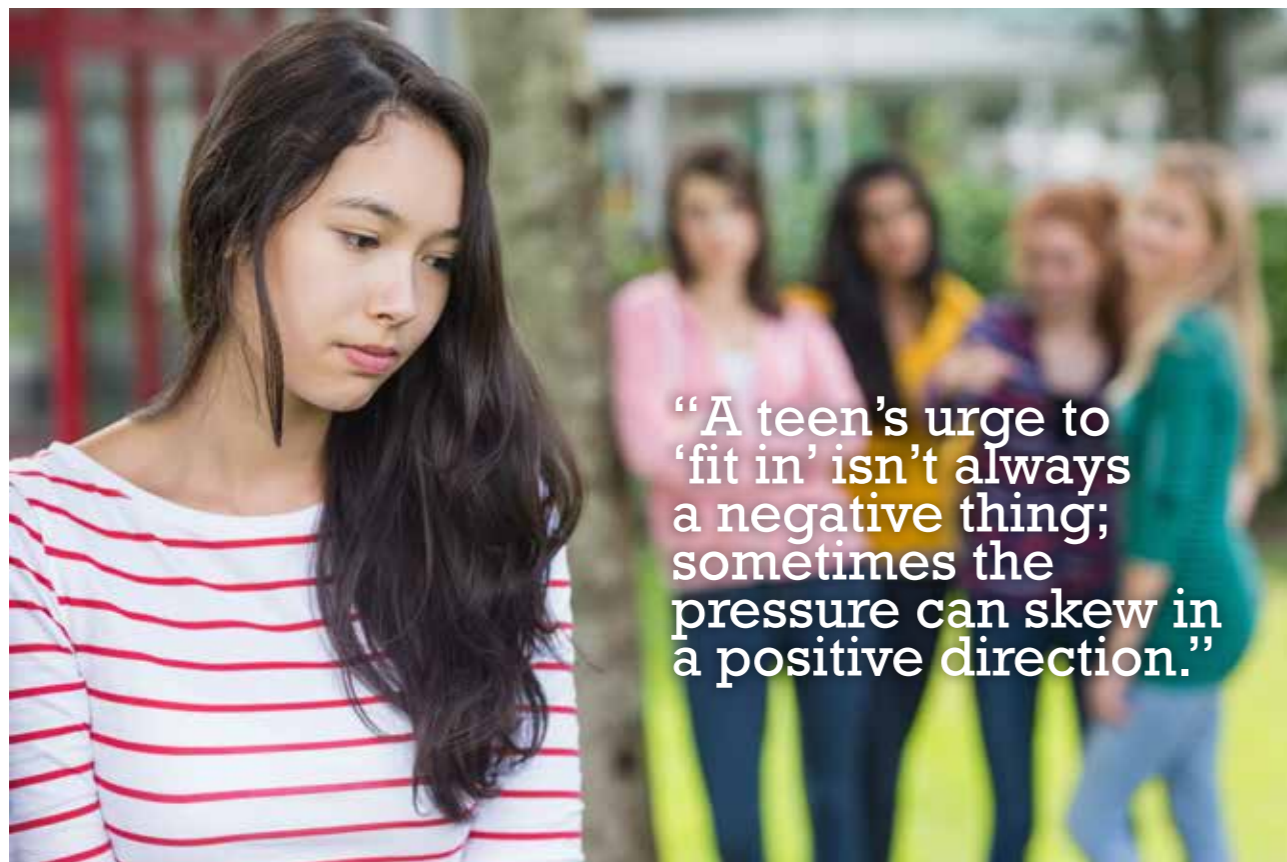


Helping Teens Cope with *Peer Pressure*



“A teen’s urge to ‘fit in’ isn’t always a negative thing; sometimes the pressure can skew in a positive direction.”

MICHAEL EASON is a new member of the **MindNLife** team in Central, joining Dr Quratulain Zaidi (who many of you will know from her regular columns in *Expat Living*). Here he looks at the all-important issue of peer pressure, especially as it affects teenagers.

Peer pressure is something that affects us at every stage of our lives. Its impact, though, can be especially consequential during the already tumultuous teenage years. The urge to “fit in” and to belong is natural; Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, considered “love/belonging” to be so important that he listed it amongst the basic five needs in his hierarchy of human motivation.

