

Chapter 10

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*H*ow to Prepare Your Child  
to Make Independent Choices



*We don't receive wisdom;  
we must discover it for ourselves after a journey  
that no one can take for us or spare us.*

-Marcel Proust



*Despite your best efforts,* at some point your child will be encouraged/coerced by either a friend or stranger to consume alcohol and other drugs. And as you know only too well, it's not always so simple as to *just say no*. The reason that it may be difficult for your child to just say no is the phenomena known as peer pressure.

Peer pressure can be extremely strong and hard to resist. Experiments have shown how peer pressure can influence someone to change their mind from what they know is a correct answer to the incorrect answer—just because everyone else gives the incorrect answer! These studies have also shown that all it takes for someone to stand their ground about what they know is right is for one other peer to join them. That principle holds true for people of any age in peer pressure situations.

## **Bridge Builder's Checklist**

*Reasons why your child may be affected by peer pressure.*

- 1) Your child may want to be liked.
- 2) Your child may worry that other children may make fun of them if they don't go along with the crowd.
- 3) Your child may be curious to try what others are doing.
- 4) Your child may believe that *everyone else is doing it*.

Though peer pressure may be uncomfortable to deal with, your child can learn how not to be tempted by the incitement of others to do something they would otherwise choose not to do. How can you help your child successfully negotiate those encounters in which they may feel pressured to consume alcohol and other drugs?

You can help your child by preparing them for such situations before they happen. How? You can *role-play* with your child. Role-playing will enable your child to have the right response at the tip of their tongue once they encounter a situation in which they're being pressured into consuming alcohol and other drugs. By having a plan ahead of time for how to say *no* to the pressures of their peers, your child can assert their independence by rejecting their friend's choices without rejecting their friend.

Now, it may be that your child hasn't asked you for help in preparing for such situations. If that's the case, make the time to bring it up yourself. Explain to your child you want to help them develop a skill that comes in handy whenever someone doesn't want to take *no* for an answer. The National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign's Behavior Change Expert Panel suggests the following exercise.

Here is a potential role-playing scenario for you to try with your daughter (You can turn the scenario around for your boys, or come up with other scenarios that fit the same pattern—anything to get your children to practice their own resistance skills):

Take the role of a boy she likes and try to persuade her to share a six-pack of beer with you. What can she say? "You're such a jerk!" is alienating. "I don't know . . ." leaves the door open and sounds like she could be coaxed. The middle ground, in which she's firm but friendly, works best. Help her

rehearse key phrases that give reasons for why she simply won't have a beer:

- “My parents will kill me if they find out, and they always find out!”
- “No, I'm not into that stuff.”
- “I tried it once, and I hate the taste.”
- “My parents trust me not to drink, and I don't want to break that trust.”

Or she could state the consequences of drinking:

- “I tried it once and ended up sick!”
- “Drinking would make me feel out of control, and I hate that.”

She'll need to be prepared for protests. She can meet them with the *broken record* technique, where she repeats her reason for not drinking until attempts to persuade her cease. Or she can make it clear that the discussion about beer is over by changing the subject, “Did you watch the game last night?” or, “Do you know if that concert's sold out?” If all else fails, she should leave, saying, “I've got to go.”

Don't forget the advice offered by The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's pamphlet—*Make A Difference: Talk To Your Child About Alcohol*, in Chapter 8. It's not enough to tell your child to avoid alcohol and other drugs—you also need to help him figure out how. What can he say when a friend offers him a beer at a party? Or what should your child do if she finds herself in a home where kids are passing around a bottle of wine and parents are nowhere in sight? How should he respond if he's offered a ride home with an older friend who has been drinking? Brainstorm with your teen for

ways to handle these and other difficult situations and make clear how you're willing to support him. An example, "If you find yourself at a home where kids are drinking, call me and I'll pick you up—there will be no scolding or punishment." The more prepared your child is, the better able he will be to handle high-pressure situations involving drinking.

There's no single approach that can insulate your child from the influence of peer pressure. Use the previously mentioned strategies along with these tips to develop a comprehensive approach to helping your child make good choices independent of the coercion of others.

## Bridge Builder's Checklist

*Ways to help your child not be influenced by the pressures of their peers.*

- 1) **Begin early.** It's incredible but true, by late elementary school, children begin to see classmates smoking, drinking, and trying drugs. Many children who become alcohol and other drugs users begin at age 12 or 13 and begin to inhale household products to get high in grades 6 or 7. Begin talking to your children early and often. Recognize when they're being curious. Don't brush them off. Be prepared to answer their questions. If you don't know the answers, find out and report back to them.
- 2) **Encourage independent thinking.** Teach your child how to think for herself. Teach her how to make age appropriate choices for herself. Encourage her to make choices, and support her choice when appropriate. Teach her the value of making independent choices rather than deferring to the wishes and desires of others. This will help her later when

she is put in a position to choose what's best for her or succumb to the influence of peers.

- 3) **Build confidence.** Direct your praise or criticism towards the action and not the person. You can empower your child by helping him master age appropriate tasks, such as riding a bicycle, building a model, working on a computer, or reading a book.
- 4) **Be clear about family values.** From an early age, children should become practiced at following rules. The best way to do that is to clearly articulate your family values and the rules that enforce those values. At the same time, you need to clearly articulate the consequences that come with breaking the rules. As your child becomes practiced at honoring the family's values by following rules and as he experiences the consequences involved with breaking the family's rules; he will become a practiced decision maker when confronted with the presence of alcohol and other drugs.
- 5) **Stand firm.** Your child looks to you for direction and support. If you're not clear, firm, and unwavering in your policies about the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, then she'll be confused by the mixed messages that you're creating. Your mixed messages may confuse your child about how to respond when confronted with a situation in which your child must make a choice about whether or not to consume alcohol and other drugs.
- 6) **Parent-Community Activities.** Help your child resist the demands of peer pressure by supporting community efforts to give young people healthy

alternatives. Alcohol and other drugs-free proms and other school-based celebrations are growing in popularity around the country. You can help to organize such events, solicit contributions, and serve as a chaperon. Local businesses are also an excellent source of support for alternative activities such as athletic teams and part-time jobs.

7) **Help Your Child Develop Healthy Friendships.**

If your child's friends use alcohol and other drugs, she is more likely to use as well. Encourage your child to make friends with individuals who will have a healthy influence. Include your child's friends in family gatherings. Encourage your child to spend more time with those who are safe to associate with. Discuss what friendship is, what qualities make a good friend, and what qualities make a bad friend. Emphasize qualities such as trustworthiness, kindness, and respectfulness as the type of qualities that make a good friend.

8) **Encourage Healthy Alternatives to Alcohol and Drugs.**

Involvement with activities that are challenging and fun is important to your child's emotional and physical well-being. Some studies of pre-teens indicate that the availability of enjoyable alcohol-free activities is one reason for deciding not to use alcohol. Encourage your children to get involved in school or religious sponsored activities.