

YOUNG PEOPLE

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Peer groups are groups of friends of about the same age, often with similar interests. We all belong to a range of peer groups at different times throughout life. Peer pressure is the influence a group has on its members to fit into a particular way of thinking and acting. The influence of peer groups increases as children move into adolescence. They can have a very positive influence, and they may also influence young people in ways you don't like.

Many parents worry about peer pressure, but peer pressure is not about a group forcing someone to do something against their will. It is more about a person choosing to do something because they want acceptance, to belong and feel valued.

If helps for parents to understand the importance of peer groups. Encouraging their positive aspects and learning how to reduce negative ones can help you provide the best support. It can reduce worry for you too!

Benefits of peer groups

For young people, a peer group is a major source of security where they form their own identity and learn to become independent from parents. In peer groups they learn to take positive risks and form their own ideas and opinions. It is where they practice how to get on in the world and gradually become adults who are able to make their own decisions.

It's good for parents to understand the importance of peer groups. They can be a great benefit because they help young people to:

- meet new people and learn to make friends
- feel they belong and are valued and accepted for who they are
- get to know their limits and what they're willing to accept
- improve their ability to make their own choices
- feel secure and increase their self confidence
- feel understood by others who are going through the same things
- have a safe place to take positive risks and test out values and ideas
- increase skills in becoming independent
- become involved in new and positive things such as music, activities and other interests
- practice getting along with others and learning to give and take
- learn about dating.

Things parents worry about

There are lots of things parents worry about during this period of their young person's development. Things can be very different as a child begins to mature and become more independent.

- **The amount of time young people spend with friends:** Young people often spend all day with their friends at school or doing activities and then come home and spend hours on the phone or internet with them. It is normal for young people to spend more time with peers than with their families at this stage.
- **Losing your influence:** Even though the information they get isn't always correct, young people will often seek the views and advice of their peers more than from parents. This is particularly so for things that are sensitive or embarrassing, or which they're scared their parents won't approve of. It could be things like smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs, or having sex. If you are used to them coming to you for advice it can feel like your views are not important to them anymore.
- **A peer group making them do things they don't want to:** It is rare that a group forces a young person to act in a certain way.
 - Peer pressure is more about a young person choosing to do things to be popular, to gain approval from peers and to be part of a group.
 - The less confident and secure a young person is, the more they will want this approval.
 - Young people who have low self-esteem are more likely to be drawn to groups which see 'having fun' as taking negative risks and doing things to attract negative attention.
 - Young people with good self-esteem are more likely to want to belong to peer groups who have fun by taking positive risks and where achieving is the 'norm'.



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Things parents worry about *continued*

- **Young people not saying 'No':** Even adults find it hard to go against their peer groups. Studies show that only one in three adults speak out when they are not happy with something in their peer group. A young person is more able to say 'no' if they are confident and have more than one group of friends
- **Young people giving up family values:** Young people are exploring values of friends and role models as well as developing values from their own independent thinking. For a while it may seem they have thrown out the important values you taught them, but they are really just testing these values out. In the end they will form their own individual identity and take on values from a mix of all they have learned.

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What you can do

Honest communication is the basis of all good relationships, including the relationship you have with your son or daughter. It's important at this time to continue to be a positive influence in their life by building on the good communication you have built over the years with them.

Many parents find the best way to support their young person is to:

- Let her know you understand some of the pressures on her. By recognising that fitting in is very serious and important at this stage, you're not putting pressure on her to choose between family and friends.
- Be open to discussing any issue, no matter how sensitive. This can provide a good balance to the information provided by a peer group. If she knows you will listen without judging and will help her find her own answers, she will be more likely to come to you.
- Take time to spend with her and show you care.
- Support her to be confident and true to herself.
- Help her understand the values that are important to her when making decisions and to think about consequences.
- Encourage her to spend time with different people and groups.
- Help her think about ways she can say 'no' when a group is doing something she is not comfortable with.
- Talk to her about how she will cope if she feels pressure to make risky choices.
- Not take it personally that she wants to spend more time with her friends.

Avoiding problems

Phone and Internet use

In our technical world, mobile phones and Internet social networking sites have replaced the old ways of keeping in touch with friends. You may need to work out a way to manage the use of phone and Internet that works for the whole family.

- For phones, this may include setting time limits for calls, having certain times when long calls are okay, using 'call waiting', and agreeing on times when mobile phones are turned off.
- For the Internet, it is very important that young people know how to use the internet and social networking sites safely.

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What you can do *continued*

When young people hang out at your house

- There are advantages when your son or daughter's friends hang out at your place but you don't want your house over-run. Some parents have found it helpful to:
 - rearrange rooms to provide space and privacy for young people, as well as other house members
 - keep plenty of low cost healthy food available such as bread, cereal, cheese and fruit
 - set some 'house rules' with their input—discuss what to do when the rules are broken.
- Be clear about:
 - what movies are not okay in your house
 - the family rules for using the phone and computer
 - the use of alcohol—lock alcohol away if necessary
 - sexual behaviour in the house.

Remember, in ACT the legal age of consent for sex is 16 years.

When you are worried about a peer group

You may not be comfortable with your young person's choice of peer groups. This may be because a peer group is into risky things such as using alcohol or drugs, skipping school, shoplifting or vandalising property.

Some parents try to enforce rules and monitor activities to stop their young person mixing with the 'wrong' groups. If you do this, you could risk them avoiding you, lying to you or becoming more determined to be part of the group.

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- Keep the communication open—be willing to listen.
- Get to know the friends and groups who are important to him.
- Think about whether your concerns about his friends are really important.
- Don't get caught up in minor things such as how they dress.
- If you believe your concerns are serious, talk to him about the behaviour in the group that worries you rather than criticising the friends.
- Talk with him about potential consequences of the behaviour.
- Look at both the short-term risks and consequences and also how this might affect his future, for example, getting into trouble with police.

When you are worried about a peer group *continued*

- Show him you trust him. If he breaks your trust ask him to suggest ways to earn it again. We all make mistakes and need the chance to learn from them.
- Talk to someone who can help if you feel unable to change a serious situation.

Reminders

- Keep communicating. Listen to your young person's point of view and ask him to listen to yours.
- Let him know that you are there to support him, whatever happens.
- Understand the benefits of peer groups, how to encourage positive involvement and how to reduce any negatives.
- Support your young person to understand the values that are important for them when making choices.
- Get to know friends and make them feel welcome in your home.
- Have clear house rules for when friends are hanging out at your house.
- Agree on a way that works for the whole family for phones and the internet.
- Remember that we are all in peer groups. It can be hard to go against a peer group, even for adults who have much more confidence.

Contacts

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| Kids Help Line | 24-hour | 1800 55 1800 |
| Parentline ACT | 9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols | 6287 3833 |

Websites

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| www.cyh.com | Parenting and child health information |
| www.kidshelp.com.au | Kids helpline |
| www.parentlink.act.gov.au | Other parenting guides, including Abuse of parents, Discipline (teens) |

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