Peer pressure online – a parent's guide

We have been working with Vodafone and the Diana Award on a project for schools called Be Strong Online. It enables young people to support each other with some of the challenges they face online. This article is about one of the topics we have been talking to young people about – peer pressure.

Peer pressure

Peer pressure has always existed among young people but, in recent years, it's taken on a whole new, and concerning, dimension.

Friends in the real world will still have a huge influence on your child's behaviour, but today, the people they meet online – whether on social media or online gaming platforms – can also exert pressure on them to act in certain ways.

This can often be a good thing – maybe encouraging them to become involved in a viral internet craze to raise money or awareness for a charity, such as the Ice Bucket Challenge. But it can also be harmful and result in children and young people acting in ways they would never think of doing by themselves or in real life, face-to-face.

Your child may join in to laugh at, or attack, someone online because they want to be popular or increase their followers on social media.

They may face pressure to take part in potentially dangerous online dares and crazes, or to send sexually provocative photos or videos (often referred to as 'nudes' by young people, or sexting) because 'everybody does it'.

Sometimes, the pressure doesn't come from a specific friend or group of friends but from the places they visit or sites they use. Young people have always been influenced by the media and those they admire – and it's easy to see how the internet can give rise to young people feeling that they have to look like celebrities (or at least pretty amazing) in every picture they take or appear to be living a life full of parties and achievements.

As a parent, there are things you can do to help your child cope with this pressure.

What to look out for

Online dares or crazes

These involve people doing dares or pranks that are filmed then shared online. The funnier or more risky the challenge appears, the more likely it is to be shared. Sometimes thousands, even millions of people can see them and taking part makes you feel part of 'the gang'. These dares are usually harmless (and often very funny), but sometimes they can go dangerously wrong. One of the most well known was the **Ice Bucket Challenge**, in which people filmed themselves having a huge bucket of iced water poured over them, ostensibly to raise awareness of Motor Neurone Disease (known as ALS in America, where it started). Millions took part quite happily, but at least two teenagers were reported to have died as a result of taking part in the challenge.

Planking saw people taking pictures of themselves 'playing dead' whilst lying face down in bizarre places. As the craze took off, people began to put themselves in ever more extreme locations to ensure the image was shared among an increasingly hard-to-impress online audience. Again, there were reports of serious injuries and deaths as a result.

Smoking and drinking

A study of 1500 15 and 16-year-olds in The Journal of Adolescent Health found that teens who saw more pictures of their friends drinking or smoking on social media were more likely to try smoking and drinking themselves.

The report concluded: 'These results provide evidence that friends' online behaviours should be considered a viable source of peer influence', leading the media to label it 'The Facebook effect'.

Sharing cruel, violent or inappropriate images and films

Bullying among school children is not a new problem but the internet has brought new ways for young people to gang up on, and humiliate, others. People can be pressurised by their friends to join in, for example by making nasty comments under photos on social media sites, or sharing unkind or manipulated images of others with the express intention of upsetting them.

Fights between young people are nothing new either but, nowadays, these are likely to be filmed on mobile phones and shared on social media, with people being encouraged to comment and pass them on. Social media can also be used to encourage people to take part in fights.

Your child may be pressurised into sending naked or sexual images of themselves to others. This pressure can include phrases such as 'everyone does it'; 'It will prove you love me'; or 'I won't let anyone else see it'. Unfortunately, images can easily be manipulated, copied, posted online or sent to others within seconds.

Missing Out or Fitting In?

Possibly the most insidious kind of online peer pressure is to look a certain way or be part of the online 'crowd'. From the selfie culture (looking perfect) to the belief that everyone else is enjoying amazing parties, the internet can make some young people feel that they have to do more and be better. This pressure can lead some young people to get involved in extreme dieting or to suffer from anxiety or low self esteem.

 Why does it happen?

