

Cool kids study offers 'revenge' for nerds

By Kelly Wallace, CNN

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Editor's note: Kelly Wallace is CNN's digital correspondent and editor-at-large covering family, career and life. She is a mom of two. Read her [other columns](#) and follow her reports at [CNN Parents](#) and on [Twitter](#).

(CNN) -- If you weren't part of the "cool club" in middle school, you may have an extra spring in your step after hearing about a new study, which could be titled "Revenge of the Nerds."

Remember the kids who tried so hard to be cool -- the ones who had boyfriends or girlfriends before everyone else, started partying earlier than most other kids their age and made a point of moving with the physically attractive crowd? Well, coolness at 13 does not translate into success by age 23, according to the study by researchers at the University of Virginia [published in the journal Child Development](#).

Those cool kids were more likely to have bigger troubles later in life, according to research released Thursday, which was conducted over a 10-year span. As young adults, they were using 40% more drugs and alcohol than the "not so cool" kids and were 22% more likely to be running into troubles with the law.

When their social competence as adults was quantified (which included how well they got along with friends, acquaintances and romantic partners), the teens considered cool in middle school received ratings that were 24% lower than their less cool peers.



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"Revenge of the quiet good kids"

"Long term, we call it the high school reunion effect," said

[Joseph Allen](#),

professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, who led the study.

"You see the person who was cool ... did exciting things that were intimidating and seemed glamorous at the time and then five or 10 years later, they are working in a menial job and have poor relationships and such, and the other kid who was quiet and had good friends but didn't really attract much attention and was a little intimidated is doing great."



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"It's ... revenge of the quiet, good kids," he added.

Allen and his fellow researchers followed 184 children in Virginia over a decade from middle school through age 23. The students came from various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds in Charlottesville and loosely match the demographics of Virginia and the nation as a whole, Allen said in an interview.

Most of the previous research examining teenage behavior explored the factors influencing success as teens, according to Allen. To his knowledge, this is the first research that looks at how these so-called cool teens will fare when they reach adulthood.

Researchers conducted in-person and phone interviews with the students and their parents during the 10-year study, observed the kids interacting with their peers and parents, and questioned their friends and fellow classmates.

To measure coolness, students were asked about their romantic behavior, including how many people they "made out" with. They were asked how many times they had damaged or destroyed property belonging to parents, sneaked into a movie without paying, stolen items from parents or family members, and whether they had used drugs and/or marijuana.

They were also asked how important it was for them to be popular with a lot of different kinds of kids, how attractive their closest friends were, and whom they would most likely spend time with on a Saturday night.

As young adults, to measure social competence, they were asked to describe how well they get along with friends, acquaintances and boyfriends or girlfriends, and whether romantic relationships ended because of concerns that their partner was viewed as not popular enough or not part of the cool crowd.

"So when we talk about kids being popular as adolescents, that's based on surveys of hundreds of people in their high school or middle school class," Allen said. "When we talk about social competence in adulthood, we're not asking the teens, 'Are you socially competent?' We're asking their close friends, 'How competent is this person, really?'"

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This is probably as good a point as any to admit I was definitely not in the cool group in junior high school. In fact, throughout my life my friends have joked that I am a nerd who has been mainstreamed into society. I've never been totally sure what that means, but I do know I was always the kid who liked school, and that immediately made me less cool.

When I think back to the kids who were in the "cool club," they are definitely not the ones who are now enjoying great success in their professional and personal lives.

Allen says teens trying so hard to be cool early in adolescence find the rewards of



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popularity in the short term, but their approach ultimately leads to a "dead end."

"It's a short cut to looking grown up, but like lots of



Talking to teens about social media

short cuts, it's keeping them from doing the things that actually make one more mature," he added. "The detour notion or metaphor really captures it, that they really are off on a different track that was appealing when they took the road but that they just find themselves deeper and deeper in and they have to engage in more and more serious kinds of behaviors to try and get their friends' approval."

"So when we talk about alcohol and marijuana use, these are the kids who are most likely drinking three six-packs, when they're 20 on up, on a weekend night to tell their friend what wild and crazy exploits they engaged in."

Diana Graber, a mom of two girls aged 15 and 18, said the study reinforces a conversation she and her friends were recently having as they all prepare for their first births to graduate high school. The conclusion: The nerds shall inherit the Earth.

Graber, co-founder of Cyberwise.org, a site focused on helping parents, educators and children use digital media safely, said growing up she found that the kids who were moving faster socially than everyone else were the ones who didn't come out on top -- and their behaviors may have been symptomatic of deeper problems.

"Reaching for a drink ... is really just insecurity, and something's missing," said Graber, who also teaches digital literacy to sixth, seventh and eighth graders. "They're getting attention in school that they're probably not getting elsewhere."

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Implications for parents and teens

Jennifer Alsip of Robinson, Texas, was in the "cool group" all through elementary, junior high and high school, she said in an interview.

"I was one of those who wasn't there to learn. I was there to socialize," she said. "And doing that hurt me in my future because I didn't take school seriously."

That lack of focus has consequences all these years later. Alsip says she has struggled financially, having to take on a second job in addition to her full-time job working at a company dealing with delinquent student loans.

"Be the bookworm. That'll get you further," Alsip tells her two girls, ages 18 and 21. "Because from my past experiences, I didn't want them being the class clown, the one who's asking 'Where's the next party?'"

That's the message that Allen, a parent of three children, ages 16, 21, and 24, hopes the study sends to today's parents.

"Pay attention as a parent to what's going to get your child to a happy spot, to a productive healthy spot as an adult," said Allen. "Keep your eyes on the long picture and don't get so distracted by how they're doing in the short term and what might predict that they're a little more popular and a little more interesting in the short term."

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For all the teens who feel like they just don't fit in or who are envious of the cool kids, the study has a clear message too: "Many of the teens who are going to do the very best in life are the ones sitting quietly on the sideline listening closely to those stories of the wild weekends," said Allen. "They're not the ones who are engaged in them."

What do you think about the study showing it's the "not so cool" kids who end up doing better in the long run? Share your thoughts in the comments or tell or .

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