



**Chapter 3:  
Healthy  
Relationships**

# FITTING IN

## When you Feel you Don't Belong

**Kids Help Phone**

1-800-668-6868

**Youth in BC Live Chat:**

[www.youthinbc.com](http://www.youthinbc.com)

**Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada**

Make some new friends!

[www.bgccan.com](http://www.bgccan.com)

**Fraser Valley Youth Society**

Support for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transexual Youth

[www.fraseryouth.com](http://www.fraseryouth.com)

**PFLAG Canada**

Support for anyone with questions about sexual orientation or gender identity.

[www.pflagcanada.ca](http://www.pflagcanada.ca)

**VOCABULARY:**

**Discrimination:** unfair treatment of a person or group on the basis of prejudice

**Popularity:** the quality of being widely admired, accepted or sought after.

**Outsider:** someone who is excluded from or is not a member of a particular group.

**Isolation:** A feeling of being disliked or alone.

**Bully:** To treat in an overbearing or intimidating manner.



At some point or another, each and every one of us will find ourselves in a situation where we don't fit in. It might be a job, a friend's family reunion, or a parent's dinner party. One common place where thousands of kids feel they don't fit in is high school. The teenage years are our formative years, when we learn about close friendships, romantic relationships, determine who we are, what we believe in, and where we want to go in life. It can be tough to find our place in the world when we get conflicting messages on how we should talk, dress, do, or act.

There are many ways we might feel different from our peers. From race, weight, sexual orientation, (perceived) attractiveness, socioeconomic status, or hobbies, some of us may find ourselves on the sidelines wondering how to be part of the social groups around us. Sometimes we might be bullied for being different, but we don't necessarily have to be teased or bullied to feel unhappy. Being rejected, ignored, or left out by our peers can be just as painful, if not more. Teachers and other well-meaning types might step in when they witness bullying, but not when they simply see a kid sitting on the sidelines, especially if that child masks their hurt and appears indifferent to being left out.

Kids who experience social rejection don't have it easy. Some people report being rejected in high school as the most traumatic experience of their lives. Socially rejected teens likely have low self-esteem, suffer from depression, drop out of school, and even consider suicide. It is easy to say "people will like you no matter what you wear or how you act" or "what your classmates think about you doesn't matter" but realistically, we all know that's not true. We are social beings, and wanting to fit in and be accepted is human nature. It should be noted that our popularity in high school doesn't always influence how popular or successful we will be later in life. To give some famous examples, Jessica Alba was tormented in high school for being of mixed

One third of high-school adolescents report experiencing peer rejection.

race, Madonna didn't fit in with her peers, Rosario Dawson was teased for her looks, and even Chad Michael Murray said he had no friends. **Obviously, high school popularity doesn't dictate the rest of our lives!** Even so, the ability to fit in and get along with our peers is a skill that will help us in our future careers and daily lives. High school is where we learn many skills, including how to get along with people, and we carry these skills off into the real world after graduation. If you are feeling isolated from your peers, rather than view it as an unfair fact of life, try to determine why it is happening. If people say they don't like you for a particular reason (eg. telling you that you are annoying, or too aggressive) look into and consider whether or not it would benefit you to change. You shouldn't change yourself and your values completely just to make a friend, but you may have to compromise, change your bad habits and build your social skills in order to fit in with others. It's like learning a new dance, we all make mistakes until we figure out what works and it all begins to flow smoothly. Don't just accept other people's word. Ask people you trust if they feel the same about you and how you could improve yourself. Remember: Fitting in doesn't have to mean being "popular", it simply means being happy with who you are and having one or two true friends who enjoy your company.



## The Problem with Popularity

Teenagers are not chosen at random to be liked or disliked. Kids who are accepted by their peers have certain characteristics that kids who are rejected by their peers might not have. "Popular" kids are often seen as natural leaders, outgoing, good at communicating their feelings, and better at handling their impulses. However, popularity does not always protect a teen against peer pressure. Teens are usually socially accepted based on the fact that they conform well to standards. Some types of conformity might not be a big deal, like wearing a certain brand of jeans or trying out for a certain sports team or cheerleading squad. Unfortunately, this might also apply to negative behavior, like drug or alcohol use or risky sexual behavior, as well. It's important to realize that doing things just to please others or meet their expectations does not create happiness in the long run. **Whether popular or not, all teens can benefit from learning to stand up for what they believe in, and respecting themselves.**

Often, youths who don't feel accepted or secure might tease or bully other kids to feel more in control or to draw attention to themselves. Bullies can be either popular or unpopular, and other kids often play along or don't stand up to the bully because they are afraid they might become the next target. If you are the victim of bullying, it can be easy to mistakenly assume there is something wrong with you, or that everyone hates you but **Bullying says more about the bully than the bullied, and other kids do realize that even if they don't speak up.** Figure out what makes you a target and talk to your **Big Brother/Big Sister** about how to work on it (eg. do you get easily upset when teased, or do you refuse to speak up for yourself?) In the meantime, talk to a teacher or your parents to figure out a plan to make the bullying stop.

