



HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Child Dev Perspect. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2016 June 01.

Published in final edited form as:

Child Dev Perspect. 2015 June ; 9(2): 101–105. doi:10.1111/cdep.12111.

The Autonomy-Connection Challenge in Adolescent Peer Relationships

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Abstract

The world of peers presents a unique developmental challenge to adolescents—one that is likely to be linked to prior experiences within the family, affected by concurrent experiences with adults outside the family, and predictive of future mental and physical health. To negotiate relationships with peers successfully, adolescents must manage the challenge of connecting with peers while establishing autonomy regarding peer influences. Both the nature of this challenge and how it is handled are linked closely to the ways adolescents are treated by the adults in their lives. Adolescents' capacities for autonomy and connection can be developed both in the family and in interventions that engage youth with adults outside the family, suggesting a substantial role for adults in easing adolescents' peer challenges.

Keywords

adolescence; peer relationships; autonomy

Managing peer relationships is one of the most challenging and important developmental tasks adolescents face. Interest in peer relationships is intense during this period, perhaps more so than at any other developmental phase, and is likely rooted in biology (1). Adolescents report being happiest when interacting with their peers (2), and the peer world is a central context in which adolescent develop social skills (3). At the same time, the problems associated with adolescents' peer relations are numerous and serious enough to concern parents, educators, and policymakers.

Adolescents face a fundamental dilemma with respect to their peers: Learning to form strong peer relationships is critical to social development and mental health, yet such relationships are routinely associated with at least moderately increased incidences of alcohol and substance use and minor delinquent acts. In this article, we consider the individual and cultural aspects of this dilemma, then focus on evidence that adolescents are most successful managing peer relationships when they learn to connect strongly with peers while establishing autonomy in peer interactions, particularly with respect to deviant behaviors. We then review factors that facilitate success or failure in balancing demands for autonomy

and connection, and conclude by discussing interventions that can facilitate this balance between autonomy and connection.

The Peer Dilemma

The role of peers' influences (both positive and negative) on adolescent behavior has long been a source of interest, and views regarding these influences have shifted over time. Research on the topic suffered from early false starts—notably the tendency to confound peer selection with peer socialization by failing to recognize that deviant teenagers were often friends with deviant peers, not because teenagers had been influenced by these peers, but because they had selected peers like themselves as friends. Although researchers ultimately recognized the problems with this approach (4, 5), more recent research that has considered these concerns over selection versus socialization nevertheless has found potential negative peer influences: Associating with deviant peers can be a training ground for delinquent activity among at-risk youth (6). Early romantic involvement has been linked to later psychosocial difficulties along with risks of both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections for sexually active teenagers (7). And driving a car becomes much more dangerous when peers are passengers, with the likelihood of an accident for an adolescent driver increasing almost in direct proportion to the number of peers in the car (8, 9).

However, the real dilemma with peers is that, as problematic as peer relationships can be, forming strong relationships with peers appears crucial to healthy social development in adolescence. These relationships often seem like matters of life and death to adolescents—a perception that may not be far off the mark. Although popularity brings the risks noted earlier, *lack* of popularity has been associated with lower quality of friendships, problematic relationships with parents, less optimal social skills, and more frequent depression, as has rejection by peers (10–13). Adolescents who reach adulthood without forming meaningful relationships with peers (e.g., those who are isolated socially) are more likely to experience mental and physical ills, up to and including early mortality (14). As difficult as it is for teenagers to live with the challenges and dangers of peer relationships, they cannot live well without them either.

The Adolescent Subculture

How do we understand this dilemma? Across several domains of research, we see the degree to which the adolescent peer dilemma is linked to the disjuncture between adolescent subculture and the norms and values of the larger adult society (15). For example, being popular within the adolescent peer group predicts some forms of problem behavior in adolescents (e.g., alcohol and substance use and minor delinquent activity; 12, 16, 17). Popular teenagers appear well-socialized in many respects, often getting along well with both parents and peers; but they appear to be socialized into an adolescent subculture with values (e.g., toward adolescent substance use and minor delinquent acts) that often diverge from those of the larger adult society (12). Similarly, adolescents who engage at an early age in pseudomature behavior—minor deviant behavior, precocious involvement in romantic relationships, or a preoccupation with physical appearance—are rewarded socially with early popularity among their peers (18). Yet when assessed a decade later, youth on this

pseudomature, popular track are viewed as less socially competent, and are more likely to have had serious problems with alcohol and substance use and legal issues. This early fast-track involvement with pseudomature behavior, while popular among peers, may well be a long-term dead end.

