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# Researchers Figured Out What Really Happens To Cool Kids When They Grow Up

Dina Spector Jun 12, 2014, 10:46 AM



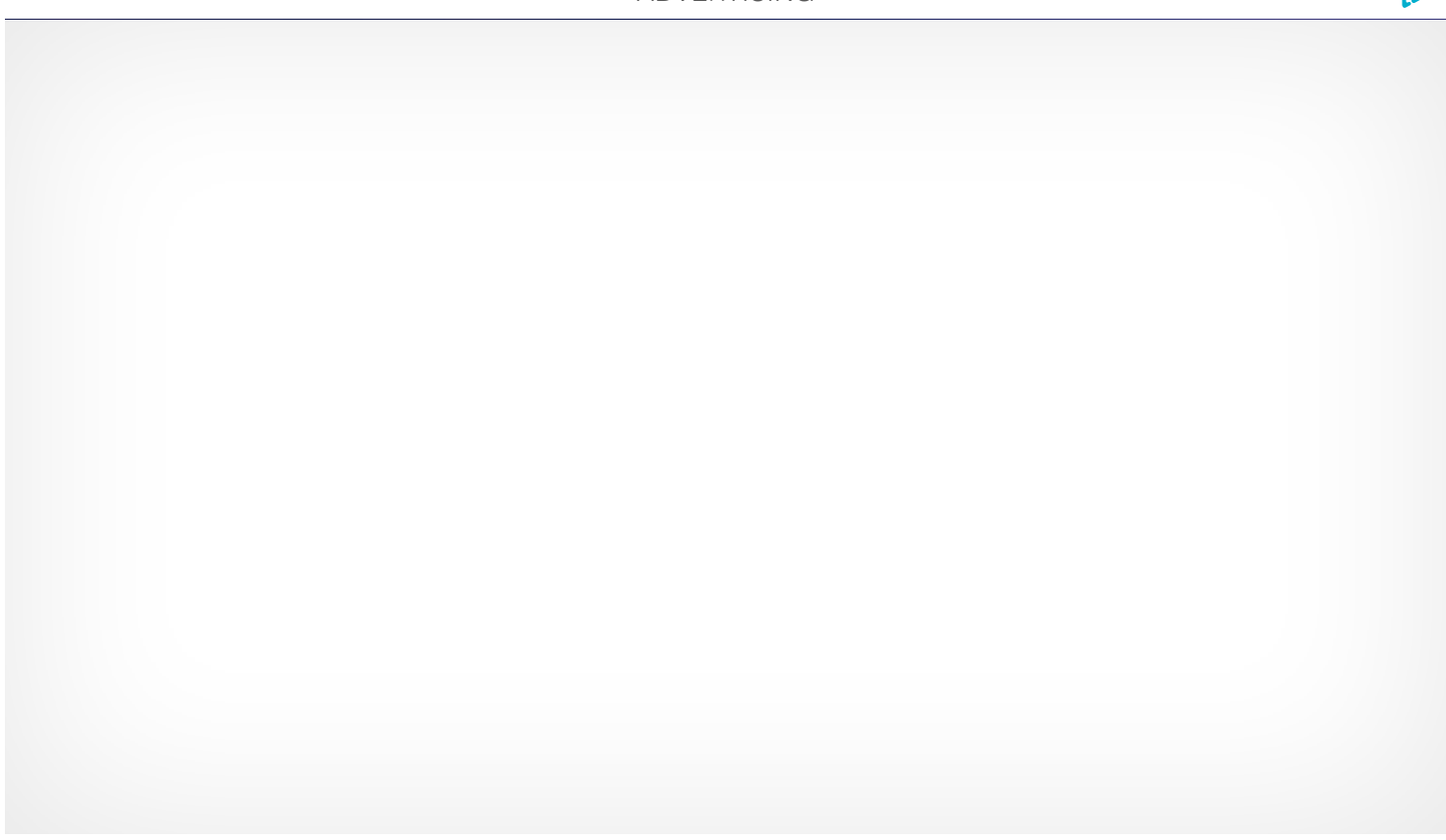
Being king or queen of the high-school hallways might seem cool in your teens, but it doesn't bode well for your social status later in life, a new study suggests.



**They may be cool now, but see what happens in 10 years.** The Internet Movie Database

Teens who try to act older than their age might gain popularity early on but are more likely to have problems with drugs and alcohol and engage in serious criminal behavior by their early 20s, according to the [study](#) published on Thursday in the journal Child Development.

