

Parenting with Confidence

On the "Outs" Wanting "In"  
Cliques & Conflicts in the Tween Scene  
By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay:

My 11-year-old, Alison, is being pushed out of the circle of girls in her classroom. There is one bossy ringleader who has paired up with another, both of whom act as if they are teenagers already. They are essentially too cool for my daughter, who is still innocent and sweet. The girls who are snubbing my daughter are hardly a good fit for her, but she insists on fitting in with them and comes home upset every day. Any advice?

Dear Parent:

Your daughter is about to round the bend into middle school. Middle schoolers are searching for independence and belonging; they are out to prove who counts in the hierarchy of cool or popular. Most are acting on uncertainty as they sense the pressure to grow up and leave their childhood behind.

This age-old process of separation begins just prior to, or during, the middle school years. Separation is a time when tweens step away from overt dependency upon mom and dad, and pay greater attention to peers for directions on how to behave.

The struggle to secure identity, social status and belonging can take place anytime between ages 11 and 15, or even much later or never for some. This time of early adolescent angst varies in duration and in degree of intensity. For many, there is confusion and an ongoing lost and found process. For others, there is hardly a bump in the road.

Beginning in middle school, and as early as fifth grade, tweens may leave friendships in

an effort to belong to the right group. It is a shuffling of the deck, whereby tweens try to secure a sense of belonging based on who is “in” and who is “out.” It is the natural forming of sororities and fraternities but without a governing body to control the outcome. Social groupings become less inclusive. No amount of adult interference, uniform dress or moral teachings is going to stop this social process. We went through it, and so will our children.

Natural leaders self-select and order the group. When you know where you belong, there is no discrepancy between where you want to be and where you land. When you long to be part of a group that does not welcome you, this is where the discrepancy causes distress. Alison may be facing a painful discrepancy between her wish and the reality of where she belongs.

Developmental maturity, social skills, economic status, ethnicity and culture all influence group identity. Some tweens belong in multiple groups based on different factors. For instance, there is one after-school group based on sports, yet another lunchtime group based on ethnicity. There could be a third social circle based on economic status and geography, namely the neighborhood circle.

The difficulty arises when young teens don’t have clear boundaries that define their social status or identity. Difficulties also arise for those who are less mature, physically or socially. In this case, their peers may then launch forward, literally dumping them and leaving them behind. There are also circumstantial factors that can lead to social alienation, such as when a child changes schools.

Teens who have unique challenges may also be vulnerable to feeling marginalized. Personality factors play a role as well. Sometimes parents do not recognize traits in their children that may be problematic in social settings. There are children that are very sensitive and easily hurt, children that have hygiene issues or children that act inappropriately in school by bragging, being disruptive or engaging in attention getting

behavior.

In trying to fit in, some kids unwittingly project a desperate vibe that is a turnoff for the other kids. They may follow the others kids around, copy how others dress or adopt the interests of the in crowd, not knowing that trying too hard works against them. Peers can sense this intense need to fit in, which lends them power to reject the child who wants to be accepted.

For tweens who lack other significant support, resources or resilience, a social challenge can lead to symptoms, such as anxiety and depression. Marginalized tweens may resort to any number of maladaptive behaviors in an attempt to protect or inflate self-esteem.

Here are a few tips to help Alison cope with her vulnerable position as she transitions out of a group that may no longer accept her:

- Social adversity builds strength in character and in coping. Parents need to be supportive but not too intrusive. Tweens need to solve their social dilemmas because that is exactly the developmental challenge they face.
- While parents need to encourage their tween to be her authentic self among peers, it is also key to recognize the importance of fitting in. As long as your family values are not compromised, it is well-advised to allow your child to have some of the same or similar styles of clothing and accessories as her peers.
- Our children pick up on our fears, doubts and anxieties. Be careful not to project your own fears and past wounds onto your daughter.
- Offer Alison an opportunity to sort out her thoughts and feelings. Engage in active listening, rather than advising, which could resort in the loss of open dialogue. It is through active listening that Alison will feel affirmed and empowered.
- Remind Alison that the social conflict is complex. After sufficient validation and empathy, she may be more able to take an honest look at the dynamics, including her suitability to the particular group.

- Take an impartial look at your child's personality and behavior in order to identify and address problem areas. Seeking professional support, such as social skills groups, can be a helpful intervention to build social skills and promote self-awareness.
- If it is clear there is a great discrepancy between who Alison is and who she wants to be, it may take a while before she is willing to re-examine her social choices. As she becomes more self-aware, she will be better able to seek connections that fit who she is right now.
- If Alison is genuinely stuck in a damaging situation, whereby the dynamics of her class are hurtful and without room for positive growth or change, you may want to reconsider all of your options for school settings.
- Build social groups outside of Alison's class, such as clubs, youth groups or sports. When Alison knows she is accepted and affirmed in many other circles, she will be better able to withstand the rejection of this particular group.
- Finally, many times the ringleaders or bullies have their own personal flaws and vulnerabilities. Alison may be less inclined to personalize mean behavior when she recognizes it is not really about her at all. Such insight can diffuse the tension and free her up to make new and more confident choices.

Separating from the security of childhood and entering the social arena of adolescence is a significant challenge. It is a time of uncertainty and insecurity, a time of disconnection and reconnection, as tweens play the field and play with who they want to be and where to belong.

Be available to lend an ear and offer suggestions. Be wise about when to rescue. Reassure your tween that she will work through it. Help her do so with forgiveness and grace.

Odd as it sounds, we all need to learn that we will not be liked by everyone. There will be

times we wish for acceptance in vain. We spend our lives learning about who we are and who we want to be, in relation to others. When your tween faces a painful social challenge, try to breathe and step back. View your child's social conflict as a significant opportunity for growth and learning that will strengthen her for life.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Kensington. Visit [www.kayabrams.com](http://www.kayabrams.com) to read more articles and learn about parenting workshops, mothers' groups and teen girls' groups.