# How to navigate peer influence around your child

**Source: Akhila Das Blah, Storyteller & Content Writer**

When your child is young, before he starts play school, you can almost see yourself in him. He repeats the same things you say, he has similar mannerisms. He observes and models his vocabulary and behaviour on those that he sees in his immediate environment – you, your spouse, your immediate friends and family.

But, as he starts to get older, he interacts more with the world around him. As he steps out of your carefully curated environment, he will start to observe and model himself on his peers at school or extended friends and family whose children, he meets occasionally. At play school, if another child is being a little boisterous or gets a laugh for throwing the blocks across the room in a funny manner or gets his way by having a [temper tantrum](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/learning/early-childhood-understanding-managing-toddler-tantrums-5596045/), your child might find the urge to try it out for him. He starts to do little things that you’ve never seen him do before. Instead of asking for something politely and working on his ‘please’ and ‘thank yous’, into which you’ve put a lot of effort and training, he starts to demand things and have a meltdown if he doesn’t get it. Suddenly, he’s a bit more aggressive and hits out at you when you say no.

When you think about it, you realize that he’s modeling his behaviour on a child he knows in school, the bus or playground. As he gets older, the child may change and the type of influence changes. A child who throws away things. A child who melts down when he doesn’t get what he wants. A child using inappropriate language. A child who lie to his parents and encourages yours to do the same. A child who has figured out a way to manipulate his parents into getting what he wants and can’t wait to teach yours exactly how to be just like him. A child who likes to push the boundaries just to see what happens. A child who likes to do reckless and dangerous things without considering consequences.

Peer influence is real and occurs at all ages. You don’t need to wait for your child to become a teenager to realize how susceptible your child is to peer influence. All children are influenced by their peer group in both positive and negative ways. If your child’s best friend is kind, conscientious and empathetic, chances are that it will rub off on your child. If your child’s best friend is driven and loves to participate in every activity, chances are that your child will be suitably enthusiastic too. Whether positive or negative, our role as parents isn’t to label other children and say that someone is a good or bad influence on your child. Especially as they get older, we cannot control who our child comes into contact with and what they may or may not learn from them. **So, what can we do?**

**Keep the channels of communication open**

Talk to them about the changes in behaviour that you might have observed. “I notice that you are shouting or throwing things when you get angry or upset. I haven’t seen you react like this before. Have you seen or observed anyone else react like this when they get angry.”

**Don’t immediately point fingers at their friend**

It makes them defensive and less inclined to tell you things. Remember, your role is to hold space without judgment. Allow your child to feel comfortable talking about his friends without feeling that he or they will be judged by you. Ask him how does he feel about it? Sometimes, your child may feel confused himself. He could feel divided between his conscience and his worry over upsetting or angering his friends. Not every child is strong enough to stand up to his own peer group. Your role is to help foster his self-belief and confidence. Encourage him to trust his instincts, to consider consequences. Talk to him about his day. Ask about his friends. Get to know their interests, likes and dislikes. If you have the opportunity, volunteer to chaperone his friends at a play-date or for a school trip. Observing your child interact with his friends will give you an idea of the group dynamic and his ability to navigate peer influence. Does everybody participate equally? Is one member of the group a self-appointed group leader? What happens when there is a difference of opinion? What is your child’s role in the group?

**Whenever having a conversation with your child, take a long term view.**

When they are young, talk about safety and making the right choice. When in doubt, they can always come and ask you. I’ve actively encouraged my children to come to me and say “Don’t be mad but… “. By stating at the beginning their need for me not to be angry, makes me immediately conscious of my reaction and encourages me to respond rather than react. So, if they’ve gotten into trouble, they know they can come to me and their immediate thought is not that my mom will be mad but that she can help. Navigating peer influence is a lifelong struggle. But, by consistently talking, listening and sharing with your child, you can hopefully equip him to be able to listen to his inner voice and make conscious, positive choices in his everyday life.