Hidden Influence: Designing Effective Interventions for Adolescents Who Don't Recognize Peer Pressure on Themselves

Introduction

This paper proposes evidence-based interventions for Fast Forward to help young people recognize and respond to peer pressure when they may not be fully aware of its presence. By looking at Fast Forward's current work with adolescents, as well as psychological research, we will focus on three areas of influence: parental guidance, peer dynamics, and metacognitive skill-building. Together, these approaches aim to discourage risk-taking behaviors among young people.

Our literature review on the presence and implications of peer pressure highlighted the need for effective interventions among all age groups. However, the primary focus of our studies was to examine these effects on young people, specifically in early years, adolescence, and young adulthood. These age ranges are generally defined as: before birth to age eight for early years (Early Childhood, 2025), ages 10 to 19 for adolescence (Adolescent Health, 2025), and ages 18 to 26 for young adulthood (Bonnie et al., 2015). The slight discrepancies between these definitions reflect the indeterminacy of age boundaries, which may complicate meta-analyses of peer pressure across these life stages. Despite variations, the need for consistent support across all of these stages is clear.

Fast Forward's Current Interventions

Current work being done by the Fast Forward organization that is focused on peer pressure includes the Going Forward program, which provides workshop sessions about health,

wellbeing, and risk taking behaviors to young people. The Peer Inspiration Projects Scotland (PIPS) initiative supports peer-led approaches to behavior change. PIPS emphasizes the power of peer inspiration, recognizing that young people often gain knowledge and motivation more effectively when influenced by their peers. Fast Forward also collaborates directly with primary and secondary schools to deliver interactive presentations that educate students about the risks associated with vaping, tobacco use, alcohol, and other potentially harmful behaviors. Along with this school collaboration, adolescents can also play a digital game where risky decision making is simulated, which can help them understand the consequences of their choices. The majority of our research conducted for Fast Forward reinforced the effectiveness of the current programs. However, it also led us to develop new ideas on how Fast Forward can continue to impact the behavioral choices of young people.

Parental Guidance

Early interventions from parents should start before the age of four, as children of this age are already subject to the pressures of peer influence (Haun & Tomasello, 2011). Interventions should model engagement in the child's life, particularly in fostering awareness of situations they may be facing outside of the home. Encouraging communication between parents and children regarding risky behaviors could significantly drive their attitudes in one direction or another (Wood et al., 2004). In such a formative period of development, observing and communicating definitive attitudes will guide a child to be able to look at the consequences of an action on themselves rather than their social status (Wood et al., 2004).

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One intervention Fast Forward could implement to increase parental involvement is the development of a mobile app designed specifically for parents. Starting in a child's early years, this app would provide daily check-in prompts that guide parents in initiating meaningful conversations. By encouraging regular discussions about emotions, peer interactions, and everyday challenges, the app fosters greater parental engagement and builds a habit of open communication. The role of parental engagement is pivotal in early years, however, it still plays an evident role throughout adolescence (Do & Telzer, 2024; Wood et al., 2004). The app could have a separate set of prompts tailored to adolescents so that parental engagement continues beyond the early years. Fast Forward could promote the app through the community organizations they partner with around Scotland.

Apps catered to parental self-efficacy have already proven effective (Outhwaite, 2023). A study conducted by the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities analyzed the use of a parenting app that included 1,026 daily age-appropriate activities across eight areas of child development (Outhwaite, 2023). Results indicated that parental self-efficacy significantly improved after using the app for four weeks, and that app usage resulted in greater gains than receiving similar information through email (Outhwaite, 2023). 89.7% of parents who utilized the app reported high confidence on all post-intervention self-efficacy test items (Outhwaite, 2023). Fast Forward could similarly strengthen parental confidence and engagement by implementing an app catered to structured prompts. In doing so, stronger parent-child relationships would be supported throughout critical developmental stages.

Peer-Influence

In order to achieve a sense of belonging among their peers, adolescents often feel pressured to engage in risk-taking behaviors (Powers et al., 2022). Reducing emotional vulnerabilities and strengthening coping skills can decrease adolescents' susceptibility to negative peer pressure (Inguglia et al., 2019; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2004). However, peer influence does not always have to be negative. Studies show that children may adopt healthier behaviors when they see their peers doing the same (Kim et al., 2019). They are also less likely to initiate risky behaviors if they see the negative influence it has on their peers' lives (Parrado-González et al., 2023).

