

The Dark Side Of Adolescent Popularity

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Summary: For teenagers, popularity itself has a downside. A recent study that followed 185 eighth graders for a year observed that over time, popular adolescents showed greater increases in levels of delinquency and drug use. In other words, the more popular the teen, the more likely he or she was to get in trouble. This means that a teenager's much sought after popularity may have some negative consequences in the long run.

FULL STORY

Although being popular is a primary goal for many teenagers--and their parents--a new study published in the May/June 2005 issue of the journal *Child Development* finds that popularity itself has a downside.

The study, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and conducted by researchers from the universities of Virginia and Washington, and Davidson College) followed 185 seventh and eighth graders for one year. Researchers used a series of valid tests to evaluate a variety of criteria, including popularity, attachment security, self-esteem, ability to develop close friendships, relationships with parents, alcohol and substance abuse and behavioral problems.

Overall, the researchers found, popular adolescents were more well-adjusted than their less popular peers on many dimensions, including the quality of their relationships to their parents and their overall level of social skills. However, over time popular adolescents tended to show greater increases in levels of delinquency and drug use. In short, the researchers noted, the more popular the teen, the more likely he or she was to get into trouble during the year in which they were followed.

In many ways, says lead researcher Joseph P. Allen, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, the findings aren't surprising. "Popular adolescents are popular in part because they are carefully attuned to the norms of their peer group," he said. "As these norms increasingly come to support even minor levels of deviant behavior during adolescence, popular teens may be particularly susceptible."

In fact, Dr. Allen's study found that popular students whose peers had higher levels of deviant behavior showed some of the greatest increases in deviant behavior themselves over time.

However, most of the increases in deviant behavior were in relatively minor acts of deviance, such as vandalism or shoplifting. Notably, popular teens did not increase levels of major criminal activities, Dr. Allen said. In fact, certain behaviors, such as hostility, that are typically not well-received by peers, actually declined for popular teens. Thus, while the study found that peers may socialize popular teens in some negative ways (toward more delinquency), the decrease in hostile behavior seen in popular teens suggests that socialization also has its positive side, said Dr. Allen, possibly leading to positive outcomes.

Overall, Dr. Allen noted, the study suggests that "there is no free lunch. As teens become more socialized into their peer groups, they gain social skills and popularity, but inevitably are influenced in ways that may not be to parents' liking."

The bottom line, he said, is that the very thing that makes a teenager popular--being able to attend to the needs and norms of their peers--may, in the long run, have some negative consequences as well. Researchers plan to follow the students through early adulthood.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 76, Issue 3, The Two Faces of Adolescents' Success With Peers: Adolescent Popularity, Social Adaptation, and Deviant Behavior by Allen JP, Porter MR, McFarland FC (all of University of Virginia), Marsh P (University of Washington) and McElhaney KB (Davidson College). Copyright 2005 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

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