



# NEWSLETTER



## HOPE Newsletter - Issue 56 9 Bad Influences on Your Child (or You)

***Worried about the corrupting effects of certain companions? Find out which behaviors are contagious, and learn how to cope when your kids—or you—come up against them.***

By Jennifer Bleyer

Your little boy's best friend comes out with a sassy retort every time his mom says no. Your daughter's pals are expanding their vocabularies... and not with SAT words. Your husband's new golf buddy? He's got a weekly racetrack habit. And your favorite neighbor keeps dropping by with a bottle of wine, insisting that the two of you polish it off.

Peer influence is remarkably powerful all through our lives. But it's never more impactful than in childhood, when values have yet to take root and the self is still being formed, says Betsy Brown Braun, a child development and behavior specialist and the author of *Just Tell Me What to Say: Sensible Tips and Scripts for Perplexed Parents*. Age 14 is a critical point. Surprisingly, that's when most kids start to resist peer influence, rather than simply following the leader, according to a 2007 study published in *Developmental Psychology*. That ability increases through age 18, but then it plateaus until at least age 30 (at which point the study ended). The takeaway: An easily influenced high school senior could be an easily influenced young adult.

For kids and teenagers, dealing with negative influences can have an upside. In the same way that fending off certain bacteria can boost the immune system, some exposure to naughtiness can strengthen a child's character and bolster his or her ability to make smart choices. "If you want kids who are resilient, you can't isolate them from social pathogens," says Timothy Verduin, Ph.D., a clinical assistant professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine. "Think about the long view, that you're training them to handle less-than-ideal people and solve their own problems." In fact, most children ultimately reject bad influences, realizing that they

don't want to be sent to detention or risk getting hurt. Unfortunately, some kids find rebelliousness alluring. Whether your child will be easily influenced is nearly impossible to predict, at least until the teen years.

### **Unruly Types: How to Deal**

"With few exceptions, you shouldn't forbid friendships with certain children," says Braun. "You'll spark a Romeo-and-Juliet effect," meaning that you may increase the allure of the forbidden friend and, in older kids, drive a wedge between you and your child. So what should you do? *Real Simple* asked experts to analyze the archetypes and offer up strategies.

#### **The Back Talker**

When told to do his homework, he responds with a snide remark. (Teen back talkers might add expletives.)

**Threat level:** High. When kids hear others talking back to adults, they often test it out themselves, usually as a way of exploring their independence, says Braun. As for cursing? It spreads like wildfire.

**Damage control:** The moment you hear your kid use foul language or notice a rebellious attitude creeping in, subtly indicate that you know where he might have picked it up. (Just don't state your assumption as fact, which will only breed resentment, says Braun.) Then express your disapproval and set a limit. A classic that works: "I don't know what's OK at Stephen's house, but that isn't OK at our house."

#### **The Shock Whisperer**

She's the third grade's foremost expert on S-E-X.

**Threat level:** Medium. Children have always been fascinated by sex. Who doesn't recall hearing a tantalizing tidbit about it in the halls of elementary school? But if your child's friend is spouting facts about sexuality before you've gotten around to broaching the subject yourself, it's time to intervene.

**Damage control:** First "find out what your child has heard, but not in an accusatory way," suggests Braun. Be cool. You can say, "How did she explain that?" or "What do you know about that? I really want to hear what you know, because sometimes kids don't tell each other the whole story." Once you've gathered the information, start to impart facts that you consider to be age-appropriate (say, where babies come from or when you think having sex for the first time is OK). If you're really concerned about what the other child is exposing yours to, you may want to bring it up with her parents. When you do, try to express concern for both children, to avoid placing blame, says Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D., a psychologist and the coauthor of *Smart Parenting for*

*Smart Kids.* You might start the discussion with something like “I don't know if you realize this, but our girls had a conversation about...”

### **The Daredevil**

The little stuntman barrels down the steepest slide headfirst. The teen version speeds (and maybe texts) while driving.

**Threat level:** High. In a study last year at the University of Guelph, in Ontario, children ages 6 to 12 watched videos of similarly aged kids performing dangerous maneuvers on playgrounds. When asked if they could see themselves taking comparable risks, the children who had seen other kids speak positively about their actions were more likely to say yes. And research confirms that teens are more likely to display risky behavior, like trying drugs or alcohol, when their friends have already taken the plunge.

