

Peer Pressure: How Adults Can Tip the Scales

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Abstract

The presence of peer influence has a multidirectional impact that lasts across the lifespan. Particularly, youth tend to experience more intense effects from their peers. As they search for independence from parents and adults, they seek cohesion amongst their peers. Adults can assist in their positive development by engaging youth in specific peer program structures such as sports, school-based peer mentoring, and adult attachment and modeling of appropriate behaviors. In the sports realm, team cohesion is a characteristic dynamic of a team wherein each member of the group subscribes to the same goal and work towards achieving a desired outcome. It provides an excellent structure for application into many other settings. School-based peer mentoring affords early adolescents with healthy, positive, and structured peer relationships. Adult attachment and mature peer relationship modeling provides the additional foundation for children to emulate and avoid the pitfalls of peer pressure.

Keywords: peer pressure, cohesion, peer mentoring, adult attachment, modeling

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Throughout the maturation of developmental stages during adolescence, youth are enabled to become more susceptible to the influence of their peers in academic, recreational, and social settings. Adolescents may experience negative or positive influences from their peers. School teachers, counselors, coaches, and parents can assist youth adjust to their physical, emotional, and social changes and growth. Adults can circumvent some undesirable outcomes by engaging peers in a variety of programs. According to Dodge, Dishion, and Lansford (2006, p. 32), interventions that mobilize adults, whether they be group leaders or parents, to supervise youth closely, to manage peer group dynamics, and to structure contact and interactions with peers are effective in reducing problem behavior.

Peer pressure is a strong form of conformity because it is motivated by the desire to belong to a group. Per Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the desire to be loved and to belong is a basic need. As conformity for social knowledge is stronger than punishment/reward, conformity to meet a basic need through peer pressure should be very strong as well (Aronson, 2008, p.31). Peer pressure has higher permanence because it is often, but not always, based on identification rather than reward/punishment. Typically one would choose a peer group that they feel is similar to who they are or who they want to be. Teachers come and go every year, but friendships can last a lifetime. Permanence would also be effected by the length of time spent in the group and if the individual internalized the values of the group (Aronson, 2008, p. 37).

Some shocking statistics about the power of peer influence have been published in a variety of sources. According to one study in Maryland, teenagers begin experimenting with alcohol as young as age thirteen (Hardy, Gerber, & Vasen, 2009). Another found that approximately 30% of middle and high school students report exposure to drugs while in the

school building. As if controlled substances weren't bad enough, Hardy et al. found that nearly half of all teens report feeling pressured into a sexual or romantic relationship for which they were not emotionally prepared.

While peer pressure can be a negative and fearful fact of life for our youth, there is a way to use this influence in a positive manner just as easily and powerfully as it is used for negative. Positive peer pressure can encourage young people to have healthy attitudes, values, elicit respect and foster pride in hard work.

Team Building

One way to encourage a more positive influence among peers is to adopt some of the techniques and characteristics found in a successful sports team. According to the definition of social psychology, within any group of people there will be influences (real or imagined) that affect individual behaviors (Aronson, 2008. p. 5). Sport psychologists have differentiated between ranks of social groups, however, placing a team at the highest, most complex level. A random gathering of people with no unifying purpose is referred to as a crowd, while a collection of people with a common purpose is referred to as a group. In order to achieve the team designation, a group must go beyond simply sharing a purpose and work together to achieve an agreed-upon goal (Schmidt, McGuire, Humphrey, Williams, & Grawer, 2005, p. 173). The dynamics of a successful team include many characteristics, including the ability of members to talk freely, trust and reliance among teammates, and an almost familial sense of loyalty to each other (Estabrooks & Dennis, 2003/2007, p. 100). This study even reports that people in groups like this do not see each other as rivals and are not primarily interested in their own success. Clearly this is an ideal situation with the potential for many positive, healthy peer influences.

