

# Teacher Peer Pressure: Positive and Transformative

by Anna Johnson, Joni Reynolds, and Beth MacDonald

During the last five years of our 26 years as a school, our vision has become more clear and defined. We believe at MacDonald Montessori School that parents, teachers, and children are all part of a learning community with a strong emphasis placed on each child's unique ability to think, reason, question, and experiment. We have noticed a deeper commitment and a more passionate involvement in the vision of the school by all staff. We believe teacher peer pressure is alive and well within our school community. If we ask ourselves what drives us to grow as teachers, the answer lies in inspiration and peer pressure from ourselves, colleagues, and other educators.

For the last 18 years we have been inspired by the educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and have been in the process of shape-shifting and changing our view of the role of teachers. We are moving daily from:

- Isolation to Connectivity
- Imposed to Collaborative
- Simplicity to Complexity
- Superficial to Reflective
- Impulsive to Intentional
- Predetermined to "Open to Outcome"
- Teaching to Learning
- Authoritative to Democratic



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Hundred Languages of Children Exhibit from Reggio Emilia, Italy, in 2004. She currently serves on the NAREA board and is an NAREA representative on the Reggio Emilia International Network.

- Needy to Competent
- Certainty to Questioning
- "We can't do it" to "We can make it work"
- Linear Planning to Cooperative Experiences and Research
- Impossible to Possible

By definition, peer pressure refers to "the influence exerted by a peer group in encouraging a person to change his or her attitudes, values, or behavior in order to conform to group norms" ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). Often, the term 'peer pressure' has a negative connotation and is associated with bad behavior. However, we chose to embrace peer pressure as a positive tool for growth. Good peer pressure can mean being pushed into something you didn't have the courage to do or just didn't enter your mind to do.

## Collaboration

We've shifted from an attitude of operating individually, within our own classrooms, to collaborating with fellow teachers across the school. When an idea for a project is generated, observations of the children are gathered and brought to weekly meetings where teams of three classroom teachers come together to analyze, question, and hypothesize on next steps. In addition, coordinators from classrooms serving the same aged children meet on a tri-weekly basis to share our work, offer constructive criticism, ask for feedback, and analyze our work with the children and parents. While there was some resistance and discomfort with collaboration when we began, now it is a valuable part of our role as teachers. We have embraced it as an entire staff, and have found this method of working together to be invaluable.

What has made this method of working together possible was the creation of the collaboration team in 2007. The collaboration team is a floating group of teachers who work in each classroom on a rotating basis, providing time for teachers to meet on a weekly basis for two hours, and biweekly for two hours of prep time as a team. When the collaboration team first began working in the classrooms, they observed the different styles of the classrooms and

materials and differing expectations of children and adults. They observed fragmentation and noticed the classrooms working in isolation. Amelia Gambetti had asked us, “Do your classrooms operate as islands or are the classrooms connected and interconnected to the school as a whole?” We were puzzled by her question before the collaboration team shared their reflections during one of our school-wide teacher meetings. It was an upsetting wake-up call that pushed us to begin collaborating in a new way.

## Competition

In our past, classroom teachers tended to compete with one another. Teachers were possessive over their work, ideas, and materials. And while we are still growing in our efforts to embrace an attitude of school-wide collaboration where knowledge, materials, and common goals are shared, already teachers are showing a new perspective when reviewing observations of children or adding insight, new direction, or depth to a project. When working and making decisions in isolation, challenges, as well as successes are faced alone. This limits growth. When classroom doors are opened, literally and figuratively, you are opening yourself and your school up to infinite possibilities. Working in this new, united way has forced each of us to be humble and to open ourselves up to criticism and feedback in order to realize the benefits of operating as an interactive community.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETH MacDONALD



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## Shared Ownership

Another shift has come in our sense of ownership of projects and ideas. In the past, teachers worked independently on projects, from beginning to end, without input from others. They were solely in control of their work. Teachers felt personally

attached to ‘their’ work and defensive in response to feedback. Through meetings with each other, collaborating with children and parents, seeking out inspiration in other schools, and close examination of ourselves, we began to change. Our mindset and image of the child has evolved also. At the heart of it, the work belongs to the children; and we, as teachers, are more committed to working together to make the children’s thinking and learning visible. We have changed to a system where thoughts, ideas, observations, conversations, and classroom work are shared freely among teachers, children, and parents.