Peer-led workshops could provide a safe space for adolescents to practice resisting negative peer pressure in a group setting. These sessions would involve activities where teens simulate common real-life peer pressure situations, such as being encouraged to vape, gamble, or drink. The idea has a similar foundation to the games Fast Forward currently develops to simulate risky decision making. By placing adolescents in these situations before they encounter them in real life, these activities can help prepare them to make more informed decisions when it matters most. The benefit of workshops being peer-led is that adolescents are often more receptive to guidance from individuals their own age, which Fast Forward has shown that they understand through the development of the PIPS program. The workshops can also apply the concept of positive peer pressure by creating environments where making the right choices are accepted and encouraged. When teens observe peers modeling healthy behaviors, they will be more likely to engage in the healthy behaviors themselves. Supervision by a qualified mental health professional during these sessions would also be beneficial, because they could identify

and support individuals who may be more vulnerable to peer influence due to underlying emotional challenges.

Overall, the intervention integrates elements from a few of Fast Forward's existing programs into one approach, combining peer-led interventions with role-play and professional support to strengthen adolescents' skills in resisting peer pressure.

Metacognition

Metacognition is defined by the ability of an individual to think about and evaluate their own thoughts based on preexisting beliefs and knowledge (Chidley at el., 2025; Belte at el., 2024). Parents and youth workers play a pivotal role in developing metacognitive strategies among adolescents (Jankowski, 2024; Weinberger, 2024). In the context of teachers and schooling, emotionally stable classrooms foster increased engagement with learning (Jankowski, 2024) and subsequently, school involvement is associated with decreased participation in risky behaviors (Goel & Malik, 2017). The extent to which these strategies are reinforced within the home can either advance or deter their utilization (Goel & Malik, 2017; Wood et al., 2004). Having clear communication between relevant adults in a child's circle is essential to supporting their development (Jankowski, 2024; Wood et al., 2004). One potential pathway for this is parent-teacher meetings, which could discuss the learning and use of metacognitive strategies in relation to the adolescent of interest.

In the context of Fast Forward's work with young people, interventions for teacher-student relationships can be integrated into the effective work already underway. The use of the PIPS network and other workshop sessions geared towards youth workers supplies them with the resources necessary to engage with peers about responsible decision making.

Integrating the concept of metacognitive strategies into these sessions could promote awareness of their positive impact. Effective metacognitive skills support confidence in self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, among other things (Jankowski, 2024). An understanding of these concepts fosters the ability of youth workers to engage in future conversations with the young people around them. These conversations could impact the way adolescents interact with social groups in and out of the classroom.

A possible application of these intervention strategies is a metacognitive journal program designed to strengthen students' ability to reflect on decision-making and peer influence. Each week, they will respond to guided prompts that help them analyze their thought processes. Prompts may include questions such as, "What influenced my decision today?", "Was I trying to meet someone's expectations?", or "Did I pause to think before acting?" The exercise not only encourages students to evaluate their internal reasoning, but also promotes awareness of external pressures, especially those related to peer dynamics. Over time, the consistent practice of self-reflection would help develop metacognitive strategies that support adolescents in making informed decisions. Fast Forward already has a relationship with many of the schools in the area, so they could utilize this relationship to encourage teachers to implement the journal program. Furthermore, pairing the journaling program with previously implemented peer discussion groups could allow adolescents to reflect with others on peer pressure in their daily lives and the emotions associated with it.

A nonprofit that has already seen the impacts of a journaling program in InsideOUT Writers in Los Angeles (InsideOUT Writers, n.d.). Their organization utilizes trauma-informed creative writing to support incarcerated youth (InsideOUT Writers, n.d.). Inside detention

centers, they spend approximately 40 weeks doing 90-minute classes that focus on writing prompts about juveniles' past, current, and future (InsideOUT Writers, n.d.). The intention behind this journaling is to allow for reflection through creative expression (InsideOUT Writers, n.d.). InsideOUT Writer's work has seen a recidivism rate of just 10%, meaning the tendency of a convicted juvenile to reoffend is only 10% (InsideOUT Writers, n.d.). This is well below the national average of 82% recidivism within ten years of release (Latzer, 2025). Both InsideOUT Writers and a journaling program implemented by Fast Forward would shape adolescent behavior utilizing internal reflection and external social awareness (InsideOUT Writers, n.d.). In doing so, Fast Forward would help youth make more conscious decisions about risky behaviors.

Conclusion

Adolescents often struggle to recognize peer pressure in their own lives, making them more vulnerable to risky behaviors (Goel & Malik, 2017). However, with the right support systems in place, such as engaged parents (Do & Telzer, 2024; Wood et al., 2004), positive peer influence (Kim et al. 2019), and the development of metacognitive skills (Jankowski, 2024), healthier decisions can be encouraged.

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