

The Anatomy of a Popular Girl

She's been stereotyped in movies, on television, in books and in our minds: The popular girl is a gorgeous homecoming queen with the hottest boyfriend, nicest clothes and coolest car. Everyone loves her...or loves to hate her. "I think we've all put down the popular girls at one time or another," says Kimberly Kirberger, co-author of the *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* series (Health Communications, 1997). "Generally, the people who don't fit in with cliques [insult others] to make themselves feel better."

That's probably because a lot of girls crave that popular social status around the time they hit puberty. Why? "Because at that age, people are looking for acceptance from a peer group, away from their family," explains L. Kris Gowen, Ph.D., producer of Teensforum.com. "And, being popular is particularly important for girls because they're taught that to be successful, they need to be liked by others, while guys are taught that it's more important to be independent."

But don't think being voted "Most Popular" in the senior yearbook is a shortcut to happiness. "Your problems don't go away just because you're popular," says Gowen. Actually, being on your high school's "Most Likely" list can often come with its own set of problems. "Popular girls may feel more pressured into drinking and drugs and sex because that's what they're frequently expected to do," says Gowen. Then add to that the envy and spite such a coveted position can breed in others and "since she has the things everyone else wants, she actually ends up being disliked," says Gowen.

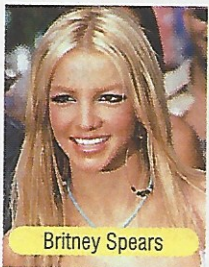
Amidst all of this pressure and seeming perfection, do we even know who Miss Popular really is? "Most groups of teenagers are all going through the same things, and everybody feels self-conscious at that age," says Kirberger. So, if you just think of that popular girl as a living, breathing person—like the girls we talked to here—you might discover that we're all just people trying to make it through life the best we can.

Haven't we all, at some point, dreamed of being the most popular girl in school? The girl who never has a bad hair day, gets the best grades and the cutest guy? We worship her, envy her or, perhaps, even hate her. But who is she? Is she worth all of this attention? The truth is, she's probably just like any other girl—even you.

By Alexa Joy Sherman

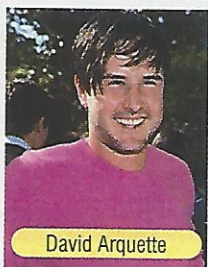
Celeb Social Ladder

Here's a big shocker: The most popular people in the news today were generally pretty popular way back when too. Here's how some Hollywood hotshots rated in high school.



Britney Spears

"9th Grade Beauty"



David Arquette

"Most Artistic"



Lauryn Hill

Homecoming Queen



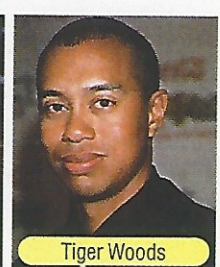
Ryan Phillippe

"Best Smile"



Tori Amos

"Most Talented," "Best All-Around"

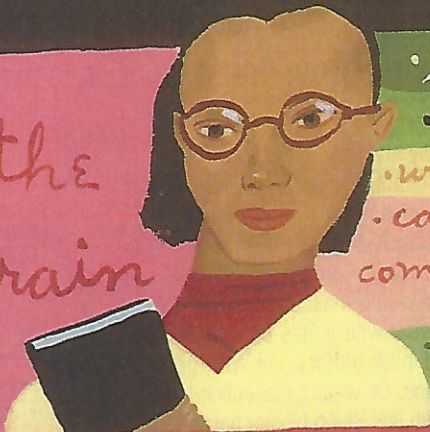


Tiger Woods

"Most Likely to Succeed"

