

Mills Park Middle School  
Cary, North Carolina



**Help Your Child Deal With  
Peer Pressure**

One of a series of Parent Guides from



# Mills Park Middle School Cary, North Carolina

## **Parent Guide**

Help Your Child Deal With

## **Peer Pressure**

The Parent Institute

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*Publisher: John H. Wherry, Ed.D. Executive Editor: Jeff Peters. Writer: Carol Bruce. Senior Editor: Betsie Ridnour. Staff Editors: Pat Hodgdon, Rebecca Miyares & Erika Beasley. Editorial Assistant: Pat Carter. Marketing Director: Laura Bono. Business Manager: Sally Bert. Operations & Technical Services Manager: Barbara Peters. Customer Service Manager: Pam Beltz. Customer Service Associates: Peggy Costello, Louise Lawrence, Elizabeth Hipfel & Margie Supervielle. Business Assistant: Donna Ross. Marketing Assistant: Joyce Ghen. Circulation Associates: Marsha Phillips, Catalina Lalande & Diane Perry.*

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## Introduction

People constantly learn from those around them. Children, even more so than adults, are greatly influenced by the opinions and attitudes of their peers. After all, making friends and interacting with peers is an important part of growing up! Peer pressure—the desire to conform to those around you—can be both positive and negative. Positive peer pressure can take the form of encouragement by a friend to work harder in class or to do well in a sport. But the desire to fit in can also make a child try something she\* wouldn't otherwise, something dangerous or harmful.

Parents can help their children develop healthy lifestyles by being aware of possible negative influences of peer pressure and by helping their children steer clear, replacing those negative influences with positive ones.

Although peer pressure is often thought of as something parents of teenagers worry about, the influence of peer pressure begins as early as age two and reaches a peak by the time children enter middle school. The middle school years are just when the pressure to look, act and dress like everyone else becomes most intense. Middle-schoolers want to be just like, and to be liked by, everyone else.

That's why it's so important for you to help your child develop the confidence, values, attitudes and skills she needs to deal with peer pressure before it's at its peak. This Parent Guide looks at some of the most effective things you can do.

### Stay Involved in Your Child's Life

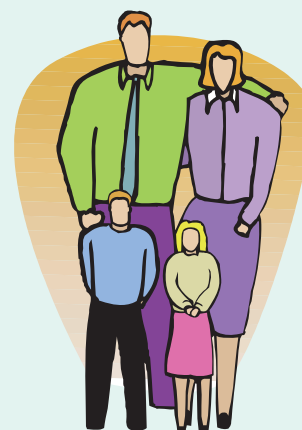
Staying involved and talking with your child about what's going on in his life is critical. If your child is comfortable talking with you about small things, he'll be more likely to talk with you about the things that are really important—including the pressures he's feeling from his friends.

It's easy to be involved when your child is very young, but as he grows older and more independent, it can take some additional effort. Look for opportunities to connect with your child. Tap into his interests, even if they are not the same as yours:

- **If he enjoys being outdoors**, go hiking together.
- **If sports are his thing**, go to an occasional ball game together.
- **Choose a book or magazine** that you both can read and discuss.

These relaxed situations offer a good way to stay connected with your child—and they provide a good opportunity to have a casual conversation about what's happening in his life, too.

Make an effort to schedule some family meals where everyone is present. Turn off the TV and don't answer the phone. Use the time to talk.



