

Cliques: Who's in? Who's out?

Robert A. Horak Jr., Ph.D.

Guidance and Counseling

Erik Erikson states that young folks need to successfully negotiate through the crisis of identity versus identity confusion during the long and turbulent time known as adolescence. More specifically, it is during this transitional period from childhood to adulthood that students use their developing cognitive abilities to struggle with issues of occupational choice, values clarification and sexual identity. It sounds like quite an important task and indeed it is. Moreover, this stage occurs in concert with all of the social, emotional and educational challenges that are woven into the daily lives of today's youth.

Fortunately, adolescents are generally equipped with sufficient abilities, time and knowledge allowing them to develop a new and coherent sense of self. However, the journey does not come with an easy-to-follow road map. Young folks are continuously bombarded with a significant amount of information from self, peers, adults and the media, information that they are required to filter, test and assimilate into a framework that will help them fully function in an adult world.

So how do adolescents typically deal with all of the confusion and anxiety associated with an unsteady identity?

Cliques play a critical role as a defense against the unpleasantness of identity confusion. Small groups of people with similar values, tastes, experiences, behaviors, goals and aspirations, where there is a sense of belonging and commitment, provide refuge in a world that is difficult to understand and influence. Cliques offer a safe place to test and practice new behaviors. They are a microcosm of society where important things happen.

So why the bad rap? Cliques are beneficial but in order to clarify who is "in" a clique, members often define that boundary by identifying who is out. "You can't sit here." "You can't talk to us." "You can't play." "You're not one of us." Such statements serve an important purpose in establishing group cohesion.

Of course this comes at a price. Emotional pain and rigid boundaries interfere with the altruistic goals of tolerance, acceptance and interdependency that we hope our society will embrace and practice.

We all suffer from the negative fall-out of cliques. Even those who are "in" struggle with the ever-present threat of being cast out. Parents and educators struggle with the awkward mix of "good" and "bad" inherent in cliques. Trying to help by fixing peer relationship problems through advice, intended to curb ill effects, may not get us the long-term results that we want. We may want to supplement typical responses to social problems with opportunities for adolescents to reflect more deeply on what's happening. The opportunity to define the problem within the context of the group's behavior and behaviors of individuals in the group may create an invaluable opportunity for students to

weigh those behaviors against their own values, morals and beliefs. Clarifying both their own values and foundations for their behaviors as well as gaining a clearer understanding of the dilemma may enhance students' positions for making decisions on how they want to respond to their unique situations. Students may discover that it is not the 'clique' but rather the behaviors of others that hurt. While adolescents struggle with identity confusion, individuals and groups must continually struggle with the ongoing challenge of satisfying our needs without creating hurt and pain in others.

As caring adults, finding ourselves tugged onto the battlefield with our teens is familiar feeling. Joining them, however, undermines their chance to exercise their will. We can, though, continue to guide them through the difficult chore of self-examination and encourage them to take action that is based on their core values.