

Intellectual Peer Pressure

by Dom Testa

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It's not uncommon for teachers and parents to notice a change in a student's attitude toward education. Most will detect it around the same time the student makes a shift between schools, either from elementary to middle school, or middle school to high school.

These are all challenging times in the life of a young person. They experience the physical/hormonal changes associated with puberty, and their social circles swing wildly as they try to find their way.

It's this social element which induces them to often exhibit behavior that perplexes the adults in their lives. A kid who has been happy and friendly turns sullen; a kid who has been outgoing becomes withdrawn.

And, unfortunately, many young people who have been great students become disinterested or downright rebellious when it comes to their education. The culprit, quite often, is peer pressure.

There are multiple programs that direct attention to the problems of smoking, alcohol, drugs, and sex; the majority of Americans recognize the pressure that young people feel in these areas. Yet when it comes to academic education, hardly a peep is uttered to make adults aware of the pressure that kids feel to dumb down.

While the blame can not ride entirely on the media, it's no secret that pop culture has embraced the notion that intellectual achievement equals nerd, while contentious rebellion and ignorance equals cool. Every movie and television program reinforces these stereotypes; the biggest-selling stars in pop music celebrate these stereotypes; why should we be surprised when young people accept the stereotypes?

Kids crave social acceptance, and the opinions of their friends carry a lot of weight. The moment one kid is labeled a nerd or geek, simply because of their academic success, it sends a shock wave through the student body at large – and kids notice. In their minds, the only logical way to avoid such labels is to either intentionally dumb down, or at the very least give that impression... which is essentially the same thing, and produces the same ripple effect.

The first step in confronting this epidemic of ignorance is to recognize that it exists. Many attribute a lack of academic curiosity on too much television or internet time, or place the blame at the feet of gadgets, such as mp3 players or video games. While these might provide distractions, the ultimate root of the problem is in the attitudes that have been nurtured over the years, and that continue to be reinforced.

The next step is to make young people aware of the cascading effects that today's educational choices have on their future. Kids are notoriously unwilling – or unable – to visualize anything beyond the present moment. It's one of the reasons they feel invulnerable, bullet-proof. They take

extraordinary risks, from racing their cars to binge drinking, because, to their way of thinking, tomorrow will always arrive, and things will always be okay.

When I host a school assembly, I challenge students to envision a post-school future. I present them with a scenario that seems completely alien to them: a future where suddenly nobody cares how cool they used to be in school; where all that anyone cares about is what knowledge and skills they possess. For many it's the first time they have considered life outside their current social bubble.

The third step lies in reinforcement of the message. This is not a one-time fix. Kids might understand the implications, and might genuinely consider amending their attitudes toward education, but the tidal wave of peer pressure against them is relentless. It requires an equally dedicated effort to mitigate.

Kids want to be liked and accepted. If, in their minds, an Honor Roll tag threatens that peer acceptance, they'll opt for an intellectually lazy path without any regard for future consequences. It's our responsibility to make sure they understand those consequences, before it's too late.

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