

Everyone is Welcome!

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When I was in junior high, I was one of the unofficial social planners. Every Thursday or Friday, a few of us would make plans to go to the movies, roller skating, dinner, swimming, “canteen” or whatever we could think of. Then we would go about inviting people to join us and encourage them to “invite whoever you want, everyone is welcome.” It was not the culture of our group or of the school to intentionally exclude others. How things have changed...

Schools are working very hard to address the growing problem of bullying through teacher trainings, student education, role plays, parent meetings and having police liaisons. However, the problem has not only persisted but has become more severe and more widespread in recent years. Before bullying can be adequately resolved, the issue of cliques needs to be addressed.

A clique is defined as a group of friends that intentionally excludes others. Typically, one or two people are the leaders of the clique or “the Queen Bees.” The rules of the group, “who is in” and “who is out” is largely determined by the Queen Bees. There are also “worker bees” that must prove their loyalty continuously by carrying out the Queen’s orders. The Queen’s orders can range from what group members must wear, what outside activities group members can participate in and even extends to bullying others not in the group.

Sadly, no one benefits from this type of arrangement because there are not true friendships. These relationships are based on fear; worker bees are fearful if they do not carry out the Queen’s orders they too will be excluded from the group or bullied. The Queen is fearful that the worker bees will leave the group and underneath the veneer, the Queen usually feels lonely. Relationships based on fear are not healthy. Lastly, the students who are aggressively excluded from the group do not benefit and sometimes may change radically in an attempt to “fit in.” Their goal can become “fitting in” instead of being themselves.

The following are some ways that parents and teachers can help children and teens and discourage the formation of cliques.

1. Be aware of cliques.
2. Encourage your child to be the “leader” and seek out new students to welcome and help to adjust to school.
3. Encourage your child to invite a student sitting alone to join them.
4. Encourage your child to make new friends while continuing existing friendships.

5. Parents and teachers can encourage children to be inclusive in their play at recess.
6. Teach children that relationships are not disposable. Even when interests change and grow friendships can remain intact.
7. Encourage older children to work with other students on class projects.
8. Create a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom in which students are expected to be respectful of one another and only offer positive feedback to each other.
9. Avoid competition in the classroom in which students are asked to “judge” other students projects or work because this can quickly lead to divisions in the classroom.
10. Avoid having a teacher’s pet.

Learning to be inclusive is part of developing healthy relationships. With the help of attentive parents and teachers, children and teens can learn to be welcoming to one another.