



COOL MAY NOT BE COOL

... The forces of peer pressure

If your friends jump into a well, would you?" How many times have you heard a similar retort from your parents or grandparents? Did this help you make better decisions when you were in the company of your friends? What are we telling our children, how much are they imbibing, and what should we be doing?

Social influence exerts its presence on children from a very early age. When children are young, they emulate parents and family members. As they grow older, their circle of interaction increases to include teachers and friends. They form social circles, which consist of select friends who have similar tastes. While having friends makes them feel like they belong to a larger group, it also comes with demands to meet the groups' conventions. These might include the groups' orientation towards academics, attention to grooming and specific styles, as well as likes and dislikes in entertainment, fashion, and hobbies.

Sometimes children want to conform to their social groups. At other

times they feel pressured to adapt to the peer pressure for fear of being left out of all the cool things or even being ostracized. Peer pressure is just another name for strong social influence, which makes one feel compelled into changing values, behaviors, and attitudes. Peer pressure can be negative or positive depending on the kind of impact it has on the person.

Children are more susceptible to peer influence during early adolescence until around fourteen years of age. Developmentally, during adolescence children are trying to become more autonomous and find their own identity, separate from that of their parents. So, it is not surprising that peers' opinions tend to have a larger impact on the child's thinking and behavior than parents. Unfortunately, South Asian culture does not value individuation as the adolescent tries to develop own identity. Adolescence is also a period of increased thrill seeking and risk taking. A few of the risk-taking behaviors are misconduct, rebellion, marijuana and other drug use,

drinking, smoking, stealing, school skipping, disinclination towards academics, and sexual behaviors. Adolescents tend to lean more on their peers' opinions when making decisions about risky behaviors. There is also increased sensitivity to peer rejections during this phase of growing up. This may further contribute to behaviors that conform to peer expectations.

Some children are more easily in-

fluenced than others and tend to be followers. Some children are strong influencers and can persuade their peers to follow them. More often we find that boys are more likely to be noted as being influenced by their peers than girls. This is probably so because boys tend to be a part of larger social groups. This might make them more vulnerable to social influence than girls who typically have two or three close friends.

South Asian children in the United States might face additional pressures. South Asian children live in two different worlds - at home and outside, in school and socially. They might endure criticism and comments by peers due to their ethnic lifestyle, clothes, and food. They might also be exposed to overt or covert racism. Some children might react to such pressures by detesting all things Indian (or other South Asian), changing the way they dress or style self, or having frequent arguments with parents about "why can't we be more like everyone else?" Family conflict can lead to children towards relying more heavily on social groups.

If the parents are first-generation immigrants, there is a higher probability of inter-generational conflict. Children might identify more with American culture and parents more with the Indian culture. There is a potential problem if parents identify primarily with Indian culture while the child identifies only with American culture, each rejecting the other culture completely. Consequently, teenage rebellion might be more pronounced in such families.

South Asian families are stereotyped as placing severe academic pressures on their children. In families that conform to this stereotype, children might attempt to break from such a mold.

All of these points make negative peer pressure seem like a formidable opponent. However, there are a few ways we can counter it.

Research has consistently shown that parents and school involvement reduce risk-taking behaviors among adolescents. Parental involvement has been shown to decrease the effects of negative peer pressure. This can be challenging to families since children tend to pull away from families and engage more with peers during adolescence. However, studies and experience have shown that parental warmth and nurturance are invaluable. When children perceive their parents as supportive and concerned about their well being, they are likely to divulge their feelings, thoughts, and vulnerabilities. Having family routines can lead to closeness within the family and allow positive relationships with parents. You can also nurture a good family environment by allowing for frequent non-judgmental discussions about a variety of topics.

Parents can help children think through problems, consider alternate actions, and long-term consequences by modeling problem-solving in the home. You can choose topics for the dinner table or family time in which you brainstorm ways to resolve real problems: Whether it is your workplace conflict or a problem your child is facing at school. Come up with different solutions instead of one. Have fun and role-play the various solutions. As a family, process the potential short-term and long-term consequences of the decisions. You are giving your child the tools he can employ when he is faced with dilemmas presented by peer pressure.

Lastly, families can inoculate their children against peer pressure by providing them with tools to resist strong negative messages. Studies have shown that giving your child the power to express her voice can be an effective form of conferring resistance against negative peer influence. If your child passively listens to you and backs off from a healthy discussion with you, she might be more susceptible to peer influence.

If your child tends to shut down when you talk, encourage her to talk by asking her opinion on the topic. If you disagree with her opinion, respectfully express your disagreement and state your views. Allow her to debate the topic with you. You can close the discussion on a healthy note of disagreement, or one of you might relinquish your stand. Either way, she will be better prepared to debate her peers when her values are challenged. If you have an opinionated teenager in your household, do not fret. She might be well prepared to take on negative peer pressures.

Here are a few takeaway points:

- Peer influence is not always bad.
- Try to step into your child's shoes and understand their perspective.
- Remember, some children will do anything to fit in!
- Engaging your adolescent in a healthy debate may go a long way to prepare him or her to face peer pressure and other challenges in life.
- Agree to disagree sometimes. There does not have to be a winner or loser during every discussion in the family.
- Adolescents hate being lectured to! Spend more time listening to your interactions with your child.
- Passively obeying when child's opinion is not given importance might make him or her more vulnerable to peer pressure.
- Avoid using guilt and shame in trying to get your child to accept your viewpoint.
- Being non-judgmental invites your child to be more open with you.
- Focus discussion on points of importance and not on intense emotional reactions.
- Always leave the door open for communication.

Questions or comments? Write to us at info@samhin.org

Anupama Saale-Prasad, PhD
Vasudev N Makhija, MD
www.samhin.org