

Peer Pressure - Driving Under the Influence

(How to make novice drivers crash, part 3)

Stephen Haley (Nov 2010)

Another title for this article could have been, "Friends Killing Each Other". It is about peer pressure on young drivers - how it works and the effects it has. And then how to overcome it, which is described positively as a set of 'skills to acquire', rather than negatively as a series of 'rules to obey'.

It comes as a shock to most people to know that the biggest single cause of adolescent deaths is their friends - or themselves - in road crashes¹. Within that, the driver who kills many of the young girls will be their boyfriend.

Even after recent improvements, young drivers have about five times the death rate of other drivers - and this is a higher factor than a decade ago². Alongside the deaths are also a much larger number of non-fatal injuries. And all this carnage is of course 'unintentional' harm.

Youngsters will admit to being strongly influenced by their peers to take higher driving risks³, which clearly raises their crash rate. By how much is hard to quantify. It is difficult to know what a driver was thinking just before a crash - especially if they die. So there is no tick-box for peer pressure on crash reports.

This article is two-in-one. The first part explains what peer pressure is and how it works. Then the second part sets out the skills for overcoming it, which is addressed more directly to the young drivers themselves.

What is Peer Pressure?

For our purpose, peer pressure is the influence between friends and within groups that makes young people drive more dangerously. We are interested in the problem of 'negative' pressure.

More widely, peer pressure affects many things we do. It is positive when it stimulates improvement. But turns negative when it incites something that is clearly wrong, which may also be harmful or break the law.

Most adults can look back into their childhood and find damaging events that were set up by peer pressure. Either a personal experience or that of a friend. Some carry deep regret about events that shaped their life. Perhaps now suffering ill health from drink or drugs, wishing they hadn't deliberately failed at school, being handicapped by a criminal record, or coping with lasting injuries from a car crash. Something set the pattern of their life that they wish could be undone. Such regret can be hard for young people to imagine.

At the root of the problem, adolescents in general feel a strong need to impress their peers. And this obsession with what friends think of them is a weakness in making their own decisions.

As young drivers 'behave differently' with friends, they do things like:

- push to the physical limits, especially with speed and bends
- perform illegal manoeuvres, such as jumping lights
- steer carelessly, including swerving to the music or taking both hands off the wheel
- treat the car as a toy and public roads as a playground
- race other vehicles, use the car aggressively and shout abuse at other drivers
- fill the car with other youngsters, often in party mood
- lark around in the car, with low attention to their driving
- turn around to talk to passengers
- stare at their phone in the rising addiction to social networking (text, email, Twitter, Facebook, etc)
- drive when affected by alcohol or drugs, or without a seatbelt.

Often they do many of these at the same time, which compounds the effect. Sometimes they deliberately try to frighten their friends too, which takes it to a different level. Inevitably, the danger is also magnified by the young driver's lack of experience behind the wheel anyway.

In addition, there is a strong link between peer pressure and the behaviour we call 'showing off'. Both involve the need to impress, which has roots in feelings of low or threatened self-esteem. So someone who

¹ ["Reported Road Casualties Great Britain: 2009"](#), Department for Transport, 23 Sep 2010

² ["Mortality Statistics: Deaths registered in 2009"](#), Office for National Statistics, 26 Oct 2010

Deaths per billion kilometres driven, figures from DfT Statistics Office, October 2010

³ ["Peer pressure putting unprepared young drivers at greater risk on UK roads"](#), Aviva study press release 13 Oct 2009

is a show-off is likely to be more easily pressured into doing something reckless. And the people who apply this type of pressure will instinctively recognise such a person as a soft target.

For young drivers, most of the pressure comes from their passengers. Research confirms that crash risk increases with the number of peer passengers in the car⁴, and also that the effect is stronger when the driver and passengers are male. Frequently, these passengers have not yet learned to drive, so know even less about what they are doing.

Passengers might also think it's okay to goad the driver, since they are not responsible for the car or the consequences. But most bizarrely, these passengers are still trusting the driver not to harm them.

