

## Helping Your Child Respond to Peer Pressure By Tim Hogan, Psy. D.

*"Old age and treachery will always win out over youthful exuberance."*

As children reach adolescence, peer culture exerts increasingly powerful influences on the lives and decisions of young people. Today, peer culture reaches even further into the lives of our children via friends and a media culture that is everywhere: the Web, smartphones, and social media. How do we protect and empower our children in the face of this overwhelming influence? Here are three key strategies:

### Strategy #1: Invest in your relationship with your child

The key to winning the battle for your child's attention is to relentlessly pursue a positive and compassionate relationship. Why? *Children will always gravitate towards the adults who take them the most seriously.* How do we do it?

First, spend time in their world. We often hear of or attend events that offer door prizes, but carry this caveat: "You must be present to win!" This simple statement reminds us of the secret of human relationships: We must be present in the lives of our children if we hope to win their attention. Notice how they communicate with peers (social networking sites, texting, etc.), spend time around them in a gentle and accepting way during times of transitions, such as in the mornings, when they return from school and in the evenings before bed. Use these times to offer support, encouragement and comfort.

Second, become a world-class listener by *reflecting, validating* and *empathizing* with your child.

- **Reflecting:** It is easy to get caught in power struggles with kids. You know you are in a power struggle when you hear yourself say "No, because I said so." Instead, notice and reflect what they are saying with their words and with their body language. (For example, "*I hear you asking to stay out past your curfew tonight. You look very excited about the possibility! Is that right?*").
- **Validating:** After you have reflected back to your child what you have seen and heard, *validate* what they are saying. You can do this simply by letting them know that their feelings "make sense". This does not mean that you agree with their reasoning or that you approve of what their idea. You are simply letting them know that they have a right to feel as they do. For example, "It makes sense to me that you would like to spend more time with your friends. I know you guys are awesome together and you have lots of fun."
- **Emphasizing:** Show empathy for the child's feelings whenever possible. For example, "I can see that you are disappointed that you can't stay out late and might end up feeling angry with me because of this."

Becoming a world-class listener allows you to keep your connection alive, regardless of whether you are comforting, enjoying, or arguing with your child.

Finally, commit to *special times* and *dates* with your child. When children are younger, schedule regular play times, called "special times". As children get older, translate special times into dates. These regular investments of time in your relationship will create a solid connection that is difficult to break, even in the face of peer pressure.

### Strategy #2: Invest in your child's talent development.

People are most vulnerable to negative peer influences when they lack confidence and want others' approval. Children who spend more time developing expertise (such as academics, athletics, music,) are less likely to become preoccupied with negative peer influences. This issue becomes even more crucial as children enter early adolescence. The time of adolescence is when talented children are most likely to abandon their interests, such as drop out of music or a sport, and slack off in school. Encourage your child to continue developing at least one of their gifts or talents through formal training or practice.

Help your child to see and understand that their unique talent and competence is connected to being created uniquely in the image of God. Post Ephesians 2:10: *"For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life"* (NRSV). Help them to see that when they improve on a gift or talent they are participating in God's wonderful act of creation.

### Strategy #3: Know what influences your child.

Successful youth ministers live by the mantra "influence the influencers." Get to know your child's friends: the people outside your family who influence your child the most. Engage them in conversation, take them seriously, meet their parents, and invite them to join you for dinner.

In this age of social media, "electronic friends" may have a significant influence upon your child. Be aware of what your child does on-line and know who their e-friends are, whether your child wants you to do so or not. Establish rules for the use electronic media and monitor your child's use of it, including the following.

- Any computer attached to the Internet should be positioned in a public place where you can supervise its use.
- Let your child know that anything done on a computer (i.e., social networking sites) that can be accessed by others will be accessed by you.
- If children want to use the computer they need to provide you with the log-in information and passwords needed to access the site. You may also wish to purchase software that allows you to monitor everything that has been viewed on their computer.

Supervising your child's use of electronic media will both keep you informed of the peer pressure your child experiences and will give you a helpful window into the inner life of your child.