

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

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Peer Relationships - Adolescents

REMEMBER:

- *Friends are an important part of adolescents' lives.*
- *Peer relationships provide many opportunities for adolescents to learn skills and develop their identity.*
- *Parents still have an important role and can continue to influence adolescents.*
- *Your relationship with your adolescent is the key means of influencing their growth and development.*

Friends and peers are an essential part of life from childhood to old age, but in adolescence (around 13 to 18 years) they take on a special significance.

Friends play an important role in the psychological development of adolescents. They are part of a bridge that supports a teenager in their journey to adulthood.

WHY ARE PEERS SO IMPORTANT TO ADOLESCENTS?

In the adolescent years, peers provide an environment to help in the development of many skills and understandings that we need to become happy and productive adults.

Adolescence is a time when a large part of the development of a teenager's understanding, of who they are and what sort of adult they are to become is happening. . It is a time when they search for a personal identity, distinct from their identity as a child or a part of the family.

The peer group provides an opportunity for adolescents to:

- understand who they are
- learn how to interact with and relate to others
- share feelings
- develop intimacy
- find acceptance
- have a sense of belonging
- learn different ways of problem solving
- feel understood
- have a safe place to try out new beliefs, roles and behaviours
- developing a satisfying relationship with oneself and others
- increase feelings of self-worth
- have fun and excitement
- practice communication skills

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Sadly there can also be downsides to peer relationships. Rejection by peers can make an adolescent feel lonely, depressed and anxious.

Peer pressure may influence a teenager to engage in risk-taking or anti-social behaviour. Some peer relationships can also be exploitive and destructive, and leave a young person feeling used or abused.

When this happens it is important for parents to remain involved in a supportive way.

WHAT HAPPENS TO A PARENT'S ROLE?

It could be easy to jump to the conclusion that parents are not important in adolescence. But the truth is, if we continue to try to maintain a positive relationship with teenagers we are still able to provide a real influence on their development.

Parents can be a model of what it is to be a mature and responsible adult. You can continue to demonstrate how to communicate and negotiate.

Teenagers are often careful observers of their parents. By modeling, by listening, and by talking with them we can help them develop their own value system that they can use to guide them with important decisions in their life.

It is important to know that adolescents generally tend to select peer groups that have values and behaviours that are similar to their own. Parents help young people to develop their values and behaviours. You can have an indirect but very real influence on not only your son or daughter but also their peers.

HOW DO I MAXIMISE MY INFLUENCE AS A PARENT?

Parental influence is strongest in families where parents demonstrate a high level of warmth and engagement with their teenagers, while being consistent with boundary setting. We need to ensure that they feel accepted and have a sense of belonging in the home to ensure that the peer group is not the only place to find these things.

Be Connected

A family where adolescents will feel comfortable and connected with, has adults who have:

- an interest and curiosity in the lives of the teenagers.
- a willingness to express feelings of love and affection.
- an interest and respect for the views that they express.
- an acceptance of the feelings they may be having. These include both positive and negative feelings, and feelings that are openly expressed and those that may only be visible through careful observation of their behaviour.
- a desire to be helpful if they need assistance.
- a willingness to encourage shared family activities.

Create a Teen Friendly Home

It can be very helpful to examine how 'teenager friendly' your house is. Ask yourself questions like:

- Do you make your son or daughter's friends feel comfortable and welcome when they visit?
- Is there a relaxed atmosphere in your home or is it tense and unfriendly?
- How much fun and enjoyment is allowed?
- Is your home the sort of place that an adolescent would want to spend time?
- Is your home focussed mainly on the needs and interests of the adults or younger children in the house, rather than the adolescents?

If your home is a place that is positive, friendly and fun then there is likely to be motivation for adolescents to spend more time there. If it is the opposite, then it may be making it more and more desirable for them to spend time with their peers.

Keep Them Busy

It is also true that adolescents who spend more time engaged in organised activities outside of school are less influenced by negative peer relationships.

Sports, hobbies and interest groups provide a positive and active time together while still allowing peer interaction to take place.

It should not be a parent's goal to keep adolescents from being with their friends. The aim should be to ensure home is a welcoming, warm and enjoyable place to be, so that young people do not feel that "anywhere but home" is a better place to be.

Aim to help adolescents get involved in activities that provide a purpose and a sense of self worth, and a positive environment to interact with others.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

Get To Know Their Friends

Invite your adolescent's friends to your house. Get to know them and let them get to know you. Don't be strangers. Refuse to believe your first impressions.

Adolescents who appear very different and perhaps undesirable on your first impression may in fact turn out to be a positive influence on your child. Similarly those who appear to be a good influence may not live up to their image once you know them a little better.

