



## THE POPULARITY QUESTION

JANET CLEMENTS

**At some point**, kids eventually think about what they can do to be more popular. Along with this, they sometimes face the challenges and pressures of conforming to group norms in order to be accepted. As a parent of a teenager, I've found that rather than feeling totally helpless in offering advice in these kinds of situations, I can use prayer to help break through the popularity issue and promote a deeper sense of value and friendship.

Recently, my husband and I got a call from our son, who boards at a prep school in New England. He mentioned that he'd seen a website displaying pictures of several of his classmates attending an off-campus weekend drinking party. He also was lamenting the fact that many of the popular kids drank and were promiscuous. He wondered if adhering to his own standards was worth the impact it might be having on his social life.

His father and I pointed out that qualities of a good friend, such as integrity and sincerity, were the foundation for lasting relationships, and that following what one considers to be good principles can never result in a loss or limitation of true friendship. Proactively seeing the good in others and bringing it out was a much more powerful approach to making friends than conforming to the herd mentality and simply trying to fit in. We also offered that one way to handle the anxiety about our son's place in the social pecking order was to see everyone as worthy of his friendship, not just those who, for the moment, seemed to be popular. In fact, one definition I later found of *popular* was "beloved." We are all beloved, since God's love is all-inclusive. Expressing His love to everyone else is natural.

Although we felt good about our conversation that night, somehow we didn't think it was ringing true in our son's heart. So before going to sleep, we spent some time praying that God would speak to him in a way that he would understand. We knew God was parenting him and providing everything he needed for his well-being. Our prayers helped us see more clearly that this God, who is Spirit, gathers His children in a purposeful, natural way that results in blessings all around. That night, we completely trusted that God was communicating to our son in the spirit of understanding.

The next evening, our son called again, excited about the day's events. He shared how he'd seen a guy in his dorm going to take a shower around 9:15 in the morning. Our son wondered why he was still in the dorm, since he knew that the final chemistry exam for this guy's class had already started. He went out of his way to ask him about it. Our son said the boy had been just waiting around, thinking this exam was at 11, and that he frantically rushed to get dressed, grabbed his pencils, and sprinted over to the exam building. Later that day, he ran up to our son to tell him that he'd been able to finish his exam with enough time. "You saved my life!" was how he put it.

That experience really struck home with our son. It turned out to be the exact message he needed at that moment — an indication of how friendships and relationships can form. He could clearly see how being thoughtful toward others is an honest, pure way of demonstrating popularity. After all, everyone likes to be treated with kindness and respect. Our son explained that he understood now that having friends and being popular was not really about being pressured to drink or smoke or have sex, but more about having a genuine interest in others. He was seeing something more clearly that Mary Baker Eddy once expressed this way: "To love, and to be loved, one must do good to others" (*Miscellaneous Writings Writings 1883–1896*, [p. 127](#)).

We were happy to see our son feeling assured. And we ourselves felt strengthened in understanding an important spiritual fact even better — that as children of God, each of us is in our right place, not somewhere on a ladder we need to climb, with some people above us

and others below. Right now, we're all at the pinnacle, in Love's embrace. As we reach out to others with the pure motive of lifting relationships through this higher view, we can expect to make more and better friends. That's true popularity. css

## **About the author**

Janet Clements is the mother of three children and a Christian Science practitioner. She recently moved from Boston to Chicago.