

Peer Pressure Power

by Lynn Brunelle

Going along with the crowd doesn't have to be a risky move.

Ever done something you didn't want to do, just to fit in? Or just because your friends wanted you to? That's peer pressure. And just about everyone feels it at one time or another.

Peers are people your age, such as your friends, who have experiences similar to yours. Your peers influence your decisions and behavior every day, and they can push you to make bad choices, even dangerous ones. But is peer pressure *always* bad?

Positive Spin on Peer Pressure

"Peer pressure can sometimes be a good thing," says Ian Brennan, cocreator and one of the writers of the TV show *Glee*. That show dealt with the issue of peer pressure all the time, through the experiences of musical kids in a not-so-popular high school chorus. "Friends can give you the courage to try something you normally wouldn't, like a new sport or auditioning for the school play," Brennan points out.

Nicole S., 16, of Edmore, N.D., used to be afraid of singing in front of people. One time, her friends convinced her to sing karaoke with them. She ended up having fun! "Now I will sing anywhere, even with people present. Positive peer pressure helped me face my fear," she says.

Pressure's On!

You are surrounded by your peers all the time, and you learn a lot—both good and bad—by just being around them. You might admire a star athlete. Maybe you notice the popular kids at school and look up to them. Those aren't necessarily bad things. The popular group could be really nice; the athlete, a hard worker. Being inspired and influenced by different peer groups could help you in the long run.

The people around you can also be negative influences, however. Maybe a star teammate tells you never to pass the ball to a certain player, or a popular student cheats on tests or sends mean texts. Should you try to be like them to fit in?

Peer Pressure Is a Fact of Life

"It's not a matter of *if* peer pressure is going to happen," says Lee Erickson, coordinator for the Northern Lights Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) group in North Dakota. "It's a matter of *when*."

"The main thing is not to compromise who you are," Erickson continues. "The kind of coolness and popularity you think you may get by joining the crowd and doing risky stuff is temporary. Your character is with you for the rest of your life."

Nicole agrees. "My motto is be who you are, not who others want you to be," she says.

Peer pressure is powerful, but the ability to choose is yours. If a situation feels wrong, there's a good chance it is wrong. Think about what's best for you-and what you'll say or do-before you're in a sticky situation. "No one has tried to get me to smoke or drink yet, but I know there will come a time," says Schuyler W., 13, of Seattle. "The thing is, I know I don't want to do it, so when it does happen, I'm just going to stick up for myself and say no."

Make pacts with your friends to stay away from risky situations together and to support one another when the going gets tough. Talk with your parents about ways they can "bail you out" if you need to save face with your peers. (For instance, if someone asks you to hang out after school and you think there might be drinking or drugs around, you can tell them your parents need you to come home right away.)

Should You or Shouldn't You?

Standing up for yourself and saying no isn't always easy. But you might give voice to a bunch of peers that feel the same way you do. It can take just one person to speak out and change a situation. According to Erickson, "People will respect you for standing up for yourself-even if it doesn't seem like it right away."

"If friends try to get you to do something that you know in your heart feels wrong," says *Glee*'s Brennan, "tell them exactly how you feel. And if they're not cool about it, find new friends."

That can be hard to do, but sometimes it's necessary. "If your so-called friends are trying to get you to do negative things, do you really think they're the best of friends?" asks Nicole. "To me, real friends accept you for who you are [and] what you believe in, and respect your decisions."

Bad News and Good News

"Negative peer pressure gets ahold of us kids really easily," says Nicole. "Because our friends do it, we're told something's 'cool' or we're pressured to try something 'just one time' because it won't hurt."

Some kids decide to go with the flow regardless of what they know is right. They tell themselves that being popular or being liked is more important than their own sense of self. It doesn't make sense, but that's the problem with peer pressure. You can lose yourself. But you can also find yourself, as Schuyler did when he was asked to go camping last year. He really didn't want to go.

"Sometimes your friends get you to do stuff you don't want to do, and it turns out great," he says. "I didn't want to go camping, but my friends really wanted me to go. Finally, I gave in, and I'm so glad I did. The trip was awesome! We did a lot of fun stuff I would never have done on my own."

