PEERS AND PRESSURE

"Now!" whispered Suki. "Quick, while the clerk's not looking."

Heart pounding, Leah leaned against the store's unattended makeup display and slid two tubes of lipstick into her purse. She looked bored and detached as she followed her friends Suki and Jill out of the store, but inside she felt panicked.

"I can't believe you made me do that," Leah wailed.

"Relax," said Jill. "Everybody does it sometimes. And we didn't make you do it."

She said nothing, but Leah knew she wouldn't have done that on her own. She'd just had a big dose of peer pressure.

### Who Are Your Peers?

When you were a little kid, your parents usually chose your friends, putting you in play groups or arranging play dates with certain children they knew and liked. Now that you're older, you decide who your friends are and what groups you spend time with.

Your friends — your peers — are people your age or close to it who have experiences and interests similar to yours. You and your friends make dozens of decisions every day, and you influence each other's choices and behaviors. This is often positive — it's human nature to listen to and learn from other people in your age group.

As you become more independent, your peers naturally play a greater role in your life. As school and other activities take you away from home, you may spend more time with peers than you do with your parents and siblings. You'll probably develop close friendships with some of your peers, and you may feel so connected to them that they are like an extended family.

Besides close friends, your peers include other kids you know who are the same age — like people in your grade, church, sports team, or community. These peers also influence you by the way they dress and act, things they're involved in, and the attitudes they show.

It's natural for people to identify with and compare themselves to their peers as they consider how they wish to be (or think they should be), or what they want to achieve. People are influenced by peers because they want to fit in, be like peers they admire, do what others are doing, or have what others have.

Peer Influence Isn't All Bad

You already know that the teen years can be tough. You're figuring out who you are, what you believe, what you're good at, what your responsibilities are, and what your place in the world is going to be.

It's comforting to face those challenges with friends who are into the same things that you are. But you probably hear adults — parents, teachers, guidance counsellors, etc. — talk about peer pressure more than the benefits of belonging to a peer group.

You might not hear a lot about it, but peers have a profoundly positive influence on each other and play important roles in each other's lives:

**Friendship.** Among peers you can find friendship and acceptance, and share experiences that can build lasting bonds.

**Positive examples.** Peers set plenty of good examples for each other. Having peers who are committed to doing well in school or to doing their best in a sport can influence you to be more goal-oriented, too. Peers who are kind and loyal influence you to build these qualities in yourself. Even peers you've never met can be role models! For example, watching someone your age compete in the Olympics, give a piano concert, or spearhead a community project might inspire you to go after a dream of your own.

**Feedback and advice.** Your friends listen and give you feedback as you try out new ideas, explore belief, and discuss problems. Peers can help you make decisions, too: what courses to take; whether to get your hair cut, let it grow, or dye it; how to handle a family argument. Peers often give each other good advice. Your friends will be quick to tell you when they think you're making a mistake or doing something risky.

**Socializing.** Your peer group gives you opportunities to try out new social skills. Getting to know lots of different people — such as classmates or teammates — gives you a chance to learn how to expand your circle of friends, build relationships, and work out differences. You may have peers you agree or disagree with, compete with, or team with, peers you admire, and peers you don't want to be like.

**Encouragement.** Peers encourage you to work hard to get the solo in the concert, help you study, listen and support you when you're upset or troubled, and empathize with you when they've experienced similar difficulties.

**New experiences.** Your peers might get you involved in clubs, sports, or religious groups. Your world would be far less rich without peers to encourage you try sushi for the first time, listen to a CD you've never heard before, or to offer moral support when you audition for the school play.

1. When the Pressure's On

Sometimes, though, the stresses in your life can actually come from your peers. They may pressure you into doing something you're uncomfortable with, such as shoplifting, doing drugs or drinking, taking dangerous risks when driving a car, or having sex before you feel ready.

This pressure may be expressed openly ("Oh, come on — it's just one beer, and everyone else is having one") or more indirectly — simply making beer available at a party, for instance.

