



The Truth About SCHOOL CLIQUES

Advice from local counselors and parents on navigating friend groups and cliques

Written by Tonya Ellis

Walk the hallway of any Katy middle or high school and you'll see them in clusters: the jocks, the nerds, the cool kids...cliques, or "squads," defined by their place in the social pecking order.

Friend Groups Versus Cliques

According to experts, kids will start separating into social groups as early as elementary school, testing the waters to find their own identities. There's a distinct difference between a group and a clique. Cliques tend to keep others out, while groups are inclusive and welcome others.

"Exclusivity is the defining factor between a clique of people and a group of people," clarifies Katie Adams, M.Ed., a licensed professional counselor (LPC)-Intern of the Houston Center for Christian Counseling. "Rather than being mutually beneficial and supportive of one another, members in cliques often use fear and meanness to control members and outsiders," adds Kelly Peyton, MA, RPT, a licensed professional counselor of the West Houston Counseling Center.

Peyton says a true clique is more focused on power than friendship. "It's human nature to desire to 'fit in,' and 'be liked.' When you are accepted into an exclusive clique, it satisfies that desire and makes you feel good about yourself." Peyton states that cliques can teach teens how to deal with conflicts and difficult people and even form leadership skills. The problem is members of a clique often have to conform to group standards. "They may even be told who they can talk to, what they can wear, and where they can go. If an individual has a falling out with one member, they will often be ostracized by the entire group," says Peyton. Cliques give kids who seek power a place to be in control and kids who would rather step back a chance to follow.

Encouraging and Coaching

Unless your child is being bullied or being mean to other kids, it's best to stay out of their social life, say the counselors. "I recommend a coaching approach over a 'rescue' approach for children that are struggling," counsels Peyton. "When children feel like a victim, often times rescuing the situation only serves to make them feel more powerless, and thus an even larger target. Step back, but don't stop being a cheerleader. "A parent's voice will always have more weight than we realize," says Adams. She recommends parents remind their children who they are and reinforce their positive qualities. Also, talk to them and teach them how to treat others and how to expect to be treated.

"Encourage them to find friends in other areas too, so they can expand who they are with and not be closed to one way of thinking," recommends Felicia Tedder, a licensed clinical social worker with LG Counseling. Let your child know they can be a part of multiple groups, that way they are not spending too much time with a particular one and falling victim to bullying or becoming the bully.

When Your Child is the Pack Leader

If you're witnessing repeated patterns of friendship changes and disagreements, your child may be the pack leader causing drama and pain to others. Pack leaders usually see themselves as better than the others when in actuality they have very low self-esteem. "These children frequently exhibit signs of anxiety and depression, or a lack of empathy," says Peyton.

"Popular children involved in true cliques versus friend groups are at a much greater risk for intense bullying and isolation should a problem occur. Any time a parent sees a sudden change in friend groups or cliques, this should be an immediate 'red flag.'"

If you sense your child is the pack leader, talk about it openly or have her speak with a counselor. Explain how her behavior makes others feel. Don't make her feel bad about her actions, but teach her that hurting others is unacceptable behavior, mean, and wrong. Then encourage acts of amends and kindness such as inviting the child she rejected over to visit. Try to notice when your child is putting down others and let her know why this is not okay.

Know Your Child and Their Friends

Tracy Launer, a Katy ISD counselor and mother of three, also says quality friendships will develop if you steer your children to positive activities and stay connected. "Express how important it is to be a leader and stand up for what you believe in," she says. "Always be kind to others, and stay out of drama that doesn't involve you."

Ellen McDougal, mother of four, also recommends knowing your kids and their friends well. "If you have a child that is floundering around and following the crowd, you have to pay more attention," says McDougal. "We try to know who their friends are, and constantly pray for them that they will make good choices." Most importantly you should model kindness yourself. **KM**

>>> TIPS FOR COPING WITH CLIQUES

- Reinforce the importance of being kind to others and that ostracizing others is wrong
- Share your own experiences with cliques in schools and how you handled it
- Encourage them to be a part of many friendship groups
- Model good behavior: don't trash talk, gossip, or compete with your peers
- Get to know their friends and their friends' families
- When your child is hurting, really listen and try to understand
- Seek counseling as needed