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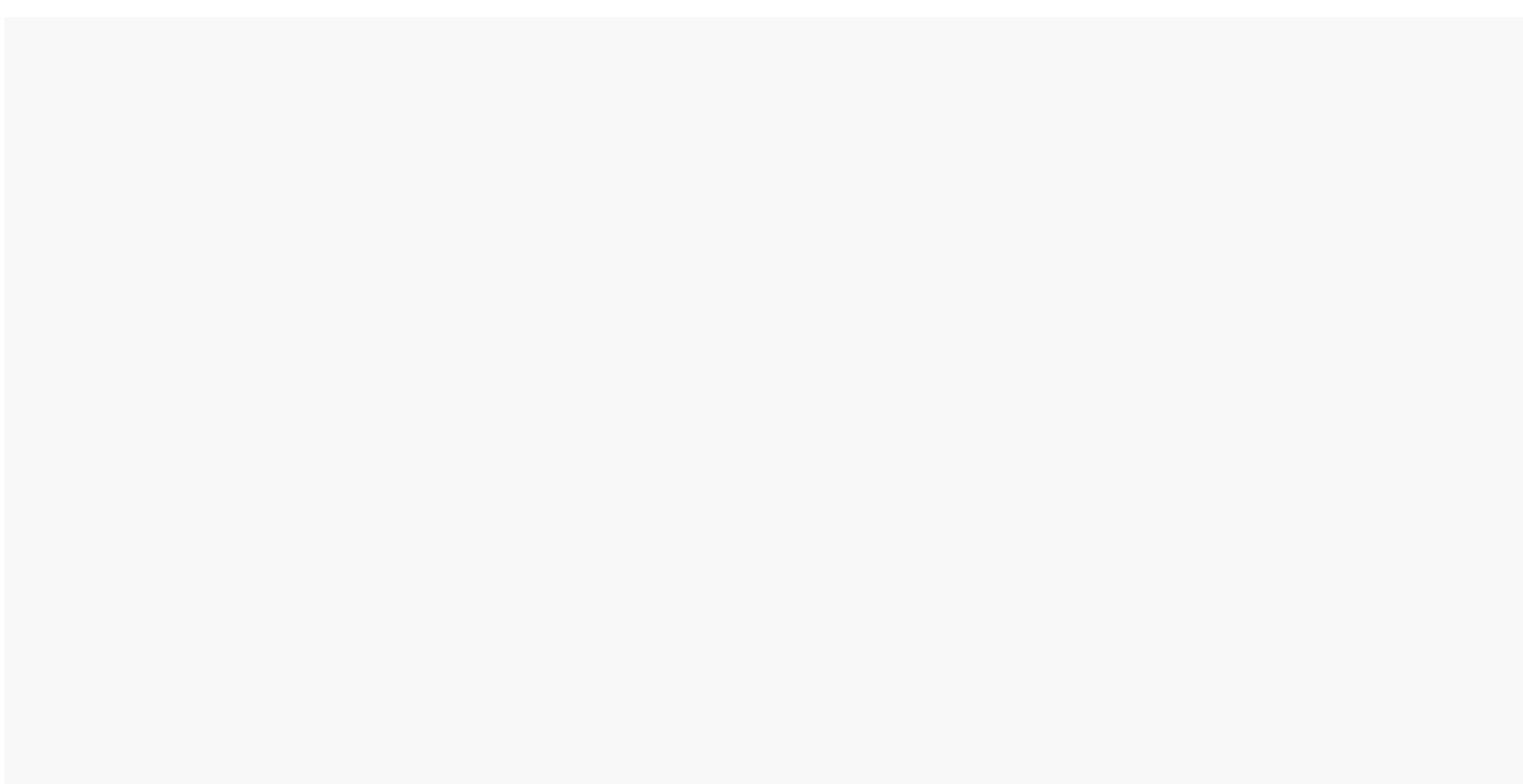
"It appears that while so-called cool teens' behavior might have been linked to early popularity, over time, these teens needed more and more extreme behaviors to try to appear cool," Joseph P. Allen, lead author and professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, said in statement.

The finding comes from a 10-year study in which researchers followed 184 students as they progressed from age 13 to 23.

At 13, those who exhibited "pseudomature behaviors" — a catchall term for behaviors that seem to boost perceived popularity — were rated as more popular by their peers. The cooler kids impressed their peers through displays of romantic behavior (like kissing or touching), deviant acts (like damaging their parents' property or sneaking into a movie theater without a ticket), or by associating themselves with more physically attractive friends.

As the years went on, however, these antics did not correlate to an increase in popularity. In fact, just the opposite happened. The pseudomature behaviors evolved into larger problems and the status of once cool individuals dropped: "The adolescent who comes to depend upon pseudomature behavior to gain peer status may gradually need to shift, for example, from minor forms of delinquency, such as vandalism and shoplifting, to more serious acts of criminal behavior to impress even a subset of older peers," the authors wrote.

The chart below shows that students who engaged in pseudomature behavior at 13 were perceived as more popular by their peers than those who did not engage in pseudomature behavior, but that correlation faded over time.



Child Development

If the trend lines continued past age 15, you'd expect so-called cool-kid behavior to be less associated with popularity as people get older — and that's exactly what happened.

By 22, the cool kids struggled to make friends. "These previously cool teens appeared less competent — socially and otherwise — than their less cool peers by the time they reached young adulthood," Allen said.

Teens who become popular simply by hanging out with pretty people probably don't work as hard to develop meaningful relationships, according to the study. That behavior is carried into adulthood, to their detriment.

One thing to note is that this was a relatively small study. The students were chosen from one public middle school in the southeastern U.S. Though participants were from both urban and suburban areas, 184 kids can't be enough to be totally sure about widespread patterns.

In any case, rock on, nerds.

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