

Helping Kids Cope With Cliques

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Your 10-year-old daughter comes home crying because the girls she's been friends with are suddenly leaving her out and spreading rumors about her. She's confused because it seemed to happen out of the blue. She doesn't know what she did wrong and is nervous about returning to school, unsure if she has any friends.

Given how prevalent cliques are throughout middle and high school, at some point your child is likely to face the prospect of being in one or being excluded from them. There's little you can do to shield kids from cliques, but plenty you can do to help them maintain confidence and self-respect while negotiating cliques and understanding what true friendship is all about.

What's a Clique?

Friendship is an important part of kids' development. Having friends helps them be independent beyond the family and prepares them for the mutual, trusting relationships we hope they'll establish as adults.

Groups of friends are different from cliques in some important ways. Friendships grow out of shared interests, sports, activities, classes, neighborhoods, or even family connections. In groups of friends, members are free to socialize and hang out with others outside the group without worrying about being cast out. They may not do everything together — and that's OK.

Cliques sometimes form around common interests, but the social dynamics are very different. Cliques are usually tightly controlled by leaders who decide who is "in" and who is "out." The kids in the clique do most things together. Someone who has a friend outside the clique may face rejection or ridicule.

Members of the clique usually follow the leader's rules, whether it's wearing particular clothes or doing certain activities. Cliques usually involve lots of rules — implied and clearly stated — and intense pressure to follow them. Kids in cliques often worry about whether they'll continue to be popular or whether they'll be dropped for doing or saying the wrong thing or for not dressing in a certain way. This can create a lot of pressure, particularly for girls, who might be driven to extreme dieting and eating disorders or even to ask for plastic surgery. Others may be pressured to take risks like steal, pull pranks, or bully other kids in order to stay in the clique.

When Cliques Cause Problems

For most kids, the pre-teen and teen years are a time to figure out how they want to fit in and how they want to stand out. It's natural for kids to occasionally feel insecure; long to be accepted; and hang out with the kids who seem more attractive, cool, or popular.

But cliques can cause long-lasting trouble when:

- kids behave in a way they feel conflicted about or know is wrong in order to please a leader and stay in the group
- a group becomes an antisocial clique or a gang that has unhealthy rules, such as weight loss or bullying others based on looks, disabilities, race, or ethnicity
- a child is rejected by a group and feels ostracized and alone

How Parents Can Help

As kids navigate friendships and cliques, there's plenty parents can do to offer support. If your child seems upset, or suddenly spends time alone when usually very social, ask about it.

Here are some tips:

- **Talk about your own experiences.** Share your own experiences of school — cliques have been around for a long time!
- **Help put rejection in perspective.** Remind your child of times he or she has been angry with parents, friends, or siblings — and how quickly things can change.
- **Shed some light on social dynamics.** Acknowledge that people are often judged by the way a person looks, acts, or dresses, but that often people act mean and put others down because they lack self-confidence and try to cover it up by maintaining control.
- **Find stories they can relate to.** Many books, TV shows, and movies portray outsiders triumphing in the face of rejection and send strong messages about the importance of being true to your own nature and the value of being a good friend, even in the face of difficult social situations. For school-age kids, books like "Blubber" by Judy Blume illustrate how quickly cliques can change. Older kids and teens might relate to movies such as "Mean Girls," "Angus," "The Breakfast Club," and "Clueless" or the new TV show "Aliens in America."
- **Foster out-of-school friendships.** Get kids involved in extracurricular activities (if they aren't already) — art class, martial arts, horse riding, language study — any activity that gives them an opportunity to create another social group and learn new skills.

If your child is part of a clique and is one of the kids bullying or rejecting others, it's important to address that right away. With popular TV shows from talent contests to reality series glorifying rude behavior, it's an uphill battle for families to promote kindness, respect, and compassion. Discuss the role of power and control in friendships and try to get to the heart of why your child feels compelled to be in that position. Discuss who is in and who is out, and what happens when kids are out (are they ignored, shunned, bullied?). Challenge kids to think and talk about whether they're proud of the way they act in school.

Ask teachers, guidance counselors, or other school officials for their perspective on the social dynamics in and out of class. They might be able to tell you about any programs the school has to address cliques and help kids with differences get along.

Encouraging Healthy Friendships

Here are some ways to encourage kids to have healthy friendships and not get too caught up in cliques:

- **Find the right fit — don't just fit in.** Encourage kids to think about what they value and are interested in, and how those things fit in with the group. Ask questions like: What is the main reason you want to be part of the group? What compromises will you have to make? Is it worth it? What would you do if the group leader insisted you act mean to other kids or do something you don't want to do?
- **Stick to your likes.** If your child has always loved to play the piano but suddenly wants to drop it because it's deemed "uncool," discuss ways to help resolve this.
- **Keep social circles open and diverse.** Encourage kids to be friends with people they like and enjoy from different settings, backgrounds, ages, and interests.
- **Speak out and stand up.** If they're feeling worried or pressured by what's happening in the cliques, encourage your kids to stand up for themselves or others who are being cast out or bullied. Encourage them not to participate in anything that feels wrong, whether it's a practical joke or talking about people behind their backs.
- **Take responsibility for your own actions.** Encourage sensitivity to others and not just going along with a group. Remind kids that a true friend respects their opinions, interests, and choices, no matter how different they are. Acknowledge that it can be difficult to stand out, but that ultimately kids are responsible for what they say and do.

Remember to provide the big-picture perspective too. As hard as cliques might be to deal with now, things can change quickly. What's more important is making true friends — people they can confide in, laugh with, and trust. And the real secret to being "popular" — in the truest sense of the word — is for them to be the kind of friend they'd like to have: respectful, fair, supportive, caring, trustworthy, and kind.

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