



Essay

Popularity: An Outsider's View

Stephanie Grant lives in Oakton, Virginia, and wrote this essay as a ninth-grader at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria. She is a member of the school varsity softball team and plays alto sax in the marching band. Sometimes in her free time, she states, she takes a flying lesson in preparation for her pilot's license.

"Why do people want to be popular?" I ask myself, staring at my bedroom ceiling. Why do the grades someone receives have such a big influence over whether people like them or not? Why is it that because I'm smart, I'm considered a nerd and consequently I have had trouble making friends? Sitting there trying to answer these questions, a voice keeps saying, deep down inside me, "That's just the way it is." Over and over and over again.

It all started when I was five years old. Back in my old school I had many friends, people I had known as long as I could remember. I joined the kindergarten class at my new school during the fourth quarter. In addition to not knowing anyone, I was a year younger than everyone in the class. The kids in my class that year didn't really bother with me during the last three months of school. In fact, the only time they ever said anything to me was when a few got mad because I had taken a seat at "their" snack table one day. They told me that I couldn't sit with them because I wasn't their friend. I silently wondered why they wouldn't want me as a friend because they didn't even know me. At the time, I thought it was acceptable for kids to ignore the newcomer. After all, I wouldn't have wanted some newcomer stealing my friends away from me, either.

My experiences with those people didn't end there. By fifth grade the very same kids that snubbed me in kindergarten were considered to be

popular by the majority of our class. This meant that most, but not all, the fifth-grade students wanted to be their friends. Those who didn't want to be their friend still knew better than to publicly go against the wishes of anyone who was thought of as popular. If they did, they'd be considered "different," which also meant unlikable to most of my classmates. This became a problem because that year the zoning districts for our schools were changed, and I found myself going to a newly built school. Again it was my turn to be the new kid because I had left all of my friends back at the old school. This time around, though, my experience with the popular crowd was something that I'll never forget.

The first couple weeks at my new school were very routine, or as routine as things can be at a new school. I

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hadn't made friends with any of my new classmates yet. I had found a couple of them to be pretty nice during the first few weeks of school. The two people I was a little shy about meeting in my class were absolutely the most popular girls in my whole grade. In addition to being the most popular girls in the grade, they were also best friends, and they were learning how to manipulate others with their popularity.

One day in October, while my class was standing in line waiting to go outside for recess, the two girls were standing next to me. They were talking about the usual things that were on the mind of an eleven-year-old at the

time.

"School's such a pain. I got a C on the math test from last week," said one girl.

The other replied, "Oh, I know. It was so unfair. Hey, when is our next soccer game?"

"Next Saturday, like usual. Hey, did you see that ugly outfit on Michelle today? It was so ugly. It seemed to suit her looks, though."

This conversation was carried on for several minutes, and I gradually became less and less interested in it. I began to ask myself why they had the power to determine who should have friends and who shouldn't. While I was searching in my mind for a rational answer, one of the pair turned to me and asked me what grade I had received on the latest math test.

I reluctantly replied, "An A."

While they gawked at my response, the same girl said to me, "Hey, did you know you're fat?"

The other girl laughed at this comment and others joined in; they were all laughing at her statement. I stood there dumbfounded. I didn't know how to respond to such a needlessly cruel comment. As I thought over what the girl had just asked me, I realized they had started talking about who they thought of as nerds and who should be added to the category. My response to her question about the grade had sealed my fate for the next two years of school.

That day I had been added to the popular person's category of geeks. The laughter continued around me as my self-confidence turned to slush and melted away on the floor beneath their mocking gazes. My thoughts then turned to, "What did I do to them to deserve such a comment? Did I wear something that looks bad today, like Michelle did?" Eventually I started thinking that I might truly be fat, like they had said.

My world changed overnight as I realized that from that day on I would never be really good friends with anyone who was friends with the two girls or anyone who wanted to be friends with them. I had been deemed "unlikable" by those girls, and because of their popularity, I would have very few friends for the rest of fifth grade.

That year I ended up with two friends—a girl and a boy. The boy was smarter than I and was ridiculed just as much as I was that year. "Oh, look,"

they'd say, "it's the dork and his girlfriend." They didn't understand the truth: he was one of the few people who would listen to me. The three of us and a few others were thought of as the brains in our class. We were the first done with all of our work, and we were always the high scorers on the tests. I suppose that information alone was enough to classify us as outcasts. I never understood why they didn't want to be our friends. What they did to me was make me think there really *was* something wrong with me. What other reason did they have for not liking me? They didn't take the time to get to know me, just like in kindergarten.

It still bothers me when I look back on it all, like now while I'm lying in my bed trying to go to sleep. For the most part, I believe I have grown as a person after my experiences with those

people. My self-confidence improved greatly by the time sixth grade had started. By then I realized that those people had no reason to say what they did; I was not fat, and there's nothing bad about being smart. I learned what really mattered was what I thought of myself. When I switched schools again at the beginning of seventh grade, I grew even more because there was a whole new group of people and I could have a fresh new start with them. I made new friends around whom I could act like myself, without feeling like an outcast. Everything has been improving since then because high school is even better than middle school—I have even better friends.

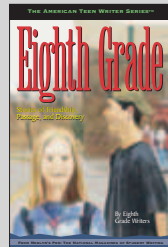
The thing that scares me about how popularity influences people is how cruel it can make them be toward others. People don't seem to think about whom they might be hurting with their

words, or how the damage they do might never be erased. The other thing that bothers me is how one day I sat next to one of the two popular girls who gave me such a hard time in fifth grade, and she didn't even recognize me. Though what she did took place four years ago, I still remember her clearly because of it. I find it interesting that I let her change my life so much, and all because of one little laugh. She doesn't realize the reason I am proud of who I am today is because of something she did to me so long ago. She has no clue how much pain she caused me when she laughed at what her friend said to me. She has no idea that because she was popular and the influence she had over people was so great, that by laughing, she made my fifth-grade year in elementary school a year I now want to forget. ★

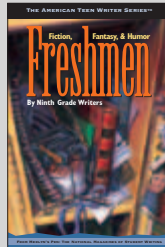
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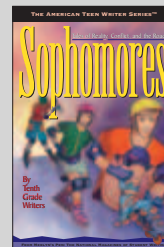
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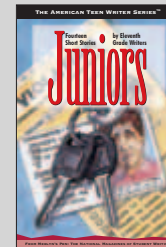
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