

Determinants of Peer Acceptance

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Peer Acceptance and Popularity

- ▶ **peer acceptance** a measure of a person's likability (or dislikability) in the eyes of peers. **Sociometric techniques** procedures that ask children to identify those peers whom they like or dislike or to rate peers for their desirability as companions; used to measure children's peer acceptance (or non acceptance).
- ▶ **popular children** children who are liked by many members of their peer group and disliked by very few.
- ▶ **rejected children** children who are disliked by many peers and liked by few.
- ▶ **neglected children** children who receive few nominations as either a liked or a disliked individual from members of their peer group.
- ▶ **controversial children** children who receive many nominations as a liked and many as a disliked individual.
- ▶ **average-status children** children who receive a average number of nominations as a liked and/or a disliked individual from members of their peer group.

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- ▶ Perhaps no other aspect of children's social lives has received more attention than **peer acceptance: the extent to which a child is viewed by peers as a worthy or likable companion**. Typically, researchers assess peer acceptance through self-report instruments called **sociometric techniques** (Jiang & Cillessen, 2005).
- ▶ In a **sociometric survey**, children might be asked to nominate several classmates whom they like and several whom they dislike. Another method is to ask children to rate every other child in the group on a 5-point likeability scale (ranging from "really like to play with" to "really don't like to play with" (Cillessen & Bukowski, 2000; DeRosier & Thomas, 2003; Terry & Coie, 1991). Sociometric results suggest that sociometric status (based on liking) and peer popularity (based on who is perceived as "popular") are somewhat different constructs, and children don't necessarily like popular children (Cillessen, 2004; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). Even 3- to 5-year-olds can respond appropriately to sociometric surveys (Denham et al., 1990); and the choices (or ratings) that children make correspond reasonably well to teacher ratings of peer popularity. This suggests that sociometric surveys provide *valid assessments of children's social standing in their peer groups* (Hymel, 1983).

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- ▶ When sociometric data are analyzed, it is usually possible to classify each child into one of the following categories:
 - ▶ **popular children**– who are liked by many peers and disliked by few;
 - ▶ **rejected children**– who are disliked by many peers and liked by few;
 - ▶ **neglected children**– who receive very few nominations as a liked or a disliked companion and who seem almost invisible to their peers; and
 - ▶ **controversial children**– who are liked by many peers but disliked by many others.
- ▶ Together, these four types of children make up about two-thirds of the children in a typical elementary school classroom. The remaining one-third are **average-status children, who are liked (or disliked) by a moderate number of peers** (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Notice that both neglected children and rejected children are low in acceptance and are not well received by their peers. Yet it is not nearly so bad to be ignored by other children as to be rejected by them. Neglected children do not feel as lonely as rejected children do (Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Crick & Ladd, 1993). Neglected children are also much more likely than rejected children to achieve a more favorable sociometric status if they enter a new class at school or a new play group (Coie & Dodge, 1983). Furthermore, rejected children are the ones who face the greater risk of displaying deviant, antisocial behavior and other serious adjustment problems later in life (Dodge & Pettit, 2003; Parker & Asher, 1987).

Why Are Children Accepted, Neglected, or Rejected by Peers?

- ▶ Do popular children become popular because they are friendly, cooperative, and nonaggressive? Or is it that children become friendlier, more cooperative, and less aggressive after achieving their popularity? One way to test these competing hypotheses is to observe children in play groups or classes with *unfamiliar peers to see whether the behaviors they display predict their eventual status in the peer group*. Several studies of this type have been conducted (Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983; Dodge, 1983; Dodge et al., 1990; Gazelle et al., 2005; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd, Price, & Hart, 1988) and the results are reasonably consistent: The patterns of behavior that children display do predict the statuses they will achieve with their peers. Children who are ultimately accepted by unfamiliar peers are effective at initiating social interactions and at responding positively to others' bids for attention. When they want to join a group activity, for example, these socially skilled, *soon-to-be-accepted children first watch and attempt to understand what is going on*, and then comment constructively about the proceedings as they blend smoothly into the group. On the other hand, children who are ultimately *rejected are pushy and self-serving*. They often criticize or disrupt group activities and may even threaten reprisals if they are not allowed to join in. Other children who end up being *neglected by their peers* tend to hover around the edges of a group, initiating few interactions and shying away from other children's bids for attention.

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- ▶ In sum, peer popularity is affected by many factors. It may help to have a pleasant temperament, and academic skills, but it is even more important to display good social cognitive skills and to behave in socially competent ways.
- ▶ Definitions of desirable social behavior, of course, may vary from culture to culture and change over time (Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005). The ingredients of popularity also change with age.
- ▶ Aggression is generally associated with unfavorable peer statuses at any age. However, during preadolescence and early adolescence at least *some “tough” boys who view themselves as cool*, popular, and antisocial do become popular with male classmates and attractive to girls (Bukowski, Sippola, & Newcomb, 2000; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Rodkin et al., 2000).
- ▶ Another example of age differences in popularity relates to how a child interacts with children of the other gender. Establishing close relationships with members of the other sex suddenly enhances popularity during adolescence. Frequent consorting with “the enemy” violates norms of gender segregation during childhood and *detracts* from one’s popularity (Kovacs, Parker, & Hoffman, 1996; Sroufe et al., 1993). In short, contextual factors clearly influence who is popular and who is not.

Peers as Agents of Socialization

- ▶ ■ Peer relationships are a second social world for children—a world of equal-status interactions that is very different from the social interactions children have with adults.
- ▶ ■ Peers are social equals (not necessarily the same age), who behave at similar levels of social and cognitive complexity.
- ▶ ■ Sociability and the form of social interactions change across development.
- ▶ ■ By age 18 to 24 months, toddlers' sociable interactions become complex and coordinated as they reliably imitate each other, assume complementary roles in simple social games, and occasionally coordinate their actions to achieve shared goals.
- ▶ ■ During the preschool years, nonsocial activities and parallel play become less common, whereas the social skills that foster associative play and cooperative play become more common.
- ▶ ■ During middle childhood, more peer interactions occur in peer groups—groups of children who associate regularly, define a sense of group membership, and formulate norms that specify how group members are supposed to behave.
- ▶ ■ Early adolescents spend even more time with peers— particularly with their closest friends in small cliques, and in larger groups of like-minded cliques, known as crowds.
- ▶ ■ Cliques and crowds help adolescents forge an identity apart from their families and pave the way for the establishment of dating relationships.

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- ▶ **■ Children clearly differ in peer acceptance—the extent to which other children like or dislike them.**
- ▶ **■ Using sociometric techniques, developmentalists find that there are five categories of peer acceptance:**
 - ▶ **■ popular children: liked by many and disliked by few**
 - ▶ **■ rejected children: disliked by many and liked by few**
 - ▶ **■ controversial children: liked by many and disliked by many**
 - ▶ **■ neglected children: seldom nominated by others as likable or dislikable**
 - ▶ **■ average-status children: those who are liked or disliked by a moderate number of peers**
- ▶ **■ Social status with peers is related to a child's temperament, cognitive skills, and the parenting style she or he has experienced.**
- ▶ **■ The strongest predictor of peer acceptance is a child's pattern of social behavior.**

