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Dealing with Peer Influences

What should you do if your child wants to play with the neighborhood troublemaker? What if he starts hanging out with a youngster who lies, destroys property or bullies other children? What if he begins expressing values or attitudes you do not like? What if he adopts behaviors that are worrisome?

Dealing with negative peer influence is a challenge, but there are solutions. Some parents may demand that their own youngster stop spending time with this bad influence, but this may not be the best strategy. Typically, children adamantly defend such a friend, and they may trivialize or rationalize his faults or shortcomings. They may ignore their parents, finding a way of seeing this playmate anyway. And if they do abide by their parents' wishes, other problems may ensue since the children's own judgment and ability to make wise decisions independently are affected.

In most cases a better strategy is to reinforce positive friendships with other children whose behavior and values meet with your approval. Encourage your youngster to invite these children over to your house to play. Arrange activities that are somewhat structured, mutually enjoyable and time-limited, such as bowling, bicycling or watching a sporting event. Also, arrange summer events (camp, special weekend trips) that bring the children together.

At the same time, do not hesitate to express your displeasure over the less desirable playmates. Speak calmly and rationally when you explain why you would prefer that your child not spend time with them, focusing on specific behavior rather than generalizing or criticizing their character. Let him know the consequences if he ends up adopting the unacceptable behavior that you have seen in these other children, while still not absolutely forbidding him to play with them. This approach will teach your youngster to think more logically and assume responsibility for his actions, and show that you trust his growing capacity to make the right decisions.

Late in the middle years, this type of approach becomes important as peer influences are very evident. Friendships often evolve into highly exclusive cliques in which children strongly influence one another. At most schools there are a variety of cliques, each with its own hierarchy of members. Youngsters' attraction to particular friends may be based on anything from personality to extracurricular interests, from athletic ability to appearance. In these pre-adolescent years, youngsters in tightly knit inner circles may feel quite secure with one another, creating their own group identity by looking and talking alike, perhaps creating a secret handshake, and feeling much more "with it" than those on the outside looking in. These youngsters often feel a strong pressure to dress and talk in a particular way, listen to certain music and wear their hair in a specific style. This peer pressure begins to compete (and sometimes clash) with the influence of parents and their values.

Pre-adolescents also tend to be quite judgmental, labeling others and at the same time becoming increasingly concerned about what their friends think of them. If a peer is even just a little different, they may conclude, "He's terrible; I just hate him."

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