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Peer Pressure

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As children and youth learn to make decisions, receiving input and even pressure from friends and other peers is common for them. Feedback and pressure from peers influence young people's clothing styles, music choices, social behaviors and even risky activities. Parents and other adult caregivers can benefit as they consider sources of peer pressure, how children and teens react to such pressures, and ways to discuss peer pressure with children of different ages.

What is Peer Pressure?

A 4-year-old preschooler may want to pick out her own socks. A 15-year-old teenager may beg to attend a late-night party at a friend's house. In either case, a child is learning to make decisions and may be influenced by others.

Making a decision on one's own can be a challenge, but learning to do so is a key part of a child's healthy development. As children grow, they learn to observe others and make choices about how to act in the real world. Also, they learn that other people may try to influence how you act and that dealing with such pressures can be difficult.

Peer pressure generally is defined as a type of mental or social pressure or stress a person feels from peers, such as friends or classmates, who seek to influence you to think, look or act in a particular way.

Peer pressure may be negative, such as if others pressure a person to do something unhealthy, like experimenting with drugs or vandalizing property. However, it also can be a positive influence; for example, a person's friends might encourage her to study hard with them for a test in school.

The Search Institute lists developmental assets for young people, and among them are "positive peer influence" and also the child's ability to "resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations."

How children perceive and respond to peer pressure is closely linked with how they develop, the choices they make, and their health and well-being. Some kids may give in to negative peer pressure due to a desire to be liked, fit in or try something new that others are doing. Other kids learn to manage pressure from peers and make their own decisions while giving thought to what others say or suggest. In either case, understanding children, peer pressure, and how to talk to children and teens about peer pressure is helpful.

Talking to Young Children (ages 4 to 8)

When talking to young children from ages 4 to 8:

What to Say and Do

- Observe as your child interacts with other children and learn more about how he or she might act with peers without you or other adults around. Even young children often act in a different way than parents expect when in a group without adult supervision. Talk regularly with your child about how he or she feels being with peers and how to act around friends.
- As adults, provide a good example and encourage younger children to influence each other in positive ways. For example, help young children learn to share, take turns, speak in a kind way and do other positive things with family, friends and peers.
- Understand that learning to act in the world and make personal choices is a very important skill for any child. Encourage your child to learn, explore and interact with others. Provide support and avoid obvious risks, but allow your child to learn based on experience and even failure.
- Provide opportunities for positive interaction with other children where you can see and support your child, such as in your home, a play session with one friend or a play group. Your child can associate further with peers in positive ways through organized social activities or lessons such as swimming or music lessons, sports, preschool and 4-H clubs.

- Invite your child's friends and peers into your home, meet and get to know them and their families, and spend time doing activities with your child and his or her friends. This allows you to make connections and communicate about peers, better understand your child's social world and facilitate healthy activities.
- Practice "parental coaching" with your child on his or her relationships with peers as needed. Extend support based on your child's age and needs, help your child negotiate differences with peers and step in as needed if peer pressures become too challenging to manage.

Talking to Adolescents (ages 9 to 13)

When talking to adolescents from ages 9 to 13:

What to Say and Do

- Plan ahead and decide what activities you will limit for kids in this age group. Set clear boundaries and explain them to your child. For example, you might not allow a child to sleep over at a friend's home. Children at this age might complain, ask why or be frustrated. Think about your reasons and discuss them with your child.
- Discuss with your child some reasons he or she might be influenced by others in making decisions. For example, he or she might feel uncertain or insecure and do something just to feel competent or "cool" in front of others. He or she might feel a need to belong in a particular group and then do something in hopes of being liked. Assist children to gain confidence in themselves and talk about avoiding any actions just to "follow the crowd."

- Reflect on some of your personal experiences as a child being influenced by peers. Share examples or stories with your child that he or she can understand about "following along" with peers. Did you ever "follow the crowd" and regret it? Did you ever start something positive in your life because a peer encouraged you?
- Adolescents often struggle to understand how their peers see them and worry about being rejected if they don't fit in. Be patient as they learn to think and act independently with peers, and reassure your child that while he or she may face some hassles from peers for thinking or acting independently, others likely will support your child. If a child is influenced by peers in a way that bothers you, listen first to understand your child and then offer guidance.
- Share stories with your child to help him or her learn about others from history or in the community who made positive choices in situations of peer pressure. Explore how he or she might use such a person's example when making personal decisions.
- If your child is reserved or having trouble making friends, use the "home court" advantage and invite peers over to help your child be comfortable. Also, this allows you to observe your child and his or her activities and lend support.
- Get to know your child's friends or peers and their families. Introduce yourself at school events or in other settings, or volunteer at school or youth activities. Making yourself aware of your child's social world lets you see how he or she socializes with friends and what interests them.