## What if I am Being Teased?

Even if you feel angry, don't let it get out of control. Anger will fuel bullying and might even cause you to get hurt. The most important thing is to stay calm and not let your tormentor know she or he is getting to you. It might help to remember the CALM acronym:

**Cool Down.** Stay calm and in control when you confront your bully.

**Assert Yourself.** Name the behavior that bothers you and ask that it stop, "Stop calling me names, it's mean." Respond to an insult with a non-defensive question like, "Why would you say that?" or "Why would you want to call me that and hurt my feelings?" Tell the bully what you want, for instance, "I want you to leave me alone." One good way to show that bullying doesn't phase you is to ignore it or laugh it off. Bullying makes the bully look silly if they don't get a reaction out of their victim. You might want to reply to a teasing statement by saying "Really? You don't say" or "Thanks for telling me" while looking uninterested.

**Look the Teaser Straight in the Eye.** Look confident, stand tall, and hold your head high.

**Mean it!** Use a firm voice and say what you feel without being insulting back.

You might want to talk to a teacher or principal about the teasing in private so they can keep an eye out for it and pull the tormentor aside for a chat without making it obvious you were the one who "told".

## What if I Get Left Out Because I Have Different Interests?



If everyone was equally good at the exact same things, the world would be a boring place! We each bring special talents to the table, and that is what makes us unique and special. If you are always picked last for a team at lunch or in P.E. class, you might want to consider asking your **Big Brother/Big Sister** to help coach you in that sport, or to practice with you so you can improve. You might also ask a friendly classmate who excels in that sport to show you a few tricks. They'll feel good sharing their knowledge with you, and the other kids will see them being nice to you and will follow their lead. If you find yourself playing activities you aren't interested in just because it feels like the right thing to do, try finding something you enjoy more! You will meet like-minded people while actually having fun. Research shows that adolescents who excel in sports are more well-liked and more accepted by their peers. This doesn't have to be true for only sports. Find out what you are good at, whether it is telling jokes, creating art, or making music, and find an outlet for you to be successful in that area. Your self-esteem will skyrocket, and others will take notice of your talent. If your school doesn't offer the activity you like, ask for permission to start a lunch hour comedy troupe or chess club for example. You can be the expert the other kids go to for help to learn more about it and that will feel good! If you don't like yourself, how can you expect other people to like you? A scrawny guy named Chester was bullied for being different, until he joined a band where his voice mattered. You've probably heard him in Linkin Park! Discover your passion and you will discover yourself.

## What if I Just Don't Get Along with People?

Getting thrown into the halls of middle school or high school can be terrifying, especially since we might not have the necessary social skills to deal with all the new people we are bound to encounter. Withdrawn or shy students may be singled out as potential targets for bullies. Ask your **Big Brother or Big Sister** to role-play various scenarios with you, such as how to make new friends or how to stand up to a bully. If you find other kids don't relate well to you, you might want to ask someone you trust (like a parent or your **Big Brother/Big Sister**) to offer you some constructive feedback on how you come across to people. Do others find you bossy or aggressive or too accommodating? You don't necessarily have something "wrong" with you to be rejected by your peers, but it can be helpful to learn how others see you. Perhaps you are at a different maturity level than the rest of your classmates, and you speak about things they don't know much about. Even if your peers don't share your interests, a fascination with geography for example, you can still be friends with them. Choose subjects that might appeal to a wider range of people your age (such as a movie you just saw) while with your peers and save the talks on earthquakes and climate change for others who share your interests. **Just because you go to school with these people doesn't mean they have to be your only social network.** Join specialized after-school clubs or community groups where you can meet like-minded people who share your interests!



## What if I Get Left Out Because of my Cultural Background or a Disability?

We're all a little afraid of the unknown. Sometimes when we're around people we don't understand or know well, we might ignore those people or tease them because we don't know how else to act. You might ask your teacher to spend some class time discussing different cultures around the world. You could even volunteer to teach the class about your own cultural background! Chances are your teacher will be willing to give you a chance to teach about your country of origin, especially for a social studies class! For a P.E. class you might teach a cultural game; for a home economics class you could teach the other students how to cook (and taste!) one of your family's favorite foods. Be creative! If your classmates understand your differences but are just plain mean, you might want to ask your teacher to introduce a lesson on racism or discrimination, such as learning about how African Americans were discriminated against in the United States, or how Jewish people were discriminated against in the Second World War. Perhaps you could each do a presentation on a famous person who suffered discrimination, like Anne Frank or Rosa Parks, and how they dealt with it. This could also work if you are getting teased or left out for having a mental or physical disability. Teach the class about your disability and explain how they can better include you in activities. Study a famous person that has the same disability to show you aren't alone and can also achieve great things.



