

# How Do I Teach My Kids to Handle Peer Pressure?

These eight strategies will help your child learn how to discern good friendships and stand up to bad influences. by Dennis and Barbara Rainey

Outside the guidance we continue to have at home, nothing will influence our children as much as the choice of their friends. The Bible speaks pointedly about the power of the people we spend time. Paul wrote: "Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Corinthians 15:33).

The opposite is also true: Good company guards against the development of bad habits. Many parents are so afraid of peer pressure they seldom use "good" peer pressure to their advantage.

For years I taught a sixth-grade Sunday school class, and one of the highlights was the "bad apples" demonstration. Surprisingly, most youth today have not heard the old saying, "One bad apple can spoil the whole barrel."

On a Sunday morning early in the nine-month class, I would bring some apples. I called them my "buddies." I usually had one beautiful, shiny red apple and a couple others that looked nice but had at least one bruise.

"These two apples with the bruises represent a couple of buddies you should not spend time with in junior high," I would say. "They have a dark side to them, a compromised area of their lives. This good apple represents you, a good Christian teenager. The good apple sees no problem with the bruised apples. He says to himself, these are my buddies. They wouldn't do anything to hurt me. They're not that bad."

Then I'd put the apples together in a plastic bag and say, "These three apples are going to become close buddies for a few months. I'll put them in a closet, and we'll check on them in a few months at the end of the class and see what happens to the good apple."

In the last class of the year, I would read 1 Corinthians 15:33 and then invite a member of the class to come up and pull the plastic bag out of a paper sack.

It never failed—the two bad buddies had really made an impact on the good apple. The identity of all three apples had been lost; the bag now contained discolored, mushy apple soup. This lesson demonstrated how bad company can corrupt and even consume the best young Christian.

Do not expect your child to have the discernment to choose good friends and withstand peer pressure without your help. Training is needed.

## **Eight strategies for helping your child deal with peer pressure**

First, ***encourage your children to trust in God***. Our most important responsibility as parents is to teach our children to believe God, trust Him, base their convictions upon His Word, and obey Him with their entire heart. For many children, peer pressure is an important test of faith; when they are

encouraged by friends to do something contrary to God's Word, they need to remember the words of 1 Corinthians 10:31, which tells us to "do all to the glory of God."

It is God's Spirit who gives them the strength to say no to friends and yes to God. As Proverbs 29:25 tells us, "The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted."

Second, ***make sure your home is a harbor in the storm***. The world is often a hostile environment for children. The family must be that safe haven that always welcomes your teen back. No matter what the world says to them, they know they can find love there. We often tell our children, "Nothing you can do will make me love you any more and nothing you can do will make me love you less." Children *need to be needed* at home. They long for approval, sense of belonging, significance, order, and security. If they do not receive these things at home, they will seek them elsewhere and from other people.

Third, ***don't relinquish your right to influence and even control your child's relationships***. You are the parent. Realize that maintaining control of those who influence your children is within the bounds of your authority and responsibility before God. As friendships take shape, steer your children in the direction of positive peer pressure and away from negative influences. We have made it difficult for our children to spend time with friends who do not provide the kind of influence we desire. In certain cases, we have even declared certain friends off limits.

Here are some pointers:

- Encourage your children to invite their friends over. Make your home the place to be. We particularly encourage our children to invite those friends that we know are good influences. If all the apples are at your house, you can check the quality of the fruit.
- If you can, get to know the friend's parents and get some idea of their values, beliefs, and convictions. You can get to know another family by picking up their child when he or she is invited to your house or offering to take him or her home.
- Be careful about where you allow your child to spend the night. That is one setting where peer pressure can be intense—to participate in ungodly conversation, watch movies, or play games that do not meet your standards.
- Be observant. If you see subtle changes in dress or appearance, find out what is behind the new look.

As your teen grows older you will need to explain your decisions more frequently. On one occasion we explained to our son Benjamin (then fifteen) that we did not feel a certain friend was a good influence on him—the boy's life reflected a home that was very unstable. It was clear that his influence on Benjamin was greater than Benjamin's influence on him. He felt we were being unfair, but we carefully explained our concerns. Then we prayed with him for protection and wisdom in handling this friendship.

You must handle this carefully, because if you are overly controlling, you can drive your child away from you and directly to the relationships that concern you. When we eliminated a relationship our child enjoyed, we stepped in and aggressively spend time with our child and met his needs.

Ultimately, of course, as your child grows older he will increasingly choose his friends on his own. These earlier times of teaching can influence those choices.

Fourth, ***use positive peer pressure to your advantage***. You may want to challenge one or two of your child's friends to be a good influence on your child at the same time challenging your child to be a positive influence on them.

Fifth, ***help your child anticipate the pressures he'll face at different ages***. Talk to your preadolescent about the challenges he will face from peers in the next couple of years. Peers will pressure him to look at pornography, to swear, to drink or take drugs, to rebel against "dumb" parents, and more. Often, because of what friends are pressuring him to do, your child will face difficult choices on a daily basis.

One technique we've used to help our children anticipate the pressures they will face is the "Decide in Advance" game. Only two are needed to play—one child and one parent. The parent comes up with a list of peer-pressure situations. For example: "You are at a friend's home. No one else is in the house. Your friend produces a pack of cigarettes and asks you to join him for a smoke. What would you do?"

Sixth, ***applaud your child's good choices***. When your child does make the right choice, put on your cheerleader outfit, grab the megaphone, and go crazy: "Way to go! Give me a high five!" We often get too excited about the wrong things. We should give a standing ovation for those choices our children make that reveal their convictions and character. Trophies tarnish; character does not. Character glistens. Character is what lasts and is passed to the next generation.

Seventh, ***when failure occurs, make sure you talk through the situation and gently help the child articulate in his own words what went wrong***. Your child will make some mistakes and succumb to peer pressure. With a force this pervasive and powerful, this is to be expected. As you deal with these failures, remember that some good testing of convictions is exactly what you want to occur when your child is still at home—where you can guide, correct, and instruct.

Role-play the situation to help the child understand how a better choice could have been made. Although discipline may be required, balance it with forgiveness and encouragement. Being a young person is very challenging. He needs to know you are on his side.

Finally, ***do not always try to rescue your child from loneliness***. Nothing has saddened us more than watching our children make right choices, and then have to stand alone. Every one of our children has experienced different levels of loneliness in junior high and high school. It also carries over into young adulthood and college as well. With the wide range of standards in the Christian community today, sometimes they will not have the support of other Christian teens. You will be tempted to think you are being too harsh by encouraging your child to stand alone against the herd. The pain of loneliness may be what God uses in your child's life to embed convictions, courage, and a stand-alone faith. God may use pain to turn him into an adult who makes an impact on our culture. The very pain that we want to rescue our child from may end up being what He uses to grow our child into a strong warrior for Christ.

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