

Cool at 13, Adrift at 23

By Jan Hoffman



At 13, they were viewed by classmates with envy, admiration and not a little awe. The girls wore makeup, had boyfriends and went to parties held by older students. The boys boasted about sneaking beers on a Saturday night and swiping things from the local convenience store.

They were cool. They were good-looking. They were so not you.

Whatever happened to them?

“The fast-track kids didn’t turn out O.K.,” said Joseph P. Allen, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia. He is the lead author of a new study, published this month

in the journal *Child Development*, that followed these risk-taking, socially precocious cool kids for a decade. In high school, their social status often plummeted, the study showed, and they began struggling in many ways.

It was their early rush into what Dr. Allen calls pseudomature behavior that set them up for trouble. Now in their early 20s, many of them have had difficulties with intimate relationships, alcohol and marijuana, and even criminal activity. “They are doing more extreme things to try to act cool, bragging about drinking three six-packs on a Saturday night, and their peers are thinking, ‘These kids are not socially competent,’” Dr. Allen said. “They’re still living in their middle-school world.”

As fast-moving middle-schoolers, they were driven by a heightened longing to impress friends. Indeed their brazen behavior did earn them a blaze of popularity. But by high school, their peers had begun to mature, readying themselves to experiment with romance and even mild delinquency. The cool kids’ popularity faded.

B. Bradford Brown, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who writes about adolescent peer relationships and was not involved in the study, said it offered a trove of data. The finding that most surprised him, he said, was that “pseudomature” behavior was an even stronger predictor of problems with alcohol and drugs than levels of drug use in early adolescence. Research on teenagers usually tracks them only through adolescence, Dr. Brown added. But this study, following a diverse group of 184 subjects in Charlottesville, Va., starting at age 13, continued into adulthood at 23.

Researchers took pains to document the rise and fall in social status, periodically interviewing the subjects as well as those who they felt knew them best, usually close friends. About 20 percent of the group fell into the “cool kid” category at the study’s outset.

A constellation of three popularity-seeking behaviors characterized pseudomaturity, Dr. Allen and his colleagues found. These young teenagers sought out friends who were physically attractive; their romances were more numerous, emotionally intense and sexually exploring than those of their peers; and they dabbled in minor delinquency — skipping school, sneaking into movies, vandalism.

As they turned 23, the study found that when compared to their socially slower-moving middle-school

peers, they had a 45 percent greater rate of problems resulting from alcohol and marijuana use and a 40 percent higher level of actual use of those substances. They also had a 22 percent greater rate of adult criminal behavior, from theft to assaults.

Many attributed failed adult romantic relationships to social status: they believed that their lack of cachet was the reason their partners had broken up with them. Those early attempts to act older than they were seemed to have left them socially stunted. When their peers were asked how well these young adults got along with others, the former cool kids' ratings were 24 percent lower than the average young adult.

The researchers grappled with why this cluster of behaviors set young teenagers on a downward spiral. Dr. Allen suggested that while they were chasing popularity, they were missing a critical developmental period. At the same time, other young teenagers were learning about soldering same-gender friendships while engaged in drama-free activities like watching a movie at home together on a Friday night, eating ice cream. Parents should support that behavior and not fret that their young teenagers aren't "popular," he said.

"To be truly mature as an early adolescent means you're able to be a good, loyal friend, supportive, hardworking and responsible," Dr. Allen said. "But that doesn't get a lot of airplay on Monday morning in a ninth-grade homeroom."

Dr. Brown offered another perspective about why the cool kids lost their way. The teenagers who lead the social parade in middle school — determining everyone else's choices in clothes, social media and even notebook colors — have a heavy burden for which they are not emotionally equipped. "So they gravitate towards older kids," he said. And those older teenagers, themselves possibly former cool kids, were dubious role models, he said: "In adolescence, who is open to hanging out with someone three or four years younger? The more deviant kids."

Dr. Allen offered one typical biography from the study. At 14, the boy was popular. He had numerous relationships, kissed more than six girls, flung himself into minor forms of trouble, and surrounded himself with good-looking friends.

By 22, he was a high-school dropout, had many problems associated with drinking, including work absenteeism and arrests for drunken driving. He is unemployed and still prone to minor thefts and vandalism.

But as Dr. Allen emphasized, pseudomaturity suggests a predilection; it is not a firm predictor. A teenage girl from the study initially had a similar profile, with many boyfriends at an early age, attractive friends and a fondness for shoplifting.

Yet by 23, Dr. Allen wrote in an email, "she'd earned her bachelor's degree, had not had any more trouble with criminal behavior, used alcohol only in responsible ways and was in a good job."

Dr. Mitchell J. Prinstein, a professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who studies adolescent social development, said that while teenagers all long to be accepted by their peers studies suggest that parents can reinforce qualities that will help them withstand the pressure to be too cool, too fast.

"Adolescents also appreciate individuality and confidence," he said. "Adolescents who can stick to their own values can still be considered cool, even without doing what the others are doing."