Pictures of Popularity

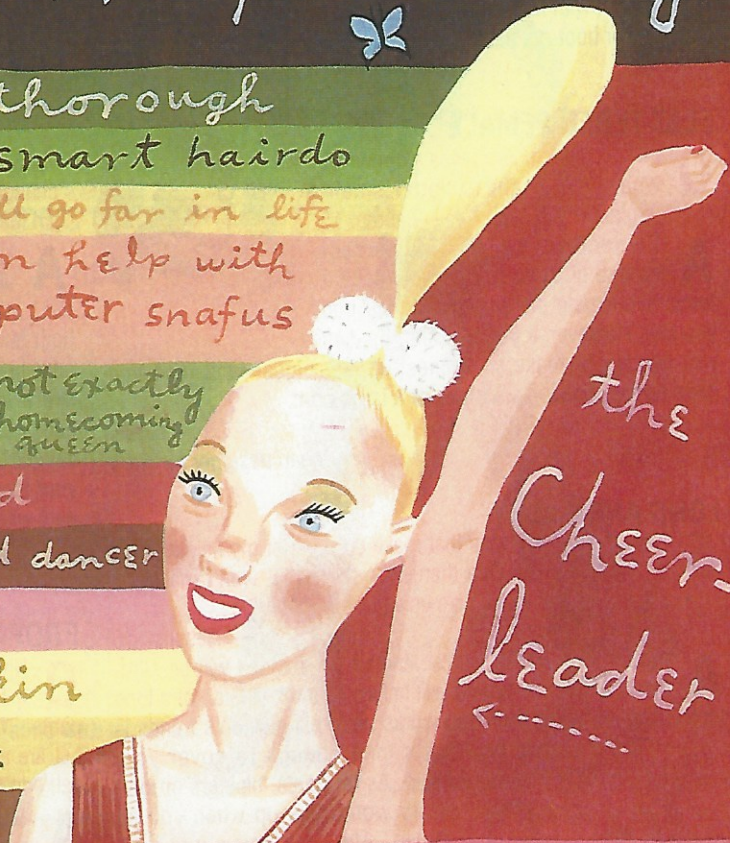
The Brain



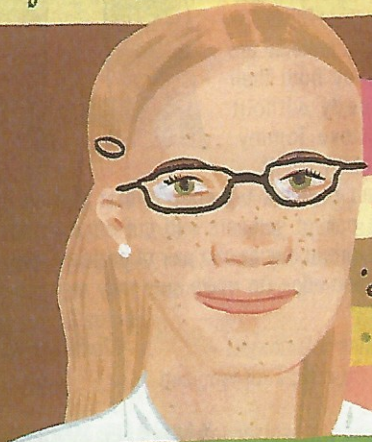
- thorough
- smart hairdo
- will go far in life
- can help with computer snafus
- not exactly homecoming queen

- cool barrettes and hair twisties
- good dancer
- annoyingly perky
- friendly
- good skin
- girls love to hate her.

the Cheerleader



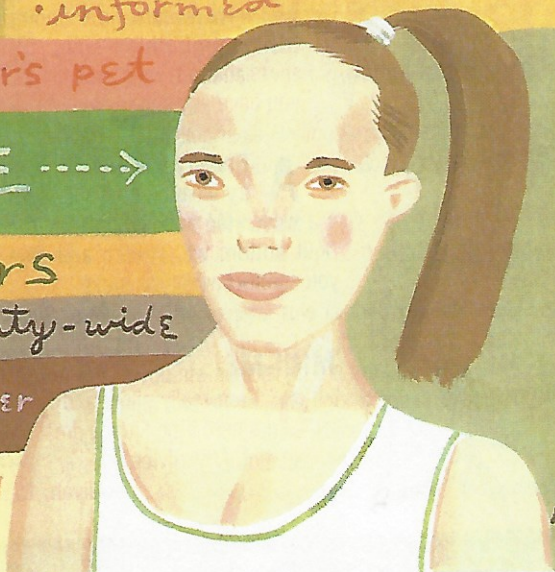
Student Council Prez



- Active in her community
- Least likely to be voted "most beautiful"
- organized
- informed
- teacher's pet

the Jock - ette ---->

- cool sneakers
- shiny hair
- known county-wide
- no jell-o butt
- boys dig her
- from afar, can be mistaken for a guy



BORDA

Rebecca Woolf, 19

Encinitas, CA

In grade school, I was anything *but* popular. I was quiet and awkward with big buckteeth. I hung with the cool kids, but I was just there to be pushed around. They'd go to birthday parties and not invite me or ditch me at lunch, and I'd go into the bathroom and cry. I felt like the weirdo, the outcast. I wasn't desperate to be popular; I just wanted to be accepted.

