

## **What's the Attraction? A Study of Popularity in Children Under 6**

**By Joyce Tatsch**

The social structure of the classrooms of young children is fascinating; each one of those little people is a unique participant in the social world of the classroom. One of the most intriguing aspects of being a Montessori teacher is observing the interactions and social machinations of children.

In my experience, a driving force in the classroom at the 3-to-6-year level is the “magnet” or “popular” child. This is the one who may wield more control than the teacher. Every class, every year, has one or two of these children, often a boy for other boys to follow and a girl for other girls to follow. Teachers ask themselves, “What makes Leslie so popular? I just don’t get it. Sometimes he/she is so hurtful, but the children keep coming back for more.” It’s not necessarily the child the teacher would select as the nicest, brightest, kindest, or most attractive who is selected by the children as most desirable. So what is it that leads other children to latch onto one child and compete for his/her attentions? Are there common physical, behavioral, or social characteristics that popular children share? Do boys and girls have differing behaviors that make them appealing to others? Do the children’s perceptions of who is popular concur with those of the teachers? These are the questions I have set out to answer. In conducting this study, I had the opportunity to observe children from infancy to 6 years old in their multi-age environments and witness each level of development—from egocentrism to awareness of others to involved and intricate verbal relationships.

I hypothesized that popular or socially competent children do share common behaviors and characteristics which draw other children to them and that these behaviors begin at an early age. However, I believe that peer-admired boys and girls behave differently from each other and possess differing characteristics that make them popular. In this study, a popular child is defined as one who is well liked, whom others follow and choose to be with much of the time.

A review of the literature reveals a wealth of information on various levels of social competence in children from 8 years old through the teens. Much of the popularity-related research of children in the early childhood years was conducted in the 1980s, with a limited number of studies conducted within the past 10 years. Discussions of popularity in younger children are usually found embedded within articles on social competence or in chapters in books about friendship or levels of sociability of children. The preponderance of literature covers negative behaviors or difficulties with socializing.

Popular children are described in *Best Friends, Worst Enemies* as showing “higher levels of sociability and cognitive ability and lower levels of aggression

and withdrawal. Their social skills draw other children to them and other people have more fun with them” (Thompson, Grace, & Cohen, 2001, p. 111). Descriptors associated with popularity include friendly, outgoing, bright, skilled, and attractive (Einon, 1998).

When discussing popular children, researchers often describe them as having a high level of social competence, which has been described as behavior that reflects successful social functioning with peers. Since peer relationships are dyadic and reciprocal, success in social functioning with peers implies that the child is popular and effective in her impact on peers and that the child is sensitive to communications from peers. (Howes, 1987, p. 253)

Popularity doesn't assume a happy, easy life with many friends. “Some popular children do not have reciprocated or best friends” (Howes, 1987, p. 254). Parker and Seal (Ladd, 1999, p. 8) state, “Children who rotated through friendships evidence a blend of positive and negative behaviors, including some that may have attracted (e.g., playful teasing, knowing interesting gossip) and others that may have destabilized their relationships, e.g. bossiness, hitting, disclosing secrets.”

Few studies focus solely on popularity traits in children under 6 years old. The main purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of characteristics and behaviors of popular children. A secondary purpose was to ascertain children's perceptions of popular children and to compare their perceptions with those of the teachers.

## **Method**

### *Subjects*

This study was conducted with children under 6 years old from three Montessori schools in central New Jersey. Montessori schools provide a unique setting in which to study children in a naturalistic environment. Classes are multi-aged; children make their own choices, circulate about the room freely, and interact with others for the majority of the day. Montessori classrooms are a microcosm of our society. They are more reflective of life outside of school than a teacher-directed classroom with children of the same age.

Children attending the schools were from middle- to upper-middle-class socioeconomic groups of primarily Caucasian but also Asian, Hispanic, and African-American ethnicities. The classes selected for study were 1 infant setting (n=15), 6 toddler classes (n=90), and 14 early childhood (age 3-6) classes (n>252<350). There was a mixture of half-day students, full-day students, and those who attended before- and after-school programs.