Within all this, it helps to recognise three levels of peer pressure - actual, assumed and imagined:

1. Actual: is the obvious one. Someone is saying something to coerce us into doing something we know is wrong and would not normally do.
2. Assumed: is when someone is there but says nothing. Instead we assume that a certain behaviour is what they want and will impress them. This is also not what we would normally do.
3. Imagined: is when no one else is there. Instead we are alone and acting out what we think would impress someone. This 'practicing' to impress can raise risks when driving alone.

The first level is the most difficult to handle, and some strategies are set out later. They also help with the other two levels, which should be easier because the pressure is more self-imposed, and in our own head. It is more straightforward, therefore, to simply recognise what is happening and stop doing it. The 'assumed' and 'imagined' levels can be more important than is often realised.

How Does It Work?

Peer pressure is anchored in a subconscious belief, which is invoked by deep needs and anxieties:

"I must do what my peers want and expect,

because... - I need to be liked and accepted (I fear rejection and loneliness)
- I want to impress, and earn respect and status (I fear ridicule and humiliation)".

This means it is easy to find taunts to sustain and ratchet up the pressure, such as:

- "Everyone's doing it, you're the only one who isn't"
- "You're scared, you're chicken!" (very effective on young males)
- "You can't do it, you're not good enough"
- "This car is junk, and you're a rubbish driver! My Gran goes faster than you!"

or some emotional blackmail, such as:

- "If you were a real friend... I thought you liked me...".

The cruel deceit is that trying hard to impress and be liked rarely achieves the intended effect. In reality, it is transparent, and more likely to look weak, shallow and even desperate.

When it creates reckless driving, it is even less successful. The wild driving that earns glory for action heroes in the movies and games is a carefully manufactured fantasy. In the real world, groups rarely respect recklessness or look for it in their leaders. Groups have a survival instinct, just as individuals have.

So the person who can be coaxed into reckless acts is more likely to be seen as a jester - the clown who is 'good for a laugh', and used for entertainment.

In the same way, groups will often reject ideas that are just 'too stupid' or 'too wrong'. This is positive peer pressure in action, and it can be interesting from within a group to notice who plays on which side. It is normal for groups to continually test and reassert the shared beliefs and values.

Also, many youngsters, especially the girls, will say privately in quite clear language how they feel about boy-racer driving, and it's not complimentary at all. It's a shame they feel unable to reveal this more openly, and break the delusion of using recklessness in a bid to be liked. Imagine a youngster starting a night out with friends saying, "I'll drive carefully to the pub to make sure we get there. And also on to the club. But then I'll do some really good stunts on the way home. Ok?".

Importantly, dealing with peer pressure usually gets much easier over time. But for youngsters it puts potholes along their journey, until they work out that handling it is part of growing up.

⁴ "[Young Drivers: The Road to Safety](#)", OECD 28 Sep 2006, p51 para 1.5.6

"[Carrying Passengers as a Risk Factor for Crashes Fatal to 16- and 17-Year Old Drivers](#)", Chen et al, JAMA Vol 283, March 2000

What are the motives?

The reasons why people apply these pressures are important too. A key factor is their own feelings of self-doubt and insecurity, and there are two main motives:

1. **To validate their own values and actions**

Getting you to copy what they do is powerful 'proof' to them that their actions are acceptable and right. Also, someone who 'fits in' with group behaviour is seen as like-minded and less threatening. They are considered to support the values that are being put into action.

2. **To exercise control over other people**

In many ways, deliberate peer pressure is a power struggle. Someone is trying to make you do something against your better judgement. It can also be a type of bullying, and someone will 'win'.

It is ironic that teenagers expend so much energy rebelling against adults for being too controlling, yet at the same time are busy trying to control each other.

In some cases there can even be a predatory angle, if the 'friend' is envious in some way, and actively wants to make someone fail or get into trouble to 'bring them down a peg' or destroy some success.

The 'exercising control' aspect of peer pressure is vital to understand, and often comes as a dramatic light-bulb moment to youngsters that suddenly changes how they react to their peers who do it.