**Damage control:** If your child is under 10, “talk with her about listening to that little voice deep inside, otherwise known as her conscience, that tells her to avoid danger,” says Braun. Intervention will be harder in the teen years, when your influence is waning and your kid’s prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that governs decision making, is still far from fully developed. Even so, says Braun, take every opportunity to remind your kid that she doesn’t have to do everything that her peers do. Frame your requests as gifts of trust and responsibility rather than as commands. For example: “When you get behind the wheel of a car, you have a choice about using your cell phone or not. I’m trusting that you won’t.”

### **The Mean Girl (or Boy)**

Master of the dark arts of exclusion and putting others down behind their backs.

**Threat level:** High. When a kid falls into the good graces of a queen bee or a pack leader, he often takes on at least some of that friend’s exclusivity, says psychologist Barbara Greenberg, Ph.D., a coauthor of *Teenage as a Second Language*. A 2007 study from the University of Western Ontario, in London, looked at children in grades five through eight who spent most of their time with kids considered to have “high group centrality” (a.k.a. popularity). Researchers found that these students were more likely to display “relational aggression” (acting manipulatively, spreading rumors) than were those in other crowds.

**Damage control:** Ask your child questions about the emotions that his friend provokes, suggests Greenberg. You might say, “How do you feel when he says bad things about Scottie?” or “What do you think is causing him to act like that?” Thinking through the answers to these questions should help reinforce your child’s sense of empathy, empowering him to act for himself and stand up for kindness toward others.

### **The Tantrum Thrower**

Like Veruca Salt, she wants the whole world, and she wants it *now*.

**Threat level:** Low. Children who throw tantrums morning, noon, and night tend to have naturally difficult temperaments, as well as parents or caregivers who reinforce their behavior by giving in to their demands. Without these two components in place, your child isn't at risk of a total personality change. She could go through a phase of mimicking the behavior, says Verduin, but it's unlikely to stick.

**Damage control:** If your child starts to act out, hold your ground ("No, you may not have a candy bar") and wait out the antics, even if your kid is causing a scene. And if the dramatic friend throws a fit while she's at your house, don't judge. Simply take your child out of the room until her buddy calms down, says Kennedy-Moore. Tell her, "Lily is very upset right now. Let's give her a little bit of space." This action puts you and your child on the same team, making her feel that you're a united front.

### **The Sneak**

If it's against the rules, he does it and lies about it. This is the teen who steals gum from the deli and smuggles vodka into the school dance in a water bottle.

**Threat level:** Medium. "Kids at the adolescent transition are trying to define who they are, and they do it by showing that they're not simply a clone of their parents," says Mitchell Prinstein, Ph.D., the director of clinical psychology at the University of North Carolina, at Chapel Hill. As hard as it can be for a parent to accept, experimenting and pushing the envelope is a natural part of the developmental process—one that most kids will go through regardless of whom they hang out with.

**Damage control:** Keeping the lines of communication open with your teen is always important, but it's especially critical if he's hanging around with this kind of kid. Using nonjudgmental words, encourage your child to talk about why he finds this friend appealing. Through this conversation, you may discover underlying issues (a difficult social scene, a dearth of self-esteem) that are driving your child toward him. If your child seems carefree about the relationship, consider the possibility that he's leading the delinquency, and implement stricter rules about his comings and goings.

### **Is Your Kid the Bad Influence?**

Here are three ways to take off the blinders and see for yourself.

**1. Talk to teachers.** They spend nearly as much time with your kid as you do, if not more. Ask them direct questions about your child's behavior: Is she uncooperative? Does he influence others negatively? Make it clear that you want the truth.

**2. Circle the wagons every night.** Put the chores and the screens aside and spend focused time with your child every evening. (The dinner table is a great forum.) Ask him, "What's new with your friends?" or "How is Alex doing?" This will clue you in to his

social interactions, giving you an opportunity to decode what's happening behind the scenes.

**3. Observe peer-to-peer interactions.** Invite other kids to your house, then stay within earshot. Does your daughter initiate the most ruthless gossip? Does your son start the potty talk? To gauge your kid's influence on a larger group, keep an eye on him when you're picking him up from a birthday party or chaperoning a field trip. You can learn a lot.

