

Peer Pressure

Information sheet from Parentline for parents and carers

Peer pressure is a normal part of children and young people's lives. The need to belong is so strong, particularly in adolescence, that the consequences of not being able to go along with the peer group's beliefs and preferred behaviours may bring about embarrassment and isolation.

What is peer pressure?

When a child or young person's friends, classmates or sports teammates try to influence how they act, or dare them to do something, it's called **peer pressure**. Peer pressure is the influence a peer group has on its members to fit into a particular way of thinking and behaving. This influence increases as children and young people grow older and reach adolescence. There are different ways a child or young person may experience peer pressure ranging from direct, open pressure, to more subtle and non-confrontational pressures to think and act like everyone else.

A child or young person may experience peer pressure in a **direct way** when they are being pressured into something they are not happy with. Because of the heightened awareness on bullying, many parents and carers worry about children and young people being influenced to do something against their better judgement by their own peer group or by others. However, peer pressure is often experienced in a much more subtle or **indirect way**. Peer pressure is more about a child or young person choosing to do something in a particular way or to wear something or say something or view things in order to feel accepted and valued by their peers, because it's what everyone else is doing.

Why do people experience peer pressure?

Children and young people may give in to peer pressure because they want to be accepted and fit in. Sometimes they may worry that other kids will make fun of them if they don't agree with what the group does or believes in. The thought of everyone else doing something may likely influence your child to not think carefully and to forget their better judgment. Other children go along because they are curious to know and try what other young people their age are doing.

Parents and carers begin to lose their predominant influence once a child starts school. For most children and young people, a peer group is one, if not the main source of security at a time where they are learning to become independent from their parents/carers. By the teenage years, peers generally become the most influential as young people work at establishing their own identity.

What is the impact of peer pressure?

The difference between negative and positive peer pressure is the impact it has on the person. While most forms of influence don't necessarily feel comfortable for the person on the receiving end, positive peer pressure results in a child or young person feeling better, healthier or happier. Negative peer pressure on the other hand results in children and/or young people feeling the opposite - unhappy, unwell or uncomfortable.

Despite the risks, peer groups remain an essential part of your child's development because they can help your child to:

- learn how to be independent
- have a safe place to meet like-minded individuals
- take positive risks and test out values and opinions of others
- test out their strengths and limitations
- feel safe and boost their self-confidence
- explore new and positive things including music, clothing, hobbies, sports and other interesting activities
- feel understood and accepted by others going through the same stage
- improve their ability to make personal choices.

Positive peer pressure

Through positive peer pressure they can be encouraged to participate in sport or work hard at school. Other forms of positive peer group influence include:

- Avoiding acting in a negative or anti-social manner
- Participating in a group sporting or social activity
- Developing new skills with a group of their friends (eg. taking a cooking class, making a video)
- Working on a school or university project together.

Negative peer pressure

Some of the common pressures children and young people may experience from negative peer pressure include:

- Pressure to try drugs including alcohol or cigarettes
- Pressure to have sex, either by a partner or friends
- Illegal behaviours such as speeding or shoplifting
- Cheating on tests, copying assignments or letting others copy their work
- Skipping school for the day to do something else with friends
- Pressure to dress a certain way that doesn't feel comfortable or appropriate
- Pressure to not be friends with certain people or to ignore or not include certain people in social situations
- Pressure to behave in a risky manner while driving or riding a motor bike, and as pedestrians.

Children and young people may know that these kinds of things are a bad idea but may still give in to the influence of their peers. A child or young person who has experienced extreme peer pressure may either suffer from the loss of their individuality or experience significant distress and other emotional problems that may continue into adulthood.

When does peer pressure become bullying?

Children and/or young people may be pressured by peers saying: 'Come on, don't chicken out'; or 'Don't be scared, no one will find out'. In these scenarios, while children and young people may feel the 'pressure', their peers are likely to drop the issue if they refuse to take part. On the other hand, if children and young people feel threatened or forced to do something, or if they are isolated from their peer group because they do not want to conform, this can be considered bullying.

How to assist children and young people in dealing with peer pressure?

The best possible support that a parent or carer can give to a young person experiencing negative peer pressure is to action either prevention or early intervention strategies and promote the more positive aspects of peer groups. Studies show children and young people who are supported by family members are less likely to be affected by negative peer pressure. There are children and young people who are simply more independent and can resist negative peer pressure better than the others. Below are some suggestions you may find helpful in supporting children and young people in relation to unwanted peer pressure:

- Always keep the communication line between you and your child open, allowing them to come to you for help and advice when they experience peer pressure.
- Try to be open-minded when discussing peer-related issues with your child or young person. It is important to let them know that you understand the pressure they may be going through.
- Try not to take it personally when your child or young person wants to be with their peers. Remember that a criticism from you of their friends and peers is like a criticism of their ability to make good choices.
- Help them understand the values that are important in making decisions and remind them to think about the possible consequences of their choices.
- Don't worry too much about minor things such as hairstyles or fashion. With understanding and guidance, children and young people generally get past this experimental phase in their lives without too much drama.
- Encourage your children or young person to 'choose their friends wisely' - if they choose to be with peers who behave responsibly, then they are likely to act in the same way.
- Teach children and young people how to be assertive in a respectful but firm way. Good friends should accept them for who they are and respect the positive choices they make.
- Show children and young people that you trust them. If they make a mistake, be patient and discuss with them how they could do better next time.
- Support your child or young person to be confident and true to themselves and take time to show them you care.
- Help them realise that life is not about fitting into a set mould or conforming to the behaviour of their peers; rather, it is about being a part of a group while retaining their own individuality.

For further information <https://www.parentline.com.au/>