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Teens Who Feel More Peer Pressure Turn Out Better, Not Worse

BY **PO BRONSON** ON 9/23/09 AT 10:01 AM EDT

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Ten years ago, Joe Allen began studying a diverse group of seventh graders near the University of Virginia, where he's a professor. One of Allen's main concerns was how these kids dealt with peer pressure, and how deeply they felt the pressure to conform to what the crowd was doing.

According to every pop theory of adolescence, peer pressure is peril. Being able to resist it should be considered a sign of character strength. But a funny thing happened as Allen continued to follow these kids every year for the next 10 years: the kids who felt more peer pressure when they were 12 or 13 were turning out better.

Notably, they had much higher-quality relationships with friends, parents, and romantic partners. Their need to fit in, in the early teens, later manifested itself as a willingness to accommodate — a necessary component of all reciprocal relationships. The self-conscious kid who spent seventh grade convinced that everyone was watching her learned to be attuned to subtle changes in others' moods. Years down the road, that heightened sensitivity lead to empathy and social adeptness.

Meanwhile, those kids who did not feel much peer pressure to smoke, drink, and shoplift in seventh grade didn't turn out to be the independent-minded stars we'd imagine. Instead, what was notable about them was that within five years they had a much lower GPA — almost a full grade lower. The kid who could say no to his peers turned out to be less engaged, all around, socially and academically. Basically, if he was so detached that he didn't care what his peers thought, he probably wasn't motivated by what his parents or society expected of him, either.

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Allen has found that vulnerability to peers' influence can be just as much of an asset as it is a liability. Many of the pressures felt by teens pull them in a good direction — they feel pressure to do well in school, pressure to not act childish, and pressure to be athletic. "We think of susceptibility to peer pressure as only a danger, but, really, it's out of peer pressure that boys learn to take showers and not come to school smelly."

Allen — coauthor of the forthcoming book *Escaping the Endless Adolescence* — has come to the conclusion that the dangers of peer pressure are somewhat overblown. Particularly when it comes to the archetypal portrayal of peer pressure: kids forcing each other to experiment with drugs and alcohol. Allen argues that in those instances, more often than not, it isn't peer pressure that is at work, but instead the operative factor is peer selection.



"The pressure to smoke and drink are less than we thought," concludes Allen. "To a parent, it seems like your child is suddenly smoking and drinking, and it's reasonable to think this was caused by the new kids he's been hanging out with the last month. But really, those who are about to smoke or drink pick other kids in a similar spot."

Teens give each other subtle cues that they're ready to deviate: it could be nothing more than ignoring the Pledge of Allegiance or a well-timed snicker while the teacher's at the blackboard. By the time one says, "Let's hang out after school," the plot is already in motion.

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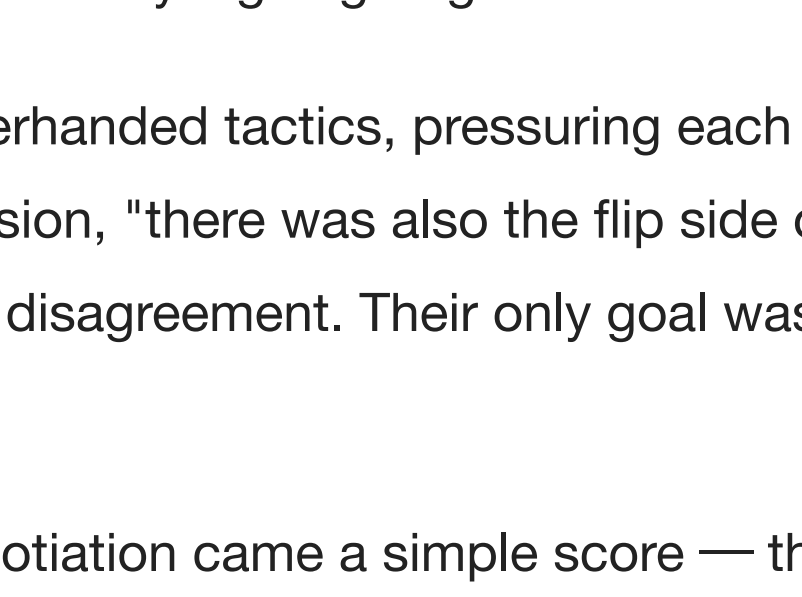
Having now watched the kids in his study grow into adulthood, Allen has been surprised at how often things that looked like good news when the kids were 13 turned out to predict less than great outcomes when they were young adults. In all, Allen tracked 19 aspects of peer relationships, each of which he thought could prove to be important for a teen's development. Most proved to be a mixed bag. Only one of those measures actually turned out to predict uniformly positive long-term outcomes. And it had to do with a vacation to Mars.

