



CONVERSATION WITH PARENTS:

Healthy and Unhealthy Peer Groups

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Your kid wants to try out for the school play, but worries that rehearsals will take a lot of time and she won't be as available to her friends. She's afraid that instead of supporting her desire to act, her friends will replace her while she's gone, and reject her when she comes back.

Starting in the tween years, kids increasingly turn to their peers for affirmation, and they form groups within which they can practice all kinds of social transactions and experiment with identities apart from their families. This is appropriate developmental behavior for adolescents. Group dynamics add another layer to our kids' social lives, however, so they also provide one more factor for parents to consider as we support our kids' development.

When considering middle-school groups, a basic but useful framework might come from the introductory teachings in a family systems course: Healthy groups adjust, stretch, and accommodate change. Individuals aren't criticized, made fun of, or shunned for taking positive risks or making healthy choices. People in healthy groups want each other to be happy and do well, whereas unhealthy groups resist changes that threaten the status quo.

Just as it's important to understand how your child's group of friends might be holding her back, it's important to consider that your child might be using her group as an excuse to avoid taking positive risks. Our job as parents is to keep an eye on the big picture: our child, his friendships, his group's dynamics, and all the interactions among these parts.

How can we know if our kids are members of healthy or unhealthy groups? Determine if your child's group of friends is a cohesive, safe place for all kinds of healthy interactions to occur. Such groups can also be exclusionary

rather than inclusive, and the source of peer rejection rather than acceptance. Hurt feelings can occur in healthy groups, but they're transient. Sadness, anger and even some anxiety are normal when they're temporary, not constant.

At the extreme, of course, are cliques that function almost like real gangs, using emotional aggression instead of physical violence. The psychology of such groups is complex; I won't try to summarize it here. If you suspect

your kid is participating in or being victimized by this kind of group, act immediately. Find out more. Talk to other parents and school administrators. Interfere the same way you would if you thought there was physical danger involved. Set limits. Redraw the lines. Exercise your veto power.

Dr. Wilner offers parenting insights on our website. Go to BeyondDifferences.org and click on "Resources" and then click "Tips for Parents."

PARTNER PROFILE



Sandy Hook Promise was born out of the loss experienced in Newtown, Connecticut after the December 14, 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Some family members of the children and adults killed and residents in the community joined together shortly after the tragedy to create this not-for-profit organization whose mission is to reduce the causes of gun violence and save lives.

"We are organizing a movement across the country around community-based solutions that will help reduce the causes of violence and, in particular, gun violence," said Nicole Hockley, Communications Director of Sandy Hook Promise and the mother of six-year-old Dylan who was killed during the shooting.

To that end, the organization addresses a variety of areas including gun safety legislation, mental health, community connectivity, and parenting. Early on, the group concentrated on federal legislation and state initiatives to help strengthen gun safety laws, activities Sandy Hook Promise will continue to support. Nicole says that her organization is now more focused on mental health initiatives, noting that mental health issues are often a precursor to violence.

"We want parents across the country to join together and focus not on our differences, but on the common bond we all share—the love we have for our children—and come together to help build a new future where all our children can be safe from violence," she said. "We are going to be very active at a national level in providing awareness and education around causes of gun violence and giving people the opportunity to engage in community-based solutions."

She says that Beyond Differences offers the type of solution that can have an impact and that she is excited about partnering with us. "No One Eats Alone and Be The One are the types of programs that speak to the social isolation issue that Sandy Hook Promise is talking about," says Nicole. "When students reach out to the kids who eat alone at the school table and make a connection, that intervention might change someone's path and prevent an act of violence," says Nicole.

She adds, "I would love to see more communities embrace Beyond Differences' wonderful programs which can make a difference not only in helping kids but also in preventing future violence."

Visit www.sandyhookpromise.org to learn more and to make the Sandy Hook Promise, a pledge that you will be open to seeking common sense solutions, having conversations and listening to both sides.