

Teacher Activity

Peer Responsibility

Learning Objectives

Students will

- understand the brain science behind adolescent decision-making
- consider the relationship between peer pressure and responsibility
- analyze decisions using a decision tree graphic

Overview

This activity will guide students in examining responsibility through the lens of their peers. Students will make connections to the topic by brainstorming examples of peer pressure in popular culture and privately reflecting on the effect of peer pressure in their own lives. They will discuss whether they believe peer pressure can make responsible decision-making difficult, and they will be introduced to brain science that explains why the adolescent or teenage brain can be influenced by peers more than the adult brain.

Once they understand the effect they can have on their peers, students will consider the *responsibility* they have to their peers. To help them think through how their decisions affect themselves and those around them, students will be introduced to a decision support tool called a “decision tree,” which they will use to analyze several peer-related decisions.

Grade Range

5–8

Timing

60 minutes

Materials Needed

- Sticky notes, three per student
- Personal Reflection handout, one per student
- Brain Diagram handout, one for the teacher to share or project
- Responsible Decisions handout, one per student
- One jar, bowl, or container labeled “Decision Jar”
- Decision Jar Slips, three copies (cut out in advance and placed in the Decision Jar)

Procedure

1. Warm-Up Activity

- Begin by writing “Peer Pressure” in the center of a white board or piece of chart paper.
- Distribute three sticky notes to each student. Ask them to brainstorm when they have seen examples of peer pressure in the media (on television, in movies, in advertisements, etc.), record an example on each sticky note, and place their sticky notes on the board.
Tip: If needed, explain that peer pressure is when people are influenced by their social group to do things they might not normally do. Negative peer pressure can influence people to make poor decisions, and positive peer pressure can influence people to do the right thing!
- Once the board is full of ideas, take a moment to read them aloud and acknowledge that the media portrays many examples of peer pressure.

2. Pass out one Personal Reflection handout to each student. Using the examples on the board as a starting point, give students 5–10 minutes to use the questions provided on the handout to reflect on their personal experiences with peer pressure. Assure students that they won’t have to share their reflections.
3. As students are writing, record the following on the board:
“Responsible decision-making: When someone evaluates the situation, the choices available, and the consequences/outcomes of these choices for themselves and others before making a decision!”
4. Instruct students to wrap up their reflections and ask a volunteer to read the responsible decision-making definition aloud.
5. Guide the class in discussing the following questions: Do you think peer pressure can affect our ability to make responsible decisions? Why or why not?
6. Once several students have shared, explain that peer pressure can indeed make responsible decision-making difficult, especially for adolescents. There’s even brain science to explain it.
7. Project or share the Brain Diagram handout and explain the following:
 - Adult and adolescent brains function differently because they are in different stages of development.
 - Adolescent brains use their amygdala to process information. The amygdala is the emotional part of the brain, and it is responsible for immediate emotional reactions. It is also key to how we process strong emotions like fear and pleasure. Kids and young adults use this part of the brain to think because it develops early in life.
 - Adults use their prefrontal cortex to think and process information. The brain’s prefrontal cortex is used for rational thinking, and it is the part of the brain that helps people logically think through consequences, reason, and solve problems. This part of the brain continues to develop until about age 25. If an adolescent makes the decision to drink alcohol underage or use drugs, the development of this part of the brain can be delayed and even damaged.
 - Because adolescents are guided by their amygdala rather than their prefrontal cortex when they make decisions, they are more likely to act based on their emotions, as opposed to considering their brain health or the legality of their actions.