The first year the teens were in Allen's study, each came to the lab with his best friend. In separate rooms, each was asked to imagine that two spaceships have taken 12 people on vacation to Mars. While on Mars, a meteor hits one of the spaceships and destroys it. The remaining ship has room for only seven passengers, plus the pilot. Another meteor is on its way, and whoever is left behind will die. The teen was asked to pick seven of the passengers to return to Earth. One was a pregnant mother, one a wealthy businessman, a radio expert, a 12-year-old who's good with computers, etc. There were no right answers or easy choices.

After the adolescent marked his own preferences, he regrouped with his best friend, to decide together who were the best choices for the trip. The ensuing negotiation was allowed to last up to eight minutes, but it was usually over in three.

What happened in those three minutes was powerfully foretelling of the kid's next seven years.

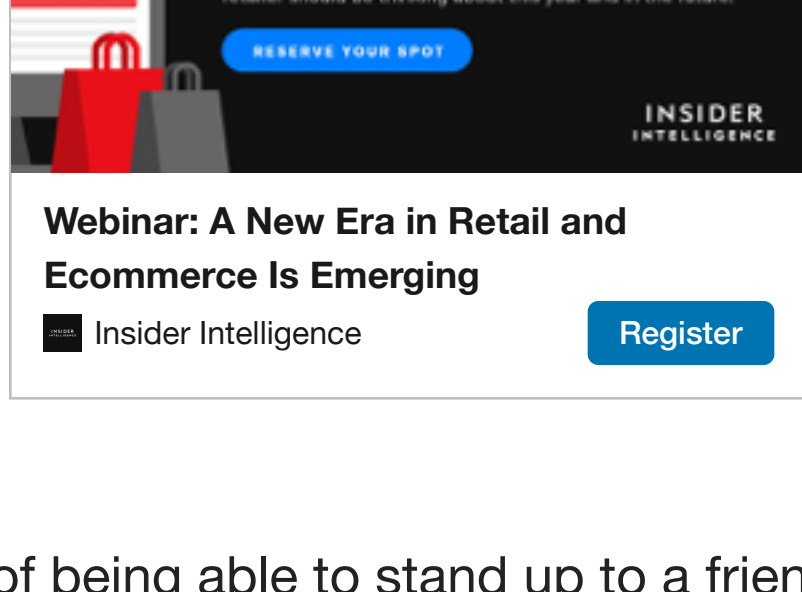
"When it was going well, both kids went back and forth, giving reasons, and reflecting it back. 'Yes, we need a doctor, but the doctor is 83 years old, so I picked the paramedic,'" explains Allen. "They were sort of supporting each other, hearing the reasons, saying, 'I see why you did that.'"



A second set of kids really battled it out, but without any anger. "There was no venom. It was like watching two lawyers. There was no credence to the other's point of view. They simply wanted to win. 'We need a doctor,' said one. 'No, we don't need a doctor; it's only a two-month journey. Nobody's going to get sick.'"

While some kids used underhanded tactics, pressuring each other, expressing skepticism and condescension, "there was also the flip side of that — kids who backed down at the merest sign of disagreement. Their only goal was to get out of this without conflict."

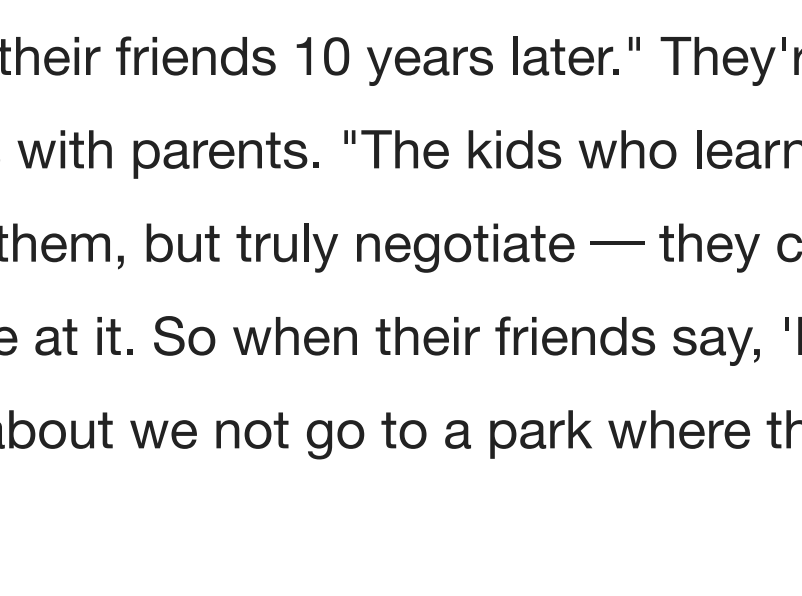
From this three-minute negotiation came a simple score — the number of times a teen changed his pick to his friend's, divided by the number of potential disagreements. If the kids originally disagreed on six choices, a good score was an even three-three split.