## Raised Expectations

We have increased our expectations of each other and ourselves and share a sense of accountability for our school. Raising our expectations works hand in hand with our desire to be respected by our peers. We are dependent on our co-teachers, and it has become almost impossible for us to work in isolation. In addition, being more responsible and accountable to others has given us pride in ourselves and our work with children and families.

## Open to Feedback

In order to work successfully in a collaborative way, a shift in individual staff mindset is also necessary. Teachers must be open to feedback and criticism and not become offended when challenged. Open and honest communication is key. With this change in mindset, collaboration and positive peer pressure can thrive.

## Hiring and Interviewing Process

This method of collaboration carried over into our hiring process as well. Now, when a new teacher is hired, classroom teachers, coordinators, and administration are all involved. Decisions are made together and careful attention is given to the placement of teachers on teams, taking each person's strengths and weaknesses into consideration. Change is embraced. When teams don't work well, we move and adjust them to keep finding the best working relationships.

## Connecting to the Larger Community

In addition to the peer pressure felt within the walls of our school, we have opened ourselves up, as a whole staff, to reaction, evaluation, and feedback from outsiders. We have had the fortunate opportunity of working closely with Amelia Gambetti, from the Infant Toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. We consider her a partner/mentor in our collaborative journey. Each time she visits, she offers a perspective from outside our context and culture and pushes us a step further in truly collaborating with one another. She has taught us the richness and power of working as a community. We have had to abandon the notion of classrooms as individual 'islands' and have begun to build bridges, creating connections.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETH MacDONALD

“People spark new ideas off each other when they argue and disagree – when they are conflicting, confused, and searching for new meaning – yet they remain willing to discuss and listen to each other.”

## Professional Development

We actively seek out new ideas by visiting schools, inviting guests to tour our school, and attending out of town professional development conferences and study weeks in Reggio Emilia. Several times a year, our school hosts a series of professional development opportunities, conferences, and visiting days. We open our doors to colleagues from other schools, share

our work experiences with them, and ask for feedback. We focus on comments, reactions, and impressions. Through this reciprocal exchange of ideas, we gain a deeper understanding of our own work.

## Parents as Partners

Parents offer an additional sort of peer pressure. It is our view that parents are equal partners, along with teachers and children, in the learning experience. For that reason we feel it is vital to share our work with parents on an ongoing basis, in the same manner we would with colleagues. Several times during the year, teachers invite parents to a parent meeting. At these meetings, PowerPoint presentations are used to share the work of the classroom. Feedback and suggestions for moving forward are shared between teachers and parents. Parents offer their own view of their children and provide important context for the work.

## Understanding Change

In an attempt to understand the complexity of the changes we have been experiencing, we have been searching for information about change. We found Michael Fullan's work both fascinating and helpful and discovered that schools, communities, cultures, companies, and corporations that see change as critical to growth have universal experiences and concepts.

In his book, *Change Forces*, Michael Fullan (1993) outlines eight lessons that are part of the paradigm of change:





1. You can't mandate what matters; it needs committed thinking and action.
2. Change is non-linear: filled with uncertainty, learning, anxiety, surprises, difficulties, and fear of the unknown. Change is "likened to a planned journey into uncharted waters in a leaky boat with a mutinous crew." The key to success lies in the creative activity of making 'new maps.' Change is sometimes perverse — "sometimes things get worse rather than better, even if we are doing all the right things. And sometimes they get better even if we are making mistakes."
3. Problems are our friends; they are natural and inevitable and you can't learn without them. Problems need to be embraced. Conflict is essential to any successful change effort.  
  
