Study: Peer Pressure Starts in Grade School; Adults Should Be Alert

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COLLEGE PARK, Md. – Peer group influences affect children much earlier than researchers have suspected, finds a new University of Maryland-led study. The researchers say it provides a wake-up call to parents and educators to look out for undue group influences, cliquishness and biases that might set in early, the researchers say.

The study appears in the May/June 2013 issue of *Child Development*, and is available online. The researchers say their work represents a new line of research – what they call "group dynamics of childhood." No prior research has investigated what children think about challenging groups that act in ways that are unfair or nontraditional, they note.

The findings refute an older view that conflicts between group loyalty and fairness are not yet part of elementary-school aged children's everyday interactions.

"This is not just an adolescent issue," says University of Maryland developmental psychologist Melanie Killen, the study's lead researcher. "Peer group pressure begins in elementary schools, as early as age nine. It's what kids actually encounter there on any given day."

Even at this earlier age, children show moral independence and will stand up to the group, Killen adds. But it is also a setting where the seeds of group prejudices can develop, if not checked.

"Parents and teachers often miss children's nascent understanding of group dynamics, as well as kids' willingness to buck to the pressure," Killen explains. Children begin to figure out the costs and consequences of resisting peer group pressure early. By adolescence, they find it only gets more complicated."

The emergence of peer groups in elementary school aids children's development by providing positive friendships, relationships, and social support, Killen adds. The downsides include the undue influence of a group when it imposes unfair standards, especially on outsiders, or members of "outgroups," which is what is often created when peers form an "ingroup."

"Children may need help from adults when they face conflicts between loyalty to the group and fairness to outsiders," Killen says. "They may be struggling to 'do the right thing' and still stay on good terms with friends in the group, but not know how. If a child shows discomfort and anxiety about spending time with friends, this may signal conflicts in their peer group relationships."

The researchers conducted extended interviews and surveys with representative groups of fourth- and eighth-graders from a Mid-Atlantic suburban area. All were from middle income families and reflected U.S. ethnic backgrounds. They probed attitudes on a moral issue – dividing up resources equally for those in and out of the group, and on a question of tradition (group t-shirts).

"We know that children have a sense of fairness very early on in life but soon enough they belong to groups that sometimes want to do something unfair. What do they advocate for, the fairness principle or group loyalty?" the study asks.

Among the findings:

- When children are members of groups that want to be selfish, they think it is wrong, going so far as to explain why it's wrong. They even think that one should stand up to groups when they want to be unfair – though the cost of social exclusion is still a concern.
- Children support members of their own groups that will tell the group to divide up resources equally, not unequally, and they strongly advocate for equal allocation of resources.
- Children are more positive about a peer who advocated for equality than a peer who advocated for doing something that reflected group identity such as the conventional act of wearing the club shirt.
- Children understand that their view of what the ingroup member "should do" would be different from what the group would want. While individually favorable towards someone who challenges the group, they expected that the group would not like it.

"Overall, these findings show that with age, children can apply their understanding of fairness to social groups, and recognize what makes group dynamics complex," the study says. "They know that groups might not like it, but there may be times when standing up to the group is the right thing to do."

In earlier studies, Killen and her team demonstrated the development of moral reasoning in young children, finding that they care about fairness, will help others solve conflicts even when they don't benefit directly, and spontaneously cooperate without rewards.

The full study is available online here: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.12011/full

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