As adults, many of us will have experienced peer pressure when we were younger, but it can be easy to forget just how potent it can be. Here's a quick reminder of why young people can succumb:

- They want to become more popular or fit in.
- They want to look cool.
- They can't see or imagine the consequences if they say something mean from the apparent safety of being behind a screen.
- They trust the person they have sent something to, and believe they won't pass it on to anyone else.
- They are easily impressed and not always able to see the truth behind the image.

What you can do

Let's talk

- Starting the conversation can often be the most difficult thing. One possible opening would be to say that you've read or heard about a child being pressured to do something online and asking if they have ever heard of that happening to anyone they know.
- Ask your child how they would feel if someone was putting pressure on them to do something online that they didn't want to do. How would they say no or resist?
- Explain that it is often difficult to realise you are being pressured until afterwards. Recognising the signs will help them identify if it happens again. Ask if they've ever been reluctant to do something online but their friends laughed at them, so they went ahead to save face? Have they ever done

something uncomfortable to help them fit in with a new group of people? Have they ever joined in with a group teasing someone online but feel bad about it afterwards?

- Try not to judge or get upset by what your child tells you. The fact that they're even talking to you about it is a positive sign and you don't want to put them off by overreacting - even if what they tell you makes you upset or angry, either at them for something they have done, or at one of their friends for putting pressure on them.
- Listen to what they say until they have finished, and then calmly ask them for more detail, explaining that you want to understand exactly what the context was, for example, or to be clear about what happened.
- Once the facts are established, thank them for telling you and discuss how they can, a) make amends if they have done something to hurt someone else, or b) how to help them feel better about themselves if they are the ones who have been hurt.
- Work with them to develop ways to deal with the situation if it happens again.

What else can you do?

- Ask their views on celebrities and find out who they admire online. Be curious about their influencers and try to understand what it is they like, so they you can help them to think about whether there might be another side to the images they see.
- Be proactive. Talk to your child about sexting now, rather than waiting until something happens. This is especially important if they are an older teen who is in a relationship or considering starting one: many images are sent between couples. The problems, if any, could occur later when the relationship breaks down but the images remain.
- Discuss it as part of a wider conversation about relationships. Let them know that it's natural to be sexually curious but that they shouldn't be pressured into doing anything they don't want to do or may regret later. Reassure them that the phrase, 'everybody does it' usually means, 'everybody says they do it, but they don't really'.
- Explain that it's illegal to take, hold or share indecent images of anyone under the age of 18. If they receive these kind of images and pass them on to anyone, they are breaking the law, even if they're under 18 themselves.
- If you're concerned that sexting is taking place at your child's school, speak to a teacher.
- If you're concerned that someone has sent your child indecent pictures or videos or that a stranger has made inappropriate contact online, report it to your internet or mobile provider and to CEOP (www.ceop.police.uk) immediately.
- If your child feels pressurised, is worried or upset about something to do with a relationship they are in, or has any questions about sexuality or sex in general, there is expert support available. Point them towards a service like Brook, Youthnet or Childline, or contact them yourself to get information you can share with your child. (Contact details below.)
- Look out for changes in your child's behaviour or appearance. You know your child better than anyone. Experimenting with fashion and having mood swings are all a normal part of growing up – but if you think the changes in behaviour

and attitude are going further than that and you're worried, don't ignore your instincts. Find out what they're doing online, where they're going and whom they're in touch with. If you think the internet is having a negative influence on their wellbeing, talk to their teachers and think about ways to help them widen their interests. Helping them to switch off and reconnect with offline groups and friends is really important.

- Set some boundaries. We all find it difficult to switch off. Many of us have written things online that we might wish we hadn't. Your children need you to help them put down their devices, even if only to get enough sleep. A child who is texting or on social media late at night is much less likely to be thinking carefully about what they say or do.

Remember, the internet never forgets

Finally, remind your child that they need to think carefully before they post anything online or via email or on social media. A compromising image sent to a friend or a nasty comment on a message board could be there forever and your child won't be able to control who sees it.

