

PRESSURES ON TODAY'S TEENS

Times have changed a lot since you were a teenager. Sure, every teen is worried about being popular, but for today's teens, that's just the tip of the iceberg. Take a closer look at some of the pressures your teen faces today, and learn how you can help.

PRESSURE TO FIT IN. All teens want to be accepted, but today they face more and more pressure to be part of the crowd. Fitting in might mean having the latest cell phone or the "coolest" jeans, or hanging out with the right people. It could even mean using tobacco, alcohol, drugs or prescription drugs.

Teen Quote: *"Many kids turn to upper-classmen as a means of fitting in or finding a sense of security within high school. Some older peers can be great and others can be horrible."* Male teen

PRESSURE TO BE PERFECT. It's no surprise that many teens have unrealistic expectations about appearance. For some, this focus on perfection may lead to extreme measures, such as eating disorders, drug use to lose weight or steroids to strengthen or improve body image. Other teens just feel stressed trying to keep up with the prettiest, thinnest, or most fashionable kids at school.

Teen Quote: *"My peers and the media have a large influence on my body image. Having struggled with eating disorders for many years, I finally realize that I make comparisons and let the appearance/discussions of my peers sometimes alter my own body image."* Female teen

PRESSURE TO BE SEXUALLY ACTIVE. Have you noticed that many 15-year-olds today could pass for 21? In part due to sex in popular culture, teens face much more pressure today to be "sexy" and sexually active at an earlier age. Both boys and girls report feeling these pressures.

Teen Quote: *"Television and movies decide the physical appearance and style of most teens... the most important influence comes from the opposite sex. Basically, most decisions high school students make come down to TV and sex."* Male teen

PRESSURE TO PICK ON OTHERS. There have always been bullies, but the taunting and teasing in high schools is at a troubling level. And increasingly it involves aggressive adolescent girls. Many girls often say that putting other people down makes them feel more included in a group, even if they know it's wrong or hurtful behavior. New forms of teasing, such as cyber-bullying, are also putting pressure on teens to take part in this hurtful behavior.

Teen Quote: *"I am sure I have been a negative influence on someone, either telling them mean things or mean things about others."* Female teen

PRESSURE TO BE SUCCESSFUL. Teens face huge stress around academics, athletic performance and other areas. Competition for college is tighter than ever, and teens are pressured early on to do “everything right” to get into the best school. Often teens feel they must excel in sports, extracurricular, volunteer and other activities to be competitive for the best schools. Many parents push their teens without even realizing it. In some cases, the stress may lead teens to use drugs or alcohol as a way to escape from their pressured lives.

Teen Quote: *“Between my job, homework, responsibilities at home and studying for my SATs, it’s easy to feel stressed out and overwhelmed.”* Female teen

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

The many pressures teens face can play a big part in influencing choices around risky behavior, especially substance use. In fact, most teens use alcohol or illicit drugs to fit in, to cope with an underlying problem, to feel stimulated or to address some combination of these. So your first step is to understand this and keep a close eye on your teen. In addition to depression, anxiety, substance use and other risk-taking might signal that your teen is struggling with the pressures of adolescence. Watch for these warning signs:

- Sudden dramatic change in behavior, such as sleeping or eating habits
- Frequent sadness or over-reactions to everyday events and disappointments
- Less interest in activities, absences from school or poor grades
- Problems with relationships or more isolation than usual
- High levels of irritability, hostility or anger
- Bloodshot eyes or confusion
- Unusual borrowing or spending of money, or secretive behavior about belongings and actions
- Self-injury, such as cutting or scratching oneself with a sharp object
- Extreme eating patterns or unhealthy obsession with appearance or weight
- Needing constant support or reassurance

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Here's how you can help your teen handle the many pressures he/she faces today:

- Appreciate how different their world is from when you were a teen.
- Be involved. Encourage other adults (coaches, older sibling, etc.) to be active in your teen's life as well.
- Challenge your teen to be an individual or a leader, not a follower, and encourage independence and integrity.
- Focus on the positive instead of criticizing, and praise your teen's special talents and nurture his/her interests.
- Entertainment and advertising have a bigger influence on teens when it comes to substance use, sexual behavior, body image and gender roles than they might acknowledge. Set and enforce limits on your teen's media use.
- Avoid commenting on your teen's appearance – instead, focus on health.
- Use everyday opportunities such as watching TV together, to start a dialogue about topics like drug use and sex. Communicate your values and expectations, and talk about the risks.
- Watch TV and movies with your teen so you can better connect and discuss the messages they send about body image and other expectations.
- Model and teach positive stress management and coping skills.
- Listen carefully and watch to make sure your teen isn't overloaded.
- Provide teen with opportunities for debate and independent decision-making.
- If you suspect your teen may be taking part in bullying, find out the reason for the behavior. Make it clear that your teen is not permitted to engage in bullying and if needed, check in with teachers and other school officials.

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