What Makes It So Strong?

Human behaviour is highly infectious. We affect each other just by being together. Mostly this is positive, and necessary to build the standards that allow societies to function well. But it can also be very negative.

There are reasons why adolescents are especially sensitive to peer pressure:

- **The journey:** This is a time of rapid physical change, and mysterious emotions and relationships. So new feelings are exposed to being frequently bumped and grazed.
In these years we also question values and try out new identities. With much insecurity and self-doubt, who we are and what we stand for is being moulded in flight. This can be used ruthlessly by anyone who is looking for someone to exploit.
One of the most compelling urges is to become independent - to exist in our own right and control our own lives. Carving out an identity that is separate from parents can feel like a real struggle for survival. The need to push adult boundaries is part of this, and if teenagers feel suppressed they have a habit of lashing out here. Reckless hints from peers might then seem to fit nicely.
At the same time, teenagers are also testing their personal abilities and limits. So this is a time of keen experimentation, both alone and in groups. Some form of acting out is common, to see 'what happens if...', and peer suggestions can get a bit wild in this process.
Also significant at this age is the lack of experience in handling tricky situations with people. And this matters when they need to stand their ground against someone they do not want to upset.
- **Peer attraction and dependence:** Teenagers often belong to multiple groups, with different norms and values. And this helps them explore who they are as a person. But the path of this quest can be confusing and frightening, as well as exciting and inspiring.
So it is reassuring to turn for advice and affection to friends who understand and sympathise. And belonging to a group or gang can become their most meaningful and trusted association and security. As a result, the need to be accepted by peers is one of the strongest motivations. And the risk of losing a friend or falling out of favour can be hard to face, especially if there are few close friends.
Alongside this, some things that groups do are bonding activities that strengthen relationships, with an assumption that everyone will naturally take part. This can make it harder to resist when wrong is being done. But unless the group is actually 'defined' by doing wrong, it should be possible to belong without taking part. It might even earn respect from others with concealed doubts. Pressure is typically strong in gangs, where conformance is often required to a strict culture that defines who they are.
- **Family strains:** The compelling pull of peer groups can tend towards replacing the parents and family as the main source of influence. But this is not inevitable, and how far it happens depends very much on how well things work at home.

The way parents present their influence to teenagers really matters, and how they react to the

adolescent process in general. Parents are often advised to keep close tabs on all of their children's friends. But a balance is needed to not collide with the need for independence. It is essential to know that seeking independence is natural, healthy and constructive. It is not in itself a rejection of parents. But reacting as if it is can turn it into one.

Many teenagers at some point make the declaration, "It's MY life!", to get adults to back off and stop interfering. If they mean it seriously, it is a sign of something that should be understood. But the way to prevent it being said is for parents to say it first. They can do this by dropping it into much earlier discussions, and perhaps when talking about someone else. Something like, "In the end everyone leads their own life, and kids need help sorting out what that means. So that's what parents are for."

It helps if a core theme in the parent's role is to be interested in and support their child's progress. Alongside, naturally, a watchful eye for signs of straying too far off course. By far the most important thing is to keep talking. It is worth trying to preserve being able to chat easily and openly about anything and everything, including asking their opinions about things.