Connect With Other Parents

Make links with other parents and community members. Talk to each other about your sons and daughters. Get to know one another and communicate about activities.

Cross-check what you have been told about what your adolescent's plans are with their friends (but be open with your adolescent when this occurs). Let them know that you are available to discuss their concerns and be willing to do so with them.

Support each other in your parenting. Be a community of parents and carers rather than isolated individuals or families.

It can also be valuable to encourage community members to act as informal mentors to your teenager.

Encourage Mentors

It can also be valuable to encourage community members to act as informal mentors to your teenager. They can be role models for an adolescent, provide support and demonstrate their belief in them.

These mentors can be any interested adult including family friends, relatives, teachers, coaches, and group leaders. A mentor is another 'shelter' in the life of an adolescent (in addition to the peer group), where they can feel cared about and encouraged.

Talk

Have casual conversations about topics like peer pressure. If you see an example while watching television programs or in a news report, try to get your adolescent to offer their opinion about the story, and how the peer pressure was dealt with. Focus on listening and eliciting their perspective, rather than talking and lecturing.

Plan Ahead

Encourage some thinking about what your teenager might say in a situation with peers. For example, where they might feel uncomfortable about pressure they are getting from their friends. Responses to an invitation might include 'I don't feel well today', or 'I've got a big day tomorrow, so I need to take it easy'. Encourage their creativity and allow them to come up with their own ideas.

Support Self Esteem

Do everything you can to encourage a healthy self-esteem in your adolescent. Build in them a belief in themselves, by showing that you believe in them.

Celebrate their successes and help them learn something when they do not succeed. Help develop their own value system and make sure they know that you will always care for and love them no matter what.

Don't Take it Personally

Parents must always remember that the attraction of teenagers to their peers does not represent a rejection of them as parents. Transitioning away is simply a normal and essential part of moving from childhood to adulthood. If this does not happen it can be a barrier to adolescents becoming independent and happy adults.

WHAT CAN I DO WHEN THINGS GO WRONG?

Sometimes teenagers choose friends who concern us. These friends may be involved in risk-taking and anti-social behaviour. They may seem to have changed your son or daughter for the worse.

This may have happened for a variety of reasons, but the underlying drive is the desire to be with others where they feel accepted and that they belong.

A significant reason why this happens may be circumstances or luck. Your teen may have met a peer by chance who may appear to be a negative influence, but they may be a charming individual who has befriended them and made them feel special.

Perhaps your teenager was feeling down one day and this person came along and helped at the time. It could also be because they have the urge to do get involved with someone they see as exciting and adventurous.

It could also be because they have a low sense of self-worth and have found someone who makes them feel good about themselves. They could feel like they cannot live up to the expectations that they have of themselves or others have of them, and they may seek out a peer group where they can feel valued for other reasons.

Whatever the reason, try to not criticise your teenager's friends. To them this may seem like a personal attack on themselves or their judgement. If you need to discuss something that has happened, focus on behaviour, events, actions, and choices - not on their friends. If parents attack adolescents' friends they will most likely defend them, and the friendships can actually be strengthened in this way.

When your son or daughter develops negative peer relationships, it often becomes a source of worry and stress for parents. Try not to let the stress interfere with your relationship. Stick together and support each other. If necessary get some outside counselling for yourself so that you do not become a victim of the situation.

If you feel that you have not been able to maintain a supportive and warm approach in your parenting, you may need professional support to improve the situation.

Parents may want to send their teenager for counselling, but this is rarely useful unless the young person sees the need for it themselves. They are unlikely to attend counselling, and if they do they may not co-operate. Often in these situations, the only person that parents have some control over is themselves.

Parents cannot 'lock up' adolescents and will not have total control over who they spend their time with. Even when parents follow many of the suggestions for building strong relationships, there is no guarantee that problems won't arise.

Sometimes a parent is very much in the background, but you can still be doing all you can do to show love and support. At these times it helps to keep a long term perspective. Hope and trust that your adolescent will get through this time unhurt, and having learnt something important about relationships (including yours), trust, and what they stand for.

While peer relationships can be concerning to parents, they are an essential and inevitable part of growing up. Parents' influence does not disappear just because young people start to prioritise their friends. You can provide your adolescents with a positive direction: it is just different from the more direct influence you may have had when they were children.

Reassure yourself that most peer relationships are positive. When negative peer influences occur it helps to maintain a sense of hope and remember that there are lessons to be learnt. Never give up on the long term goal of helping your adolescent become a happy and successful adult.