Teen Peer Pressure

Learn what kinds of peer pressure teens face, who’s most vulnerable, and how to help your son or daughter resist.

Remember when your teenager took her first steps as a toddler? You hovered behind her -- back bent, arms spread -- prepared to catch her should she fall. Much as you might like, you can't shadow your adolescent as you did back then, being there to break her fall when she missteps.

But, say experts, there are steps you can take to support your adolescent in the face of teen peer pressure. Follow them and you’ll rest easier when your teen heads out of the house on a Friday night.

Teen Peer Pressure: What's Being Pushed?
So, just what high-risk behaviors might your adolescent feel pressured to engage in? Plenty, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which periodically conducts surveys on health-risk behaviors among youth. The latest survey results indicate that teen peer pressure is real. Many adolescents are engaging in behaviors that place their health at risk -- including cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, illegal drug use and sexual activity. And in all likelihood, their peers are pushing them to try these behaviors.

Here are some of the survey's findings.

**Smoking.** By the time adolescents are just 13, one in five has tried smoking.

**Alcohol use.** Two-thirds of teens between the ages of 14 and 17 have tried alcohol. Of teen boys who have tried alcohol, 20% did so by the time they were 12. Episodic, or binge drinking, is also fairly common. Of the adolescents aged 12 to 17, one in four said they'd had five or more drinks consecutively within the past month. Almost a quarter of drinkers aged 16 to 21 admitted to driving after drinking.

**Drug use.** Slightly more than 25% of adolescents aged 14 to 17 have used illegal drugs. One-third of young adult marijuana users aged 18 to 21 started using the drug by the time they turned 14.

**Sex.** About one in every three kids aged 14 to 15 has had sexual intercourse. Of sexually active teens, almost 30% used no birth control during their last sexual encounter.

Well-documented risky behaviors aren't the only ones teens may feel pressure to try. Health professionals who work with adolescents report other equally troubling behaviors that may not be as common, but are, nonetheless, on the rise. And they point to teen peer pressure as a culprit.
Consider teens' ardent attempts to emulate unrealistic body ideals. "There's a lot of peer pressure to have your body look a very specific way," says Lauren Solotar, PhD, chief psychologist at May Institute in Massachusetts. While the desire to look "fit and thin" is more pronounced among girls, she notes that many boys as young as middle-school age are on the quest for "six-pack" abs. "It's scary, all the push and the pressure," Solotar says.

Intentional self-injury, in some instances provoked by teen peer pressure, is also on the rise. "It's a method of coping with difficult emotions," says Alec L. Miller, PsyD, chief of Child and Adolescent Psychology at Montefiore Medical Center/Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. "There seem to be some peers who are engaging in this behavior [slashing their arms], and persuading others to try it." For example, a survey conducted at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School in Massachusetts during the 2004-05 school year, based on the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, revealed that 20% of high school students had intentionally hurt themselves within the past year.

**Identifying Vulnerable Teens**

When it comes to determining who will succumb easily to teen peer pressure, there's no single profile.

Some experts say those who are socially adrift are the most likely candidates. "Teens who are prone to social isolation, and have less of a cohesive sense of self, will do things to feel connected," Miller says.

But others say adolescents who seem like the least likely suspects are actually the most susceptible to teen peer pressure. "Popular kids tend to be the most vulnerable. They pay attention to what their peers value. And at 14 or 15, when their peers value experimenting with alcohol, they're going to be right there," says Joseph P. Allen, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia.

**Why Teens Fall Prey to Peer Pressure**

Kids' personal traits aside, many experts agree that simply being of middle-school age is one of the leading causes of peer pressure. "Developmentally, these kids really want to conform," Miller says.

Headstrong children who have known few parental limits in their lives are increasingly vulnerable to peer pressure during the middle-school years. "I see young kids who are strong and willful who have gotten away with a lot," says Michelle M. Forcier, MD, head of adolescent medicine at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago. "Then parents suddenly panic because the risk-taking behavior is now about more serious things."

How society is set up also makes adolescents conducive to teen peer pressure, some experts say. "If you go back 40 or 50 years ago, adolescents were much more likely to be integrated with adults, to be more a part of adult society," Allen says. That has changed, he notes, and there's now a much stronger emphasis for teens to socialize with peers. "It's an independent youth culture, where values don't come from parents. There's no real connection to adult values," Allen concludes.