- **Media illusions:** There is a direct link between what young people see in the media and the things they push each other to do. Some parts of the media draw a bulls-eye target on young people, seeing them as a gullible cash-machine. And this has consequences far beyond just taking their money. A barrage of fantasies shifts our perception of what is normal and acceptable. Which it seems is easier to achieve in a harmful direction than a helpful one. Compelling role models are carefully drawn and crafted by marketing psychologists to get deep inside the baffled heads of the young marks. The bravery and daring of 'action heroes' is often shown with death-defying stunts in a vehicle. We must ignore that our hero survives only because the script says so. And that every dramatic movie sequence was meticulously planned and rehearsed over and over to manage out the risk. Even more, the action is often performed by a stunt expert. Or better still the clip is produced in risk-free computer graphics. But still these stories spin the discontent that life is too empty without hero-level drama. It can come as a sharp jolt to realise that media role models only work as fantasies, and not in the real world. Across everything from driving to relationships and lipstick. Adopting an illusion as a role model is to steer straight for disappointment - and probably resentment at some stage too.
- **Male/females contrasts:** There are significant differences in how the sexes encounter and handle peer pressure. In general, males are much more prone to pressure that involves a physical challenge. They are wired and charged to seek this out to prove their maleness. So the male stereotype is a combination of brave, fearless and strong. And overt displays of maleness are used to impress and attract females. Although this doesn't seem to work in practice as well as the males think it should. Aligned with the stereotype, one of the most powerful taunts to a male is "Chicken!" - to accuse him of being scared. It cuts deep to the core of male self-worth. It is on a par with sexual prowess, which is also a 'physical challenge'. Also with males, feeling stress tends to increase risk-taking as a release. It dates back to the primeval hunter that is still locked deep in the brain's wiring and chemistry. This provides an internal urge to resolve the stress of peer pressure by doing something rash. Conversely, the female weak spot is in pressures about being able to socialise - who they are friends with, and how they look. This matters a lot more in their groups. Interestingly for driving, most girls simply 'don't get' the obsession with physical challenge that boys have. Some pretend to in order to be sociable, but hormonally it is a mainly male thing. Predictably, it is a common reason for women saying they don't understand men. From this, females are far less attracted to reckless activity - nor impressed if it is forced on them. So male displays of scary driving are more likely to meet with a yawn at best, or with alarm and scorn. Another advantage that females have is their reaction to stress, which is to reduce risk. This is the opposite of the male response, and helps to protect them from being pressured into risky driving. Having said that, 'equality' seems to be pushing some young females to copy the worst of male behaviour. A very public example is binge drinking that comes out onto the streets. No one intended being 'equal to men' to be taken at this level. Some say they are starting to copy bad driving too.

All of this means that we should not be surprised if adolescent encounters with peer pressure present some problems to solve. Making the right decisions can be tough at this age, and even harder when pressured to make wrong ones. Their journey takes a bit of effort to navigate through, and the guidance they need is to help them choose to stay on fairly firm ground and headed in broadly the right direction.

Strategies - “Top Twenty Tips” This section is written more directly to young people themselves, and is about ‘skills’ rather than ‘rules’.

The points below will help prevent your driving being made more dangerous by peer pressure. Different items will be more useful to different people. And many can be used more generally, beyond just driving. It should also help to know that handling peer pressure usually gets much easier with practice, and that most pressure comes from things your peers will grow out of quite quickly.

Interestingly, teenagers report that they feel pressure from individual friends more often than from groups.

In truth, it is easy for adults to give advice on peer pressure - they have the edge on experience. But it is also true that many look back to see they made harder work of it than necessary.

Most situations are relatively simple if caught early. And a lot can be done even before the pressure begins. If peer pressure is already a problem, the hardest part can be finding the courage to begin.

Here are some things you can do:

Top Twenty Tips for handling peer pressure - ‘skills to acquire’ rather than ‘rules to obey’

