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# Powerful versus Popular

## Definition and Distinction of Social Vocabulary in the Middle School

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Many adults look back at middle school and cringe at the thought of themselves during this period of adolescence—and with good reason. Bad haircuts, awkward yearbook photos, braces, and the first hints of puberty are reasons enough to want to forget these hard years. Bad fashion choices aside, the discomfort we as adults remember runs deeper than these superficialities. While our choices may be embarrassing to look back upon, for the student currently grappling with an emerging identity, the complexities of friendship, and ever fluctuating social standing, middle school is more than embarrassing—it's hard. The social dynamics at play are intense, fluid, inconsistent, confusing, sometimes unfair, and always present in the world of middle school students. Social shifts impact all facets of student life—academic, extracurricular, family, emotional well being, and identity. Efforts to teach and learn are frequently compromised when social upheaval is playing out. After watching thousands of adolescents navigate the seventh and eighth grades both in our classrooms and in the hallways, we have observed identifiable, consistent social tropes that appear year after year. These situations are, of course, new and sometimes overwhelming to the students caught up in them, but to veteran teachers in middle schools, these social dynamics are expected, workable, and potential opportunities for student growth. Defining elements of this social world, identifying patterns, and exploring the consequences of social choices can help students understand their world and help teachers and parents both honor and

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provide gentle perspective on these very real challenges of middle school life.

In this article, we attempt to dissect one of the major elements at play during the years between elementary school and high school: the frequently misleading concept of popularity. We make an important distinction between the commonly applied label of *popular* and the less discussed label of *powerful*. The overly simplistic term *popular* belies a far more complex social power structure that most middle school kids experience constantly but rarely comprehend. Understanding what power looks like, what popularity looks like, how they intersect, and how they diverge brings clarity and can help all parties involved recognize what they see, define it, and create strategies to move forward. A drama-free world is probably not possible when adolescents are involved. But a drama-understood world is.

So why are two history teachers writing about the social lives of their students? Shouldn't we just teach our subject matter? Well, we could, and it would probably be easier and make for shorter days. But we take the broadest definition of teacher—counselor, advisor, guide, more experienced person, someone interested in teaching—and we work to develop relationships in a way that invites kids to come talk. It becomes our challenge to help students begin to gain perspective on the social landscape. It is also our responsibility to assess how much of the landscape we can see, understand, and benefit from and which students can be agents of positive change among their peers. We are fortunate to work in a school that places a high priority on the relationships developed between students and teachers and teachers and families. These relationships are built to foster the full development of each student, provide knowledge of him/her as a whole person, and therefore grant us an understanding of his/her life outside the classroom. This understanding, which lies at the core of our teaching philosophies, is both a privilege and a responsibility and is rooted in the basic premise that by knowing our students, we can teach them better.

When relationships are nurtured, teachers become more aware of and empathetic to the specific issues each student faces and can begin to discern how these issues impact all facets of that particular student's life. The natural next step, then, is to tailor ways to support each student.

This customization is at the heart of our teaching and ultimately why teaching in middle school makes sense for us. It's an age that requires delicate negotiation between autonomy and dependence, between things public and private, between student and parent, and most frequently between student and student. A blanket approach could not work in all

circumstances—and an unstructured approach would lead to nonstop diplomacy. Much like a gaseous substance, the work surrounding the social lives and choices of middle school–age students could, if given the space and time, expand to occupy all of our time. By creating space and time to dialogue directly about social issues that arise, rather than teaching around them, we are often able to help students move forward. The middle school–aged student doesn’t yet have all the tools and strategies to avoid getting mired in a social crisis. The momentum created by dialogue, in effect, gets a student “unstuck.” As a result, they can stay engaged in the classroom even when they are socially preoccupied, and we can often move an individual or group out of a tricky space and into one where learning—about themselves, about relationships, and maybe just about history, can occur.

