

## The Truth About Adolescent Peer Groups

Our kids go through some fundamental brain changes as they enter their teens. Aside from years 0 to 3, there is more brain construction, reconstruction, and rewiring going on than at any other time in life. In addition, we now know that the adolescent brain has been designed by nature for specific purposes. Developmental specialist, Dan Siegel M.D.\*, uses the acronym ESSENCE to describe these *normal* specialties.

E S: Emotional Spark. Teens are more emotional because their brains are undergoing massive changes. Hormonal changes do also play a part, but probably a lesser one. Because of heightened emotionality, we have more vivid memories of our teen years than we do of childhood. We need to be patient, cool, and non-confrontational with adolescents.. It's best to just let a lot of this overly emotional behavior pass. Remember, it's physiological. They're getting hijacked by their changing brains.

S: Sociability. During adolescence switch their allegiances from parents to peer groups; the people they will go through life with. Many lifetime friendships are formed during this phase of life. To become independent adults, young people must separate from parents to form their own identities. This is healthy and normal. In doing so they must become their *un-parents*. Don't take this as rejection. They've already internalized the values of their parents for good or for ill. Look at this normal behavior as *temporary insanity, and don't take it personally*. The teen may try out several types of peer groups, but you have more influence than you think, if you play your cards right.

N: Novelty Seeking. Like kittens, adolescents are naturally drawn to what is new and different. This is a normal part of identity development because they need to explore what's out there to see what fits them. As adults, we feel like we're on the edge of a knife because we have to make on the spot judgments about loosening the reins so they can grow, while trying to keep them safe. We need to let them know we can't compromise on health, safety, and harm to others or the environments they operate in. (Sorry kid, no sky-diving). Other than that, we need to let them negotiate. It's good practice.

CE: Creative Expression. Teens are like sponges. Their brains are highly primed for learning and creativity. We need to feed their curiosity and not let learning environments become such a grind that we send the message that learning is boring, irrelevant, and drudgery. Unfortunately, we too often send them that message with the ways they're taught in school. Teens need time, opportunities and encouragement to pursue their own interests. Many of our most innovative ideas and inventions have come from the minds of teens and young

Understanding what's normal in the context of adolescent behavior helps us to clarify what we can expect from where we should be concerned, and we're concerned a lot about their friends. Let's look at some myths about peer groups.

Myth 1. Peer groups go out and recruit our kids. False. Teens themselves seek out the groups they feel most comfortable with.

Myth 2. Peers pressure teens into doing drugs, alcohol, or having sex. False. Teens put pressure on themselves and the behavior comes from within. When teens feel the love and acceptance they can't find elsewhere, they want to conform to the culture of this new 'family.' Regarding alcohol, they watch what *you* do.

Myth 3. Teens join groups to "stick it to" their parents. Sometimes true. Teens can sniff out rejection and hypocrisy like bloodhounds. When we're overly controlling and tell them, "Do as I say, not as I do!" they lose respect for us. When that happens the attachment between parent and child is weakened, and they look for it elsewhere. That, in addition to normal exploration of peer affiliations and alternative identities, can lead teens to the wrong places. Teens within the peer group tend to genuinely care and look out for each other, something they may not be getting at home. Make sure they're getting it from you.

### Peer Groups Usually Don't Have the Final Word, You Do!

Check out and examine your own values, behavior and character. You are the model the teen will emulate, for good or for ill. They internalized those parts of you very early in childhood, and though they may be in temporary cold storage for now, when the kid is older, she'll take them out to defrost. Remember that trying out alternative values, behaviors and identities is *temporary* and a normal part of trying to figure out who she is and what she stands for.

If you maintain a connection with your teen in terms of communication, tolerance and respect for her individuality, the underlying attachment will remain strong enough to weather the storms. If not, you have some work to do, but with knowledge and different parenting strategies, you can still reconnect. Either way, you have more influence than you think you do.

Set aside time for the adolescent and express interest in their lives. If you're cool and accepting and avoid ordering them around, telling them they're wrong, or lecturing, there is a much better chance they'll let you inside their heads. *Please* give them your respectful attention. It's extremely important for a teen to feel respected. They're also easily embarrassed, so adults need to make the effort to be sensitive. When you're with your teen put away your devices and don't text! Otherwise, the teen will see just how important she is on your list of priorities. Meals should be free from devices and about conversation and the respectful exchange of

Ideas. When your child is speaking, *don't* interrupt, belittle her ideas, or speak over her. Always demonstrate interest and respect, even if you disagree. Ask her why she thinks or feels the way she does without being critical.

Meals together should be a part of your daily ritual. Ferrying your child around is also an excellent time to reach out and talk. If your teen knows you'll be there for her no matter what (and there'll always be plenty of '*no matter what's*' before she turns 25), that connection will still be there.

If it helps, please keep in mind that identity seeking and the importance of fitting into a peer group peaks around middle school, and starts tapering off in senior high school, so stay connected.

It's a good idea to invite your child's friends to hang out at your house so you can get to know them. Don't let their appearances deceive you. Many of the preppy kids who look great on the outside can be the most cruel, and the scruffy black garbed "goths" may be the most gentle, caring, and artistic. It's perfectly fine to encourage your teen to avoid the high status *popular* groups. They tend to be where the "mean girls" hang out; someone is always *in or out* of cliques such as these, causing significant emotional pain.