Then, in junior high, I grew into myself. I became more attractive, boisterous and confident, and suddenly I was the leader. All the guys who once called me names like "flat-as-a-board Becca" were now interested in me. It didn't happen overnight, but since I had always felt mature for my age, I related to people who tried to be older, who would drink on Friday nights and hang out with older boys. At the time, that seemed cool and fun.

By high school, the people outside of our group hated me and my friends, but we didn't care. We were on the soccer team and in student government, and people knew who we were. Some of my friends were really cruel, picking on everyone. I actually forgot how it felt to be the outcast. At times, I was frustrated with myself, knowing I could have stood up for someone but didn't.

We got really good at being cheesy and fake: I'm happy, I'm popular, I get good grades, boys like me. We didn't even admit to ourselves when things went wrong. No one could see it, but we were completely dysfunctional. We were all confused, depressed and insecure—pretty much how every teenager feels, regardless of her social status.

We actually created an image that was impossible to maintain. Everyone knows who you are, so anything you do is completely exploited. Since I dated older guys, people started crazy rumors, toilet-papered my house and wrote "slut" on my garage. It was hard to hear the lies, but it also taught me that it's essential to be honest about who you are.

Gradually, I got tired of hiding everything. I realized how ridiculous trying to keep up the image was. I didn't say, "I hate you, it's over, goodbye,"



to my friends, but I started hanging out with other people. Suddenly, it didn't matter who saw me with someone outside of my clique.

The funny thing is, after all that, I was elected homecoming queen. I had turned into a popular cliché. It was probably my proudest and most embarrassing moment. When my mom's friends came up to me and said, "This is the proudest moment of your life!" I thought: No, I don't want to be labeled because I wore a crown one night. I was a writer and was about to have one of my stories published—to me, that was something to be proud of.

I think the only reason I was ever considered popular is because other people cared about what I was doing and gave me that power. Honestly, deep down, I thought the people outside of the clique were more interesting. I was always kind of different, even when I was popular.

Aviva Mitchell, 17

O'Fallon, IL

I go to a small, Christian school, where being popular isn't a big deal. I was pretty oblivious to the whole idea of popularity until about seventh grade, when I started thinking that I needed to be everyone's friend.

But I didn't strive to be popular. I didn't worry about what looked good. I just focused on my relationships with my parents and God and tried to get good grades. As time went on, people would tell me, "You're popular." I didn't get it, but soon I realized that at my

school, the people who are strong within themselves are popular, and that's what I was.

I know I really don't fit the popular stereotype. People think that you have to be beautiful to be popular, but when I go to the mall, people don't go, "Oh, my gosh! She's hot!" I don't get asked out a lot. I've only had one relationship. Sometimes I question how I became so popular if I'm not pretty and I don't have a boyfriend.

There are people who think I'm a snob, which might fit the stereotype, but I don't think it's because I'm popular—it's probably because I'm so serious. I do question myself, but if I can't find any wrong there, I'll give people who criticize me the benefit of the doubt and realize that they don't know me well.

I also don't try to live up to other people's expectations based on my social status. I won't be at every party just because someone thinks I should. However, *I will* set a good example for other students—not because I'm expected to, but because it's right.

There are people in my senior class who do fit the popular stereotype. They go to every party and think it's cool to drink. I know they could be just as popular if they didn't pretend to be so worldly. A couple of them shove seventh-graders around, and everyone laughs. Since I stand up to that, the cruel people look at me like I'm a dork. But everyone else thinks, "You're popular; I'm going to do that too. For the most part, I just pray about how



I can use this power to make somebody else better.

