

SHORTCUTS

Peeking at the Negative Side of High School Popularity

By Alina Tugend

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PROM time has come and gone, and while it didn't affect me or my sons this year (I'm too old, they're too young), it still caused a reminiscent tightening in my stomach.

The prom, along with its endless pre- and post events, is just one more social trial that adolescents face in their school years and yet another test of their relative popularity, of fitting in, of being accepted.

And it got me thinking about popularity. It's important for most teenagers, but sometimes even more so for their parents. In my community, parents often like boasting (thinly veiled by mock dismay) that their children are at parties every weekend and never around the house.

I have, for example, a friend whose son is academically proficient and involved in school and outside activities. Yet, he is not a big socializer.

"It's hard," she says. "When other parents talk, it's easy to feel like something is wrong with your child, even when there isn't."

So I wondered, is popularity always a good thing? And how does it play out in life after high school?

Mitchell J. Prinstein, a professor and director of clinical psychology at the University of North Carolina, outlines the way researchers often look at popularity: there are the students he calls "high status," like the student council president or the captain of the football team.

"Some of the most popular kids are very much disliked by other kids," he said. This may be partly envy, but sometimes these standout teenagers can be bullies or part of the mean-girl clique.

Another kind of popularity is what Professor Prinstein calls "likeability." That is how much a person is liked or preferred by peers — someone other people enjoy hanging out with on a Saturday night.

These teenagers tend to be well-adjusted on many levels, including enjoying good relationships with their parents and other adults, as well as being able to master diverse social situations.

"They tend to be carefully attuned to the norms of their peer group," said Joseph P. Allen, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. "They're less trendsetters than trend spotters."

Surveys estimate that about 20 percent of students in any school are highly liked, about 50 percent are average — having some friends, but not necessarily a lot — and the rest are considered neglected or rejected students. These are either ignored or actively disliked.

That pretty much sets the scene for most high schools we know. I fell into that vast middle ground — I had a group of friends, was involved in various school activities and sports (and yes, I went to the prom). But I certainly didn't scale the glittering heights of popularity.

Still, the real question is, what does being popular in middle and high school tell us about the world outside the bubble of adolescence? Does it matter?

Professor Allen, who is also the co-author of “Escaping the Endless Adolescence” (Ballantine, 2009), has some answers. He has been following a demographically diverse group of 185 students from Charlottesville, Va., since they were 13 years old; they are now 24. He plans to continue studying them for several more years.

Professor Allen is using the criteria of likeability, rather than high status, to define popularity. His longitudinal study has found that the more popular teenagers were more likely to get into trouble with mild deviant behavior, like shoplifting or vandalism, and to drink or smoke marijuana.

“This is the currency of adolescents,” Professor Prinstein said. “It’s one way to signal to their peers that I’m not doing what adults want. I’m autonomous and independent.”

Much of that small-time crime disappears as the students age, Professor Allen said, but the drinking and marijuana use actually tended to become even more of a problem in college and afterward.

While not every highly social teenager engages in substance abuse, “we find that the popular kids are more vulnerable,” he said. The very thing that makes teenagers popular — being in tune with the needs and norms of their peers — can have negative consequences, he added.

The good news is that it’s not necessary to have loads of friends or to rank high on the popularity scale to feel good about yourself, researchers have found.

If your child has a few close friends who make her feel accepted and liked, is doing fairly well academically and is involved in a few activities in or out of school, then you probably have little to worry about. “They’re learning to be both connected and autonomous,” Professor Allen said.

In fact, another study of 164 13- and 14-year-olds, a subset of Professor Allen’s group, found that teenagers who perceived themselves as well liked and comfortable with their peers were just as socially successful over time as those who were deemed popular by others. This internal sense of social acceptance, the study’s authors said, may be as or more important in the long run than the number of friends you have.

But there is some evidence that being more popular may have some long-term economic benefits. Using information from 4,330 male respondents from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study — one-third of a continuing random sample of more than 10,000 men and women who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957 — a group of economic and labor researchers reported in 2009 that they had found a link between number of friends and higher earnings in the future.

The participants were asked in a 1975 survey to name their three closest same-sex friends from high school. Controlling for all other factors, including intelligence, the 2009 report found that being nominated as a close friend by one person is associated with earnings that are 2 percent higher later in life. Nominations by five people equaled a 10 percent increase in wages.

It may be that being named as a close friend indicates good social skills that are beneficial throughout life, said Gabriella Conti, a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Chicago and lead author on the report.

Certainly there is evidence that the qualities we usually associate with being well liked — being extroverted, emotionally stable and self-confident — usually help on the job.

“A lot of work being performed in the current workplace is not done in isolation,” Brent A. Scott, an assistant professor of management at Michigan State University who wrote his doctoral dissertation on popularity at work. “People need to be socially capable in teams, and to be successful they need to navigate the social landscape. Popular people are more capable of that.”

But there are other qualities that contribute to being well liked professionally that may not have carried much clout in school, he said, like being conscientious about your job.

The good news for all of us is that once we leave high school, there are far more ways to flourish than in the narrow confines of adolescence. How many of us have had the rewarding experience of going to our school reunion to discover that the mighty have fallen, or at least are just as human as the rest of us?

The bigger puzzle, I find, is why so few people actually believe in retrospect that they were popular in high school.

“Because it’s a jungle,” Professor Allen said. “Even if you were popular, you still had experiences of being left out and rejected. No one goes through unscathed.”