



Children and Peer Pressure

One of my core memories from my childhood is a phrase repeated ad nauseam by my beloved grandpa: “Show me your company and I’ll tell you who you are.” I remember thinking, “What company... I don’t have a company, I’m just a kid.” A few years later, I obviously realized that, by company, he meant the people who I surround myself with, my peers. And his statement was born out of the knowledge that children are deeply influenced by their peers, and that inevitably, the people who I would choose to spend my time with could either help me to succeed and grow or they could hinder me.

Peer pressure is the influence exerted by peers, either consciously or unconsciously, that encourages individuals to conform to certain behaviors, attitudes, or expectations. “Teens are especially responsive to peer influence. That’s because their brains undergo changes that make them highly attuned to social situations. At the same time, the reward system in the teen brain becomes extra sensitive. The reward system is a brain circuit that causes feelings of pleasure. It’s activated by things we enjoy, like eating good food. It’s also activated by social rewards, like getting a compliment. And teens are just learning to navigate the social world. Understanding other people’s values and being influenced by them are important parts of socializing. Being influenced on things like clothing choices and musical taste can help teens learn to fit in and make friends. But taking part in risky behaviors, like drinking alcohol or smoking, can lead to health or legal consequences” (1).

Peer acceptance can have a powerful impact on children. Children often feel compelled to align their behaviors with those of their peers, even if those behaviors don’t completely align with their values or principles. We have all seen those groups of 12 year-old-girls walking together in the mall... There might be eight of them, and all eight have the same style pants (most in the same color as well), the same hair style and the same shoe. God forbid, one of them wore jeans while the rest of the group showed up in leggings. One might as well not even get out

of the car. While I am being slightly humorous, I wish I was exaggerating. Overall, this is harmless and typical/age-appropriate for pre-teens and teenagers, but it illustrates the importance kids place on fitting in. It is when these pressures to fit in begin to change a child's demeanor, happiness and value set, that parents and caregivers need to address the situation as a more serious matter, particularly if the child is at risk of engaging in risky activities.

Social inclusion and exclusion are major factors when it comes to peer pressure. The fear of exclusion from a peer group can be a powerful motivator for children to conform to the norms of the peer group around them. A common scenario: a group of 13-year-old boys has met to play basketball at the park. One of the boys decides that it would be fun to climb and jump over the giant fence... Two of the boys in the group concur that this is a great idea, while it is evident that two other boys think this is dangerous and crazy. It makes them nervous, and they clearly don't want to participate. The first three boys, who are the bigger and most athletic of the group, begin to climb the fence, and they declare that whoever doesn't climb the fence is a "wuss" and "should just go home and hug their mommies." What happens most of the time? The other two boys put their concerns and instincts aside and climb the fence. I mean, could anything be worse for a 13-year-old boy than being called a dreaded "wuss?" Yes, they could face exclusion from the group. Next time, when all the boys head to the park, they may not be invited. They may actually have to sit home and hug their mommies (lol), and so they join the group. While there are many children that will be able to withstand this sort of peer pressure, there are many who will engage in activities that they are uncomfortable with or abandon their individuality to fit in. This sort of situation can become more complex as children get older as some may succumb to peer pressure by experimenting with substances or engaging in risky behaviors, driven by a desire to be perceived as 'cool' or 'popular.' It is essential, therefore, to define peer pressure for children so that they can recognize it when they face it. It is even more important to equip them with the tools to combat it.

There are some cases where peer pressure can be a positive. For instance, academic pressures can also be a form of peer influence, where students may feel compelled to achieve certain grades or adopt specific study habits to align with their peers. If students surround themselves with high achieving peers, they may be more inclined to work harder and set higher academic goals. For instance, a teacher may place a student, who is struggling in a particular

academic area, next to a higher achieving student in hopes that the higher achieving peer's study habits and values might be observed by the lower achieving student and influence him or her to adopt some of those habits. On the other hand, peer pressure can academically influence a child in the opposite direction as well. If a child's peer group doesn't place a strong emphasis on academics and intellectual achievement, then a student may be inclined to abandon steadfast study habits and lower his or her level of academic goals and achievement. For example, if a child has a group of friends that walks home from school everyday, and instead of checking in at home and getting some homework done, they go directly to the person's house whose parents aren't home and play video games all afternoon/evening, they may be more inclined to place a higher degree of emphasis on video gaming than on getting an A on the following day's math test.

Navigating and coping with peer pressure and peer acceptance are life skills. Parents and caregivers, therefore, should feel comfortable addressing the topic of peer pressure with children. It helps to first define it and then to encourage open and honest communication so that your child feels comfortable discussing his or her experiences, fears, and concerns without judgment. Equip children with assertiveness skills to help them express their opinions and make decisions that align with their values. Teach them to say "no" when necessary and stand up for themselves. Foster a strong sense of self-worth and confidence. A child with a healthy self-esteem is more likely to resist negative peer pressure and make decisions that align with their values. Encourage the formation of positive peer groups with shared values and interests. Having a supportive social circle can provide a buffer against negative influences. Suggest alternative activities or options that align with individual values and interests. Encourage children to participate in a variety of sports, music activities, volunteer opportunities, etc. This can help them develop healthy friendships with other people who have similar, productive interests. Help children develop critical thinking skills to evaluate situations independently. Encourage them to question the consequences of their actions and consider the long-term impact. Celebrate and encourage individuality, emphasizing that everyone is unique. We are all children of God, and God has placed each of us in this world with a unique set of gifts and talents. By embracing this belief, children are less likely to succumb to the pressure to conform to others' expectations. Emphasize your family's core values. When faced with peer pressure, having a clear understanding of

personal values provides a guiding compass for decision-making. Our Catholic faith provides our young people with a clear value set and a purpose. This should be drawn on when faced with pressure to conform to peer influence and to meet any challenge that comes their way.

Peer pressure is an inevitable part of a child's social journey. Combating peer pressure is an ongoing process that involves education, communication, and the development of essential life skills. By empowering children with a few strategies, they can confidently navigate social situations and make choices that align with their values and aspirations.

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References:

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