The good news is peer pressure isn't always something to fear. Your decisions are yours to make. Take the time to make them wisely.

Power Up

Resisting negative peer pressure is a challenge, but it is definitely possible. Here are a few tips for navigating all kinds of pressure-filled situations:

- **Find real friends who accept the real you.** Knowing whom to listen to and whom to avoid is the key to steering clear of negative peer pressure.
- **Know what to say.** "Just say doing that stuff really isn't your thing," says Elli L., 15, of North Dakota. "You can also blame your parents-it works wonders."
- **Be confident.** Stick up for yourself. People will respect you for it.
- **Think about it.** Keep in mind that just one destructive decision can change your whole life, says Nicole S., 16, also of North Dakota. Think: How might this one moment affect how you see yourself?

Getting Real With SADD

Looking to join other kids who want to make smart decisions and avoid negative peer pressure? Check out Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD). It's a national group, based in middle schools and high schools, that works to save lives by spreading the word about the dangers of risky behaviors such as drinking, using tobacco, bullying, and driving

distractedly (including driving while using a cell phone).

SADD is a great resource for kids who are feeling pressured. "It is comforting to know that there are so many people supporting each other," says Elli L., a SADD member in North Dakota. "We all kind of hold each other up."



Courtesy Of Northern Lights Sadd

Teens from around the U.S. went to Washington, D.C., for a SADD conference.

"SADD does a lot of awareness projects," adds fellow member Nicole S. Groups organize awareness days; dances; bowling, pizza and roller-skating events; and more. "We get the word out, but we have fun doing it," says Nicole.

Young people take the lead in SADD groups. "The kids are in charge," says regional director Lee Erickson. He works with more than 200 chapters of SADD in South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota. "Our job as adults is to listen, provide support, [and] offer tools and motivation, not to tell them what to do. They can figure that stuff out on their own."

SADD has chapters all across the country. To find one in your area or to learn more, visit www.sadd.org.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is peer pressure?

- A. the admiration that some people have for a star athlete or popular students at school
- B. the confidence that some students show when they refuse to do something they dislike
- C. the feeling that you need to do something because people similar to you are doing it
- D. the fear of getting up in front of a large group of people to sing, dance, or act

2. What is the passage trying to persuade readers to do?

- A. The passage is trying to persuade readers to sing karaoke and go camping.
- B. The passage is trying to persuade readers to resist negative peer pressure.
- C. The passage is trying to persuade readers to get into arguments with their friends.
- D. The passage is trying to persuade readers to spend more time studying than playing sports.

3. Peer pressure can be a good thing.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

- A. Some young people decide to go with the flow regardless of what they know is right and lose their sense of self.
- B. SADD is a student group that works to save lives by spreading the word about the dangers of risky behaviors.
- C. People's peers often influence their decisions and can push them to make bad choices, even dangerous ones.
- D. Schuyler W. did not want to go camping, but his friends convinced him to, and he had a great time.

4. Why might someone give in to peer pressure from friends?

- A. Someone might give in to peer pressure from friends because he or she is worried about losing those friends by saying no.
- B. Someone might give in to peer pressure from friends because he or she is a member of Students Against Destructive Decisions.
- C. Someone might give in to peer pressure from friends because he or she is a star athlete and does not care what others think.
- D. Someone might give in to peer pressure from friends because he or she is very confident and has a strong sense of self.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A. a national group that helps kids deal with peer pressure
- B. peer pressure and how to handle it
- C. the fear of singing in front of people
- D. ways that your parents can "bail you out"

6. Read the following sentences: "The people around you can also be negative influences, however. Maybe a star teammate tells you never to pass the ball to a certain player, or a popular student cheats on tests or sends mean texts."

What does the word **negative** mean above?

- A. short
- B. tall
- C. bad
- D. good

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Peer pressure can be a bad thing; _____, it can also be a good thing.

- A. in particular
- B. on the other hand
- C. as an illustration
- D. as a result

8. What is an example of negative peer pressure mentioned in the passage?

9. Name two tips given in the passage for dealing with peer pressure.

10. Choose an example of negative peer pressure mentioned in the passage. Then explain how some of the tips listed in the passage could be used to deal with that particular situation.