Even if an image or comment is deleted someone else could have already shared it and your child will have lost control of what they posted. Ask them how a friend, teacher or relative might feel if they saw what they were doing or saying? What about a future employer or university admissions officer? Encourage them to take time to think before sending or uploading *anything*.

Further help

If you are concerned about peer pressure affecting your child, don't be afraid to get advice or support from their school or a friend you trust. If you think your child may be being pressurised into doing something that could put them at risk, you can contact the NSPCC's free Online Safety Helpline (0808 800 5002), or CEOP (www.ceop.police.uk) for advice.

You can find out more about how Vodafone and the Diana Award are helping schools through the Be Strong Online project and see the Peer pressure module for young people **here.**

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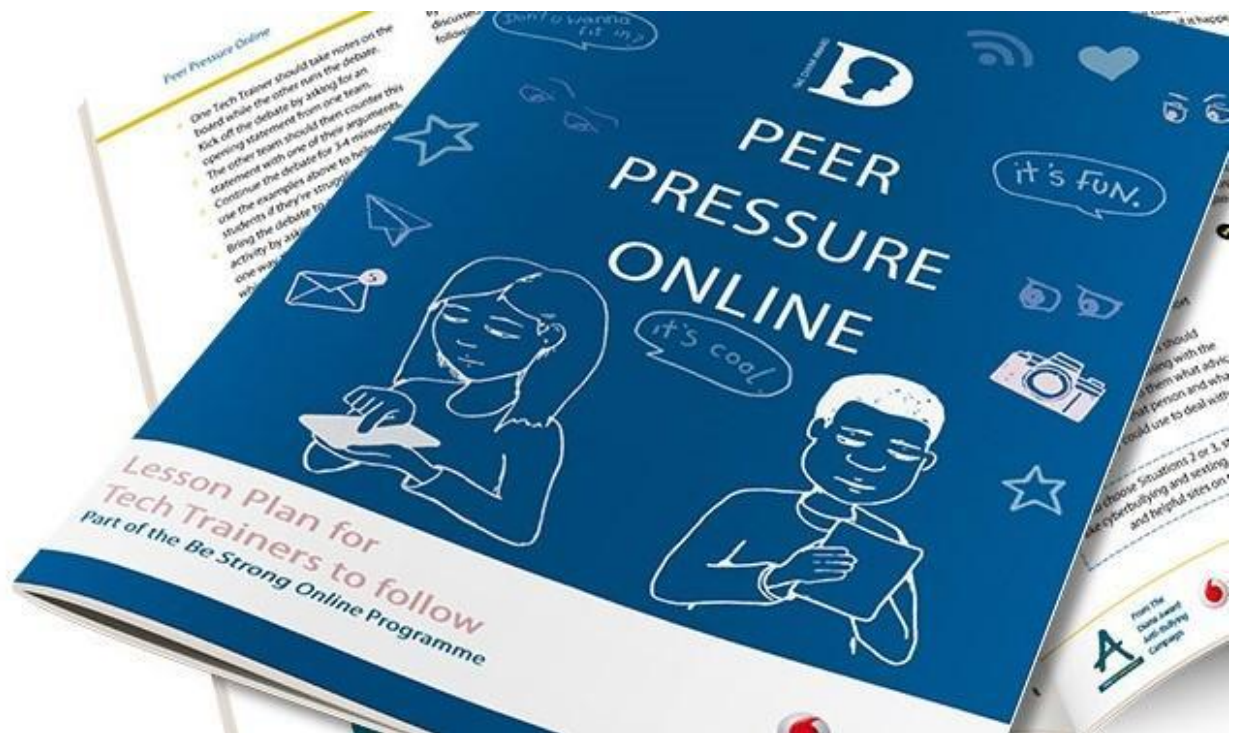
Useful links:

www.antibullyingpro.com/how-to-stay-safe-online

www.parentinfo.org/

https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/

www.brook.org.uk/

www.childline.org.uk

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