In order to reach this upper echelon of social interaction, a group needs to develop cohesion, which can be defined as the tendency of a group to come together in pursuit of its goals (Schmidt, McGuire, Humphrey, Williams, & Grawer, 2005, p. 173). Cohesion is multidimensional, dynamic, purposeful, and affective (Estabrooks & Dennis, 2003/2007, p. 101). Cohesion depends on whether or not the team is oriented towards practicing skills and reaching agreed-upon goals, rather than simply beating an opponent. Numerous studies have found that group cohesion is not a necessary component of success, but achievement of goals and high performance does have a positive effect on cohesion (Schmidt, McGuire, Humphrey, Williams, & Grawer, 2005, p. 174). This high correlation between team success and cohesion was present for a variety of sports teams—individual to collective, male to female, across all age and ability levels and is present in self-reported questionnaires as well as quantitative performance measurements (Patterson, Carron, & Loughead, 2004). While cohesion is an important factor in team building, it does not inherently lead to positive social influences among group members. Miller et al. found that teams whose goals placed a high emphasis on winning reported lower morals within the team and an increase in legitimizing physical aggression towards other players. Conversely, teams whose goals reflected a desire for mastery of skills and whose coaches did not tolerate violence reported an increase in team morals and sportsmanship. Shortly after a new team has attained cohesion, the group enters a phase called “norming.” In this stage, team members view each other as members of a greater cause. They respond to conflict in a positive manner and strive to always do what is best for the team. Individuals not only know their roles on the team, but also encourage everyone else to do their best in their own role (Schmidt, McGuire, Humphrey, Williams, & Grawer, 2005, p. 176). Teams with strong cohesion were less likely to report amoral behavior among teammates and strongly disapproved overly aggressive

activities on the field (Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Treasure, 2002). Team cohesion establishes a system of positive peer pressure where the members successfully avoid undesirable behavior that is not only a threat to their group dynamics, but socially unacceptable in all realms.

So how is team cohesion achieved? As one author put it, the coach is “the definer, shaper, and provider of the sport experience for the members of a team” (Schmidt, McGuire, Humphrey, Williams, & Grawer, 2005, p. 179). Schmidt et al. (2005) suggest that since cohesion is such a dynamic and active process, it must be facilitated by a skilled leader who can apply both “the science and the art of coaching”. Loughhead and Hardy (2004) emphasize not only the importance of skilled formal leadership (an adult coach), but suggest that even informal leaders (peer captains, student leaders, etc.) have a great influence on team cohesion. The study found that while coaches tended to train, instruct, and discipline athletes, the peer leaders spent more time providing support, feedback, and democratic behaviors than the adults. This is no doubt also a result of the coaches’ decision-making skills, as they tend to be the ones to assign peers to step up in a leadership role. In order to develop cohesion, one study offers a four-phase strategy that begins with *education* (reviewing of principles and skills, emphasizing teamwork and deemphasizing individual success), *goal-development* (identifying individual goals that help the team as well as goals for the team as a whole), *implementation* (recording team performance, comparing to previous results), and *renewal* (reconsidering goals or setting higher expectations) (Estabrooks & Dennis, 2003/2007, pp. 105-108). Schmidt et al. (2005) make a distinction between transactional and transformational leadership. A leader who uses a transactional approach offers rewards for the desired behavior and punishes inappropriate behavior. Under this style of leadership, team members are “conditioned” to accept the team values, but do not truly accept them as their own. Coaches will often resort to threats and punishment, which will

lead to temporary cohesion that expires if the consequences are not consistent or when individuals on the team rebel against this authoritarian style. On the other hand, transformational leaders seek to influence the values, needs, and goals of each member of the team. By employing a strategy to encourage cohesion, rather than enforcing it, the result is a team that willingly accepts their roles and aligns their personal goals with the goals of the team.

