

How to Tell the Difference Between a Clique and a Friend Group

Cliques can be risky for young people. Learn how to identify a clique and how to prevent your child from joining one.

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Cliques are a group of friends that do not allow other people to join their group and become their friend. Cliques are known to be exclusionary and that exclusion can often lead to bullying.

During the middle school and high school years, kids are developing closer friendships and trying to figure out where they belong. As everyone struggles to find their place, cliques and bullying become more prominent. Consequently, identifying the differences between a close-knit group of friends and a clique is essential.

Here is what you need to know about cliques including the risks and consequences for kids as well as how to steer your child away from them or cope with them should your child be affected.

Clique Definition

A clique is a tight knit group of friends that do not allow other people to join their friendship. Typically, kids in these groups make it clear to outsiders that not just anyone can join. Another determining factor is that cliques often focus on maintaining their popularity or status.¹

Friendships naturally form around things that people have in common.² As a result, it is just as natural for football players to hang out together as it is for the mathletes. Groups can form around band, drama club, chess club, art club—even liking the same music or movies. Kids often feel supported and

welcomed because of their similar interests. But sometimes a group of friends is actually a clique.

Cliques are known to be exclusive and feed off the FOMO (fear of missing out) of their peers. They accomplish this exclusivity by making those on the outside feel like they are less important than those on the inside. What's more, people in cliques are notorious for using their perceived power as a way to hurt or bully others. They often exclude, ostracize, and leave out others on purpose.

"Parents need to be cautious and recognize that at any age, everyone wants to feel included and part of something," says Anisha Patel-Dunn, DO, a psychiatrist and chief medical officer for LifeStance Health. "Cliques aren't inherently bad or negative, provided we teach our children to be inclusive and make sure that when they're part of a group, they're not being exclusionary to others."

Signs of a Clique

Here are some signs of a clique that differentiate them from other groups of friends:

- Consists of an exclusive group of people
- Focus on status, popularity, or climbing the social ladder
- Ostracize other people
- Use their power to hurt or humiliate others
- Insult people by trying to "improve" them
- Restrict people in the group from socializing with others
- Experience lots of pressures or rules as a member of the group
- Gossips or spreads rumors
- Have members who are bossy or demanding

"If your child tends to speak about a certain group of friends consistently, expresses a preference for being around a particular group of friends, or has a name for the friend group they're in, they are likely part of a clique," says Gabrielle Schreyer-Hoffman, PhD, a psychologist in private practice specializing in adolescents and emerging adults.

The Problem with Cliques

When people think of cliques, they often assume that they are only comprised of the popular kids at school. But cliques exist on every level of the social ladder. And sometimes the most controlling and destructive cliques are the ones that aren't on anyone's radar.

To outsiders, the group may look like a cross-section of friends who simply enjoy time together. But upon closer inspection, you will see that they are wrought with peer pressure and unhealthy friendships. Here are some ways in which cliques could harm your child.

a. Limits a kid's social circle

Problems arise when others are not welcome to join or hang out with a group of friends. What's more, in cliques it's often frowned upon for a member of the group to have friends in other groups. The expectation is that to belong to the group, friendships are exclusive to the group. If someone in the group does stray from the group, they are quickly ostracized.

"When cliques become exclusionary, it can quickly turn into bullying," says Dr. Patel-Dunn. "Cliques can be cruel to the people they are not including. Psychologically, it can be very damaging when someone is excluded from the group."

This excessive togetherness also can be harmful because your child is not meeting new people or expanding their sphere of friendships. Remember, it is healthy to have friends in different social circles with a variety of different interests. Encourage your kid to branch out and meet new people.

b. Keeps kids from discovering their identity

Cliques can hinder your child's self-discovery and impact their self-esteem. Although it may appear comforting for your child to hang out with the same kids all the time, this pattern can create problems over time.

"Talk to your child about their friends and groups of friends, what they do together, how they feel when they're with their friends, and if they're struggling with any issues or problems within their clique," says Dr. Schreyer-Hoffman.

If your child seems more anxious or unsure, or you find that they question where they stand with their friends, you need to pay attention. Cliques can damage a person's sense of identity and make it harder for your child to have a clear understanding of their likes and dislikes. Instead, they may find that they just go along with the group. They may even struggle with moral decisions as the pressure to belong increases.

c. Lacks authentic friendships

When teens belong to cliques, there is very little chance that there are any true friendships in the group. Usually, group members are more concerned about maintaining their status in the group than they are about really getting to know someone.

