Peer influence on positive youth development

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During adolescence, youth may increasingly turn to their peers for advice. Youth become less dependent on their parents or family members and more dependent on their peers (Uslu, 2013). Some youth follow prosocial peer leaders who encourage healthy living and habits. Others follow leaders who encourage illegal, immoral, and unhealthy behaviors. Little is known about these leader-follower relationships (Ward, Lundberg, Ellis, & Berrett, 2010).

Different theories have been suggested to explain youth followership. The social exchange theory states that adolescent followership is based on social support, social status, the potential for close friendships, interpersonal rivalry, cognitive dissonance, and idealized influence (Ward et al., 2010). According to self-determination theory, youth engage in healthy and unhealthy activities through followership because they are trying to fulfill their needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Ward et al. (2010) defined competence as feeling effective within an environment or feeling that an individual’s specific skills will bring about a specific action or outcome; autonomy as a person’s need to be in control of their own behavior; and relatedness as feeling connected with others, belonging, caring for, and being cared for, as well as being part of a community.

Youth want to participate in groups where they feel welcomed and appreciated and where they are allowed to have a voice and can help make decisions (Ward et al., 2010). Sports teams are common peer-to-peer interaction groups where this occurs. On teams, youth receive a sense of friendship, are able to relate with other teammates, and feel unified. These feelings come from the feedback team members receive from each other and can ultimately influence their social
behaviors. Social behavior is not the only thing peers influence though. Research has shown that academic aspirations and achievement are also affected by peers (Holland, 2011). Youth will interact with peers who they feel will be able to provide them with assistance and advice, or in other words, youth who are not afraid to also share their voice and help make a decision. Youth view their peers as good sources of information when making choices and decisions, including the choice of what to do after primary and secondary education, even if their peers may not always be the most knowledgeable sources of this type of information.

All peer group programs have youth that are influenced by peer pressure (Tate & Copas, 2010). Peer pressure affects all ages and cannot be removed or added to a program at will. It always exists. “Like energy, peer pressure cannot be created or destroyed. It can be negative or positive, destructive or constructive; but it is a remarkably powerful phenomenon that enhances or thwarts treatment efforts depending upon how staff members regard it” (Tate & Copas, 2010, p. 13). Positive youth development professionals can utilize peer pressure. They can try to redirect peer pressure, or the group’s consensus; however they cannot create or destroy it. If an adult tries to force a consensus on a youth group, the youth may start to hide their opinions from the adult and exclude the adult in their decision making.

In order to understand how peers influence each other, it may be helpful to understand how youth groups develop. Tate and Copas (2010) identified a four step process of group development. In this process, group development starts with casing, where members engage in superficial acquaintance activities and are unsure over the perceived uncertainty of group goals. Next groups undergo limit testing, where members establish their positions with the group and fears and conflicts are expressed and many times blamed on the group leader. Third, groups
undergo a polarization of values. Members overcome their defensiveness, increase their involvement, explore their feelings, and discuss problems. Finally, groups begin having a positive peer culture when members relax their defenses and consider adapting new behaviors and attitudes. At this final stage, the group becomes a source of learning and strength; however, many groups never reach this stage because of the time it takes to develop.

Peer group membership is important as children grow up (Nesdale, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Roxburgh, 2014). According to Nesdale et al. (2014),

Children willingly become group members, identify with their group, display behaviors that favor the in-group over any out-group, seek to defend and strengthen the status of their group, conform to group norms, and are prepared to exclude members who do not conform. (p. 12)

Youth place high priority on group membership. Youth also feel it is important for their peers and group members to accept them. Therefore, when youth are rejected from a group or are threatened to be rejected from a group, it impacts them greatly (Rubin et al., 2006). Rejection from a group may cause anxiety, unhappiness, anger, loneliness, and depression (Sandstrom & Zakriski, 2004). Research has also shown that peer rejection may influence how well youth solve social problems or understand how to behave appropriately (Nesdale et al., 2014). Youth who are rejected may grow more aggressive or disruptive, while being socially withdrawn. For positive youth development professionals this information might mean that intervention is needed to assist those youth who are having problems forming relationships with others. However, it will take careful consideration when deciding how best to enact this intervention. The findings of
Nesdale et al. (2014) suggest youth may need help in a variety of forms, such as, handling biases; forming, keeping, and building friendships; coping with stress; or improving self-esteem.

Some new youth development programs are altering the term *peer* to include youth of different ages. Cross-age peer mentoring is when an older youth mentors a younger youth (Karcher, Kuperminc, Portwood, Sipe, & Taylor, 2006). This mentoring relationship focuses primarily on relationship building, as opposed to the achievement of academic or behavioral goals like many other mentoring relationships. According to Karcher and colleagues (2006), the target of cross-age peer mentoring is to increase developmental achievements, like social skills, connectedness to school, and self-esteem. As with other mentoring programs, cross-age peer mentoring can have great effects if the mentors attend their sessions consistently.

All in all, many theories exist to explain how peers influence each other during development. Youth turn to their peers for the answers to various kinds of questions or problems and are often simply looking for a group or organization to call their own. These peer groups develop over time and incorporate the inevitable peer pressure. Sometimes this is positive peer pressure and sometimes it is negative peer pressure. Likewise, sometimes it incorporates youth of the same age, and sometimes it incorporates youth differing in age. Overall, youth development professionals can consider how peer pressure is affecting their work.
References