*\*Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

## Help Your Child Become Self-Confident

Kids who are self-confident and who feel good about themselves are less likely to give in to negative peer pressure. Here are a few ways you can help your child become self-confident:

- **Let your child know that you value her opinion.** Ask her what she thinks about important current events, where she would like to go on the next family vacation, or even what she thinks of your new shirt. The more opportunities your child has to express her opinion, the more comfortable she will be having opinions. And that's an important part of building self-confidence.
- **Look for opportunities to talk with your child about making decisions.** If you hear a story about a child who made a bad decision that led to trouble, for example, ask your child what she would have done in that situation. Your willingness to listen to her talk about how she would handle a difficult situation, rather than simply lecturing her about what you think she should do, will show her that you're willing to listen to her point of view.
- **Encourage your child to make decisions for herself whenever possible.** Praise her for her good choices and compliment her on her positive achievements.
- **Begin early to help your child develop hobbies and pursue special interests.** Having a special skill or being an "expert" on a certain subject—whether it's computers, dinosaurs, stamp collecting or Harry Potter, for example—will give your child even more reasons to feel good about herself.

## Be a Good Role Model

It's a fact: Parents are their child's first and most important teachers. From the earliest years, your child is learning from what you do and the example you set. He'll notice, for example, if the values you preach are the values you practice—and, more to the point, he'll notice if they aren't.

Sooner or later, he'll test those values. It's natural, as he gets older, for your child to test the values you teach him. Don't back down when that happens. Regardless of what he says, your child needs reasonable rules and boundaries. Remember, the world will not come to an end if you don't allow your child to do something simply because "everyone

else is doing it." Consistent rules and boundaries provide a sense of security and a framework for making good decisions.

Manage your own peer pressure, too:

- **Don't overschedule yourself** because you can't say "no" to requests from others.
- **Resist the urge to follow the latest trends**—whether it's the latest kitchen gadget or the newest power tool.

It's tough to tell your child not to follow the crowd if you're doing much the same thing yourself.



## Get to Know Your Child's Friends

After their parents, children are most influenced by their friends. Friends teach one another about the importance of loyalty, sharing and so much more. Friends also can draw one another into negative behaviors.

Here are a few things you can do to make sure you know who your child's friends are and what they're up to:

- **Make your child's friends feel welcome in your home.** Invite them to come over ... and to come in. Invite them to participate in some of your family activities. Stock up on popular snacks. Give your child and his friends their "own space"—your child's room or the recreation room or den, for example.
- **Talk with your child about his friends.** What do they like to do in their spare time? Are they good students? What are their families like?
- **Talk with your child's friends.** Find out about their likes and dislikes and their opinions on various issues.
- **Make it a point to get to know the parents of your child's friends.** Seek them out at meetings, in the community or one-on-one. Find out what their rules are, what chores they expect their child to do, etc.
- **Don't jump to conclusions about a youngster because of his appearance**—what he wears, his hairstyle, etc. Appearances—both good and bad—can be deceiving, so get to know the youngster behind that facade before forming an opinion about him.
- **Give positive feedback about those youngsters of whom you approve**—but don't go overboard. If your child thinks you are trying to "hand pick" his friends, he may reject them before he really gets to know them.
- **Resist the urge to criticize the friends about whom you have concerns.** If your child gets defensive about certain kids, he may become even more determined than ever to maintain those friendships.

## Encourage Your Child to Participate in Positive Activities

Activities such as music, sports, scouting, religious groups and other youth programs provide a positive focus for your child. They help to ensure that she is surrounded by peers who share the same positive interests. The more time she spends focused on positive activities, the less time she will have to spend on negative ones.

After-school activities are especially important for children of working parents because, according to the experts, those unsupervised hours after school are the hours when children are the most susceptible to negative peer pressure—and trouble.

## Teach Your Child How to Say 'No'

Sometimes the shortest response is the easiest. Help your child role-play a situation in which she says "no" politely but firmly. Remind her that saying "no" to a friend can sometimes be a hard thing to do for even the most confident and well-intentioned young person. After all, the need to fit in is a powerful force.

You can make it even easier for your child to resist negative peer pressure by teaching her strategies she can use to say "no" in less direct ways. She can suggest an alternative, make an excuse, change the subject or return the challenge when dared to do something.

