

WHAT IF WE GIVE IN TO SOCIAL PRESSURE?

Many of us talk about the intense peer pressure our young people face today. But what about the social pressure for parents and caring adults? Do our children give in to this because as adults we also give in to materialism, social acceptance and personal gratification? We all know that moral character, values and self-respect are traits that can bring a person endless happiness and success. But as parents we are pressured by our children, their friends, the media and other parents to play “not a big deal” to many of the self-destructive choices our young people are making. In the short run it’s easier to make the “popular” decision so our children can go along with the crowd, but in the long run our society will be raising our children instead of courageous and conscientious parents.

My greatest concern is for the health and safety of our children. I have heard from hundreds of teenagers how they “beat the system.” Our 4.0, athletic, and “perfect” appearing children make us look good while they are sneaking off to their parties, just doing “a little” marijuana because “my parents did it.” And the studies report that our pot-smoking teens can hide for nearly two years before they show signs of their marijuana addiction. We hear about the booze party at a friend’s house, and his parents will chaperone it because “they’ll do it anyway and at least they are safe here.” Why do we play dumb to the alcohol at the weekend campouts?

And what about the “hush-hush” topic? Hundreds of teenagers have told me that the peer pressure to have a girlfriend or boyfriend and to experiment with sex is nearly twice as hot as the pressure to drink or do drugs. Have you ever spent time with a drunken young person, one who is afraid she has gotten pregnant or has a sexually transmitted disease, or one who is vomiting his drug abuse out of his body? Our behaviors to be socially accepted have upped the ante. In 1994 a “Sex and the America’s Teenager’s study” reported that, “1 in 4 young adults has been infected with a sexually transmitted disease, that’s well over a million, and . . . the fact is that most sexually active teens don’t use condoms consistently . . .” (Michael Gurian, The Wonder of Boys, 1997). Why is it that somewhere along the line our young people have gotten the message that since everyone’s “doing it,” then we can all slide by, no matter what the consequences?

THE PRICE OF DENIAL AND RATIONALIZATION

Is it true that some of us don’t want to be the parental outcast? Are we afraid to be the prudish adult in the neighborhood, the one who stands up for the unpopular, safer choice for our children? And we rationalize, “A little pot won’t hurt anyone, smoking cigarettes and drinkin’ aren’t that bad, I did it, and at least he’s not doing drugs; and sex is normal, I mean we grew up in the free-lovin’ sixties, and I turned out okay, right?”

Our children are drinking and experiencing drugs, sex and emotional chaos when we have more toys, entertainment, and social services than we have ever had before? Is it possible that as adults we have given in to the social pressures of the 90’s, where being our child’s friend, and buying him what’s “in and popular” is more important than exercising the strong character it takes to make healthy choices for everyone involved? If we are to be totally honest with ourselves, can we really deny what these behaviors are doing to the hearts, minds and bodies of our children? The real issue is NOT only about the use of illegal substances or promiscuity. Is it possible that the real issue is why are caring adults playing like these self-abusive behaviors are “not a big deal?”

TAKE ACTION THAT BREAKS SOCIAL PRESSURE

It's time to take action. It will take courage to get us out of our socially accepted comfort zones. But we must become passionately, accountable as parents. We can openly communicate with our young people and each other in some of the following ways:

- Call each other when we have compliments and concerns about our children or theirs.
- Ask the uncomfortable questions, however many times it takes.
- Listen to what we don't want to hear, let our children coach us to be better parents.
- Make sure a child is where he says he is by occasionally calling his friends.
- Ask relatives and friends for feedback about our children's behaviors.
- Ask for feedback about our own behaviors as caring and courageous parents.
- Take them to good counselors if they hesitate talking about bothersome issues.
- Encourage support groups where they can express their feelings in a safe place.
- Share honesty in a caring way about behaviors that are healthy and not healthy.
- Set up mutually agreed upon boundaries, with TOTAL personal safety in mind.
- Be totally honest with myself about my own self-destructive habits and behaviors.

PRODUCTIVE LISTENING

We can teach our young people about self-respect and self-care, even if some think it's unpopular and not "kool". We must become better listeners and listen to ALL of the messages. Children have three primary requests of their adult listeners:

1. Listen, please don't lecture.
2. Talk in a respectful way, as tone of voice is VERY important also!
3. Value each teen as an individual, don't make comparisons to siblings, friends, etc.

THE REWARDS OF COURAGEOUS CARING

The highly acclaimed child psychologist, Haim Ginott taught us many years ago to give up our old communication habits, including giving in to the ego of social pressures, so we can listen to the messages of our children. His constituents, Faber and Mazlish address our lifelong goals as caring adults in their book, How to Talk so Kids Will Listen, and Listen so Kids Will Talk:

We want to find a way to live with each other so that we can feel good about ourselves, and help the people we love feel good about themselves.

We want to find a way to be more sensitive to one another's feelings.

We want to find a way to express our irritation or anger without doing damage.

We want to find a way to be respectful of our children's needs and to be just as respectful of our own needs, a way that makes it possible for our children to be caring and responsible.

We want to break the cycle of unhelpful talk that has been handed down from generation to generation, and pass on a different legacy to our children, a way of communicating that they can use for the rest of their lives, with their friends, their co-workers, their parents, their mates and one day with children of their own.

It's time we stand up to the social pressures that caring adults are facing. It's time to do whatever it takes to keep every young person's body, mind and heart **safe** and **healthy**. We can do it together! And it's for a great cause--the lifelong and respectful relationship that will be there long after the social pressures have passed.

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