

## Family Pack – Social Skills, Friendships and Peer Influence

Social skills consist of the ability of an individual to make and keep friends, to share and cooperate, to work collaboratively in a group, to be assertive and to be confident and feel good about him or herself.

The following family pack discusses some of the social skills you can help develop in your teenager, as well as ways to help your teenager cope with some of the pressures of being part of a social group.



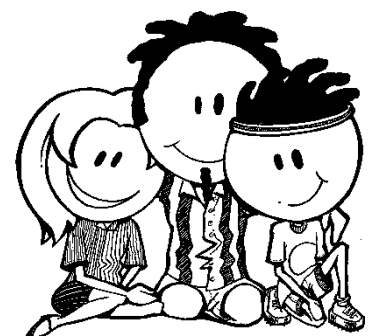
## Friendships, peer groups and identity formation

### Friendship is important

Friendships play an important role in how students cope at school and are an important part of your teenager's network of support. Students need friends to share both the fun times and the tough times. Friends can be there to celebrate and share in success, but also to provide encouragement and support needed to deal with challenges.

Teenagers without friends tend to be more lonely and unhappy. They tend to have lower levels of academic achievement and lower self-esteem. As they get older, they are more apt to drop out of school and to get involved in delinquent activities.

1. Friendships provide opportunities to develop conflict resolution skills. Peers can learn how to end a fight and remain friends.
2. Peers provide fun and excitement through companionship and recreation.
3. Peers also give advice to one another. They talk through lots of issues and problems with their friends.
4. Peers provide opportunities for witnessing the strategies others use to cope with similar problems and for observing how effective they are.
5. Loyalty is a valued trait in friendship. Peers are looking for loyal allies that can help them out at school or in their own neighbourhood.
6. Friendships also provide stability during times of stress or transition. It is helpful for peers to have a friend who is going through the same situations and can ease the anxieties of the times.



## Changing friendships

Friendships change as children move into their adolescent years.

- They tend to spend more time with their peers.
- They are also more mobile than when younger so more time is spent with peers without parental supervision.
- During the adolescent years, there will be increased contact with peers of the opposite sex.
- In the early adolescent years, small groups of friends or cliques are often formed which help to boost their confidence and give them a sense of identity.
- Another feature of the adolescent years is the emergence of crowds.

## What can I do to enhance my teenager's identity formation?

- Be accepting of your teenager and the differences between the two of you.
- Show respect for individuality by allowing your teenager's self-expression, reasoning with them, taking their point of view into account and negotiating with them.

## How can I help my teenagers make friends?

- Encourage them to practice their social skills with the family. Demonstrate how to ask questions, role-play how to be assertive and how to give and receive compliments.
- Ask your teenager to invite friends they would like to know better over to your house.
- Provide opportunities and an environment conducive to your teenager spending time after school and on the weekend with friends.
- Encourage your teenager to get to know their extended family (uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents), as well as family friends.
- Help your teenagers to make new friends outside of school through activities such as hobbies, sport and music.
- Take your teenagers on holidays where there are teenagers of similar ages.

## Top Tips if you are worried about your teenager's friendship choices

1. **Get to know their friends.** Learn their names. Invite them into your home so you can talk and listen to them and introduce yourself to their parents.
2. **Help your teenager to understand the difference between *image* (expressions of youth culture) and *identity* (who he or she is).**
3. **Keep the lines of communication open.** Find out why these friends are important to your teenager.
4. **Check whether your concerns about their friends are real and important.** If you believe your concerns are serious, talk to your teenager about behaviour and choices—not their friends.
5. **Encourage your teenager's independence** by supporting decision-making based on principles and not other people.
6. **Let your teenager know of your concerns and feelings.**
7. **Encourage reflective thinking** by helping your teenager think about his or her actions in advance and discuss immediate and long-term consequences of risky behaviour.
8. **Remember that we all learn valuable lessons from mistakes.**

## Peer influence

One of the main reasons young people give in to peer influence is because they are afraid they will lose their friendships and not fit in with the group.

Explain to your teenager that if peer influence is telling you to do something without questioning why, to do something you know is wrong, or to do something you feel uncomfortable about doing, then you need to think carefully about your choices and decide whether this is worth doing.

A good rule is if it makes you feel bad, it is probably bad for you! If peer pressure is telling you to act in a generally appropriate way, to do something that seems right, or to do something positive that doesn't hurt anyone, it is safe to say this will be all right.

Explain that going along with a healthy group of friends is not a bad thing, as long as following the group doesn't cause you to act without thinking about how you really feel about the situation. In a situation where peer influence is good, individuals in the group will be acting as individual parts of a whole, each working with each other in a cooperative and supportive way.

### Positive peer pressure

The ability to develop healthy friendships and relationships with peers depends on a teenager's self-identity, self-esteem and self-reliance.

At its best, peer pressure can mobilise your teenager's energy, motivate for success and encourage your teenager to conform to healthy behaviour. Positive peers can and do act as positive role models demonstrating appropriate social behaviours. Positive peers often listen to others concerns as well as accept and understand the frustrations and challenges associated with being a teenager.

### Negative peer pressure

The need for acceptance, approval and belonging is vital during the teen years. Teens who feel isolated or rejected by their peers (or in their family) are more likely to engage in risky behaviours in order to fit in with a group. In such situations, peer pressure can damage good judgment and encourage risk-taking behaviour, drawing a teenager away from the family and positive influences and luring them into dangerous activities.

A powerful negative peer influence can motivate a teenager to make choices and engage in behaviour that his or her values might otherwise reject. Some teenagers will risk being grounded or losing their parents' trust just to try and fit in with their peers. Sometimes, teenagers will change the way they dress, their friends, their values or create new values, depending on the people they hang around with.

### Always remember

No matter what kind of peer influence your teenager faces, he or she must learn how to balance the value of going along with the crowd (connection) against the importance of making good decisions (independence). You must always ensure your teenager knows that he or she is loved and valued as an individual at home.

