

DEALING WITH PEER PRESSURE AND BAD COMPANIONS

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure takes place when a child does something he or she does not want to do as a result of being pressured by peers. Peer pressure is a part of almost all children's lives. All children experience peer pressure and give in to it at one time or another. While parents can't protect their children from experiencing peer pressure, there are steps they can take to minimize its effects.

Bad Companions

Some children, rather than experiencing the normal peer pressure that occurs with most children, have one or two bad companions who are a negative influence. Children choose bad companions for a number of different reasons. Some choose them for the attention they get (both from parents and other children) while others choose them for companionship. Children may also choose bad companions for the excitement that accompanies getting into trouble, to rebel against parents, or because they suffer from low self-esteem and/or little self-confidence.

As with peer pressure, there are steps that parents can take to minimize the effect that bad companions can have on their children.

What Parents Can Do

***Develop a close relationship with your children.** If they haven't already, parents should work on developing an open, honest and close relationship with their children. Children who have close relationships with their parents are more likely to identify with and work to please their parents. Children who have close relationships with their parents are also much more likely to come to their parents when they are in trouble or are having problems.

***Help children understand peer pressure.** Children will be much better able to stand up to peer pressure and the suggestions of bad companions if they

have an understanding of the process. Parents should make sure their children know that peer pressure is something that all children, and even adults, experience at one time or another. Parents can also explain that it is normal for children to want to fit in and go along with their peers, and thus give in to peer pressure. When children have an understanding of the process and the feelings involved with peer pressure, they are much less likely to give in to it.

***Plan regular and frequent family activities.** Parents should work hard to participate in regular, frequent family activities, starting when their children are very young. Parents should look for activities that the whole family can participate in, such as picnics, hikes in the woods, sports, etc. Parents who spend regularly scheduled time with their children participating in fun activities will have the opportunity to develop close relationships with their children. Children who spend a lot of quality time with their families are less likely to give in to peer pressure.

***Encourage friendships with positive role models.** Parents should encourage their children to develop and maintain friendships with children who have positive qualities. When children are young, parents can do this by inviting such children over to play or inviting them to join the family for an outing. Parents can also encourage their children to join groups or activities (e.g., scouting, sports, church groups) which involve interacting with positive role models.

***Get to know your children's friends and their parents.** Parents should make an effort to spend time with their children's friends to get to know them. They should also make an attempt to get to know their children's friends' parents. When parents do this, they are able to see whether their children's friends are positive influences, and whether friends' families have values similar to their own.

***Know where your children are and what they are doing.** When children are at home, parents should supervise their activities. When children are not at home, parents should make an effort to know where their children are, who they are with, and what they are doing.

***Don't criticize your children's friends.** When children have friends who are a bad influence, it is not a good idea for parents to criticize these

friends. In many cases, children will become defensive and will continue to see such friends out of a sense of loyalty or to rebel against their parents. Instead of criticizing bad companions, however, parents can and should discuss specific behaviors and/or actions. For example, a parent can say, "It seems like every time Julie is over here to play, you break a house rule."

***Try to figure out the reason, then address it.** Children give in to peer pressure and develop friendships with bad companions for many different reasons. Parents should try to find the reasons and then attempt to solve the problem. For example, if a child gives in to peer pressure because he or she lacks the self-confidence necessary to stand up to peers, then parents can take steps to improve self-confidence in their children.

***Encourage a wide variety of friends.** Parents should encourage their children to have many different friends. This will expose children to other children who have many different interests and ideas. This will help promote individuality, and will make it less likely for children to give in to peer pressure from any one group.

***Encourage individuality and independence.** Parents should encourage their children's individuality and independence. One of the best ways to do this is for parents to model or demonstrate these behaviors. Parents who resist pressure from their own peers are teaching their children a valuable lesson. Parents who express their individuality are doing the same. Parents should also discuss independence with their children. They should stress the importance of being one's own person and doing what one feels is right for them.

***Teach assertiveness.** Parents should teach their children how to stand up for what they believe in. Parents can do this by using role-playing. Role-playing involves practicing different responses to various situations. This gives children a chance to practice saying no to their peers. Parents can also teach their children how to problem solve when they are faced with peer pressure, perhaps by suggesting alternative activities, or by explaining why they refuse to participate in a certain activity.

***Praise assertiveness.** Parents should provide lots of praise to their children when they act in an assertive manner. Behavior that is praised is much more likely to be repeated.

***Provide discipline.** When children give in to peer pressure and do something inappropriate, or get into trouble with a bad companion, parents should apply natural consequences or another form of punishment. Lecturing will probably not be enough to discourage such behavior in the future. Natural consequences can be restricting privileges, not allowing the child to spend time with the group or friend with whom he or she got into trouble, or requiring that the child make restitution for the wrong he or she has done.

***Seek help.** If a child is consistently giving in to peer pressure, or chronically getting into trouble with bad companions, a mental health professional should be consulted.

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