

# Influence by peers in adolescents



## **Introduction**

According to Erikson (1950), during adolescence, the development of new identities which are meaningful are of utmost importance to the individual.

This is due to the fact that adolescence is a period of time in which individuals become more independent from their families and as a result, peer groups become much more influential than they were previously (Kandel & Andrews, 1987; Windle, 2000; Wood, Vinson & Sher, 2001).

Adolescents spend the majority of their time with their peer group and thus the peer group is the dominant socialisation unit (Oetting & Donnermeyer, 1998). This essay will address the extent to which adolescents are influenced by their peer groups in relation to substance use. Firstly, the reasons why peers are influential will be discussed. Following this, the empirical evidence based on the phenomenon will be explored in detail.

## **Why are peer groups influential?**

Many studies in relation to the influence of peers on adolescents have aimed to explore the reasoning behind the extent to which adolescents are influenced by their peers. The influence of peers may be thought of as a type of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1959; Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984).

Various peer groups approve of varying activities and when individuals engage in approved activities, the peer group positively reinforces this behaviour, for example, by allowing the individual to become part of the group or by paying more attention to the individual (Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984). This is a source of motivation for the individual to repeat the activity or engage in other approved activities (Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984).

Adolescents have also been observed to choose friendships with individuals who engage in similar activities to those which the particular individual engages in. This provides the individual with more opportunities to engage in the activity and so the peer group may influence the rate of frequency which the individual engages in the activity (Bauman & Ennett, 1994). Adolescents also feel a need to “fit in” with their peers or have sense of belonging or a feeling of being normal and will often conform to activities of a particular group by participating in the same activities as members of the peer group (Bauman & Ennett, 1994).

The way in which individuals choose their friends and the way in which the peer group influence the individual’s decisions to engage in activities is often done so in two ways. The selection model suggests that a particular activity results in a friendship. That is, adolescents will form friendships simply because of similarities in the activities which they engage in. In contrast, the influence model suggests that a particular friendship will cause an individual to engage in particular activities because the individual wants to be like other members of the peer group (Bauman & Ennett, 1994). The need to be similar to peers is so strong that often adolescents will project aspects of their own personality or behaviours onto their peers when describing them so that they appear to be more similar to the peer group (Holmes, 1968).

As adolescents progress from early adolescence to late adolescence, they gradually become more independent from their parents and families and begin to spend more time with their peers. The increase in the amount of time which the adolescents spend with their peers results in the peers having a more important role in their lives which in turn results in the

adolescent becoming more susceptible to the influence of their peers (Brown, 2004; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

However, it is important to note that as adolescents progress into working environments and romantic relationships, the relationship with their peers become less important and less influential (Brown, 2004). Although the extent to which adolescents are susceptible to the influence of their peers increases during early adolescence (Erickson, Crosnoe & Dornbusch, 2000; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), this is not the case with all individuals. Some adolescents are more susceptible to peer influence than others (Berndt, 1979; Erickson, Crosnoe & Dornbusch, 2000; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). The susceptibility of adolescents to peer influence begins to decrease as an individual approaches adulthood (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007).

### **Empirical evidence in relation to adolescent substance use and peer influence**

Kaplan and colleagues (1984) have reported that substance use (i. e. drug use) has a particular function in peer relations. Engaging in substance use is a way to interact with a particular peer group and to become more similar to that peer group if they also engage in substance use (Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984). It was also reported that the frequency of substance use is also increased as the peer groups provide the substance which is being used and the amount of opportunities to engage in the substance use are increased (Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984). In a study by Akers (1977) and a subsequent study by Akers and colleagues (1979) it was found that one of the dominant determinants in an adolescents choice to engage in substance use is whether or not their friends engage in substance use.

Kandel and colleagues (1978) also reported peer influence as being the dominant force in an adolescent's choice to engage in substance use and prior exposure through association or friendships with individuals who use substances is the strongest predictor (Kandel, 1980). It was also found that the extent to which an adolescent is susceptible to the influence of their peers depends on the extent to which the adolescent is involved in the peer group (Kandel, Kessler & Margulies, 1978). Another strong predictor of adolescent substance use as reported by Kandel (1980) is the extent of the perceived drug use of the adolescent's peer group, the peer group's reported use of drugs and their tolerance of substance use. If the adolescent is under the illusion that the members of the peer group use drugs frequently, be it from their own perceptions or from the reports by their peers, and if it is thought that the peers are tolerant of such behaviours, then the adolescent is more likely to engage in substance use.

Substance use is also associated with particular peer groups according to the values associated with the group. These values include values of willingness to take on a new venture, values with relation to the importance of experimentation and new experiences and values of conformity (Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984). Kaplan and colleagues also found that adolescents who had previous or current experiences of substance use were more likely to become part of a peer group in which substance use is a common activity among peers (Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984). They also reported that when adolescents feel rejected by their peers, they also feel rejected by their family and school friends and it is this fear of rejection and the need to be

accepted that further influences adolescents to conform to the norms of their peer group (Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984).

