

Peer Pressure – Will Your Child Succumb to It?

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It's time to take a new look at an old concept – peer pressure. How many times have we blamed a teen decision to use alcohol, pot or other drugs, have sex, cut on themselves, run away or attempt suicide on “peer pressure?” Is this just an occasion of ‘passing the buck’ onto someone else's child to skirt our own child's personal responsibility or, perhaps, even our own? Or is “peer pressure merely a term we use to cover our confusion as to ‘why’ our child could make such a poor decision.

Instead, let's redefine ‘peer pressure’ to remove the generality of the term and remove the fear of being accused of poor parenting.

From years of listening to troubled teens – over 25,000 in nearly all 50 states across every socio-economic, ethnic, rural or urban, and religious boundaries – a new definition has become clear.

Peer Pressure is actually Peer Opportunity coupled with Emotional Vulnerability. BOTH must be present to tip the balance and motivate an adolescent to make poor choices.

First, take Peer Opportunity. When a child's friend or older sibling has alcohol, tobacco, pot, cocaine, meth, pharmaceutical drugs, inhalants, steroids or other inappropriate substance with them, is using them and, likely, offering them or exhorting your child to use them – this is Peer Opportunity. The “forbidden fruit” is present for the picking (using). However, this does NOT mean your child/your teen is going to take advantage of that opportunity.

Many teens DO say “NO,” “Not interested,” “Not my thing,” “My parents would kill me!” In other words, Peer Opportunity is not enough to get any child/teen to use or participate in an unacceptable act. Teaching your child refusal skills and practicing how to say No when offered is very useful in moments of Peer Opportunity. It prepares a child to handle the moment more comfortably and with confidence.

What makes a child actually take a bite of that “forbidden fruit” is *Emotional Vulnerability*. We will never eliminate Peer Opportunity completely. Alcohol and drugs, teen sex, and other dangerous choices will be present in the world for as long as there are people on the planet. But parents CAN impact the Emotional Vulnerability of their child, thereby tipping the balance in favor of a “No, thanks” response.

So, what is Emotional Vulnerability?

It's best understood through the workings of the adolescent brain. The cortex of the brain starts to grow when a child is 12 and continues to grow until they are 24 to 27 years old. The cortex's job is to provide impulse control and the ability to analyze situations, determine outcomes and consequences, and make deliberate and healthy decision. As a result, a 12 to 18 year old teen clearly doesn't have a fully developed cortex. In fact, if you've ever asked a 12 through 18 year-old, "What were you thinking?!" The best answer would be, "I wasn't thinkin' nothin'. I don't have a whole brain to think with yet." They really DON'T have a whole brain to think with yet, and are primarily responding to their emotions.

We all have a part of the brain called the amygdale which has been shown through brain scans to be the first part of the brain that activates when we go to make decisions in life. The amygdale is where we store a certain amount of emotional memory – particularly fears. Therefore, our kids our making decisions based on those feelings and fears. This is abundantly clear to me from the thousands of conversations I have had with teens. Teens don't understand why parents berate them, hit them, criticize them or ignore them; they just believe that they, the teen, are at fault and unlovable. They react to the feelings of rejection, hurt, anger as they become emotionally vulnerable – needy – desperate to be loved.

Emotional Vulnerability is when a child's fear of not being lovable exceeds a certain threshold. Teens are particularly vulnerable to wanting to fit in, be liked, and be acceptable to their peers. They all have varying levels of these feelings and fears at times in adolescence. However, there are varying circumstances in a child's life that create a level of fear of not being loved and lovable that tips the scales towards serious *Emotional Vulnerability* and dangerous choices.

Life circumstances that increase a child's fear of not being loved/lovable include parental divorce. And don't fool yourself, they didn't "get over it" because it happened back when they were 6 and now they're 12. Divorce leaves many children with a diminished sense of security and lovability which may surface or re-surface more acutely when their cortex starts to grow at 12. Once that reasoning power begins to develop, a teen will question anew: "What's wrong with me? What did I do to make my parents fight, hit me, split up?"

Thousands of teens have shared with me how they feel it is THEIR FAULT that a divorced parent isn't present in their lives right now. They feel unlovable and are plagued by self-loathing, assuming it is their fault that a parent isn't around. This is especially acute when a biological parent has abandoned the family – even if it happened before the child was even born. In adolescence, the brain has grown just enough for a teen to question, "WHY aren't they coming to see me? It must be ME. They don't really love me. I'm a loser."

The gut-wrenching fear of not being lovable/loved generates an acute loneliness that none of us, young or old, can endure for long. Drugs, alcohol, sex, running away, cutting, suicide attempts now have appeal as methods to escape the acute pain that seems to be bottomless and inescapable.

Even high-achieving teens from affluent families can have significant *Emotional Vulnerability*. Upper middle class to affluent parents may give their kids abundant material goods, exposure to hobbies and travel, etc. However, they also have a strong tendency for an abundance of high expectations with praise or criticism directly linked to performance. High-achievers come to me when they have partied too much and are now addicted to cocaine, meth, heroine, prescription painkillers, other drugs, having eating disorders or are cutting on themselves. They say they succumbed because they felt so 'STRESSED" by the expectations of their parents and/or social standing.

