

Peer Pressure—It's Not Just for Kids

-by Jill Crawford, LCSW

Happy new school year, everyone! Wake up sleepyheads! It's time to trade in those laid back leisurely days of summer for the more structured and stress-filled days of school. And so it is also time to revisit some of our favorite recurring number one stressors. I have chosen to focus on peer pressure this month, simply because it is a topic everyone has had some experience with, and frankly, because it never seems to go away, no matter how levelheaded we are (or think we are). If it happened to take any time off this summer, I hope you didn't let your guard down, because peer pressure will be back with a vengeance as soon as school starts. Peer pressure...unavoidable, all-consuming, undeniable. It's as predictable as the changing of the seasons, a rather nonstop rite of passage, a prerequisite for advancement from childhood to adolescence, and then eventual entry into the adult world. Our children begin experiencing peer pressure with some of their earliest social experiences, as young as preschool years, and it really takes off from there. As educated adults, we know this, we expect it, we prepare for it. We read books and fad magazines. We talk to our friends, and to professionals, and even (reluctantly!) to our parents, asking....How can we, the loving committed parents that we are, help our children weather this unrelenting storm of questionable peer influence, help them navigate the complicated social choices that they will undoubtedly encounter?

In our quest to become experts about this certain fate that our children will certainly endure, our focus becomes so intense that something important might escape our attention. And that is that we, the parents, in all of our infinite wisdom and herculean efforts, are just as vulnerable to peer pressure within our own peer groups. Wait.....WHAT??

Didn't we leave all of this behind when we graduated from high school all those years ago? Didn't we grow up, hold our heads high, and move forward to become our best evolved, independent selves with minds of our own and an "I-don't-care-what-other-people-think" attitude? How is this possible??

Well, the long and the short of it is that parents are humans too. We too have our moments of wanting to fit in, of doubting ourselves, battling insecurities, yearning for positive feedback, and looking to our peers for acceptance. And during our child-rearing years, who do our peers include? Other parents, and lots of them. We cross paths everywhere, and there is a lot of time for chit-chat while we wait for our kids to finish up their activity du jour. The talk tends to revolve around-what else-our kids, the issues they're struggling with, and how we are handling them. This can, at its best, be very helpful. Parenting is a tricky arena, with no blueprints and no easy answers. Support and community with others in similar situations can be a wonderful thing. So it begins. Like with any group, we check each other out, migrate towards those we believe we are like, and try to connect. We gain exposure to other parents' thought processes and the choices they make where their kids are concerned. We may find that we admire some, are horrified by others. We may decide we should try being flexible to more closely align with particular parents whom we respect. And we will certainly, in the spirit of unrelenting peer pressure, be constantly measuring ourselves against each other, gauging our own competence, and even perhaps our parental "coolness" rating. It is quite possible, then, that our desire for acceptance, subtle yet powerful, may even overflow into the way we parent our kids. Consider these examples:

"But Mom, EVERYONE is wearing these jeans. I have to have them. Pleeeeeeeease?!"

"Dad, you are SO embarrassing. No one else's parents want to talk to the other parents before the sleepover."

"You guys, my curfew is so lame. Why can't I stay out til midnight like EVERYONE ELSE?"

"All my friends have cell phones. You guys are just cheap."

"Why can't I have a Facebook? Just because you guys don't have any friends means I can't talk to mine?"

On the surface, these pleas from our kids appear to simply be the manipulative ruminations of most teenagers to get what they want, right? Well, that is certainly true. But beneath the surface of what is obvious, there may be a more subtle process at play for us. Though we may stand strong against such teen fury in the throes of battle, in the back of our minds, perhaps there is a little nagging voice that wonders, “Hmmm. *Am I* harsher than the other parents?” “*Am I* too overprotective?” “*Should I* be loosening up a little and just letting go?” “*Am I* ruining her social life?” “Maybe I just need to take a leap of faith and trust a little more.” “I don’t want her to be a social pariah.” And just like that, you’re sucked in. You suddenly mistrust your own judgment. You wonder if relenting a bit will give you the much-sought-after closeness you seek with your teenager, or at this point maybe you’d just settle for a smile and a hug. And really, what *are* all the other parents doing? Are they more laid-back? More open-minded? More...gasp...understanding???

Have no doubt—your teenager will wage a no-holds-barred assault if he or she senses you are second guessing yourself. The desperate pleas, negotiations, and badgering are just the beginning. They are pros at tugging on our heartstrings, finding the cracks in our armor, and pushing our buttons. If they see an opening, they will go for it. And you will be vulnerable simply because, as parents, we want to make our kids happy, and they will try to convince you that the thing/privilege they are begging for will truly make them happy. You may consider overturning your decision, surrendering your values, going against your better judgment. You may think about how good it would feel—just this once—to be “the cool parent.” What to do, what to do. And time’s ticking, because your kid needs her answer right now, because her very life depends on it, or so she will have you believe. Take heart—there is nothing wrong with reconsidering and changing your mind if her arguments have compelled you. Just be sure to do so for the right reasons, not because you are caving in to pressures—those exerted by your child, those that are self-inflicted, or those that are unspoken yet loudly heard from your own peer group, other seasoned parents. Take time to conduct a little informal field research—talk to other people who are parenting teens. Ask around. See if all the lines you’ve been fed by your child are true, if you really are “clueless,” “unreasonable,” or “old-school.” Well gee, that’s a bit harsh. Really, perhaps doing this research will just open your mind a bit to alternative parenting practices, and maybe you will find that it is time to update some of your rules, privileges, and expectations.

On the other hand, there is also nothing wrong with standing your ground. There is a lot to be said for a parent’s gut instinct. If you have a bad feeling about something your teenager is asking for, that feeling needs to be honored. You’re not a rookie, right? You know a bit about life and the way the world works. I promise—your child’s world will not end if she does not get her way. She will tell you it’s ending, and she will pull the guilt trip to end all guilt trips. But in fact, she may also learn a few things about boundaries, limits, and how to be resilient in the face of disappointment. Sure, she may be furious with you for awhile, but that’s okay. This, too, shall pass. There will be many gambles along the way. Sometimes you’ll win, sometimes not. Just know your own heart and mind, know your child, know your values, and, most importantly.....breathe. Peer pressure is forever, so pace yourself.

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