

WHEN TEENS GET **LEFT OUT** OF FRIENDSHIP GROUPS



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Many teenagers I work with feel hurt or sad about being excluded from friendship groups.

Usually one or more of their “friends” has done or said something to leave them feeling left out or not accepted.

This could be someone avoiding eye contact, ignoring them in conversation, not asking them to an event/gathering or not responding to invitations/communication. This kind of exclusion can be mild (e.g. over the short term by one person only) or severe (long term and done by many).

There are some tricky issues about exclusion. **First, many teens find it hard to admit that it has happened.** It is hard for adults to admit they would like to be more “liked” by someone, let alone for an adolescent for whom social life is usually much more important. Instead of admitting to feeling hurt per se, teens will often talk about being annoyed or frustrated with someone. At home, they often will act in an irritable or aggressive way rather than in a sad way. Sometimes, it is only after specific and repeated questioning that details of feeling excluded or left out emerge.

Another tricky issue is trying to determine when excluding someone becomes bullying. **Obviously teenagers must be allowed to choose their own friends and shouldn't be forced to be friends with any particular person.** However, it is reasonable to expect teenagers to be kind to others and this means avoiding excluding people in obvious or repeated ways. It is not easy to decide what behaviours teens “choosing their own friends” and what are bullying behaviours.

Yet another problem with exclusion is that it is often well hidden from adults. Given that we don't often know the kinds of friendship behaviour that is normal for a particular group of teenagers, it is easy for teens to ensure we don't know when exclusion is occurring. For example, unless we know that 99% of teens in a given year level are facebook friends with a particular person, we won't know that this same person refusing to be facebook friends with our daughter is particularly hurtful for her.



Unfortunately being excluded happens to most teenagers at some point, particularly girls. **In the cut throat world of teen popularity, there always has to be someone who is on the “outer circle”.**

However, even though it is inevitable, it is also often a very painful process. We as adults are in a different life phase and don't have the same level of investment and pride in our social life. Teens don't have careers to feel good about, they don't have kids to care about and be proud of, they aren't in relationships that they can feel have security and pride in – for all of these reasons and more, for many teenagers much of their self worth relies heavily on whether they are accepted by their peers. Being excluded therefore threatens the basis of self-esteem.

How do we support young people through exclusion? The most important strategy is to sympathise, love and care for young people as they endure this very normal experience. This means we must know when it is happening, which also means we need to regularly ask teenagers about their friendship groups and how they are feeling about the relationships with their friends. We need to hear the deeper pain which is often behind their comments about “annoying” people, and be ready to compassionately ask questions when we notice irritable behaviour.

If teenagers know they have adults around them who care that they are hurting, then they often can find resources within themselves to deal with it. Of course, at times we need to go further and give specific strategies to young people, but before we give any advice or take any other action, the first step must be to simply listen and care.

Part of listening and caring is to make sure we don't minimise their distress. It is sad and unpleasant to witness teenagers who are upset. When we feel this way means it is tempting to "jolly" the teenager out of their hurt, by brusquely saying things like "you'll be okay", "cheer up", "it's a fact of life" or other similar statements, or being impatient with their sadness or ignoring it altogether. Unfortunately when we do this, teens can interpret it as us not caring about them. And it also sends a subconscious message to the teenager along the lines of "it's not okay to be upset". Instead, we need to be appropriately caring and sympathetic, and allow the teenager to feel better in their own time, not in ours.

Another way to support teens through exclusion is to avoid jumping in with advice too quickly. As adults, we might immediately be able to see that there are some things the teenager can do to respond to the exclusion, to make them more friends, or to strengthen their friendships. The trouble with giving advice too quickly is at least twofold. First, it can mean we are not listening for long enough and carefully enough, which means the teen is not supported well. Second, it deprives the teenager of a chance to problem solve themselves. A better approach can be to ask the teenager questions about how they want to respond, what they think works best, what they think might make things worse and so on.

It is not that advice isn't often helpful, just that it is often given too quickly. Once a teenager feels supported and cared about, and we have asked them questions about how they think they want to do, it can then be helpful to talk through ideas about how to respond to being excluded.

Another way to support teens deal with exclusion over time is to help them form more than one group of friends. Facilitating positive teenage friendships is an important job for those of us who work with teens, and an ongoing one. It should not be left to chance. We know that teens need good friends, and sometimes adults need to "step in" to help the teen have the best chance of that happening. This means encouraging and facilitating outings, conversations, activities and communication with several sets of peer groups, at school, work, sport, through family connections and so on. This is a process which takes time, and we can't "find friends" for the teenager, particularly overnight, but it should be a priority for us

to help the teenager have consistent opportunities for positive social contact.

Talk through how best to respond to exclusion at the time the exclusion is happening. It can be useful to have a conversation with teenagers about their response options when they are excluded. This means finding out exactly what is said/not said, done/not done and to brainstorm with them what they might best do. As a rule of thumb, it is best for teenagers to "act" in cheerful, positive, nonchalant ways around excluding peers. Acting angrily, or upset in response to exclusion can make it harder for the teenager to reconnect with those young people later, or even if this isn't going to happen, can lead to the teenager feeling disempowered by the experience. This doesn't mean teenagers should deny their hurt in front of their closest friends or family (or themselves) but it does mean acting confidently and cheerfully around most of their peers, most of the time.

“ Acting angrily, or upset in response to exclusion can make it harder for the teenager to reconnect... ”

If possible, cut down at least some of the things that trigger the hurt. Spending time on facebook is something most teenagers do – and many do it excessively. Being excluded can make it happen more frequently. This makes sense, as excluded teens as searching for evidence that they might be being accepted again, or at the least they want to know what is being said/not said about them. We should be compassionate towards a teenagers' desire to check facebook, whilst still putting in place some boundaries about this.

Watch out for excessive rumination or talking about the pain and try to add in something more positive. Whilst I have talked about making sure we allow the teenager to feel sad, and to not "hurry up" their experience of pain, it is also possible for teenagers to spend too long thinking about their peer group. At these times, it can be helpful to help the teenager have something else to interfere with their worrying – physical activities (eg sport/going to the gym), other hobbies, time with other groups of friends, outings with families, television and so on are all good activities to help the teenager distract themselves from their pain while going through this experience.

Get extra help if the teenager seems significantly upset over a period of time. Exclusion is a normal experience for teens, but it can be a very distressing time. We shouldn't underestimate the pain teens can feel over something that might seem trivial to us. If the teenager seems upset over several days or weeks, it is a good idea to seek advice from a GP, school counsellor or a psychologist.

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<http://developingminds.net.au/teens-being-left-out>