

# ***Research on the Influence of Peer Pressure on Adolescents***

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**Abstract:** Peer pressure is influential in swaying adolescents' actions and decisions. To investigate the holistic influence of peer pressure on adolescence, this paper conducts literature reviews on peer pressure's influence on adolescents regarding risky behavior, romantic relationships, and academic investment. The results show that peers are capable of bringing up and down adolescents' rate of engaging in risky behavior depending on the quality of the friendship. Peers influence adolescent sexual behavior and partner selection, and they have a high level of intervention in their romantic relationships, presenting both positive and negative influences. Peers influence adolescents' effort exerted on academic work depending on the type of image that adolescents are trying to maintain and the degree to which an adolescent's school value hard work. The paper also traces the biological and sociocultural causes of peer pressure's huge influence on adolescents and provides recommendations for alleviating negative peer pressure.

**Keywords:** peer pressure, adolescents, risky behavior, romantic relationship, academic performances

## **1. Introduction**

Peers are groups of people who share similar interests, ages, backgrounds, or social standing. They are an essential source of knowledge, criticism, and support for people as they develop their sense of self. The presence of peers is particularly important during adolescence because adolescents start to shift from spending quality time with families to spending time with friends and peers. Peers become a safe arena where adolescents can experiment, learn, and maintain certain social norms with peers, prompting adolescents' competence while trying to find their identity and autonomy on the path to becoming adults. As significant as peers' role in adolescents, peer pressure is often inevitable. Peer pressure happens when peers exert pressure on adolescents to engage or not engage in certain behavior. Such pressure can be as explicit as spoken or direct peer pressure or as subtle as unspoken and indirect peer pressure, but it is equally influential on adolescents, who crave peer acceptance and novel experiences. Currently, there is extensive psychological research on peer pressure's influence on different activities like investment, substance, aggression, and many more. However, a more holistic view of the role that peer pressure plays in adolescents' lives is limited. Therefore, due to the great influence and prevalence of peer pressure in adolescence, this essay investigates the current situation of peer pressure by examining peers' influence on adolescents regarding risky behavior, romantic relationship, and academic performance. The essay also traces the reason why adolescents

are so susceptible to peer pressure and offers recommendations for adolescents to correctly handle negative peer pressure.

## **2. The Current Situation of Adolescents' Peer Pressure**

The following chapters examine the current situation of peer pressure in adolescence. The section focuses on peers' influence on adolescents' commitment to risk behavior, where the correlation between adolescents' and peers' participation in risk behavior is explored, along with the positive influence of peers on pulling adolescents out of committing risky behavior. The second section focuses on peers' influence on adolescents' engagement in romantic relationships, which investigates the ways that peers influence the attraction of the potential partners, motivation of starting a romantic relationship, and engagement in sexual behavior. The last section focuses on peer pressure's influence on adolescents' academic performances, which explores how the type of social image that adolescents attempt to maintain, and the social environment of the school positively or negatively influence adolescents' academic performances.

### **2.1. Peer Pressure on Risk Behavior**

Risk behavior like alcohol intake, cigarette usage, use of illegal drugs, sexual behavior, risky driving practices, and criminal activities are nothing new in the reckless period of adolescence. On the path to becoming independent adults, adolescents explore their identities by conducting new and often risky actions [1]. Unsurprisingly, Peer pressure is one of the major sources influencing adolescents' commitment to such kind of action. Bearing imaginary audiences and the desire to fit in, adolescents do what are the 'norms' in their friend circle, which often turn out to be risky behavior. Indeed, researchers find correlations between adolescents' rate of committing risky behavior and that of their friends. However, correlation does not imply causation, this kind of correlation could be caused by adolescents' egocentrism, as revealed by self-reported data: perceiving more similarity with their friends than reality; or adolescents' selective attention: humans' proclivity to befriend those who are similar to themselves [2].

Luckily, longitudinal studies find that in terms of alcohol intoxication and delinquent behaviors, friends resemble each other before they become friends, but such resemblance continues to grow for those that remain friends for a year. This is because the accepted friends exert influence on one another, whether that means bringing up or down the rate at which one engages in alcohol intoxication and delinquent behaviors [3]. Similar results have also been found in terms of cigarette, drug use, and aggressive behaviors, which imply that though selective attention does take place during the selection of friendships, peer pressure that push adolescents into risky behavior exists.

Furthermore, in a lab experiment, participants are randomly assigned to a risk-taking or risk-aversion group with a peer, a virtual peer, or alone. The results indicate that participants with a peer -whether with a physical peer or a virtual peer - engaged in more risky behavior than those alone, which points to the presence of a peer as being the cause for the commitment to risky behavior [4]. The finding about virtual peers (who communicate with the participants by sending direct messages like that on Facebook) being as influential as physical peers, further points to the more modern form of peer pressure where adolescents listen and get influenced by their friends, or even strangers online.

