Peer pressure, either negative or positive, plays a formidable role in the developmental and emotional growth of our youth and has a direct impact on school relationships. Often when we talk about peer pressure, especially in adolescents, it is in a negative context. However, peer pressure can become positive and powerful if the right programs are in place.

In a school setting, peer pressure can be destructive, or it can build a spirit of unity and cooperation. Negative peer pressure occurs when an individual makes an unhealthy, harmful choice and influences others to join him or her. This pressure comes out of acts, for example, of cheating, disrespect, irresponsibility, lying, and bullying. Negative peer pressure particularly affects the student who is vulnerable to influence or harm, and it may be fostered by systems such as the family and the school. Sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, truancy, and bullying typically are outcomes of negative peer pressure. Conversely, positive peer pressure often results when an individual is motivated by Christian values to edify and serve others instead of self. Peer mentoring, student leadership, and Christian character are outcomes of positive peer pressure.

In a Christian school, we have the unique opportunity and freedom to teach our students about kindness based on God’s truth, which helps create positive peer pressure. At our school, substance abuse and sexual promiscuity are not commonplace; however, we are not immune to the negative peer pressure of bullying. Consequently, we have created specific programs that celebrate Christian character traits such as being kind and serving others, and programs that counter the negative peer pressure of bullying. In order to change negative peer pressure into a force that is positive, educators and counselors need to do the following: (1) recognize that peer pressure is a powerful issue, (2) provide a means for students to have a voice, and (3) create programs that enhance positive peer pressure.

Exploring the Damage Caused by Negative Peer Pressure

Dan Olweus (1993, 9), a pioneer of school bullying research, writes that “a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students.” The research literature identifies four kinds of bullying: verbal, physical, relational, and reactive. Lesser known of the four are relational and reactive bullying. Relational bullying includes gossiping, spreading malicious rumors about another, and excluding a person from a group (Vall 2002). Reactive is a more obscure and deceptive form of bullying, with the student instigating a physical fight and then feigning a self-defense motivation (Smokowski and Kopasz 2005).

Numerous studies on bullying document the emotional and physical damage that results from this kind of unrelenting negative peer pressure (Smokowski and Kopasz 2005; Wolpert 2003; Whitted and...
An empirical study found that 60 percent of boys with a bullying history in sixth through ninth grades had a criminal record by the age of 24 (Whitted and Dupper 2005). Two-thirds of all school shootings have been attributed to a bullying past out of which the victim becomes the aggressor (Hamilton Fish Institute 2005). Bullying has become the third leading cause for suicide among teens (McGraw 2003).

Furthermore, not only are victims being harmed, but so are the bystanders who remain silent because of fear of retribution. Sadly enough, when negative peer pressure on the school campus is ignored, other students eventually become unresponsive. Recently, this phenomenon was played out in our community at a public high school where several students and an adult were caught on film watching a fellow student being beaten and kicked to the ground by another female student. The observers including the adult janitor viewed the assault without a stir of emotion expressed on their faces, and only 2 students attempted to intervene (Lindberg 2004). Daily, our students are bombarded with unhealthy images and messages of violence through the media. Repeated exposure to this type of worldview normalizes violence and desensitizes our youth to negative peer pressure. We can no longer view bullying as a part of growing up or a means to “toughen up.” If left untreated, bullying will only fester and malignantly grow.

**Giving Students a Voice**

Four years ago, we observed an increased number of counseling referrals for bullying. In response to this concern, the guidance counselors provided a presentation on bullying to teachers and discussed plans to administer a bully survey. Our purpose for the survey was to determine whether the increased referrals for bullying represented a few isolated cases or a schoolwide problem. A reproducible survey was found and modified to accommodate our students from first grade through eighth grade and to reflect our Christian values.

Before the survey was given, it was stressed to the students that the findings would be confidential and that anonymity was an option. On the last page of the survey, the students had an opportunity either to identify a peer that was bullying them or to draw a picture of a bullying incident. Unlike public schools, our survey revealed minimal physical bullying but a significant degree of verbal and relational types of bullying. For many victims the survey provided a safe voice for them to share their concerns about bullying. The identifying information from the survey has been invaluable for the counselors. It gave opportunity for appropriate follow-up and intervention for the victims of verbal or relational bullying as well as for the child who exhibited bullying behavior.

