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## Popularity contest-ed

*Girls who live to be cool at school have larger lesson to learn, woman says*

The Arizona Republic  
 Sept. 14, 2006 12:00 AM

So painful were the memories of Laura Lawless' high school experience that she vowed to attend her 10th reunion this year only if one of these was true:

- She had married a millionaire.

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- She had become a millionaire.

- She had been named Miss America.

Almost achieving one of the three - Lawless was Miss Arizona 2002 - isn't reason enough to go back to Dominican Academy, a prestigious Catholic prep school for girls in New York City.

"I couldn't have been less 'in' in high school," said the Phoenix lawyer, 27. "I had almost no friends and was universally regarded as the class geek."

Sporting "big, buck teeth," acne and giant glasses with pink frames, Lawless said she tried to fit in, fixing her hair the way other girls did and slouching her socks. Her efforts were mocked by the popular girls who, despite their mandatory school uniforms, were able to exclude those who didn't have the right earrings or shoes.

"Girls can be brutal," she said. "But I learned that one or two good friends are so much more important than 15 to 20 superficial friends."

It's a lesson that not everyone who tried to fit in - and couldn't - learns, said Annie Fox, an author and "Cyberspace Dear Abby." Being unpopular in school can, at best, bring on sad memories, Fox said, or at worst, insecurities and doubts that stand in the way of happiness and success.

"It forces you to suppress who you really are, because you may be too much or not enough of what these other (popular) people think is valuable," said Fox, host of [www.theinsite.org](http://www.theinsite.org), a Web site for teens and young adults. "You go through school with a false you out in front, and you lose that piece for good."

That's especially true for girls, she said.

"Girls are so (much more) advanced socially and emotionally than boys their age," Fox said. "For girls, their group of friends is like their lifeblood. With boys, they bond for specific tasks, and when it's over, it's over."

Girls are more worried about being made fun of - something that doesn't happen to popular people - than they are about anything else, according to a 2003 survey. "Feeling Safe: What Girls Say," a report from the Girl Scout Research Institute, said girls fear being teased more than they do terrorist attacks, natural disasters or being kidnapped.

"I get so many e-mails from girls who have popularity issues, and I worry that they don't quite get that's not what's important," said Meg Cabot, a popular teen author.



**enlarge image**  
 Kaitlyn LaVoy (left) a senior at Apollo High School in Glendale, believes popularity is part of confidence building and should not be reflected by ones clothes, cars or possessions.

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Here's advice from Fox and Cabot on how parents can help:

- Popularity vs. friendship: Help your child understand the difference. Popularity is superficial, short term and dependent upon personal possessions, Fox says, while friendship is lasting, forgiving and a place where kids can be themselves.
- Conversation starters. Watch the movies *Mean Girls* or *Election*. Talk about how the characters' actions and feelings are mirrored in her school.
- Watch, and watch what you say. If your child has abandoned things she used to enjoy or people she used to like, find out why. Say, "I'm noticing you're not doing (blank) anymore, and I know you used to love to," Fox said. "Not, 'Why aren't you . . .'"
- It's not about you. Just because you were popular in school doesn't mean your children need or even want to be.
- Be empathetic and positive. If she's feeling sad because her middle-school friends are no longer around in high school, let her know that's normal, reassuring her that she'll make new friends soon.
- If your child is popular, encourage her to put herself in others' shoes and consider their feelings and to show a genuine interest in others and in what they have to say.

Reach the reporter at [janie. magruder@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:janie_magruder@arizonarepublic.com) or (602) 444-8998.

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### Your comments

As a high school teacher, I agree with the student. It is very serious to kids. Not irrelevant, but important for kids to discern the difference between friendship and the idiotic, materialistic stuff that our society says gives people value.

I was cool in school--by the time I was a senior but who cares? What have you done that will make a difference if you died tonight? Who would come to your funeral? Not those superficial friends and partiers.

And yes, belonging is so important, and the cruelty of some so blatant that shootings do occur. (Terry9178, September 14, 2006 07:08PM)

I don't think this article is that stupid, honestly. If it weren't a real concern, we wouldn't have kids shooting each other over this stuff.

"Popularity" is overrated, anyway. In my experience, "popularity" is based on what clothes you wear, eventually what car you drive...basically, if you have whatever \*thing\* is "in" at the moment. That crap is all totally superficial. Oooh, you're not wearing the cool shoes, therefore you suck. What a load of garbage. What does that matter in the great scheme of things? So what if you did have all the "popular" stuff? When you're dead, you won't have any of that stuff, & if you're a total jerk to people, what do you think they'll remember about you then? That you had the "cool" stuff, or that you were a total a\*shole? Hmm, let me think...

Who wants to be a cookie-cutter sheep, anyway... (Stacey995, September 14, 2006 02:36PM)

Being popular should be the number one concern of every high school age kid. High school should start incorporating classes on how to be a more popular kid at school and best ways to pick on nerds 101. Studies have shown that the most popular kids get laid the most and have the most success in sports. (herb1740, September 14, 2006 11:50AM)

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I think being popular in school is the most important thing and every kid should try to do that. I was so popular and all the girls loved me, now I'm still dating chicks and having fun with my other popular friends from high school. You don't want to be a loser who gets left out all the time! (scottie6795, September 14, 2006 10:14AM)

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This article may seem irrelevant if you are an adult but to a teen who is facing this challenge it is important to know others are going through this. It is also a reminder to parents to talk to your kids and take notice of their lives....lets stop being only concerned of what we think is "stupid" and appreciate what was written...it is not like this was a headline article. True it served a purpose for a select group but none the less it is the truth and it is getting worse in the schools with all the "popularity" rules and demands. (CC4065, September 14, 2006 09:38AM)

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I agree with Scott...This newspaper is full of crap. You guys always miss the real news. You just copy every one else. (Monica9897, September 14, 2006 07:17AM)

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agreed scott, this article was stupid, especially if you are an adult. i do remember how important popularity was when i was a teenager and i can look back and reflect how silly it all was. i was not popular in high school. i was poor, and i lived in a trailer and get this... I WALKED TO SCHOOL!! i attended a high school that was mostly rich kids and wannabe rich kids (Cactus.....Cobras). We had one student that drove a brand new camaro with "Princess" on the Personalized L.P. GAG...SNORT. of course, she was popular. i went on to have the time of my life overseas in the military and am now a healthcare professional. i've had beautiful girlfriends here and abroad. (i wasn't popular with the ladies in H.S.) i have absolutely ZERO regrets about not being popular back then, it just doesn't matter. if you are a teenager reading this please, please, please, do not be ashamed of who you are and be REAL!!! don't succumb to the popularity factor. you are so much better than that!! cheers -CHS alum- (rayos xx (yer0793), September 14, 2006 03:10AM)

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Along with renaming the Az Cardinals stadium the Pink Taco Stadium....I'd have to say this article comes in a close second to being -THE- most stupidest article I have ever read in the Az Republic so far. (scott2339, September 14, 2006 01:46AM)

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