

Teenagers who are well liked may not be as well behaved

By EMILY SINGER

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Many young teens spend math class daydreaming of popularity, but being part of the in-crowd may be a double-edged sword. Popular adolescents have better social skills than their less popular peers, new research shows, but they are also more likely to get into trouble.

“Most people tend to think that if their children are well-liked by their peers, that will provide a safety net,” says lead researcher Joseph P. Allen, a psychologist at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. “But we found that even though they were well-adjusted in a lot of ways, at 13 these kids were at an increased risk for marijuana and alcohol use and other mildly deviant behavior.”

As children reach adolescence, they begin to assert their independence by acting out. Young teens also start to look to their peers more than their parents for clues on how to behave, creating a recipe for negative peer pressure. “Popular kids are popular partly because they are good followers and very tuned into the norm of their social group,” Allen says. When the social norm turns rebellious, these kids follow along.

Researchers followed 185 seventh- and eighth-graders in Charlottesville, Va., for one year, assessing popularity, self-esteem, substance abuse, behavioral problems, relationships with their parents and the ability to develop close friendships. The group was a mix of girls and boys and included students of different ethnic and economic backgrounds.

Allen’s team found that popular kids -- defined as those most well-liked by their peers -- had better relationships with their peers and parents, but they were also more likely to engage in delinquent activities. For example, at the beginning of the study, both well-liked and less

popular kids had similar levels of drug use. But during the course of the year, popular kids became three times more likely to experiment with marijuana and alcohol.

The findings create a quandary for parents, who want their kids to be both well-liked and well-behaved. “The good news for parents is that popular kids tend to have good relationships with parents,” Allen says. “So if you’re the parent of a popular kid, get more involved ... talk to them and try to bridge the norms of family and peer group.”

Although popular teens were more likely to try drugs, the study found they did not participate more frequently in major criminal activities.

In many cases, mild problem behavior will turn out to be relatively harmless, says Robert Crosnoe, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin. Previous studies have shown that teens who experiment with alcohol as part of their social network are less likely to suffer from chronic problems than those who experiment outside of a social context, he says.

Tom Dishion, a psychologist at the University of Oregon in Eugene, says the effect of popularity may also depend on the school and the community. Being popular in an area with a high risk for crime may not be a good thing, he points out, because the negative influences are more serious.

Allen and collaborators plan to follow the adolescents in their study for the next decade to determine whether these popular kids become more rebellious as they age or turn into well-adjusted adults.

The findings were published in the May issue of *Child Development*.