Allen sees it as a measure of being able to stand up to a friend — to maintain autonomy — yet do so in an amicable way that still preserves the friendship. In simplest terms, if two friends can agree to disagree, that's an excellent sign. It's different from merely resisting peer pressure, because many kids who push back against peer pressure do so in a way that severs or threatens the relationship.

How does a child get this secret ability, to agree to disagree with his best friend? To Allen, it isn't a mystery at all — it comes from learning to do the same with parents.

He knows this because he's put the parents through similar trials as well, with their 13-year-olds. The kid raised to be obedient to his parents wasn't the one who was most impervious to his peers' influence. Instead, it was the opposite. The kid who blindly obeys his parents also blindly obeys his peers.



"Those kids who say 'Yes, sir' to their parents transfer that to their friendship relationships," Allen says. "The kids who are really pushy and angry with their parents, they're still more hostile to their friends 10 years later." They're all learning a conflict style from their interactions with parents. "The kids who learned to negotiate with their parents — not just badger them, but truly negotiate — they could use those tactics with their peers, and be effective at it. So when their friends say, 'Let's go to the park and drink,' he suggests, 'How about we not go to a park where the police cruise three nights a week?'"

"The best relationships feel both autonomous and connected," Allen describes. "The challenge for parents is to negotiate disagreements with their child in a way that allows respect but preserves the relationship. When a parent says, 'You're too young to understand,' and the teen says, 'You're too old to know what it's like these days,' both are saying, 'Your judgment is impaired.' Both are on the defensive."

"Rather, focus on the reasons you disagree, rather than making it personal — get a meeting of minds, or, if you can, just agree to disagree."



"The parent still has to be the ultimate authority," Allen adds. "But not only is it OK to give in when a kid presents a better argument, it's huge money in the bank."

