

But All Of My Friends Are Doing It! **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Okay, how many times do you hear weekly, if not daily, “But all of my friends get to (stay up all night, go to R-rated movies, eat dinner in front of the TV set)? Why are you so (strict, overprotective, out of it)?” Sound familiar? Well, if it does, join the club! Most parents and their children find themselves on different pages of the book, or even not in the same volume, many, many times during the growing years. Why? Well, because kids and parents see things differently. Children think more in the here and now and tend to be somewhat self-absorbed, whereas parents have to take into account pesky stuff such as responsibilities to accomplish, making sure that the activities are safe, and that teeth are brushed and homework completed. And, to make matters worse, your child will always seem to know someone who is said to be allowed to stay up all night, drink beer with his buddies in the bedroom, or skip dinner nightly and exist on junk food. Yes, these families may exist, but they don’t have to set the example for yours!

As they grow, your children will come in contact with other kids and families whose code of values differ in many ways from yours. I’ve found that the smartest way to deal with this difference is to focus upon the big stuff—the behaviors requested that can be harmful or dangerous, or the exposure to morally inappropriate ideas or information.

So, let’s take a look at the forbidden fruit that may crop up at friends’ homes and the most politically correct ways in which to handle these issues, with your own children as well as with their friends’ parents. Obviously, these will change as your child grows, but there are a few generic principles that I’ve found apply to most situations:

Don’t win the battle just to lose the war. Socialization at every age is important to your child’s cognitive and emotional development. You can only be the cookie-Mom for so long, and then you have to let go and allow your child to explore other people’s homes, values and rules. To lessen your anxiety, try to get to know your child’s friends and their parents intimately—via telephone, personal visits, play dates together at the park, or volunteering at school activities and field trips. With little ones you’ll keep a close eye on their friends’ environments, and most likely you’ll migrate to inter-family relationships that reflect your own family’s code of values. As your kids grow, you should never allow them to stay in a situation that you feel is immoral or unsafe, but you may have to give a little when it comes to the smaller stuff. For instance, perhaps the kids will be offered more junk food than you’re comfortable with, or the bedtime is too late for your taste. Think about it—will this really hurt your child a week from now? Probably not, as long as you let him or her know that this is not what you would allow in your home. Explain to your children that other people have different values and rules, and within certain parameters you’re willing to let them experience these differences. If you see, though, that your kid is becoming rebellious to your own rules or developing an “attitude” because the Jones’ do it differently, then it may be time to tone down the visits with the Jones clan.

Stick to the five W's—the Who, What, When, Where and Why of the visit.

Especially as your children grow into the tween and teen years, about all you may get from the kid is to find out who's doing what with whom, when it will happen and where, and why in the heck they want to do it anyway. Let your kid know that ultimately he or she is responsible for the behavior and that later and greater freedoms (driving the car, attending sleep away camp) will depend upon the honesty and common-sense shown now while visiting with friends.

Let's take a look at some typical, "But all my friends are doing it!" situations, starting with the younger kids and working our way up through the teens:

Situation #1: Your six-year-old son wants to play with the kid down the block who appears to be a ballistics expert. He always seems to be in the front yard shooting cans with his BB gun, owns three (count them, three) fake hand grenades, and brags that his father has rifles in the house. You have a standing family rule for all of your kids that guns, even toy ones, are off-limits. Your child, who has recently become interested in all things military, accuses you of being unfair. "How come Jason can play with guns and I can't? *All of the boys in first grade own them and I just want to go down to his house and play. It's no big deal!*"

What to do? First, be sure that you've listened to your son's entire argument, and if there's room for compromise, do it. Perhaps you can allow Jason to come to your house to play with your son's toys and games—it may turn out that the lure is not really the play weapons, but Jason's fun presence. If so, having him engage in non-weapon play may actually help him to broaden his horizons and become a friend to many other kids also.

- **Draw the line in the sand.** If your son insists on playing at Jason's house, you may have to stand firm on this one. Not only would your child be playing with toy guns (against your family rule), but there's also the real possibility that Jason's Dad owns and stores at least one real gun in the home. Explain to your kid that his being around a real gun is intolerable and that he can't visit any home if a gun is present.
- **Call the other parent to check on the reality of the situation. Never, ever be reticent to inquire about real or toy weapons.** It's not only your right, but also your responsibility, to know if the kids will have access to BB guns, toy bows and arrows, or other play weapons. Many families do not allow their children to play with toy weapons, as the parents believe that these toys are "gateways" to the real McCoy, or that playing with a toy bow and arrow can be dangerous. If a weapon-free environment (be it toy or real) is part of your family's code of values then this issue is most likely worth digging in your heels.
- **Don't beat around the bush.** I've found that it's usually best to be direct and forward about this issue. Ask Jason's Mom or Dad if they possess a gun and how it is stored. If you feel even the least bit uncomfortable with the answer—**don't**

allow your child to visit their home. It's just not worth your worry and the possibility of injury. Perhaps the weapon can be removed during your child's visit, but many folks won't go to the trouble to do so, or you may have doubts that they will actually follow-through with the temporary removal. And, there's still the issue of the boys playing with the toy guns—something that may be just as difficult to control or curtail.