8. Invite students to discuss this question: Now that you understand a little more about how adolescent brains process information, how could the development of the brain affect the influence of peer pressure on kids' decision-making?
9. Tell the class that, even though their brains are wired to react more emotionally and less rationally than adult brains, strategies exist to help them think through how their decisions may affect themselves and those around them. This can help them—and all young adults—make more responsible decisions.
10. Distribute a copy of the Responsible Decisions handout to each student and draw a copy of the diagram on the board as well (leaving out the text). Explain that for a decision to be responsible, the decision-maker should consider how the decision will affect themselves and others now and in the future. This simple diagram can be helpful when making tricky decisions!
11. Demonstrate how the diagram works by providing an example of a situation where a decision must be made, such as the following: "Your cousin offers to buy you and your friends alcohol. You know this is both a risky behavior AND that it's illegal for him to supply you with alcohol and for you to engage in underage drinking. What do you do?" Guide students through the steps below as you help them understand how to use the diagram as a support for their decision-making.
 - Top row:
 - Explain that the first box is for an overview of the situation.
 - Write "cousin wants to buy us alcohol" in the first box.
 - Second row:
 - Explain that this row is for the choices you have and the different ways you could respond to the situation. Sometimes there are two choices, sometimes there are three choices, and sometimes there are more.
 - Ask students: What positive and negative choices would you have in this situation?
 - Record students' ideas in the boxes and draw a couple more boxes to hold additional choices if needed. Be sure students describe at least one choice that involves saying "yes," as well as at least one choice that involves saying "no."
 - Third row:
 - Explain that this row summarizes how each choice from the second row could affect the decision-maker *and* other people. Students should think about immediate and future effects.
 - Write "me" in one of the boxes below every choice. Then encourage students to think about how each choice could affect them now and in the future and record these effects in the "me" boxes.
 - Work with the class to select at least one other person or group of people that each choice would affect, thinking especially closely about their peers. Record these people in the second box below each choice, as well as how the choice could affect them now and in the future. Additional boxes may be added, if needed.
12. When you get to the fourth row, explain that this row is for an explanation of their decision. Encourage students to review the chart's contents with a peer and decide which choice is the most responsible decision.

13. Ask several pairs to share the decision that they arrived upon and explain their reasoning. Then point to the final box at the bottom of the decision tree and reiterate that an explanation of the decision they selected can go in this space.
14. Introduce the Decision Jar Activity and explain that students will practice using this decision support tool in small groups. Do the following to prepare the class:
 - Hold up the Decision Jar and explain that this jar is full of different real-life decisions.
 - Ask the students to take one decision slip each from the jar and read it to themselves.
 - Instruct students to form groups of three, so that each student has a different decision scenario.
 - Have students share their scenarios with the students in their groups and use the decision tree diagram to determine the most responsible decision for themselves and their peers.
 - Allow groups to work until there are about five minutes left in the session. Groups who finish early may take an additional scenario and handout.
15. **Wrap-Up:** As the session comes to a close, bring the students back together and use these questions to help them summarize their thoughts: When it comes to decisions involving our peers, what responsibilities do we have to ourselves? What responsibilities do we have to our peers?

Optional Extension: To explore the positive side of peer pressure, student groups may create and act out scenarios in which peer pressure prevents someone from making a poor decision.

National School Standards

CASEL SEL Framework

- Responsible decision-making: The ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacity to consider ethical standards and safety concerns and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being.
- Relationship skills: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.

National Health Education Standards

- Standard 4: Students will demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal communication skills to enhance health and avoid or reduce health risks.
- Standard 5: Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to enhance health.
- Standard 7: Students will demonstrate the ability to practice health-enhancing behaviors and avoid or reduce health risks.

