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**PRESS RELEASE**

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**Teens More Vulnerable to Peer Influences from Popular/Well-Liked Classmates**

Wondering if your teen's friends are a bad influence? Check out how popular and well-liked they are. In a unique experiment, researchers from the University of Colorado at Boulder and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that adolescents were particularly likely to say they would engage in aggressive and risky behaviors if they believed they were in a chat room with highly popular/liked adolescents who endorsed such behaviors. The study, one of the first to examine how peer influence works, is published in the July/August issue of the journal *Child Development*.

"Parents, educators, and scientists know that one of the most potent predictors of adolescents' engagement in aggression or risky behavior is the extent to which adolescents' friends are engaging in similar behaviors," said Geoffrey L. Cohen, Ph.D., associate professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Yet, he noted, "we know little about how peer influence works, or about factors that might affect adolescents' vulnerability to peer influence."

To better understand how peer influence works, Cohen and his co-author, Mitchell J. Prinstein, Ph.D., associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, had adolescents participate in an experimental conversational forum over networked computers. Instead of real people on the other end of the computer, however, the teens responded to computer-generated entities manipulated to appear like either highly popular/liked classmates or unpopular/unliked classmates.

The researchers found that adolescents publicly conformed to the behavior of high-status peers when others viewed their responses. They also privately internalized the aggressive and risky attitudes of highly popular/liked peers, endorsing these attitudes even when their responses were no longer visible to others.

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“The effects of peer influence were remarkably strong,” said Dr. Cohen, “predicting adolescents’ aggressive and risky responses even more than their overall levels of past aggressive behavior.”

The results also suggested that adolescents’ social anxiety (i.e., their fears about others not liking them) may be one factor affecting their vulnerability to peer influence. Those high in social anxiety were especially likely to be influenced by peers, even if the peers were not highly popular/liked.

“These results offer implications for understanding and remedying adolescent aggression and risk behavior,” said Dr. Prinstein. “For instance, many interventions try to change adolescents’ aggressive and risk behavior using rational arguments, persuasive information and fear appeals that emphasize the negative consequences that follow from such behavior. But a more effective route involves changing not adolescents’ own attitudes but their perceptions of the attitudes of their *peers*.”

“You lead them to think, ‘This behavior does not fit with my group, or with the group to which I want to belong,’” added Dr. Cohen.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 4, *Peer contagion of aggression and health-risk behavior among adolescent males: An experimental investigation of effects on public conduct and private attitudes* by Cohen GL (University of Colorado, Boulder) and Prinstein MJ (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.