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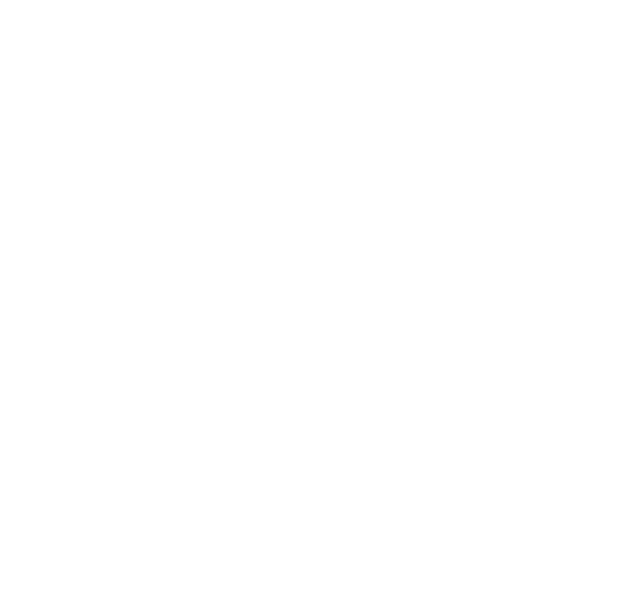
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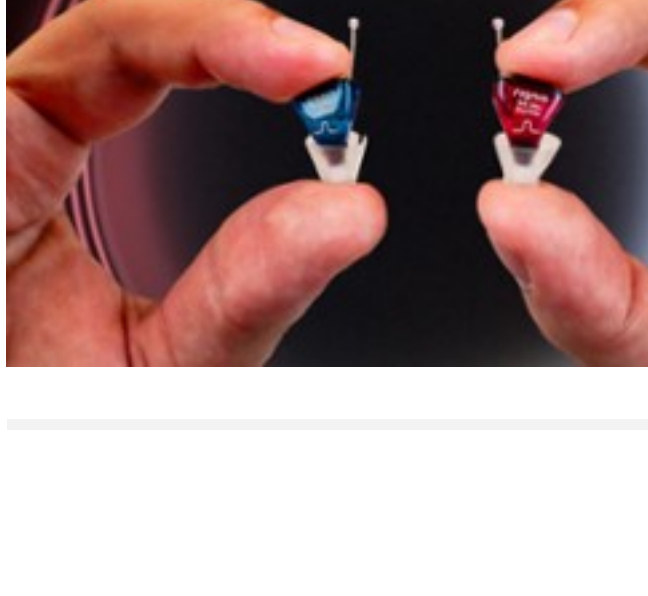
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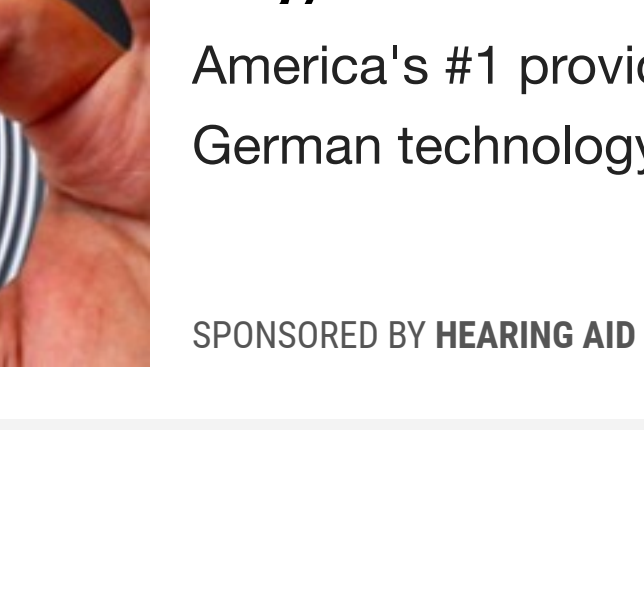
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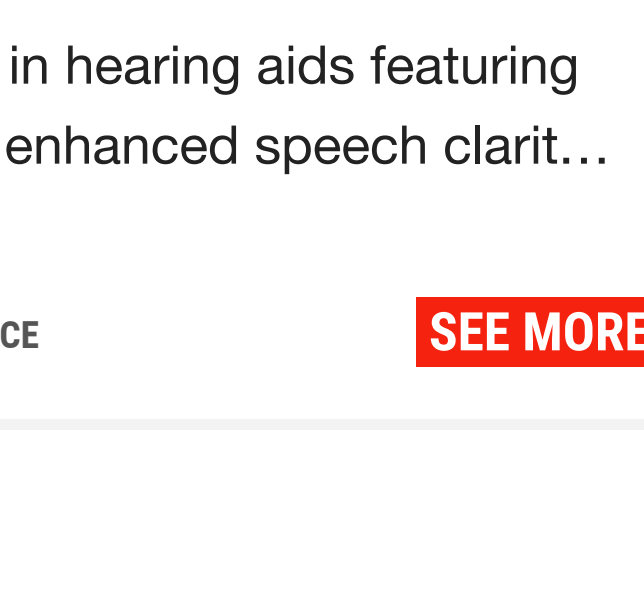
