

PEERS OVERVIEW

How much influence does peer pressure have in the context of a specific peer group? Studying an actual group is insightful. Consider this group of white male high school students, ages 16-17, who jokingly refer to themselves as the "Regulators" (a name taken from the popular western movie, "The Young Guns").

BACKGROUND

THE COMMUNITY

Liberty is a suburban Kansas City community of approximately 30,000 people. Liberty has become a residential community for people working in Kansas City. Yet, it maintains its own entity. People refer to themselves as being from Liberty. It is a fairly stable community. The population is mostly white (in a senior class of 360 kids, 4 were black; no other minorities were represented). Kids have to work to create conflict in Liberty. The most destructive activities in Liberty are drinking parties when parents are away from home. Most Liberty families are middle or upper-middle class, and there is little poverty in the community. Most of the parents of the high school's kids are white-collar workers or employees at a nearby Ford plant.

THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

It is a traditional high school, with only three grades: 10th, 11th, and 12th. It is fed by a junior high school composed of grades 7, 8, and 9. The junior high is known to be very strict; control is tightly maintained. Students are held accountable by their teachers for work due and proper behavior. The opposite seems to be true of the high school, which operates under much less structure. Kids are expected to be in class (on time), turn in their work (without heavy supervision), and be responsible for their own actions during free time. The high school kids often have a hard time adjusting to the newly found freedom. The permissive atmosphere of the school seems to produce multiple responses from the students.

The "Regulators," self-named peers at Liberty High, display the following group characteristics:

- They are all members of middle to upper-middle class families.
- They are all fairly bright and score well in the classes in which they are interested.
- They all participate in sports (particularly soccer) and are fairly successful.

- They each own their own vehicle, usually recreational: jeeps, Ford Broncos, 4 x 4 trucks.
- Most of them do not have close relationships with their parents.
- They set their own clothing trends within the group. If one member buys a particular type of ski coat, typically they all will end up with one similar.
- If they are not participating in sports, they leave the school commons area (the normal after-school hangout) and hurry to each other's house after school.
- Regulators are fairly mischievous. The entire group were arrested after destroying twenty mailboxes the on graduation night. They had all been drinking. Their punishment consisted of sixty hours of community service and repayment and apologies for the mailboxes.
- They all dip Skoal. None in the group smokes cigarettes.
- They generally remain single. Only one has maintained a relationship with a girl over a month. She got pregnant two months into the relationship and had an abortion. The relationship then terminated. Most of the guys do date and would like a longer-term relationship, but it never seems to "work out."
- Except for two Regulators, they are personable kids and, individually, fun. Yet, they set themselves apart, at school and at sporting events.
- They restrict their alcohol consumption and casual drug use to the weekend.
- They are all risk takers, particularly when challenging authority. Raucous incidents are always on the edge of serious trouble. Examples include throwing of water balloons at homecoming floats under construction and harassing opponents' teams at athletic events.

ISOLATED INCIDENTS

- One member, Tom, and another non-member friend broke into a mall department store after seeing a movie inside the mall. After being pursued by the mall security, they tried to flee, and both were caught by the police. This was Tom's second offense—he had previously totaled a friend's car before he had received his driver license.
- Another member, Matt, along with a friend, was missing for sixteen hours after Halloween evening. They were found, passed out, in a car thirty minutes away from Liberty. The story circulating is that they attended a friend's party, but they do not remember much after that.

QUOTES FROM GROUP MEMBERS

When asked how they define their own group, two of the members responded:

Family—we are all best friends, and all of us are real close. I depend on them.

We are all very close; whenever I have problems, I always turn first to Tom and Bill (two members of the group).

When asked how others in the high school perceive their group, two members replied:

I think people would think of us as popular, but also as bad influence. I missed school couple of days, and everyone said class had really calmed down when I was gone.

We get along real well as a group. It's not like we try to exclude anybody, but we just end up together. I don't think we have a bad reputation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Does the general description of the Regulators remind you of any similar high school groups?
2. What are the positive and negative influences of peer groups?
3. Are girls or guys more likely to be influenced by peer groups?
4. How can a youth worker combat the negative effects of peer pressure? How can a youth worker support the positive results, while maintaining an identity separate from the peer group?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Do not underestimate the influence of the high school peer group. The negative effects are rather obvious from the above example. Evaluate how to use peer influence for positive results.
2. A group mentality needs to be developed when approaching kids. If one approaches adolescents as a group instead of as isolated individuals, the potential for reaching kids will increase.
3. Youth workers are encouragers. With this in mind it is important to remember the impact that one person can make, especially on young people.

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