- 1. Expect it to happen:** Peer pressure is predictable, and should not take you by surprise. Expect in advance that your friends and groups might sometimes pressure you to do something you feel is wrong. You can probably guess where and when it could happen, and even who might do it. As with most problems, this one is easier if you are prepared for it.
- 2. Don’t try to impress:** Trying to impress causes a lot of young drivers to crash - especially at night, on country roads, crossing traffic or on bends. Anyone who is impressed by recklessness is a threat to you. You can decide consciously to give your passengers an ‘unspectacular’ ride. Most of them will appreciate it more than being unsure whether they will make it home.
- 3. Beware of your passengers:** One of the biggest risks to young drivers is their young passengers. If your friends want to distract you or add some excitement to your driving, that instantly shifts the main source of danger to inside the car. And you don’t need that. Especially in the first years of driving there is enough to handle with what’s happening outside.
- 4. Stay in control:** Recognise attempts to control you. When you are the driver, “Who is in control?” is a vital question. It must be you, without peer passengers pulling your strings.
You are responsible, and you can’t blame your actions on someone else’s idea. That no longer works like it did as a child. Especially, reject things you would regret or be ashamed of later.
If a friend makes a habit of trying to make your decisions, something like “You’re so controlling!” or “Stop trying to control me!”, pitched in a tone that fits the moment, can help to reset the game. This is a right time to show your independence.
- 5. See through the media:** The modern media plays many tricks on us all. And we fall victim if we don’t work them out. For young drivers, don’t believe that being reckless is impressive. It actually has the opposite effect. Remember that action heroes who earn admiration for reckless driving are only characters in a carefully scripted fantasy. Take them as pure entertainment and not as models to copy into your real life.
- 6. Adopt a virtual coach:** This is a simple technique to give you a more objective view of your driving. Imagine a friendly trainer is in the car with you. Not to criticise, but only to be constructive and help you to freely notice when things are wrong. Either make one up, or choose someone whose opinion you respect. It will greatly increase your awareness of what you are doing.
- 7. Learn to say “No”:** Saying no to friends and peers can be hard if you fear it might turn them against you. The secret is to keep it low key. So brief and light-hearted, and talk about something else. Making a big deal of it makes it bigger for the other person too. Having said that, if the pressure is escalated and you judge that a measure of anger or other emotion is needed, then don’t be afraid to use it.
Set the ball rolling by being gently firm on small things that are not important. Try not to wait for a major challenge to suddenly freak out and create a scene.
Also, don’t over-explain or justify yourself - it’s just your decision. You don’t want a debate that will try to talk you round. Campaigns on drugs use the tag line “Just say no”, which is relevant in driving too. Similarly, don’t start preaching about right and wrong - that can come later if you want to.

8. **Avoid the situation:** Sometimes you may know there will be pressure at an event to do something you don't want to do. If you think it will be too difficult to handle, have the strength to simply give it a miss. Say you're doing something else. Avoid the situation and don't put yourself at risk. You weren't going to feel right there anyway. Also, if ever a situation turns ugly or aggressive, it can be better to just leave. Caution is better than injury.
9. **Become a people watcher:** Not in any creepy sense, but just notice how your friends and groups operate. Spot when someone is put under pressure, and who is doing it. Notice how it is handled, and build a sense of what works and what doesn't. Look for who is successful, and the words and manner they use. Also notice those who cave in, and the difference in how it happens.
10. **Keep talking:** This really works. Talk to a friend or adult that you trust and is well grounded. Drawing on wider experience can help you make the right choices when under pressure. And doing this is a sign of maturity, not weakness. Often if you sense something is wrong, others are sensing it too. Even if you feel you should be rebelling a bit while you're young, it is worth keeping good connections in place with parents and other family adults. If necessary, cast your net wider to other adults you know. Find someone with whom you can have mutual respect.
11. **Get a reputation:** It can help to deflect pressure before it starts if you are known for making your own decisions, and not being 'steerable'. Let the people you mix with know you're not a worthwhile target. That's not to say be aggressive or deliberately awkward. Just steady and assertive, with a will of your own. Set the expectation that you don't always submit or follow.
12. **Be true to yourself:** Understand that resisting peer pressure is not an act, it is the real you. The fake thing is doing something against your better judgement. So be careful about trying to change yourself to win friendships, especially if it means you would like yourself less. Try not to let liking yourself depend on whether everyone else does.

In truth, being a genuine and comfortable person, with definite values and the confidence to hold them, is more likely to attract respect and friends. Your peers are searching for answers too.

