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# Be Aware of Your Adolescent's Peers and Activities: Keep up Your Guard During the Holidays



### Author:

[Philip J. Lazarus, Ph.D., N.C.S.P.](#)

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By [Philip J. Lazarus, Ph.D., N.C.S.P.](#)

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My wife and I have some friends—John and Rebecca in Raleigh, North Carolina—who were recently asked by their 16-year-old daughter, Cathy, if she could go on a five-day trip with some other teenagers during her Christmas break. They said, “We need a lot more information.” Cathy then developed an elaborate computer presentation showing where she would be going and the educational advantages of the trip. The parents said, “Cathy, that was a fantastic slide show. We were most impressed. But, we are concerned about the lack of adult supervision. Therefore, the answer is ... no.”

We have some other friends—Scott and Donna in Houston, Texas—who tell the story of their 15-year-old daughter, Jill, being invited to a party. In that particular community, it seems that teenagers have “house parties” and invite up to 200 of their closest friends. Consequently Scott and Donna’s daughter asked to attend. Dad replied that he would need to contact the parents, arrange to meet them, and discuss the issue of parental supervision at the event. He asked for the parents’ phone number and, all of a sudden, Jill changed her mind about attending.

Throughout the year, and especially during the holiday season, parents of adolescents need to be aware of their children’s activities and observant of their children’s peers. During Christmas time—when all of us are busy with family, friends, church and school activities, and shopping—it is important not to let down our guard. It can be difficult to monitor our youngster’s comings and goings. Nonetheless, parents need to closely supervise their teenagers and, when appropriate, provide, as my friend John Rosemond would say, “an adequate dose of Vitamin N” (for “no”) to ensure their teenagers’ safety and well-being.

### **The power and influence of peers**

Developmental psychologists have found that vulnerability to peer pressure—that is, how easily individuals are swayed by the influence of friends—increases as children become teenagers, peaks at around the 8th or 9th grade, and then begins to decline as teenagers move through high school. In other words, the impact of peer pressure increases in early adolescence, reaches its crescendo in middle adolescence, and declines in late adolescence as older teenagers have formed a more coherent sense of identity and values.

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At the same time, parental influence begins to decline as children approach adolescence. In fact, as teenagers mature, they may want to push us away as they try to find their own sense of individuality. For example, when we went to school one morning, my teenage son, Adam, asked me to walk about 100 yards behind him as he got nearer to the building. Consequently, unless we make a concerted effort to maintain active engagement, our distance from our teenagers may become emotionally and even physically greater.

Research has shown that as children reach adolescence, parents begin to disengage from their children's lives. This includes less monitoring and regulating of the adolescent's relationships with friends, their use of leisure time, and their choice of activities. To the extent that parents become less involved in their children's lives, their parental influence is diminished. This opens the door for peers to exert a significant impact on each other's behavior.

As conceptualized by Laurence Steinberg, the adolescent's social world can be drawn as three concentric circles. The youngster's one or two *best friends* occupy the inner circle. In the next circle (middle circle) are members of the adolescent's *clique*. These youths are also the adolescent's friends, however, these friendships are not as intimate as the ones within the inner circle, and these relationships may fluctuate in importance from week to week. The outer circle is composed of the adolescent's *crowd*. These are like-minded adolescents who share some common characteristics but are not necessarily each other's friends. Crowd members don't share intimacy, but do share a common identity. In fact, it is possible for adolescents to be members of the same crowd without knowing each other well.

When parents and other adults think about peer influences they tend to think about best friends (the inner circle), secondarily about the clique (the middle circle,) and rarely or not at all about the crowd (the outer circle). However, during adolescence, peer influences operate within cliques and crowds in important ways.

The crowd does not influence members directly—through modeling, reinforcement, or coercion. Instead it sets up standards and norms that teenagers feel they must follow. Once an adolescent has identified a particular crowd (e.g., "jocks," "brains," "preps," "druggies," etc.), the crowd's standards become internalized to the individual, and incorporated into his or her own sense of self. Therefore, the adolescent does not feel as if he or she is being influenced by peer pressure. Instead, the teenager feels as though these group standards are an expression of his or her personal identity.

### **How do adolescents sort themselves into crowds?**

Steinberg and his associates who studied 20,000 teenagers and their families in nine different communities tried to answer this question. Basically they found that there are three sets of forces that determine the crowd with which an adolescent will identify. These are:

- The adolescent's personality and interests, which has in part been determined by parenting practices.
- The types of peer crowds available to that student in his or her particular school and community.
- The tactics that parents use to manage their child's friendships.

A nautical metaphor is helpful in describing how these three sets of forces work together; it has three parts—the *launch*, the *territory*, and the *navigational plan*.

Parents establish goals and objectives for their child at an early age. They *launch* their child into adolescence with certain presumptions and core values about life. For example, some students are instilled with the value that school success should be a top priority, and are launched on a pathway toward scholastic excellence. Others are launched with a value system that stresses “getting by” and not singling oneself out by over-achieving at school.

Once a child reaches adolescence, the *territory*—that is, the particular types of peers and crowds the youth will come into contact with—is as important as the launch. When an adolescent ends up in the orbit of a given peer group, that group keeps the child within its sphere of influence and encourages the youth to adopt particular attitudes, behaviors, clothing styles, etc.

In their large scale study, summarized in the book, *Beyond the classroom: Why school reform has failed and what parents need to do*, Steinberg and his associates looked at drug use among adolescents. They found that the most important determinant of an adolescent’s initial experimentation with drugs was the home environment. Adolescents were more likely to begin drinking and experimenting with marijuana when they came from households that were excessively permissive or when the parents were disengaged from their children’s activities. This is not particularly surprising; however, it is the peer group—not the home environment—that determines whether the adolescent will progress toward regular drug use. Adolescents who had drug-using friends were much more likely to become regular users. Moreover, an adolescent who comes from a disengaged family but does not connect with a drug-using peer group is unlikely to get into trouble with drugs.

Parents may socialize a child in a certain direction, but whether the adolescent will be successful depends on the peer influences the youth encounters along the journey. As noted by Steinberg, “This, in turn, will depend on which peers are available for the child to associate with, and how the child navigates among the different circles of classmates within his or her school.”

### **How might parents help their children navigate through adolescent society?**

Parents can have a powerful influence by developing a *navigational plan* when the child is young and by steering their youngster toward some peer groups and away from others. Through such piloting—even during adolescence—parents can exert some control over the types of peers to whom their child is exposed. One way to do this is by *attempting to influence their child’s choice of friends and their out-of-school activities*. A second and more powerful way is by *selecting the types of settings where their child will spend time*. Parents can do this by selecting one neighborhood or school over another and by involving their child in certain types of after-school and weekend activities while prohibiting others.

Certainly, parents cannot choose their adolescent’s friends; however, they can influence choices by defining the available pool of possible peers. In this way, parents can increase the odds of success by trying to maximize the number of “good” peers and minimizing the number of “bad” peers to whom the child is exposed.

During adolescence, young people require more parental engagement—rather than less. This is a time when they begin to experience the many facets of their personality and to test *us* as well as *themselves*. During this time, adolescents will try to do what is forbidden because it is *exciting* to break the rules. Though our adolescents may push us away or disregard our rules and suggestions, they need our guidance—during this time more than ever. As you help them navigate through the shoals and rocks of

adolescence, provide your teenagers with a healthy dose of Vitamin N as needed. Be vigilant, and always keep your guard up!

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