**Making Your Child Resilient to Teen Peer Pressure**

In spite of adolescents' vulnerability and the strong influence of peers, parents can exert a positive influence on their adolescents' decision-making processes, offering them ways to combat the effects of peer pressure. Experts explain how.

- **Keep communication lines open**
  
  Talk to your kids -- and don't wait until they're teens. Healthcare professionals, counselors, and educators agree unanimously that open communication between parents and their children helps youth better manage teen peer pressure. "It's not too early to have an honest conversation about drugs, sex and other pressures when your child is in fifth grade," Miller says.

  Dialogue that starts early pays off in the long run. "The kids who weather the decision-making process are those who can talk to their parents, no matter what the issue, and who know that even if their parents don't approve of it, they will listen and help them make a decision that makes sense to them," Forcier says.

  Research supports this theory. Teens who report learning a lot about the risks of drugs from their parents are up to 50% less likely to use drugs than those who say they haven't learned a lot about drugs from their parents. That's according to results of an annual, nationwide survey of teens in grades 6 through 12, conducted by Partnership for a Drug-Free America
Practice peer pressure scenarios
Teen peer pressure may come as a surprise to your child. Out of the blue, he may be offered a cigarette or a swig of alcohol, and he may have no idea how to respond. You can help prepare him for these scenarios. "Find a calm period, prior to or during early adolescence, and role play," Solotar suggests. "It's much easier to manage a situation if you've already thought it out."

Listen to your teen's perspective
Express your personal opinions, but don't let them shut down communication, advises Forcier. "You want to make clear to your adolescent what you believe in. But if you shut down on certain topics, your kid won't come to you as a trusted adult," Forcier says. She offers the example of the parent who adamantly refuses to discuss birth control with her 15-year-old daughter. "These kids are the ones we often end up seeing for pregnancy tests," Forcier says.

Keep inviting your kids into your life
"There is a natural break [between teens and their parents], and it should happen. But I tell parents to keep inviting kids to do things. Kids want their parents to maintain the relationship," Allen says. He warns that it may take some creativity and effort on the part of the parent. "You might have to find new ways to relate to your kid," he says. He suggests trying to find mutual, life-long interests to share with your adolescent, like playing tennis or cooking together.

Think beyond punitive responses
A parent's initial reaction to an adolescent who comes home inebriated may be to punish. But, ultimately, that's not a solution to the real problem. "A punitive response doesn't get at what you need to change the behavior," Forcier says. "If a teen is 14 and she's drinking, there's probably a good reason for it. If you address it, maybe she won't need the alcohol."

Facts about Peer Pressure
Peer pressure is one of the most difficult things that children have to deal with in schools, colleges and even later in life. Here are some facts about peer pressure...

- Peer pressure is most common in students of impressionable age or adolescents, but can also be cited at later stages in life.
- Children of impressionable age often fail to realize that they are getting into several habits and making several choices as a result of peer pressure alone.

Sources:
- CDC: Vital and Health Statistics, "Health-Risk Behaviors Among Our Nation's Youth." Lauren Solotar, PhD, chief psychologist, May Institute, Mashpee, MA. Alec L. Miller, PhD, chief of child and adolescent psychology, Montefiore Medical Center/Albert Einstein College of Medicine, NY. Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, Massachusetts: "Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, 2004-05." Joseph P. Allen, PhD, professor of psychology, University of Virginia. Michelle M. Forcier, MD, head of adolescent medicine, Children's Memorial Hospital, Chicago. Tom Hedrick, senior communications officer and founding member, Partnership for a Drug-Free America.
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Peer pressure is not always negative. There are negative and positive effects of peer pressure. Peer pressure can be positive if the peers help in changing the person for better.

Peers can tend to have a diminutive effect on the individuality of adolescents by influencing their choices in terms of movies, music, fashion and their way of life in general!

Peer pressure is a serious issue, which can hamper the normal development and growth of a child and hence is not something, which can be dismissed as a temporary phase in high school, college or even later in life!

Peer pressure is sometimes cited as one of the main reasons, which leads to unhealthy habits as well as deadly addictions like smoking, drinking as well as drug abuse.

Peer pressure can also lead to involvement in unprotected sex and other harmful sexual acts and can also lead to issues like teen pregnancy.

Peer pressure can be overcome with some help from you friends, family and your own determination to retain your individuality.

