



## **How to Make Peer Pressure A Positive Experience**

**By Judy Arnall**

My eight-year-old son was excitedly telling me about a birthday party trip to a popular play place. He casually mentioned that he had a fun and bumpy ride in the back of the parent's van. Upon further inquiries, I discovered that several boys rode in the back of the van with no seat belts. For eight years I taught my son not to get in a car that didn't have a seat belt for him. I taught him to say "No" to any adult that would urge him otherwise. It still didn't work. He, along with two other boys, succumbed to peer pressure, and didn't question the decision making of the adult in authority.

Peer Pressure is influence from people of the same age, group or affiliation, to behave in the same way regardless of individual attitudes, feelings, or beliefs. It can be positive and healthy, or negative and destructive. And it's with us all our lives. Even as adults. Humans have a basic need to belong, in our family, peers and our social groups. However, peer pressure is most influential in middle childhood and adolescence, when your child is venturing forth and discovering his self-identity outside the safe confines of the immediate family. Our children's desire for acceptance is normal and a healthy

developmental stage. Our goal as parents is to help our children cope with negative peer pressure while growing to healthy independence.

My kids go to Scouts, Guides, sports groups, friend's houses, sleepovers, church groups, classes, and they socialize with the other 15 children that live on our street. They are exposed to video games, brand name clothing, scooters, swear words, graffiti, dares, and of course, negative attitudes. Some of these are good influences and some are not-so-good depending on how these influences fit with our family norms. Our children are going to encounter values, attitudes and beliefs that are different from our families' values throughout their lives. So what can parents do? Parents can subtly influence the choice of peers, but cannot control the choice completely. There is much parents can do to influence peer relations if they know three main points:

1. The need for acceptance in a peer group will become much greater if the child's needs are unmet by family. These needs are: acceptance of themselves, unconditional love, understanding, fun, the need for control and autonomy, the need of skill mastery and self-confidence.
2. The more the child needs approval, the greater the possibility he will override his beliefs and attitudes with the prevailing behaviour of the peer group.
3. Children often find their unrealized personality characteristics in friends. For example, a shy child will gravitate toward a more outgoing child.

Let us look at the positives of Peer Pressure. Peers provide encouragement and challenge to engage in positive activities. A good example is the popularity of Harry Potter books. Many parents are overjoyed to find their children reading what their peers are reading. Peers can provide positive pressure to join a soccer team, stop bad habits, work on community projects, and eat healthier or even set up a business. Peers also ease some of the stress in the major transitions in life by providing security and confidence. Peers listen, understand, and provide a sounding board. Children need to go out in the world and test the values learned at home. The peer groups are the next logical step in the world, as well as peer's parents and other adults in the workplace, and volunteer settings.

Peers teach compromise, negotiation skills and fair play. We can teach our children all we want about losing graciously in a soccer game, but a friend will teach our child actual consequences if they display obnoxious behaviour. They might not speak to them for a while. Another positive is that children gain experience in reading the social norms of groups, which is excellent practice for being a discerning adult.

The three warning signs of negative peer pressure are:

1. Your child is heavily dependent on approval by others, including you. He may consult friends on small decisions and worries obsessively about what peers will think of what he bought, said, or did.
2. Your child won't take responsibility for his actions when in trouble and blames his peers instead.
3. Your child is secretive about friendships and won't bring friends home.

## **WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?**

1. **Look at unmet needs and underlying feelings of your child.** Look beyond his behaviour. Does he need more attention, self-confidence, encouragement, and understanding? You can give it!
2. **Keep connected to your child.** Spend time with him. Give him unconditional love. He won't want to do things to jeopardize his relationship with you.
3. **Treat your child with dignity and respect.** Respect his space and belongings. Avoid criticism, judgments, and put-downs. Treat your child with politeness and kindness and he will come to expect it from his peers too.
4. **Help your child maintain healthy self-esteem.** Help him develop his talents and abilities to give him confidence. Every child excels at something. Encourage him rather than praise him, to avoid over reliance on approval from others. Focus on the effort, not the results of his activities.
5. Pick your issues carefully. Give your child small harmless rebellions. Teach your child to follow his instincts (the feeling in his tummy). **Allow your child to say "No" if he and you feel it's appropriate.** For example: sharing toys, accepting rides, participating at an event. Teach your child to be politely assertive with peers, siblings, other adults and you. Remember

that other adults do not always have your child's best interests at heart.

6. **Keep communication lines open.** Listen, listen and listen some more. Be non-judgmental and acknowledge feelings behind your child's words and actions. Seek to understand why your child wants the negative peer relationship. eg: When a friend is a negative influence, ask "Tell me how Jim is valuable to you? What do you get out of being with Jim? What risks might there be hanging out with Jim? What are your plans to deal with the risk? What role do you want me to play in helping you deal with the risks?"
7. **Increase your child's decision-making.** Starting about age nine, limit rules to ones that are necessary for safety and get your child's input on them. They need autonomy and control over their lives as much as adults, even though they are lacking in experience. Children need practice in making good choices and decisions. They learn best by experiencing the consequences of those choices, when the results are not yet so serious, and they have you around to guide them. Ask "What did you learn about this? What can you do instead next time?"
8. When your child seeks out his alter-personality in a friend that's a negative influence, **Help your child find those unrealized parts of himself**, and help him develop them the best he can, so the need to seek them out in others is lessened. For example, get him into supervised rock climbing if he likes to hang around a peer that thrives on danger in destructive ways.

As parents we have to remember that "we can't adjust the wind, but we can adjust the sails". Our children will inevitably meet up with negative influences. While we can't control how much or what type these influences are, we can control the quality of our parent-child relationship. Which will in turn greatly influence the type of people they are and the type of people they choose as friends. We still have the most influence over our children and we can teach them how to seek and maintain healthy peer relationships.

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