

## How To Be Popular (For the Right Reasons)

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Back-to-school jitters may seem like kid stuff to you, but worries about the social pressure to be popular are no laughing matter. Traveling around the country on my book tours, I hear a lot about what's on kids' minds. Teens as well as "tweens" (8- to 12-year-olds) often tell me they think of school largely as a place for socializing and less as an arena for learning. Making friends—lots of them—is crucially important to these age groups, because popularity in school is intrinsically linked with self-image—especially among girls.

Consider this: In a Harris Interactive survey of about 2,300 girls aged 8-17, the majority said they worried more about "being teased or made fun of" than about natural disasters or terrorist attacks. So how can parents help their daughters navigate the social complexities of middle school and high school, where the pressures to fit in are greatest?

Friendship vs. popularity. First of all, parents can make it clear to their child that it's more important to be a good friend—and to have good friends—than to be in the top tier of the social hierarchy at school. Having friends is not always the same as being "popular." Friends show genuine interest in others and in what they have to say. Friends try to imagine how they themselves would feel or react in the same situation. In other words, they express plenty of empathy, which makes people feel more "connected" to them. At the same time, friends are good listeners who encourage others to talk about themselves. They make the person who is speaking feel important—and do so sincerely. Friends are genuine and consistent in their beliefs and their behavior: They are the same people in private as they are in public.

Arrogance vs. confidence. Not everyone is blessed with good looks, brains, athletic prowess or wealth. If your child possesses one or more of these attributes, urge her not to act as if she is better than anyone else (or even to think it). Behaving like that is the quickest way not to make friends. You may even have to tell your daughter flat out: "No one likes a snob."

Self-confidence is the polar opposite of arrogance and perhaps the most important attribute that well-liked people possess. Yet it can be most elusive during the teen years. Still, lots of kids manage to work it out. Consider, for example, the kids who are not the most attractive or athletic but who project a positive self-image and have the ability to laugh at themselves. Kids like these are always accepted, respected and well-liked.

Why? Because their healthy self-esteem and sense of humor make them the kind of people that others naturally want to spend time with.

Self-confidence cannot be faked, but it can be fostered. Encourage your child to participate in extracurricular clubs and activities that she feels enthusiastic about. Such activities help to boost self-esteem—which, in turn, will make her happier. And happiness also happens to be one of the qualities that people admire most in others. People are drawn to cheerful extroverts, especially those who have the ability to make others feel excited about their own interests.

Worrying about your social status vs. doing something about it. The surest way for any child to ruin her chances of making friends is to spend too much time—or any time, really—worrying about her social status.

That's why it's important to remind your daughter that if she spends all her time worrying about being popular, she'll miss out on all the fun she could be having by simply enjoying herself and her real friends—the ones who already value and support her. The truth is, no one likes hanging out with a worrywart or a social climber, and tweens and teens are especially adept at recognizing these insecurities in others.

So rather than idly watching your daughter put pressure on herself to be popular, encourage her to pursue the interests and activities she loves, to listen attentively and with empathy, to be creative and to speak up. Tell her never to let the fear of being unpopular hold her back in any way—such as allowing her peers to speak on her behalf or to make decisions for her. By expressing her own opinions and ideas, then getting others excited about them by being excited herself, she'll be well on the way to becoming a well-rounded human being and popular for the right reasons.

Planets orbit around the sun. People orbit around sunny people. That's why, if you want to be popular, it's important to radiate warmth and self-confidence in every situation. Because who doesn't love being around a truly happy, cheerful person?

No one!

Encourage your child to...

- Be friendly and outgoing.
- Put herself in others' shoes and consider the feelings of others first.
- Be generous with her time and talents.

- Pitch in to help get the job done, willingly and eagerly.
- Show a genuine interest in others and in what they have to say.
- Pursue the interests she loves, be creative and speak up.

Meg Cabot is the author of the “Princess Diaries” books and other best-selling fiction for teens. More than 15 million copies of her books are in print worldwide. Her newest young-adult novel is “How To Be Popular” (HarperCollins).