



Middle Schoolers and Cliques

The Good, the Bad, and Avoiding the Ugly

by Eddie Baumann and Abby Baumann

It's March, and the seventh-grade students are in the process of selecting class officers for the upcoming school year. As the candidates give their speeches in chapel, a candidate for class president campaigns on a platform of "eliminating the cliques that are a big part of our school," providing suggestions for things that should be done. When the ballots are counted, she is soundly defeated. The following September she can be found at lunch, sitting every day at the same table, surrounded by about five of her closest friends.

Cliques are part of young adolescent social life. Although they often seem negative and we as adults try to eliminate them, cliques are a persistent part of middle school life. My 12-year-old son, Jonathan—a sixth grader himself—says, "You can't get rid of [cliques]; it's like a law of physics." Unlike objects, which are controlled by the laws of physics (although we say that apples don't fall far from the tree), people behave in ways they perceive as in their best interest. In addressing the negative effects of cliques, we may be wise to understand the benefits that young adolescents receive from cliques and use those benefits to achieve constructive ends.

Cliques: The Good

Cliques are small groups, averaging five to six people. The members feel they know and appreciate one another better than those outside the group know and appreciate them. Members of cliques tend to define themselves by common activities or friendship. Usually, they share similar age, social class, and ethnic backgrounds, as well as the same gender. Unlike groups—often brought together by adults, common problems, or activities—cliques exist through member choice (Ennett and Bauman 1996, 196).

Not all middlers belong to cliques. Some are "liaisons"—being socially active and having many close friends or making connections between many different cliques. Some may be "isolates"—having few friends either within or outside a group. Unlike the stereotypic "loner," isolates tend to be so by circumstance, not by choice.

Cliques provide a number of benefits to their members. Middlers are in the process of defining who they are and will become, and cliques provide security and emotional support. Since middlers often feel they are performing before an imaginary audience, cliques are a place where they can be themselves without having to play the emotionally taxing game that occurs when they feel that others are scrutinizing their every move.

As image bearers of God, we desire a sense of intimacy; and cliques provide some of the intimacy middlers crave. Clique members will share things with one another that they will not share with adults who care for them and may be in better positions to assist them. The reason that clique members often will not share with those outside the group is that cliques allow their members to develop a sense of autonomy or independence—a development that is characteristic of students this age. It is an environment that provides a haven from adult control—where issues, problems, or feelings can be discussed "among equals" rather than in the top-down style characteristic of adult-adolescent relationships.

Finally, cliques allow their members to play and practice the social roles that are a necessary part of adult social life. Members learn to give and receive emotional support. They can try out new ideas or behaviors within a relatively safe environment where feedback is often gentle and supportive rather than brutal and destructive.

Cliques: The Bad

Given the benefits that middlers receive from cliques, we may wonder why cliques are negative. Yet when they combine with aspects of the sin nature, cliques often produce very negative results.

An important part of the young adolescent social world is the need for popularity (are adults much different?). Ideally, such a desire would prompt people to put their best foot forward. Many times this prompting occurs; but in a number of situations, it does not. Middlers will often pursue popularity through power and control. Since people value popularity and thus it becomes a scarce good, competition for popularity develops. Some pursue popularity through putting down the competition—using tactics of character assassination as well as emotional and sometimes even physical cruelty (Giannetti and Sagarese 1997, 154–55).

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The question is why the good students, even in a Christian school that encourages a more compassionate and caring ethos, don't prevail. The key is the nature of the benefits that middlers receive from cliques. Cliques provide a safe environment for the emerging identity, and students need this type of environment because their developing identity is fragile. This fragile identity makes middlers self-conscious and insecure, and insecurity makes people timid and vulnerable. Therefore, middlers will resist making waves because defending the victim of attack or cruelty means placing oneself at risk.

Cliques: Avoiding the Ugly

When we as caring adults see these types of social injustices or cruelty, we try to remedy the situation. We desire to create environments that cultivate greater compassion, or at least tolerance, toward others. Often our solutions compel us to try eliminating the cliques, which we see as the source of the problem. However, if cliques are like a law of physics, we can't eliminate them. Because their members receive so many benefits, adult-imposed solutions often reinforce the desire for autonomy and independence, a desire that is the developmental reason for the formation of cliques. However, adults can eliminate or at least control the negative effects of cliques.

First, although middlers dislike rules, they usually thrive

in reasonable, supportive environments. These are environments that caring, supportive adults develop and maintain. Expectations are reasonable, rules are minimal, and the rules that exist are understood as mutually beneficial and not controlling. Adults model compassion, care, and justice to all students by defending victims of attacks or cruelty. They also provide emotional and, at times, institutional support for students who take the risk of defending those who receive unjust treatment.

Second, while popularity is scarce, success is not. Unfortunately, our society tends to place a greater worth on certain talents and abilities, recognizing and thus creating a desire for these. In this sense we are guilty of coveting certain gifts. Schools can become guilty of this as well. Middlers tend to gravitate toward those areas that they perceive as areas of public recognition, such as athletics, academics, and music; or they try to create value for themselves through getting negative attention. Students who experience success in areas they do not perceive as ones the culture highly values or in areas that are not highly visible publicly should receive encouragement and recognition—if not publicly then privately by a caring adult.

Finally, when we ask all students to work together on common problems that affect them and we provide a forum where ideas from a number of students or groups are acknowledged, valued, and used to find a common solution, we help students develop a sense of appreciation and empathy for others. At the same time, we reduce the amount of competition between groups.

Cliques are part of middle school life. Regardless of how well-meaning we may be as adults, we cannot eliminate them. What we can do is use the phenomenon of cliques among middlers to develop a more compassionate, caring, Christlike attitude in these developing individuals.

References

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