Peers

Once children become teenagers they develop independence and begin experimenting in drugs, sex, and alcohol. Society and most parents instill upon their children that underage drinking, sex and drug use are wrong but peer influence can easily sabotage many teenagers.

As stated in Prevention Alert (1999), Peer influence is most strongly felt in episodes of heavy drinking. As teenagers spend more time with friends outside of the school environment they are put in situations where their peers are consuming alcohol. Teenagers will often sleep over at each others houses and their respective parents will have no control over the situation or know what their child is doing. Often teenagers will claim they are spending the night at a trusted friend's house while they are really staying at a party. Another study, conducted by Mayer, Foster, Murray, & Wagenaar, 1998, at the University of Minnesota, found that teenage drinkers were more likely to participate in binge drinking episodes when with peers, in large groups of underage persons, and away from home.

Friendship stability probably increases in adolescence because older teens work harder than younger teens and elementary school children at maintaining positive relationships with friends through negotiation of conflicts (Bee and Boyd, 2003). This may also be the reason why peers have such a great influence in risky behavior. In order to stay friends with a group a teenager might feel the need to do the same activities. They rather do the same things as their friends than risk loosing them or not being able to "hang out" with them as much. Teens often choose friends who are committed to the same activities they are (Bee and Boyd, 2003). They tell researchers that maintaining these friendships and continuing in the activities are linked together (Bee and Boyd, 2003). These activities can extend past extracurricular activities to drinking and partying.

In a 1995 national survey of school students, 8% of the eighth graders reported that they had been drunk one or more times in the most recent 30 days, whereas 21% and 33%, respectively, of tenth and twelfth graders reported being drunk in the previous 30 days (Barnes, Reifman, Farrell, Dintcheff, 2000). With so many of their peers drinking it is easy to see how teenagers are influenced by stories in school to parties with friends. Drinking often will lead to risky behaviors like unprotected sex.

Starting at an early age, school and parents will instill in their children that they should wait to have sex. Waiting to have sex is a nice idea, teenagers say, but they hardly believe anyone does it (Meckler, 2003). As children turn into teenagers gradually they will hear stories from their friends and peers as they begin to have sexual experiences. Boys in particular actively talk about their sex lives and might even feel pressured to make up stories or actively seek sex. The Kaiser survey found that boys face particular pressure to have sex often from male friends (Meckler, 2003). Nobody wants to be the last of their peer group to have sex or be liked by the opposite sex.

Parents will often talk to their teenagers only a few times about sex. Most of what teenagers know about sex will come from school and stories from their peers. Most teens are uncomfortable talking to their parents about sexual issues. When a teenager is homosexual they rather tell their friends than their parents. Those who do come out are far more likely to tell peers than parents, although telling peers carries some risk (Bee and Boyd 2003). Clearly teenagers can relate to their peers better than their parents in sexual matters.

Illegal drug use can also lead to sexual activity. About a quarter said that alcohol or drugs had influenced their decision to do something sexual at least once (Meckler, 2003). Even if a teenagers personal beliefs or upbringing tells them they should wait to have sex the peer pressure

might override their convictions. Often teenagers will turn to illegal substances to help loosen them up to allow sexual activity to happen. These same teenagers are clearly armed with the knowledge that drinking and drug use can lead to unprotected sex and promiscuous behavior. They have been taught in school about the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases but they will use the alcohol or drugs as an excuse for themselves.

Before independence as a teenager, children's time with peers was often structured. Once teenagers develop independence and the ability to drive vehicles they are able to gain more unstructured time with peers who are also independent. All this time with peers leads to teenagers first drinking experience, first sexual experience and illegal drug use. All their prior knowledge and parents upbringing is no match for peer pressure when it comes to making these important choices. The childhood time parents spent with their children is easily documented but the time teenagers spend with their peers is largely undocumented and harder to follow. Further research should be done on how teens are affected in situations where they are away from their parents, surrounded by peers and challenged to participate in underage drinking, drug use or sexual activity.

Works Cited

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