This problematic situation may reflect a divergence in the norms of adolescent and adult subcultures that characterize modern Western society. In contrast, non-Western and pre-industrial cultures have often engaged adolescents more intensively with adults, and these cultures in turn have had lower rates of juvenile delinquency and deviance (19). In modern Western society, segregating adolescents from most of adult society—which occurs with extended formal education and high student-teacher ratios in classrooms—establishes conditions that can allow a distinct, often problematic peer culture to emerge (20). This culture is not entirely antisocial; for example, popular teenagers also tend to become less aggressive over time, as peers do not reward such behavior (12). Yet the sometimes-deviant norms of the adolescent subculture nonetheless create a challenge for teenagers trying to form strong relationships with peers without succumbing to the negative effects of deviant adolescent behavior.

Navigating the Peer World Successfully

How do adolescents navigate this minefield, seeking positive connections with peers while avoiding the problems often associated with those connections? Their dilemma reflects a universal human challenge: connecting with others while resisting group influences that might impair individual self-interest. The most successful (though not completely problem-free) path through this dilemma involves learning to establish simultaneously autonomy interests and strong connections with peers.

Adolescents who can establish a degree of autonomy with their peers—in particular, by showing they can resist negative peer influences—fare well over time. Autonomy with peers, demonstrated in analogue situations at 13–15 years, predicts not only greater career progress but also avoidance of criminal behavior and problems associated with alcohol and substance abuse, up to a decade later at 23 years (21). However, such autonomy ideally occurs *not* in opposition to connection with peers, but in conjunction with it. Strong peer connections in early adolescence, when they occur with adolescent autonomy, predict long-term success not only in friendships, but also in romantic relationships (21).

Thus, adolescents who learn how to connect with peers while still going their own way with respect to deviant peer influences fare best in the long term. Fortunately, although establishing autonomy and maintaining peer connections require skill and tact, the two outcomes are not diametrically opposed. On the contrary, adolescents who are the least susceptible to peer influences (i.e., the most autonomous) tend to become gradually more popular over time (22). Similarly, adolescents who establish a degree of autonomy while maintaining connections when discussing disagreements with a close friend at 13 years are more competent in friendships at 18 years and withdraw less socially at 21 years (23). Although conformity to (often-deviant) peer norms is rewarded in early adolescence, over time, the ability to act autonomously is apparently of greatest value to social development

and functioning. Moreover, rather than conflicting with peer relations, this increasing autonomy appears to facilitate them.

Parents and the Peer World

How can adults help adolescents achieve balance in their relationships with peers? Although peer relations in adolescence have been viewed as a largely uncontrollable force independent of parental influence (24), recent research suggests the opposite. Both adolescents' capacity for autonomy and their capacity for connecting with peers are linked closely to their prior and concurrent experiences within the family. In laboratory observations, peer reports, and postings on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook; 25), a developmental cascade occurs in which autonomy and relatedness in adolescents' interactions with parents at 13 years predict their ability to establish autonomy while maintaining relatedness with peers of the same gender and ultimately, with romantic partners at ages 18 and 21 (26). These findings are consistent with the idea that teenagers learn how to behave autonomously in the family, and that such behavior can be compatible with establishing and maintaining positive relationships. How these teenagers then behave with their peers is apparently in line with patterns established within the family.

In contrast, parental behavior that undermines adolescent autonomy predicts relative decreases in adolescents' capacity to display autonomy with peers over the following years (27). Teenagers whose mothers control them psychologically are more likely to be influenced by peers to engage in risky sexual behavior and substance use (28). Adolescents who get used to having little autonomy at home apparently neither expect nor receive different treatment in the world of peers.

Adolescents who have difficulties establishing autonomy within the family also tend to struggle later with autonomy with peers, as well as have lower-quality overall relationships with peers. Some teenagers who struggle with autonomy from their parents also experience aggression in dating (29) and hostility in close friendships more than a decade later (30). However, parents' role in granting autonomy must be considered within the relevant social context: In risky environments—where teenagers may need more restrictions to remain safe—delayed granting of autonomy may be appropriate and beneficial (31). In addition, the type of autonomy that has been linked to later success with peers is primarily cognitive and verbal—parents of teenagers who are successful with their peers allow their teenagers to disagree in reasonable ways, which differs from simply allowing teenagers unfettered behavioral freedoms.

Connections with and support from parents are apparently as important as autonomy processes in forecasting adolescents' success among peers. For example, adolescents' attachment security has been linked to success establishing autonomy and relatedness with peers (32), increasing levels of social skill over time (28), and less frequent aggression in romantic relationships (33). In addition, parents who are perceived as influencing their teenagers via supportive, positive relationships (as opposed to heavy-handed efforts at control) have the most influence relative to peers (28).