However, peers' influence on adolescents' engagement in risky behavior is multifaceted, and just like how peers can suppress one's rate of committing risky behavior to increase the resemblance between them, peer relationships also have the potential to protect adolescents from dangerous activities. Such protection depends on the quality of friendship—both positive and negative. Research suggests that adolescents who have negative-quality friendships are more likely to engage in delinquency, risky sexual behavior, and substance abuse. These behaviors result from their negative

feelings caused by peer conflict and a lack of intimacy. On the other hand, positive friendship – those characterized by a high level of support and lack of conflict- results in less risk-taking, as the emotional support from such friendship, rather than participation in risky behavior, is used as a coping mechanism for adolescents experiencing stress and confusion [2].

## **2.2. Peer Pressure Romantic Relationships**

Similar to risky behavior, adolescents seeking status and companionship yearn to be involved in dating and romantic relationships, which in turn teach adolescents valuable lessons on communication, empathy, emotion, identity, and even sex. Research even suggests that in the US, by grade 11, 80% of adolescents have experienced some form of romantic relationship [2]. Despite its intimacy and privacy, a romantic relationship is a social event, which means that peers or peer pressure are often involved, whether in the attitude of a romantic relationship, the selection of a romantic partner, or the perceived norms in a relationship.

Even before the start of a romantic relationship, research has found that peers influence one's attraction to potential partners. In one study, adolescent participants are shown the picture of their potential partners, who appear with either no rating from peers or peers' ratings showing low or high attractiveness. Participants are then asked to rate the attractiveness of each potential partner. The results show that participants' rating of attractiveness depended on the rating given by peers, where participants find their potential partners with a high rate given by peers to be more attractive than potential partners without peer rating, and such rates of attractiveness are then significantly associated with a higher likelihood to dating [5].

Likewise, studies that use interviews highlight the amount of influence and intervention that adolescents' peers have on their romantic relationships. In the study, participants mentioned that their peers played a key role in motivating them into relationships, as engaging in a relationship is considered the norm and someone not doing so would feel left out. Because of such peer norms and expectations, the vast majority of participants, including those under social pressure, have engaged in at least one relationship. Overall, in front of peers, participants see engaging in romantic relationships as something prideful and cool that increases their status. Predictably, such peer pressure can be detrimental: nearly half of the participants admitted to feeling awkward in a relationship as a result of explicit peer pressure and social cues from friends. Nevertheless, positive influence from peers is also reported, many participants mentioned their peers as advisors in their romantic relationship that provide a range of support that help their romantic and sexual relationship [6]. Indeed, one of the four kinds of support that Thomas Berndt specified was informational support, the advice and guidance in solving personal problems like those that occur in a romantic relationship.

Peer pressure is common in sexual behavior, with adolescents reporting direct pressure from friends and romantic partners to engage in sexual behavior. However, research shows that adolescents' susceptibility to peer pressure and influence in sexual situations vary. Through an experimental paradigm stimulating an online chat room, a study finds out that though youth report a greater likelihood of engaging in sexual activity when they are observed by and interacted with peers in a chat room, there are individual differences mainly regarding the participants' gender, ethnicity, and pubertal development. Namely, girls are more resistant to peer pressure than boys, but among the males, African American boys are particularly susceptible to succumb to social pressure, and boys in the later pubertal development are associated with greater susceptibility [7].

## **2.3. Peer Pressure on Academic Performances**

Peer pressure is common among older adolescents pursuing higher education because they are concerned with developing a social image of their identity while surrounded by their competitors –

peers. Peer pressure is prevalent in schools; studies have discovered peer societies that negatively influence adolescents' educational investments. Those school investments, such as SAT prep courses and their effect on practicing for the high school exit exam, are negatively yet significantly impacted when similar behavior is observed in one's peers.

Negative peer pressure in education is often associated with the presence of the type of social image associated with the overall take-up of educational opportunities. The framework created by Austen-Smith and Fryer rationalized two types of social image influencing the degree of peer pressure received by students. Namely, the social and economic types; peers appreciate those who are high on the social types, yet firms hire those high on the economic type. Therefore, when the opportunity of signaling to one's economic types by exerting efforts on education is more cumbersome than singling to social types, students are likely to reduce the educational effort to avoid sending the signal that they are low on social types to their friends. On the other hand, if peers also like high economic types, where being smart is thought of as being cool, students may undertake certain actions like participating in a class discussion, answering questions, or working on a group project to showcase their ability, and other students that lack such academic ability might choose not to undertake such action and put their efforts on maintaining their social image [8]. Overall, such concern in both types of social image results in negative peer pressure.

