

# The Power of Peer Pressure

*A psychologist identifies the destructive force of the Lord of the Flies syndrome.*

By Karen Gram

Inside the kindergarten classroom, the children gather at the door, ready to go home. Some quietly wait for the teacher to dismiss them. They wave to parents from the threshold and hold up artwork, eager to show what they have made. Others ignore the adults. They play and push each other into the hall. They chase each other in circles, oblivious to admonishments of teacher and parents.

The second group perfectly demonstrates the early stages of what a clinical and developmental psychologist fears is a trend destroying the psychological health of an ever-growing number of people. Dr. Gordon Neufeld calls it peer-orientation. It is rampant among juvenile delinquents, but is also evident in every school and on every playground.

The Vancouver psychologist says the children in the first group above take their cues from adults. They are “adult-oriented” and are most closely attached to parents or other adults responsible for them. But those in the second group try to win attention and approval of peers — not parents. They are “peer-oriented.”

Neufeld said this is scary because, as the kids age and the orientation to peers strengthens, mob rule, a sort of Lord of the Flies syndrome, sets in and parents and teachers are left in the dust, incapable of reaching their children, morally and intellectually.

Because parents today want their children to have all the best opportunities to learn, they put them in programs as young as two years old, enroll them in umpteen after-school lessons or put them in day-care so that the parents can work and provide a comfortable home with all the amenities the kids want.

The kids are busy, but they lack the closeness of a parent. Instead, they are surrounded by other children and end

up bonding with them. Behavioural problems inevitably arise. Studies show that the worst-behaved kids are those who spend the most time with other kids.

Neufeld said peer-oriented people can't set their own boundaries or maintain their own identities because their top priority is the approval of their peers. In the long run, peer orientation prevents children from developing into healthy, mature adults who can integrate into society while maintaining their own identity and morals.

In the short run, it prevents children from learning from teachers or parents. They actually learn more at recess and lunch-time than in the classroom. And it creates severe behavioural problems. Peer pressure, a phenomenon that first became a significant problem with the baby boomers, is a consequence of peer orientation.

Neufeld said children naturally seek another human being from whom to learn how to behave and to develop a sense of their own identity. In the past, that has come from adults — parents, grandparents, caregivers and teachers. Children attached themselves to and gradually gained from them a sense of security from which to act, and an understanding of boundaries.

But things began to change with the baby boomers, the first mass youth culture in North America. Neufeld said today's youth are the children and grandchildren of the first deeply peer-oriented group, and the phenomenon has compounded. With parents increasingly absent, day care and child centres taking on more parenting functions and television exerting increasing influence, the bonding mechanism of childhood is being destroyed.

Developmental psychologists say kids who are oriented to peers rather than adults get stuck in the first of three stages of maturing. They experience

attachment — the first stage — but since it is to their peers, they don't progress to the second stage in which they form opinions and ideas that distinguish themselves from others. Finally, they fail to achieve the third stage of development in which they become socially integrated and capable of confidently expressing ideas and preferences. They remain attached to peers, responding to their demands and conforming to their standards.

“As parents, we have forgotten our basic function,” said Neufeld. “We're the anchor point, we're the psychological womb, we're the secure home base. Love is not enough. I see families full of love. They adore their children but their child is too peer-oriented. The psychological umbilical cord is severed and so the nurturance doesn't get through.” Parents need to reconnect the psychological umbilical cord.

It worked with young offenders in Florida. Prison staff forbade interaction between inmates. Instead, they established one-on-one relationships between inmates and staff. “It had a phenomenal success rate measured by recidivism.”

Neufeld said North America's school system works against adult attachments. Unlike European schools in which teachers stay with students for up to seven years, children here are expected to respond to a new teacher every year. In high school, every hour. While some teachers intuitively develop relationships with their students, many do not. In the past, teachers didn't have to work so hard to connect with students because adult-oriented children would automatically take cues from other adults when away from home.

*(Adapted with permission from the Vancouver Sun)*