Keep in mind, what is tolerable stress to one child may not be for another. Depending upon what position that child has in the family (first born, middle child or youngest); upon their natural aptitudes (how hard it is for a particular child to succeed at school, sports, other activities); and the degree of control and criticism in the home, a child can or cannot tolerate a parent's disappointment or disapproval over such things as a lower than desired test score or less than stellar performance.

And any child that is subjected to regular criticism, ridicule, name-calling, or verbal abuse by a parent is going to translate that to into feelings of not being lovable – not good enough to be loved. When a teen feels they are "not being enough to be loved," their *Emotional Vulnerability* level rises significantly and primes them to give in to Peer Opportunity to drink, use drugs, have sex, run away, attempt suicide, etc.

SOCIETY'S MESSAGE ENCOURAGES KIDS TO MAKE POOR DECISIONS

We live in a society that encourages us to escape our feelings and especially the fear of not being lovable or loved. Advertising is rife with encouragement to use alcohol, prescription drugs, cigarettes, gambling, food, or whatever it takes externally to relieve such feelings.

In addition, society tells us we aren't supposed to show our feelings of inadequacy – it makes us weak; it's shameful; it's unacceptable; it's embarrassing; and it makes us vulnerable to be used, hurt or taken advantage of. Youth and adults who survive by hiding, denying and suppressing their feelings lose the ability to be empathetic or compassionate; they become the bullies and abusive parents. They are in our school yards, on the streets, on the job and in our families.

Most people do not grow up in “emotionally responsible” environments – where parents are able and willing to identify their feelings, respect other people’s feelings including their children’s, and then talk about them without criticism, shame or blame. Many parents can’t comfortably respond to the feelings of their spouse or their children without feeling guilty, defending themselves, or blaming others. It is likely they grew up being criticized, blamed, scolded, teased, shamed, told to “get over it,” or had their feelings ignored or overrun by the priorities of their parents.

If we haven’t experienced emotional respect, responsibility, patience, compassion and courtesy in our childhood, it’s hard to know what that feels like much less provide it as a parent to our own children. Compassion, patience and kindness are attributes we learn. We come out of the womb self-absorbed creatures screaming and demanding for our own survival. We learn to respect other’s feelings and needs through example and experience. Or, we DON’T learn by example as well.

We learn to hide, deny and suppress our feelings at very early ages and most definitely by high school. We become even more adept at it as adults.

For 10 years, I have asked teens in middle school/high school assemblies and parents at evening programs to identify feelings of characters I portray in my one-woman theatrical awareness program, *LEGACY OF HOPE*®. Invariably, middle school students will eagerly identify 30 to 40 different, subtle emotions. High school students will generally identify about 10. Parents consistently identify only 3 and always very basic emotions like anger, mad and sad. That’s it.

So, I then ask each of these audiences a multiple choice a-b question:

- As a result of the number of emotions each age group identifies, do you think that
- a. Middle school students have more emotions than high school students and adults?
 - or
 - b. Do we hide, deny and suppress our feelings as we get older?

EVERY audience regardless of age agrees that the answer is b:
We hide, deny and suppress our feelings as we get older.

I then ask each audience “*Why – why do we hide, deny and suppress our feelings as we get older?*”

Audiences of ALL ages agree that it is because we are taught by families and society that it is weak to show feelings; that it makes us vulnerable to criticism, ridicule and bad consequences; that we do it because we’ve learned it is a waste of time to show feelings because nobody really cares about them; etc. etc. etc. . . . answers that are NOT relationship-building nor life-affirming reasons; in fact, quite the opposite.

This social norm contributes to a lack of openness, honesty, authenticity, and belonging. It contributes to difficulty having intimate relationships and eventual high levels of divorce. It motivates a significant amount of drinking, prescription drug use and abuse, domestic violence, illegal drug abuse, overeating, other compulsive behaviors and the *Emotional Vulnerability* that leads our children to succumb to Peer Opportunity.

Case made? I hope so. More importantly, new case made for parents to learn to identify and respect their own feelings.

I encourage parents to get help in therapy or self-help groups to process old fears and wounds, understand where their feelings are rooted in their own childhoods, and begin emotional healing and growth.

Parenting is a tough job, and includes minimizing the *Emotional Vulnerability* of our kids. Basically, it's helping our kids know they are loved no matter what, that problems between parents are NOT their fault, that the behaviors of an alcohol or drug-abusing parent are symptoms of a disease and NOT proof that they are an unlovable child, etc.

We CAN minimize a teen's likelihood of making a poor choice - like drinking, using drugs, having sex, cutting, running away, attempting suicide and more - by reducing their *Emotional Vulnerability*. It may start by reducing our own adult *Emotional Vulnerability* first.

We are emotional beings whether we like it or not.

Even if an adult learned to numb their feelings and think they don't really have many emotions, those feelings are suppressed and exist on a subconscious level. Subconscious emotions do motivate every decision we make in life because we adults have an amygdale, too.

It is powerful and on purpose in the scheme of life. We are born with the need to be loved, and emotions contribute to our success at receiving and giving the love we need for emotional well-being. As scary as it may seem to adults to look back into a troubled childhood, your parenting style and the *Emotional Vulnerability* and well-being of your own children depend upon it.