

Behavioural Pressure in Cyberspace

Building Internal
Resources and
Resilience in
Young People



by Catherine Knibbs

Young people using cyberspace via any device that enables them to communicate with others digitally, and in particular the internet to access websites and social media, are under a considerable amount of peer pressure and what seems to be trickery and/or good (although sneaky) marketing techniques employed by app/game/sales developers.

Underdeveloped cognitive systems, such as decision making, attention, memory recall and negative behaviour choices (known as executive processes) are due mainly to chronological age and are developmentally inhibited during adolescence. Due to this, young people often miss the ulterior message or motive hidden in 'online activities', whether these are passive or active interactions.

Beginning with a look at peer pressure, this is usually thought of in an extremely simplistic format: as being both the visible and invisible force that "makes teens bully/drink alcohol/smoke/take drugs" etcetera. However, how does this play out for young people on the internet? In short, the visible form of peer pressure - for example an invitation to an illegal party and subsequent further invitations and reminders - is one that can generally be easily spotted (quite often it is in print on social media or via text message) and can then be challenged/confronted and changed/prevented quite quickly.

But what of the invisible form of peer pressure, which for the sake of this article will also include the marketing techniques that result in negative behaviours such as cyberbullying,

trolling, addiction to gaming and gambling sites, pornography and forums that promote self harm/eating disorders/suicide ideation and so on?

In order to understand how difficult it can be for a young person to spot peer pressure or other methods of misdirection, I would like to highlight two of these methods that you as an adult may have unwittingly fallen prey to.

Lets start with a silly Facebook game; *"What's your superhero name?"*

1. Take your pets first name and last two digits of the year you were born and match them to this picture.
2. "Digory Do-Good" you say? Ha ha ha... pass it on to your friends - it's only a bit of fun!

Or perhaps *"What are your top 10 favourite novels/films?"*

So you write your list, possibly attempting to name books like Shakespeare rather than Enid Blyton (would you be under peer pressure here to fit into societal norms or to appear well versed and read?) and again pass on the game by nominating friends.

Would the outcome of the first game have been more obvious if it asked you to name your first



pet, mother's maiden name, favourite food or any other security question that might be used by the banks, energy suppliers or credit card companies?

The second game's outcome may not have such a direct impact on you, until you realise that every time you log into Facebook (for this example), you are inundated with adverts that suggest you visit Amazon, WH Smith, Waterstones or suggest Cinema showings and the latest DVD's?

I'm hoping right now you have just had what Psychologists call the 'aha' phenomenon. Do you feel in any way foolish, conned or tricked into giving some form of personal information which could be used in an attempt to steal your identity

by a game on Facebook? Or, as in the second game, did not know that 'online' marketing tricks are used to monitor your interaction and "smartshop" you (a technique employed to show you adverts whilst you browse the internet based on products you have looked at or bought recently)? If so, you would not be the first, nor the last, to have joined in these types of games without realising they could have an ulterior and misdirected outcome. This is not to say that these games have been designed by corrupt or criminal people - however, what if they were? Would you have noticed the underlying message?

In order to understand the nature of deception and peer pressure, I would have to write a very

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different article. However, for now I will discuss a simplistic form of these theories so you can understand why young people make the choices they do and why the internet can sometimes be a dangerous place for young developing minds.

The ability to read another person's facial/non verbal cues when they speak to us is a skill that we develop from the very moment we are born. We are innately wired to communicate with others in order to get our needs met and to survive in the world. However, it takes us some years to begin to work out when we are being conned, tricked and pressured into doing something that ordinarily we would not do. For example, before the object constancy period (where infants are able to hold an object in mind such as mummy is still alive when she goes out of the room and has not disappeared forever) means it is possible for us to trick, bring surprise and joy again and again to very young children when we play games such as peek-a-boo and "where did the ball go under the cup"?

Children learn to spot when they are being tricked in these games once they develop the ability to remember what happens next, where the games direction usually goes and as time develops the ability to predict the outcome with certain people. However, often they are unable to generalise to

other situations and games of a similar nature or with other people. We develop this skill once we are able to think using theory of mind and to use abstract concepts. It is also a skill that needs practice. However the very important skill we use implicitly is involved in face to face interaction and involves an interpretation of cues that are only available when we see another person's face. This is the missing 'ingredient' in online communications which makes it difficult for some young people to notice the intentions of A.N. Other.

Peer pressure then can be seen to be the force, which when added to this 'missing ingredient' can cause some young people to fall foul of its hidden intentions by an inability to understand exactly what interaction it is they are involved in. Whether that is playing a game, accepting cheats and hacks which turn out to be trojans/viruses, adding comments to a thread that involves the demoralisation and mocking of another person (cyberbullying, trolling, or "banter" as its also known), kicking people from games (purposive exclusion) or setting up groups that they are rejected/omitted from, or designing pages and websites devoted to the intentional hurt and harassment of someone else.

In order to help young people, in particular adolescents, build a repertoire of resources to enable them to spot these subtle pressures we are stuck with a dilemma. Realistically we would need to build their knowledge of such deceptions by teaching them about these (this could take a very long time indeed!) and this scaremongers and makes the internet a place that becomes very frightening and dangerous to them. This is not helpful. If however on the contrary we do not teach young people about the dangers of deception and peer pressure in cyber space we would be doing them a great disservice and not

preparing them for what could happen, nor how to spot it and disengage.

This brings me neatly onto the adolescent brain and why this can be such a difficult task.

Firstly (according to many parents, some teachers and some forms of the media) many adolescents "know it all", i.e. can we teach them about the dangers and probability of negative things happening when they are primed for hyper-rational thinking? Can we teach them when they are going through a normal developmental phase of 'empathy switch off' and as such would not be able to use the Pre Frontal Cortex to integrate information and process another person's point of view (also known as theory of mind)? Can we

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help support them through moments of peer pressure when their brains are developing and it is normal for them to value peer opinions much more than parents and teachers? And secondly how do we combat the dopamine rush that is in its highest sensitivity period during adolescence

and contributes to much of the developmental risk taking and addictive behaviours that we so often see in young people?

I believe we can, if we educate teachers and teens together about how their brains work. Young people would like to know that they are developing in a very complicated way and are not 'abnormal' as they so often feel throughout puberty and adolescence.

However, most importantly, this would need to be underpinned by play, starting with infancy, including teaching parents how to play with their babies and children, followed on by early childhood and primary school. The mechanism of play enables children to learn how to attune to another through sharing and co-operative games. Furthermore, learning about when things go wrong enables a child to learn about empathy and theory of mind and this enables them to learn social development skills and enables the social part of their brains to build in strength. Play is also a way in which young people can learn about cheating and trickery in a safe and manageable way, which in turn can help them develop the skills I eluded to that are missing in the online marketing and peer pressures. Children can learn to build resilience and how to recover from mistakes and social mishaps and again this builds towards an integrated brain needed for the adolescent period.

I also personally think that teaching children and young people mindfulness skills would enable them to develop a thinking pattern that responds to a situation rather than reacts, and would therefore result in a more thoughtful, diligent and mature way of behaving when under peer pressure and would enable children to build their internal resources and resilience towards negative outcomes and behaviours when using the internet and everything it has to offer. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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