## Procedure

A three-part questionnaire developed by the author was distributed to the teachers in the three schools at a meeting to explain the purpose of the research project, review the questionnaire, and define popularity. Teachers (n=27) were asked to complete two three-part questionnaires which included an introductory letter and directions for completion of a form for a boy and a form for a girl they deemed popular in their classrooms. A Children's Interview was designed to verify teachers' selections of children and popularity attributes. Each teacher chose from 3 to 8 children of ages 4 to 6 in her class to interview using this child-friendly questionnaire (n=80).

### *Teacher's Questionnaire*

Part 1 consisted of 24 characteristics that my classroom experience led me to believe would be relevant to popular children. Teachers were asked to rate children on a 5-point scale, with opposing behaviors at either end. The order of "positives" and "negatives" was varied, though values were transformed to be consistent for purposes of statistical analysis. Part 1 questions were designed to identify the following characteristics and behaviors of popular children:

- demeanor (e.g., makes sounds [coos, babbles, talks, sings, hums] versus is quiet);
- physicality (e.g., likes to touch peers/keeps hands to self);
- peer interactions (e.g., plays independently/plays with many friends);
- adult interactions (e.g., seeks adult attention/is independent from adult attention);
- work habits (e.g., is disorganized/is organized).

Part 2 consisted of eight multiple-choice questions which described choices such as playground preferences (swings, climber, sandbox) and behaviors (is athletic, is intellectual, is creative), categorized as follows: playground play, group play, age preference, personal attributes, qualities of behavior, peer relations, approach to play, demeanor.

Part 3 consisted of demographic data and a paragraph written by the teacher describing the child selected as popular and reasons for choosing this child. Fully completed questionnaires returned for analysis numbered 45. After reviewing the results, I visited each of the classes at my school to observe the children who had been selected as popular, keeping anecdotal records of observations of the children's behaviors with their peers and teachers, both outdoors and indoors.

## *Children's Interview*

Each interviewed child was asked to select one boy and one girl he or she considered popular and to describe the reasons why (Table 2). The teacher provided the child with a definition of popular. The other questions were included to validate the primary issue of popularity.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### *Part 1 (5-Point Scale)*

A correlation matrix was used to determine significant correlations among the 24 items of Part 1. Sets were determined by examining the relationship of each question to the other 24. The questions with values greater than 0.4 in the matrix were considered to have a statistically significant correlation as they relate to the question being considered. Four very similar clusters were identified. When teachers selected the first characteristic/behavior in a cluster, they tended to select all the correlated traits.

Teachers selected the following attributes most frequently:

1. is even-tempered;
2. avoids conflict;
3. shows excitement when peers are nearby;
4. is sensitive/nurturing to peers;
5. laughs easily;
6. is agile;
7. is comfortable with adults;
8. is independent of adult attention;
9. talks to self/others during play;
10. makes sounds, coos, babbles, talks etc.;
11. chooses friends over work/play;
12. plays with many friends;
13. prefers active workplace;
14. is healthy;
15. attends school regularly.

The first five variables seem to define a socially adept child who is easy to get along with. All the characteristics selected indicate that the popular child enjoys the company of his/her peers and is someone other children want to associate with, would like to emulate, and find comfortable to be with. S/he touches base with many other children, in a sense claiming her/his territory. This child seems to be at ease in any situation and conveys a sense of security to classmates.

The next eight variables (6-13) find the child actively involved with classmates, playing and probably interacting verbally. Indications are that s/he is so involved with peers that there is no need to seek adult attention, although

the child is comfortable to do so, if need be. This child is likely to have a large selection of friends who keep him/her occupied for as long as desired. Verbal fluidity gives an advantage with adults and peers alike: conversing with a verbally talented 3-to-6-year-old is enjoyable and interesting. Verbal skills can enable a child to be entertaining and charming.

As evidenced by the study, health and attendance (14-15) are critical in maintaining the popular child's status. This research seems to affirm that consistency in the bonding process is a major factor in any relationship. Young children depend on one another's presence. In the event of frequent absences, children appear to make a natural selection of another child to fill in the gap.

### *Part 2 (Multiple Choice)*

For the sample as a whole, the most frequent teacher choices within each category were as follows:

- Demeanor: active and energetic;
- Approach to Play: has own ideas of play which others follow;
- Qualities of Behavior: exhibits strong verbal skills;
- Age Preference: plays mostly with children of same age; and
- Group Play: leads play/prefers chase games.