Here are a few things you can suggest that your child do:

- **Offer positive alternatives**—saying, "Let's play basketball instead," when a friend suggests going to the park to smoke, for example.
- **Make excuses when she needs to say no.** "My mom wants me to clean my room before my dad gets home."
- **Stand her ground.** Let her know she doesn't need to cave in and go along with a bad idea just because her friend persists.
- **Be assertive.** It's a sign of maturity to say, "No. I think that's wrong and I'm not doing it." She will be helping herself and, possibly, her friend as well.
- **Ignore.** Sometimes, the best—or the only—thing to do is simply to ignore the suggestion and walk away.

## Tell Your Child How to Avoid Trouble

Make sure your child knows how to recognize certain signs that a situation might lead to trouble. Here are a few:

- **Lack of adult supervision.**
- **Rumors of drug use** or other questionable behavior.
- **Statements like,** "We won't get into any trouble," "We won't get caught," or "Everybody else is doing it, so what's the big deal?"

Discuss with your child which strategies she'd feel comfortable using. Some kids can easily stand up for themselves and explain why they don't want to do something, while others would prefer to simply say, "I have to go now. Bye."



**Most of our failures in understanding one another have less to do with what is said and what is heard than with what is intended and what is inferred.**

—George A. Miller,  
Psychologist

### How Do You Know If Your Child Has Fallen in With the Wrong Crowd?

All parents want their child to have friends, but having friends who propose harmful activities can be dangerous. Parents need to take action if they suspect their child is involved with a crowd that promotes activities such as smoking, using alcohol or drugs, sex, reckless driving, vandalism and other illegal or dangerous acts.

Some signs that your child may be involved with the wrong friends include:

- **Lack of communication.** Your child doesn't tell you much about his new friends, where they go and what they do together.
- **Secrecy.** Your child doesn't want you to overhear phone conversations. He doesn't tell you his plans for activities with his new friends.
- **Behavior change.** Your child just isn't the child you used to know. You have a gut feeling that something is different and something is not right about the kids he's hanging out with.
- **Lack of respect.** Your child talks back to you and questions family values. He puts more stock in the values of his new friends.
- **Poor academic performance.** Your child's grades are worse than they've ever been and his schoolwork is no longer as much as a priority to him.
- **A change in dress.** Suddenly your child is dressing like members of a group that causes you to be concerned.
- **A loss of interest in activities.** If your child used to love scouts or soccer and has suddenly lost interest, he may be focusing more on his new friends.
- **Excessive dependence on his new friends.** If your child lacks confidence, he may rely on his new friends, even if they engage in behavior your child knows is wrong.

### What to Do if Your Child Gets Into an Uncomfortable Situation

Sometimes, in spite of his best intentions, a kid will find himself in a situation that he simply is not equipped to handle. He may have assumed that his friend's parents would be home or he may have been unaware that alcohol would be available at a party, for example.

Create a family code your child can use when he calls you from an uncomfortable—or dangerous—situation. For example, your code phrase might be, "Did Uncle Jerry get back today?" Let your child know that, if he uses the code, you will come and get him immediately—no questions asked.



**What should you do if your child has fallen in with the wrong crowd?**

If you suspect your child has a friend who is a negative influence, take these steps:

**2. Talk with your child about his new friend (or friends).**

Set aside a time when you can both give your full attention. If your child resists such a conversation, say that you don't need to talk about it immediately, but that you would like him to set a time to talk with you about it before he is with his friends again. Let your child set the time for the talk. Listen carefully to what your child has to say. Don't challenge your child. Start the conversation with an open-ended question such as:

*I can smell tobacco when Joey comes into the house. I'm concerned that he smokes and that he will encourage you to smoke. I'm really worried about this. Should I be worried?*

*I've heard Greg use language that we don't allow in our family. I'm concerned because I've heard you talking like that, too. I won't tolerate it or allow it in my house.*

*I'm concerned that the overly sexy way that Katie and Lindsey dress sends a message that they're ready for sexual activity. Is that a message you want to send? Are you sexually active? I don't think you're ready. Do you know the risks of sex?*