A field experiment conducted by Bursztn et al furthers the influence of social image at school. Namely, in the kind of cool-to-be-smart schools where students are more likely to become popular if they are studying hard, students with lower academic abilities are more likely to forgo potentially valuable educational opportunities and effort because of the concern for their economic image and fear of revealing their 'unintelligence'. On the contrary, in the smart-to-be-cool kind of school where the pressure of being perceived as a nerd refrains them from taking part in educational opportunities. In other words, students face a kind of social stigma for publicly making an effort to excel [9]. As a result, while all types of schools have underperforming students, two types of mechanisms motivate their actions: one attempting to conceal effort in the smart-to-be-cool school, and another attempting to conceal low ability in the cool-to-be-smart school.

Peer pressure in school is a two-edged sword, yielding both positive and negative influences on the student. Negatively, intense peer pressure—for example a great disparity between one's grade and that of the group—can lead to anxiety and low self-esteem, even in an irreversible mindset that leads students to give up on improving their grades. Positively if members in a social group constantly compare with each other and grow in the same direction, individuals will be more motivated to move forward together [10].

### 3. Cause of Peer Pressure

An increase in the quantity and quality of time spent with peers builds the foundation for peer pressure to occur, so one of the reasons why peer pressure is so influential and prevalent during adolescence is because adolescents experience a shift from family to friends and peers. Instead of family members, adolescents see friends as companionship, intimacy, and even a source of the happiest experience and discussion of personal issues. With the such condition of extensive and connected times spent with peers, peer pressure influences adolescents so much due to both biological and sociocultural reasons.

Biologically, adolescents are more likely to receive greater pleasure from social acceptance than adult brains, thus emulating the norms in order to gain gratification from acceptance. Furthermore, although adults judge through the frontal cortex, since the connection between the frontal lobes and other parts of the human brain is still continuing to form into one's 20s, adolescents often process information with the amygdala. Feeling overwhelming yet often unexplainable emotions, adolescents are weak at being resistant to peer pressure, which often induces emotion. During adolescence, people also experience a growing desire to seek novelty, encouraging them to follow their peers, and explore

new environments by trying new things like smoking or engaging in a romantic relationship. Nonetheless, according to cognitive neuroscientists, it is adaptive to have a biological system that motivates adolescents to start exploring outside of their homes and making their own peer circles, as it paves the path for adulthood [11].

From social and cultural, studies have found that the need to fit in is particularly prevalent in the human species because it is evolutionarily crucial in ensuring one's survival. Though the need for survival is hardly present in modern society, the pressure to conform is still influential, perhaps seen in the famous Ash's line experiment, conforming to the majority exists in spite of not actually agreeing with them. Such conformity is seen everywhere in society, whether it is following fashion trends, suppressing one's opinion, or copying peers' actions. Such conformity to the larger group is even more distinguished because adolescents, immersed in their small society of school and constantly seeking peer approval, are more concerned with their perceived 'coolness', so they are often willing to conform to things like their outfits, social values, and people they like to hang out to impress other, becoming more popular. The pressure to be like one's peers, or one's circle of friends, might also contribute to the formation of in-group identity. As explained by Tajfel's social identity theory, after one categorizes themselves into the social group that they belong to, the process of social identification takes place, where one adopts the norms and characteristics of the group that they belong to. This might explain why some adolescents from different social circles wear very different fashions but resemble each other. Such identification with the group then fuels in-group and out-group comparison, which often results in positive distinctiveness, strengthening one's self-esteem, something that adolescents greatly value.

#### **4. Recommendations for Dealing with Peer Pressure**

Minimizing the influence of peer pressure on adolescents is particularly challenging because as we learned earlier, part of the reason why peer pressure exists is that adolescents want to please their peers and don't want to say 'no' to them in the fear of alienation and unpopularity. Furthermore, in addition to the direct or spoken type of peer pressure, in which peers directly suggest that adolescents engage in specific behaviors, there is also more subtle, or unspoken, peer pressure, in which peers' actions indirectly pressurize adolescents to try something in order to gain acceptance; such indirect peer pressure is just as influential but much more difficult to identify and mitigate. Therefore, this essay offers several recommendations for dealing with peer pressure, and advice for both adolescents experiencing peer pressure, and adults, who can utilize their role as mature caregivers to give constructive guidance to their adolescent children [12].

