

Introduction

I'd like to begin by showing you a series of power point slides that picture teenagers. Determine if you can what their subject is. The subject of those slides is **"high school cliques."** That's the term I indexed to find them. They reveal what is, for most teenagers, the decisive factor in their lives. It's the company they keep, and that's what I'm going to preach about on this Mother's Day 2013.

Primary Groups

The two verses we read are parallels. Notice the words **"walks with"** and **"companions of"** in Proverbs 13:20 and the word **"company"** in 1 Corinthians 15:33. They reveal what those verses are about. It's the company we keep - what sociologists call **"primary groups."** American sociologist Charles Cooley defined a primary group as a small circle of associates and friends with whom a person interacts intensely on a regular basis. While adults can belong to primary groups, almost all teenagers actually do and that's what I'm going to focus on this morning – teenagers and the primary groups or cliques to which they belong.

They've given names to their groups, including Jocks, Populars, Goths, Mansonites, Skaters, Thespians, Geeks, and Preppies. I saw a group of teenagers sitting around a picnic table at Boardman Park who looked like this. They were Goths.

It's a fact of life. Teenagers desire and seek to join a primary group and at some point, almost all do. They interact intensely with a small circle of associates and friends on a regular basis.

The Effect of Primary Groups

And it's normal that they do. Benjamin Siegel, a pediatrician and expert on the psychosocial aspects of child health, says it this way: **"Kids need friends. Building relationships is an important part of**

their development.” Teenagers’ joining primary groups is normal.

But as our verses teach, it isn’t just normal. It’s defining as well. According to Proverbs 13:20, if the primary groups of teenagers are wise, they’ll be wise. But if those groups are foolish, they’ll be foolish. According to 1 Corinthians 15:33, if the primary groups of teenagers have bad morals, they’ll have bad morals. But, by implication, if those groups have good morals, they’ll have good morals.

That’s true and here’s why it is. Their primary groups act as a kind of filter through which teenagers process outside social forces, like parents, siblings, teachers, classmates, police, and youth group leaders to name a few. The members of their primary groups condition how they respond to the messages of those outside forces. First, those members direct how much importance is attached to the messages. Second, they direct whether conformity to the messages is desirable or undesirable. They censor all incoming influences, in other words, keeping out what they deem unacceptable or **“not cool.”**

The result is that the primary groups of teenagers, more than any other sociological agencies, mold what they are and determine what they do. To say it another way, teenagers take on the nature of the company they keep. They assimilate the beliefs and behaviors of their primary groups. They come to think and act as the members of those groups do. A 104 year-old woman was asked, **“What’s the best thing about being 104?”** To which she replied, **“No peer pressure.”** 104 year-olds don’t have it but teenagers certainly do and most give in to it.

Their sexual activity illustrates what I mean. According to the American Public Health Association, 33% of American students have had intercourse by the 9th grade. According to the Centers for Disease Control, that number increases to 60.5% by the 12th grade. I believe both numbers are inflated or at least skewed, but they do reflect this reality. A large percentage of American teenagers are sexually active.

But why are they? Planned Parenthood conducted an extensive study to answer that question. It found that the primary motivation of sexual

activity among teenagers isn't pleasure. It's peer pressure. An American Public Health Association study concurs. It found, **"One of the biggest reasons teenagers engage in sexual activity is because they think their peers are also having sex."**

Those studies illustrate what our verses teach. Almost all teenagers take on the nature of the company they keep. They assimilate the beliefs and behaviors of their primary groups.

Teenagers – Be Courageous

But they don't have to. Teenagers, you have two options before you. One is to be conforming. Just think and act as your primary groups do, ignoring the consequences of doing so. The other is to be courageous. Stand tall and think and act consistently with reality.

A star high school football player wanted to participate in an evangelism program his church developed, but couldn't if he played football his senior year. Despite overwhelming pressure from his primary group, his teammates, and even his youth leader at church, he decided not to play. The reality is that evangelism trumps football every time and he courageously chose reality.

Teenagers, you should too. Don't be conforming and thus a social product of your primary group. Be courageous, and think and act consistently with reality instead. That's easier said than done of course. So let me share two insights that might assist you in doing it.

First, now is not forever. Teenagers, I know it's difficult to project yourself into the future. But try. If things proceed normally, the members of your primary group, after graduation, will disband and go their separate ways. That may be hard for you to grasp now but it's true. I had a primary group of four or five athletes in high school. But we all went our separate ways after graduation and I haven't seen any of them since – 1968. Teenagers, you can almost count on it. The primary group that means the world to you now likely won't exist in five years.

A second insight is that love casts out fear, to quote 1 John 4:18.

