

Youth and Negative Peer Influence

(by Teresa D. Goins)

As mentioned before, I have the rare privilege of being in close contact with four to six young teenagers (my granddaughter and her friends) on a daily basis. **And the stories they tell!** In this article, we will explore the prevalence of negative peer pressure in the lives of today's youth and what church leaders can do to help.

What is negative peer pressure? The predominant Raising Children Network (an Australian company that advocates internationally with the publication of evidence-based, best practice parenting guidance for child development) believes we should better call it peer influence. Negative peer influence is "when [a young person does] something [he] wouldn't otherwise do because [as a result of it, he feels] accepted and valued by [his] friends." The teenagers that hang with my granddaughter Madison are good kids – they go to church, participate in youth choir, and have an overall desire to do the right thing. They are not perfect; but no matter how 'good' they try to be, they are inundated with temptations. One of Madison's friends has mentioned on several occasions that, during school hours, she has been asked by another student (who is supposed to be her friend) to smoke marijuana with her in the bathroom. And these kids are in middle school! Madison's group of friends are daily taunted to 'vape' and to engage in inappropriate sexual behavior. No matter the theme, the usual "try it, you'll like it" applies.

A popular *WebMD* "Teens and Peer Pressure" article confirms our list of most common temptations in this excerpt:

Say you're invited to a party when you know there will be **alcohol** or **drugs**. A friend decides to **cut class**. Someone offers you a **cigarette**. Or friends talk about **having sex** with their boyfriends or girlfriends. Peer influence is the pressure to conform to the behaviors, attitudes, and personal habits of '*the group*.'

So, how can we expect our young teenagers to respond? Raising Children says that "getting the balance right between being [themselves] and fitting in with [the] group" is the key. Statistics show that the confident child is less likely to be negatively affected. It is okay when kids listen to the same music, dress in the same way, and enjoy the same activities. The problem occurs when a child veers away from what he has been taught (and what he personally values) just to please someone else.

For the sake of our precious youth, we church leaders must take peer influence seriously! First, we must listen to our kids, without judging. There should be open communication, for example, between Sunday School teachers and their students. An atmosphere in which no

topic of discussion is taboo (in hopes to positively guide them) should be established. We shouldn't be embarrassed by anything our kids need to discuss. The fact that they are actually sharing with us is a real positive. Refrain from being too critical (or better yet, hypocritical) or disapproving of them. Only when we offer advice in a non-threatening way will they truly listen. The *worst* thing we can do is laugh at them or scold them for talking about their concerns. ***Be real!*** That's the only way we can make a difference.

Encourage your teens to be true to themselves. Build up their self-esteem by giving them important jobs to do as a part of your church's goings-on. Pray for them and praise them when they do something right. Be a role model and someone they can confide in when they are troubled. Suggest some creative ways to say, "No." As parents and grandparents, we can give our children a code word that only the family will share. When a risky situation arises, let them text or call you, at which time you can say something like, "You can't go to the party tonight because you have to attend our family outing." That way, they have a 'way out' and don't have to be embarrassed in front of their friends.

Of course, there are occasions when we should take negative influence a step further. If a child is in real trouble, a discussion with your pastor and the child's parents is in order. Otherwise, continue to guide and support your young people. Raising Children claims that if you foster a positive relationship with your teenagers, they will be more likely to keep you informed. So, the next time a teenager tells you they've been told, "C'mon, everybody's doing it," remember: We parents and church leaders *ALSO* have ***influence*** over our children! Amen.

SOURCES:

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/behaviour/peers-friends-trends/peer-influence>
<https://teens.webmd.com/peer-pressure#1>

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