### TIPS FOR FITTING IN

- ◆ It's never too late. Even if you eat alone and have zero friends, it doesn't mean you're doomed. If you're just sitting around waiting for the cool kids to "discover" you, you might be watching too many Hollywood movies. Take matters into your own hands and try making friends with a person who seems lonely like you. Once the two of you bond together it will be easier to approach others.
- ◆ You don't have to walk up to a total stranger and ask "Will you be my friend?" That sounds awkward! Try asking for help on a homework question, or ask a question about what the cafeteria is offering for lunch. Most people will return your friendliness, and are more likely to talk to you again after you've done the hard part and made the initial contact!
- ◆ Join clubs and sports teams and volunteer around your campus. The best way to meet your fellow students is to work with them on fun projects. In the meantime you will discover new activities and develop new skills!
- ◆ Stick up for yourself. Don't be aggressive or rude, but don't be a doormat and let people walk all over you. People are drawn to confident people, and respect those that show self-respect.
- ◆ Don't be a hypocrite. Never abandon your current friends to spend time with the popular crowd. If someone asks you to stop being friends with someone else, there is no guarantee they won't ditch you once they are bored with you. Don't forget the old saying: "Make new friends but keep the old. One is silver but the other is gold!"



### Networking/Conversation Starting Tip: Be Curious!

Typically, people like getting the opportunity to talk about themselves and their interests!



## WHAT BIG BROTHERS/BIG SISTERS CAN DO WHEN THEIR LITTLE DOESN'T FIT IN

- ◆ Be Available to Talk and Listen. Try to step out of the situation and make sure any advice you give is appropriate for your Little's situation and isn't overly influenced based on your high school situation—eg. If you were the “popular kid” or the “left out kid”. Try to be impartial.
- ◆ Don't fill your Little's head with unrealistic expectations like “Everyone wants to be your friend!” Not everyone in the world (or his school for that matter) will want to get to know him. Explain that it is better to have one or two true friends who stick by you than a large crowd of acquaintances who don't respect your feelings and individuality.
- ◆ Encourage your Little to Solve the Problem Themselves. It's normal to want to save the day when a child you care about is being left out, but it isn't necessarily the most helpful thing for them. By intervening and coming to the rescue, you are telling your Little you don't trust him or her to deal with things on their own. If your Little is becoming depressed or might become injured and you must take action, do it in a way that will not embarrass your Little or yourself. Talk to your Mentoring Coordinator before taking any major steps. Never encourage violence.
- ◆ Help your Little blend in. While individuality is important, if your Little is being teased for his or her dreadful fashion sense, or outdated haircut, and he or she genuinely wants it changed, ask your Mentoring Coordinator or your Little's parent for permission to accompany your Little on their next shopping trip or to take them to a hairdresser you know and trust. If you think your Little might have a disorder or learning condition that is causing him or her to stick out, suggest to his or her parent or your Mentoring Coordinator that your Little meet with a professional.
- ◆ Teach New Social Skills. Role-play with your Little how to make friends, and how to stick up for himself or herself against bullies or teasers. That's what being a **Big Brother/Big Sister** is all about!

## What if I am Confused About My Sexuality?

GLBTQ Youth (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Questioning) often already feel as if they don't fit in. They may also face teasing and discrimination from peers, confusion about their sexual identity, and even possible rejection from loved ones. Some studies suggest that GLBTQ youth may be more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Refuse to become a statistic—talk to someone you trust today (like your **Big Brother/Big Sister**) or contact one of the resources listed on the first page of this article for support. Groups like the Fraser Valley Youth Society can help with strategies on fitting in, dealing with bullying, and coming out to family and friends.

## Resources

Available from the Fraser Valley Regional Library

### For LITTLES (6-12)

- *Big Bad Wolves at School.* Stephen Krensky. NY: Simon and Schuster, 2007.
- *Joshua T. Bates Takes Charge.* Susan Shreve. NY: Knopf, 1993.
- *The Brand New Kid.* Katie Couric. NY: Doubleday, 2000.
- *The Gold-Threaded Dress.* Carolyn Marsden. MA: Candlewick Press, 2002.
- *Clancy the Courageous Cow.* Lachie Hume. NY: Greenwillow Books, 2007.
- *Clique, Phonies & Other Baloney.* Trevor Romain. Minn: Free Spirit Pub, 1998.

### For TEENS (13-17)

- *Odd Girl Speaks Out: Girls Write about Bullies, Cliques, Popularity, and Jealousy.* Rachel Simmons. Orlando: Harcourt, 2004.
- *Colour Blind (VHS).* Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1999.

### For BIG BROTHERS/BIG SISTERS & PARENTS

- *101 Ways to Deal With Bullying: A Guide for Parents.* Michele Elliot. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997
- *Quirky Kids: Understanding and Helping Your Child Who Doesn't Fit In.* Perri Klass and Eileen Costello. NY: Ballantine Books, 2003.
- *Clique: 8 Steps to Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle.* Charlene C. Gianetti and Margaret Sagarese. NY: Broadway Books, 2001.
- *Teaching Tolerance: Raising Open-Minded, Empathetic Children.* Sara Bullard. NY: Doubleday, 1996.
- *The Bully, The Bullied, and the Bystander.* Barbara Coloroso. Toronto: Harper Collins, 2002.
- *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls.* Rachel Simmons. NY: Harcourt, 2002.
- *You Have to Say I'm Pretty, You're My Mother: How to Help Your Daughter Learn to Love her Body and Herself.* Stephanie Pierson and Phyllis Cohen. NY: Simon and Schuster, 2003.

**Thank you to the following members of our Panel for**

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