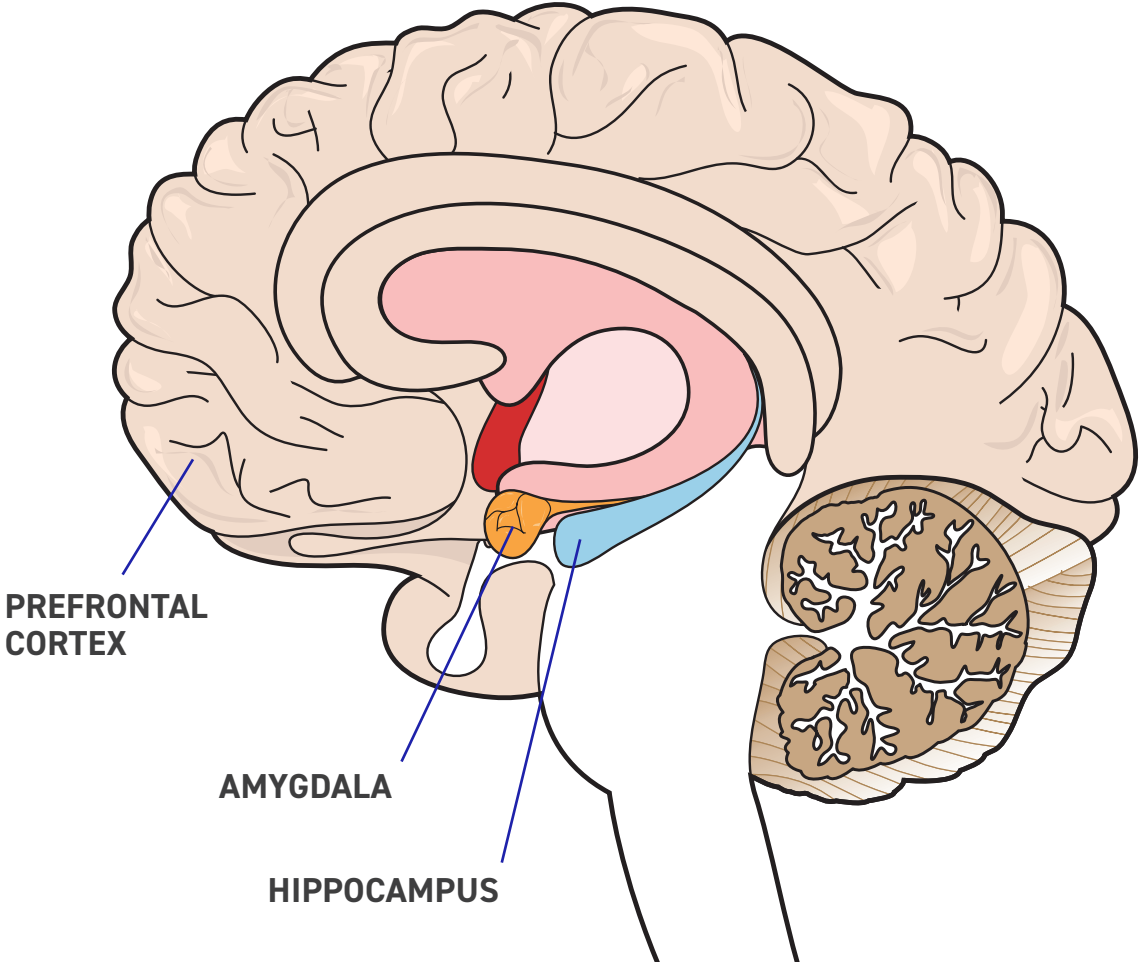
Common Core ELA Standards

- W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing one's own clearly and persuasively.

Peer pressure can have positive and negative effects. Review the examples of peer pressure that you and your classmates have seen in popular culture. Then, in the space below, reflect on your own experiences with peer pressure.

Use the following questions to help guide your reflection:

- Can you think of a time when you gave in to peer pressure and did something you might not have normally done? How did this make you feel?
- Can you think of a time when you stood up against negative peer pressure? How did this make you feel?
- Can you think of a time when you tried to influence someone else's behavior? How did it positively or negatively affect your peer?



What is the situation?

What choices do I have? (Fill in at least two)

Who will these choices affect and how could it affect them?

Review the choices you have and how each choice could affect you and those around you. Then select the responsible decision that will be best for you and those around you, and explain the reasoning behind your choice in the space below:

Decision A

You hear that a classmate is having a party where alcohol will be present. Do you consider telling a trusted adult?

Decision B

Everyone is talking during class and ignoring the teacher. Do you chat with your friends too?

Decision C

Your friend wants to go on a diet and asks you to join him or her. You don't think the diet method is healthy. What do you do?

Decision D

Your parents won't get home until late, and they asked you not to have anyone over while they're gone. A couple of your friends are asking if they can come over and hang out. What do you do?

Decision E

It seems like everyone is starting to date, but you're just not that into it. Your friends are trying to get you to tell someone that you like him or her. What do you do?

Decision F

You want to go to a party with your friend this weekend, but you know your friend's parents won't allow it. You think your friend could just lie to his or her parents, telling them that he or she is going to your house. What do you do?

Decision G

Your best friend still dresses like he or she did when you were younger. You really want him or her to go shopping for clothes that will fit in better. What do you do?

Decision H

It seems like all of your friends have stopped trying in school. You think it might be easier not to try too, but you also know that school is important. What do you do?

Decision I

Your brother asks if you want to come along to a party with lots of older kids. You know there will probably be alcohol there. What do you do?

Decision J

Your friend has said "no" several times when you've asked him or her to hang out with your group of friends. You really want him or her to come! What do you do?
