

Get to Know Your Child's Friends

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

Adolescents are social by their very nature. It is during the teenage years that their social lives begin to blossom and develop, often becoming the most important area of their lives.

The need for acceptance and belonging drives some young people into lives of moral compromise. Unfortunately, the desire to belong can sometimes be greater than the desire to live a life of non-compromise. Kids can view compromise as well worth it, if the end result is that their social group will accept them.

Ever hear the response, “Everybody’s doing it” or “Everyone’s going to be there”? Is it true that everyone does that? Is it true that everyone is going to be there? What teenagers mean is that everyone who is of influence in the teens’ world or social group is involved in, or values this or that, or is going to be at this or that happening. Sociologists tell us that kids build their world and values around these social groupings, and that their most important peer influence comes from a still smaller, more intimate group of two or three best friends.

It is no secret that we become like the people we spend the most time with – even Paul warned that “bad company corrupts good character.” (1 Corinthians 15:33) So it is important that parents understand the “rule of friendship” by which teenagers live. The fact is, all social groupings have rules of behavior by which acceptance in the group is determined. No young person will remain in a social grouping where they do not “live” by the group’s rules. Let’s say, for example, a teenager consistently hangs out with a group of friends whose behavioral focus is drinking alcohol. The “rule of friendship” would contend that the teenager in question also drinks. Still, many parents have lived in a state of denial when they’ve confront their own teens about their friends’ behavior, and their kids admits that their friends are indeed involved in the behaviors, but contend that they themselves are not. The “rule of friendship” would suggest otherwise.

The priority of social development of adolescents is a good reason why parents should do whatever they can to get to know their teen’s friends. Strive to make your home a safe and welcome place for your teens and their friends to hang out. Knowing your teen’s friends will help you understand what types of experiences your teen might be struggling with – and will definitely provide insight into the morals and values that are influencing your son or daughter. In the process of getting to know your teen’s friends, you will learn a lot about your own daughter or son, as well.

Here are a few suggestions when it comes to getting to know your child’s friends.

1. Never embarrass your kids in front of their friends. Doing so will lessen the likelihood that your kids will want to have their friends hang out when you are around. Think of it from your kids’ perspective: Why would they want to take the chance of being embarrassed in front of their friends? If you want the opportunity to get to know your child’s friends, don’t embarrass your

children – or their friends! There are times for praise and rebuke, but make sure these are done at the right place and time.

2. Don't Act Like a Teenager. You're not one. Your kids know it. Their friends know it. They are counting on you to act like a grown-up. Be friendly. Don't be overbearing when trying to get to know your child's friends. Be yourself.

3. Offer the Secret Ingredient for Friendship-Building... Food. It's no secret that kids like to eat. And typically there's food around when we hang out with our friends. Take advantage of the food-friend connection by making sure you always have some "fun food" on hand (such as chips, sodas, "munchies") when your kids bring their friends around.

4. Allow Kids to be "Kids." Let's face it – being a teenager can be a challenge. And sometimes, kids just need to "let off a little steam." When they do, they might act a little weird at times. But as long as they're not doing anything illegal or immoral, just let them be. Simply stated, if you want to get to know your child's friends, when they are around your home, don't constantly be nagging them about normal "kid" behaviors.

5. If space and resources allow, consider having a dedicated "kid-friendly" area in your home. It's a good idea to turn an unused room or space in your home into a "kid-friendly" area where your kids and their friends can hang out. This way, as a parent, you can pop in periodically, have some interaction with the group, and then pop back out again – which your kids, their friends and you, will probably appreciate.