

Contagious Behavior in Adolescents and Teens By Dr. Laura Fadell

I'm sure most of you have heard the phrase "Birds of a feather flock together." I became very familiar with it in my early teens, as this was something my mother would frequently say during my adolescence, particularly when she didn't approve of my momentary group of friends. Come to find out, my mom was right. That old saying couldn't be truer, especially when the 'birds' are adolescents trying to navigate their way through the often painful and confusing task of establishing their own identities and defining to themselves and to the world who they are.

Peer influence is the process by which children shape each other's behavior and attitudes, leading to conformity within the group. Because adolescents are more dependent on their peers compared to younger children, this age group is especially susceptible to influence from friends. In fact, research has demonstrated that friends' behavior and attitudes become more similar over time. Highly visible peer groups are considered high-status, regardless of whether the visibility is due to prosocial or antisocial behaviors (the movie *Mean Girls* is a great example). Therefore, membership in a high-status group offers more benefits than membership in a low-status group. Because of these benefits, high-status group members are intensely motivated to preserve their social position. This pressure makes high-status group members more likely to conform to group norms and especially strict in dealing with group members who do not maintain group standards for behavior (the movie *Heathers* is another great example of the consequences when a member deviates from the established rules).

In terms of prosocial behaviors, studies have found that peer influence is associated with academic engagement, sharing, cooperation, participation in extracurricular activities, and sexual abstinence. Negative behaviors influenced by peers includes aggression, risk taking, promiscuity, delinquency, substance abuse, problematic eating behaviors, vandalism, cheating, stealing, and truancy.

One theory that describes the process by which peers wield influence over the behaviors and attitudes of each other is called *Social Contagion* (sometimes also referred to as 'peer contagion', 'behavioral contagion', or 'emotional contagion'). Regardless of what term is used, Webster has defined 'contagion' as "the spreading of an idea, emotion, behavior, etc." Generally speaking, social contagion is thought to occur when behaviors, attitudes, and emotions are transmitted between school-aged peers or friends. It's more apt to occur when the collective excitement of the peer group is strong and widespread.

The important questions are whether or not all adolescents and teens are vulnerable to *Social Contagion*, and what can be done to protect them from falling prey to this sort of influence. According to Klapp (1971), the degree to which an individual is vulnerable to suggestion depends on their pre-existing sensitivities or attitudes. In other words, if your teen is insecure, has difficulties making friends, is emotionally immature for his or her age group, or is alienated from parents and siblings, they are likely at a significant risk for contagion. In terms of the behavioral aspect of contagion, it has been suggested that

often the behavior is transmitted unknowingly, or without conscious effort and that by merely being in the presence of others, a child can adopt the group's attitudes and behaviors.

Although I have focused exclusively on adolescents and teens in this article, parents should be aware that contagion has also been found to occur in preschool, daycare, and elementary school settings. Therefore, it's never too early to become aware of how your child interacts with other same-aged peers. Is he shy and quietly goes along with the group's chosen activities or does she take the lead in most situations? Neither attribute is bad per se, they are just points to consider in terms of how your child operates and integrates in a group setting. During my years working with children and families, I have found that the best inoculation against contagion is to instill in your child confidence and independence. Support your child anytime they "think outside of the box" and praise their uniqueness every chance you get. Do not criticize because they will have no trouble finding others who won't. I'm not suggesting you don't discipline when appropriate, but be mindful of your words. Most of all, keep a watch on the flock!