*I'm worried because you have seemed so secretive lately. I don't allow sneaking around or lying. You must let me know where you're going and what you'll be doing and who you'll be with before you can leave.*

*I noticed that Todd is a very aggressive driver, and I think he's reckless. I don't want you driving like that or riding with him anymore. If you get a ticket for driving like that, you'll lose your keys and license.*

*I've been concerned that Abby, Katie and Heather exclude other girls. How do you feel about how they treat other kids?*

*I'm uncomfortable about your friendship with Karen. She's rude to your sister and you've been coming home late when you have been out with her. Are you comfortable with this friendship? I hope you don't act like that to others.*

**1. Determine whether or not your concerns are legitimate.** Ask yourself:

*How does my child act when he is with this friend?*

*Does this friend engage in behavior that is contrary to our family values? What specific behavior is the most troubling?*

*Has my child changed for the worse because of his involvement with this friend?*

*Are my concerns just superficial? (You just don't like the kid's quirky personality or his haircut.)*

**3. Consider what your child has told you.**

*Does your child see a good side of this friend or group that you missed?*

*Has your child been feeling left out and needed friends, even if they were the wrong kinds of friends?*

*Are these friends just testing the waters of independence?*

*Has your child just outgrown his old friends and interests?*

*Does your child need your help in getting out of this friendship?*

Consider a compromise with your child. Say that for now you will allow your child to associate with his friend only at school, in your home and with your family until you get to know him better and feel more comfortable about his behavior.

**4. Set up a meeting with the other child's parents.**

Say your kids have been spending a lot of time together and you just want to get to know them better. Talk about what rules and guidelines they have for their child.

**5. Establish rules for your child**

**about when he can go out,** and where he can go. Also set clear consequences if your child doesn't follow the rules.





**6. Forbid the friendship** if you feel that your child's new friend is definitely urging him to use drugs or engage in other activities that don't fit in with your family values. Take these steps:

1. *Tell your child exactly why you are forbidding the friendship. Make clear that you do not condemn the child, but that you do condemn his behavior and that you do not want your child to associate with him. If it is a school friend, say your child may not see the friend outside of school.*

2. *Help your child participate in activities where he can make new friends.*

3. *Monitor your child's activities (you should be doing this anyway). When he goes out, expect him to tell you where he is going. Get a phone number where you can reach him. Drive him to and from activities.*

4. *Remember, you are the adult and you are in charge. Don't let your child make you feel guilty for your decision.*

**7. Educate yourself about gangs** if this is a concern in your area.

**8. Seek help if your child continues** to associate with friends who are a negative influence in spite of all your efforts. Contact:

*Your child's teacher or guidance counselor.*

*Your pediatrician. He can recommend a good family counselor.*

## Talk With Your Child About the Dangers of Risky Behavior

If you haven't talked with your child about alcohol, drugs, smoking or any of the other risky behaviors that some kids engage in, do it now. Even if you don't think it's a problem, do it. In addition to the pressure your child may be getting from friends, consider the powerful impact of the messages she sees and hears on TV and in popular music that glamorize smoking, drinking, drug use and sexual activity.

Know where your child is, who she's with and what she's doing. Ask every time before she goes out, even if she rolls her eyes and complains. Remind her of her curfew.

You don't need to be paranoid, but keep your ear to the ground. Even if you've tried to keep open channels of communication between you and your child, she may keep information on risky behavior to herself. Network with other parents, especially those of your child's friends. Find out what they've heard about what's going on in their kids' lives. Do all the stories seem to match up?

### Tobacco

The experts say that more than three million young people between the ages of 12 and 18 smoke. Girls often start to smoke because they think it will help them be slim, sexy and sophisticated. Boys often smoke—or use smokeless tobacco—because they are emulating professional athletes they admire. Both boys and girls are most likely to try tobacco for the first time when they are with their friends.

