

By Popular Demand

By Kathiann M. Kowalski

Every school has an in crowd — and a less-than-cool group too. What does it all mean for you?

Amy's hair is always perfect. Amy's purse is the latest style. "And," says 17-year-old Danielle L. of New York about her classmate, "she says she has so many outfits she doesn't wear the same one twice."

Like Danielle, you probably know who's really popular and has high status at your school. They're the trendsetters, and just about everyone else follows their lead.

What does in-crowd entry take? The criteria vary from culture to culture and even school to school. Nonetheless, teens worldwide worry about popularity. As people grow from children to adults, seeking approval from peers is normal, explains Mitchell Prinstein, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Being popular has definite benefits. Popular kids often enjoy plenty of party invites and dates. Along the way, they develop social skills and learn how to get along in different settings too.

Being a trendsetter can also be exciting. That's especially true if that status is used for a positive goal, such as making school a more welcoming place. "It is my hope that popular teens will choose to be the superhero rather than the villain," says psychologist Leanna Closson of the University of British Columbia.

The Price of Popularity

Popularity can have an unpleasant side, though. "Amy is very self-centered and complains about petty things," notes Danielle. "She makes fun of other people and is in general not an all-around nice person."

Sound familiar? Eric M. says the popular crowd acts the same way at his Utah high school. "They act really mean on the outside to make themselves seem better than everyone else," says the 16-year-old.

If being both popular and unlikable seems odd, think about how some teens—especially girls—try to boost their status. They gossip, snub, mock, or

exclude others. And they don't just pick on unpopular kids; they often target the middle and higher popularity levels, say researchers at the University of California, Davis. Teens may secretly hope their popularity will rise if they knock down potential "competitors." Even if that makes them more popular, in the process they may make themselves less likeable.

Achieving popularity doesn't guarantee happiness, either. One study of New England teens found that high-status girls were more likely to have symptoms of depression after high school. Feeling you always have to act a certain way to stay popular can be stressful, suggests study coauthor Antonius Cillessen of the Netherlands' Radboud University in Nijmegen. "Maintaining status is like walking on your toes all the time," he says. "It's hard work."

Danielle sees it all the time. "Being popular means that you have to prove yourself to others, or maybe that they don't accept you for exactly who you are," she says. "I'd rather have a few good friends and keep who I am than have too many friends and lose that aspect of myself."

More Risky Business

Though popularity has its benefits, it can also have consequences when it comes to your health. Very popular teens are more likely to smoke and to use alcohol and other drugs, reports Kathleen Boykin McElhaney, a psychologist and research scientist at the University of Virginia. "When you start those habits early on, in fact they follow you" into adulthood, says McElhaney.

Very popular teens are also more likely than other teens to be violent or sexually active. Violence presents physical and legal dangers. Sexual activity raises risks for pregnancy, various diseases, and emotional upset when relationships break up.

A Happy Medium

Most teens are neither highly popular nor unpopular. "I think I'm somewhere in the middle," says Danielle, and that's OK with her. "The middle is, in a way, the best place to be," observes Prinstein. You get the benefits of social opportunities but can sidestep the pitfalls of popularity.

"What really matters is whether you as a person feel that you have acceptance," stresses McElhaney. "Really, one or two friends that you can trust are plenty." You don't need to be super popular to foster those

important friendships. Just be the type of person you'd like to have as a friend.

"My advice to others on likability is to genuinely care about other people's needs and be a hard worker willing to give something for others with no reward in sight," says Eric. Don't try too hard, though: Be sure to voice your own views. "Having a one-sided friendship where one person is the leader and the other is not isn't good," notes Eric.

Indeed, Danielle likes her close friend Alyssa much more than she likes very popular Amy. As Danielle sees it, Alyssa treats everyone with kindness and respect. Alyssa makes time for Danielle whenever needed. "She is true to herself and doesn't change her personality depending on the situation," adds Danielle. "That's what I really like."

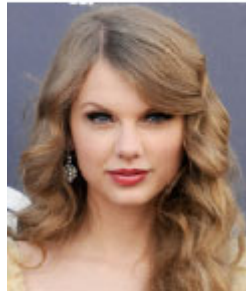
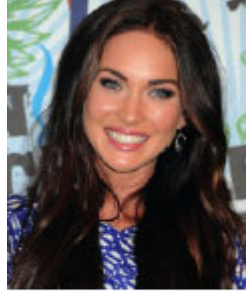
In the end, popularity contests can't guarantee happiness. But good friendships can last a lifetime. So, aim to be a good friend instead of jockeying for a spot among the in crowd. You'll be happier—and healthier too!

Find Your Niche

If you're feeling left out of the social loop, look around. Find a club or a group that interests you and can use your talents. Danielle L., 17, found friends by playing tennis and making art at her New York school. Eric M., 16, enjoys stage crew at his Utah high school. "They're some of the best people," he says.

Celebrity Status?

Teen popularity doesn't determine whether you'll be a winner or a loser in the long run. Actors **Megan Fox** and **Leonardo DiCaprio** both say they were unpopular in high school. Even singer **Taylor Swift** has said she was excluded from the popular clique in junior high.



Ap Images

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Who does Danielle say is her close friend?

- A Amy
- B Alyssa
- C Eric
- D Leanna

2. Popularity can have many effects on teens – both positive and negative. According to the passage, all of the following are positive effects of popularity EXCEPT

- A popularity helps teens develop social skills
- B popular teens often enjoy lots of party invites
- C being popular guarantees happiness
- D popular teens often get more dates

3. What can you conclude about popularity after reading the passage?

- A People who were unpopular in school make great actors.
- B Popularity doesn't determine success after high school.
- C Most successful people were part of the popular crowd.
- D Very popular teens have less stressful lives than others have.

4. Read this sentence from the passage: "Amy is very self-centered and complains about petty things," notes Danielle.

In this sentence, the word **petty** means

- A modern and refreshing
- B squealing with laughter
- C feeling extremely popular
- D having little importance

5. The main purpose of this passage is to

- A teach kids how to become part of the popular crowd
- B describe the benefits and consequences of popularity
- C persuade teens to stay away from drugs and alcohol
- D show the steps teens should take to become successful

6. Which singer named in this passage was unpopular in junior high?

7. Danielle says, "I'd rather have a few good friends and keep who I am than have too many friends and lose that aspect of myself." What does this say about Danielle as a person?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

_____, experts stress that you don't need to be very popular to foster good friendships.

- A In particular
- B Before
- C After
- D So

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Mitchell Prinstein, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, explains that seeking approval from peers is normal as people grow from children to adults.

Who? _____

(does) What? _____

Where? at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

When? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** acceptance: approval.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____
