

Toolbox Talk for students

Fitting In Without Losing
Yourself



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help learners recognise peer pressure, understand how the need to belong can influence decisions and feel more confident setting boundaries or seeking support when something goes against their values, wellbeing or safety.

Imagine you are new to a group and everyone seems to know each other. Somebody offers you a drink, encourages you to place a bet or suggests doing something you are not comfortable with. You hesitate and someone says, “Come on, everyone else is doing it” or “Don’t be boring” What you choose in that moment may have less to do with what you actually want and more to do with wanting to be accepted. That pressure can be powerful, particularly when you are starting somewhere new and still trying to find your place.

Why It Matters

Wanting to belong is a normal human need. Friendships, teamwork and feeling part of something can make college, apprenticeships and working life far more enjoyable. The difficulty comes when acceptance seems to depend on behaving in ways that make you uncomfortable. Peer pressure is not always somebody directly ordering you to do something. It can be a joke, a look, repeated encouragement or the feeling that you are the only person saying no. It might involve alcohol, drugs, vaping, gambling, dangerous driving, humiliating somebody else or taking an unsafe shortcut. It can also mean working in a way that goes against your values because you are frightened of being left out or judged. A decision that creates a few minutes of approval can lead to stress, financial problems, damaged relationships or risks to health and safety afterwards. This does not mean every social event, drink or bet will automatically become a serious problem. It means your choices should still belong to you.

What It Can Look Like

Direct pressure may sound like, “Just have one” “Put some money on it” or “Nobody will find out.”



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Indirect pressure can be harder to recognise. You might notice that you are laughing at something you do not find funny, spending money you cannot afford or agreeing to a task you do not feel trained to complete. Perhaps you drink more than you intended, use drugs because they are available or join gambling conversations because everybody else appears involved. You might hide what happened afterwards, borrow money, miss lessons or feel anxious about being placed in the same situation again. People respond to pressure differently. Saying yes once does not mean somebody is weak, addicted or has a mental health condition. Pay attention when a behaviour becomes difficult to control, needs to be hidden or repeatedly causes problems with money, relationships, education, health or safety.

What Can Help

Decide some of your boundaries before you are under pressure. It is easier to respond when you have already considered what you are comfortable with. Ask yourself, “Would I choose this if nobody were watching?” and “How am I likely to feel about this tomorrow?” A boundary does not need a long explanation. You could say, “No thanks” “That’s not for me” “I’m not spending money on that” or “I haven’t been trained, so I’m not doing it.” If somebody continues, repeat your answer rather than becoming drawn into an argument. You are allowed to change the subject, move away or leave.

Planning ahead can also help. If you are going somewhere where alcohol or other pressure may be present, decide how you will get home and identify somebody you trust who will respect your choices. Keep enough money or battery on your phone to leave safely. You can support other people by accepting their first answer.



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Do not demand an explanation, make them defend themselves or turn their boundary into another joke. A simple “fair enough mate” can make it easier for somebody to remain part of the group without doing something they do not want to do.

If you have already agreed to something and regret it, you can still change your mind. If alcohol, drugs or gambling are becoming difficult to control or are affecting your money, attendance, relationships or health, speak to somebody you trust, your GP or an appropriate support service. If somebody becomes seriously unwell or is in immediate danger after taking a substance, seek emergency help.

Preparing for Life in Construction

Construction can create strong friendships and a real sense of belonging. There may also be social events, conversations about gambling or situations where a new starter feels expected to prove themselves. Not everyone drinks, gambles or enjoys the same things, even when it appears that way. You do not need to take an unsafe risk, join in with poor treatment or ignore your own limits to earn respect. The people worth working with will respect a clear boundary. Being able to say, “I’m not comfortable with that,” is useful both socially and when a task, instruction or situation does not feel safe.

Discussion Questions

- Why can peer pressure feel stronger when somebody is new to a group?
- What can make saying no easier in the moment?
- How can a group include people without pressuring them to make the same choices?



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Takeaway Message

Fitting in should not require you to ignore your safety, values or wellbeing. You can enjoy friendships, humour and social events while still making different choices from the people around you. A clear boundary may feel uncomfortable for a few moments but agreeing to something you do not want can affect you for much longer. The right people will not require you to prove that you belong by putting yourself at risk.

Action

Choose one short sentence you could use when you do not want to join in, such as, “No thanks, that’s not for me.” Say it aloud once so that it feels more natural if you ever need it under pressure.



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