Make sure your child knows the facts—and the proven health risks—associated with tobacco use. Make sure he understands that it is against the law in most states for children under the age of 18 to purchase or use tobacco products. Do not allow your child to smoke in your home or car. If you are a smoker yourself, try to quit. Tell your child you don't want him to follow in your footsteps.

### Alcohol

Most parents aren't aware how many young people drink. In one study, two-thirds of all high school seniors and one-third of all eighth graders reported drinking in the previous month. More than 10 percent of senior high school drinkers said they had their first drink before the age of nine. One in three fourth-graders reported feeling "some" to "a lot of" pressure from their friends to try alcohol.

Most drinking takes place in homes when parents are away. Don't let your child go to a party unless you know there will be adult supervision. Call to check. Don't take your child's word for it. Expect your child to report in when she gets home. It sends a message that you care, and it gives you a chance to check her physical condition as well.



Be sure to talk with your teenager about the dangers of drinking and driving. Make it clear that you never want her to drive after drinking or get in a car driven by someone who has been drinking. Agree to provide her with a "hassle free" safe ride home if she ever finds herself in a position where the driver for the evening has had something to drink (see the "secret code" idea in the previous section on uncomfortable situations).

## Drugs

Young people often experiment with drugs because they are curious and because they want to fit in with their friends. As with most risky behavior, peer pressure is the most common reason why young people try drugs. And it's not just illegal drugs such as marijuana that are at issue. Over-the-counter drugs such as cold medicine, diet pills and painkillers, as well as prescription drugs such as Valium® and Ritalin® are drugs of choice for many young people today.

If your child is a student-athlete, be aware that performance-enhancing drugs and supplements are not issues only professional athletes deal with. The desire to boost athletic performance and energy, enhance physical appearance and increase muscle mass may entice your teen to experiment with these products. He can succumb not only to peer pressure but also to the competitive pressure he places on himself.

- **Be clear** about your expectations. Explain to your child that you expect him to avoid these substances.
- **Educate your child** on the potential damage to kidneys, liver and heart from serious prescription anabolic steroids and over-the-counter creatine and protein supplements.



- **Be vigilant.** Monitor what your teen buys, including Internet purchases. Read the ingredients. Check with your family physician if you aren't sure of a product's safety.
- **Talk to your child's coach** and determine the school's policy on performance-enhancing drugs. Make sure your child understands these rules and the consequences of breaking them.
- **Discuss the ethics** of his involvement with these substances. A noble athlete is expected to compete fairly.

Above all, support your child—whether he wins or loses. Praise him for making the decision to say no to these drugs.

The most important thing you can do is to keep the lines of communication open. Let your child know the dangers associated with drug use. Explain that even over-the-counter drugs can be dangerous or even deadly if not used according to directions.

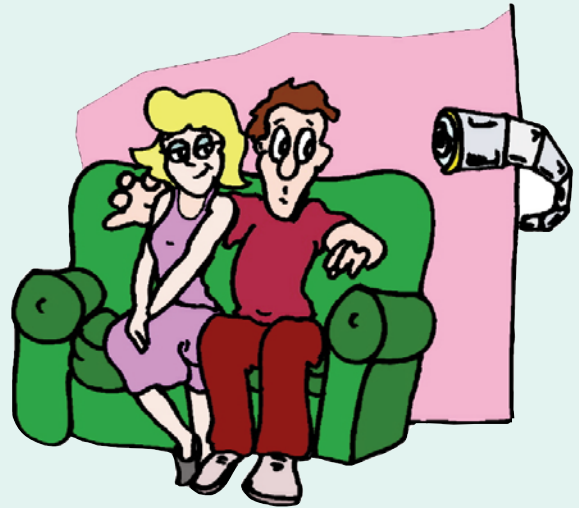
## Sex

From steamy TV soap operas to suggestive magazine ads to explicit song lyrics, today's young people are bombarded by sexually provocative messages. Although everyone else—especially kids—is talking about sex, parents are too often missing in action. Research shows that fewer than 20 percent of parents have ever had any meaningful conversations with their kids about this important and sensitive topic.

