

The Secret of Popularity



Teens can benefit from being able to tell the difference between 'perceived popularity; (the high-status mean girls and boys) and 'sociometric popularity' (the nice kid everyone likes). *Photo: iStock*

By

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Everyone knows the stereotypical images of popular kids: mean girls gossiping at the playground, cool jocks picking on weaker classmates. But what really makes one classmate more popular than another? Research points to a key skill: the ability to tune in to another person's perspective.

In an [Australian paper](#) published last year in the journal *Child Development*, researchers

found that popular children possess an advanced “theory of mind.” That is, they’re better than their peers at recognizing their own and other people’s mental states—what they want, think and feel—and understanding how that influences behavior.

In their analysis, the researchers gathered data from 20 studies, which included 2,096 children between 2 and 10 years old from 10 countries. (The studies used teacher reports and peer nominations to gauge popularity.) They found that the link between theory of mind and popularity was stronger among girls, who generally exhibit more communication, cooperation and sensitivity in their interactions with peers than boys. They also found that the effect didn’t vary with age.

Of course, popularity isn’t always positive. Researchers distinguish between two types: “perceived popularity” (the high-status mean girls and boys) and “sociometric popularity” (the nice kid everyone likes). Each type involves being able to tune into what others want, think and feel, but how that skill is used can differ. “Sociometrically popular children tend to use this skill to be empathic and sensitive to their friends’ needs,” says lead researcher Virginia Slaughter, “while perceived popularity children may use it to gossip or manipulate classmates to gain or maintain a high status.”

Understanding that distinction can help teens to navigate the sometimes tricky social world of adolescence. Psychologist Lisa Damour, author of “Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions Into Adulthood,” says that if your teen comes home complaining about one of the “popular” kids, follow up by asking, “Is that person really popular—or is she powerful? Is he really well-liked—or is he popular because other kids are afraid of him?”

She says that helping your child to distinguish between the two can “knock perceived popularity off its pedestal.” “Introducing the term ‘powerful’ as an alternative to ‘popular’ helps teens to appreciate that status can be gained by being mean,” says Dr. Damour, and many will decide that they want nothing to do with it.

Richard Rende, a developmental psychologist and the author of “Raising Can-Do Kids,” believes that children should be taught crucial social skills like perspective-taking. Simply knowing “how to play well in the sandbox with others,” he says, is a predictor of professional success and of developing strong, meaningful relationships throughout life.

Some tips to help children build those skills:



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Knowing 'how to play well in the sandbox with others,' is a predictor of professional success and of developing strong, meaningful relationships throughout life says Richard Rende, a developmental psychologist. *Photo: Getty Images*

says Dr. Rende. Help children practice through everyday interactions, like ordering for themselves at a restaurant or answering a doctor's questions directly.

Manage conflict. When parents jump in to referee too quickly, it sends the message that conflict is inherently bad, says Dr. Rende, "but conflicts are a platform for discussion, sharing perspectives and...social learning." Parents should only step in when the conflict crosses the line and becomes one-sided or aggressive. Model good conflict management with your own kids. Instead of saying, "because I said so," explain your perspective: "You can't have these cookies right now. I know they smell great and you'd enjoy them, but I need you to eat your dinner first. You can have them later."

Collaborate as a family. Establish a family culture where conversations work toward

Rethink discipline. Consider discipline an opportunity to teach your child how to step in another person's shoes, says educational psychologist Michele Borba, author of "UnSelfie." Instead of resorting to timeouts, she says, ask them, "How would you feel if that happened to you?" Help young children to understand how their actions affect others and allow them the chance for "a redo" to make amends.

Practice mind-reading. According to a [study published last month](#) in Educational Research and Reviews, children who play chess score higher on tests that measure theory of mind skills than peers who do not. "Games like chess, checkers or cards build social skills by teaching children how to understand what another person is thinking and predict what they will do next," says Dr. Borba.

Build conversational skills. Good language skills allow you to better express your feelings and decipher what someone else is saying,

finding a solution that's good for everyone, says Dr. Rende. When putting together family meals, talk about cooking a dish that makes everyone happy. When doing family chores, focus on how you're all helping each other out.

Read fiction together. [Research suggests](#) that reading literary fiction can improve a reader's theory of mind. Help your children step into a character's mind by pausing from time to time to ask what they think the character is thinking and feeling. "Perspective-taking doesn't just happen overnight," says Dr. Borba. "It's built in small moments like these."

—*Ms. Wallace is a freelance writer in New York.*