

Is Your Teen on the Fringe?

Signs that your child is feeling left out and how you can help.

Jeremy comes home from school and spends the rest of the afternoon and evening behind a closed bedroom door. Tasha seems down lately, ignoring her long-time friends and spending more and more time alone.

Maybe you've noticed similar behavior in your own teen. Child development experts say that these years are the second most significant period of change in the human lifespan. And a major shift in friendships is almost always part of the package.

Most young teens find that their childhood friendships—often based on proximity ("you're my friend because you live near me")—aren't sustainable in the new, larger world of adolescence. Friendships begin to be formed based on affinity ("you're my friend because we like the same things").

The result is often teens on the fringe: students who feel like they don't fit in. They move away from the comfort of childhood friendships with hopes of joining ranks with a difficult-to-penetrate new circle of friends (cheerleaders, football team, popular kids). This can leave kids in limbo, lacking significant friendships and feeling a deep sense of loneliness. Those feelings can leave kids vulnerable to high-risk behavior, such as drug use, sexual activity, or petty crime, which they perceive as their ticket to acceptance.

To find out if your child is moving toward the fringe, watch for these telltale signs:

Distancing from childhood friends. This can be a healthy process—so don't jump to conclusions. But be aware that this social shift can result in a move to the fringe, especially if the old friends aren't eventually replaced by new, healthy friendships.

Quantity time spent alone. This is especially common in young teen boys: their social skills are often not developed, and it's emotionally easier to be a loner than to bushwhack into new friendships. If your child seems content to be alone, there's probably no need for concern. But if he seems to resent his isolation, take steps to help him branch out .

Depression. I'm not necessarily referring to the clinical types of depression. All young teens get moody and "down" at times, but take notice if this seems to be a regular mood.

Popularity longings. It's certainly not uncommon for teens to want to be popular (it's not uncommon for adults either!). But watch for regular verbalizations and attempts at breaking into popular cliques.

by Mark Oestreicher

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For additional help and insight, Pastor Jim D. has free copies of a now out of print book available:

Family Rules: Raising Responsible Children without Yelling or Nagging
by Dr. Kenneth Kaye Ph.D. 2nd edition © 1990.