

COPING WITH PEER PRESSURE

An Information Sheet from the Guidance Counsellor

Peer pressure can be a powerful force in the lives of children. It is a topic which is discussed frequently at school and it is an issue which often raises anxiety in parents.

Young people need robust and healthy peer interactions in order to find acceptance outside the family circle. Peers also assist children to get to know themselves and to clarify their beliefs. The peer group provides the opportunity to learn to relate to a range of people with different personalities and interpersonal styles.

Peer pressure can manifest itself in various forms, from the irritating to the dangerous. It can be seen in the craving for the latest clothing or footwear that **everyone** is wearing, as well as in teenage experimentation with alcohol or drugs.

Some research indicates that young people are more likely to bow to peer pressure if they associate with friends who are older. For example, a 15 year old whose friends are 17 or 18 may see these friends as role models or mentors. Positively, this could mean that the younger person has the opportunity to learn academic, athletic or cultural skills from a more experienced student.

However, it can also mean that the younger person feels pressured to drink, smoke and participate in other dangerous activities which will ensure acceptance by the older group. In the 15 year old's eyes these behaviours could be seen as signs of maturity.

Young people often react negatively to parents questioning them about their friends. They may see this as an invasion of privacy and a sign that they are not trusted to make good choices.

Following are some ways in which parents and teachers can help to create an atmosphere in which children may recognise and resist negative peer pressure when it arises.

Encourage children to cultivate more than one circle of friends.

Young people with only one circle of friends can be more susceptible to peer pressure. This is because they are over-reliant on one group. If they have several groups of friends they can gain acceptance and support elsewhere if they are feeling negative peer pressure in one group.

Instill in children a sense of responsibility for their actions.

If children have been encouraged to take responsibility and to make choices from an early age then they are more likely to know how to make choices when it comes to resisting peer pressure. Giving children age-appropriate tasks such as household responsibilities, teaching them how to make healthy choices about foods they eat and television programmes they watch can develop their skills in decision making.

Work at building healthy self-esteem in children.

Always praise and acknowledge achievements. Separate worth from accomplishments; children are important for who they are rather than for what they do. Separate worth from mistakes; people are always more than their mistakes and making mistakes never takes away from their importance and worth as people. Focus on progress rather than perfection. Avoid the temptation to rescue; it is important not to shield children from the consequences of their actions.

If you would like more information on child and adolescent development or to discuss particular concerns, please contact

Brian Thompson on 3839 4977.

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Promote open communication with children.

Model for children effective communication. Be honest and offer children opportunities to talk by spending time with them. Genuinely listen to children, seek opinions and advice from them. This models that decision-making is a collaborative process and that it is alright not to always have all the answers. Remind children that everyone needs help sometimes and that it is okay to talk about problems. If adults promote open communication with children, then they are more likely to talk when they are feeling pressured by their peers.

Model appropriate and healthy ways of relating in your own relationships.

Show children that true friends respect each other's individuality and decisions. Friends do not need to always think and act the same way. Also, friends do not try to emotionally manipulate, blame or induce guilt in others when they make different choices.

Encourage children to set goals and acknowledge the achievement of goals.

Young people who have no clear goals can be more susceptible to peer pressure. This is because they drift aimlessly and are easily influenced to engage in unhealthy behaviour that seems to fill a gap in their lives. Goals can be personal, academic, sporting, cultural. They provide children with a focus in life and give them targets to aim for. Adults can help to make goal setting a part of children's lives from an early age.

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