

Evelyn and her twin brother Rory are at a party. Evelyn fancies Jonas and notices him furtively joining a group at the back of the house. She begs Rory to come with her to see what they are up to. Rory is reluctant but gives in.

Evelyn: What's up, guys?

Jonas: Have you tried this before, Evelyn? You'd like it – here!

Evelyn (giggles and tries a puff): What is it?

Rory: It's weed, Eve, dagga. I'll see you guys later, OK? Come, Evelyn. Let's go back.

Jonas (holds his arm): Don't run off and tell Mr Barnes. He was prowling around like a watchdog earlier! Stay and join us!

Rory: No, I'm cool. I'm just going to get a coke, that's all. I'm thirsty.

Jonas: Have some of my beer. Just don't let the watchdog see! (Evelyn laughs.)

Rory: I've got a drink inside. I...

Evelyn: Rory, don't spoil the fun. You're eighteen, brother! Live a little! Can I have a sip, Jonas?

Mike (Moves to block Rory's exit): Sit down, Rory! Have some of my beer.

Rory: OK, Mike, relax! I'll have some.

As he hands Rory the beer, Mike relaxes and moves aside a little. Rory sees the gap, takes a sip and returns the bottle, keeping Mike at arm's length as he does so. Rory steps firmly through the gap and leaves. He immediately phones his parents to tell them that Evelyn is in trouble.

## Discussion

1. What strategies can I suggest to my child if he is reluctant to give in to peer pressure (like Rory)?

Friends can be a great support, and can help to keep your teen on the right path, but, too often, adolescents are pressurised by their peers to do things that they do not want to do. Sometimes they are willing participants, but even if they are not, the pressure will still be there. Your child needs to know he has every right to say 'no'. If his friends are OK with that, he just needs to be firm in his own mind. However, if they continue to try to persuade him, he will need to be more prepared. He needs to keep the situation from developing. If he is in a public place in broad daylight, he will usually just need to be insistent and he will be able to get out of the situation. Even here, though, the emotional pressure is difficult to combat. It might work for him simply to say, 'I just don't want to go there/do that.' However, he might want to have a few 'excuses' ready. If he is a sportsman, he can maintain his 'coolness' by saying that he can't drink/stay out late because of his exercise regime. (Another good reason to encourage your child to play sport!) He can blame his parents, saying, 'My mother will freak!' or 'My dad tests me every few months – I don't dare take these drugs.' He can plead a prior arrangement or suggest alternatives: 'They're serving hamburgers! Come, I'm starving!' It is often a good idea to rehearse situations at home. Let him select a few 'excuses' that he feels comfortable saying, and find words that will not sound nerdy or goody-goody.

It is easier to stay out of 'grey areas' than to extricate oneself from danger. Rory's instincts told him that the back of the house was risky, but he was persuaded. Suddenly the pressure was greater. There were no other people around, it was dark, the group had been drinking and they were less inhibited and more aggressive. They were doubly eager to include him, partly because he had suggested his willingness by joining them, and partly because they did not want him to report them. Rory was determined and was lucky to see a gap: otherwise he risked giving in or being beaten up.

2. What action do I need to take with a child who is attracted by her peers' persuasion (like Evelyn)?

Peer pressure is very real. Adolescents need to be accepted by their friends in order to form their own identity. This is an important developmental stage, and parenting needs to adapt to it. We cannot fight this, so it is best to adapt to it. You and your daughter can work on ways to develop her self-confidence. Remind her, 'If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.' Help her to feel like the 'cool' one. Let her have good

clean fun which her friends will want to join in with. Encourage her to develop a hobby that she enjoys and does well. Let her express herself in her music or clothes. (See also the pamphlets on 'Moodiness', 'Materialism' and 'Self esteem'.) If she feels valued and confident, she will be less likely to feel the desperate need for peer approval that can lead children to do silly things. Secondly, you can encourage friendships with 'desirable' children, through sport, socialising or activities. This has to be done sensitively. Thirdly, remember not to blame the peer group. Your child will resent your disapproval of her friends and, anyway, they cannot be blamed for her decisions. Fourthly, try to know what your child is doing all the time, so that if necessary you can step in and refuse to let her go there/do that. Children are sometimes relieved at your intervention.

