

RESEARCH

F ACTS and FINDINGS

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Peers

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Parents and other adults often worry about peer pressure among adolescents. Adolescents certainly spend more time with peers, and correspondingly less time with their parents, than children of elementary and pre-school age. But this shift is appropriate developmentally because adults in our society are expected to become independent of their parents and to form strong relations with their peers, as friends, colleagues, and partners in their own new families.

Does spending more time with peers mean rejection of parents? Not necessarily. Parents continue to influence adolescents strongly. Adolescents who see their relations with their parents as supportive are more socially competent and more likely to report positive peer relationships (Brown, 1990). Moreover, peer influence is strongest in relatively superficial matters such as preferences for music and clothing styles, and beliefs about how late to stay out at night. In more serious matters such as religious beliefs, moral values, and political ideas, parents are more influential for most adolescents (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Still, differences between peers and parents can contribute to increased conflict in the family. And parents who were once practically the sole influence on their children can feel their authority is threatened and that their ability to raise their adolescents as they see fit is compromised by peer influences.



Youth appear most influenced by peers during middle adolescence (roughly ages 14-16), as compared with early and late adolescence. In later adolescence, young people tend to become less rigid in their expectations for “normal” behavior, and more tolerant of peers’ individual differences (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Parents feeling helpless as their adolescents make choices they disapprove can take some comfort knowing that as young adults their sons and daughters will almost certainly express appreciation for what they did and tried to do.



Adolescents, like adults, respond most strongly to the beliefs and expectations of people they respect and admire and of people they interact with regularly. Peer pressure does not come equally from everyone who is of the same age. Nor do those whose opinions matter appear out of nowhere. Adolescents often choose as their friends peers with beliefs and values like their own. As a result, what looks like peer influence is often similarity among like-minded peers who selected each other because they were similar.

Peer groups often establish unstated norms for their members' behavior that distinguish them from other peer groups. For example, most high schools have cliques of athletes, musicians, serious students, socially oriented or popular students, rebels, and outsiders. These groups have different statuses, forming a prestige hierarchy. The peer groups with the highest status are often the "jocks" and the popular crowd, distinguished by expensive clothing and attractive physical appearance. How adolescents view the status of their own peer group as compared to other groups can affect their self-esteem (Santrock, 2001; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). While adults sometimes chide adolescents for not valuing academic achievement and pro-social behavior, the so-called peer culture in most high schools accurately reflects the place of celebrities in sports and entertainment in our society.

Peer relationships occur on a one-to-one basis, as well as in groups. One-to-one peer relationships are most likely to form between adolescents who see each other as similar in some ways; for example, having the same taste in music or participating in the same activities. Peers who choose each other for pairs or groups can reinforce their similarities. And sometimes their influence on each other can be in opposition to parents' influences and to adult societal values. Above and beyond what may be considered "curiosity" or "experimentation," many youth report pressure to engage in risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol, smoking, using illegal drugs, and engaging in sexual activities. Some peer groups actively discourage striving to succeed in school and otherwise conforming to conventional behavioral expectations. However, peers may also cultivate values that adults readily label positive: hard work, academic achievement, loyalty and other forms of prosocial behavior (Santrock, 2001).



Peer influences also depend on an individual's place within peer networks. Some individuals are generally popular and well liked. Popular youth have close peer relations, and tend to be friendly, intelligent, and funny. They tend to want to conform to the expectations of those who make them popular. Other youth elicit strong but divergent reactions — they are well liked by some of their peers and strongly disliked by others. They have to choose which peers to try to please. Still others are unpopular; they are widely ignored or actively disliked. They will be influenced by the rejection of some of their peers and usually find solace, and another source of influence, in the company of other rejected youth.

Researchers have begun to study these neglected and rejected adolescents, especially those who are not just unpopular, but who are frequently victimized by their peers. In the short term, rejected youth tend to be aggressive, irritable, anxious, withdrawn, and socially awkward. In the long term, peer rejection and victimization often lead to developing a poor self-concept, and can lead as well to anti-social behaviors and conduct problems. Current research on school violence perpetrated by male youth investigates possible links between peer victimization and later episodes of violent lashing out at peers (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Little research has been devoted to adolescents' romantic relationships, an important sub-set of peer relationships. This is surprising in view of how important boyfriends and girlfriends are to adolescents and how important romantic attachments are in adults' lives.



Another neglected issue is the way in which adolescents are isolated from adults so that peer influence predominates. Schools and other societal institutions, residential patterns, even workplaces tend to segregate people by age. One way to reduce the influence of peers is to create more opportunities for adolescents to form strong relationships with adults outside their families. This can be done in mentoring programs and informal mentoring relationships that occur when youth and adults engage in activities of mutual interest over an extended period of time (e.g., learning to dance or play an instrument, volunteering in the community, workplace internships or apprenticeships). Age segregation is so common in our society that we overlook opportunities to form groups across ages based on common interests in such activities as photography, fishing, drama, environmental protection, or local history. While some youth need a close one-to-one mentoring relationship, others can benefit from simply being acquainted with several caring adults. Such relationships do not replace but complement those with parents and peers.



For more information, see:

Brown, B.B. (1990). Peer groups and peer cultures. In S.S. Feldman & G.R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Santrock, J.W. (2001). *Adolescence* (8th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Savin-Williams, R.C., & Berndt, T. J. (1990). Friendship and peer relations. In S.S. Feldman & G.R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Steinberg, L., & Morris, A.S. (2001). Adolescent development. *Annual Review of Psychology* 52, 83-110.

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