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How To Raise A Confident Child

Most parents assume they've got years until they need to worry about peer pressure—that it will be a while before their child comes home wanting to pierce his belly button, peroxide his hair, or join a band of rappers. Guess what? If he's old enough to point to the Power Ranger underwear ("Like Jimmy's!") instead of the white jockeys you want to buy him, it's time to start teaching him to think for himself.

Unfortunately, many parents make the mistake of minimizing the power and long-range effects of peer pressure during the early years. In an attempt to be less strict than their own parents were, many are afraid to establish the kind of firm, clear guidelines that experts say all kids need. Or they're just too busy to bother. "You can't let it go and expect to jump in, in fifth grade, and fix their attitude then," says Antoinette Saunders, Ph.D., a child psychologist in Chicago. "By then, you've lost all credibility."

The Easy Years: Preschool Through Kindergarten

It's normal for children to mimic their peers. Imitating others and conforming to new and different norms in dress, style, and behavior often offer the first lessons in judgment, ethics, and values. "Kids need to experiment to figure out who they are," says Lawrence Kutner, Ph.D., author of *Toddlers & Preschoolers*.

Ironically, peer pressure can work for you during your children's formative years. Channel the kids into positive play, says Jonathan Bloomberg, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Illinois, and then keep them busy and focused. Structured, supervised activities expose children to other kids engaged in cooperative play. Many communities offer soccer for preschoolers, which, like Sunday or Hebrew school, is considered ideal because of a built-in protective element -- no post-game drinking tradition is associated with these activities, and any adult role models your kids trust and confide in--coaches, teachers, aunt's--can serve as lifesavers later.

Other kids can set a good example too. Three-year-olds sometimes toilet train themselves after other toddlers shudder at their stinky diapers. Kids often take up a sport or instrument because their friends do, and once they latch on to healthy habits, they tend to hang on.

When kids are young, they're also apt to follow the rules because you said to. If your 5-year-old's buddy is allowed to watch Jurassic Park but she's not, there's no reason you can't just say no, says Dr. Saunders. When her own 6-year-old announced she would invite only "cool" kids to her birthday, Dr. Saunders said: "Invite the whole class or skip the party." "I don't believe in giving in to a child's demand for exclusion," she says. However, do pick your battles carefully. If your kindergartner insists on wearing fluorescent shoelaces to school - so what?

The Impressionable Years: Grade School

As children grow, talking through problems and role-playing, become more useful strategies in counteracting peer pressure than a "no" from you.

"You can start discussing ethical issues when your child is 6," suggests Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D., professor of child development at Syracuse University. "And don't be afraid to express your family's values." For instance, a 7-year-old shortstop can try to imagine what it would be like to trade places in the outfield with an overweight boy whose teammates mock him. An 11-year-old who sees graffiti on a school wall can be asked who should pay for the cleanup and how the school is affected.

Grade school is also the time to explore such issues as smoking, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, even eating disorders. However, teaching children to "just say no" may not be effective enough. What they really need is a range

of verbal skills, so they can negotiate with their friends or gracefully refuse. "A child needs to find the right tone, one that doesn't make him sound prissy or judgmental or make his friends think that he'll snitch on them," says Dr. Honig. "That's something a parent can help a child practice."

Encourage your child to make up clever one-liners. Asked to try "really cool" cigarettes, an 11-year-old can be coached to shrug nonchalantly and respond with "They make me puke." Urged to taste beer, one kid said, "Nah, I'd rather shoot pool," in an amused tone that took all the pressure off as his friends burst into laughter.

Throughout these discussions, try to focus on your child's real dilemma, which, experts say, is "How do I say no without losing friends?" Here again, from the start, you can help your child understand that he/she can disagree with friends without ruining friendships. "Parents can ask their children to talk about what they feel makes a good friend, what are their expectations and what are their criteria."

The Hard Years: Teens

Sometime between the ages of 11 and 14, our kids begin to identify so strongly with their peers that we may not recognize them anymore. Suddenly they're humming along to songs that celebrate murder and wearing stuff we never bought them at the Gap. What if our kids follow others into real trouble?

Don't underestimate your role in the development of your child's self-esteem and judgment. "Peers fill a power vacuum only if kids are not well parented," says David Elkind, Ph.D., professor of child study at Tufts University and author of *Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance*. Studies show that parents who are too authoritarian or too lax often raise teens who engage in risky behavior.

Dr. Elkind believes that teens do best in households in which parents set limits, take time to talk to their children, and remain consistent about the rules. Even so, kids do experiment: Your teenager will probably take a drag or a beer at least once. Your first question, experts say, should be why? "If they are experimenting, it's one thing," says Dr. Saunders. "If they are becoming a follower, it's another."

Look at the big picture:

- How are his/her grades?
- Who are his/her friends?
- What is his/her behavior like on the whole?

If you don't see big changes (a sudden drop in grades, a new set of creepy friends), chances are he/she is just experimenting.

Tell your child you are disappointed in his/her behavior. If he/she was out with friends when he/she got caught drinking, do you institute grounding or do you give him/her another chance? Your best bet, say experts, is to give him/her a chance to earn back rights and privileges--use of the car, late curfew--by doing chores and showing responsible behavior. "Grounding for long periods of time doesn't work," says Dr. Saunders. "It just makes your child fester in anger."

Changes in family life -a divorce or a move -make teens more vulnerable to peer pressure. And some experts believe that whatever the parenting style, some kids are more easily influenced in a negative way by peers. Some of the signs that your child is at risk, according to Dr. Moskowitz, are:

- Your child's appearance changes drastically.
- His/her grades drop substantially.
- He/she talks about skipping school or hangs around with friends who do.
- He/she prefers playing at friends' homes where there is no supervision.
- Your child's personality has always been that of a "sensation seeker."

Most children don't fall into those categories. And despite their baggy jeans and dreadlocks, they still internalize the morals you hold dear. "Your values--culled from many years of family experiences, not from one big lecture--are going to outweigh any peer influence," says Dr. Kutner. "Your kids are studying you more closely than anyone else ever has in your whole life, including your parents."

And how you withstand peer pressure can serve as a model. "If you must have the same Jaguar as your sister-in-law, don't be surprised if your child demands the same stereo as everyone else," says Dr. Honig. If you set limits and take a hard line when your school-age children shirk responsibility, they will be familiar with the house rules when they reach adolescence. And if you have created a safe haven at home, your children may listen to Nirvana, shave their heads, and vote Libertarian, but they will always know who to turn to when in doubt about doing the right thing.

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