

Peer Influences

Imagine that your child has started school and is now exposed to a wider group of children. He comes home one day and says, "I don't like carrots anymore. Charlie says they're yucky." Or perhaps your child tries on some new vocabulary that you don't appreciate.

Our children have a powerful need to belong—to feel accepted. And as parents, we all want our children to be well liked. Our role can include being supportive and listening, but be careful not to rescue. We want to teach our children to be assertive and to think for themselves. We can encourage leading with uniqueness rather than following others.

What to Say and Do:

- Show understanding about your child's feelings. Identify the feeling. "Mindy, you feel left out. You are afraid that you won't have friends." Notice happy feelings as well as the sad ones. "Mary, you are very happy. You were invited to the birthday party."
- Be an available listener. Children open up on their own time—sometimes after school, sometimes at bedtime.
- Do not advise or be judgmental.
- Teach problem solving and include your child in decision making. Questions stimulate thinking. "Marcus, you did not like the way Billy treated you. What do you want from Billy? What could you do next time if that happens again? What will you do differently tomorrow? How should friends treat each other?"
- Restate your family rules and values without diminishing others. "In our family, we don't use those words."

Preventive Tips:

- Be an aware parent. Keep communication open between home and school. Be involved by driving car pools and volunteering at school.
- Encourage outside interests and activities beyond your child's peer group.
- Get to know your child's friends and their parents.
- Give your love randomly for no particular reason. Comment on your child's talents and uniqueness rather than on how she looks or what she wears.
- Limit TV and allot more time for family activities.
- Keep your home atmosphere nonjudgmental and uncritical. Let go of perfectionism. Mistakes provide opportunities to learn.
- Help your child build relationships with other mature, encouraging adults.

Positive Aspects of Peer Pressure:

- New Interests
- Fitting In
- Independence

Some of the skills children learn through their peer relationships include assertiveness, conflict management, how to earn respect and control aggression. Research also indicates that play with peers

provides children with important opportunities to discuss feelings, expand thought processes and knowledge, and experiment with language and social roles.

Sometimes peer influence isn't all bad. Imagine this scenario: a group of preschoolers have invented a game called Flying Firefighters. They leap from the climber and race towards the slide. Caught up in the action, all five of them zip down the slide—even the child who ordinarily won't go near one on family outings to the park. He's astonished to discover that slides are actually kind of fun after all.

Here is another example of the positive effects of peer influence: "If you run your truck into my sand tower one more time, I won't invite you to my birthday party." Never mind that the party isn't for another ten months, wielding threats about birthday parties is the ultimate in preschool peer pressure. The perpetrator, truck in hand, considers the threat and makes a wide detour around the tower and, just to be on the safe side, around a half-constructed ice cream store as well. Lesson learned.

At times, peer pressure can coincide neatly with exactly what parents are working on. For example, healthy peer pressure can encourage a child to develop new interests, a hope of many parents. The young truck driver in the sand box decides to try building towers instead of following her current interest in knocking them down. The child who was fearful of slides finds himself enjoying a fast ride on one. In much the same way, a toddler in diapers steps right up to the toilet to be like his potty-trained friends and a child who prefers wrestling to reading, heads towards the book corner because that's where the other kids are.

All parents hope that their children will somehow learn to 'fit in' in the larger world. The child who was warned not to ram her truck into another child's sand tower learned a valuable lesson in fitting in. She found out there are certain behaviors other kids won't put up with. And that kind of peer pressure sends a stronger message than all the adult admonitions in the world.

Identifying with a peer group is an early step towards being one's own person. It's true that wanting to watch the same TV shows, yearning for the correct Beanie Baby, and insisting on wearing identical T-shirts looks more like a step backwards in independent thinking. On the surface, it can seem like peer pressure is undermining independence - until you consider this: becoming separate from those who take care of you is a little scary and sometimes a little lonely. But being just like your friends can ease the process. Peer pressure to conform can actually help a child lay a foundation for someday leading an independent life.

What if all these new interests and feelings of fitting in also involve some less desirable behaviors? What if the new tower builder learns to throw sand? The child on the slide finds out about pushing? The toddler discovers the delights of flushing socks down the toilet? Such things happen, of course. Fortunately, over the years your child's desire to be like you will turn out to be the stronger force. Episodes of peer pressure are temporary, while your love and concern are ongoing.

Your clearly stated, confident expectations ultimately help your child apply the brakes on those occasions when peer pressure urges him to take a wrong turn.

No one can eliminate peer pressure from a child's life and perhaps no one would want to. Certainly, it will make you uneasy at times and will call for your intervention at others. If you find yourself worrying about peer pressure, remind yourself of its advantages: it can expand your child's interests, help him learn to fit in, and even support early attempts at independence.

Resources:

Positive Parenting from A to Z by Jane Nelsen

Children's Peer Relations and Social Competence: A Century of Progress by Dr. Gary Ladd