Creating Positive Peer Pressure

How many times have we all heard or read about the typical negative peer pressure story: a child starts dressing a certain way, or smoking, or taking drugs, or having boyfriends, or even stealing, because the “kids at school” did that, or asked them to do it?

We have to recognize that peer pressure is indeed a very strong force in the life of a child who attends school. It exists. But it does not have to be negative, nor does it have to be shaped by children or by the law of the jungle. It is up to us, the adults, the teachers and the parents, to harness such a great weapon to help shape our child’s life and attitude in a positive manner.

One great effort to create positive peer pressure is the well-known “Just Say No” campaign, started in the 1980s and lasting into the early 1990s. The slogan was created by Nancy Reagan and originally meant to discourage children from using recreational drugs. It eventually expanded to include resisting peer pressure on premarital sex and violence. This was by all measures a high-powered campaign. From direct leadership and involvement of the first lady, to television shows and songs, to partnering with the Girls Scouts and the Kiwanis. How successful was it in achieving its stated goals?

Statistics show a drop in the percentage of high school seniors using marijuana: from 50.1% in 1978 to 36% in 1987,and as low as 12% in 1991. Similarly, the percentage of students using psychedelic drugs, cocaine and heroin also decreased over that period of time. However, there is no factual proof that this drop in drug use by children was directly caused by the “Just Say No” campaign. Critics add that the campaign was too expensive. Though in my humble opinion, it could not possibly be more expensive than the cost of half the youth of America on drugs. China’s “been there, done that” way back in the 19th century, most of her middle and upper class addicted to opium and wasting away family fortunes; a situation that eventually led to the two Opium Wars against Great Britain.

But harnessing peer pressure does not have to be national or large-scale initiatives. All of us, adults who work or live with children, have the power to create similar movements on a much smaller scale. Let’s take for example, something as simple as what to wear or what to eat. It usually takes just one child to come to school with a new pair of “flash and squeak as you walk” sneakers, with everyone oohing and aahing over them, to cause all children to whine to their parents about wanting the same pair of shoes. But what if the school had a dress code that prohibited such shoes? On the one hand, such shoes would become more desirable, simply because they were forbidden goods; and on the other hand, the spirit of rebellion against authority would become stronger.

Let’s assume that the adults and children seeing the flashing and squeaking shoes all reacted with disgust and turned away from the child; and that the teacher requested all students to take off their shoes in the classroom, in order to get a quiet atmosphere conducive to better work. It is very possible that most students would not be tempted to buy similar shoes, and that eventually, the lone child would give up wearing the offending pair of sneakers to school.

How powerful is that? What’s to stop us from starting campaigns and movements to promote some positive values then? If students who serve the community are given more recognition and honors, then logically, students who do not will try to do so. If students who achieve better academically are given recognition and honor, then the others will strive to also achieve better academically. What about promoting a healthier life style? Better eating habits? More exercise? Less computer gaming? Less television watching? Less wasting of natural resources? More recycling? The possibilities are endless. It is up to us to pick up the reins of our children’s lives.