

ADOLESCENT PEER GROUPS

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Peer groups are a major component in the adolescent development process. Adolescents face daily problems such as loneliness among their peers, rapid physical and emotional changes, fear of failure, and the constant search for their own identity. Adolescents engage in social relationships by joining identified groups. The development of a personal identity is an essential part of the adolescent experience. As adolescents mature they gain a greater understanding of their roles within their peer groups:

The importance of developing social identity improves social skills, which helps build personal identity. By identifying with groups, teenagers place themselves into the peer system, which gives them a temporary identity while working toward a more concrete personal identity. Teenagers watch the other people in their groups and observe how they want or don't want to exist as an individual. The group members practice their social skills on each other as they observe each other as well. Since teenagers are starting to think more maturely and take other's perspectives into consideration, the actions they take among the group members help them realize what kind of person they are through the social skills they are practicing.¹

These peer systems become particularly important in educational settings where adolescents spend a prolonged amount of time with the same group of peers. High school teachers often consider how and why peer groups play such a key role in development. Secondary school teachers see this influence

¹ Steinberg, Laurence, (ed.), *Adolescence*, 8th ed., McGraw-Hill Higher Education, Boston, 2008.

because “peer groups become more important during adolescence than during childhood. They play a significant role in the process of developing social identity”.² The achievement of a social identity also corresponds with the ability to cope with certain developmental tasks of adolescents. The beginning of adolescence is a time when many changes occur. Teachers and other adults will expect adolescents to become more responsible. Children begin to mature mentally and think more about their identity and where they fit in the world. As they mature, their “interactions with peers along with this identity search begin to intertwine with one another.”³ A high school usually offers students more time to interact with their own age group as opposed to the smaller classrooms of elementary school. Also, unlike elementary school, students have more than one teacher. This may make it more difficult to establish a trusting relationship with a teacher, so they rely on their peers more. Peer groups serve several key functions for young people: “Adolescents see peer groups as being important not only because it gives them emotional support with people their own age, but also it is the source of status they need for identity achievement.”⁴ For the most part, groups consist of similar people with similar interests. By watching the others in their group, teenagers may feel relief knowing that they too feel or think the same way about everyday high school encounters. Friendships help adolescents have positive views about their identity and help them begin to show higher levels of social skills and identity development. Peer groups help adolescents communicate effectively with their teachers, enhance peer social skills, and provide interactions with parents to contribute to their development.

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³ Steinberg, Laurence, (ed.), *Adolescence*, 8th ed., McGraw-Hill Higher Education, Boston, 2008.

⁴ Eccles, Jacquelynne S. et al. “Motivation to Succeed.” in W. Damon and N. Eisenberg (eds.) *Handbook of Child Psychology*, Vol. 3, 6th ed. New York: Wiley, 2006.

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