Adolescent Development Stages

Adolescents display peculiar behavioral and mental characteristics in each of the three adolescent development stages. The following article explains in detail, all the three stages of adolescent development.

Adolescence is a very delicate period in one's life. It arouses various internal conflicts, as an adolescent is neither a child and nor an adult yet. It is a very challenging period for the parents too, as parenting teenagers involves coping with their moods and behavioral changes. There are basically three adolescent development stages which every child goes through, although the ages at which the child experiences these stages and the duration of each stage varies from child to child. Here are the three stages of adolescent development.

Early Stage (12-14 years)

This is the first among the adolescent development stages. It is usually experienced between the years 12 and 14. These are the characteristics displayed by adolescents during the early stage.

- In this stage, the teens are still coming to terms with who they are. They experience moodiness and are often irritable.
- They are still developing their communication skills, so they express themselves better by actions rather than by words.
- During early adolescence, the girls outperform boys and develop skills faster. There is a tendency to show off one's skills and qualities.
- Family ties are weak and parents are no longer looked up to like before. There is more trust in the friendships forged outside home.
- Sense of dressing and interests depend upon that of the friends. Friendships are mostly among the same sex.
- Sometimes, the teen may display childish behavior.
- At this stage, teens like to experiment with their bodies and thus resort to masturbation. Teens are still discovering their sexuality and may worry whether they are sexually normal or not.
- Teens may experiment with forbidden substances, such as cigarettes or alcohol.

Middle Stage (14-17 years)

The middle stage is experienced by adolescents between the years 14 and 17. This is the second stage of adolescent development. Here are a few characteristics displayed by adolescents during the middle stage.

- There is a somewhat developed sense of self-identity. The focus shifts on self-improvement.
- Teens lay great emphasis on the body and the outer appearance. The changes in the body due to puberty may make them self-conscious of their bodies. Sometimes, the teen might feel very inferior to others too.
• Relationship with the parents becomes stressful. The teen finds his parents interfering and thus, may emotionally withdraw from them. The teen may feel that he has lost the support of his parents and this might make him feel sad and lonely.
• Focus of the teen is on making new friends. The teen identifies with his peer group.
• Intellectual development starts taking place. The teen starts analyzing his inner self.
• The teen has a heightened sexual energy and may experience love and passion for the first time. The teen forms relationships with the opposite sex and may enter and exit relationships very quickly. The teen is still discovering his sexuality, considers both homosexuality and heterosexuality. Sex education at this stage, thus, is very essential.
• A sense of morality and ethics develops in a teenager.
• The teen selects his role models and even sets goals for himself.

Late Stage (17-19 years)
This is the last of the adolescent stages of development. It is experienced between the years 17 and 19. Here are the characteristics displayed by adolescents during this stage.

• The sense of self-identity deepens and the teen develops a sense of self-esteem.
• Intellectual development progresses. Communication skills are developed and the teen is able to express himself well.
• Stability in emotions and interests is exhibited. The teen starts taking his relationships with the opposite sex seriously.
• The teen is able to take independent decisions and starts relying on himself rather than his parents or friends.
• The teen loses the typical childhood trait of stubbornness and is able to compromise on various issues.
• The teen starts thinking about the future for the first time.
• The teen starts questioning his existence - about what role he is going to play in the world.
• He identifies his sexual preferences and is able to express love and concern for others.
• The teen starts accepting the social institutions and traditions.

These are the three adolescent development stages, which every child goes through. If a child displays a behavior deviant from the above-mentioned stages of healthy adolescent development, he might be facing some adolescent behavior problems. In such a scenario, consulting a psychologist is recommended.

Teens At Risk: Who Is At Fault?

Pointing fingers usually doesn't accomplish much. However, it is extremely valuable to know who and what is causing today's youth to become at-risk.

Nothing is more destructive to a teen and their family than the abuse of alcohol and drugs; the earlier the intervention, the better. Unfortunately teens often hide their alcohol/drug usage from their family and it can take months or even years before the parents become aware of the problem. Many parents minimize the problem and don’t pick up on the warning signs until the child has spun out of control. Finally the family is confronted with an addicted teenager and is unable to deal with the situation on their own. Shame and denial become obstacles to the teen’s recovery (Parent Teen Guide).

