

Family Focus

Dealing with Peer Pressure

With another school year well underway, children are already being exposed to new ideas and new opportunities. They are also being exposed to friends and peers whose influence can be a very powerful force in their life. This is a natural part of growing up, and sometimes a good thing. For example, children whose friends are high achievers at school might be influenced towards achievement themselves. However when a child's experience doesn't have a positive effect, (specifically when a child encounters negative peer pressure) he or she can stumble upon some uncomfortable situations.

The good news is, research shows that parents have far more influence than friends when it comes to moral values. So while it's impossible to shield your children from the peer pressure of what clothes to wear or what music to listen to, it is possible to guide them towards making decisions that can keep them safe and out of harm's way. Below are a few suggestions that may help:

Create and maintain an open line of communication. Encourage your children to be open and to share their feelings with you. Be respectful of your children, and try to avoid 'talking down to them.' Frequent communication with your children can have a strong impact, and demonstrate that you care about their thoughts and feelings.

Set a good example. Remember as you interact as a family that children pay more attention to your behaviour than you may think. Child psychiatrists and authors will often point out that what children become has a lot to do with the example set by those who raise them. Specifically, children often learn through the 'monkey see, monkey do' method.

Encourage your children to be assertive. Encourage your children to stand up for what they believe in, even if their ideas may differ from others. One of the hardest things for children to do, is to speak out against popular opinion when they believe something 'doesn't seem quite right.' Let your children know that everyone is entitled to their own opinion, and that they can agree or disagree with someone and still be respected.

Get to know your children's friends. Make an effort to get to know your children's friends. Encourage your children to have their friends over for dinner or invite them along on a family outing. This gives you a chance to learn more about your own children's interests and to better understand how they interact with their peers.

Praise your child for doing the right thing. Express your admiration to your children for their independent thinking and speaking out even when they know that their point of view may not be the 'popular opinion' of others.

Set ground rules. Believe it or not, children crave rules from their parents. Setting reasonable and clear boundaries concerning curfews, household chores and social activities, will show your children that you have expectations of them. When setting these rules, clearly discuss the rewards or consequences of following or breaking these rules with your children.

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