It is common knowledge that many adolescents aspire to be like particular individuals in their society when they reach adulthood. Adolescents want the social images associated with such individuals to be associated with them and this is another reason why many adolescents experiment with substance use in order to acquire the social images desired (Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Jewsbury Conger & Smith, 1997). In particular, if a positive image is associated with the behaviour of the individual which the adolescent aspires to be like, the adolescent will be more likely to engage in such behaviour, especially if their peers admire the behaviour of the individual (Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Jewsbury Conger & Smith, 1997; Chassin, Tetzloff & Hershey, 1985).

It has also been suggested that adolescents may engage in substance use in order to explore the social consequence associated with such behaviour while they are trying to establish an identity which they want in adulthood (Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Jewsbury Conger & Smith, 1997). In doing this, adolescents may be testing the strong stereotypes which they associate with different individuals in society (Snortum, Kremer & Berger, 1987). Peers also help members of the peer group to develop positive social images of individuals who in reality may actually have negative social images and so an adolescents views may become distorted by their peers (Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Jewsbury Conger & Smith, 1997).

Bauman and Ennett (1994) also report that peer groups often restrict the membership in their group to individuals who engage in similar behaviours those in the peer group. This is extremely influential in an adolescents decision to engage in such behaviours due to the fact that, as mentioned previously, adolescents have a strong need to “ fit in” and “ belong” to a particular identity and will often take any steps necessary to achieve this, even if substance use is involved. However, Bauman and Ennett (1994) also found that more than half of the commonality of peers’ use of drugs can be accounted for by the selection model. As mentioned previously, the selection model and the influence model are the two main ways in which adolescents choose their friends. The evidence reported by Bauman and Ennett (1994) suggests that substance use among adolescents is not simply due to the influence of peers. The fact that over half of the commonality is due to selection, suggests that adolescents who are members of peer groups who use drugs were already using drugs before they became associated with the peer group and only became part of the peer group because it was a similarity between the particular individual and the members of the peer group.

As mentioned previously, adolescents also tend to project their own behaviours onto their peers when describing them. This may lead to adolescents who use substances reporting that their peers also use substances when in fact this may not be the case (Bauman & Ennett, 1994). Adolescents may do this in order to create the notion that the behaviour in which they are engaging in is “ normal”. This reinforces their belief that substance use is not “ wrong”. It is important to take this into account when

reviewing the literature on the subject area as much of the research in this area is based on self-report measures and it is possible that the information collected may have been distorted by the adolescents who provided the information.

The ways in which peers influence adolescents may be active or passive. Active influences refer to when peer explicitly offer a substance to an individual. Meanwhile, passive influence refers to the perceptions and interpretations which an individual has developed about a particular peer group and also the reinforcement of these perceptions and interpretations (Graham, Marks & Hansen, 1991; Oostveen, Knibble & De Vries, 1996). According to Graham and colleagues (1991), both types of influence are independently associated with substance use in relation to alcohol. The extent to which peers influence adolescents is so strong that it has been reported that simply the presence of peers doubles the amount of risk taking and risky behaviour which adolescents will engage in (Gardiner & Steinberg, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is clearly apparent that peers may be influential in substance use among adolescents. Peer groups have been found to positively reinforce the use of substances if the peer group views substance use in a positive light. However, it has also been reported that often peer groups are formed on the basis that the individuals involved are substance users. In such cases, the peers did not initiate the substance use behaviour. However, it also the case that even when such peer groups are formed, the peers may still be influential in relation to the frequency with which the



adolescents engage in substance use (Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984). It may be the case that if the adolescent in question was to become a member of a peer group which does not engage in substance use, they may cease their own substance use simply because their friends are not engaging in this behaviour (Akers, 1979).

Another determining factor in the extent to which peers are influential in adolescence substance use is the extent to which an adolescent is involved in the peer group (Kandel, Kessler & Margulies, 1978). The perceptions which an adolescent has in relation to the extent to which their peers use substances is also influential in adolescent substance use. However, in this case, it is actually the adolescents' perceptions which are influential rather than the peers per se.

One of the major reasons for the extent to which peer groups influence substance use in adolescence is actually due to the fear of rejection and the need for acceptance of adolescents (Kaplan, Martin & Robbins, 1984). Again, this is not directly caused by peers. However, the peer group is a mediating factor. Also, as was mentioned previously, members of peer groups often share similar social images of particular individuals which they aspire to be. The peer group is influential in this instance due to the fact that the common desire experienced by all members of the peer group acts as a source of positive reinforcement which in turn encourages adolescents to engage in particular behaviours. Adolescents are directly influential in the use of substances among adolescents in the case of peer groups who restrict membership to those who use substances (Bauman & Ennett, 1994).

It is possible that the peer groups do not directly influence the use of substances among adolescents as according to the selection model, adolescents choose their friends because of a commonality in the activities which they engage in. The empirical evidence cited in this essay provide evidence both for and against the notion that peers are influential in adolescent substance use. It appears that it is necessary to carry out further research based on the phenomenon in order to determine the extent to which peers are influential in adolescent substance use. It may be the case that both an adolescents peers and also the adolescents choice of peers may be influential in adolescent substance use rather than one or the other. Further research in the area is also needed as this essay only addresses the extent of the influence of peers on adolescents in a particular scenario i. e. substance use. In order to correctly evaluate the influence of peers, it is necessary to research all possible scenarios in which peers may be seen to be influential.

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