Most peer pressure is less easy to define. Sometimes a group can make subtle signals without saying anything at all — letting you know that you must dress or talk a certain way or adopt particular attitudes toward school, other students, parents, and teachers in order to win acceptance and approval.

The pressure to conform (to do what others are doing) can be powerful and hard to resist. A person might feel pressure to do something just because others are doing it (or say they are). Peer pressure can influence a person to do something that is relatively harmless — or something that has more serious consequences. Giving in to the pressure to dress a certain way is one thing — going along with the crowd to drink or smoke is another.

People may feel pressure to conform so they fit in or are accepted, or so they don't feel awkward or uncomfortable. When people are unsure of what to do in a social situation, they naturally look to others for cues about what is and isn't acceptable.

The people who are most easily influenced will follow someone else's lead first. Then others may go along, too — so it can be easy to think, "It must be OK. Everyone else is doing it. They must know what they're doing." Before you know it, many people are going along with the crowd — perhaps on something they might not otherwise do.

Responding to peer pressure is part of human nature — but some people are more likely to give in, and others are better able to resist and stand their ground. People who are low on confidence and those who tend to follow rather than lead could be more likely to seek their peers' approval by giving in to a risky challenge or suggestion. People who are unsure of themselves, new to the group, or inexperienced with peer pressure may also be more likely to give in.

Using alcohol or drugs increases anyone's chances of giving in to peer pressure. Substance use impairs judgment and interferes with the ability to make good decisions.

Pressure Pointers

Nearly everyone ends up in a sticky peer pressure situation at some point. No matter how wisely you choose your friends, or how well you think you know them, sooner or later you'll have to make decisions that are difficult and could be unpopular. It may be something as simple as resisting the pressure to spend your hard-earned babysitting money on the latest MP3 player that "everybody" has. Or it may mean deciding to take a stand that makes you look uncool to your group.

But these situations can be opportunities to figure out what is right for you. There's no magic to standing up to peer pressure, but it does take courage — yours:

* Listen to your gut. If you feel uncomfortable, even if your friends seem to be OK with what's going on, it means that something about the situation is wrong for you. This kind of decision-making is part of becoming self-reliant and learning more about who you are.
* Plan for possible pressure situations. If you'd like to go to a party but you believe you may be offered alcohol or drugs there, think ahead about how you'll handle this challenge. Decide ahead of time — and even rehearse — what you'll say and do. Learn a few tricks. If you're holding a bottle of water or a can of soda, for instance, you're less likely to be offered a drink you don't want.
* Arrange a "bail-out" code phrase you can use with your parents without losing face with your peers. You might call home from a party at which you're feeling pressured to drink alcohol and say, for instance, "Can you come and drive me home? I have a terrible earache."
* Learn to feel comfortable saying "no." With good friends you should never have to offer an explanation or apology. But if you feel you need an excuse for, say, turning down a drink or smoke, think up a few lines you can use casually. You can always say, "No, thanks, I've got a belt test in karate next week and I'm in training," or "No way — my uncle just died of cirrhosis and I'm not even looking at any booze."
* Hang with people who feel the same way you do. Choose friends who will speak up with you when you're in need of moral support, and be quick to speak up for a friend in the same way. If you're hearing that little voice telling you a situation's not right, chances are others hear it, too. Just having one other person stand with you against peer pressure makes it much easier for both people to resist.
* Blame your parents: "Are you kidding? If my mom found out, she'd kill me, and her spies are everywhere."
* If a situation seems dangerous, don't hesitate to get an adult's help.

It's not always easy to resist negative peer pressure, but when you do, it is easy to feel good about it afterward. And you may even be a positive influence on your peers who feel the same way — often it just takes one person to speak out or take a different action to change a situation. Your friends may follow if you have the courage to do something different or refuse to go along with the group. Consider yourself a leader, and know that you have the potential to make a difference.

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