### **Grown-Ups Are Not Immune**

Admit it. There are people in your orbit who aren't the best influences. We could all use some help with these classic cases.

#### **The Compulsive Dieter**

She talks incessantly about calories, fat content, and the latest reading on the scale.

**Threat level:** Medium. According to an analysis of survey data that was published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* in 2012, women are more likely to harbor negative feelings about their own bodies—and obsess about getting thin—if they have friends who frequently gab about dieting and weight loss.

**Damage control:** Check in with yourself. How do you feel about your body when you're with this pal? If you find yourself becoming too self-critical, rethink the relationship or the way that you spend time with each other. Irene Levine, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine and the author of [The Friendship Blog](#) suggests that you avoid meeting for meals. Instead, she says, "base your togetherness on other things you have in common."

#### **The Downer**

He's relentlessly miserable—about the weather, his job, his wife, his car, you name it.

**Threat level:** High. Decades of scientific research support a phenomenon known as "emotional contagion." Moods spread among people the way that viruses do. Just as being around someone who's happy can make you feel good, being around someone who's constantly complaining can make you feel terrible.

**Damage control:** After you hang out together, ask yourself, Am I feeling more pessimistic and grumpier than I did before the visit? Am I more easily agitated? If the answers are yes, cut back on the amount of time that you spend with this person, says Greenberg. Eventually you may want to end the friendship altogether.

#### **The Shopaholic**

Every time you're together, you find yourself in a store.

**Threat level:** High. It's hard to stop yourself from splurging on a fabulous new dress when a friend won't stop telling you that you have to have it. "Shopping is a team sport in some sense," says Levine. "When you're with a friend who is buying nice things, you're more likely to let go of inhibitions and 'go for it,' too." You may also feel compelled to spend simply to show that you aren't cheap. Overspending loves company.

**Damage control:** Your best bet is to shift the setting. If she brings up ducking into a store, suggest a movie or a cappuccino instead. Not going for your subtle hints? If you must shop together, let your friend know that you're on a budget, and mention a precise dollar amount (say, \$50 for clothes), says Andrea Bonior, Ph.D., a psychologist and the author of *The Friendship Fix*. Vocalizing your budget will help you feel accountable for your spending and will, hopefully, prevent your friend from cajoling you to empty your wallet.

### **The Passive-Aggressive Competitor**

Every question she asks (about kids' SAT scores, a raise at work, a vacation) is a trap of one-upmanship.

**Threat level:** Medium. Comparing yourself with others from time to time is normal, says Bonior. But hanging out with a friend like this may transform that natural tendency into an obsession and launch you into a full-blown rivalry. In no time, you could find yourself feeling insecure and trying to one-up others, too.

**Damage control:** Before getting pulled into her tit-for-tat cycle, step outside yourself and watch how you react to her comments. Bonior recommends developing a way to address her nosiness politely, like waiting five seconds after a prying question and responding with something like "I'd rather not get into that right now" or "I'm surprised you asked that." You could also try subtly changing the topic to something related: "Speaking of the kids' school, have you heard about the Model UN field trip?"

### **The Party Animal**

She's always asking you to meet her for late-night drinks—or a Vegas getaway.

**Threat level:** Low. If staying out late or frequenting clubs isn't your cup of tea, it's probable that nothing will change that. You're in danger only if you find yourself tagging along repeatedly just because you don't want to hurt your friend's feelings.

**Damage control:** The key to a healthy relationship is holding comfortable limits around the party animal. "You need to be strong enough to say, 'Sorry, I'm not staying out until 3 a.m.,'" says Bonior. Instead, suggest that you meet early in the night, before the major festivities even begin. Speak matter-of-factly, without passing judgment. Or, if it's

fun for you, hit the dance floor till the wee hours with her once in a while, as long as it doesn't have a negative impact on your life (as in, work or family).

**TOWNSHIP OF NUTLEY**

1 Kennedy Drive - Nutley, New Jersey 07110 - (973) 284-4951

Website: [www.nutleynj.org](http://www.nutleynj.org) - Facebook: [www.facebook.com/nutleynjgovernment](https://www.facebook.com/nutleynjgovernment)