Even though it may be a little uncomfortable, it's important to talk with your child about sex. It's important for her to have accurate information that reflects your family's values—before she encounters pressure from her friends to experiment.

**If  
you treat people as if they were  
what they ought to  
be, you help them  
become what they are  
capable of being.**

—Johann Goethe



Here are a few things you can do:

- **Before you start**, think of the questions your child may ask. You might even want to talk through your answers with your spouse or a good friend.
- **Don't worry** that talking about sex will encourage your child to try it. The young people who are the most sexually active are often the ones who have the least information.
- **Look for opportunities**. If you are watching a TV show that presents an unrealistic view of sex, use it as a way to lead into a conversation about sexuality.
- **Listen to what your child has to say**. It's the best way to find out what she does and doesn't know.

## For More Information

**“Action Steps To Help Your Children Cope With Peer Pressure and the Need for Peer Acceptance”**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
<http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/govpubs/phd711/cope.aspx?printer=yes>

**“Dealing with Peer Pressure: Helping Your Kids to Stand Alone”**

by Belinda Mooney  
 Parents’ Source  
[www.parentsource.com/7.03.article.html](http://www.parentsource.com/7.03.article.html)

**“Evaluation of the Impact of Two After-School Recreation Programs”**

by Dwayne Baker and Peter A. Witt  
<http://rpts.tamu.edu/Faculty/Witt/wittpub3.htm>

**“Helping Kids Keep Themselves Out of Hot Water”**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
<http://family.samhsa.gov/teach/pressure/summer.aspx?printer=yes>

**“Negative and Positive Peer Pressure”**

by Denise Witmer  
 About.com  
[http://parentingteens.about.com/cs/peerpressure/a/peer\\_pressure.htm](http://parentingteens.about.com/cs/peerpressure/a/peer_pressure.htm)

**“Negative Peer Pressure: How to Help Kids Say ‘No’ and Still Keep Their Friends”**

by Sharon Scott  
 4therapy.com  
[www.4therapy.com/consumer/life\\_topics/item.php?uniqueid=6941&categoryid=491&](http://www.4therapy.com/consumer/life_topics/item.php?uniqueid=6941&categoryid=491&)

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1-800-477-8925  
[www.parent-institute.com](http://www.parent-institute.com)

**“Peer Pressure: Helping Your Teen Resist Negative Peer Pressure”**

by Anne Marie Robichaud  
 CanadianParents.com  
[www.canadianparents.com/articles/feature09h.htm](http://www.canadianparents.com/articles/feature09h.htm)

**“Peer pressure—It isn’t all that bad. Helping your child form positive friendships”**

Capita Region Board of Cooperative Educational Services  
[www.capregboces.org](http://www.capregboces.org)

**“Preparing Youth for Peer Pressure”**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
<http://family.samhsa.gov/teach/pressure/preparing.aspx?printer=yes>

**“Preteens and Peer Pressure”**

by Denise Witmer  
 About.Com  
<http://parentingteens.about.com/cs/peerpressure/a/preteenspeer.htm>

**“Secrets to Help Your Kids Handle Peer Pressure”**

by Nancy Samalin  
 Bottom Line Secrets  
[http://bottomlinesecrets.com/blpnet/article.html?article\\_id=7297](http://bottomlinesecrets.com/blpnet/article.html?article_id=7297)

**“Teach Your Child Refusal Skills”**

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
<http://family.samhsa.gov/teach/pressure/refusal.aspx?printer=yes>

**What Kids Need to Succeed**

by Peter Benson, Judy Galbraith and Pamela Espeland  
 Free Spirit Publishing  
 1-800-735-7323  
[www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com)

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parents to encourage learning in their children:*

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