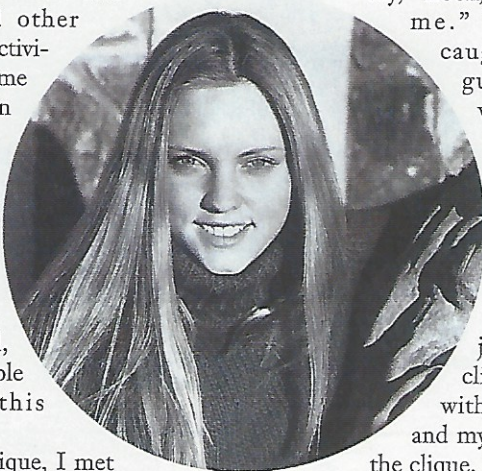
It might seem like I have a perfect life because of my social status, but I have the same problems as anyone. It's actually not so easy being popular, because I'm watched very closely. If I were to slip, everyone would know. Every popular person knows that they have the same problems as anyone else. I'm no better or worse, and I shouldn't be judged because of my popularity. It's important to get to know each person individually, because we're really no different.

Ashley Fisher, 15
Pacific Palisades, CA

Growing up, I was always pretty happy. I was never an outcast or socially distraught. In middle school, people started dividing into cliques, but since I've always been my own person, I wasn't necessarily part of any one group. I just had a lot of friends and pretty much knew everyone.

Then, when I got to high school, I became friends with some older people through dance and volleyball and other extracurricular activities. Guys gave me more attention and, suddenly, I had a whole new group of friends. It didn't really matter what grade you were in—all of the social, well-known people hung out in this group.

Within this clique, I met people who were really concerned with popularity. I guess some people aren't very comfortable with themselves, so to know that people want to be like them or know them boosts their self-confidence. A lot of people in the clique weren't very nice; they would be cruel to other students or get involved in drugs and alcohol just to be popular. I didn't like their morals, their values or how they viewed people. As I became more confident, I would call them on their behavior. I even got into a couple of fights when they would refer to someone as a "dork" or



backstab people within the clique.

But I also met a lot of nice people who just wanted to be social. I wasn't driven to be popular, and I wasn't cruel. I was just a nice person who liked to go to parties and meet new people. My best friends within the group had the same qualities I did, and we developed a really strong bond.

The thing is that people outside of the group stereotyped all of us. Even the friends I'd had in middle school started to stereotype me. They would say, "She's one of them. She thinks she's better than us." In reality, they didn't even know my new friends. I acknowledged to them that I didn't hang out with them as much, but that was because we all went our separate ways.

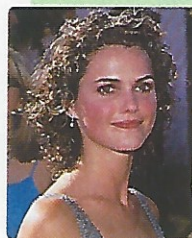
Other people stereotyped me, too, without even knowing me. At first, it felt awful. I didn't know why people were judging me so harshly. Then I realized that it was their loss. If someone said something really horrible about me, I would confront them.

I didn't fight with them; I would just say, "Look, you don't know me." That kind of caught them off guard, and they would end up apologizing and saying, "I guess I was wrong."

Now I'm pretty much friends with everyone, not just the popular clique. I hang out with my old friends and my close friends in the clique. Honestly, I don't think people should even use the word popular. There are so many people who don't necessarily fall into that category who are interesting and nice. They're no different from the popular people. People have to love themselves for who they are and not for what group they're in. In a few years, our high school social status isn't going to matter. I'm sure a lot of people think they would feel better about themselves if they were accepted into a popular clique, but really it's just another group of people, and most of them are just as dorky as anyone else.

The Outsiders

Surprise! Not all stars have always had such a stellar social life. Here are some celebrities who didn't find their popularity until after school.



Keri Russell

"I felt very alienated. I didn't have a clique of friends or a boyfriend."



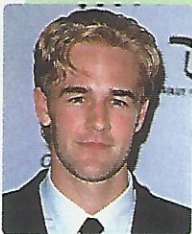
Courteney Cox

"I was never in the cool group."



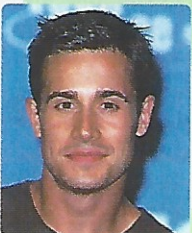
Alicia Silverstone

"I was the class nerd... I didn't date."



James Van Der Beek

"I never really fit in... I was as big a dork as Dawson."



Freddie Prinze Jr.

"I was a loser."



Breckin Meyer

"I ate lunch in my car by myself every day."