Our students love to hear what we were like at age 13. In casual conversation, it’s fun to reminisce about our own bad haircuts, braces, teachers, and epic social disasters. But, in the critical moments like the scenarios that follow, we’ve found that merely revisiting our own identities as middle schoolers rarely provides clarity and keen insight into our current students and the situations they encounter. When a student approaches a teacher, she seeks a caring adult with a lifetime of experience and perspective. Although recollections of *our* middle school experiences are, of course, a piece of this lifetime, they are less useful in practice than a deep understanding of the complexities of *any* middle school experience. Additionally, while we remember who we were in middle school, we no longer live in the skin of middle schoolers. We do not try to reconcile the wrongs we committed or remedy the wrongs done to us. Outside of a universal empathy for every student, all of whom we know to be encountering a tricky age in their lives, it is never a good strategy to project one’s own experience as a student onto current students. It is close work with countless adolescents, rather than just reflection on our own adolescence, that has taught us that middle school life is often just as hard for a popular student as it is for an unpopular one, and, in fact, popularity may not even be what we’re talking about.

### **Popular versus Powerful**

Students frequently refer to a popular crowd of peers and strive to be popular. At the same time, they point to the popular crowd or the popular student as a source of much of the social turmoil. And that’s where their definitions break down. The turmoil is rarely rooted in popularity alone but nearly always in power and influence mistakenly thought of as pop-

ularity. Thus, the people given this label are often referred to with disdain, as in “everyone hates the popular kids. They are so mean.” How is this contradiction, of wanting to be popular and yet reviling those already popular, to be reconciled?

As adults, the concept of something being deemed popular is easy to understand. It’s something well liked by the majority of people. One might win a popular vote or work to get a reservation at a popular restaurant. To a middle schooler, being popular is often hard to achieve (like that reservation), but it very rarely means well liked. In fact, we commonly see students with many friends still not considered popular by their peers. It’s baffling, until you begin to dissect exactly what it is that students mean when they use that term. Students allow the term *popular* to encompass far too much.

Using such inflexible labels as popular actually makes sense developmentally, even while it confounds adults and is maddening to watch play out year after year. Middle schoolers want things, and people, to fit into categories that make sense. As teachers, we see them begin to attempt, but not master, more conceptual, abstract thinking in the middle school classroom. Wrestling with the developmental concepts of self and other is a natural partner to what we see academically in our classrooms. Student identities are up for definition, and that is both exciting and scary for them. If they don’t act fast, they will be defined by their peers. There’s a fluidity and urgency in play. There are two main paths taken. In the first, choices are frequently made in an effort to conform to an already existing collective identity. It can be a safe approach to look around and do what others are already doing. This allows a student to fly under the radar and still feel like she fits in. For example, having long, straight hair rather than a short cut among girls is safe since choosing the shorter hair would draw unwanted attention or define that girl as outside the standard. The second requires an active and aggressive attempt at identity formation, one that is about outwardly defining oneself for the world. Musical tastes become more important, hair gets dyed, outlandish outfits appear, and definitive statements about who they are become common in this effort to actively carve out an identity. Often, this identity searching is extreme. Students explore different personnas to decide which fit and which gain acceptance. In our own teaching, we’ve encountered a student who wore a different decade of dress each day, one who opted for a lab coat, a student who donned a winter scarf from September until June, and one who only wore yellow. We’ve taught a student who signed each assignment with a favorite reality

TV star's name. Stylized headgear ranging from birthday hats to 1940s fedoras, students carrying guitars all day, and something as simple as oddly colored socks are not uncommon in a seventh- or eighth-grade classroom. We see students wear glasses who don't need glasses and students refuse to wear them who should. Every article of clothing and every action, whether deliberate or not, is ultimately weighty since it is up for analysis by their peers. This alone is enough pressure to consume a student, and they haven't even left the house yet! Actively working for peer acceptance—or an active indifference to peer acceptance (perhaps stemming from a fear of rejection)—is a critical daily decision.

