4 Myths about Peer Pressure

National Bullying Prevention Month shines a spotlight on this critical issue in schools and youth programs. Bullying undermines learning and development, and it can have tragic consequences for students. Whether as a bully, a victim, a bystander, or an upstander, each and every student is affected.

The focus on bullying also shines a spotlight on the ways peers affect each others’ lives and learning—for better or worse. As adults, we often focus more on the negative ways peers treat or influence each other, such as through bullying and negative peer pressure. But when we focus all our attention in these problem areas, we miss out on the positive influence that peer relationships can have in the lives of young people. The following are four myths about bullying and peer pressure that need to be reversed.

Myth #1: Bullying is normal. Sometimes people will dismiss concerns about bullying, saying that it’s just part of growing up. In reality, the vast majority of young people do not bully others. However, when bullying behaviors evoke laughter, cheers, or feelings of power, they are reinforced and create a culture that condones bullying.

The good news is that the rate of young people experiencing bullying in U.S. schools has dropped from 28% (in 2011) to 22% (in 2013), according to the U. S. Department of Education. There’s still work to do—particularly with groups of youth who tend to experience higher levels of bullying, such as LGBT youth—but there’s progress. We shouldn't accept bullying as an inevitable part of life. Rather, we can emphasize the many other ways peers interact with each other that are supportive, encouraging, and inspiring.

Myth #2: Peer pressure is always negative. Too often, we assume that peer pressure is what happens when someone gets gullible, vulnerable, or maladjusted kids to do something bad or risky.

Although negative pressure is part of the dynamic, peer influence or pressure is much broader than that. Through their relationships with peers, young people develop social skills, try new activities, and figure out a lot about themselves and who they are becoming. All students absorb ideas, likes, dislikes, and values from their friends and classmates.
In fact, we want to help students learn to influence others in positive ways. We do this by helping them learn to write and speak persuasively and by cultivating leadership skills. So being influenced by and influencing peers is an inevitable and important part of growing up and being part of society.

**Myth #3: Peer relationships don’t really affect learning.** We may think we are teaching individual students. Yet, in reality, they are part of a web of relationships, all of which affect how they learn and what they learn.

A growing body of research highlights the ways peers influence each other’s attitudes toward school and learning. That influence can be negative, when peers dismiss education or “being smart.” But the influence can also be critical for school success. If students enjoy being with friends in school, they’re more likely to show up and engage. Friends help each other problem-solve and learn. Peers often provide emotional support and safety through challenges, and they often reinforce positive educational aspirations.

**Myth #4: Adults don’t play a role.** A great deal of peer pressure (including bullying) occurs away from the watchful eyes of teachers, staff, parents, and other adults. That can leave the impression that “kids will have to work this out among themselves.”

Like most myths, there’s some truth here: Young people do need to learn to solve problems on their own. But adults can also play important roles. Teachers and staff members reinforce positive peer relationships by . . .

- Modeling positive, respectful relationships with all young people;
- Creating a cooperative, respectful climate in classrooms or programs; and
- Giving students opportunities to work together cooperatively, talk about what their learning, support their opinions with evidence, and provide feedback to each other—all important 21st century skills.

Positive peer relationships play a critical role in schools and programs. Not only are they foundational for preventing bullying, but they are also an integral part of learning. National Bullying Prevention Month provides an opportunity to celebrate and harness this power for preventing bullying and for enhancing learning experiences for all young people.

http://www.search-institute.org/blog/myths-about-peer-pressure