

Peer Pressure

Heavy-handed, high pressure tactics to coerce others into doing things is only a small fraction of "peer pressure"

Ask any student about their fears of coming to the high school and many will say "peer pressure." But what exactly is peer pressure? The more we know what the dynamics of peer pressure are, the better we will be able to help students recognize and cope with it.

Most people think peer pressure is an attempt to get someone to do something dangerous or unhealthy by the use of heavy-handed (and at times threatening) taunts, pleadings, or demands. There may be relentless attempts by a group of "bad kids" to convince a "good kid" to try a drug, change a relationship, or break a law or school policy. But closer examination of the nature of adolescent psychology and behavior reveals that this form of peer pressure makes up only a small portion of the many ways that peers become direct or indirect influences in other children's initiation of negative behaviors. Peer pressure is usually not so overt, threatening, and relentless. In fact, sometimes it isn't even spoken or acted out at all.

First of all, the primary influence in any teenager's life is his or her closest friends. Although minor acquaintances and even strangers could exert some amount of peer pressure, it is usually the close friends who are most influential.

Second, peer pressure is so influential because it is usually quite subtle and difficult to detect. A teenager going to a party and simply observing behavior such as drinking or other drug use, smoking cigarettes, etc., could provide significant pressure to conform and contributes to defining the norm. This is also the way media (popular songs, television and movies) contribute to setting and reinforcing adolescent standards of behavior.

Third, it is the need for an audience and the individual's perception of how this audience will perceive them that tends to shape behavior. The perception of how others see a particular individual can be different from how that person is actually being perceived. For example, a student who acts tough and threatening to another person in order to impress onlookers may think he is being seen in a positive way, when in reality they are annoyed and turned off by his behavior. Another way the "perceived audience" becomes an influence includes the person who comes up with the idea to try a new behavior and brings it to the group. The primary objective of the behavior is "I want to be seen as cool by others." The peers might not say or do anything, yet still be the major factor (or pressure) in shaping an individual's behavior. We often assume that the person in the group who first initiates a behavior is where the pressure on others to "go along" comes from, but peer pressure actually causes the initial behavior. Peer pressure causes new behavior as much as it causes others to conform.

The more we know about peer pressure and the many forms it takes, the better we will be able to talk to our kids and help them identify strategies to cope. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

*Ms. Klamerus
Student Assistance Coordinator
201-935-3007 ext. 4014
Mklamerus@bectonhs.org*