Trust your instincts. It is usually obvious when driving is reckless. So you have a pretty good sense of what is right and wrong in terms of creating danger on public roads. Use this inner voice as your compass, and to give the confidence to make up your own mind. A big difference between drivers is how much they choose to ignore what they know to be right.
13. **Avoid creating regret:** Sometimes people behave as if regret doesn't exist. But on the road, it swells up fast if something goes wrong. And strikes to the core. The trick, at any age, is to be guided by what the consequences of your decisions could be, and avoid things you might wish could be undone later.
14. **Fix it yourself:** Step up to dealing with peer pressure yourself. Don't expect or demand that someone else will fix it for you. You might ask a friend to help you against someone pressuring you. But it should be 'with' you, not 'for' you. Others can give advice and back you up, but it's ultimately for you to clearly own the stand that you make. When you say "No", it must be you saying it.
15. **Don't blame someone else:** You undermine yourself if you blame someone else for your values and beliefs. Whatever words you choose, the message is actually, "I'll do what I want, not what you want". If you don't stand firmly in your own shoes, you will be seen as a soft touch for more pressure later.

Some people advise blaming your parents for why you can't do something, such as "My Mum wouldn't like me to do that.". But please do not try that, especially when you have reached driving age. The reaction in any group rougher than a knitting circle will be swift and severe. "Who's a Mummy's boy (or girl) then..!", would be just the start of the ridicule. And the episode might earn you a lasting nickname.
16. **Choose friends wisely:** Friends are probably one of your main influences. But things that go wrong in people's lives are often connected with who they were mixing with at the time.

So choose friends and groups based on who you are, and want to be. Not the other way round. Then you're less likely to be pressured. And don't try too hard to be accepted. If it feels necessary, the fit probably isn't right anyway, and it can soon look a bit desperate.

Try to mix with a variety of friends and groups. Be loyal to a best friend if you find a good one, but try not to be over-dependant. Varied groups might be neighbourhood, school, clubs and interests.

In most cases, all it takes for an individual to stand their ground on what they know to be right is for one other peer to join them. Just one good friend. It might even show who your real friends are.

17. **Dump bad friends**: It might sound blunt and harsh. But if someone keeps wanting you to do things you know are wrong, that identifies them as a threat to you - and the group too. Think about why they are doing it. Watch out for jealous friends. Good friends will be quick to tell you if you're about to make a mistake. It's a measure of the friendship.
18. **Don't dish it out**: Avoid being the person who puts negative pressure onto others. Especially to do something harmful or criminal. Apart from the common sense wrong of it, you would then probably be more expected to do comparable acts yourself.
19. **Help others**: Take opportunities to support your friends if they struggle to resist pressure. "I think you're right, I don't blame you, I wouldn't do it either".
Also, show an interest in your friend's issues and doubts. Talking them through will help to crystallise the values that guide your own choices. And it forges stronger friendships to support you in return.
20. **Consider advanced driving**: Look for a group that is active and has other young members. You don't have to take the test. A good group will show you what is really impressive on public roads. It's about controlling risk to take out the threats. Any idiot can create risk (and they do!), but it's the good drivers who deal with it. If you really want to get excited in a car, go along to a track where you can give it some serious work.

Wrapping up

It is not inevitable that peer pressure will make young drivers more dangerous. They could handle it.

The problem that starts in being over-sensitive to peer opinion, creates an overwhelming urge to impress. Which is made worse by the lack of tools and experience to deal with the inevitable pressures.

But the question of "Who is in control?" is a powerful trigger for wanting to overcome peer pressure. Especially when one of the most powerful adolescent instincts is to want greater control over their lives.

And for young people, an approach that gives them 'skills' is more likely to be useful and successful than one that gives them more 'rules'.

The "Top Twenty Tips" above are broad enough for everyone to find and develop their own personal skills for dealing with peer pressure. And to help keep control to themselves over what they do, rather than giving control to peers who will abuse it.

More widely than peer pressure, many young drivers do not imagine or handle danger very well. And therefore put themselves into situations they do not fully comprehend. Certainly, in every horrific crash, no one ever meant for it to happen.

But the skills that govern managing risk are missing from the way driving is currently taught and tested.

Defining these skills in a teachable form has been the central aim of the [SkillDriver project](#). And this better grasp of risk overall will also help to strengthen the ability to control peer pressure.

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