

A Technical Assistance Tool for Helping Youth Navigate Peer Influence

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Peer influence plays a critical role in shaping youth's^a experiences and behaviors. Peer influence can include direct pressure from peers, perceived peer norms about what “everyone” is doing, digital influences, and the influence of close friends' attitudes and behaviors—influences that can be both positive and negative. Peer influence is particularly important in relation to substance use and risky sexual activity, which can increase the risk of unintended teen pregnancy.^{1,2,3} Youth-supporting professionals can help youth develop positive peer networks that support healthier decisions about substance use, sexual activity, and contraception use.^{4,5,6}

This tool provides practical, research-informed strategies that youth-supporting professionals can use to help youth recognize and respond to negative peer influence, strengthen positive peer connections, and make safe decisions related to substance use and sexual activity. This resource builds on previous Activate resources^{7,8} that focus on helping youth-supporting professionals [build trust and rapport](#) with youth before [engaging in difficult conversations](#), such as conversations about substance use and risky sexual activity.

Activate: The Center to Bring Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Research to Youth-Supporting Professionals bridges the gap between research and practice in support of the Office of Population Affairs' aims to promote adolescent health and prevent unintended teen pregnancy. Activate translates research and creates research-based resources for use by professionals who support young people experiencing the child welfare or justice system, homelessness, or disconnection from school and work (i.e., opportunity youth).

Why Peer Influence, Substance Use, and Risky Sexual Activity Can Be Addressed Together

Substance use is linked to risky sexual activity, including engaging in sexual activity when judgement and decision-making are impaired,^{9,10} sexual initiation before age 14,¹¹ inconsistent contraceptive use,¹² coercive sexual encounters,¹³ and sex with multiple partners.¹⁴ These sexual activities increase the risk of unintended teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).¹⁵

Research shows that peer influence can shape both substance use and risky sexual activity. For example, when asked about their peers broadly, youth often overestimate alcohol use among their peers, which can make alcohol use^b seem more normative.^{16,17,18} Research further shows that close friends shape norms through everyday interactions and shared expectations.¹⁹ For example, youth may be less likely to try substances when their close friends do not use them. Peers can also shape norms and behaviors related to sexual activity and contraception use.²⁰ Youth who perceive that their peers are sexually active or approve of sexual activity are more likely to engage in sexual activity than those who do not share these perceptions.²¹ Peer influence on substance use and sexual activity may be particularly important for youth experiencing the child welfare system, juvenile justice system, or homelessness. Young people in these

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^a Throughout this resource, we use youth to refer to all adolescents and young adults ages 14-24.

^b Alcohol is the most commonly studied substance when examining the relationship between substance use and sexual activity.

settings are more likely to experience disruptions in their connections to stable, supportive adults, due in part to placement instability, and may consequently rely on peers for emotional support and guidance.^{22,23,24,25,26,27} Together, this research suggests that youth-supporting professionals can help youth recognize and respond to peer influence and build peer relationships that support safer decisions.

Strategies for Helping Youth Address Peer Influence Related to Substance Use and Risky Sexual Activity

Below we describe four strategies that youth-supporting professionals can use to help youth resist negative peer influences (i.e., peer pressure) and strengthen positive peer influences related to substance use and sexual activity. For each strategy, we include guidance on how to apply it in practice. The strategies are intended as general guidance and may need to be adapted based on the circumstances and experiences of the youth you are working with.

Help youth recognize and name negative peer influence.

Youth may experience negative peer influence (i.e., peer pressure) from friends, romantic partners, or acquaintances to use substances or engage in risky sexual activities.^{28,29} This peer pressure can occur in person or through digital communication, such as text messaging, social media, or other platforms and apps.^{30,31} Youth may sense when this is happening but lack the language to describe it. Helping youth recognize and name this peer pressure is an important first step in building their ability to respond effectively. To help youth name the kinds of peer pressure they experience, youth-supporting professionals can:

- Help youth identify **what** negative peer influence looks like. Negative peer influence can include peer pressure, as well as peer approval of risky behaviors or peer engagement in risky behaviors without directly pressuring others to join in.
 - “Do you feel pressured to engage in certain activities when you see your peers posting on social media about those activities?”
- Ask questions to help youth identify **who** is pressuring them to make risky choices and/or who is encouraging them to make safer choices.
 - “Is anyone in your life pushing you to do something you don’t want to do?”
 - “Who do you look to for examples of how you want to be or things you want to do?”
- Ask questions to identify **where** youth are experiencing peer influence. For example, is it happening in a residential care setting, at home, or at school?
 - “Where do you feel like you have the most freedom to make your own choices?”
 - “Are there certain places where you feel you have to do what your friends expect you to do?”
- Help youth **connect** their experiences to their feelings and choices. Youth may not always label an experience as feeling peer pressured, but they may connect it to feelings such as nervousness, guilt, or embarrassment.
 - “How did you feel in your body when that situation happened?”
 - “What made it feel hard to do what you wanted to do?”
- “Did you feel like you would be judged or let someone down if you didn’t do that?”



What can you do to help youth name the kinds of peer influence they experience?

Start by creating a trusting, nonjudgmental space where youth feel comfortable sharing. Use open-ended questions and real-life scenarios to help them reflect on situations where they may feel pressured or influenced by peers, and introduce clear, age-appropriate language to describe what they may have experienced. This process can help youth recognize what is happening, describe it in their own words, and consider how they want to respond.

