



4-3-5 Peer Pressure Article

Its Influence on Teens and Decision Making - A Resource for Older Kids, Parents, and Staff

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Say you're sitting around with some friends playing video games and someone mentions a particular game that happens to be one of your favorites. "Oh, that game's easy. So not worth the time," one of your friends says dismissively. The others agree. Inwardly, you know that it is a game you happen to enjoy quite a lot but, outwardly, not wanting to debate the issue, you go along with the crowd.

You have just experienced what is commonly referred to as peer pressure. It is probably more accurate to refer to this as peer influence, or social influence to adopt a particular type of behavior, dress, or attitude in order to be accepted as part of a group of your equals ("peers"). As a teen, it's likely you've experienced the effect of peer influence in a number of different areas, ranging from the clothes you wear to the music you listen to.

Peer influence is not necessarily a bad thing. We are all influenced by our peers, both negatively and positively, at any age. For teens, as school and other activities take you away from home, you may spend more time with your friends than you do with your parents and siblings. As you become more independent, your peers naturally play a greater role in your life. Sometimes, though, particularly in emotional situations, peer influence can be hard to resist—it really has become "pressure"—and you may feel compelled to do something you're uncomfortable with.

What scientific research tells us about peer influence

"There are two main features that seem to distinguish teenagers from adults in their decision making," says Laurence Steinberg, a researcher at Temple University in Philadelphia. "During early adolescence in particular, teenagers are drawn to the immediate rewards of a potential choice and are less attentive to the possible risks. Second, teenagers in general are still learning to control their impulses, to think ahead, and to resist pressure from others." These skills develop gradually, as a teen's ability to control his or her behavior gets better throughout adolescence.

According to Dr. B. J. Casey from the Weill Medical College of Cornell University, teens are very quick and accurate in making judgments and decisions on their own and in situations where they have time to think. However, when they have to make decisions in the heat of the moment or in social situations, their decisions are often influenced by external factors like peers. In a study funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), teen volunteers played a video driving game, either alone or with friends watching. What the researchers discovered was that the number of risks teens took in the driving game more than doubled when their friends were watching as compared to when the teens played the game alone. This outcome indicates that teens may find it more difficult to control impulsive or risky behaviors when their friends are around, or in situations that are emotionally charged.

The positive side

While it can be hard for teens to resist peer influence sometimes, especially in the heat of the moment, it can also have a positive effect. Just as people can influence others to make negative choices, they can also influence them to make positive ones. A teen might join a volunteer project because all of his or her friends are doing it, or get good grades because the social group he or she belongs to thinks getting good grades is important. In fact, friends often encourage each other to study, try out for sports, or follow new artistic interests.

In this way, peer influence can lead teens to engage in new activities that can help build strong pathways in the brain. As described in the article "Teens and Decision Making: What Brain Science Reveals," neural connections that are weak or seldom used are removed during adolescence through a process called synaptic pruning, allowing the brain to redirect precious resources toward more active connections. This means that teens have the potential, through their choices and the behaviors they engage in, to shape their own brain development. Therefore, skill-building activities—such as those physical, learning, and creative endeavors that teens are often encouraged to try through positive peer influence—not only provide stimulating challenges, but can simultaneously build strong pathways in the brain.

While we are constantly influenced by those around us, ultimately the decision to act (or not to act) is up to us as individuals. So when it comes to decision making, the choice is up to you.

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