Peer Mentoring

Transformational leaders can foster healthy habits and positive behaviors in youth by facilitating and supporting youth groups in a school-based setting. Peer groups have a multidirectional impact on the lives of youth. For instance, peers may reinforce conducive or deviant behavior in each other. Dodge (1993) found that adolescents who had developed positive peer relationships generated more alternative solutions to problems, proposed more mature solutions, and were less aggressive than youth who had developed negative peer relationships. There are cultural and societal outlets that insinuate that youth who are influenced by peers are operating in a sense of “cognitive weakness.” Contrarily, Steinberg and Monahan (2007) have proposed that individual conformity in any situations is a joint product of the pressure to conform and the capacity of the individual to resist the coercion. The strength of the peers influence has a greater impact on the ability to influence than the internal attributes of the influenced peer.

Youth participants in cross-age peer mentoring programs are more likely to be successful academically and are more likely to avoid risk-taking behaviors. According to Garringer and McRae (2008), cross-age peer programs provide a growth and learning opportunities for both mentors and mentees, resulting in a “double impact” that is appealing in schools and districts attempting to support students with limited financial resources. Peer mentoring differs from

student leaders, peer tutors, or peer assistance. The goal of the program determines the classification of the peer group and the procedures that will be used to attain the goals. In a peer mentoring program, the goal is to emphasize establishing mutually beneficial developmental relationships between the mentor and the mentee using a one-on-one model (Garringer and McRae, 2008, p. 2-3).

The success of peer mentoring programs is supported by the positive outcomes from the mentors and mentees. In order for programs to have positive outcomes, program facilitators and supervisors must pay close attention to program structures and practices that support peer mentors as they work with their mentees (Garringer and McRae, 2008). Mentors and mentees both experience increased connectivity to their peers and school. However, each group benefits in its own way. The self-efficacy of mentees increases and their academic performance improves. Also, their prevalence of delinquent behavior subsides. Additionally, mentors experience increased self-esteem, heightened moral reasoning, better intrapersonal communication and conflict resolution skills, and a better relationship with their parents. According to Karcher (2007), it is important to utilize a cross-age peer model in which there is some hierarchy between mentor and mentee. Typically, the success of this type of model necessitates there is at least a two-year age difference between the mentor and the mentee.

Effective peer mentoring programs are desirable to school officials, teachers, and parents. There are a variety of factors that contribute to a successful peer mentoring program. More specifically, all participants have a shared understanding of the nature of the mentor-mentee relationship and there are clear expectations for the mentor and the mentees interaction (Karcher, 2007). Education and orientations are helpful to ensure the standard information and expectations are disseminated to each participant and supporter. Effective programs have a

mentee orientation, an initial mentor training with ongoing support, and pay close attention to the developmental considerations of the mentee age group and the mentor age-group. A study by BBBS (2004), found that “Littles” matched with high school “Bigs” showed more improvements in grades than “Littles” matched with corporate or college-age “Bigs.”

Within each individual there is the capacity to assist, volunteer, and contribute. Youth are not exempt and are equally able to contribute. Adults are responsible for fostering the climate of leadership and accountability where such involvement may flourish. The school setting is an ideal medium to reach youth. As more structured youth-driven programs emerge, young people will have more external resources they may access to gather positive knowledge from older peers, and employ to decrease faulty decision making and employ healthy thought patterns. Peer mentoring may serve as a vehicle to reach older youth and their younger peers. With the adequate support of adults, youth will be empowered to make a difference and others grow from the seeds that were sowed.

Adult Attachment and Modeling

Adults in the lives of children need to be the primary role models. Nature intended that young creatures are to learn from the adult members of their population. However, young people that do not feel attachment to adults are more influenced by their peers (Kim, Kwak, & Yun, 2010). The single largest problem with peer pressure is that immature children are learning from other immature children (Neufield & Mate, 2006, p. 97).

Unfortunately, to be role models adults need children to feel attached to them. As parental attachment appears to be the best indicator of the ability to self regulate and teacher attachment seems to be tied to intrinsic value, clearly both are needed (Lerner & Kruger, 1997). Additionally, teachers' abilities to have children attach to them rather than peers is supported by

successful past teacher relations and has a greater effect on all future teacher relationships than paternal attachment (O'Connor & McCartney, 2006).