Situation #2: Your twelve-year-old daughter has been invited to a sleepover at a girlfriend's house, one that is notorious for large parties, kids watching anything on cable that they can find, and lots of prank calls being made to boys in their class. When you bring up your concerns with your child, she accuses you of being too overprotective, "You never let me do what the other girls can do. You just don't want me to have friends! Everyone will be at that party and I'll be the only one not there. It's just not fair!"

What to do? Well, after you've gathered your wits about you (it's usually best to take a few breaths before diving into this type of confrontation), I'd begin with a quick (and do make it fast) response about how her request was a tad on the rude side, and that she'd probably get farther if she was more polite. Then, before rendering your lecture on how horrible the other parents must be, ask some questions and be a good listener. Who will be supervising this rip-roaring event? Does your daughter agree with you contacting the parent in charge and asking some basic questions? (If not, then it just isn't going to happen—at twelve years of age it's imperative that you communicate with the other parents to make sure that the situation is safe). When calling the parent, I'd suggest that you:

- **Take the rap for being nosy, overprotective, or neurotic.** I've learned from my clinical practice that folks are much more open to dealing with **your** self-criticism than the perception of being criticized themselves. My personal favorite when I'm in this sticky situation is to begin the conversation with something like "I know that this is a bit neurotic, but..." Or, a good fall-back is "I'm known for my over-protectiveness, but...", and then I fill in the blank with my concern. This tactic gives the other parent permission to consider me the loopy one and generally leads to a more pleasant conversation. Then I would ask "Will the kids be allowed to watch R-rated movies during the sleep-over?" If the answer is "yes", then I'd request that something else be chosen, letting it be known that your family has a "no-R-rated movie" rule and that you try to stick to it whenever possible. Suggest that your child bring over a few new, hip videos that the girls would enjoy, but also ones that you can live with.
- **Compromise if it's within the zone of reason.** If, after your phone conversation, you feel that your child will be safe and that there's a pretty good chance that the other parent heard you and respects your views, talk to your daughter about your decision to give it a try. But, add a short (again, make it quick) discussion of what

you expect of her—to avoid watching something inappropriate, to behave like a human being the next day after staying up late or all night, and remembering and following your family’s code of values. Remind her that even though the other girls may misbehave, it is up to her to make good, wise decisions.

- **Say “No” and stick to your values if you still feel uncomfortable.** If, after speaking with the parents, you get the feeling that you’re being placated and that it will truly be less a less-than-well-supervised party, either offer your daughter to go for a few hours and then you’ll pick her up, or nix the whole thing. Sure, she’ll be mad, but at least you tried to compromise and it’s just not a safe situation.

Situation #3: Your fifteen-year-old son’s best buddy, Roger, just got his driver’s license, and his Dad’s old car. In a nonchalant manner, your kid informs you that from now on, Roger can drive them to the movies and to school. Roger is a nice kid, but it seems like only yesterday that he removed the training wheels from his bike, and now the kid, with little experience behind the wheel wants to take your son’s life in his hands? And, to make matters worse, Roger’s girlfriend has apparently been given permission by her folks to ride with him. When you start to ask questions and express concern about Roger’s lack of experience, your kid goes into a commercial-grade negotiation stance bargaining with tactics like “He’s a great driver—hasn’t received a ticket yet!” Then comes the inevitable “You don’t trust my friends...you don’t trust me. What have I done to not be able to drive with Roger? You never let me do anything fun!” as he stomps off to his room.

What to do? Let him cool his heels for a few minutes in his room and gather his bearings. Sure, it’s a disappointment to not be able to drive right away with Roger, but if you talk it through he may be able, at age fifteen, to understand your fears and concerns.

- Explain to him that according to USAA, AAA and many other research organizations, that the first six months after getting one’s license is the most prevalent period for accidents to occur. Why? Mainly due to lack of experience. As parents we have been driving for 10, 20, 30 or more years and understand the concept of defensive driving, that just because the other guy has the stop sign it doesn’t guarantee that he will really stop. After about six months of driving himself, Roger will have probably have had some slip-ups or near misses, and will be a much safer driver himself.
- Also note that even good drivers, with experience, tend to become distracted by their passengers, the radio blasting, and the kidding that goes on between good friends. Tell your son that concerns you and that even when he is allowed to drive with Roger that there will have to be a firm discussion of cautions to be taken and rules to be observed.
- Let your kid know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. The six months will pass quickly, and by then he’ll be getting his own license. Assure him that

the same six-month rule applies to his driving of friends, and hopefully he will understand and appreciate your concern.

As a parent, one of your most important roles is that of protector as well as provider. Being politely assertive, asking appropriate and pointed questions, and keeping a sense of humor as well as a sense of balance are requisite when guiding your children into and through friendships and the growing years. Involvement with your children's friends is key in helping you to gain information upon which to base your judgments, and ultimately decisions, about acceptance of other kids' privileges and rules!