

Coping With Cliques

Have you had it up to here with the gossip and put-downs? Are you tired of following the dress code of your group but think you'll be dropped if you don't? Are you concerned about whether you'll still be included this year at school or whether you'll feel like an outcast — or worse, be picked on?

Whether you're on the outside looking in or the inside wanting out, it can help to know what makes cliques tick.

A Group of Friends vs. a Clique

Being part of a group can help make your day easier to deal with — and you can learn some great life skills like being a good listener, sharing experiences, and respecting people.

Groups can form around things people have in common. So jocks, goths, preps, skaters, and even the math club are naturally drawn together because they share similar interests. The people in these groups feel they have a place where they're welcome and supported, and where they can be themselves. Some people form groups from being in drama club, or liking the same music or movies, or even just because they like to hang out at the mall.

Some groups stick together for a long time. Others drift apart after a while as people develop new interests, make different friends, or just find they have less in common. People can move in and out of different groups and can even be part of several at the same time. Even within a group, people often have one or two friends they feel closest to and enjoy the most.

Some friendship groups seem pretty flexible and welcome people to join in. Others seem much more restricted, though. People in these groups make it clear that not just anyone can be part of their crowd. That type of restricted group is sometimes called a **clique**.

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What's the Deal With Cliques?

Cliques are tight groups that usually have a strict code of membership and ways to act. Instead of being centered on shared values and beliefs, many cliques tend to focus on maintaining their status and popularity. For instance, a clique may try to make it seem like the people in it are "better" than those outside, or that their clique is higher status than another clique.

People in cliques sometimes use their power to hurt others on purpose, either by excluding them, being mean, or both. Sometimes they might insult people by trying to "fix" them or give them "makeovers." Other times it becomes more serious and someone outside the group is targeted or victimized for being, looking, or acting different.

Unlike regular groups of friends, where members are free to socialize with others outside the group, people in cliques often do everything together. They sit together in class, go to the mall together after school — and they only do stuff with other clique members or people they decide are "cool."

Although people might think it's better to belong to a clique than to be excluded, many times people in cliques end up dealing with lots of pressures and rules. They soon start to worry about whether they'll continue to be popular or whether they'll be dropped. After a while, they may begin to realize that true friends wouldn't be so bossy or demanding.

Why Do Cliques Attract People?

Cliques attract people for different reasons: For some people, being popular or cool is the most important thing, and cliques give them a place where they can get this social status. Other people want to be in cliques because they don't like to feel left out. Some people simply feel it's better to be on the inside than the outside (it's not, but more on that later).

Cliques give people who like to take control a chance to be in charge (for good or bad!). For people who feel more comfortable following, they offer a place where rules are clearly defined. It's usually clear to clique members what they need to do to fit in. Sometimes that means sacrificing some freedom and following the leader rather than doing what you feel like doing.

Clique membership is usually tightly controlled by the leaders. These social gatekeepers are the ones with the power to decide who should be hot and who should not. This type of membership control usually happens in cliques of girls.

As many great kids have found, entry into a clique isn't guaranteed. In fact, a girl who is seen as likeable and popular may actually be excluded from belonging to a clique. That's because her personality or confidence may pose a threat to the leaders. She might not be a good "follower" — especially if she can be popular enough on her own. Sometimes her friends may even be invited to join when she isn't. Clique members may deliberately exclude her in an attempt to take away her perceived power or the threat they think she could pose.

Cliques aren't just for girls. Guys form cliques, too — usually around a sport, computer game, or type of clothing or music. They can be just as mean as girls about the outcasts of the social group.

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The View from the Inside

It's not all roses inside a clique either. A person's standing within the group can always be under threat. Most of the followers cling to the leader not out of true friendship but because they want to keep their position in the group.

But even the leader can lose her power. In fact, the queen bee in a strong girl clique probably worries as much — or even more — about being popular and accepted as the outsiders do. Because no one feels secure, clique members often use the tools of flattery, humiliation, or rumors to manipulate situations and preserve their status.

A few girls manage to stay friends with people both inside and outside the clique. But that can be hard to do because there's often intense pressure from the group to be friends only with people on the approved list. It takes a lot of self-confidence to dare to be friends with someone outside the clique.

Sometimes clique members decide they want out. They don't like being limited by the rules, and they don't like leaving others out and hurting people's feelings. As people get older, they may not feel like being part of a clique anymore. Usually toward the end of high school, kids are more relaxed about who is "in" and who's not. But earlier on in your school life it can take a lot of courage to leave a clique or decide to remain on the outside.

Beware of online groups and cliques using social network sites. These have become popular sites to put others down, invite only selected friends to a party, and make mean comments or posts. People can even build fake profiles. Only post profile information and photos that you want everyone to see. Keep your messages to other people online private.

Surviving Cliques

Whether you're on the inside or the outside, cliques can make your life tough. But there are ways to cope:

- **Know yourself — and your reputation.** Now is a time for getting in touch with your values, interests, and beliefs. If you're encountering cliques, it's a good opportunity to ask yourself some self-discovery questions about what you and your true friends give each other. Do you want to be part of a group because you need to feel accepted or because you actually share their values? Has your group of friends morphed into something you don't like? How do your friends influence the way people think about you? Does this make you feel good or bad?
- **Stay involved in activities that make you feel good about yourself.** If you're in a clique, don't let the group pressure you into giving up things you love or spending time and money on things that aren't important to you. If you're on the outside and feeling left out, getting involved in things that interest you is a great way to find a sense of belonging, help you feel valued, and take your mind off a group that's not welcoming. If you don't have friends at school, join a volunteer group (helping others or the environment can make you feel good about yourself).
- **Keep your social circles open and diverse.** Cliques can be very limiting in the way they control how members look, think, dress, and behave. Don't let them make you miss out on getting to know people who may become close friends. If you're on the outside, it can help to find a close friend or group of friends whose values, goals, and behaviors fit in with yours. The support and genuine caring you get will keep you from feeling so defenseless when the mean girls tease and bully. Sometimes just knowing that clique members are probably insecure can limit their power over you.
- **Speak out.** If you feel your group of friends is turning into a clique, take a stand for your beliefs. The clique might go on without you (remember those girls who feel threatened by someone

else's strength). But there's also a chance that others might follow your lead and stop acting so clique-y. If it's too hard to get up the courage to speak out, you still don't have to participate in things that feel wrong. And if you're on the outside and know that a clique is bullying or intimidating others, let teachers or counselors know about it.

- **Have a mind of your own.** Be sensitive to others and don't go along with what you don't believe is right — even if others are doing it. You are the only one responsible for how you act. True friends will respect your mind, your rights, and your independent choices. Even if someone tells you to do something that is "just a joke," say no if you know it's not right. Try not to be intimidated. If your crush is on the "outside," ask him or her out anyway. It can feel good to mix things up a little.

Friendships change. Just as one clique can make life miserable, changes in social groups can take their power away. You may encounter cliques as a freshman or sophomore. But the good news is that most cliques disappear by the end of high school.

Want to know the real secret to being popular and having friends? Be a good friend yourself. People who enjoy true and lasting popularity are those who have good friendship skills. Being a friend means being respectful, fair, interested, trustworthy, honest, caring, and kind. So if you want to have friends, be just the kind of friend you'd like to have and stay true to who you are.

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