



STATUS & POPULARITY

By Wilson McCaskill

Spend sometime in any classroom or just observe a playground for a few minutes and it's quite easy to see those who are popular. It's even easier to spot the loners, isolates and outcasts.

If a child is popular and blessed with virtues they will be a valuable asset in the classroom. Serving as a role model they can be effective agents for changing inappropriate attitudes and behaviour. Popular children who are open, generous and inclusive by nature, help to create safe and happy classrooms.

However, not all children are popular for the right reasons and as all parents and teachers know, classrooms can have both saints and sinners. It's often a toss up as to who is the most popular.

In classrooms with a strong commitment to virtuous conduct, the *Luke Skywalker*s will prevail and those without, the *Darth Vader*s attract many to the temptations of the *dark side*.

Unfortunately, virtuous behaviour does not in itself make someone popular. In fact, virtuous behaviour without certain key attributes can leave a child at the risk of being seen as a teacher's pet or something equally disparaging.

Irrespective of how virtuous or popular a child is, he or she will in the main have one, two or all three of the three key elements that determine the likelihood of popularity.

For boys the three key elements are:

1. Sport
2. Size
3. Humour

There can be little debate that boys with sporting skills are usually popular. If their skills range across playground games and all the codes of school sport, there is every chance they will experience considerable popularity.

Boys who are popular because of sporting ability are at their worst when they exclude others from participating. They dominate the games being played by insisting on receiving the ball, or demanding to bat etc., and refusing to accept the rules, especially if it means they or their team mates will lose.

They often decide what will be played, who plays with whom, and expect compliance from all who participate. They are invariably scared of losing and are careful to keep other boys with superior sporting skills on their side. In team games this means that their team is far superior to the opposition and instead of the exhilaration of a closely fought contest, they enjoy the far more brutal thrill of thrashing the opposition.



Size certainly helps a boy to be popular. If he is big and strong as well, other children will see the obvious advantages of keeping him on side. Boys with size but lacking sporting prowess often compensate for this by increasing their apparent size. They do things like wearing clothes several sizes larger than they need and walk or slouch along in a gait larger than necessary. They tend to push and shove their way through people rather than slipping or sliding between them to minimize disruption. They often convey a kind of deliberate clumsiness and use both themselves and their belongings to consume more space than their size warrants.

Unrest, upset and even danger looms if a big boy chooses to use his size to intimidate others. I have met many teachers who felt threatened by the behaviour of a large boy in their class.

A boy with sporting ability but lacking size sometimes compensates by a larger than life energy level. It's not unusual for these boys to be here, there and everywhere. They are frequently noisy and look for every opportunity to show off their athleticism. They don't just put their hand up to answer a question but thrust it up accompanied by a jump out of their seat. Asked to return something to its appropriate place they are likely to throw and catch it several times as they do so. Simple actions are turned into sporting challenges. They are live wires who can rarely hold still and whose boisterous behaviour constantly imprints itself on the consciousness of the class.

Humour is the third key element in being popular. Boys who can make others laugh are fun to be around. If the humour is appropriate and well placed it can be a breath of fresh air in the classroom. Inappropriate humour, delivered to be disruptive with little regard for the consequences, can be seen by the peer group as attractively anti-authoritarian and courageous. This type of humour is sometimes used by boys who lack both size and sporting ability to gain favour with their class. It can work very well. Sadly, I have seen far too many class clowns who have become trapped in their role by the need to be popular and the demands and expectations of their peer group.

It's "cool to be a fool" is a prevalent attitude in schools and it's important to counter this notion. I suggest to children that there is no such thing as a "cool fool." A fool is a fool and only another fool thinks that being a fool is cool. I further advise that when someone is being encouraged to be a fool by their class they are being ripped off. Their class knows how desperate they are to be popular and forces them to be the class fool to gain the popularity they want. Eventually though, the class fool, who thought all along they were being cool, becomes predictable and boring and sadly turns into a real fool. When that happens nobody wants to know them anymore and they realize how badly they've been ripped off. All they wanted was to be cool and popular, and all they're left with is being a fool and lonely.

Hollywood all too frequently promotes the idea of a cool fool to a receptive children's market. A long list of films sells the idea that the more absurd you are, the more fun you are and the more you upset the apple cart, the more cool you are.

If a boy has all three elements (sport, size, humour) and virtuous conduct, there is every chance he will make an excellent leader. When all three elements are combined



in a child who is drawn to the *dark side* it will take a concentrated effort by a resourceful teacher, supportive parents and a strong peer group to bring him back to the good side.

For girls the three key elements are:

1. Looks
2. Clothes
3. Charisma

Good looks will get you friends (and at a certain age, definitely boy friends). This doesn't mean that without good looks a girl won't have friends but you'd be hard pressed to convince plain Jane's that good looks aren't a valuable asset.

