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Kids talk: Being different, fitting in

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Article Text:

Who's in? Who's out?

That's something kids deal with every day at school.

As a therapist who works with kids and teens, I listen to them talk about finding their place in their schools.

What they say about their social identity, their interests, how they dress and, most of all, how they see themselves can help other kids deal with the same pressures.

About cliques:

Kaylee, who is 12, sees cliques at her middle school.

"Some cliques are definitely about clothes," she says. "Like whoever wears the most Roxy clothes hangs out together. Then there's the eighth-grade quad. They dress more adult, like that'd be more sexy.

"I like to wear what I want," Kaylee adds, "but I do dress similar to what everyone else wears. Let's be real; I think everybody thinks: Oh, is she gonna like me and let me hang out with her?"

"I don't want to hang out with the populars because I don't want to be all snooty," seventh-grader Emily says.

"I just want to be with my good friends who I just enjoy — the ones who are popular to me.

"The people who are meaner to me, like the potheads, I don't care what they think. But the people who I do care about, their comments affect me."

About clothes:

Both Emily and her 12-year-old friend Sara feel that being comfortable and sporty matters above all else.

To that end, they even wear jammies to school. If you go to a middle school or high school in the county, you may notice lots of girls are wearing pajama pants. It seems to be the in thing.

Eva, 11, is clear that clothes are a very big thing with girls at her school.

"Just your clothes put you into a category," she explains. "First, there are the really good dressers: popular, the latest styles, expensive clothes.

"Then there are the in-betweens; that's me: not super-popular, and you don't care all that much what you wear. You definitely don't want to be so stylish you can't move!!

"Last, there are kids who just don't care at all what they wear.

"I like to get to know people before I judge them," Eva says. "I don't say, 'Oh, she's a freak, don't talk to her' before I even know them.

"I kind of try to be friends with everyone so that I'm liked everywhere. I'm a people person. I'm independent.

"You have to be independent to be liked everywhere and then you're not tied down to a certain clique.

No one says, 'Oh, she's a brat, she's a science geek' because I'm friends with everyone."

About social cues:

Not everyone has an easy time figuring out the social cues in middle school.

A bright, articulate 12-year-old who thinks deeply about herself tells me what it's like when it's not so easy to fit in.

As a teacher and a therapist, I know there are so many kids out there who will know exactly what she's talking about.

"I just try to blend into the shadows at school," she says. "I want my clothes to blend in, too. I have a hard time with social interactions, and on top of that I'm having a hard time in my life right now.

"I don't want to complicate things by standing out. I do want to be liked and accepted, but it's not that easy."

Then there's Laurel. She's 12 and absolutely loves standing out and being different.

"It's important to me to be different," Laurel says. "I express myself through my sparkly, layered clothing from different countries. I like my clothes to be different, not brand names.

"I like the attention," Laurel adds. "I act like I don't really care what everyone thinks, and then they think: She doesn't really care, so there's no point in making fun of her to get a reaction.

"Underneath, you really do care, but you just have to show that confidence when you walk around."
About high school:

Rachel, a junior at a local high school, notices that students at her school hang out in two quads. In the first quad, there are the mainstream kids — "the athletic types from every sport," she says.

"They're the 'teen people' kids."

"Then there's the second quad with the alternative people. They're expressive with their clothing. There are lots of smart people there.

"I personally don't care how I dress," Rachel says. "I go to school in jammies if I want to.

"I've got all my friends from the sports I've done all my life. I'm just trying to be myself, and if people like me, that's that. It must work, because I always have friends."

Blake, 16, is naturally a nice guy. "Just being nice to other kids is how I'm accepted," he says. "A lot of high school kids are rude to the teachers and each other. But I actually like being nice."

Eliot, 18, thinks there are social situations in high school that ! can create discomfort. "I think that whenever I feel like I'm better than other people, it is a way of dealing with my own anxiety," he says.

Andrew, a junior, lives between high school and adult worlds. He runs his own custom surfboard design and shaping business.

"I have achieved things that high school kids respect, but being accepted in the business world is more challenging," he says. "That's where it really matters. Some adult shapers don't seem to take me seriously at first because I'm 16. I have to prove myself."

A.J., a junior, has earned social status through surfing achievements in a town that loves surfers.

"I get along with anyone who treats me with respect," he says. "I have a lot of friends. But then, Santa Cruz is Surf City, U.S.A."

No doubt, his friendly demeanor plays a role in all this, too.

Taylor, a senior, says it's important just to know who you are and be who you are. People respect you for not being fake.

"When people are real, other people notice," he says.

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