3. In this day and age, should one allow one's children to drink or smoke at parties, since it seems to be the norm?

Parents feel peer pressure too! Our children tell us, 'All the other parents let their children do X.' We wonder whether we are too harsh. We listen to their arguments: 'If you provide the alcohol at my party, people won't try to smuggle it in, and you can control it!' We are tempted to give in to the inevitable – children these days do drink (or have cell phones, or go to clubs) ... shouldn't we just accept it and work with it? However, remember the discussion above. Feel confident in your parenting. Try talk to other like-minded parents (while encouraging your child to socialise with their 'desirable' children!). Examine your principles and stick firmly to those you maintain. Your rejection of 'parental peer pressure' might give your child a good example.

*We aim at something better. We want to form them to habits and virtues possessed by a good [person] and a good citizen. – Marcellin Champagnat, founder of Marist schools*

4. What responsibility should siblings/friends take for each other? Do boys have more of a responsibility to look after girls, or the other way around ... or neither?

Various factors (family philosophy, age of children, circumstances) will determine to what extent you expect siblings to take responsibility for each other when they are together. You will need to assess in each situation whether it is reasonable for siblings to do so, and whether it is desirable. Should an older sibling be responsible for the younger sibling ... even if it ruins his fun? ... even if it is risky? What could Rory have done to protect Evelyn? Is a younger child responsible for the older one, too? Do you expect your older daughter to protect your younger son or the other way around ... or both ... or neither? Does the sibling want to be looked after ... or left alone? Do you expect your daughter's boyfriend to protect her? Should she

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protect him? Do you expect your son to put himself at risk for his girlfriend? These are complex details to discuss as a family. The same questions can be asked of responsibility for one's friends.

5. It is very difficult for a child to report the bad behaviour of his peers. How can I broach this with my child?

Those who 'blow the whistle' are usually disliked by some. They are said to be 'disloyal'. This often discourages adolescents from reporting bad or even dangerous behaviour. Parent and child need to find a procedure which allows the child to maintain his status within the group, but retain his integrity, too. Some people do feel that it is disloyal to report a peer, but perhaps it helps to show your child that keeping silent can endanger the friend and the community. Sometimes a method can be found which allows a win-win situation. In some cases, an emotionally intelligent child can approach his friend directly and stop the situation. In rare relationships, the friend can be helped to realise that the whistle-

blower's intervention was an act of loyalty, not disloyalty. More often, a subtle approach will be necessary. You can encourage your child to tell you when he is uncomfortable, on the understanding that if necessary you will take it up confidentially with the teacher/school/other parent. (It is not appropriate to approach the other child directly.) If your child has a teacher that he can trust, he might tell him/her. It is not an easy thing to ask a child to do, and the decision must be his. It is worth noting that the reporting is often forgotten in time, and the whistle-blower forgiven. The school's attitudes of community spirit, and of openness, trust and forgiveness are important.

*We seek to be simple and sincere people, with generosity of spirit and a ready smile of friendship. – from *Simplicity* by Marcellin Champagnat, founder of Marist schools*

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Peer Pressure



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*An initiative of the Sacred Heart parent body*

## Useful contact information

Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre	011 484 1734
Childline	08 000 55555
Famsa: Parktown	011 788 4784
Soweto	011 933 1301
Teddy Bear Clinic	011 484 4554
Lifeline	011 728 1347
DARE (formerly Drugwise)	011 788 0717

## Further reading

<http://www.family.samhsa.gov/get/involvement.aspx>  
*Life Talk for a Daughter and Life Talk for a Son*, Izabella Little,  
Oshun Books (Struik), 2006

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