Of course, good friends see past the veneer of good looks but if being popular means having lots of people who want to gather around you, then having good looks almost guarantees there will be no shortage of people who want to share in your company.

Girls with good looks invariably know they have them. Why wouldn't they? Friends, family and even strangers have made mention of their good looks on countless occasions. Their good looks have become as much about who they are as what they look like. Good-looking girls with a deeper awareness of themselves and others will seek friendships that are based on more solid values than physical attributes. They will gladly share themselves with a variety of people and seek no special treatment or acknowledgement because they are good looking.

However, there are those girls who see their good looks as a sign of status and superiority. Blessed with good looks they are highly selective about the company they choose and become skilled at exploiting the advantages that such a blessing brings.

If clothes maketh the man, then they certainly help girls to make their mark. In schools without rigid requirements for the wearing of a school uniform, clothes can become the means by which cliques, groups and the in-crowd are identified. Even in schools with a fairly strict requirement for the wearing of a uniform, girls find inventive ways to adjust the uniform to create a distinction between who is *in* and who is *out*.

The wearing of jewellery, make up, or some fashion fad such as bandanas or special shoe laces or indeed the shortening of skirts, can all serve as the means by which girls show they belong to the in-group of the school or class.

Invariably, these elite and exclusive groups are established by one or two popular girls who set up the conditions for belonging. Wearing the right things is essential but it takes more than just wearing them to be allowed in.

Firstly, a girl must be given a signal or invitation to join and joining obliges them to maintain the uniform, adopt a certain attitude, display specific behaviours and shun



those who don't belong. The club is exclusive, demanding both loyalty and observance of all its codes of conduct.

The Club President is most likely a girl with the third element of popularity. More intangible than looks and clothing it is the most powerful element, and girls who have it wield considerable influence.

It is charisma.

I define charisma as personality with a mix of mystique and unpredictability. The quality of mystique makes it difficult for us to be sure of what a person is thinking or feeling. Unpredictability means we can never be sure of what they will say or do.

Making friends with these girls is a stressful experience. Although it means you belong to an exclusive club, you can never be absolutely sure of how long your membership will last. To belong, you must work at pleasing the President and your position of favour can be usurped at anytime by someone the President feels is more pleasing, entertaining or interesting than you.

Girls with looks, clothes and charisma who use their popularity to destabilize groups by excluding, antagonizing or denigrating those they deem unworthy, can cause havoc. They are skilled at devising daily rituals such as hugs, kisses, specific greetings and such like, that all members must do or use. Done publicly these serve to show who is *in* but more importantly, who is *out*.

For many girls belonging to the club is everything and exclusion makes them hurt and unhappy. Not being in the club puts you at the risk of rejection and ridicule in almost every area of school life. The President and her seconds in command deliberately generate the anxiety of possible separation and blind allegiance by at various times expelling one of the club's members. Often, the outcast knows of no reason why, but her pain and frequently her tears have been seen by everyone. If and when she is invited back into the club her gratitude is immense and her sadness replaced by such happiness that even her parents are invariably pleased she's back in the fold. All this serves to reinforce the power of the club to both members and non-members.

If it all sounds exaggerated and overly dramatic then you haven't seen the destructive force that this kind of popularity and exclusiveness can create. If you have, then you'll no doubt want to know what can be done.

Exposure is the answer. For both boys and girls, the more they question and understand what makes boys and girls popular, the more able they are to see past the elements to the virtues that do or do not lie beneath.

By blowing the cover of those children who use their popularity to be destructive, we make it much harder for them to manipulate and exploit others. By understanding the mechanics of popularity, boys and girls can get past the cult of personality to discover the virtues of good character.



There will always be children who are more popular than others but an informed class will not make the mistake of following the popular just to be part of the “in-crowd.” Rather, they will do what they believe to be right. And should they want a leader, they will look for one that is of good character, inclusive and perhaps popular as well.

Teachers who are aware of an exclusive club or clubs in their class need to start a discussion that allows these clubs to be openly described and detailed. Get members and non-members to comment on why such clubs are formed and what it’s like to be in or out of the club.

Be firm in your assertion that the classroom is an inclusive world in which all members have equal rights and that any diversion from this makes it unsafe. Then proceed to get everyone to agree to the removal of all rituals, symbols and indicators of exclusive membership. Be vigilant, because letting go of these things isn’t easy and some will remain if only in a reduced form. Also be on the lookout for others that take their place.

Regularly discuss the progress of the shift from exclusive behaviour to inclusive behaviour and acknowledge the progress that has been made. Reveal to the class how much the changes have allowed you to see some good things about people that were previously hidden by the exclusive behaviour and stresses of being in a class divided.

Further, it will be very beneficial to implement the Values to Virtues strategy on page 45 of the Professional Learning section in the Play Is The Way® Complete Program Volume 1.