

How can I teach my young child to deal with peer pressure?

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WHEN CHILDREN ARE YOUNG, you make the important decisions for them.

But as they grow older, this begins to change. Adolescents are likely to run into some difficult social situations where they have to make their own decisions.

Friends and acquaintances may pressure them to experiment with alcohol or other drugs, or indulge in risky behaviour. They may find themselves caught up in situations where it's hard to say no and go against the group.

Children want to fit in. They want to be part of a group, and they like to appear to be more sophisticated than they really are. If they're around older siblings and friends, they don't want to be seen as "the baby." It's not easy to stand up for yourself and do what you think is right when friends are encouraging you to just try a drink, or a joint, or some other substance.

Even very young children can get caught up in group behaviour that makes them feel unhappy and uncomfortable. The group may pick on one child, or leave one child out of a game. Children sometimes get involved in power struggles within a small circle of friends. "I won't be your best friend anymore" is a common threat that young children use against each other.

Understanding the group

You can help your child by encouraging them to talk about what happens in their group of friends, and discussing how the individuals must feel. How do you feel when you're left out of a game? Is it okay for the group to leave one person out? How can you stand up for the person who is being left out, and try to make that person a part of the group?

You won't find an easy solution to every problem. But talking with your child about group behaviour helps them to understand what is going on. If they learn to think about how other children feel, they'll be more likely to want to reach out to

the child who is unhappy and left out, and stand up for what they believe is right. You can teach them that by helping someone else, they'll feel good about themselves and more confident of their own strengths.

Peer pressure

Since even young children have to deal with group dynamics, they can start to explore some of the issues of peer pressure. Talk to your child about what happens in a group. If a group of children are playing a game like hide and seek, it's important that everyone plays by the rules. Otherwise, one person will spoil the game for everyone else. But if the group wants to do something that's risky or harmful, then refusing to be part of the group can be a very good thing. One child's refusal to go along with the group may give others the courage to say no to the group as well.

Talk to your child about individual differences. Does everyone have to be the same as the others in a group? If your child can respect individual differences, they'll have a richer life in their teenage and adult years.

Talk about being a leader or a follower. Listen to your child and let them know that you understand the difficulties of coping with peer pressures. If you can listen to them and discuss the issues without being judgmental, chances are they'll continue to talk to you as they get older.

Peers can be great

When we talk about “peer pressure,” we usually think of bad influences. But most of the time, other children will influence your child in ways that are healthy and supportive. Your child can have the same positive influence on others. When you treat your child’s friends with respect and warmth, your child will watch you and learn valuable lessons about how to behave toward others.

When you tolerate differences in others, and value individuals who may be seen as eccentric or unusual, your child will also learn to be tolerant of others. When you don’t judge people on the basis of their income, the clothes they wear, or their racial origins, your child will realize that there is really nothing to be embarrassed about when people are different. Peers may hold a lot of influence over a growing child, but you can be even more influential—just by being yourself.

Friends

Friends are important to us throughout our lives, and learning to socialize with others is part of a child’s normal development. Every child has to learn how to fit in with the group while still holding on to their own values and identity. When you help your child to develop confidence and security, they will be better equipped to deal with the pressures of the group. They’ll have the strength to say no to things that make them uncomfortable or that they believe are not right.

For more information

We understand that everyone’s needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or you want to help your child deal with a drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.



Activity Page

HOW TO SAY NO AND STILL BE FRIENDS

Practise these strategies with your young child so that they feel comfortable saying no. You can act out any number of situations, making them appropriate for your child's age.

For example, if your child has certain neighbourhood boundaries where they are allowed to play, you could act out a scene where your child says no to a friend who wants them to go outside the boundaries to the corner store. Your child can help you think of other situations where they would have to stand up for themselves and say no to a friend.

FOUR WAYS TO SAY NO

1. Saying No Thanks

The first strategy for resisting pressure from friends and acquaintances is a simple "No thanks, I don't want to." Often that will be the end of the incident. You've made a choice and others should accept your choice.

2. The Broken Record

Sometimes another kid will keep up the pressure, urging you again and again to try it just once. Simply repeat your first answer over and over again. Say "No thanks, I don't want to" as many times as necessary. Don't explain, and don't get upset and try to justify your decision. Simply repeat your answer in a friendly neutral manner. Eventually the kid who is putting on the pressure will get tired of hearing your answer and will give up.

3. Reverse the Pressure

If someone is repeatedly nagging at you to do something that you don't want to do, turn the pressure around. Say to that person, "Why are you picking on me?" This reverses the pressure, forcing the other person to explain the behaviour. It also implies that maybe it's the other person, and not you, who has the problem.

4. Excuse Yourself and Leave

The best way to get out of a tricky situation may be simply to leave. In a friendly tone just say, "Sorry, I have to leave," and then walk away. You don't have to justify your actions to anyone and you don't have to put up with pressure that makes you uncomfortable.

Encourage your child to think about these ways of saying no any time their friends or classmates want to do something that makes them uncomfortable. When children learn that they can say no and still stay friends, it relieves them of a lot of the pressure.

READ BOOKS

Your local library has books about peer pressure written for children of different ages. Reading books with your child is a great way to open up the lines of communication. Talking about the incidents in the books may help your child to feel more comfortable about discussing real-life issues related to peer pressure.





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