##### **4.1. Advice for Adolescent**

When adolescents clearly feel uncomfortable with and clearly feel pressurized by their friend circle or peers in particular situations, then they should purposefully seek positive and like-minded peers who hold similar values and boundaries to them. Such friendship will likely bring an agreeable and safe atmosphere that encourages rather than pressurize. However, it is frequently difficult for adolescents to withdraw from a fully formed friend group, and it is even more difficult for them to successfully find and assimilate into new friends with whom they share qualities and bind. It is therefore important that the following advice – setting boundaries and offering alternatives, are particularly important.

One of the reasons why adolescents are so susceptible to peer pressure is that adolescents generally have weak, swayed, and curious personalities. Thereby, setting clear boundaries and limits will become useful when adolescents are struggling with whether to say "No" to their peers. Namely, boundaries like not taking illegal drugs, not skipping school, not having sex before 18, not smoking,



and many more might give adolescents that push in rejecting peer pressure. The boundaries will vary from person to person, and parents can also help in setting them, but overall, having limits will make adolescents feel more in control among peers, and in life in general.

Even with strict boundaries set, adolescents might still be afraid to say “NO” in participating in some unwanted activities and being seen as the odd one out. Therefore, it can be practical for adolescents to offer an alternative, as a means of compromising and escaping undesired events. For example, when peers offer that the friend group skips school, one can suggest meeting the friend group after school is over. Likewise, making excuses can be equally useful. For example, when peers pressurize an adolescent to drink, he can mention that his recent medication conditions don’t allow alcohol intake.

## 4.2. Advice for Parents Helping Adolescent

An essential lesson that parents can teach adolescents is confidence, which can be done through praising and modeling. This building up of confidence will give adolescents the inner strength to stay firm with their own choices and have less fear of not being liked by everyone.

Adolescents often succumb to peers’ way of doing things often because they are confused about what to do themselves, so parents can also train adolescents to develop their own ability to make decisions by giving adolescents the freedom to make decisions for themselves rather than making decisions for them. This will not only inform adolescents that they have the capacity to decide their own path but also, through trials and errors, teach them the right thing to do.

Just like how adolescents can offer alternatives and excuses, parents should let their adolescents know that it’s acceptable to ‘blame’ the parents as a getaway from being pressured by peers into doing certain things. For example, rather than saying “I don’t want to”, adolescents can mention that their parents are really strict on partying or late-night stays, which can pull them out of certain situations without the fear and embarrassment of saying “NO”. Likewise, adolescents and parents can establish certain code words, and when adolescents mention this word on the phone or through text, parents will go to the adolescents’ location and demand them home, pulling them out of an unwanted situation.

## 5. Conclusion

Adolescence is a unique stage of life in which biological development and sociocultural concerns combine to make adolescents extremely vulnerable to peer pressure. When examining the current phenomenon of peer pressure in society, peers exert a significant on the choices and actions of adolescents regarding risky behavior, romantic relationship, and academic investment. Both physical and virtual peers influence adolescents’ engagement in risky behavior despite selective attention taking place. However, depending on the quality of the friendship, such influence can take the form of lowering or increasing the rate of risky behavior engagement. Peers’ perception of the attractiveness of one’s potential partner sways adolescents’ own view, and peers exert high intervention in motivating adolescents on engaging in romantic relationships and public displays of affection. Adolescents also receive peer pressure on their engagement in sexual behavior, yet their susceptibility differs. Peer pressure regarding adolescents’ effort exerted on academic work exists and influences adolescents differently depending on the type of image that adolescents are trying to maintain and the degree to which an adolescent’s school value hard work. Such peer pressure can either discourage or encourages adolescents’ investment in the school. Both parents and adolescents themselves can take certain actions to minimize the influence of peer pressure. Though efforts should be made to avoid the negative influence of peer pressure, experiencing peer pressure and learning to overcome it is a vital part of adolescence, and it prepares adolescents for adulthood by pushing them to explore the outside world, figure out their identity through trials and errors, and gain independence

from learning to say no to going with the flow. After all, we should be open-minded toward peers who can widen our experience while still respecting our unique identities and opinions. Though this essay gives an expansive view of peer pressure, even broader aspects of peer pressure's influence on adolescence can be explored in future research, for example, peer pressure on following the fashion trend, peer pressure on music taste, or even peer pressure on changes of attitude and point of view. The ways in which peers influence adolescents have changed over time, and many of the older studies used in this paper may have lost their temporary validity with the rapid development of technologies that facilitate online connections and the social separation brought about by COVID-19. Therefore, it is encouraged that future psychological research not only continues to investigate the topic of peer pressure but also examines how peer pressure manifests itself in the fast-paced society.

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