Teach and practice refusal and boundary-setting skills.

Youth are more likely to resist peer pressure when they have simple, prepared responses.^{32,33,34,35} Teaching youth refusal skills can help them navigate situations where they feel pressured to use substances or engage in risky sexual activity by giving them strategies to avoid or exit these situations.^{36,37,38} Refusal skills include being direct, giving reasons for not participating in an activity, redirecting to alternatives, using external excuses, or using humor. Youth-supporting professionals should also work with youth on respecting and responding to boundaries regarding substance use and sexual activity set by others. Boundary-respecting skills include recognizing and honoring when others express discomfort or say no and understanding that respecting others' boundaries is as important as asserting one's own. Youth-supporting professionals can help youth practice the S.T.O.P. approach to saying no, which includes setting boundaries and responding to peer influence with clear communication.³⁹





What can you do to teach and practice refusal and boundary-setting skills?

Role-play with youth so they can practice setting and respecting boundaries in a low-stakes environment. Support youth in identifying and clarifying their boundaries before they are in a situation where they need to assert them. Reinforce that setting boundaries includes both expressing their own limits and recognizing and respecting others' boundaries. Prepare youth for real-world challenges by practicing how to respond when someone ignores or pushes past their boundaries, including when to disengage or seek support.

Provide accurate information about peer norms and substance use trends.

Youth may underestimate or be unaware of the risks associated with substance use and unprotected sex. Youth can also hold inaccurate beliefs about how common these behaviors are among their peers, and this can influence their own choices.⁴⁰ Providing accurate, relevant information in a nonjudgmental way can help youth better understand what their peers are actually doing, what risks may be involved, and how to make safe choices.^{41,42}

It is important for youth-supporting professionals to stay up to date on information, including the slang or “[street names](#)⁴³” for drugs, and to [understand](#)⁴⁴ how those drugs impact the body. In addition, information about regional and national trends on substance use among youth can be helpful. For more information on how to track trends in your community, see the list below. These resources can help professionals stay informed and discuss trends with youth in accurate, nonjudgmental ways:

- [Monitoring the Future](#) is an ongoing study at the University of Michigan that conducts annual surveys of more than 25,000 adolescents and young adults on attitudes and behaviors related to drug use. The project regularly publishes data on prevalence and emerging trends.⁴⁵
- The [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#) (YRBSS) is the largest public health monitoring system in the United States focused on high school students. YRBSS tracks and publishes health-related behaviors, including sexual behavior, substance use, and social media use.⁴⁶
- The [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) (NSDUH) provides nationally representative data on substance use, substance use disorders, mental health, and receipt of substance use and mental health treatment among U.S. residents age 12 and older. NSDUH data are used to generate national, regional, and state-level prevalence estimates, which can be viewed by age group on interactive maps.⁴⁷

Youth-supporting professionals do not need to present detailed data on sexual behavior and substance use to youth. Instead, they can use information to answer questions accurately, correct misperceptions about what “everyone” is doing, and connect youth to credible information when needed.





What can you do to provide accurate information about peer norms and trends related to substance use and sexual activity?

Talk with youth openly about different substances, the different names they are called, how they affect the body and mind, and their risks and side effects. Youth may use slang or euphemisms, so stay up to date on slang and jargon used in your community. Discuss questions about sexual activity using accurate language and in a non-stigmatizing way. When youth say that “everyone” is using substances or having sex, respond with curiosity and accurate information rather than judgment. For example, the scenario below shows how a youth-supporting professional might correct a misperception while talking with a young person:

- **Youth:** Everyone drinks at parties. If you don’t, you’re basically the only one.
- **Professional:** It can definitely feel that way, but actually a lot of teens don’t drink at all or drink less than people think. Research shows that many high school students choose not to drink.
- **Follow-up:** Do you feel like it’s really everyone, or just certain groups of people?

Encourage youth to build prosocial peer relationships.

Prosocial peers are those who generally support or help others and model positive behaviors; research suggests they can help protect against substance use in their peer groups.^{48,49} When youth are surrounded by peers who value safety, respect boundaries, and engage in positive activities, they are less likely to be encouraged to use substances or to see substance use as acceptable.⁵⁰ In prosocial peer groups, youth encourage one another to make healthy, safe, and constructive choices, such as helping others, respecting boundaries, and discouraging harmful behaviors.⁵¹ Relationships with prosocial peers, such as peer-to-peer mentors, are associated with positive social, academic, and health-related behaviors.^{52,53}

Prosocial peer relationships can encourage youth to:^{54,55,56}

- Spend time with friends who respect their choices.
- Support friends who say no to substances or unsafe sex.
- Create group norms around safety and respect.

Prosocial peer relationships can also create a strong sense of belonging, which can reduce the pressure some youth may feel to seek acceptance through engaging in peer pressure (including related to substance use or sexual activity).^{57,58,59,60} In this way, prosocial peer relationships serve as both a buffer against negative influences and a source of support that promotes resilience and well-being.



What can you do to encourage youth to build prosocial peer relationships?

Create opportunities for youth to take on meaningful leadership roles, such as co-facilitating activities or discussions with other youth. Support youth in building skills that strengthen positive relationships, including how to initiate contact, check in on friends, and maintain supportive connections. Teach and give youth opportunities to practice ways to recognize and respond to harmful or risky peer behaviors, including how to speak up safely or seek help from a trusted adult when needed.

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