

INSIGHTS THAT MY CLIENTS
HAVE TAUGHT ME

NOW IS THE TIME TO VACCINATE
YOUR CHILD AGAINST
PEER PRESSURE

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Now is the time to prepare if you wish to avoid the adolescent disease that parents fear the most. This disease is very contagious, striking early in adolescence, and often lasting a full decade. This disease is PEER PRESSURE and, for most parents of adolescent children, this is the time when they feel the most helpless, most frustrated, and most angry. Parents often complain, "The trouble with Johnnie is the kids he hangs out with." While this is usually not the only problem, your child's friends can make a tremendous difference in the behaviors he exhibits.

The desire to be like peers becomes especially strong in the early teenage years and, because of the difference in maturation rates, girls may be affected somewhat earlier than boys. Peer pressure is part of growing up and cannot be completely eliminated. However, your child can be "vaccinated", i.e., made "immune," to the worst effects of peer pressure. The key is to start early in the pre-school years in order to build up your child's sense of value and self-worth, to increase his self-image and to help him to recognize that he is an important individual.

Children are not born with a positive self-image. We, as parents, create in our children their self-concept through our interactions with them and our reactions to them. Most of our child's feelings about himself are formed before he ever reaches school age.

If your child sees himself/herself as a valuable person who is capable of making good decisions, when the temptation of peer pressure comes along he will be able to sit down and weigh the situation for himself and decide what is right and what is wrong.

Children are born with only two emotional feelings -- the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises. All other emotional feelings, such as fear of the dark, the fear of snakes and many behaviors, such as lying, are learned. Often, we parents are not aware of how and what we are teaching our children.

There are a number of things that are very important in helping to *vaccinate* your child against peer pressure. The first is to start listening to him/her -- really listening -- from the earliest age. It can be very difficult and frustrating to listen to small children. Little children have so much inside of them and a very limited vocabulary that, sometimes, it is just so hard for them to get all their thoughts out. They have trouble forming their words and sentences, and often talk about many

things at the same time, scrambling their thoughts and switching back and forth between topics. Spending an extra minute or two in eye-to-eye contact with your child as he struggles to communicate with you, gives him the message that he is an important person, worthy of your time and effort, and that you will patiently wait for him to tell his story. Establishing a habit of communication with your child early in life is essential if you expect him to be willing and able to communicate with you during his adolescence.

Listening and accepting your child's feelings are very important when it comes to *vaccinating* him against peer pressure. To listen to and accept our child does not necessarily mean that we agree, but means that we are willing to acknowledge that he feels a certain way or that he wants a certain thing. Our two-and three-year-olds often hook us into a power struggle over toys and games that are shown on TV commercials. Each new commercial brings a new, exciting toy into the child's life and prompts the demand, "I want one of those." For most of us, we are tempted to respond in a logical -- rather than a feeling -- way: "We can't afford that. You have too many toys already." etc., etc. A much more helpful and validating response to the child would be, "Yeah, that toy sure does look like fun. Wouldn't it be neat if we could have every toy we see on TV?"

Another successful way of increasing our child's self-image is by the use of verbal rewards. Your pre-school child lives for your attention. If he cannot get positive attention, he will seek negative attention -- any response from you is better than being ignored. There are few things that your child can do that will guarantee your undivided attention, but "being bad" will do it every time. On the other hand, verbal, positive, emotional responses help create a positive self-image. If you have a child between one and three, try getting excited, really excited, the next time he kisses you. Do a little jig and say, "Wow! That really makes me feel good all over!" The message the child gets is, "I am valuable to Daddy and I can do something that makes him happy."

Small children should be given choices which are in relationship to time. This method can help you reduce the power struggles that start occurring as the child reaches two. "I'm going to count to ten (very, very slowly), and when I reach ten, it will be time to go to bed;" or, "Do you want to go to bed now or do you want me to set the timer on the stove for five minutes more, and then it will be time to go to bed?" Building a sense of autonomy in this way is important if you want to help your child avoid the pitfalls of being negatively controlled as a teenager. Autonomy is good, it requires thinking, which leads to figuring out what consequences will result from different behaviors. Children who have a good sense of autonomy are not easily controlled by us, other children, pedophiles or by abusive mates.

Another factor that is important in the training of your child is to give him the opportunity to make decisions at a very early age. These decisions should be within limits which you find acceptable and comfortable. For example, you can ask the child, "Do you want to walk to bed or do you want me to carry you?" or, "Do you want milk or orange juice?"

**Good decisions come from experience
and experience, well, that comes from
making bad decisions.**

Remember, it is okay for your child to fail. Children learn to make good decisions by making bad decisions and then being given the opportunity to learn from them without being criticized or put down. Learning to make good decisions is no accident. It takes practice on the part of the child and the parent!

Another important concept is that you try to see yourself as your child might see you; do you believe the boss who is always right? Don't you secretly enjoy seeing him get caught being wrong. This is also true for the parent who gives the message "I may not be right, but I'm never wrong." It is a sure way to lose the respect of your children. There is another problem for the child who believes that their parent is "always right." You are presenting a model of perfection that is unreal and impossible to live up to. Such an image can also bring disillusionment and a sense of failure to the child because they can never reach this goal.

Parents often give their children double messages, which are confusing and damaging. First, we worry that their peer group will overly influence them, and then we demonstrate our own fear of what the neighbors think or what the people at the club might say. If we show that we are controlled by our own peer group, we should not be surprised to find that our children follow right along with being controlled by their peer group.

What example do you set by how you solve your problems? Do you get into a win/lose struggle with your mate or does one person give in every time there is a difference of opinion? Such a parental example gives children messages of how the world will be and teaches them problem-solving skills that may not work as they reach adolescence.

Your child's acting out is not a problem, it is the child's way of getting attention and/or asserting their sense of control in their life. The child that runs away from home does not have a problem. Running away from home is their solution. Be careful that you do not confuse a child's solution with their problem. Children need to learn problem solving methods that they can use as teenagers and as adults in their work and in their families.

Finally, the way in which you discipline your children is an important factor in the development of your child's self-worth. Longitudinal research covering 32 countries and 17,404 subjects published in 2009 by Murray Straus, PhD suggests that children who are spanked have lower IQs than those who are not spanked or are spanked very seldom. "How often parents spanked made a difference. The more spanking, the slower the development of the child's mental ability," Dr Straus said. If spanking is the only option you have, it is like playing your trump card first. When that quits working, then what? Your attention is the most important thing that your child needs. Removal of your attention for short periods of time, such as sending your child to their room, can be more effective than spanking.

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