The following eight attributes in Part 2 were selected by teachers most frequently:

1. is active and energetic,
2. is athletic,
3. prefers climber,
4. prefers chase games,
5. is leader in free play/running activities,
6. has own ideas and choices of play which others follow,
7. prefers sandbox,
8. is empathetic,
9. plays mostly with children the same age.

Findings in Part 2 give us a more complete picture of the popular child. The first five variables show us that the popular child tends to be active, energetic, and athletic. Study findings indicate an outdoor behavior pattern similar to the indoor pattern of circulation within the classroom. Playground choices of climber, chase games, and leading in free play/running activities indicate not only movement, but movement with others following.

The study indicates that in all of the activities it is the popular child who is making the choices others follow. This is what teachers see every day on the playground—one child leading a pack of at least three staunch admirers or the sandbox “construction bosses” directing the building of bridges, tunnels, and castles.

We also learn from the study that the popular child is empathetic. S/he takes

the time to listen to others, s/he cares, s/he is comforting. With her/his verbal skills, s/he would know the right words to use in these touchy situations. Teachers can rely on this child to help needy peers, a kind of second assistant in the classroom.

In contrast to the teachers' selection of empathetic as a variable, the popular child is not a mediator. More than verbal skills, mediation requires the ability to work with two or more conflicting views. This may be a skill that develops only later, in the elementary years.

Finally, the statistics show that most of the children in the study prefer to play/work with peers of the same age. This study revealed that most of the popular children were the older ones in the class, negating the choice of Plays mostly with older children, but does recognize that a child's preference is not to play with younger children. I would surmise that these children prefer peers because of a similar level of ability and shared interests.

#### *Gender Differences*

Significant ( $p < .05$ ), gender-related differences identified by responses to Parts 1 and 2 were found.

**Girls.** Considering all the findings for girls, we have a picture of a child who is a good communicator and enjoys the company of her peers. More than likely, she is learning how to deal with her power and can be insensitive and bossy in the process. She can use her strong verbal skills in fantasy play and in being creative or she can create conflict within her sphere. This is part of the process of learning the skills of social competency. Girls' tendency to be verbal will bring forth challenging social situations. Finally, the research shows they tend to look in the mirror more often than boys, perhaps because they care about how they present themselves. Is this our societal influence? Children's remarks about girls support teachers' views. They often commented about appearance and clothing, e.g., she dresses pretty and has shiny hair, she wears cowgirl boots. Children have sometimes been victims of a popular girl's insensitivity and use such descriptors as sometimes she's mean to people, I like her but she does not like me that much. Peers also see that their girlfriends are creative and come up with good ideas and games to play, that they are nice, and that if they could choose, their first choice would be to play with this girl.

**Boys.** The study findings indicate that a popular boy is one who is empathetic. He likes to touch his peers, which might be his method of comforting a friend or interpreted as the opposite of aggressive touching. However, since the data show less emphasis on verbal skills than for girls, it might be his chosen method of soothing friends, perhaps by putting his arm around his buddy. He laughs easily and has a good sense of humor, qualities which may help him avoid conflict. He can use these tools to gloss over or make light of uncomfortable

situations.

In addition, the data show that he tends to be more even-tempered. Perhaps the popular boy is learning to control his negative emotions more than the popular girl, utilizing behaviors which are nonconfrontational in problematic situations. The popular boy has a lot of energy and is athletic, possibly an alternative way of releasing frustrations as opposed to the girl's verbal release. Many comments from classmates describing their favorite boyfriend relate to athleticism: He teaches us to learn and run faster, he's a good basketball player, he's the biggest and he's as old as me.

### *Classroom Observations*

The observations of children at my school revealed that those children selected by teachers as popular had characteristics in common:

- they circulated around the room or playground on a regular basis, simply interacting through conversation or choosing to sit next to or play with a variety of children;
- they were at ease in their environments and comfortable in their interactions with peers, smiling and friendly;
- they used their communication skills in positive ways to relate to peers and solve problems (e.g., "Let me help you," "I like your shoes," "Why are you crying?") vs. children with aggressive or negative interactions or those who simply ignored others in need;
- they were sometimes manipulative in gaining their own choices of preferred games, etc.;
- the girls had medium to long hair.

### *Children's Interview*

Of the 80 children interviewed, 61 selected the same popular boy or girl that his/her teacher selected. Six of the popular children recognized themselves as popular. Most of the children's descriptions of why a child was popular matched those of the teachers.