They may obsess over who is mad at whom and who invited whom to the latest social event. What's more, young people in cliques are often too busy managing the dynamics of the group to share who they are. Most of their time and energy is spent following the group's rules and people-pleasing.

d. Encourages poor decisions and risk-taking

There is power in numbers, and when teens belong to cliques, they feel empowered to do things they would not otherwise do.

"Children and teens are very influenced by their peers, especially if their group of friends has narrowed due to participation in a clique," says Dr. Schreyer-Hoffman. "[This, in turn], may further increase the risk of the youth succumbing to peer pressure or influence due to fears of having a falling out with their clique or angering members of the clique."

How to Tell if Your Child is in a Clique

Kids in cliques are more likely to:

- Spread rumors and gossip
- Make fun of other people
- Bully those who do not fit with the ideals of their group
- Make poor decisions, such as experimenting with drugs and alcohol

Cliques also can lead to cyberbullying. Because peers in the group usually have their back, kids may engage in cyberbullying others more freely. Meanwhile, members of their group often "like," "favorite," and "share" their mean posts to increase their status in the group.

How to Prevent Cliques in Your Child's Life

Steering your child away from cliques isn't a one-and-done task, but it starts with lots of conversations.

a. Talk about friendship

One way to prevent cliques is to ensure your child knows what friendship should look and feel like. Talk to them about what unhealthy friendships look like and teach them how to identify toxic friends and fake friends. Also, stress that it is important to be themselves. A real friend will like them for who they are and will not pressure them to be different.

You also want to have conversations about the consequences of poor choices and unhealthy friendships. Talk about the importance of being a good friend. Emphasize being honest, dependable, compassionate, and trustworthy, and remind them that spreading rumors or engaging in gossip hurts other people.

Also, have conversations about using social media responsibly. Make sure your child thinks twice before clicking send on a text message, email, or social media post. Once something is said or done that is hurtful, it is very hard to make it right after the fact.

b. Give your child some freedom

It is easy to fall into the trap of trying to get your child paired with the "right" kids. But don't force your child's way into the "right" classrooms, the "right" sports teams, and the "right" peer groups. Instead, try to have a more hands-off approach in these areas.

Allow your kids some freedom in choosing friends and activities that interest them. If you push for the "right" friendships, they may be inclined to worry

too much about popularity and may end up doing almost anything to be in the "right" crowd.

c. Know your child and their friends

"The best thing you can do is keep a watchful eye on your children and be that 'fly on the wall.'" says Dr. Patel-Dunn. "Be the chaperone that drives them to their sports practice, for example, or have dinner together at least a few times a week—that uninterrupted time can be a great opportunity to check in and learn about what's going on in your child's day-to-day."

"I would encourage parents to get to know their child's friends as much as possible," suggests Dr. Schreyer-Hoffman. "Additionally, parents should find opportunities to observe their child and their friends together, learn about each child, and understand the dynamics of the clique. If one youth seems to be the 'leader' of the clique, it would be particularly important to understand this youth and what they are interested in, and what they may encourage the clique to do or engage in."

d. Talk about cliques

"While parents cannot prevent other kids from forming cliques, they can openly discuss this phenomenon with their children so that their children don't feel they have to mold themselves to certain groups but can be themselves and foster their own diverse friendships," says Laurie Hollman, PhD, LCSW, a psychoanalyst, licensed clinical social worker, and author.

How to Help Your Child Cope with Cliques

It's normal for kids to move in and out of different peer groups or be part of several groups at one time, so don't automatically assume that every tight-knit group of friends is a clique. It's normal for kids to want to spend time with people they have things in common with.

It's also natural that occasionally someone will be left out. But in a healthy friendship, this is never done intentionally. With cliques, this is not the case. Being excluded in a very public way is one of the hallmarks of a clique and can be difficult for kids to cope with, especially if they are also being bullied or teased.

"If your child is being bullied, it's important to help them understand how they can stand up for themselves," suggests Dr. Patel-Dunn. "Get the teacher or school counselor involved [and]...talk to [your] children about self-empowerment. You can help them reflect on whether this group is the best place for them. Do they really want to hang out with people who are cruel?"

Help your child recognize the difference between toxic people and fake friends and friends who are just having a bad day. You also want to take steps to help build their resilience, perseverance, and self-esteem. Being excluded by a clique can be overwhelming and painful. Help your child not only learn how to take back their power, but also turn their situation into something positive.

And, if your child is showing signs of depression, anxiety, or even high levels of stress, consider talking to a mental health professional. They can work with your child on how to develop healthy coping strategies and equip them with the skills they need to stand up to people who are treating them poorly.