

Teen, mom debates may help resist peer pressure

Teens who express their own views in discussions with mom, even if they disagree, are more likely to resist peer pressure to use drugs or alcohol, researchers discover.

Frustrated parents who are frequently at odds with an argumentative adolescent might take heart from the findings of the new research on teens, their moms and their friends.

"What we find is the right kind of argument is one where a teen and the parent are trying to persuade each other with calm reasoning," explained lead author Joseph Allen, the Hugh P. Kelly Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia.

"This is very different from bullying or shouting or pressuring or whining, or just withdrawing, which are all kind of other approaches teens sometimes use to get their way."

Essentially, the kids who express their own points of view in the right way are practising an important life skill.

Allen said teens need to learn to stand up for themselves somewhere, and those who learn to do so in the right way with their parents are actually much better suited to do it well with their peers.

The study was published this week in the journal *Child Development*.

Allen's team began following more than 150 teens at the age of 13. The group is now aged 24, but the data for this particular paper is derived from a period when they were aged 15 and 16.

The researchers videotaped the teens and their parents discussing a disagreement, and then observed and coded the information to understand what was happening.

"And what we found was that what teens learn at home in terms of handling disagreements, they largely take into their interactions with their peers," Allen said in an interview from Charlottesville, Va.



Teens who express their own points of view in the right way, instead of bullying or withdrawing, are practising an important life skill. (iStock)



Joseph Allen said teens need to learn to stand up for themselves somewhere, and those who learn to do so in the right way with their parents are actually much better suited to do it well with their peers. (Canadian Press)

"So if they learn to be calm and confident and persuasive at home, they'll do the same thing with their peers."

On the other hand, if they use bullying, whining and pressure — or just withdraw — when there's a disagreement, they'll do the same thing with their friends.

But, Allen noted, teenage friends don't usually put up with as much bad behaviour as parents do.

Teaching teens to be persuasive

By interviewing the teens' friends, the researchers found that the calm, reasoned arguers were more successful with their peers.

The study was only done with moms because there were more families with mothers, due to divorces and the rates of single-parent families, but Allen said it's possible the same process applies to interactions with dads.

Allen said it makes sense that the teens who can disagree with their parents can disagree with their peers and don't get influenced as much.

"A teen who, for example, with their parents just says 'yes sir,' 'yes ma'am,' even when they really don't agree or really don't understand, it looks like they maybe do the same thing with their peers — and they just say 'OK, I'll do it,' whether or not it makes sense for them."

Parents need to stay calm and model the behaviour they want their teens to use, and they need to teach their teens how to be persuasive, he advised.

Karen Skinulis of the Ontario Parenting Education Centre in Richmond Hill, Ont., welcomed the research. She said it can be hard to convince parents that having discussions with their children will be a good thing — sometimes they're afraid to do it.

"Being able to talk safely with your parents about your viewpoint, and have it respectfully acknowledged and listened to, gives children a confidence that helps them feel that their ideas are sound and logical," she said.

"Then they feel that they really start developing that confidence in themselves as a result of being listened to by their parents, a feeling of 'I'm valued and I have worth.'"

When a teen argues by bullying and shouting, it could be because he or she feels there isn't another option open to them. Parents need to stop that kind of dynamic and find a different way of making decisions together, Skinulis said.