

Being Cool in Junior High Is NOT Good For Your Future

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For those who reign in middle school hallways, it does not get better, according to a recent study.

Researchers from the University of Virginia looked at the life outcomes for those who were considered popular in middle school -- those who were more likely to engage in adult behaviors at a young age -- and found they were less likely to have healthy relationships 10 years later or to have found success.

The study followed 184 adolescents from communities in the southeastern region of the country, starting when they were 13 and ending at 23. Through a series of interviews and surveys, the researchers found that the “cool” kids in middle school were more likely to have engaged in romantic behavior at young ages, participated in delinquent activity and picked friends based on their levels of physical attractiveness.

However, by high school, their peers were less impressed by such behavior, and the popularity of cool middle school kids tended to fade. Years later, the study found that kids who were popular in middle school were also more likely to have engaged in criminal behavior and had more trouble managing their social relationships.

“It appears that while so-called cool teens’ behavior might have been linked to early popularity, over time, these teens needed more and more extreme behaviors to try to appear cool, at least to a subgroup of other teens,” study author Dr. Joseph P. Allen, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, said in a press release. “So they became involved in more serious criminal behavior and alcohol and drug use as adolescence progressed. These previously cool teens appeared less competent -- socially and otherwise -- than their less cool peers by the time they reached young adulthood.”

Allen elaborated on these developmental struggles to *The New York Times*: “They [formerly cool kids] are doing more extreme things to try to act cool, bragging about drinking three six-packs on a Saturday night. ... They’re still living in their middle-school world.”

The study suggested that these students' interpersonal relationships suffered over time because, instead of focusing on building stable friendships during a critical developmental period, the cool kids were focused on debauchery and superficial behaviors.

“To be truly mature as an early adolescent means you’re able to be a good, loyal friend, supportive, hardworking and responsible,” Allen told the *Times*. “But that doesn’t get a lot of airplay on Monday morning in a ninth-grade homeroom.”

On the other hand, previous research by Allen has shown that those who had trouble making friends in middle school also had issues later in life, according to *Education Week*.

As the outlet notes, “Apparently in middle school, middle-of-the-pack is the way to go.”