There will be times when your kid does crazy things and breaks the rules. That's what adolescents do. Teens are novelty seeking, impulsive, emotional and risk-taking creatures whose rational thinking brains are still baking. They won't be fully *done* and ready to come out of the oven until they're in their early 20's. Other than bubble wrapping them, we need to remember that they are still children and supervise them. They are not ready to be left alone yet, but that's what we do. The most dangerous time of the day is from 3:00 to 5:00 when school is over but the parents are still working. This is when teens experiment with sex, drugs, and alcohol. Not only do you have to check in, but cooperate with other parents on determining who can be home, and when. Never let a teen spend the night elsewhere until you get explicit assurances that there are no drugs, alcohol, guns, or members of the opposite sex, and that a responsible adult will be there. Likewise, don't hand over the car keys to a teen unless you're driving with them. Remember their impulsive brains are still baking! Driving with peers in the car results in the highest number of teen fatalities from auto accidents.

Unfortunately, teens don't always take our word for much. Therefore it's important that they learn from consequences early and that we don't bail them out. If the police ask you to come down to the station, let the teen take responsibility. If she fails to turn in her term paper, she gets a D. There is very little, other than addiction, disability, bad role models, or teen parenthood that the teen won't eventually grow out of. Even if the child is arrested for a juvenile offense, very few of them reoffend as adults. When a teen is in trouble, be calm and let the consequence teach. If you are punitive, the child will turn the blame on you rather than take a good hard look in the mirror. It gets the child off the hook.

Remember to hold firm on the boundaries you set. Hurt kids, especially, are holding a lot of pain and the deviant behavior is but an outward symptom.. If the teen is in a peer group that's dangerous and truly deviant, it's probably because of her own pain and lack of confidence and self esteem. You need to step in. These kids need more help than a parent alone can give. To prevent them from falling in with destructive kids, they need to know there's an alternative. You need to convince them until they truly believe it, that you love them and will be there no matter what. The buck stops with destructive or dangerous behavior and they need to know it's your job to protect them. They need to experience consequences for what they do, but you will not abandon them. And though you can't prevent a teen from acting like a teen, you can stay close to them; communicating and monitoring.

They will never tell you this, but it's not true that kids don't like spending time with their parents. It's scary to venture out into the adult world, so kids will go back and forth between the "world out there," and the safety of home. They'll seek you out as long as you're loving, helpful and respectful. Always lend an ear and don't criticize. Say, "That's an interesting comment. Why do you feel that way?" They may actually tell you! Another thing that astonishes parents is the extent to which your teen absorbs everything you do and say. They just file it away in their mental file cabinet for future use. You'll see that some of your thoughts and values that they felt were stupid at the time, are precisely the ones they claim as their own in young adulthood, and especially when they become parents.

All of this is especially true for teens that have been emotionally or physically wounded. They are very afraid and need lots of reassurance. These kids, even more than others, need to vent and release their pain. Give them escape hatches. Their language may not be as civil as you'd like, but don't make that the point. They need to know it's safe to growl and even blow up sometimes, and you'll still be there. This makes them feel safe. You also need to be their committed advocate in school. Many teens feel like school is a battlefield and a place where they cannot succeed and feel good about themselves. Discouraged kids have more trouble complying with the rules and have proportionately more suspensions and expulsions. In my view, any child whose behavior is interfering with their ability to learn should have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) with a mental health, not a behavior plan. Hurt children are highly reactive and go into "fight, flight, and freeze" before they're even aware of it. They need to be managed for trauma. Stay away from behavior modification as a form of discipline. That can make matters worse. Their behavior is *not* usually intentional. They get hijacked by their triggers.

Suspensions and expulsions cause teens to miss class, making them even less likely to feel engaged in school success. This makes them very vulnerable to being attracted to peer groups where the teens no longer feel like they belong in school and are too far behind to catch up. Therefore, they often drop out with sometimes tragic consequences; pregnancies, drug use, and becoming involved with the juvenile justice system.

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If your teen has a pattern of discipline problems, it's a symptom, not a cause. If she doesn't have an IEP, contact the school to start the process. If you put your request for a comprehensive evaluation in writing, the school has 60 days to respond; an eternity if your kid is struggling. The law offers protections when children have behavior problems. Do *not* let the school talk you into taking a "wait and see" attitude. If your teen is discouraged, tell her you'll do what it takes to improve her school experience and then act immediately. Special education law mandates that a child's education be designed to fit all of her needs that interfere with learning, including social and emotional needs. Don't settle for less. This is one area where you should hire an advocate to steer you through the special education maze.

In short, the adolescent years (12-25) are a time of huge developmental shifts. It pays to remain calm and carefully monitor without being intrusive. Much of what they do is not intentional, but part of the process of forming their identities while their brains are still under construction. It's our challenge to keep the lines of communication open so they see you as a safe, uncritical base. Extra efforts in that direction must be made for teens who are vulnerable. The biggest protective factor for these teens is the ongoing presence of adults who care.

If you do your job and stay in there for the long run, you'll have given your child a precious gift; a positive model of support, constancy, and empathy. Eventually this will pay off in spades. Even children with traumatic pasts can be turned around. It may take awhile—even years, but it happens all the time. Remember, it's as normal for teens to try on different identities as they try on clothes. Eventually they switch back to an outfit very much like the one you chose for them. Hang in there!

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- Siegel, Daniel M.D., *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*. The Penguin Group, New York 2003, 2014