

BY ANNE CASSIDY

At 10 years old, Elizabeth Clark might be considered a child of the '90s, but what she truly yearned for was a symbol of '50s conformity. "All the girls are going to wear a poodle skirt to the sock hop at school," she told her mother, Ellen. "Can I have one, please?"

However, not just any poodle skirt would do. Elizabeth's had to be made of felt; it had to flare out when you spun around in it. And, of course, it had to have the poodle on the front. "There was just one reason she wanted that skirt," says Ellen. "She wanted to be like everyone else." Despite some misgivings, Ellen bought it for her. In fact, she ended up buying two; her 7-year-old daughter, Susannah, decided she wanted to look like her sister.

What is it that turns most kids this age into such raging conformists? Even the ones who have blithely moved to their own inner rhythms all their lives seem to get swept up in the desire to march in step with their peers. Parents often find this stage especially tough to deal with; we fear that our influence is waning, that we're somehow losing our children. We're faced with new and difficult questions: Shouldn't I encourage my child to be independent, not just one of the crowd? Do I want other kids to have so much power over what she says and does?

The short answer to these questions is: Relax. The need to be like everyone else is an important developmental stage in any child's life. "Fitting in with peers is a natural part of growing up," notes Harold Koplewicz, M.D., chief of



AUGUSTUS BUTERA

# The age of conformity

## Why kids need to be in

child and adolescent psychiatry at New York University School of Medicine and author of *It's Nobody's Fault: New Hope and Help for Difficult Children and Their Parents* (Times Books).

"Kids this age need to be with other people, and their parents should want them to be with other people. Conforming doesn't have to be bad. It's only when kids start doing things they really don't want to do that conformity can be danger-





ous." You can nip any problems in the bud by understanding what drives your child's need to fit in, and giving her aid and comfort in the innocent ways she wants to express it.

To put your child's feelings in perspective, take a moment to consider how important peer approval is to *you*. "Conformity is not unique to kids," says Sharon Scott, a family counselor in Dallas and author of *Not Better . . . Not Worse . . . Just Different* (Human Resource Development Press). Ask yourself whether your child's desire to play soccer because all his buddies are in the same league is all that dissimilar from your joining a tennis club because many of your friends are members.

The itch to belong actually begins in the first years of elementary school, when children are beginning to shift their focus from family to friends. Although at this age they're comfortable relating to parents and siblings, they don't have much experience in presenting themselves to peers in large, structured settings. "Kids this age need common ground in order to play together," says Karen Bierman, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Pennsylvania State University.

**Wearing the same "uniform" sends peers a message: "I'm just like you are. Let's be friends."**



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with the in crowd.



ty. Conformity becomes a way of saying, "See, I'm just like you. Can we be friends?"

These friendships offer children invaluable information about the world that parents simply can't provide. "When a child is with his parents he is, by necessity, the younger, dependent one. But in peer relations everyone is equal. If a child is losing a game, other kids won't let him win just to be nice, the way his parents would," says Kathryn Urberg, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Wayne State University, in Detroit.

Bierman adds, "When we talk about social skills, part of what we mean is being able to read what's going on in a situation and adjust to it." Kids learn naturally to become flexible and adaptable with others, as long as they have opportunities to navigate their social lives solo. The key for parents is to give guidance when needed, but not to take over.

At the same time, keeping out of your child's business does *not* mean removing yourself from his life. When his urge to be part of the crowd first shows itself, your impulse might be to hang back from him. "However, staying close to your child is especially important between the ages

of 7 and 10," says Koplewicz. "For one thing, it builds a reservoir of goodwill for when he's 12 or 13." But there are even better reasons. As your child chooses which group he wants to emulate, your opinions become crucial—even if he pretends otherwise. It's helpful for him to hear that belonging to a group doesn't require slavish

## Wise words for budding conformists

**It's slightly paradoxical, but one of the best ways to retain a degree of influence over your 7- to 10-year-old is to give him the power to make his own decisions—up to a point. Parents contributing editor Lawrence Kutner, Ph.D., suggests ways of speaking to children this age that acknowledge their urge to conform and promote self-respect.**

DON'T SAY	DO SAY	WHY
"You look like a slob in those clothes."	"What do you like about that shirt?"	Rather than insult his taste, get information. Once you understand why he likes certain clothes, you might make other suggestions that fit his sense of style and yours.
"You're too young to be listening to that!"	"I can see that you're becoming more mature in your tastes and you don't want people treating you like a kid anymore. Let's talk about how we can both change a little to make that possible."	Odds are your child is trying to come off as older, and doesn't want to hear that her efforts aren't working. Acknowledge that she's growing up (which is what she wants), then work together to come up with ways to recognize her newfound maturity that make you comfortable, too.
"Do whatever you want."	"Let's talk about it."	Even as kids get older, they still not only need limits but crave them. It's one thing to give your child more freedom, and another to leave him adrift to make all his own decisions. In fact, kids often secretly want their parents to say no to dating or wearing a particular piece of clothing, because it gives them a face-saving excuse for their friends.



Give in on the request for a new backpack—save your objections for MTV.

conformity, especially when the other kids do things that make him uncomfortable. You can say, "It's totally okay with me if you want to wear baggy jeans like your friends, but don't feel you have to have

a girlfriend if you don't want one."

In addition, focus on your child's specific behaviors or desires, not the fact that she displays them in order to fit in. If she asks to hold her birthday party at a local bowling alley because all the other kids do, don't say, "Can't you think of something more original?" Instead, tell her, "I know it's im-

portant to you to have a party at a place your friends really like," then graciously accede to her wishes, unless there are other reasons not to do so. If that's the case, be honest about those reasons and offer alternatives: "We can't afford bowling for so many kids. You can have a smaller party at the bowling alley or a larger party at home. Which would you prefer?"

On the other hand, you wouldn't want your child watching MTV just because her buddies do. Again, don't base your objections on the other kids. Remember the line we all groaned at as kids: "If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you do it, too?" Instead, sympathize with the impulse behind the request, but assert your own values. Say calmly, "I know your friends like music videos. But I don't think anyone your age ought to be seeing the sexual images in a lot of those videos, and I don't want them in our house." Then be prepared to stand firm.

Now is the time to develop a positive attitude about your child's need to fit in, because at this age kids are just dipping their toes into the waters of social conformity. (Just wait until they're preteens and can't possibly go to school unless they're wearing the right brand of jeans.) Let your child know that you understand his need to have the same baggy pants and fade haircut that all his friends have. But also stress that what matters most to you is what he's like underneath those clothes and that haircut. You'll find that, remarkably enough, he'll become more and more his own person—even as he joins the crowd. □

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