

# The Ins and Outs of Peer Pressure

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Imagine getting together for coffee with a group of friends. There is the laughter of adults enjoying the company of other parents. The conversation turns to a discussion of a recent Oprah show. "I just love that show" you chime in (you really hate it). Later, someone suggests a movie. "Yes, let's!" you reply, even though you'd rather walk along the river and continue talking. By the end of the evening, in spite of excellent coffee, old friends and a reasonably good movie, you still feel "something" was missing. It was. Each time you concealed your true feelings, you disregarded a part of yourself. You were missing.

When we pretend to take on another's perspectives, go along when we really don't want to or fail to state our preferences, we hide ourselves from others. We become invisible, and smaller somehow, diminished in even our own eyes. "I just like to go along," we say, yet if we see our children doing likewise, we may wonder if they experiencing 'pressure' from their peers.

**"As parents...we are the first 'peers' our children will know."**

Peer influences are normal and necessary in our lives. From earliest childhood, each time our needs are met, our wants are considered and our expressions recognized we develop a sense of ourselves as being worthy and valuable. Encouraged by these favorable positive experiences, we reach out to supportive others again and again, learning confidence. In time, the occasional let down from others doesn't disturb us overly much. The balance of our experience is positive. We often refer to this inner resiliency as "healthy self-esteem" or a "solid sense of self." But even when others don't grant our requests, if respectful, they teach us that open disagreement has no negative effects on one's self. We learn again that we can 'be' ourselves; we esteem ourselves.

As parents, we seldom think of ourselves as peers to our children. In a broad human sense, however, we are the first 'peers' our children will know. If we respond to our children's feelings with respect, even when we disagree, they will come to expect respect. If we encourage them to develop and express their own viewpoints, they will become accustomed to healthy interactions.

Within this kind of healthy relationship, parents often notice more overlap than difference in their values and those of their children's peer group. In some instances, such as the anxiety associated with those dreaded skin breakouts, peers provide more support than

parents ever can! Even on a "pretty good" day, one's peers do much to support one's sense of self and offer a sense of belonging.

### **WHAT CAN HARM A CHILD'S SENSE OF SELF?**

- Neglect
- Abandonment
- Ridicule
- Contempt
- Sarcasm
- Mockery
- Any kind of abuse
- Arbitrariness
- Heavy judgments
- Insistence on conformity
- Parental insecurity
- The need to overpower
- Belittling feelings
- Stifling communication

### **WHAT CAN STRENGTHEN A CHILD'S SENSE OF SELF?**

- Acceptance of differences
  - Enhancement of uniqueness
  - Permission for expression
- The right to say no  
The freedom to say yes  
Respect for feelings  
Support for personal process

*Source material: "Boundaries: Where You End and I Begin." Anne Katherine, MA. Parkside, 1991.*

Most parental objections regarding peer group influences follow an incident when children take a position contrary to our values. This is often expressed as "everyone's doing it" but may mean, "I don't want to do it your way!" Peer influences are not negative unless a child is feeling that she has no choice. Children appear most vulnerable to negative peer pressure when their self-esteem is low or when parental influence is weak, with limits only vaguely defined and seldom enforced. It is not helpful to assume that peer influences are all-embracing -- parents will be the strong influences in many areas.

If peer influences are normal and necessary, how do we as parents support positive peer experiences? When we pay attention to our own needs, wants and preferences, expressing ourselves clearly and openly within our peer group, we model for our children how healthy relationships thrive. When we honor our children with the same respect as we hope their peers will extend to them, we teach them to be satisfied with no less. Children who develop healthy, confident "solid selves" will seldom experience peer influences as pressure.

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