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What if your child is serious about learning but their friends are not?

Why is it that some students love learning and some seem to love mucking up? I once worked with a Year 9 student named Michael who was in the bottom maths class at school. He wanted to learn, but was being dragged down by his friends who constantly reminded him that “anyone trying hard is a goody-goody suck up.” It is not easy for a student to break free from this type of peer pressure. The need to belong to a peer group is very powerful, often leading individuals, whether children, adolescents or adults, to do things they would not otherwise do if they were away from the group.

After a few coaching sessions I knew that Michael had a reasonable amount of ability in maths, and a good work ethic. I told him that maths coaching would be a waste of time if he did not change the way he operated at school. With my encouragement, he told his friends that he was going to sit at the front of the classroom and get as much work done during the class as he could. He put up with their teasing, which only lasted a few days, and began to make rapid progress. He was soon promoted to a higher class, and then the top class. In the final exam of the year he came first in the grade.

I can still remember the phone call I took that afternoon. Michael had raced home from the bus to call me with the great news, even before he told his parents. I was pleased for him, and though I did take some credit for the result, I told him that it was his belief in himself and his willingness to act in his own best interests that had been rewarded.

Where does the need to belong come from? Abraham Maslow is famous for devising the “Hierarchy of Human Needs”. He reasoned that all human actions are directed at satisfying a need that is being felt. Further, physical needs are more powerful motivators than emotional needs, which in turn are more powerful than intellectual needs. Once our physical needs are met, we are motivated to satisfy needs that are higher up in the hierarchy. When a need from lower down is felt, we find it difficult to operate at a higher level:

- 1. BASIC** Need to have enough food, water, clothing and shelter
- 2. SECURITY** Need to feel safe and free from the threat of harm, both physical and emotional
- 3. BELONGING** Need to feel that people like me and love me, including family, friends and peer group
- 4. SELF-ESTEEM** Need to feel good about myself by becoming competent in achieving a range of tasks and to be recognised by others
- 5. SELF-ACTUALISATION** Need to become the best person I can be, often by helping others or supporting a worthy cause

As shown, the need to belong is more powerful than the need for achievement. Note that the self-esteem of Michael's trouble-making friends was boosted by the kudos they got for challenging the teachers, compensating for their poor academic performance.

Humans are like other members of the animal kingdom that act instinctively to satisfy their needs. But humans have the capacity to think before they act, to decide whether the action is really in their own best interests. Students, teachers and parents can analyse their own actions at any time by asking “Am I being instinctive, emotional or rational?” and the follow-up question “Is what I am doing helping me?”

The recently released film “Mean Girls” is an excellent portrayal of the peer groups operating within a junior high school setting. The central character tries to fit in as she learns the un-stated rules for conformity. At one stage she under-performs in maths in an attempt to become more popular.

Students need help to modify behaviour that is not really helping them, especially if their peer group is sabotaging their chances of success. Wise parents and teachers understand the behaviour of students and work with them rather than against them.