



Parents Make A Difference!

Teens and Their Peers

December 2004

True or False? – Most teens are comfortable with their group of friends.

True or False? – Most teens report that their parents know their friends.

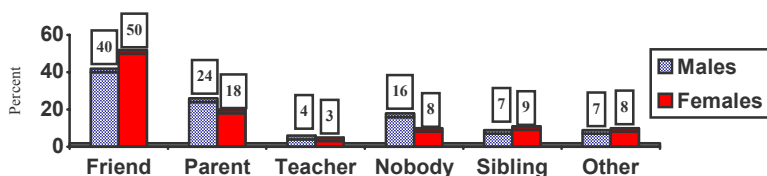
True or False? – Most teens report that they can stand up for their beliefs and resist negative peer pressure.

According to the 2001 Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS) of 5,704 7th-12th graders, the correct answer to all three of these questions is "true"!

Teen Friendships are Important

Peers are very important for teens since friends are a source of support and influence. In fact, if faced with a personal problem 50% of female teens and 40% of male teens would choose to talk to a friend before anyone else.

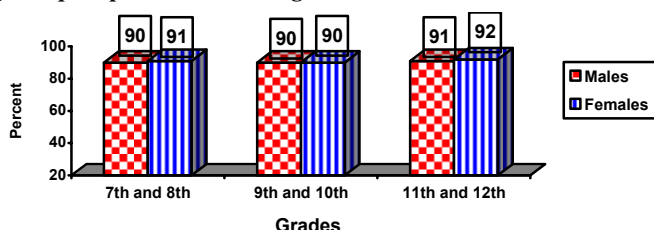
Student responses to the question, “If you were having a personal problem and needed someone to talk to, who would you most likely go to?”



As teens grow older, they tend to spend more time with their peers and less time with their families. As a result, many parents worry about their teens' relationships with other teens. Parents hear stories all the time about good kids getting in with the wrong “crowd” and no parent wants that to happen to his or her son or daughter. According to Nina Mounts, University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, it appears that many parents have a couple of misperceptions about teen peer relationships.

First, many parents believe that peers are always a bad influence on teens. Research shows that peers can be a negative *or* a positive influence. Yes, peers can lead your child to drink alcohol or smoke. But peers can also push your child to go to school, excel in academics or extra-curriculars, and pursue a college education. The type of friends your teen chooses determines the type of influence that they might have on him or her. SWYS findings illustrate that almost all of our teens feel they can resist negative peer pressure.

Students who *agree or strongly agree* with the statement: “I stand up for my beliefs and can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.”



Second, many parents believe that they will always be at odds with what their teen's friends believe. Many parents believe that the generation gap puts their teen at odds with them on key values and moral issues. Research in this area shows, however, that parents and peers hold many of the same values. Parents' values about long-term plans for the future are especially important to teens, and these same values are usually supported by peers. Where teens and their peers usually differ most with parents is on things such as clothes, hair, or music – which have few long-term effects.

Teens Worry About Their Friends

When asked to identify how much they worry about 19 common teen concerns, topics related to peers did cause worry for teens in southwest Wisconsin. The third top concern for teens, after #1 – getting good grades and #2 – getting along with my parents, was losing a friend or relative because of death. Teens were also concerned about friends who were drinking and smoking, being pressured into drinking and/or drugs by peers, and being pressured into having sex. It is clear that teens value their friends to a great extent and that their friends do have significant influence on them.

Teens who worry about:	Total
Getting good grades	96%
Getting along with my parent(s)	75%
Loss of a friend or relative because of death	73%
That my friends are drinking	42%
Being picked on or physically hurt by another teen	43%
That I don't have the things my friends have (CD's, name brand clothes, cell phones, etc.)	40%
That my friends are smoking	37%
Being pressured into drinking or doing drugs	40%
Being pressured into having sex	32%

What Can Parents Do To Support Positive Peer Relationships?

Remain close to your teen – a close relationship with parents is the best insurance that the teen will choose friends that the parents like. It also helps to be able to resist negative peer pressure. Even if they may say otherwise, teens want and need the security that their parents provide.

Encourage your teen's decision making – teens who practice decision making at home are more likely to use these skills to make good decisions when they interact with peers.

Know your adolescent's friends – a teen's selection of friends says a lot about who they are and what they are likely to be doing when you're not around. Without trying to be one of the gang, try to get to know your teen's friends as individuals. When parents show genuine interest in their friends, teens are less likely to see their parents and friends as opposing forces. In southwest Wisconsin, 70% of teen males and 78% of teen females reported that their parents "*often*" knew their friends.

Don't jump to conclusions based only on what your teen says is happening with friends – parents often hear "Other kids' parents don't make them come in THAT early!" or "ALL the kids are going to that party!" Some parents may feel coerced into changing the rules because they don't want to be different from other parents. Ask for more information from your teen. And you may also want to have a conversation with your teen's friends' parents. In southwest Wisconsin, about half of the teens reported that their parents "*often*" knew the parents of their friends.

Make room for peer activities – teens do need time with their friends. It allows them to learn more about themselves and other people. Offer your home as a place to gather or offer to drive younger teens to a social function. You will be able to have greater influence and monitor activities if you provide a respectful, welcoming atmosphere.

Encourage your teen's relationships with peers who have values you approve of. If your teen has friends that you're concerned about, keep a closer eye on their activities. Don't say anything positive about the friend and don't say anything negative either. Your lack of response toward the friend will signal your teen about your feelings.

Hang in there – keep communicating, setting limits, emphasizing values and standards, and providing support – even when teens seem to be turning a deaf ear, violating the rules, or actively resisting you. You are more of an influence than you realize!

PARENTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

"Parents Make a Difference" is a product of the Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS), a program of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, local school districts and UW-Platteville. This series is adapted from the UW-Extension "Whose Kids?...Our Kids!" series. This issue was written by Ruth Schriefer, UW-Extension Iowa County and edited by Deb Ivey and Sarah Weier, UW-Extension Iowa County, Tom Schmitz, UW-Extension Grant and Lafayette County and Bev Doll, UW-Extension Grant County. Thanks are extended to the 5,704 7th to 12th graders from southwest Wisconsin who participated in the 2001 SWYS survey. Contact UW-Extension for further information, by phone: Grant County (608) 723-2125; Lafayette County (608) 776-4820; and Iowa County (608) 935-0391 or on the web at http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/grant/tap/parent_resources.html