

Teen Challenge: Questions & Answers About Popularity, Peer Pressure, and Self-Image

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Parents are faced with varying levels of challenges. For some parents, it is trying to get their teens to turn off the light in their bedroom. Other parents are dealing with more grave matters: drugs, sexual promiscuity, and criminal activity. The series of questions and answers below provides general suggestions that fit a broad range of challenges with teens.

Question Summary

1. My teenager is starting to hang around with the wrong crowd. What can I do?
2. My teenager would do anything to be accepted by the group. Should I be worried?
3. My teenager is very popular in school, but I'm getting reports that he (or she) is unkind to those not in the right clique. Is it my place to say anything?
4. My teenager is not the most attractive or popular person in school. She tries to be accepted by the popular kids, but they only ridicule her. What can I do?

5. My daughter doesn't think I notice, but I'm beginning to suspect she's got an eating disorder. How can I be sure? What can I do to help?

1. My teenager is starting to hang around with the wrong crowd. What can I do?

The reason we never think our kids are hanging around with a bad crowd when they're in third or fourth grade is that those kids didn't look so bad back then. They seemed pretty normal, though perhaps not particularly well behaved. Now, when those same kids are sixteen or seventeen, we wonder how we could have missed it. Your child may be hanging around with the very same kids, only now you see the glaring moral disparity that was almost invisible before.

We get nervous when we look at these kids and see the signs of where some of them may be headed in terms of the trouble they could potentially get into. We know we don't want our kids to go there. But from the child's perspective, nothing's changed. These are still the same kids they've always hung around with.

Any approach you take to attempt to lead your teen away from these peers must rely on the power of your relationship with your teen. You need to sit down and have an honest talk about the types of behavior that are right for your family. If your family has established a common moral stance, you can appeal to that. Point out some of the more dangerous aspects of particular lifestyles. Hopefully your teen will agree with you that there is a disparity between what those friends are like and what your family stands for and will see the need to make a break.

But don't do it in time of crisis. When your teen says, "Mom, can I go over to Matt's house today because we're going to spend the weekend together?" that's not the time to say, "No, I don't like Matt." Your timing is probably as important in these conversations as the words you use. When talking about any important issue with your teen, make sure you operate in periods of non-conflict.

Keep the concept of substitution over suppression in mind. If you're going to attempt to suppress a relationship, make sure you're ready to substitute something in its place. If you're going to tell your teen that these are not the best

kids for her to hang around with, you'd better be establishing relationships with families that have great kids. Provide a natural alternative. You simply can't cut off relationships in your kids' lives without providing a substitution.

Sit down with your teen and have a talk. Ask her what qualities draw her to these friends. Then ask how she feels these qualities and these friends are going to help her reach her goals in life. As kids get into the teen years, you want them to come to their own conclusions. You provide guidance, but you don't make the decisions for them. It's so much better for your teen to say, "Yeah, maybe this guy really isn't the best one for me to hang around with," than for you to dictate that to her. When your teen realizes for herself that someone is a bad influence, she'll be more willing to break off that relationship. But if you dictate with your authority, you're just asking for strife.

2. My teenager would do anything to be accepted by the group. Should I be worried?

Sometimes it's a good thing to want to be accepted by the group. Peer pressure isn't always bad. If it's a positive group, with values you agree with, then it may be applying positive peer pressure on your child. He may clean up some behaviors just because of his new friends. There are personality, temperament, and love language variables that may make your teenager predisposed to want to be accepted by or close to a group. However, if you're pretty sure that isn't the case with your teen, you should try to determine what it is that is motivating him to want so badly to be accepted by this group. We all need to feel accepted and appreciated. But if a teen is willing to do nearly anything to be accepted, it may be cause for alarm. Help your teenager evaluate exactly why this is so important in his life that he's willing to compromise who he is to be accepted by them.

You may find that this is really a need for more time with Dad or an indication that you've got an independent family as opposed to an interdependent one. Or there may be some deficiency in the child's self-perception. If he feels that his own identity will be enhanced by just being friends with these people, then you as his parent need to deal with the root issue (the lack he feels in his own self) rather than the symptoms.

3. My teenager is very popular in school, but I'm getting reports that he (or she) is unkind to those not in the right clique. Is it my place to say anything?

It's always your place as a mom or dad to be a moral compass. This behavior, if true, calls for correction. Correction simply means "putting back on track." This situation does not necessarily call for discipline. It may be more appropriate to provide moral correction. Point out how his actions may be hurting others. Isn't it wonderful that your teenager is well accepted? If you have a child like this, you have the opportunity to instill graciousness and empathy. Teach your popular teen to reach out in kindness and gentleness to those who don't have everything he has. A teen who is friendly to those who are less popular is attractive in a way that transcends nice looks, clothes, and teeth.

4. My teenager is not the most attractive or popular person in school. She tries to be accepted by the popular kids, but they only ridicule her. What can I do?

Usually when your teen desires acceptance by a certain group, it's saying more about your teen than about the group. The key question is why your teen feels she has to be accepted by this particular group. Sit down and talk with her. Ask her what it is this group offers that she desires. What would she gain if she were accepted by this group, and what would it mean about her if she weren't? Listen for clues about what she feels she's lacking that she thinks this group would provide. That's where you should focus your efforts to help your daughter.

The hard truth is that life is not fair. Not everyone will like your child. Young people can be terribly cruel to one another. If this group is rejecting your daughter, it may also be because of insecurities of their own, because confident people welcome new friends easily. Take this opportunity to gently teach your child. Rejection hurts. Right now she's feeling like the outcast. But that won't always be the case. Help her to understand that she will often be in a position of accepting or rejecting others. Now that she knows how awful rejection feels, she can determine to reach out to others in the future. Have her seek friends from outside the "in" group. She may find that there are more neat kids outside the group than inside.

5. My daughter doesn't think I notice, but I'm beginning to suspect she's has an eating disorder. How can I be sure? What can I do to help?

Eating disorders are serious business. There are specialists in this area who can give you information that will allow you to evaluate and attempt to understand the problem. Good information is also available on the [Internet](#). The first step is to get educated. If after you've learned a bit, your suspicions seem to be confirmed, consider taking her to a specialist.

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Usually at the root of any eating disorder is a feeling of non-acceptance by those who are close to her, especially her father. If your daughter is showing signs of an eating disorder, Dad needs to get more involved. It is amazing what a bicycle ride or walk in the park, or a trip to the mall with dad can do for a daughter who is struggling with her own acceptance. In a case like this, parents should concentrate on purposefully expressing their unconditional acceptance of their teen. If you find yourself in this relational context and realize you haven't been extending unconditional acceptance, then this is a good place to start bridge-building back to your daughter's heart.