There are many different ways to define peer pressure. However, one that I find particularly comprehensive and easy to understand is from Dr Brett Laursen, a psychologist who conducts research in this area in both the US and Finland. He explains peer pressure as “influence to behave differently, that’s exerted by peers.” Interestingly, he also notes a gender difference in peer pressure. Boys seem to be more likely to be influenced by groups and group membership, whereas girls are more susceptible to

be influenced on an individual level. This observation may be useful to keep in mind when evaluating if your own child is under the influence of peer pressure.

Dr Laursen also identifies two different types of peer pressure: explicit and implicit. Explicit peer pressure may result when someone is directly pressured into something, such as changing their clothing style because they were being made fun of at school due to how they dress. Implicit peer pressure, on the other hand, results from more indirect forms of pressure, such as a teen wanting a particular brand of smartphone because they notice all the “cool kids” seem to have this type. So, it’s important to keep in mind that teens may not always even be aware or conscious of the peer pressure that is present in their lives.

This urge to belong or “fit in” is by no means always a negative occurrence. Sometimes the pressure may actually skew in a positive direction. Teens who socialise with others who value good marks in school, for example, may be pressured to study and perform better on exams so as not to be looked down upon by members of their peer group.

While the desire to belong is a basic human need, it can become so strong that we may comprise certain core values or beliefs in order to “fit in”. For a teenager, this is often especially tempting as so much of a teen’s identity depends upon peer recognition, approval and status. Negative peer pressure may result in a child engaging in activities detrimental to their well-being, such as skipping school or experimenting with illegal drugs.

If you notice that your teen seems to be acting entirely out of character and making choices that seem to contradict your sense of who they are, this may simply be part of the natural process of identity exploration – a phase in life that many psychologists agree is part adolescent identity development. However, if your teen seems to be experiencing undue distress or legal, behavioural, social or academic difficulties, looking at their peer group may be helpful in determining if peer pressure could be a cause of some of these issues.

The following are just a few suggestions for helping your teens deal with and manage peer pressure.

#1 Help them learn who they are and what they stand for

Support your child in exploring their likes and dislikes, their interests and disinterests. Encourage their interest in new activities. Nurture their natural talents. Help boost their self-esteem and confidence.

#2 Practice assertiveness training

Teens who are more assertive are often less susceptible to peer pressure. Learning to use “I” statements, such as “I feel” or “I want” is just one way to encourage your child to be able to express themselves openly and assertively. Parents may also role-play or strategise with their teen some ways to refuse or to disengage from a situation that makes them uncomfortable. Some psychologists and therapists may also specialise in helping teens work on increasing their assertive communication style.

#3 Listen and parent without judgment

Some parents have found it useful to have a key or “safety” word that their teen can text them or call them with if they find themselves in an uncomfortable situation. Upon receiving this message and learning your teen’s location, you or someone you trust can go and “rescue” your teen from wherever they are – no questions asked on your part. This way your child does not have to fear punishment or consequences, and he or she is able to safely resist or remove themselves from a situation that they may have otherwise simply gone along with due to fear of you finding out about the situation and becoming punitive.

#4 Normalise the experience

Talk with your child and help them to understand that peer pressure and influence exists everywhere in life. We are pressured to buy products through marketing and advertising, commercials on television and social media, and on billboards in the MTR stations. We are pressured to keep up our appearances by having the latest technological gadgets, name-brand clothing labels and so on. Helping your child to understand that pressure is a normal part of life can help them begin to build up the emotional tools they need to respond to these pressures, both as teenagers and as they transition to college life and later to adulthood and beyond.

In sum, peer pressure is an unavoidable part of life, and the desire to belong is actually natural and healthy. It’s only when this desire is so strong and we begin compromising our sense of self that it becomes problematic or even pathological. Talking openly with your teen about this experience and laying down some basic ground-rules are useful strategies in helping them successfully navigate through this impressionable time of their life.

About Michael

Since 2005, Michael Eason has worked clinically with counselling and psychotherapy for adolescents and adults, including clients with LGBT issues, substance abuse challenges and dual diagnoses. He is a US Licensed Psychotherapist. *EL*



For more information, contact MindNLife at 2521 4668 or info@mindnlife.com, or visit mindnlife.com.