

21. Beans in a jar and the domination of the peer group

Here is a simple demonstration of the power of the peer group. A class of young people, or a similar gathering who know each other, is asked to inspect a jar of beans, in turn and without discussion. After examining it, they are asked to pass the jar on and to write down on a piece of paper their estimate of the number of beans in the container. The demonstrator collects the pieces of paper as the estimates are made and keeps them in order.

In the next stage, the jar of beans is circulated again, and the class or group is told that it can revise its estimates. This time the estimates are called out in turn, to the class or group. As each estimate is called out the demonstrator logs it on a flipchart or blackboard. It becomes plain that after the first two or three calls, other members of the group start to revise their original estimates so that it is close to the standard or norm that they see emerging. Individuals may make quite big revisions to make sure they are close to the group norm. By the end of the exercise, a clear group norm can be seen on the chart.

The demonstrator can now plot the original estimates on the chart and start a discussion as to why the patterns are not the same. Individuals may explain that when they heard the estimates of other members, they felt the need to revise their own estimate. Some may explain that when two or three seem to agree, they thought that they must be right, and that they lost confidence in their own estimate.

The group norm that emerges may be far removed from the true number of beans in the jar. And individuals who revised their estimate to be close to the norm, can have been right all along. There may be a few independent individuals who stick to their own personal estimate against the group norm, but these are usually rare. Such individuals can also be more accurate than the group norm. But they can be subjected to mild banter and derision or worse, for sticking to their judgement.

This demonstration is based on some classic experiments on factors affecting group judgement, conducted in the 1930s by Jenness, and written up in the psychological journals of the time. I have used the beans in a jar event many times in the past to start discussions on the influence of the peer group.

All this pressure to abandon your own judgement and conform to the group norm is generated merely over estimating the number of beans in a jar. When more serious matters are at stake, the pressure increases. "... *if you don't wear Nike trainers and Adidas top and trousers, you are the laughing-stock of the school. I don't know who starts these trends, but they mean everyone needs a computer, a mobile phone, 'in' clothes ... to be cool.*" Catriona McPhee, aged 12, in *Living Green* 32, Summer 2000.

'Once in school, they'll learn to hate each other.' This was the title of a newspaper report by David Hill about a new book entitled *Prejudice*, by Cedric Cullingford. The report, in *Guardian Education*, 3/10/00, proposed that in theory, prejudice has no place in the classroom, but in practice, that is precisely where it breeds.

Once the habit of dividing people into 'one of us' or 'not one of us' is established, it continues in other contexts. Recent research carried out at Lancaster University on football supporters found that they failed consistently to come to the aid of an injured supporter from a rival team. Secret cameras filmed in actor apparently writhing in pain on the floor. When the actor

wore a Manchester United shirt, 80 percent of Manchester fans came to his aid. But when he wore Liverpool shirt, all but a handful walked straight past.

'They used to want a revolution. Now they just want money,' was the title of an article in *The Observer* November 11th, 2000. It quoted surveys commissioned for *The Observer* demonstrating that any teenage tendency of the past to rebel against the system, had given way to the current peer group identification with consumerism. "I love labels. If it doesn't have the label, I won't buy it. Labels are everything. It's about looking right, being part of something, of a group," said one. The survey showed that for 14 to 16 year-olds, friends are twice as important as family. Four out of five rate 'having a good time' and music as a 'most important to me'. Designer clothes are more important than the environment and making money rates higher than helping others, the survey showed.

In a previous column, (*Natural Parent*, November/December 1998) I noted some other examples of negative socialisation:

Report 1: Children now expect bullying to be a regular feature of school life. This was the conclusion of a national survey commissioned by the *Family Circle* magazine showing that eight out of ten have suffered at least one sustained attack. On average, the first bullying experience can now be expected at the age of eight.

Report 2: A report commissioned by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust showed that weapons are now carried by one in ten school students. Although this is much lower than the USA, the trend is upwards. Indeed, a later study published in the *British Medical Journal* in April 2000, reported that around a third of 11 to 16 year-old boys and 8 percent of girls in Scotland, had carried weapons ranging from knives to replica pistols and knuckledusters. The study showed that those who were involved in drugs, were more likely to carry weapons.

Report 3: Primary Schools are to be issued drug guidelines by the Head Teachers Association. Solvent-sniffing is now found to be common among children as young as 7. The HTA claimed that schools were choosing to sweep the problem under the carpet by not informing the police in order to protect the reputation of the school. The primary school peer group is now a child's key source of information about drugs. As the youngsters grow older, their peer group will supply information about smoking, alcohol, ecstasy tablets, and expensive teenage fashion. A government survey on drugs published in November confirmed a rising trend in the use of drugs amongst schoolchildren. By sixteen, 39% had tried drugs, 55% cigarettes and 73% alcoholic drinks.

John Holt put the peer group agenda in perspective when he wrote: "*To learn to know oneself, and to find a life worth living and work worth doing, is problem and challenge enough, without having to waste time on the fake and unworthy challenges of school - pleasing the teacher, staying out of trouble, fitting in with the gang, being popular, doing what everyone else does.*" (*Teach Your Own* p.64 -5)

All this helps explain why one reason for starting to educate children at home is to replace the predominantly negative socialisation of school, with the predominantly positive socialisation of a home-based education programme, operating out-and-about in the community. One home-educating parent commented, "*people often say to me, you are so brave. But I reply, no, you are the brave one, because you hand your children over to a bunch of strangers, and hope for the best.*" She might have added, "*and you hand your children over to the domination of the peer group, and hope for the best*".

Ironically, the domination of the peer group is brought into being by the adults who created an ageist institution called school in the first place, and those who continue, foolishly, to perpetuate its existence. The idea that press-ganging all young people of the same age, and more importantly, similar immaturity, into one place for a total of at least 16,000 hours, year in, year out, will somehow lead to emotional and social maturity, is dubious, if not absurd. It plainly does no such thing. The next learning system has to deconstruct the ageism of the present one and create all-age, community, invitational learning centres. (It is feasible, however, to have some age-grouping within a non-ageist institution for particular purposes and as a temporary phase or expedient - such as early childhood groups.)

We do not have to look far to see how such institutions can work - the public library is just such an institution, and so is the family. I have often answered the question of what do we do with the current schooling system by suggesting we close it down completely. Then we hand the plant and personnel over to the library service asking it to expand its educational brief beyond books, and multi-media information materials to the organisation of invitational community learning centres with courses, classes and group activities such as orchestras and drama. The public library has many of the features required in the next learning system - it is non-ageist, it is invitational and personalised not coercive and standardised, and it also operates with a catalogue curriculum approach rather than a restrictive imposed curriculum.

What can parents who still have to use the flawed institutions of the schooling system do in the meantime? It is not going to be easy. The social psychological research on the difficulties of changing attitudes once they are established, is not encouraging. On the other hand, after one beans in a jar event, young people were known to label as 'beanies' people who abandoned their own judgements merely to please the group, rather than discussing them. Thus the peer group had moved towards two key ideas in democracy - toleration of a variety of points of view and a need to explore these.

Therefore, constantly presenting the facts, such as the findings of the surveys given above, can be a start. Then there were some ideas in a previous column on damage limitation (*Natural Parent*, Jan/Dec 2000). At least it makes you feel better by at least doing something.

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