Psychosocial experts point out that the principal benefit teenagers seek in primary groups is acceptance, which enhances self-esteem. The feeling of belonging **“is a very powerful force that can outweigh ties to church, family, or community”** to quote one expert. But consider this. You aren't truly accepted unless you're truly loved. And people who truly love you won't purposely harm you or allow harm to come to you. You realize what that means of course. Suppose the members of your primary group reject you because you don't conform to them. Or they pressure you to do something that's contrary to reality, knowing it will or may harm you. If that's the case, they don't love you. And if they don't love you, your feeling of acceptance is an illusion.

I read about a 16 year-old named Jeff. Jeff was part of a clique, a group of body builders who worked out together every day. One day, several of them began pressuring him to use anabolic steroids to enhance his efforts. He knew they'd mock him if he didn't, he said, and caved. He began using them, knowing the danger in doing so.

Consider two facts. First, Jeff graduated from high school two years later, went to the Marines, and never saw those body builder friends of his again. Now is not forever. Second, those body builder friends of his didn't care that anabolic steroids might harm him. Love casts our fear, which means their acceptance of him was an illusion.

I say all of that to say this. Teenagers, get your primary groups into perspective. See them for what they really are – an important but temporary part of your lives. Be courageous. Don't let them direct how you think and act. Think and act consistently with reality instead.

Parents – Lead

Doing that is the responsibility of teenagers. But parents, you must assist them in fulfilling it. Listen to what Benjamin Siegel, who I already quoted, says in that regard, **“On the one hand, they (teenagers and children) want to assert their independence. On the other, they need their parents.”** Tom Hendricks, founding member of the

Partnership for a Drug-Free America, concurs. After acknowledging the power of peer pressure, he says, **“Not wanting to disappoint their parents is an important barrier to teens using drugs.”** It’s true parents. You play a vital role in your teenagers being courageous.

What is that role? It’s to lead them. They don’t need you to be their buddies and friends. They have plenty of those in their primary groups. They need you to be their leaders instead.

Christian psychologist James Dobson wrote about research that was done in the Arizona State Prison. Its purpose was to identify common characteristics that prisoners shared and that contributed to their criminal behavior. It found one fundamental characteristic that almost all the prisoners shared in that regard. Surprisingly, it wasn’t poverty. It was that almost all of them, as children and teens, spent almost all of their time in the company of their peers or alone. There was little or no parental guidance. Dobson drew this conclusion from the research:

“There is no substitute for loving parental leadership in the development of children.” So parents, lead your children and teens.

Leading them involves two basic activities.

First, teach and model reality, beginning with God’s word, the Bible. As Proverbs 22:6 says it, **“Train up a child in the way he should go.”** Purposely communicate to your children and teens and live out the best information about the most important matters in human life. You must know that information of course to teach and model it, which you know by studying the Bible first of all and human life second of all.

Leading your children and teens involves a second basic activity. Discipline them. As Proverbs 23:13 says it, **“Do not hold back discipline from the child.”** Based on the reality you’ve taught and model, establish wise and clear-cut behavioral guidelines. Then reward or punish your children and teens accordingly - for following or violating them.

Stephen Wallace is a senior advisor for SADD, Students Against Destructive Decisions. Wallace asked a large group of teens what their

parents could do to stop them from drinking, which most of them did because of peer pressure. Their first answer was **"talk to us."** They want to know what their parents think, they said. They want to be taught reality in other words. Their second answer was **"punish us."** They want to know that the rules matter and consequences show they do, they said. They want to be disciplined in other words. Based on those and other answers, Wallace exhorts parents to be the **"Bad Guy"** to quote him. **"Your rules and structure give your teen a framework for understanding the world,"** he says, **"even if he protests."**

You get what he's saying. Parents, lead your children and teens. First, teach and model reality. Second, discipline them. They're far more likely to be courageous if you do and conforming if you don't.

I'd throw in a quick aside here. Lead fairly. Christian parents want their children and teens to be godly non-conformists. They're always harping to them about not going along with the crowd and doing what is right no matter what. But at the same time, many of those same parents want them to be popular and part of the in-crowd. They brag about how socially adaptable their children and teens are and how well they fit in. But that poses a dilemma for them. Should they do what is right and risk losing popularity or should they compromise what's right and be popular. Either way, they can't live up to the conflicting expectations of their parents, which is exasperating, even defeating.

Parents, lead your children fairly. Expect godly non-conformity, not popularity, from them.

Conclusion

Howard Ferguson was a highly successful real estate developer and wrestling coach in Cleveland. Listen, in closing, to his incisive words about the company all of us keep: **"Associate with people of good qualities. It's better to be alone than in bad company. If your friends have lower expectations than you do, pull them up to your level; don't drop to theirs."** The wise man and Paul would agree.