

## Adolescents are more susceptible than adults to peer influence and to external pressure or coercion, with susceptibility greatest in mid-adolescence; the mere presence of peers measurably increases adolescents' risk-taking and shifts their decisions toward immediate rewards.

Evidence strength: High

Scientific consensus: Established

### BOTTOM LINE

The field agrees adolescents are more sensitive to peer presence and social pressure than adults, peaking in mid-adolescence. Open questions are about why (reward-system sensitization, still-developing social cognition) and how large the effect is in real-world settings — not whether it exists.

#### WHAT THIS CLAIM DOES NOT SAY

- Does not claim that peer presence compels conduct or removes responsibility for an individual's choices.
- Does not claim adolescents are passively controlled by peers or cannot resist pressure at all.
- Does not equate susceptibility to peer influence with a propensity for antisocial behavior — the two are measured separately.
- Does not claim a specific age at which an individual becomes peer-resistant; maturation is gradual and varies between individuals.
- Does not claim the effect is uniform across situations; it is strongest in arousing, peer-present contexts.

### SCOPE — WHERE IT HOLDS

A population-level developmental pattern. Susceptibility rises into mid-adolescence and declines as resistance to peer influence increases roughly linearly between ages 14 and 18, continuing to mature into the early twenties. Effects are strongest for spontaneous, emotionally arousing decisions made with peers present, and weaker for private, deliberate choices. Susceptibility to peer pressure is measured separately from willingness to engage in antisocial conduct, and describes group averages, not any individual.

### EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

In a randomized experiment, the simple presence of peers increased risk-taking and reward-focused decisions among adolescents but not adults; neuroimaging shows peer observation heightens activity in adolescents' reward circuitry during risky choices. Self-report data from thousands of individuals show the capacity to resist peer influence grows steadily from about age 14 to 18 and into the early twenties. Together these indicate adolescent decision-making is more contingent on social context than adult decision-making — a difference courts have treated as relevant to both culpability and the dynamics of interrogation.

### STUDIES (VERIFIED SOURCES)

## SEMINAL

**Gardner, M., & Steinberg, L (2005). Peer influence on risk taking, risk preference, and risky decision making in adolescence and adulthood: An experimental study. *Developmental Psychology*, 41(4), 625-635.**

Experimental · N = 306 · 13-16, 18-22, 24+ (three groups) · doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.41.4.625

Randomized experiment: peer presence increases risk-taking in adolescents/youths but not adults.

## SUPPORTING

**Steinberg, L., & Monahan, K. C (2007). Age differences in resistance to peer influence. *Developmental Psychology*, 43(6), 1531-1543.**

Cross-sectional · N = 3600 · 10-30 years · doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.43.6.1531

3,600+ participants: resistance to peer influence increases linearly ages 14-18.

**Chein, J., Albert, D., O'Brien, L., Uckert, K., & Steinberg, L (2011). Peers increase adolescent risk taking by enhancing activity in the brain's reward circuitry. *Developmental Science*, 14(2), F1-F10.**

Neuroimaging · N = 40 · adolescents, young adults, adults · doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7687.2010.01035.x

fMRI: peer observation heightens adolescents' reward-circuitry activity, predicting risk-taking.

## LIMITATIONS

Much evidence relies on laboratory tasks and simulated risk (e.g., a driving game) whose real-world generalization is debated; samples are largely U.S./Western; self-report resistance measures are susceptible to reporting bias; effect sizes vary; and group averages obscure substantial individual variation.

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

(1) That susceptibility to peers means an adolescent had no choice — influence is not compulsion. (2) That being influenced by peers is the same as being antisocial — the constructs are measured separately. (3) That peer effects vanish at 18 — resistance keeps maturing into the twenties.

## EXPERT WITNESS NOTES

Use to explain why adolescent conduct is more situation- and peer-dependent, supporting reduced culpability (Roper/Miller) and heightened vulnerability in coercive interrogation (J.D.B./confessions). Distinguish susceptibility from antisociality explicitly. Acknowledge the laboratory basis of the experimental work on cross-examination; the convergence across methods is the strength.

## LEGAL MAPPING

### RELIED ON BY

Roper v. Simmons — 543 U.S. 551 (2005)

Miller v. Alabama — 567 U.S. 460 (2012)

### RELEVANT TO

J.D.B. v. North Carolina — 564 U.S. 261 (2011)