Somewhat surprisingly, parents' marital interactions also affect their teenagers' functioning with their peers. For example, teenagers whose parents have marital problems when the youth are in early adolescence display less autonomy and relatedness in interactions with peers one year later (34). Such marital difficulties also predict aggression in teenagers' romantic relationships 3 to 7 years later (34, 35). Most strikingly, observations of parents' marital interactions when adolescents are 14 years old predict qualities of adolescents' interactions in their own adult marital relationships up to 17 years later (36). These findings suggest the extent to which teenagers may learn critical relationship behaviors they will apply with their peers by observing their parents modeling such behavior with one another.

When we put all these findings together, we see that qualities of adolescents' relationships with their peers are apparently informed by patterns of relationships established within the family. In particular, the often-contentious process through which adolescents negotiate with their parents for autonomy, if handled successfully, apparently pays dividends in the adolescents' capacity to establish autonomy while forming and maintaining strong relationships with peers.

Interventions That Influence Peer Relationships

Although interactions between adolescents and their parents are linked to qualities of youths' relations with their peers, the normative adolescent strivings for autonomy reduce teenagers' tendencies to turn to parents for guidance, particularly regarding issues surrounding peer relationships (37). Yet if we look beyond the family, we see opportunities for adults to influence the quality of adolescents' relationships with peers. As Schlegel and Barry's (19) anthropological findings suggest, connecting to the adult world can be valuable for teenagers. And in a few areas of modern society, this impact extends into the peer domain.

Adolescent romantic relationships would seem like one peer domain where nonparental adults might have the *least* influence, but this turns out not to be the case. For example, an adult-driven intervention—the *Teen Outreach Program*—influenced adolescents' behavior in romantic/sexual relationships enough to reduce about 60 percent of teen pregnancies (38). The key ingredient: voluntary community service for youth that gives them the opportunity to connect meaningfully with adults and come to view themselves as autonomous, contributing members of the larger adult world. Such connections bring other benefits as well—for example, 60 percent reductions in school failure and suspension rates. And given the degree to which most teenagers are disconnected from meaningful contact with the adult world, little time is required—the typical program involves 20 hours of volunteer activity combined with weekly discussions with an adult facilitator over a school year. Teenagers' autonomy (in selecting the type of volunteer service they will perform) and sense of connection with adult facilitators predict most optimally program outcomes that succeed at the site level (39). And adolescents who are least likely to have strong connections with adults at home (as a result of parents' absence or economic stress) apparently benefit most from the program (40). In short, contact with the adult world can alter adolescents' behavior even with regard to their most intimate peer relationships.

Schools also can affect adolescent-peer interactions. In work that parallels studies on parent-teen interactions, a school-based intervention that altered *teacher*-adolescent interactions in a classroom—the *My Teaching Partner-Secondary Program*—increased not just student academic achievement—its intended target—but the quality of peer interactions within the classroom (41, 42). Two of the targets of the intervention were adolescents' experience of autonomy within the structure of the classroom and their sense of connection to their teachers.

Summary and Conclusions

These two experimental evaluations of social interventions, the findings from anthropological studies of human societies spanning hundreds of years, and basic developmental research on adolescent peer relations are consistent in their conclusions: To thrive, teenagers—like all humans—need strong social connections in which they can also establish themselves as autonomous individuals pursuing their own interests. When adolescents experience these characteristics within their peer relationships, positive outcomes follow, even far into the future. Yet the sometimes-problematic values of the modern Western adolescent subculture create a tension for adolescents between the desire and need to connect with peers, on the one hand, and the risks that flow from the deviant and problematic behaviors sometimes supported within the adolescent peer group, on the other. Although this tension cannot be resolved simply, adolescents who fare most optimally are those who learn to establish their own autonomy in ways that do not undermine their social relationships.

These relationship capacities do not arise *de novo* in adolescence, nor do they simply occur randomly. Rather, parents apparently influence their adolescents' ability to manage the challenges of peer relationships related to autonomy and connection, and external interventions that address these issues also affect teenagers. The good news is that adolescents' peer experience—problematic as it can be—is anything but the uncontrollable force of nature that many parents and other adults fear. However, parents and adults must work to nurture and guide adolescents' peer relationships in ways that adapt over time both for teenagers and the larger society.

Acknowledgments

This study and its write-up were supported by grants from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the National Institute of Mental Health (9R01 HD058305-11A1 & R01-MH58066), the William T. Grant Foundation, and the Institute for Education Science (R305A100367).

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