Talking to Teens (ages 14 to 18)

When talking to teens from ages 14 to 18:

What to Say and Do

- Talk with your child about how he or she will respond if a friend or peer wants him or her to do something risky or dangerous. For example, a peer might suggest the teen drink alcohol, bring a weapon to a party or break a law. Explore such “What if” scenarios and discuss peer pressure and how your child could handle situations that feel uncomfortable or wrong.
- Agree on a “safe word” or “code” that your teenage child can text you or call and say to you if he or she needs help to get out of a potentially difficult or harmful situation with peers.
- Understand that exploring “risky” behavior with peers is not uncommon for teens. Examples of such behavior might include driving carelessly, using tobacco or alcohol or other drugs, doing extreme sports or getting involved in sexual activity. Take time to discuss healthy choices, risks and consequences, the influence of peers and responsible behavior with your teenage child across all of these areas.
- Assist children in thinking ahead of time about what they might do when a peer tries to influence them. For example, a peer might encourage them to do something to “be cool,” to “just try it” or even accept a “dare.” What will your child do? Encourage your child to consider his or her choices and make a conscious choice to follow or not follow others’ requests or demands.
- Talk to your child from a young age about choices and peers, including sex, drugs or other challenging topics. Then as teens, they will be used to open dialogue with you and are more likely to come to you with peer concerns. Point out that they have a mind of their own and that most peers are typically not making unhealthy choices, such as smoking or other habits.
- Figure out regular or meaningful opportunities for your teenager to be in groups with other peers, learn together and take risks. Organized sports, extracurricular activities (speech, band, 4-H clubs, theater, etc.), social gatherings and other settings provide a chance for young people to learn about themselves and each other. Teenagers learn key skills such as independence, mastery and dealing with adversity through such experiences. Support them in such experiences while not being overly intrusive as they spend time with peers.
- Be cautious in using an authoritarian approach with teens in regard to peer pressure, such as simply forbidding a teen’s association with specific friends or peers that you have concerns about (“I forbid you from hanging out with_____!”). Such efforts usually do not go well and can increase problem behavior in some cases. Instead, take a proactive approach by talking to teens about potential concerns, lay out clear expectations and rules ahead of time, and join with fellow parents to discuss any items of concern.

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Recommendations for Parents Related to Peer Pressure

In helping children and youth manage the challenges of peer pressure, parents and other adults can focus on the following points:

- **Set clear rules or boundaries and communicate your expectations.** Be clear about things you may ask children not to do, such as smoking tobacco or using alcohol while under age. Also, be clear about rules such as driving with friends or being home by a curfew. Clear expectations help children know what to do and also give them a reason to resist negative peer pressure.
- **Become familiar with your child's friends and peers, as well the friend's parent(s) or caregiver(s), so you know them and can influence them.** First, get to know your child's friends and peers, which allows you to let them know your standards and discourage unhealthy peer pressure. Also, make them feel welcome in your home so that your child feels comfortable bringing peers to the home instead of spending time in unsupervised places. Finally, get to know the parent or caregiver of your child's friends and peers so you can communicate with them as needed.
- **Help your child discover his or her interests and strengths and develop positive self-confidence.** As a child develops skill and confidence in music, sports, academics or other areas, he or she will feel less need to follow the pressure of peers.
- **Provide opportunities for children and their peers to be involved in games and projects with you at home.** Regular opportunities to spend time with you will help them to be a working part of the family, rather than spectators.
- **Assist your child in managing social pressures and anxieties.** Observe your child and ask questions about how he or she is feeling, giving your attention to the peer pressures he or she experiences. Listen and express your support.
- **Encourage your child's independent thinking.** Help your child practice making decisions and thinking for himself or herself. Support your child in forming his or her own views and then making healthy decisions.
- **Teach your child the skills to say "no" if needed, resist negative peer pressure or avoid just following the suggestions of their peers.** A strong sense of self can help children make their own choices, develop trust in themselves and act as leaders in a peer group.
- **Show empathy for your child's anxieties and the feelings that come with peer pressure.** Empathy involves seeing things from a child's perspective, listening and valuing your child's feelings. Sharing empathy can help him or her learn to trust his or her own decisions.

Recommended Resources

- **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry – “Facts for Families”**
www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Home
- **Child Trends**
www.childtrends.org/publications/
- **Kids Health – Educational Resources for Kids, Teens and Parents**
<http://kidshealth.org/>
- **National 4-H Council – Positive Youth Development**
<http://4-h.org/>
- **Search Institute - Positive Youth Development, Keep Connected Resources**
www.search-institute.org/
<https://keepconnected.searchinstitute.org/>

Books

- *Building Relationships* children's book series, Julia Cook. Includes *Making Friends is an Art!* (2020), *Cliques Just Don't Make Sense* (2015), *Tease Monster: A Book About Teasing vs. Bullying* (2019) and *Peer Pressure Gauge* (2019). Ages 3 to 12.
- Faber, A., and Mazlish, E. (2012). *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: Scribner.
- Steinberg, L. (2011). *You and Your Adolescent: The Essential Guide for Ages 10-25*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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