



### **The Teen Years: Peer Influences**

Friends can encourage one another to do well in school, stay away from drugs and alcohol, and refrain from sex. Just as easily, friends can challenge one another to take dangerous risks and reject school or your family's values. Some research confirms what traditional wisdom tells us: keeping "bad company" encourages risky and delinquent behavior.

Research also suggests that children who have an ongoing pattern of aggressive behavior or rejection are more likely, as teenagers, to be friends with other aggressive youth. Gangs are a modern-day example of a group of antisocial friends. Only a small number of teens join gangs, but gang members are the perpetrators in three-fourths of the murder and assault acts committed by youth. Gang violence today is deadlier than gang violence of previous years largely because the weapons of choice are automatic weapons rather than chains or switchblades. Not surprisingly, one of the early signs that a teen is in trouble is affiliation with gangs or groups of antisocial friends.

While parents cannot pick their child's friends, they can have a powerful, often indirect, influence on how their teens select friends in two primary ways:

- *Parental monitoring.* When parents know where their teens are, who they are with, and what their teenager is doing, he or she is less likely to get involved in deviant behavior. The most successful parental monitoring takes place when parents show a genuine interest in their child's activities and are warm and caring rather than intrusive.
- *Parental guidance about where the teen will spend time.* Parents can set boundaries about the appropriate places where teens can spend their out-of-school time. For example, teens can spend out-of-school time involved with school clubs, sports teams, recreation centers, volunteer work, religious organizations, a job, or home activities. Spending time in these ways minimizes the amount of time a teen has available for unproductive or potentially dangerous activities.

If you are concerned about your teen's friendships or about gang activity in your neighborhood, you can talk with school counselors, mental health professionals, religious leaders, or the police.

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