

Skill-Building Opportunities

Encouraging Leadership

Question: I worry that my child is too much of a “follower” with her friends. Sometimes it seems like she will do whatever they say and do or believe whatever they tell her. How can I encourage my daughter to be her own person?

Peer pressure can be brutal and everyone wants to fit in, especially kids as they explore new social circles. These relationships with friends will become increasingly important in your child’s life as she gets older. Whether it’s a new best friend or a group of friends, all are important milestones in her social development. And it’s good to remember that all children are influenced by what their friends say and do.

There are two complementary approaches that may help your daughter become “her own person.”

- One approach involves helping your daughter evaluate what her friends tell her, so she doesn’t just do what they do or believe what they say. This calls on the life skill of Critical Thinking.

Critical Thinking involves “thinking about our thinking” by reflecting, analyzing, reasoning, planning and evaluating.

- The second approach involves providing her with opportunities to lead, calling on the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Keep your child’s development in mind.

Critical Thinking develops rapidly during the school-age years. Children progress in their ability to evaluate the accuracy of information from others, moving from an understanding that others might not know something to an understanding that others may be intentionally or unintentionally deceitful.

2

Help your child learn to evaluate information received from others.

According to Frank Kiel of Yale University: “Critical thinking is the ability to step back and look at what you’re doing, to look at the dimensions of the task and to evaluate.”

Help your daughter evaluate what she hears—whether from her friends or from others— thus increasingly gaining the ability to tell the difference between fact and fiction. You can:

- Ask your child questions that help her think about what she has been told, whether by her friends or even something she sees on television, by asking her questions

such as: “Do you think this information is true? Why or why not? How can you find out more?”

- Engage your child in looking at the reasons behind why people behave in certain ways: “Do you think that she wants you to like her or to be impressed?” Having this kind of discussion around books you read or movies and TV shows you see together provides non-threatening ways to sharpen her thinking about why people behave as they do.

3

Help your child role play how to handle situations where she might be included to go along with the group.

Again, this role playing may be most effective at first if it is not about her own situation, but about others. Ask her:

- “What could this character in the story have done not to go along with the group?”

Brainstorm as many possible approaches as you can and then evaluate what might work and what wouldn't, so you can evaluate these solutions.

4

Give your child opportunities to lead in different kinds of groups.

In doing so, you are helping your daughter learn the life skill of Taking on Challenges, as she moves into other groups.

Think about your daughter's interests and see if you can find groups where she might be with other children with similar interests or help her create a new interest, such as:

- Is there a sports, art, singing or church group where she could shine?
- Could you work together as a family on a volunteer activity, such as bringing food to shelters?
- Could she work with younger children, sharing a talent or an interest or helping them with school work, such as learning to read? Older children can feel much more competent when they can lead younger children.

5

Praise the strategies she uses in becoming her own person.

Carol Dweck and her colleagues found that the way adults praise children affects their mindsets or beliefs about the world. Children who are praised for inborn characteristics

like: “You are so smart!” are likely to have a fixed mindset. Children who are praised for their effort or strategies are more likely to have a growth mindset.

Each step your daughter takes in becoming her own person can be acknowledged. You can say things like:

- “You didn’t go along with your friends when they wanted to do something you thought was wrong. I know that took courage, and I am so proud of you!”
- “You helped the young child you are working with feel good about herself and be her own person! That is such an important thing to learn in life.”