

# How to Help Children Deal With Pressure

When children are young, parents 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.



Parents can help young children 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 her a part of the group?

Parents 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.

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 is 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.

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

child but you can be even more influential – just by being yourself.

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.

This article is one in a series written by the Strathcona County Community Drug and Alcohol Strategy Committee providing information about drug and alcohol issues.

The Drug/Alcohol Resource Directory has been developed to help people become more aware of the services and resources available to deal with drug/alcohol issues. It's a comprehensive list of all services available for prevention, early intervention, and treatment.

The Drug/Alcohol Resource Directory is available at the Strathcona County Health Centre located at 2 Brower Drive or at Strathcona County Family and Community Services 276, 2755 Broadmoor Boulevard (above Smitty's restaurant) in Sherwood Park.

Residents with questions about the strategy can call Strathcona County Family and Community Services at 780-464-4044.