



Society for Research in Child Development

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Teens' Perception That They Are Liked Found To Be At Least as Important as Actually Being Liked

We all know that children who are popular do well socially. A new study has found that teenagers who feel good about themselves and are comfortable with their peers can also be socially successful without being popular in the traditional sense.

These findings come from researchers at the University of Virginia and are published in the May/June 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Researchers studied 164 adolescents from racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse backgrounds. The teens were interviewed at age 13 and then again at 14. The researchers also interviewed the adolescents' same-sex close friends.

Teenagers who felt good about their own social standing did well over time, the study found, regardless of how popular they were (popularity was gauged based on assessments by peers at school). These teenagers were increasingly less hostile and more frequently sought out by their peers. Teenagers who were considered popular by their peers also did well, regardless of their own perceptions of their social standing.

Adolescents who lacked both a strong sense of their own social acceptance and who were rated by their peers as unpopular fared the worst, according to the study. They were increasingly more hostile, less sought out, and more withdrawn over time.

These findings, say the researchers, highlight the importance of considering social acceptance in adolescence from a multifaceted view. In adolescence, as groupings of individuals change, often growing larger than they were in elementary school, the meaning of popularity as defined by classmates can diverge from teens' own sense of their social acceptance. A complete understanding of how teens function at this developmental stage should take into consideration both teens' own sense of their social standing and ratings from their peers.

"During adolescence, teens' perceptions of their own social success may be a crucial predictor of long-term social functioning, such that even teens who are not broadly popular may demonstrate positive adjustment over time if they maintain a positive internal sense of their social acceptance," according to Kathleen Boykin McElhaney, research associate in psychology at the University of Virginia and the lead author of the study.

“Perceiving oneself to be liked may actually be at least as critical in determining future social outcomes for teens as is actually being liked by other teens,” says McElhaney, who called adolescents’ feelings of confidence in their own social standing a “protective factor.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 79, Issue 3, “*They Like Me, They Like Me Not*”: *Adolescents’ Perceptions of Acceptance Predicting Changing Social Functioning Over Time*, by McElhaney, KB, Antonishak, J, and Allen, JP (University of Virginia). Copyright 2008 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.