

Best Ways to Help Your Kids Handle Peer Pressure

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The very idea of "peer pressure" strikes fear in the hearts of most parents. Images of their kids following the crowd rather than remaining independent thinkers is enough to start any parent lecturing children about good judgement.

But what too many parents overlook is that sometimes peer influence can be instructive – and even healthy. Kids engage in this social dynamic with their friends because it teaches them how to get along in the world.

So how can parents best help their children develop the judgement necessary to determine when it is beneficial to go with the flow and when it is critical to walk away? My suggestions . . .

❖ **Listen compassionately, not judgementally.** When your child comes to you upset because he/she was picked on or rejected by other children, it's hard not to jump in and intervene.

However, you can't always protect your child from hurt feelings. By nature, kids are fickle. They're insecure about who they are and whom to admire. The child who is "in" today may be "out" tomorrow merely because of what he wore or said—or for no reason at all.

These rejections can be painful for any child, and they seem even more cruel when our children are the recipients.

Example: Your child always gets picked last for the team in gym class.

What to do: Avoid making derogatory comments about other kids or telling your child it is not worth getting upset about. Listen to her complaints, and act as a supportive sounding board. You can't make the pain disappear, but you can make it safe for her to vent her feelings.

❖ **Don't back down from your values.** Parents worry that peer pressure will undo all of their efforts to teach positive values. As they get older, your children are going to test your values. They may hear the message from their peers that it's cool to smoke . . . or that it's wimpy to be respectful to adults. Your kids will try on behaviors and attitudes that are contrary to your values.

Important: Your children will still look to you for moral guidance, and you must constantly reinforce your values, not just by what you say but—more important—by what you do. However, your efforts can backfire when you children think you're being "preachy."

Example: You overhear your 13 year-old daughter and her girlfriend making disparaging, mocking remarks about a new classmate. Your daughter says, "What a wierdo. That outfit she wore today looks like it came from a garbage can."

You're distressed to hear your thoughtful daughter speaking this way. Yet it would be a mistake to attack her in front of her friends by saying, "What's gotten in to you? You used to be such a nice girl."

Better: Calmly mention the incident when the two of you are alone. You might say, "I was surprised to overhear you speaking so unkindly about the new girl. You're usually so compassionate. It must be hard for her to come to a new school where she doesn't know anybody."

❖ **Teach children to stand up for themselves.** When your child is facing a problem with a peer, the best thing you can do is help her figure out how to handle the problem on her own. Sometimes you have to get involved directly if your child can't handle the situation on her own or is in any danger. Ideally, however, helping your child develop her protective responses will enable her to become more self-sufficient.

Example: Your 10 year-old complains that a classmate picks on her every day. Instead of expressing outrage, help her work out a solution by role-playing. Suggest that you'll play the classmate and she can try out responses—such as making a joke, ignoring the classmate or standing up to him/her.

❖ **Encourage your child's self-esteem.** The compulsion to compare and compete happens early with kids. That's why they brag so much. The pressure to be as cool as the coolest kid is intense. Your child may be convinced that he simple can't survive without the latest \$120 sneakers . . . or that she must dress exactly like everyone else . . . or that she'll die if she isn't part of the "in" crowd.

In fact, most children don't want to be unique. They want to be just like everyone else—and be *liked* by everyone else.

How can you help your child develop self-esteem when all that matters to her is being accepted by peers? What happens if your child is rejected by a clique?

Key: Acknowledge your child's hurt feelings, and let her know you understand how bad it can feel to be rejected. Then help him evaluate the situation beyond his feelings. You might say, "It must be hard not to be in that group. But are those boys people whom you really admire? Do you think you could trust them to be good friends when the going gets tough? These are things for you to consider."

❖ **Praise your child for doing the right thing.** Recognize that the hardest thing is when your child takes an independent position because she believes it is the thing to do. The child who learns to limit the influence of peers is the true leader with a steady moral compass.

Example: Your daughter stands up for an overweight kid who is being picked on. Don't take her response for granted . . . or say, "Well, I expect you to do the right thing, no matter what your friends are doing." Instead, express your admiration. Tell her, "Going against the others took guts. I'm proud of you for sticking up for her when everyone else was being weak."