the communication channels open and find out why these friends are so important to your child/teenager.
- Get to know their friends; and remember that criticising their friends is like a personal attack; a slight on their ability to make good choices.
- If you need talk about concerns you may have, talk about the behaviour not the friend.
- Encourage your teenager to trust their own sense of what is right and talk about ways of saying 'no'. Be prepared to say 'no' for them, if they ask you to.
- Find ways to show your teenager that you trust them and in doing so give them the opportunity to show you that they can be trusted.
- Try to provide privacy and space for your teenagers and their friends. Change the use of some rooms in the house if necessary.
- Negotiate rules and boundaries. Try to do this with good humour and be flexible where you can, but make firm rules and stick to your guns around what you will allow to happen in your home, issues of safety, alcohol consumption, parties and being in cars with peers.

- Don't be afraid to talk to other parents if you have concerns about what is happening within the peer group.
- Help your child to feel good about themselves. Teenagers with healthy self esteem are less vulnerable to peer pressure.
- Be their back up plan. Have your child know that you will always come and get them, anytime of the day or night if they feel worried or unsafe.
- Don't despair when they want to spend more time with their friends than they do with you.

Most importantly, maintain the relationship, but don't let being your child's friend be your main priority. They are making friends outside of the family. At home they need a parent: a strong, loving and supportive adult who, with the benefit of life experience, can be there for them, guide them and who is not afraid to say no.

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