

# Children's Peer Groups

- *Within the group, Kerry was a different person. No longer just the "baby of the family," Kerry became the leader of the girls in second grade.*
- *Adrienne refused to wear pants to nursery school. "Girls wear dresses. If I wear pants, they'll call me a boy."*
- *The group took John outside. "You help us steal skateboards or you're out of the club."*



You probably believe your children need to be with other children. You're right. To mature, your children need to have friends and be part of a group.

At the same time, you probably worry about the groups your children join. You should. At times, a peer group may tear down your children's self-confidence. It may pressure them to do things that go against your family values and standards.

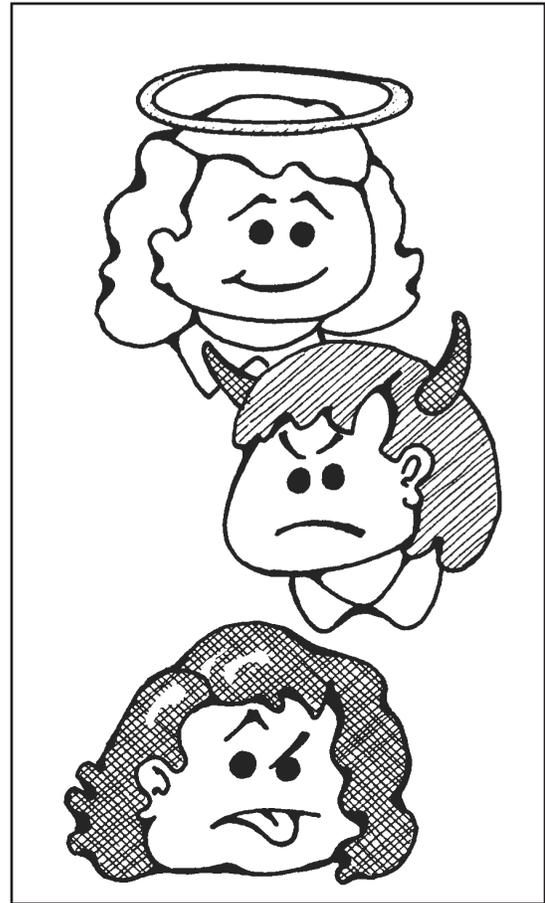
Your children need to learn to take the best of what peer groups offer without giving up their rights and beliefs.

## A trial by peers

Children begin to play in peer groups when they're toddlers and preschoolers. These groups are not organized. They're just a bunch of kids doing more or less the same thing. They gallop across the playground like wild horses or cooperate on building a hideout.

It's during the elementary school years that peer groups really take over. These groups are more organized and closer knit than ever before. For days or even weeks, the same children may belong to a club that collects bottle caps or jumps rope. They pledge to follow certain rules: "Never kiss a boy," "Never tattletale." Each child finds a special place within the group: leader, follower, advisor, clown, or hanger-on.

On one hand, children are afraid to lose membership in a peer group because it plays such an important part in their lives. It helps them feel like somebody. Within the group, Ben becomes Brain, Steve becomes Shrimp,



and Mel becomes Money Bags. Through the eyes of their friends, children gain a new sense of themselves—their looks, background, personality, and skills. Within a group children feel secure. They dare to bicycle across town and swim in the creek. They even start making decisions on their own.

On the other hand, children may feel controlled by a peer group. Often elementary school children feel they have to conform. In their minds, the group way is the only way. Anything different is wrong. The only child taking violin or the only one not cheating on a test may be excluded from a group.

## Help the child be the judge

Many parents are afraid to let their children belong to peer groups. Some are so threatened they try to cut friendships off.

Others sit by and let their children deal with the peer group all alone. These parents think their children do not want or need their parents any more. Or the parents feel powerless to help, so they withdraw their support. Often their children get into trouble or danger because they lack guidance from an adult.

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# H E L P I N G • C H I L D R E N • G R O W

Children, however, need the support of both their parents and their peers. You provide this guidance and support when you:

- Help children feel secure and loved within the family.
- Help children size up a peer group.
- Help children stand up for their beliefs.
- Give children opportunities to become part of several peer groups.
- Step in and redirect the group, if needed.
- Help children leave a group, if necessary.

This kind of support helps children learn to think and act independently—even in the face of peer pressure.

## Support your children



Children need you in good times and bad times. They need help seeing different ways to deal with peer group situations. They have several choices, as follows.

**Go along with the group.** Ms. Greitzer was glad when Billy began hanging around the boys on the block. A shy child, Billy was suddenly riding his bike all over town and making new friends. He and the boys made up secret languages. They made up jokes. When Ms. Greitzer asked Billy how he felt about Jim, Roy, and Paul, "They're my best friends," he said happily.

**Try to lead and make the group go their way.** One day Mr. Rhodes saw Sarah and her friends making fun of Judy, another girl in their class. Later, he asked Sarah why everyone picked on Judy. According to Sarah, Judy was the class cootie.

When he asked if Judy had done anything mean to Sarah, she answered, "No." Then he asked her how she felt when the kids made fun of Judy. Sarah admitted that she felt badly.

"Well," said Mr. Rhodes, "I had a friend, Jim, and everyone used to tease him. I felt terrible when they were mean, but I was scared to stop them. When I got to know Jim I had him show the other guys how to find pollywogs in the pond. After that, they started liking him too. What do you think you could do to help Judy?"

**Pull back for a while.** One summer Ms. McIntyre noticed that Pete had started swearing and hitting his brothers. She found out from her neighbors that their sons also were becoming more aggressive. So she decided to watch Pete's group more closely. Rick, a new boy visiting his aunt, had become the group's new leader.

She talked to Pete about Rick. Pete said he didn't like the things Rick got the group to do. "You know," she suggested, "You could stay out of the group when Rick is around. There's a lot to do around here. I was even thinking of building a tree house with you."

**Leave the group and join a new group or start one of their own.** Mr. Rader noticed Cheryl's long face at dinner. He asked her if anything was wrong. He said he would be glad to help if he could. She confided that all the kids were planning to break Mrs. Cabot's windows. "If I don't do it, they'll kick me out of the group," she agonized. Mr. Rader said he didn't want her to belong to that group. They were too old for her and should know better than to break other people's windows. He suggested Cheryl see what the girls her age were doing.

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