

Bad Influences

What do you do if your kids are associating with “bad” kids? I’m not talking about the type that light cats on fire, but just kids that are a little ornery, rambunctious, or are bad influences. Should you separate your children from the children who are negative influences, or should you hope that your own children can positively influence the others?

We’ve been in different small groups at times when the ice breaker was, “Who was the worst influence on you as a kid?” The most common answer has always been ‘neighbors.’ I suppose if we were to think of the worst things we’ve ever done in our lives, most of them were done with someone else—a neighbor or a close friend. Having a friend there gave us a chance to prove how cool we were or to receive approval for our acts of deviousness. In looking back at our own childhoods, we can see that it would be wise to not underestimate the influence of friends.

The Bible says it straight out, “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character’” (1 Corinthians 15:33). If your child hangs out too much with bad influences, there is a good chance that he will be *influenced* for the *bad*. Your child can be corrupted by friends, just like the metal on your car can be corrupted when exposed to water.

Your child certainly can influence others for the good and should do so as his character is developed. We haven’t hit the teen years yet, but I wouldn’t expect younger kids to withstand significant amounts of peer pressure, because their character is not well formed. It is still being actively developed. While it’s possible for the good kid to lead the bad kid, what’s possible may not be as important at the moment as taking a look at what *is* happening. Is your child influencing the bad influence, or is your child being negatively influenced? With some kids our kids will lead out; with others they tend to resort to becoming followers. We tell them, “If you can’t lead, then follow someone who is making good choices.”

If our child was being negatively influenced we would:

- 1) Limit the amount of time he is exposed to the bad influence.
- 2) Closely monitor the children’s activities and speech when they are together.
- 3) Withdraw my child from the situation if it became severe enough.

For example, if our child was around a negative influence at a weekly playdate, I might shorten the playdate from three to one-and-a-half hours. I’d also try to supervise the situation more closely. If I still felt that my child was being negatively impacted, I might quit going to the playdate altogether.

What if the child is not bad, but just ornery or rambunctious? You are the only one who can accurately assess the impact on your child. However, if it gets bad enough that you’re asking the question, my guess is that it is bad enough that you’ll want to do something about it. You obviously don’t want the behavior that you’ve seen imitated by your child. So, in light of that, I’d put some sort of boundaries on the relationship.

That said, I want my kids to be in the world and influencing the world. But I don’t want them in over their heads. They need to be mature enough to handle it.