Unfortunately, teenagers often don’t see the link between their actions today and the consequences tomorrow. They have the mindset that they are indestructible and immune to the problems that others experience. Some teens will experiment with alcohol or drugs and stop, or continue to use occasionally. Others will develop a dependency and will end up causing significant harm to themselves, their families, and society.

Each year, thousands of at-risk teens are diagnosed with clinical depression. If left untreated or ignored, it can be a devastating illness for the teen and their family. If allowed to continue, depression can lead to attempts at
suicide. In high risk teens with depression – that is teens who have threatened or attempted suicide – there are four risk factors that account for more than 80 percent of the risk for suicide. They are: major depression, lack of mental health treatment, bipolar disorder, and easy access to firearms (The Warning Signs and Major Risk Factors of Suicide).

With increasing industrialization and urbanization, as well as the disappearing family unit and community social structures, more and more youth find themselves without social supports, adequate nurturing from parents, and the ability to function in school settings. At the same time, they may experience a growing dependency on drugs and alcohol. Without a strong family unit, at-risk teens are attracted to the street gang “family” lifestyle.

Youth experience increased freedom from parental scrutiny, and with this freedom comes an opportunity to become involved in socially unacceptable activities. Peers have tremendous influence among their fellow teens and a juvenile’s behavior is often dictated by whether their peer group is involved in drugs, gangs, and other forms of antisocial behavior (Juvenile Justice in America, 333).

The more of these factors that are present in a teen’s life, the more likely it is that he or she will become involved in problem behavior. The rapidly expanding underclass is one of the most serious problems facing at-risk youth. The underclass is made up of people living below the poverty level. Joblessness pervades the inner cities and finding employment is difficult. These teens live in deteriorated neighborhoods and go to sub-standard schools. Another feature of underclass life is the ever increasing trend of adolescent females having children out of wedlock, which only perpetuates the welfare and poverty cycle to another generation (Juvenile Justice in America, 418-419).

These realities go to the heart of the problems facing many at-risk youth today. It reflects the fact that impoverished and dysfunctional families have trouble raising children that have the skills to become contributing members of society. The challenge is to provide nourishing environments so that adolescents can be hopeful regarding their futures. Prevention programs must be developed with young children before they become involved in antisocial groups and commit illegal activities.

At-risk teens post a more challenging problem, because many have already been socialized into a deviant lifestyle. For these kids to feel hopeful, they must come to believe that the future has possibilities for them, they can attain their goals, and there are adults who will support them so they can better their lives (Juvenile Justice in America, 424).

What defines an "At-Risk" youth?

Many social critics argue that today’s youth face more serious and critical risks than any previous generation. Parents are convinced that their children face a major crisis. Most experts will agree that violence in schools, deteriorating family structure, substance abuse, alarming media images, and gang activity put teens at risk.

Teenagers who have trouble coping with the stresses of life are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, engage in criminal activity, are sexually promiscuous, and attempt suicide. Many of these at-risk teens run away and eventually find themselves locked up in detention centers or living on the streets (Teens at Risk, 12).

If a teen is experiencing more than four of the following warning signs, they could be at risk.

1. Has the teen ever been suspended, expelled, been truant, or had their grades drop?

2. Is the teen verbally abusive?

3. Does the teen struggle with basic family rules and expectations?

4. Does the parent have difficulty getting the teen to do basic household chores and homework?

5. Has the teen had problems with the law?
6. Does the parent have to pick their words carefully when speaking to the teen, so as not to elicit a verbal attack or even rage from them?

7. Is the teen in danger of dropping out of high school?

8. Does the teen associate with a suspect peer group?

9. Has the teen lost interest in former productive activities, sports, hobbies, or childhood friends?

10. Has the teen ever displayed any evidence of suicide?

11. Does the teen seem depressed / withdrawn?

12. Does the teen ever display violent behavior?

13. Is the teen sexually promiscuous?

14. Has the teen’s appearance or personal hygiene changed?

15. Is the teen deceitful and manipulative?

16. Has the teen been caught stealing money or personal items from their family?

17. Is the teen severely lacking in motivation?

18. Does the teen sometimes lie regarding their activities?

19. Does the teen display outbursts of temper?

20. Does the teen lack self-worth and self-esteem?

21. Does the teen defy established rules regardless of the consequences?

22. When trying to deal with the teen, do the parents feel powerless?

23. Does the teen have a problem with authority?

24. Do the parents suspect the teen is experimenting with drugs or alcohol?