



Parents Make a Bigger Impact on Teens Choosing Good Than Parents Think

While parents often worry about the influence peers have on their adolescent children, a new study indicates that they can play a role in helping their teens choose 'good' friends.

The results showed teens are more likely to have good friends – ones who don't fight and who have plans for college, for instance – if they have a warm relationship with their parents and if their parents choose to live in a neighborhood with high-quality schools. Parents' monitoring and supervision are also associated with adolescents' choice of friends, but not as consistently.

“We know from many other studies that peers have a strong influence on the behavior of adolescents, so the process of friendship formation is important to understand,” said Chris Knoester, lead author of the study and assistant professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

“In fact, some scholars have even suggested that parents exert virtually no influence on their children's behavior when they are teens — peers are seen as that much more important. However, we found evidence that parents can act as architects of the friendship choices that their children make.”

The researchers found that specific parenting practices are linked to friends' characteristics even after taking into account the influence that parents themselves have on their children's behaviors and the likelihood that their children will select friends who are similar to themselves.

Knoester conducted the study with two other Ohio State sociologists, assistant professor Dana Haynie and graduate student Crystal Stephens. Knoester presented the results Aug. 13 in Philadelphia at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

The study used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which included interviews with a national sample of 11,483 seventh to 12th grade students and their parents.

The researchers thought that parents could influence their children's choice of friends through manipulating their environment (such as choosing where they live), monitoring and supervising them, teaching them how to behave, and forming close relationships with them.

“We found that parent-child relationship quality, and choosing to live in a neighborhood because of its good schools, is consistently linked to the characteristics of adolescents' friends,” Knoester said.



A good-quality relationship is one in which parents and teens participate in activities together, communicate frequently, and express affection for one another.

When teens and parents reported good relationships, the teens had friends who were less likely to fight and be delinquent, and more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities at schools, have higher grade point averages, and have plans for college.

But when teens and parents reported conflict in their relationship, the teens were more likely to have friends who fought and were involved in delinquency, and who showed fewer pro social characteristics, such as higher grade point averages.

Results also showed that when parents said they selected their neighborhood because of the good schools, their adolescent children tended to have more 'good' friends.

Knoester said the effects of parental supervision weren't as clear in the study. For example, when parents were more familiar with their children's friends, these friends tended to have more pro social characteristics. But there was no link between parental familiarity and friends who participated in fewer delinquent activities.

Also, teens who had more autonomy from their parents tended to have friends who were more delinquent. But autonomy wasn't always bad. When adolescents were more involved in extracurricular activities, the study found higher levels of autonomy encouraged teens to have friends who were also more involved in such activities. Overall, the results of this research show that parents still have an important role in their children's lives after they reach adolescence.

"Most people recognize that parents directly affect the behavior of their teens," Knoester said.

"However, our findings indicate that parents can also indirectly influence their children's behaviors by shaping their choice of friends.

"Parents may be most likely to affect their children's choice of friends by maintaining a positive relationship with their teen, with high levels of involvement and low conflict. They can also help by selecting a neighborhood with good schools and making an effort to get to know their children's friends and other parents in the community."

Source: Ohio State University

Written by Jeff Grabmeier, 2005.