



# What to do when a case of Parent Peer Pressure strikes

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There's a dreadful condition that affects parents and strikes us when we least expect it.

It's not transmitted through handshakes or sneezes like the common cold, but in the sneakiest way imaginable: through shared (and often unsolicited) opinions.

It's called Parent Peer Pressure, or PPP. You, or someone you know, is likely suffering from it as we speak.

Here's how PPP works: You're catching up with a friend over coffee when you innocently say, "Mary is really enjoying her break from ballet right now."

"A break?" replies your friend. "Are you sure? We put our little Simone in a specialized camp over the summer and she's improved sooooo much..."

And there it is: You are the victim of a sudden attack of PPP. In a split second, the comforting certainty that you've done the right thing for your child is gone. The peace of mind is replaced by the nagging questions: "What if I'm making a mistake? What if Mary falls behind the other kids?"

## PPP is on the rise

Sadly, PPP seems to be on the rise. Parents have always shared opinions about what is best for kids, but now they have a powerful broadcasting system at their disposal: social media.

To quote Katy Steinmetz from an article in Time Magazine: "This generation [of parents] has no Dr. Spock. They have a zillion competing Facebook friends and Internet "experts" — none authoritative and many contradicting one another."

An innocent comment from someone doing something different with their kids, especially someone we respect and know to be a thoughtful parent, can send us into second-guessing.

It can be confusing and overwhelming.

## Welcome to the PPP support group

I write about PPP because I am in the middle of a mild attack myself. As my son moves up the hockey system, more opportunities present themselves. As we navigate these opportunities, we (my son, my wife, and I) are trying to make the right decision for what will be best for him.

Because I work in sport and understand the long-term athlete development model, I have a good idea of what is right for a 13-year-old kid. And yet, I am still affected by what other parents are saying. I still have to manage doubts.

I can't imagine what it's like for parents who aren't as familiar with current research and recommendations:

- The mom who knows nothing about ballet that is told her son has "principal dancer" potential and should be enrolled in individual lessons.
- The dad who doesn't know hockey and told his daughter has "college" potential and should attend extra summer camps.

Add sound bites from a few well-meaning parents and PPP strikes again.

The good news is that it's possible to manage PPP. With a few simple strategies, that really just amount to a shift in perspective, it's easy to feel more confident with your decisions even in the face of other parents' contradictory opinions.

## Strategy 1: Trust your child. Really trust them

You can trust your kids when it comes to what's good or not good for them. For this to work, you have to fulfill a few conditions as a parent:

- First, put your own opinion aside and keep an open mind.
- Second, present the options and choices to your child in a simple and direct way.

- Finally, listen and watch. They will tell you and show you how they feel. Your child's body language won't lie.

"Do you want to do the swim camp next week?" you ask. "Sure," your child responds without enthusiasm, her head bowed and shoulders hunched over. Maybe it's the right time to ask her if she's feeling tired from swimming. Or maybe it's time to go suggest a family swim instead.

This kind of communication with your child takes a little practice and time to develop trust. But if your goal is to help them be active for life, then it's a worthwhile investment.

### Strategy 2: Inform yourself. AfL makes it easy

Most parents don't back up their opinion with extensive research. Instead, they repeat "sound bites" — chunks of truth — that makes sense to them. In the social media era, the challenge is to find the sound bites that are actually based on sound science.

When it comes to sports and physical activity, Active for Life can be your go-to for PPP inoculation.

We've taken the science and expert advice and made it easy for the busiest parents to arm themselves with PPP-abating information. Of course, the challenge is to read the information with an open mind. And the goal is to identify the key sound bites that inform and make things clearer for you.

See the sidebar for helpful information on a number of topics we find parents commonly have questions about.

### Strategy 3: Write down what makes sense for your child

If you have followed steps 1 and 2, you likely have a good grip on what is best for your child. There is great value in writing down the key principles you believe in so you can go back to them when in doubt.

For my son, we did this as a family. We called it our "manifesto". We kept it simple and narrowed it down to three principles:

1. Transition to specialization: At 13, my son is at the beginning of the phase of the LTAD in which he should specialize in hockey. The key word here is "beginning". Like anything else it should be a transition to specializing in hockey and not an abrupt change where he stops everything else.

2. Enjoyment: The second key principle is that it MUST be fun or it's not worth it. It's no secret that many teenagers drop out of sport. Often the seriousness of organized sport is cited as the main cause for kids quitting. This is common sense, but it's good to remember why kids play sport in the first place. What was really valuable here is that we discussed with our son what made hockey fun for him. He answered that he loved skating, improving his skills, and being with kids like him.

3. Stay grounded: Finally, the last principle came from a hockey specialist that I heard speak one day. His words stayed with me: "If you want to help your kids in hockey, make sure they are in the system, but be wise and protect them from the system at the same time."

Reminding yourself that every child and every family have different needs at different times can be helpful to keep PPP at bay.

Just like the seasonal cold, you will still be infected by PPP. But when you're confident that you've done your homework, and that you're in tune with what is best for your child, it's less likely to keep you up at night.

### Inoculate yourself against Parent Peer Pressure (PPP)

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