A popular girl explained her reason for being popular: "...because I like to play with everybody in the school." A popular boy described his popularity, "...because everyone loves me since I'm very nice to everyone." Other children's typical descriptions of popular children included the following:

*Because he brings cool stuff to share and he has cool clothes.*

*I don't know. I like her but she does not like me that much.*

*He teaches us to learn and run faster.*

*She never does anything bad.*

*Because a lot of people play with him, not just his friends.*

*I don't know.*

*He's the biggest and he's as old as me.*

*She dresses pretty and has shiny hair.  
Sometimes she is mean to people.  
Because he wears jeans all the time.  
Because she wears cowgirl boots.  
I like to play with him/her.  
She wears a lot of shiny shirts and stuff.  
He/she is nice.  
He's funny.  
He's a good basketball player.  
She comes up with good games to play.*

### **Implications**

This study has provided information about the characteristics and behaviors of popular children under 6 years old. The study is limited to defining characteristics and behaviors of popular children. It does not promote popularity in children, which is a broad blending of traits and behaviors that create a unique personality.

Teachers can use this valuable information to assist the popular child to apply her talent in a socially beneficial way. For practical purposes, teachers who are able to identify characteristics of popular children should be able to promote development of certain behaviors within the classroom to help all children improve social competency skills. Behaviors such as including several friends in one's play, showing empathy by listening, and being sympathetic to friends can be encouraged through discussion. Teachers can promote verbal skills actively by encouraging children's participation in classroom discussions and increasing personal verbal interaction with shy children.

During class discussions, popular children are often looked to for solutions to problems. Teachers may want to encourage popular children to assist them in conflict resolution, not only to help the children in conflict but to promote mediation skills in the popular child.

Teachers also may be able to help parents to promote social competency in their child in an effective manner, knowing what characteristics are desirable to peers. Most parents are aware of who the popular children are. If they can begin to recognize those qualities which make children so desirable and provide a home atmosphere promoting such attributes, they may increase their own child's social competency. For example, reading and conversation are vital to good verbal skills, while being relaxed and having fun promote a good sense of humor and laughter. Parents should bear in mind that the purpose is not to make their child popular, but to help him/her to have friends and feel comfortable socially.

Parents of popular children often need help; they feel the need to keep all



their child's play dates and attend all the birthday parties. It is flattering to have a popular child in the family, but teachers can help parents with advice on how to curtail the whirlwind of social events. The popular child, like all children, needs time alone to begin to know herself.

With popularity comes a burden of sharing oneself and meeting the demands of many children. Young children may not be ready for this social responsibility; it can be a burden that causes them to become irritable and moody. They need guidance in using their talents in positive ways. Parents and teachers have a responsibility to guide popular children in coping with their position. Popular children are clearly valuable individuals within the classroom.

### **Limitations and Further Studies**

This study, with its isolated focus on popular children, can lead researchers in many directions, including follow-up studies of the same children through the years, studies focusing on infant popularity, and further exploration of other demographic and ethnographic groupings. An interesting extension to validate this study further would be to ask teachers to complete the same questionnaire for children deemed to be outside the popular category. The question also arises, "Will Chris always be popular?" A follow-up study conducted over a period of 5 or more years could yield fascinating results.

### **Summary**

A study was conducted to determine characteristics and behaviors of popular children under age 6 in three Montessori schools in Central New Jersey. Teachers completed a three-part questionnaire for a girl and a boy they deemed popular. Findings revealed that young children do exhibit charismatic behaviors and characteristics, some of which include the following: strong verbal skills, agility, even temper, making the choices and leading in free play, laughing easily, and playing with many friends. The study indicated some significant differences in characteristics exhibited by popular girls and boys. Primarily, girls tend to use their verbal skills in social situations, sometimes leading to power struggles. They want to make a good impression and care about how they look. Findings showed that boys are empathetic and less likely to be verbally confrontational but are more physically active, which could be their way of releasing frustrations.

For verification of teacher's perceptions, children aged 4 to 6 responded to a teacher-implemented questionnaire addressing their perceptions of popular children. Of the 80 children interviewed, 61 gave responses which matched those of their teachers. Their descriptions of attributes of popular children were consistent with those of teachers in almost all instances.

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