**FRIENDS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS**

*Peer relationships become increasingly important during the teenage years and parents may feel that they are being pushed aside. Parents need to adjust to this increasing influence of peers by developing a different sort of relationship with their teenager. Social events provide important opportunities for teenagers to mix with peers and they become very important to teenagers. They can be a source of conflict with parents attempt to impose restrictions. Strained peer relationships can also be a source of distress for teenagers. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you deal with the challenges that you and your teenager may face in this area.*

**WHY ARE FRIENDS SO IMPORTANT FOR TEENAGERS?**

Social activity with peers is very important to teenagers. Friends come to play an increasing role in their lives and contact with parents may decrease considerably.

**WHY DO SOME PER RELATIONSHIPS LEAD TO PROBLEMS?**

Teenagers can sometimes get into trouble when they are with their friends if there has been no clear guidance from parents about what they are allowed to do.

Teenagers may be encouraged to deceive parents who attempt to restrict their activities. For example, a teenager may appear to accept a parents decision not to allow them to go to a late night party and go to their room saying they are going to bed. If the parents are not in the habit of checking, the teenager may just slip out through the window and go to the party anyway. If they are discovered, there may be serious conflict that damages family relationships.

If they are not discovered, they may increase the habit and run serious risks with the parents being totally unaware of what is going on.

**HOW TO ENCOURAGE YOUR TEENAGER TO HAVE GOOD FRIENDS AND POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS**

* **Take an interest in who your teenager spends time with**

Find opportunities to talk to your teenager about who they spend time with. Make this an everyday topic of conversation to let your teenager know you are interested in what they do and who they are with. It is reasonable for parents to want to know this information, as part of showing a general interest in their teenagers activities.

* **Look for ways to meet other parents**

School events or other local activities can be a good way to meet the parents of your teenagers friends. You may need to take the initiative, but you will usually find that most parents are pleased to get to know the parents of their teenagers friends too. It is important to create a network of parents. This can help you monitor where your teenager is and what they are doing, or talk over a concern with someone else who is parenting a teenager. This can often result in getting some good ideas when you are unsure what to do.

* **Show interest in your teenagers social activities**

Teenage relationships are often difficult, especially if a teenager is lacking in self confidence. It is easy for teenagers to become negative about themselves or their ability to have good relationships with their peers. Show an interest and be prepared to listen to their concerns.

* **Set some rules about social activities**

Develop some rules about what is permitted during the school week and on holidays and weekends. Decide what people, activities, and places are acceptable; which days of the week these can occur; and set time limits for being home. During school terms discourage social activity during the week. Where possible, make these rules known to your teenagers friends (and their parents) to avoid misunderstandings and ensure consistency. If a special event comes up, be prepared to be flexible, but put some rules in place to ensure it does not disrupt school work.

* **Consider how to reduce or prevent contact with undesirable peers**

Monitor who your teenager is spending time with at school and on weekends. Talk regularly to teachers, neighbours and other parents to increase your monitoring network. If you believe your teenager is mixing with peers who are a bad influence on them, you may wish to restrict their contact with those peers in the hope of preventing them from being exposed to risks. This can be a very appropriate strategy, particularly when the peers are known to get involved in illegal or dangerous activities and especially with young teenagers.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEENAGER APPEARS TO HAVE DIFFICULTY MAKING FRIENDS**

* **Make a time to talk to your teenager**

If you suspect that your teenager has trouble making or keeping friends there are things you can do to help. However, this can be difficult as parents are usually not present when problems are occurring. Some teenagers are socially isolated and ignored, whereas others may be a target of bullying. Bullying now receives increased attention in schools, but not all schools are effective in putting a stop to it. The most effective way to deal with teasing or bullying is to ignore it. If the bully fails to get the reaction they want they usually look elsewhere. However, in practice ignoring a bully can be very difficult to do.

* **Coach your teenager how to make friends**

If your teenager agrees that they do not have many friends and this seems to be a problem, you can help them to improve matters. Explain to your teenager that in order to make friends it is important to be in the same place fairly regularly, to have the opportunity to spend time together, and have some interests in common. Without these, it becomes very difficult to be friends with someone.

* Ask them to think about places they go to (e.g. school) and to identify one or two people they think perhaps they could be friends with. They may need to spend a day or two thinking about this but do not let it go on too long
* When your teenager suggests one or two names, ask what your teenager knows about them. It usually will not be much. Problem solve with your teenager how to find out more about them. Ask questions such as W*here do they live? How do they get to school? What do they do on weekends?*
* Once you have done this, if your teenager is still interested in having them as friends, problem solve how they can find ways to spend more time with them. Prompt them to consider things like going to school earlier, changing what they typically do during recess or after school, or even joining an activity that they are involved in. Some teenagers find it difficult to talk to peers in situations where there is no activity taking place. It is therefore better to encourage your teenager to join in activity based social groups. This type of situation is usually easier to interact in

As your teenager creates more opportunities to spend time sharing common interests with their new friends, the friendship should develop. If your teenager still fails to make or keep friends after following this plan, you may need to seek professional assistance for them.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEENAGER DOES NOT WANT TO MAKE FRIENDS**

Some teenagers will protest that they do not want or need friends. It can be difficult for parents to decide if this is correct. It is certainly true that some teenagers take pleasure in solitary activities such as certain sports, music, reading and computers. However, social skills are important in helping teenagers to get a job or create intimate relationships as adults. If your teenager tends to prefer doing things on their own, encourage them to find ways of getting to know others who have similar interests.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEENAGER WILL NOT TALK TO YOU ABOUT THEIR FRIENDS**

* **Ask another reliable adult to help**

Despite your efforts, you may find that you and your teenager are not talking about their friends and social activities. You may be worried about what might be going on. Consider asking your teenager to talk to another adult. A trusted friend or relative may be acceptable to you and your teenager, or you may want to consider asking your family doctor or the school counsellor. Sometimes, this will break the ice and you will then find your teenager more willing to talk to you. However, sometimes this will not happen. They you may have to accept that this is something that is just too difficult, but you can at least have some confidence that you have provided an alternative that may be better than nothing.**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

Many parents have very mixed feelings about their teenagers friends and acquaintances. Teenagers can be very sensitive to a parents criticism of their friends, and this can be a cause of considerable conflict. While parents cannot easily influence who their teenager spends time with and where they are permitted to go. If you believe that particular peers are a bad influence on your teenager then be prepared to act to limit their contact. At the same time, encourage your teenagers contact with peers who are a good influence on your teenager.

**KEY STEPS**

* Take an interest in who your teenager spends time with
* Look for ways to meet other parents
* Show interest in your teenagers social activities
* Set some rules about social activities
* Consider how to reduce or prevent contact with undesirable peers
* Help to problem solve when things do not work out
* Make a time to talk to your teenager
* Coach your teenager how to make friends
* Ask another reliable adult to help