



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

A Parent Guide for Difficult Behaviors, Part 6 PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Dear Parent,

Peer pressure consists of expectations to conform to the norms of an age or interest group. Peer approval through conformity is a persistent challenge to children of all ages, particularly adolescents. It can be positive when it influences a child to participate in worthwhile activities, events, or goals but sometimes it is the force behind negative activities.

The concern for popularity creates a psychological pressure to be “like everybody else” rather than being independent. An adolescent experiments with a wide variety of behavior patterns in order to find a place in the peer group, often at the cost of sacrificing his personal interests, values, needs, and preferences; being true to himself; or coming to know his truest self. Fear of rejection and fear of being made fun of are such barriers to self-esteem that children are willing to pay a high price to achieve and maintain peer approval.

As a member of a peer group, a child perceives that she has more influence than she would have as a single individual. This is comforting; it lends stability and substance to her view of herself; and it strengthens her to face and share an inner world of confusion, self-doubt, and conflict. Membership in a peer group expands an adolescent’s feelings of self-worth and protects her from loneliness. It fulfills a basic human need for belonging, acceptance and significance. It is not a surprise, then, that children tend to form exclusive cliques which are comforting to members who form the “in crowd”, but a source of pain for those who are “out”.

Peer pressure is observable in children of various ages but particularly during teenage years. Generally by age 17 adolescents develop a growing appreciation of their personal values and become more comfortably able to resist peer pressure although, in reality, many adults continue to struggle under the weight of peer pressure.

If you are a parent of teenagers you will recognize the following symptoms of adolescents that feed into peer pressure. If you are not yet a teen parent, fasten your safety belt as you embark upon a future that highlights the following characteristics of teens: Children study themselves in the mirror; imagine that they are someone else or somewhere else; worry about what their friends will think; have an inferiority complex about their looks, personality style, dress, abilities; question their identity and future; become acutely conscious of everything around them; feel bad about themselves; become supercritical; and are excessively sensitive and vulnerable to the opinion of peers.

At any stage in life, but particularly when motivated by peer pressure, children can really be cruel to each other and demonstrate abusive, intolerant or rude behavior. Through insults, taunting, hurting words, put-downs, name-calling, domination, ostracizing, or bullying, they pick on the weakest members of the group. Both physically and emotionally they hurt delicate children and treat the possessions of others with irreverence and disdain. Though all children have the capacity for both kind and hurtful behavior, those who have a close relationship with their parents and identify with family values are less susceptible to peer pressure. It is the primary vocation of parents to form children (1) to know themselves and accept their assets and limitations; (2) to respect, affirm, and care about others; and (3) to view all people as made in the image of God.

This newsletter offers information to deal effectively with the issue of peer pressure. May the suggestions that follow affirm your parenting style and serve as a guide to support your efforts in child formation.

I—STRENGTHEN CHILDREN TO RESIST PEER PRESSURE

- Pre-determine phrases for predictable tough situations, i.e., group teasing of a single student, cutting classes, cheating, drinking, drugs, smoking, sex, attending movies.

“ I don’t feel like it.”

“ I’ve decided not to do that anymore.”

“ It’s not worth the risks.”

“ My record is clean. I plan on keeping it that way.”

“ I’d like to, but I hope to live to be 20.”

“ I can’t afford to be grounded by my parents.”

“ No. And if you had my parents you would not do it either!”

- Teach your child to use the **ACTS** Response Strategy to Peer Pressure Situations.

1. **Assess** the Situation: Consider the who, what, when, where, and how of the situation. Who are you with, what is happening, when or where are you, how are people acting, and how do you feel about what is occurring?
2. **Consider** the Consequences: How will you feel about yourself tomorrow? Could this be trouble in your life? Is it harmful to your health or soul? How would your parents or loved ones feel about your decision? What positive results can you predict? What negative results can you expect?
3. **Test** the Effect of the Decision on your Self-Esteem: How will you feel about yourself if you give in to the pressure? And how will you feel about yourself if you do not give in to the pressure?
4. **State** your Position with Confidence: Assume good body posture. Make eye contact. Speak in a controlled voice. State your position in a simple

sentence, i.e., “I have other plans.” “I promised my mother that I wouldn’t.”

- Help your children to differentiate the permanent value of traits like character, sensitivity to others and industry from transient values that change with age, i.e., good looks and sports ability.
- If you do not like a behavior choice of your child, use quiet words of advice that demonstrate understanding. Serious anti-social behavior requires serious responses, i.e., grounding or social restrictions.
- Make systematic, planned efforts to develop moral reasoning and self-control within your children.
- Provide books, conversation and film that help adolescents to make sense of their feelings, body changes, desires, and struggles.
- Sensitize your children to reflect on choices and the consequences before acting. Give them the vocabulary of “what is the most helpful thing to do in this circumstance?” and “what is the least harmful thing to do?”

II—HELP A CHILD TO COPE WITH REJECTION

- Be a good listener. Hear the words and feel the emotion behind the words. Do not always try to solve or explain away the feelings.
- Teach your child how to evaluate rejection or criticism, rather than accepting it as face value. It can be a tool for clarifying his own values. The effect that rejection has on him depends on what he decides to do about it. “What positive thing can I learn from what my critic is saying?”
- “Learn something from everyone; even if it is what not to be.”
- If your child is experiencing an unknown type of rejection, first check on his hygiene habits and the cleanliness of body and clothing. Then ask his favorite teacher to observe and to offer solutions.
- Remind her of times that she did not want to play with someone, especially times when her choice was not a statement against the other child.
- Explain that sometimes other children do not feel good about themselves and that they think being mean will make them feel better. Help her to view the isolation as a statement about the other person, not herself.
- Maintain a list or photo collage of people who love her and what it is that each appreciates about her. Refer to it when she is feeling unloved, isolated, or rejected.
- Ask him to be proactive and think of some way that he can add to the group or form his own group, careful not to exclude others. Encourage him to be the initiator of peer events, not relying on others to provide entertainment and companionship.
- Offer to help him learn the skill that he lacks, i.e., pitching, roller skating, bicycling.
- Encourage her to invite a friend to your home or to an outing.
- Encourage friendships in places other than school, i.e., scouts, dance, neighborhood.

III—HELP A CHILD TO AVOID CAUSING THE ISOLATION OF OTHER CHILDREN

- Ask a reference librarian to suggest children’s literature that illustrates empathy, understanding of others, acceptance of differences, etc.
- Guide your child to understand the reasons why sarcasm, cattiness, and put-down remarks reveal insecurity and are unkind and self-defeating behavior.
- Model through word and example the virtues of empathy, compassion, self-acceptance, and acceptance of others.
- Peer abuse is lessened by building respect, kindness, and self-esteem. Teach your child to be affirming of others, to express appreciation, recognition, and admiration.
- Through film, books, or discussion, expose your children to characteristics of prosocial behavior.
- Use role-playing to foster perspective-taking that enters into how another child views and feels about a peer pressure situation.
- During elementary school years invite all the students to parties so that no one is left out. Or, if numbers need to be limited, extend invitations privately. Instruct your child not to discuss the party at school where non-invited students may be hurt.

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