

Parent pages



Resources for Christian Parents in the 21st Century

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The Problem With Popular

It is a new school year! This means a new classroom, new teacher, new book bag, for some a new school, and maybe new friends. With each new school year comes new opportunities to practice and develop social skills, which can be a risky thing.

Nearly every parent can remember school year tales about the “popular kids” and the “rejects.” Nearly every child in school can tell you who fits into which group.

It is certainly a common worry for children and parents alike. No one wants to be, or wants their child to be, ignored, disliked, controlled, or harassed. Unfortunately, Christian schools are not exempt from the travails of social hierarchy. Yet, through the saving grace of our Savior, we can do much to tackle this kind of situation.

Can't be one without the other

For there to be a popular group, there must also be an unpopular group. Popular groups can and do act as bullies. In order to feel superior, they must create—and maintain—an inferior group. It is hard to understand how being mean to another person can lift your own image in other people's eyes.

It would be better to see this situa-

tion as one of power instead of popularity. People stay in the group out of a fear that they don't even realize. A truly popular child is one who is liked and admired by many different children in the class. A child in the power group has rules about who is valuable and who is not.

This kind of social hierarchy is not limited to the classroom. We see it in our own world and during the time of Jesus.

The Pharisees and Sadducees had the power, and the lepers and the tax collectors were the rejected groups. It was shocking to the people of the time when Jesus spoke to, ate with, and touched the people in the rejected groups.

These actions created much anxiety for those

in power as it threatened to upset the balance they had set.

A trio of emotions

For children, there are three emotional



characteristics at play in this type of situation:

- Personal fable.
- Imaginary audience.
- Self-perception.

Because young children are just beginning to notice other people and to learn to understand what someone else is feeling, they often work from a situation called **personal fable**. They believe that no one else feels the way they do, and they can feel that no one else likes them.

When children find a friend who does feel the way they do, they develop a strong bond with that person. As children approach adolescence, they develop an idea of an **imaginary audience**. This is a belief that everyone is looking at them and is judging them. It feels very safe to belong to a group of friends who have strict rules that if followed protect you from this judgment.

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A Growing Christian Makes the Best Parent!

The third emotional characteristic at work here is one of **self-perception**. Children with a healthy self-perception have a positive view of themselves in three areas: self-concept (who am I?), self-esteem (how good am I?) and self-worth (how valuable am I?).

As Christian parents, *we have* the ultimate answer to the self-perception dilemma. Our self-concept is rooted in our Creator (I am God's child), our self-esteem comes from the redemptive power of Jesus' death and resurrection (I am forgiven) and our self-worth comes from the work of the Spirit (I am powered by the Holy Spirit.)



While we assume the children with the healthiest self-perception and the strongest social skills are the popular group, this is often not the case. Just as children in the rejected group who do not understand the social codes and find it difficult to defend themselves have weak social skills, the children in the power group also have unhealthy social skills. Their sense of security comes from being able to control the children in their class, or from feeling that someone else is controlling that for them.

The healthy children are the ones in the middle who are not rejected by the power group but do not belong to it either. The goal in any given classroom is to have all the children in the middle group.

Children in the power group tend to have advanced verbal skills but weaker family bonds. Often they have learned that their parents love them when they say "yes" to every request. This makes it difficult for them to realize that they can survive a friend saying "no."

They also get their sense of self-esteem by comparing themselves to others. Children in the rejected group sometimes have a verbal disadvantage, which allows others to talk circles around them. Sometimes they have a strong interest that is not shared by others in the class. Frequently they have weaker social skills and cannot

read the "codes" of the class.

Both groups need help with social skills. The children in the power group need to learn to survive being different and survive others not doing everything they say. They also need help in skills of empathy as they frequently dismiss the feelings of those they hurt, even when they hurt people in their own group. The rejected children need to learn to be interested in other children and what they like. They also need to learn how

to survive teasing, which can be a natural part of social skills development. If you are never teased, then you feel just as rejected as if you are teased all the time.

Often the answer is found in the emotionally healthy children in the middle group. They are the ones who can best take the risk to accept the rejected children and stand up to the powerful ones. This is no small feat, and it is risky behavior. It can turn others against you and create difficult consequences.

In a Christian school, *we have* the most effective tool at our disposal. A Christian school nurtures faith, and faith helps children to show God's love to others and to take risks to make the world a better place. In this setting we are teaching children to be both salt and light in their classroom world. In other words, they shine a light on what is wrong and work to preserve what is good.

Teachers can further ameliorate a power group situation by using teaching techniques that promote collaboration. The more experiences children have with each other, the more confident they will become in being friends with even children who are different than they are. It's also very important that a teacher discipline privately and not set a child up to be a rejected child. A common class goal or project can be one of the best ways to create a spirit of acceptance as children learn more about each other's gifts and how to work together.

As parents, we also have an important role. When we nurture our child's faith,

we give them a healthy self-perception. When we properly discipline our children, we teach them that love is not conditional. When we pay attention to the other children in our child's class and encourage our own children to make friends, we support developing social skills.

As much as we would like to "get in there and fix things," this is not effective. It is better for us to practice social mentoring, by talking to our child and brainstorming responses to other children, than to engage in parent manipulation. It's always a good idea to talk to your child's teacher, especially in a spirit of support and helpfulness. If you are reporting harassment from another child, work with your child to make a list of specific things that happened. This gives the teacher something other than vague accusations.

An evening time of talk and prayer with your child will go far to build a healthy self-perception, create an atmosphere of trust between you and your child, and to give you opportunity to model Christ-like behavior. Remind yourself and your child that a child of God is always popular with Jesus.

For Discussion:

- To which typical class group did you belong?
- What could you have done as a child that could have made things better?
- What can parents and teachers do to make this situation worse?
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For Further Study:

- Biblical self-perception: Psalm 103, Romans 5.
- On being "salt" and "light" Matt. 5:13-16.