"People spark new ideas off each other when they argue and disagree — when they are conflicting, confused, and searching for new meaning — yet they remain willing to discuss and listen to each other."
4. Vision and strategic planning come later; visions emerge from action — not precedes it; people learn on the job.
5. Individualism and collectivism must have equal power. Over-

coming isolation is the goal; and learning in groups always produces conflict; and conflict cannot be avoided.

6. Neither centralization nor decentralization works. Both top-down and bottom-up strategies need each other. Change flourishes in a 'sandwich.'
7. Connection with the wider environment is critical. There are more ideas 'out there' than 'in here.'
8. Every person is a change agent. Each teacher is responsible and competent. Ideas and thinking should not be left to the 'experts.' We are each responsible for our collective inquiry and renewal.

Coming together as teachers and shape-shifting our personal attitudes has been a journey, and is quite often "not so easy." However, our journey, like life itself, is always worth the struggles that accompanies it. Our vision is always for the children and creating with them and their families a learning environment and an atmosphere that is exciting and joyful for all who are with us everyday.

## Reference

Fullan, M. (1993). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

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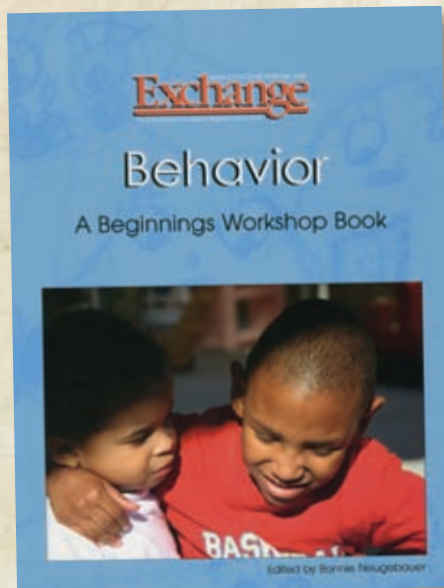
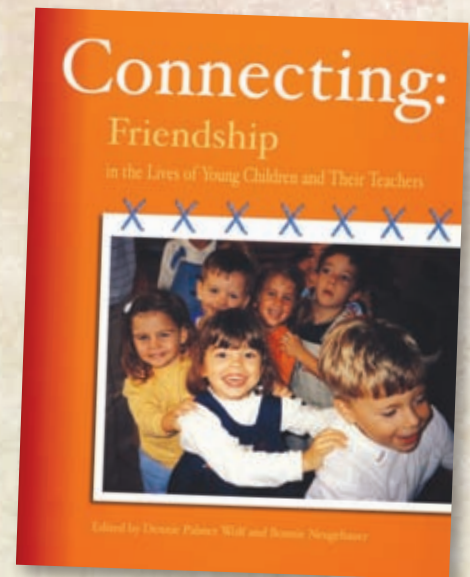


# Resources for Helping Young Children Deal with Peer Pressure.

## Connecting: Friendship in the Lives of Young Children and Their Teachers

This thought-provoking collection of articles offers practical tools and ideas for facilitating relationships among children and adults with contributions by experts including Ashely Montagu, Judith Leipzig, Kay Albrecht, Lella Gandini, Margie Carter, Diane Levin, and a host of others.

- The Nature and Stages of Children's Friendships
- Facilitating Friendships
- Reflecting on Friendship



## Behavior: A resource for teacher training

Authors Karen Stephens, Karen Miller, Roslyn Duffy, Diane Levin, and others lend their expertise on working with young children with challenging behavior. This Beginnings Workshop book is the perfect platform for staff development.

- When Children are Difficult
- Positive Behavior Strategies
- Conflict Resolution
- Power Struggles
- Anger
- Parent Perspectives on Discipline

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