



H.O.P.E Newsletter – Issue 11

The “Cool Kids”: How to Help Your Child or Teen Deal with Peer Pressure, Exclusion and Cliques

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When we think of peer pressure, we typically have a picture in our minds of a kid handing your child a cigarette, a joint, or a beer and saying something like, “Come on, just try it.” But at times peer pressure can be felt without a single word being spoken, like when a clique excludes others or rolls their eyes at the (in their opinion) “uncool” kids who walk by.

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Here are five of the top peer pressure situations, with ways you can help your child or teen handle them:

1. Drugs, tobacco, alcohol, and partying. The average age American kids take their first drink is 11 for boys and 13 for girls. Drugs are rampant in our communities today—not just marijuana, but also bath salts, meth, K2 (aka “spice” or synthetic marijuana), and prescription medications. This is not to say all kids will follow this pattern of alcohol use or get into drugs, but chances are, your child will come into contact with another kid who has knowledge of these things and may even be using one or more. As a parent, being involved and communicating with your child about drugs and alcohol is of vital importance.

What you can do: As a school counselor, I always say that you really can’t start talking with your children about these things too early. It’s important that you discuss your rules and values pertaining to drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, but also help him come up with several options to escape the situation if he’s being pressured to try something. For example, you might role play with your middle schooler and teach him to say a strong and direct “No.” He could also suggest a different activity, change the subject, or leave the situation by walking away.

I’ve also heard a lot of parents talking about the “no-questions-asked” pick-up. That’s when you tell your child that if he calls you to leave a party or a bad situation, you will go and get him with no consequences and no questions asked. This is something that each parent and family has to decide if it’s right for them. If this works for your family, it can be very effective.

2. My Child’s Personality is Changing—for the Worse! Kids who hang out together tend to adopt the same types of attitudes, likes, dislikes, and values—and in fact, research has shown that people tend to mimic the behavior of others in order to fit in into a group. This can be distressing if your formerly sweet kid is rolling her eyes at you and responding with, “Whatever” to everything you say. If she’s becoming defiant, aggressive or disrespectful, you’ll want to address this behavior and nip it in the bud before it continues to escalate.

An important thing to note here is that teens and tweens start to become more peer-focused and less family-focused. They want to spend more time with their friends and might confide in them more often than family. Also, adolescence is where most of the task of “individuation” really takes place: this is the process of coming to understand and know oneself as your own person. This means kids start to want more choices, more freedom—and at times more privacy and distance from their family. Peers become the center of their universe, and with their natural desire for a sense of belonging, teens can be extremely susceptible to peer pressure. Another factor that makes them susceptible is the still-developing teen brain, which has not yet become a master of decision-making and self-management! This means that they don’t always have the thinking skills and self-control skills it takes to resist peer pressure.

What you can do: When your child’s behavior is changing as a result of spending time with a new group of friends, start by having a conversation about it with her in a moment when you are both calm. Know beforehand that this is an issue ripe for power struggles. Your child identifies with these kids she’s hanging out with in some way—maybe they have something in common that drew them together, or she feels accepted in this group. If your child feels like you are

attacking her friends, she will likely get defensive and dig in her heels—and want to be with them all the more. It's most helpful to focus on the *behavior* of your child's friends, or more importantly, *your child's* behavior when she is with these friends. You might say something like, "I've noticed that you talk back to me a lot since you started hanging out with Courtney. Why do you think that is?" This conversation should be focused on your rules and values, and should reiterate your expectations for behavior. Rather than trying to forbid your child's friendship, you might decide to put some parameters on it if repeated problem-solving discussions don't help. For example, you might say that she can only see Courtney outside of school once a week, or that she can't go to Courtney's house until her behavior improves, but Courtney can come over to your house so you can get to know her better.

Note: If your child begins to exhibit behavior changes that you find worrisome or concerning, it may be helpful to speak with your child's doctor or another professional about your concerns to rule out any underlying issues that may be affecting your child's behavior.

3. My Child is Being Excluded. It's so painful for kids when they're excluded from something, whether it's an event like a birthday party, or a clique or group at school. Many times there isn't a clear reason why this happens; it just seems like out of the blue, your child is left out and feeling miserable.

It's important to know that at some point or another, almost all kids feel the pain of being excluded. This could be a result of direct exclusion (another child specifically telling them they aren't welcome), shifting loyalties among friends, or "fifth wheel" problems. If you're the parent of a teen, you've probably already seen that adolescent friendships can shift and change dramatically in seemingly short periods of time: that girl your daughter used to hang out with all the time might start hanging out with another girl. Even in a group with just two other kids, a third can easily feel "lost in the crowd."

What you can do: Try to pinpoint which of these situations is leading to your child's loneliness and then talk with him or her about some ways to solve the problem. Don't blame your child for why this is happening, because that won't be helpful. Often there is no rhyme or reason for why your child is being left out or ostracized. Put on your "coaching hat" and help your child to come up with some strategies to improve the situation. For example, if she's going to hang out with two other girls and this leaves her feeling left out, perhaps she could invite a fourth so that she will have her own buddy. If her problems center around the kids at school, try to get her involved in a group where she can make friends from other towns who share her interests—and where she can see firsthand that there is a life outside of school. If she is socially awkward or you notice her doing things that puts others off, (like always needing to get her way or being too clingy) you can coach her on ways to behave socially without making her feel like there's something wrong with her. (More on this next.)

4. When Your Child is Socially Awkward. Sometimes kids feel like they don't fit in consistently and repeatedly. If this is the case, it might help to ask yourself if your child is lacking any vital social skills and if perhaps this is the reason that other kids are not responding

positively to him. It's important to note that it's normal to feel left out or lonely once in a while, but you can help your child realize he has some control over his own behavior and responses.

What you can do: In this case, it's helpful to talk to your child about social cues. You can do this when you're watching TV or out at a restaurant. Ask your child how he thinks the waitress is feeling, or what they think it might mean if a character in a movie has his arms crossed. Role-playing is something else that could also help—teach your child some specific skills like introducing himself and act it out. Many parents also come up with a cueing system that helps their kids learn how to interact socially. Let's say your child with ADHD is constantly monopolizing the conversation, and talking a mile a minute. Together, come up with a signal you can give him (touching your chin with your forefinger, for example) to let him know he needs to let someone else have a turn. It might also help to talk to your child's teachers or school counselors for some support and additional ideas to specifically help your child. (Don't feel shy about reaching out—at my school, I help parents with this issue all the time.)

5. Last word: Put the Focus on Your Child's Strengths

It's important to help your child focus on his or her strengths and what they *can* control. Emphasize your child's positive internal qualities and teach them some positive self-talk they can use when they are feeling pressured. For example, instead of thinking, "Why can't I just be different?" They could say to themselves, "Everyone is different. I like who I am."

Pressure is one of those stressors that we all experience at every stage of life. It can actually be motivating—it can help us excel at work and earn promotions, and it can help our kids ace that final exam. It can be the thing that gets your child to try a new sport, join a new club, do better in school, or stops them from doing something stupid.

But pressure can also be overwhelming and can sometimes lead us down the wrong path. Start talking to your kids about positive coping skills and strategies to escape high pressure situations when they are young so that they can manage the pressure they will encounter not only in adolescence, but throughout life as well.