Any student who was identified as a bully by three or more peers was asked to meet with the counselor. In that meeting, the expectations for future conduct and the range of consequences were discussed. The parents were notified of the bullying concerns and told that unchanged behavior would lead to a parent-student conference with the principal. In such a conference a behavior contract would be presented. Both parent and student would be expected to sign the contract and agree to its terms. The bottom line of the contract is that school expulsion could be a consequence of continued bullying. To date, we have not had to use this option; however, it is there should we not be successful in reaching students and helping them alter their behavior.

Because of the inordinate time needed to manually evaluate the results of 500 surveys, the instrument was administered just once a year. The findings in the spring were then used as a pretest measure for the coming school year. However, we were able to computerize the bullying survey last year, permitting it to be electronically scored. This method makes it possible to administer the survey at the beginning and end of each school year, providing us with comparative pretest and posttest data. As a result, we will have a far more accurate picture of where problems exist in the fall and of the success of our intervention, as measured by the spring survey.

**Enhancing Positive Peer Pressure**

There is a growing awareness in the educational community that strategies designed to enhance caring interactions among children can have a positive impact on peer pressure (Whitted and Dupper 2005). Commercial options take varied approaches. Kool-2B-Kind is a biblically based program that encourages elementary children to notice acts of kindness initiated by their peers. It is based on Mark 12:31 (NIV): “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If the kind act occurs in a “target area” of the school (for example, the playground, where bullying could be prevalent), the child is permitted to go to the office and fill out a “2Kool Certificate.” The principal signs it, and child who did the kind deed receives it. The child who reports the kindness receives a “credit card” on which this and future reports are recorded. The program...
Peer mentoring, student leadership, and Christian character are outcomes of positive peer pressure.

The Peace Keeper Commission is a unique program designed for our school but one that others can easily replicate. It was created with the intent of training children in mediation and mentoring. An annual bullying survey measures and monitors the incident rate of bullying. The initial strategy used was to give students and advisors an eight-week training in conflict resolution. These trained mediators were prepared to work with younger students at opportune times in the school day. Over time we discovered that the mediation program was difficult to implement because of having to juggle conflicting class times so that mediators could meet with students. Another unforeseen obstacle was that very few of the trained mediators had the maturity to oversee conflict mediation without coming across authoritative or bossy. The following school year, mediation was phased out to focus on the mentoring program, which was growing rapidly each year, with over 60 students serving as mentors. The annual mentor training teaches students not only social skills especially in the area of listening but also the importance of Christian love through encouragement and praise for their assigned mentees.

We learned several lessons through this transitional shift from mediation to mentoring. First, we discovered that very few students manifest the degree of maturity needed to be in a mediation position that reflects a mind-set of service instead of authority. Mentoring fostered humility and compassion, whereas the mediation role tended to create a prideful and authoritative positioning with peers. Second, we observed that the most effective and compassionate mentors were those who had experienced bullying in their past. Third, we experienced the bountiful and provisional fruit from a program that is in God’s will: parent volunteers, minimal program expenses, and exponential growth in membership each year. Finally, we discovered a reciprocal exchange of esteem building; the mentors feel valued and special in the adoring eyes of their mentees, and conversely mentees who are ostracized by their peers begin to feel visible and loved in the eyes of their mentors.

Programs designed to focus on character traits provide positive reinforcement for desirable peer interactions. In our program called Sensational Saints, a specific fruit of the Holy Spirit is selected for each month, with the classroom guidance lesson focusing on that quality. From each class one student is selected who displays that character trait. That “sensational saint” attends a party, receives a ribbon and a certificate, and has a photo taken. Photos are displayed on a prominent bulletin board located just outside the cafeteria. Students love to hear their names announced on the “Morning News” while their peers applaud their achievement!

Student organizations that provide opportunity for leadership enhance the likelihood of positive peer influence. At our school, those opportunities arise out of the Elementary Student Advisory Council, the Middle School Student Government Association, and the National Junior Honor Society. In each organization, children get a voice and the opportunity to influence their peers in a positive way.

Does peer pressure have an important role in a child’s life? The answer is a resounding “Yes, it does!” In fact, during the preteen and adolescent years, little else influences young people as much as their peer group. As Christian educators, we have the responsibility to expose bullying and negative peer pressure and the privilege of promoting positive peer relationships. With the help of God, we will see young people treating others as they wish to be treated, fulfilling the Golden Rule and His design for relationships.

To view the references, visit www.acsi.org/–cse.

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