Fostering the child's attachment to an adult occurs with collection (Neufield & Mate, 2006, p.180). Collection involves addressing the child, preferable by name and engaging them before peer interaction for the day occurs. Peer interaction is not discouraged but needs to occur second, behind the adult attachment. Collection also includes providing the child a compass point. In the school environment, this can be in the form of structure and the school policies such as that all children will be treated fairly. Additionally, collection should include letting children know that they are liked. "The association between students' social behavior and their peer acceptance was attenuated or channeled away by teacher liking. In other words, peer acceptance or rejection of a student represented both the student's own behavior or attribute and the extent to which the classroom teacher liked the student" (Chang et al., 2004). Collection also includes getting to know the students. Particularly, students' strengths and weaknesses should be discovered and strengthened. Discipline should support collection and the structure for fairness.

Proper collection will place adults as role models. Children model behaviors they see in adults. Any adult that has had a child repeat an undesirable word can tell you that this is true. Traditional school arrangements with one teacher directing a class offers little chance for adult peer interaction modeling to occur. However, as co-teaching and special guest occasions should be encouraged as opportunities for this type of modeling. Additionally, field trips to courts and civil functions can provide similar experiences.

The parent-teacher-peer relationship is very important to children. They may experience difficulties when their parents and teachers are in conflict. Additionally, teachers suffer from job dissatisfaction and parents' lack confidence in schools because of this discord (Vickers & Minke,

1995). “Although teachers are unlikely to receive training in building home-school connections, those that did were much more likely to use all types of strategies to promote a successful transition to school” (Hughes & Kwok, 2007).

Appropriate training on parent relationships should be based on three simple points: parents care, parents perceive school personnel as experts, and providing multiple positive solutions. The fact that parents care should be self evident however “the phrase “parents who care” is often restricted to parents whose roles abide by traditional definitions of parental involvement (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Additionally, students in the education field often expect relationships with parents to be challenging (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). This belief created in a teachers’ own education may be difficult to change without conscious effort. “It is only when teachers become aware of their own fears, concerns, and negative feelings that they are able to rationally eliminate them and develop more effective strategies” (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004).

Another part of this conscious process is to be aware of the educators’ roles as expert in their peer relationship with parents. Most parents know that they did not have to receive any training to become a parent but that educators must have four or more years of education. Additionally, parents would also expect that teachers, for example, have additional knowledge based on the experience of say three years experience with twenty four students in a class. This example would yield experience of seventy-two children for the teacher to a number much less than that for the parent.

Because the parents see the educator as an expert, the teacher or counselor needs to come to meetings with multiple positive solutions. Lack of this preparation will reduce or eliminate the parent’s confidence that school staff can help them with their child. Multiple options are

required in case some of the attempts may have already been tried and failed. Positive alternatives are essential because parent and children in these conditions have already had enough negative messages. Repeated lack of solutions will install learned hopelessness in the parents. Repeated negative messages will support the learned hopelessness and/or cause the parents to stop listening to school staff. Neither of these situations supports the environment that is best for a child to have a positive learning experience.

Discussion

While there is a plethora of research on team cohesion, little is to be found that studied peer pressure within the team. Peer mentoring is an emerging field, making research of this topic in short supply with the growing demand. Further research is needed in order to fully evaluate the effectiveness of these programs cross-culturally and throughout different socio-economic backgrounds. Aside from parental attachment, there is less research about non-familial adult attachment and relationships. Attachment to teachers, coaches, role models, and other adults has a great impact on a child's life and demands further investigation.

The villages that raised our parents, and possibly us, have changed beyond recognition. Lack of adult attachments has allowed peer influence to be overly influential. Parents and school personnel need to work together to ensure that children succeed. Peer pressure will never go away, but adults can make a difference by helping children attach to them, providing structured, supervised peer interactions, and by modeling good peer behaviors. The task that lies ahead of all adults in the lives of children won't be easy but it is important. Children are their parent's future but it can't be separated from the future of all.

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