



Teenagers and Peer Pressure

Peer pressure is the influence a teenager's social group has on him or her. As children approach the teenage years, friends and 'fitting in' becomes extremely important. Teenagers need to be accepted by their peers, to be part of a group. The need to fit in and belong can be so strong that it can influence many aspects of a teenager's life; including how they dress, the music they listen to and the activities they are involved in.

Although some peers can influence each other in a positive way, such as encouraging each other to do well in school and become involved in positive activities, others can put pressure on their peers to do something they know is wrong, or is risky. When this happens, common sense often takes second place to fitting in with the group, and although they may be aware that they are at risk in situations, they have often not yet developed a strong enough sense of themselves to stand up to group pressure.

What can parents do?

As well as teaching teenagers how to handle peer pressure and positive ways of getting along with others, something which I will discuss next week, parents can help teenagers manage peer pressure by saying no for them, when the teenagers cannot say it for themselves. Parents can hold the line for their teenagers and set boundaries for them. So for example, your thirteen year old daughter wants to go to a disco that is for older teenagers, in a nightclub environment, she tells you that everyone in her class is going and that it will be so much fun. However with your own years of experience and wisdom you know the pressures she may face going to this disco. The fact that it is happening in a nightclub already puts pressure on young people to act in older ways, which might mean having a drink or maybe going off with some boy, something which you know she is not ready to handle or say no to herself. For this reason you calmly and firmly tell her no, and when she begins the '*you're the meanest parent*', '*everyone else's parents let them go*' and '*you're ruining my life*' argument that can go on for hours, you can acknowledge her disappointment at not being able to go by saying something like '*I understand that you are disappointed that you are not going to the disco, but I have made my decision and I am happy to talk about it with you if you like*' by remaining calm and showing understanding you can help your teenager to accept the limits, which can keep them safe.

Although setting boundaries is helpful and often necessary, it is also important to teach teenagers the skills they need to withstand group pressure, as parents cannot be with them 24/7.

For example, your teenager arrives home from school on a Friday evening and tells you that she is going to a friend's house for a sleepover the next night. She is very



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excited about this as it is her first sleepover with this particular group of friends. However her excitement soon turns to panic when at the sleepover, her friends are pushing her to drink some alcohol with them. In that moment your teenager is on the spot with emotions running high as her peers wait anxiously for her to make a choice. In a situation like this, your teenagers mind is most likely racing with thoughts of what she is going to do next; should she take the drink and risk getting into trouble, but at least be part of the group or should she stay true to herself, say no and maybe leave the sleepover.

This is a very difficult situation for a young person to find themselves in. As I mentioned last week, teenagers have often not yet developed a strong enough sense of themselves to withstand group pressures and in addition to that, a teenager's brain is still developing.

The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for impulse control, judgement and decision-making is developing at a slower rate to the part of the brain responsible for emotions and the need for fun, pleasure and fitting in. This can often explain why teenagers make bad choices when they find themselves in this type of situation with their peers; their emotions are heightened and their ability to fully comprehend the consequences of their actions is reduced.

For this reason it can be useful for parents to think about the types of situations their teenagers may find themselves in. To identify the risks that their teenagers may be exposed to in such situations, for example, what they may face going to discos, sleepovers or on the internet and social networking sites. To think about the types of pressures they may encounter in these types of situations and together come up with strategies, things your teenager can say or do in these situations that will help them to stay true to themselves as well as remaining part of their group.

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