

Group Pressure – A Reality

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Adult stakeholders in education, namely parents and teachers, often question why young people [students] do things that many times they do not agree with or that they think is not right. Why do young people in full vigour of life inject drugs into their bodies? Why do they get involved in intimate relationships, exposing themselves to diseases and infections that could potentially ruin their lives? The answer in many cases is because of the pressure imposed upon them by friends and/or peers—what is known as group pressure or peer group pressure.

Simply defined, group pressure is the influence that your friends have over you. Researchers in the area of peer/group pressure suggest that the influence of friends can be good or bad. Group pressure is good when peers encourage you to give the best of yourself by supporting you when you take part in uplifting and productive activities. However, it is bad when “friends” urge and force you to do things that you know are bad or dangerous: “Everybody does it.” “There is nothing wrong with one cigarette.” “No one will ever know....”

What puzzles parents, and sometimes teachers, is why do friends have so much power over each other? Why is it so important for young people to please their friends? My own experience is that the young people of today want their friends to think well of them; they don't want to feel rejected and they want to be accepted by the “crowd”—to “fit-in.” In some strange way this makes them feel good about themselves, but in a very real sense the effort that goes into fitting in makes these adolescents extremely vulnerable to the opinion of the group. Many adolescents will do anything to win the approval of their friends and once they get that approval they will do anything to keep from losing it. So what can adolescents do to resist such group pressure that may eventually cause them to do wrong?

The following are some simple strategies that can be adopted, but in the end it really boils down to your personal opinion of yourself and, to a large extent, your willpower [to resist]:

1. Perception – Do you see yourself as a valuable person worthy of noble purposes or does your value depend on what your friends think of you?
2. Planning – You must have an advance mental plan that will help you to make decisions that you believe are best for you when difficult times arise, and you must be committed to this plan.
3. Selection – Choose your friends well; often it is not difficult distinguish which friends can help you and which ones can hurt you.

4. Purpose – You need to define clearly [for yourself] what you want to do with your life. If you want to progress in life you must decide who you are going to listen to—your parents, your teachers, your ministers of religion, or those who when you falter and you most need help and comfort leave you as if they had never known you.

Wanting to be accepted as part of the crowd is quite healthy because it is important for young people to feel wanted, but when that want steers you to become involved in things that you know are wrong then it can be a dangerous thing. While it can be hard to walk away from group pressure it is certainly not impossible to do so. You must find the strength and conviction to say NO to harmful pressure. Remember that, in the final analysis, paying attention to your own feelings and beliefs and finding inner confidence are the keys to surviving.

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