

The Health Benefits of Adolescent Conformity

Conformity is not something most Americans cherish. We like our sons and daughters to grow up thinking for themselves. Yet during adolescence it is quite common for youth to band together into groups that strongly influence how they dress, talk, and think. Parental exhortations to “Think for yourself” and “Stop following the crowd” often lead to rebuttals such as, “I have to be there for my friends; they’re counting on me!”

As much as parents would like their teens to think and act independently, a recent study by psychologists at the University of Virginia and University of Utah suggests that “following the crowd” may actually have mental and physical health benefits for teens in the long run. The researchers interviewed 171 teens and their friends periodically over a period of 14 years (from the ages of 13 to 27 years old) to measure allegiance to their group and also to their closest friends over time. They also surveyed the participants periodically about their physical and mental health. By age 27 those who had conformed the most to the wishes and expectations of their group (as rated by their friends) reported better physical and mental health as young adults than those who were considered more nonconformists.

These results may seem surprising but are consistent with other findings that “going it alone” is not healthy for teens. Socially isolated teens are more likely to have health problems as adults.

So how does being a follower, letting others take the lead, and putting the needs of the group over individual needs make one healthier? The authors noted that the physical health benefits were correlated with the mental health benefits of group affiliation. Belonging to a group confers a sense of identity which can lift self-esteem, and also security. You don’t have to rely solely on your own personality or skills to feel good about yourself, and you don’t have to face the world alone. Being part of a group also provides its members opportunities to practice social skills.

So maybe encouraging your teen to resist peer pressure isn’t always such a good idea, especially if it isolates your son or daughter from a potential source of social support. Of course groups can acquire bad habits, just as individuals can. So what’s a parent to do? One obvious strategy is to become acquainted with your teen’s group of friends, even the sketchy ones. Get to know their parents and form your own social support network. By encouraging social connections and familiarizing yourself with your teen’s support system, you will know more about what they’re up to, and you may even have some influence over them. In the long run you and your teen may be healthier for it.

Allen, J.P., Uchino, B.N., Hafen, C.A. (2015) Running with the pack: Teen peer-relationship qualities as predictors of adult physical health. *Psychological Science*, Vol. 26, Pp 1574-1583.

