Imagine you’re with classmates when a friend from another school approaches. Your classmates start making fun of her. You know it’s hurtful, but you want to fit in. You laugh along but feel bad later.

Or suppose a friend wants you both to try out for a play. You’re shy, but he talks you into it. Later, you’re thrilled to be chosen for a part.

Both of these scenarios show how friends or peers can influence a person’s actions—in good ways and bad ways. Teens can be especially sensitive to peer influence, better known as peer pressure. Science helps explain why.

**The Basics of Decision Making**

When a person makes a choice, different parts of the brain go to work.

The brain’s *limbic system* creates an emotional response, and the *prefrontal cortex* produces logical thought. In situations like the two above, “what we are doing is very quickly, and often unconsciously, calculating the rewards and costs of different actions,” says psychologist Laurence Steinberg. Steinberg is an expert on teen peer influence. When we decide that an action is more likely to do good than harm, we act in that way, he says.

**Teen Decision Making**

The brain makes decisions using this process throughout a person’s life. But during the teen years, there are key differences in how the brain works.

One difference involves a chemical called *dopamine* in the brain’s reward center. Dopamine helps send signals in the brain that make people feel happy. The number of brain receptors interacting with dopamine is higher in teens than in other people. This means that when a teen gets a reward—such as a compliment—the reward center reacts more strongly than it would for an adult or a child.

Another difference is that...
Teen Drivers and Risk Taking

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Teen Passengers</th>
<th>Driving Risk</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Normal</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5x more likely to take risks</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 or more</td>
<td>3x more likely to take risks</td>
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Taking Number of Teen Passengers 0 1 2 or more
Driving Risk Normal 2.5x more likely to take risks 3x more likely to take risks

When alone, teens did not take more risks than adults. But when their friends were with them, teens took more risks and ran more yellow lights. They did this even though their friends weren’t allowed to talk.

This happens in real life too. Teen drivers are 2.5 times more likely to take risks while driving when another teen is in the car, and 3 times more likely with multiple teens in the car.¹

The Power of Peer Pressure
Why do teens sometimes take more risks when they’re with friends? Steinberg says that “being around peers makes teens more focused on possible rewards and less aware of risks.”

But not all risk taking is bad. In fact, “risk taking is normal during adolescence,” says Steinberg. Trying a new activity when you don’t know that you’ll succeed is a type of risk that helps a person grow into an independent adult.

What’s a Teen To Do? An Expert’s Advice
To avoid letting peer pressure lead you to make bad choices, Steinberg says you should plan ahead. His advice: Have a script in your head about what you’ll say and do. Be aware that your brain works differently in groups than when you’re alone. Pause and use extra caution at those times.