Kids and Cliques

Along with middle school come many things for kids: more work, more people, lots of physical changes, and cliques. The formation of “cliques”, or exclusive groups of friends, can be agony for kids both on the inside and on the outside. The energy exerted on trying to fit in during these years is phenomenal. Kids struggle to define themselves by the people they hang out with. These years are hard on nearly all kids for different reasons. Remember it is impossible for you as a parent to manipulate group membership, but you can find out your kid’s social position and support and guide him.

What is a clique? A clique typically is a group of same-sex children, with under 10 members. The members of the clique define themselves by clothes, looks, interests, and popularity. The same insecurity that causes kids to form such cliques often causes them to then marginalize others, and clique members can treat ‘outsiders’ cruelly.

How to help kids …

- **If they are in a clique.** They are living in tension, hoping to stay in the clique, trying to always do the “cool” thing. They may also be dealing with internal moral battles when the clique does something that their conscience tells them is cruel or wrong. If you think your child is in a clique, try to gather as much information as you can. Allow your child to have friends over whenever possible, and observe the group interactions. You’ll be better able to talk with your child about problems if you have information. Also assure your child that you have high expectations for his or her behavior. Tell your child “I know you’d never participate in making other kids feel badly, and I know you’re a great judge of personality – you wouldn’t hang out with kids who aren’t good people.” Kids can rise and fall according to your expectations of them. Also, expect them to behave respectfully towards you. If kids can act rudely towards their parents, they can easily mistreat others (including peers) as well.

- **If they are clique ‘leaders’.** Clique leaders could potentially use their leadership skills for good rather than harm, so try to help them do so by imparting to them a sense of social responsibility. Tell the leader, “People admire you because you’re confident and you’re a natural leader, maybe you should stop your friends from causing trouble for so-and-so.” The leader is one person who can be made to feel accountable for his actions, because of his power over others. While other members often feel diminished accountability for their actions due to the group structure, group leaders may sense their power and be more easily capable of feeling accountability. Also, you can appeal to your young leader’s sense of empathy with a victim by reminding the child of a time he or she was more vulnerable and needed help from others.
If they are victims. No one wants to think her kid is a victim of clique cruelty, but if this is the case you ought to be aware of it. A child may feel embarrassed to tell you that she is the target of a clique. You may need to search for “clues” to determine whether your child is a victim. If your kid seems to be moping or depressed for considerable time periods for what seem to be social reasons, this is often a clue. Sleep difficulties, avoidance of school and/or social activities, and increased health problems can also indicate possible difficulties. If you do think your child is a victim, try to help without making the child feel more ashamed. Two of the biggest causes for choosing a certain victim are bad hygiene and ‘un-cool’ clothes, so try to teach good hygiene habits and take your child shopping for some ‘cool’ clothes. Also, support the friendships your child does have, encourage discovery of talents and interests away from school peers, and encourage your child to talk to a guidance counselor about their concerns. Forbidding your child to be with certain peers often makes these peers even more attractive. It may produce the opposite effect from what you hoped for.

How to help yourself...

- Talk to other parents about how their kids are doing and their experiences of social groupings at school.
- Talk to school personnel – the principal, guidance counselor and/or teacher. Find out how they address bullying and cruelty, what they teach about conflict resolution, and how a child can get help.
- We all want to belong to a community, whether it is a school, neighborhood, family, church, etc. Look back at times when you had a hard time either fitting in, or being bossy, or following a leader without thinking. Talk to your child about these times, how you managed them, and what you learned. Children need to know these are different options available.
- Educate yourself further. Here are some books which may help you:
  - Cliqués: 8 Steps to Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle by Charlene C. Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese.
  - Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence by Rosalind Wiseman

Your kid may feel like middle school will never end and being cool is the only thing that matters. However, as a parent, you have the advantage of knowing that with a few years of maturity under their belts, almost everyone will look back at middle school and laugh at his own antics and those of his peers. Support your child through these tough years, and stress (though the child may not believe you) that the days of cliques will likely end when high school begins.

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