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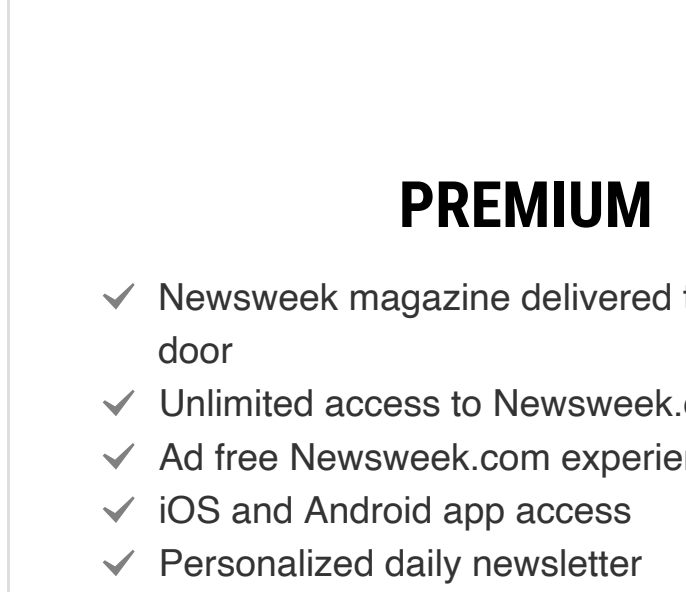
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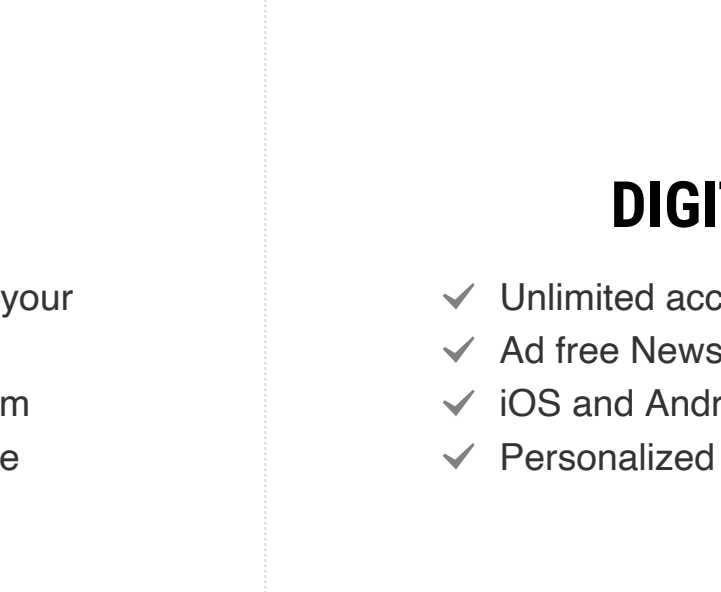
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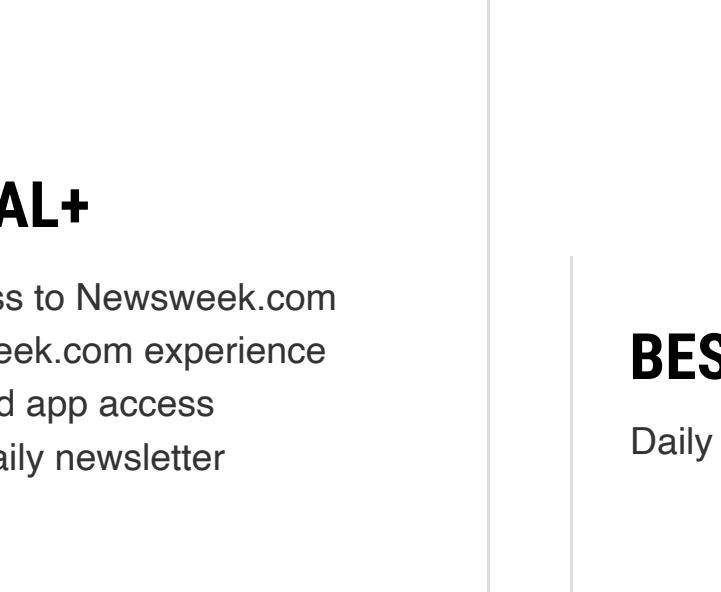
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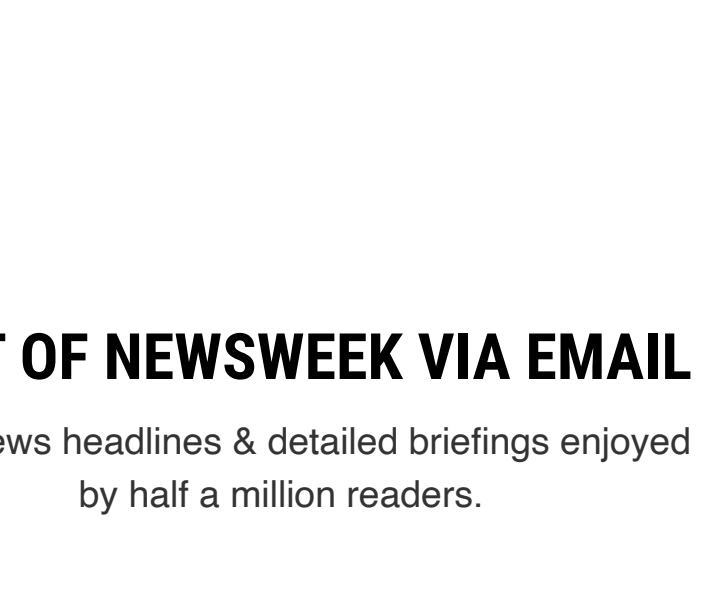
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