

Peer Influence

“The teen brain is wired differently from an adult brain when it comes to making decisions,” says Dr. Laurence Steinberg, a researcher at Temple University. How? He notes two main differences: First, teens are drawn to the immediate rewards of a potential choice while being less attentive to the possible risks. And, second, they are still learning to control their impulses, to think ahead, and to mediate the influence of others.

Peer influence is not necessarily a bad thing. Everyone is influenced by peers, both negatively and positively, at any age. As teens become more independent of their parents, peers naturally play a greater role in influencing their thoughts, feelings, and actions. But sometimes, especially in emotional situations, peer influence can be hard to resist. It can become “pressure,” and a person may feel forced to do something he or she is uncomfortable with.

According to Dr. B. J. Casey from the Weill Medical College of Cornell University, teens do exercise good judgment and make thoughtful decisions when given time to think things through. But when decisions have to be made in the heat of the moment or in social situations, teens are often influenced by peers and find it harder to suppress impulsive or risky behaviors.

Learning how to pause in critical situations is an important part of decision making. Pausing can give teens a better chance to evaluate the facts before making a rushed decision.

In evaluating risky situations, the following questions can be helpful for teens to consider before acting:

- ▶ What are the possible consequences?
- ▶ What are the short-term benefits (such as the feeling of fitting in) versus the possible harmful outcomes (to yourself or others)?
- ▶ How could peer pressure be influencing your decision?
- ▶ Where can you turn for additional information or advice, if you need it?

Imagine This: Using facts you’ve learned, review the scenarios below and write a paragraph describing how you might respond to each one.

1. As you’re leaving school on Friday, a friend invites you to a party. He says it’s going to be a blast because his parents are away and some friends are bringing a keg. He asks, “So, are you going to come?”
2. Your friends arrive to pick you up for a concert. They’re laughing hysterically as the car pulls up, and you notice some empty beer cans in the front seat. You hesitate as the door swings open, but your friends shout, “Come on, get in!”
3. A friend has started smoking cigarettes. You don’t want to smoke, but she keeps pushing you. “You should have one,” she says, “It’s no big deal. Just take a puff off mine.”
4. You’re at a party and somebody offers you a Vicodin®, saying “Don’t worry, it’s legal. Besides, look at all the celebrities who are doing it.”

DID YOU KNOW? When making decisions in the heat of the moment or in social situations, teens are often influenced by peers and find it harder to control their behavior.

