



## The Influence of Negative Friends: Delinquency Training, part 2

Parents have far more influence over their children than they realize. A number of women have told me they married someone they did not like, just to irritate their parents. This demonstrates how powerful parents really are, that their children would go to such extreme lengths to annoy them. When children come into contact with friends who are a negative influence many parents intuitively know that they are sailing into troubled waters. Parental anxiety over this issue is justified. Research shows that the influence of negative peers is powerful and problems often double when children first connect with other children who also engage in the problem activity. This effect is so strong it is referred to as delinquency training by researchers (ongoing coercive family interactions, described in our last newsletter, are the initial stages of delinquency training).

When parents are worried about the negative influence of their children's friends they often respond in one of two ways; forbidding their children contact with these friends or giving up and avoiding conflict by becoming overly permissive (because they think that there is nothing they can do anyway). Both responses can make things worse. Research shows that contact with negative peers tends to increase if parents fail to supervise their

child's activities. On the other hand if parents try to cut off contact with friends they see as a bad influence many children, especially older children, are likely to rebel. Forbidding contact with friends often backfires because children believe their parents have no right to dictate who they are allowed to be friends with. Because of this many children feel justified in lying to their parents about their social activities openly defy their parent's attempts to use discipline over this issue. This increased conflict with parents can launch young teens into more serious problems such as staying out too late, use of illicit drugs, and sometimes involvement in crime.

If for some reason a child with problems does not connect with negative peers there usually is no escalation into more serious

problems during the teen years. Research shows that the escalation of problems that often does occur in the early teen years is almost entirely caused by increased contact with negative peers. This raises the question of the wisdom of grouping children with problems together in social service interventions. Most social service programs routinely group youth with problems together to receive service. Research on group interventions for children with conduct problems consistently show these interventions are usually ineffective and at best have very modest short term benefits but can have powerful negative side effects which can persist for years.

Some of this research is counter intuitive. For example a commission of leading scholars who reviewed the research literature on the negative effects of deviant peers

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A number of services discussed in the report on the negative effects of deviant peers grouped together have been shown to have negative effects These services include:

- The Scared Straight program
- Boot camps
- Residential programs (the report indicates reducing placements of youth who come from the same community in residential programs may partially reduce harm)
- Incarceration
- Alternate school programs
- Group homes
- Group foster care (the higher the number of children in the home the more negative)

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grouped together for interventions concluded that adolescence is not an ideal time to have group discussions about substance use, delinquency or sex. A summary of their report can be found at <http://www.srca.org/documents/publications/SPR/spr20-1.pdf> This does not mean all group interventions are a bad idea. Group treatment for anxiety or depression is not an issue with children who do not have problems.

The negative effects of grouping children with problems together has been shown to occur as early as preschool and can occur as late as the college years. Children are more susceptible to negative peer influences during early adolescence especially if they have just begun to experiment with delinquency or substance-use as well as if they are exposed to negative peers who are slightly older.

There are research-based effective alternatives to group interventions. The interventions that have the strongest research support focus on parenting and family. Increasing a positive parent/child bond, empowering parents with non-coercive discipline and increasing parental monitoring have all been shown to reduce the attraction and influence of negative peers. Service providers should seek to accomplish two things: They should seek to empower parents of high risk children to parent their children more wisely, and they should seek to do everything with their power to decrease the likelihood that children with problems will have opportunities to connect with each other.



## Access to Online Parenting Training

Parenting Wisely is now online and offers the same program as the CD-ROM, with streaming high-quality video. As gas prices increase, and parents are squeezed for time, having parents use the program online makes more and more sense. Research shows that parents prefer online programs to CD-ROMs, partially because they can use the program without interacting with an agency person, which seems to make them more defensive. See our website for a free demo of the online program. <http://www.familyworksinc.com/parentingwisely/>

Children in the Middle, an evidence-based program for divorcing, divorced, or separated parents, is also online with the same advantages listed above. See our website for a free demo of the program. <http://www.divorce-education.com/online/> If you would like to view the entire program, contact us for a complimentary password. This program will revolutionize how divorce education programs are delivered.



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