



The Price of Teen Popularity

Risky Behavior More Likely Among Popular Kids

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May 17, 2005 -- Teen popularity may not always be a totally rosy scenario, a new study shows.

Researchers found that popular young teens had plenty of social benefits but were also more likely to get into trouble with alcohol, marijuana, or minor delinquent acts during the yearlong study.

"Popularity with peers was found to play a multifaceted role in early adolescence," say University of Virginia psychology professor Joseph Allen, PhD, and colleagues in the May/June issue of *Child Development*.

That is, popularity was positive in many aspects, but it often meant obeying the group's more shadowy values, too.

Studying Popularity

The teen years are notorious for their intense social pressures. It's a time when many young people are testing their wings, somewhere beyond childhood but short of full adulthood.

Popularity is at the heart of Allen's study. Participants were 185 seventh- and eighth-grade students from one middle school.

The group of 87 boys and 98 girls was 58% white, 29% black, and 13% from other or mixed ethnic backgrounds. The students' close friends and mothers were also included.

Bright, Dark Sides of Popularity

Popular teens were well-adjusted in many respects. Their social skills were stronger than those of other students.

The popular teens also had stronger relationships with their mothers and closest friends. In addition, their hostility scores had dropped at the one-year follow-up.

However, while popular early adolescents have numerous positive characteristics, over time these popular adolescents also displayed relative increases in levels of minor deviant and alcohol and substance abuse behavior, though they also demonstrated relative decreases in levels of hostility, write the authors.

More Popular, More Peer Pressure?

Popular teens may be seen as trendsetters, the ones who "rule the school." But does their popularity hinge on the group's favor, and what does it take to win and keep that approval?

Every teen is different, and so are the people they hang out with. But Allen's study shows that when risky behaviors are perceived as cool, popular teens may act accordingly.

"Popular adolescents are popular in part because they are carefully attuned to the norms of their peer group," says Allen, in a news release. "As these norms increasingly come to support even minor levels of deviant behavior during adolescence, popular teens may become more susceptible."

'No Free Lunch'

The drop in hostility indicates that popularity may be helpful. "Peer socializing influences can be positive," write researchers. But overall, "there is no free lunch," says Allen.

"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," he says.

The brief study doesn't address long-term behaviors, but the researchers plan to study the students through young adulthood, says the news release.

"These findings do not imply that popular adolescents will engage in serious levels of deviant behavior or even to maintain minor levels of deviance over long periods of time," write researchers.

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SOURCES: Allen, J. *Child Development*, May/June 2005; vol 76: pp 747-760. News release, Society for Research in Child Development.

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