Much of the identity options available are flavored by what kids see in popular culture. Despite how media savvy we assume today's middle schoolers to be, they are still presented with and thereby influenced by infinite images of "popular" teens in media and young adult books. While the archetypes of the jock and the cheerleader have faded to a certain extent, the idea of the popular kid (whether a Gossip Girl or a very cool vampire) or the outcast are still very much present in contemporary pop culture. The middle school world isn't always one of nuance and subtlety, so the overly typed roles of teens (often older than the middle schoolers themselves) presented in the media around them feel accessible and attractive. These high school characters are aspirational in that they seem to know themselves and seem to know how to deal with the complexities of adolescence in a way that feels impossible to most middle schoolers in their own lives. Sixth-grade girls read *Seventeen* while 17-year-old girls read *Cosmo*. This developmental reaching and desire to see into one's social future and know what to do is understandably appealing even while, as teachers, we see the pitfalls. Because they are not yet socially mature enough, what they glean from these images and articles is often an oversimplified and therefore less helpful way to conceptualize social dynamics. Middle schoolers searching for their own identities often utilize these simplified labels of popular and unpopular to help make sense of their place within an increasingly important and complex social hierarchy. These terms are temporarily useful to students, yet ultimately inadequate, and belie a far more complicated system at work. Using these simplified terms actually makes it harder for them to understand and navigate their world. Our job, as their teachers, is to push on those definitions and identities in a way that is appropriate to where a student is as an individual. Just as a single lesson can and should be differentiated to meet the needs of a wide variety of students, the social lessons imparted by teachers must similarly be differentiated based on the social maturity

and confidence of the student. Deconstructing these assumptions and sitting with them to break down the simplified roles helps them grasp their own context and gives them more room and space to grow into an identity that is not limited by the two axes of popular and unpopular.

The jargon of popularity gets thrown around daily. Parents and students worry about lab partners, trip groups, and which five kids are invited to the mall or a sleepover. For both, a child's status in relation to the "popular kids" can often be preoccupying, but it is only one part of a much more complex dynamic. As teachers, we try to monitor and understand what dynamics are actually at play with each particular situation and with each particular student. This creates a seemingly endless combination of possible ways to handle social challenges with students. But, there are consistent themes and definitions that provide clarity and understanding and ultimately make this daunting task more manageable.

The misuse of the word *popular* is problematic, but we can break it down and strip it of some of its mystique. The reality is that when students use the term *popular*, they usually mean *powerful*. A middle schooler, without coaching, would never make this distinction. A popular student in the standard definition, while easy to envy, can be a benign or positive force. They are well liked because of traits like a good sense of humor, a special talent, or an ability to make others feel welcome and included. The idea of a peer being more powerful generally isn't in their worldview, while the concept of popularity is ever present. Certain acts or attributes that reflect power often mistakenly fall under the student term *popular*; for example, associating with an established group of powerful friends, a social maturity that grants opportunity to manipulate, a quick wit and an ability to make cutting remarks faster than others, a confidence that stems from meeting traditional standards of beauty, or a growth spurt that moves a student from the bench to the starting lineup. It might be an older sibling offering fashion tips or social opportunity, having money, influential and powerful parents, even living close enough to school so that a home becomes a gathering space (for those invited) might factor into power. This is not to say a skilled athlete, a student from a wealthy family, or a kid with a great sense of humor will be powerful and therefore the source of drama. This list is not exhaustive, as middle schoolers' tastes and interests are fickle and fleeting. But, all or any of these scenarios and a maddeningly long list of others can impact whether or not a student has power (even if not seeking it intentionally) over social situations in middle school.

Power in the middle school world is the ability to influence general

attitudes (often in a negative way) about someone or something—the ability to steer an individual or a group in a particular direction. Often, these actions can appear effortless and easy to a less powerful student caught up in the whirlwind. For this student, struggling with her own identity and sense of place, these moves seem confident and rooted in positive social clout. Powerful students, therefore, appear to their classmates (whether accurately or not) to be immune to self-doubt and to have resolved all of their identity issues, much like the older kids in television shows and movies. A powerful student might still wear unusual clothes or odd hats, but he or she does it with what seems to be a steady confidence. While some students (both powerful and nonpowerful) genuinely exhibit this self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-comfort, most are grappling with similar sets of identity-related concerns. The difference is that to the average middle schooler the powerful student doesn't appear to be struggling—they appear to already know. This knowledge is intimidating and enviable and moves a student into a place of influence, which classmates, in turn, view incorrectly as popularity. While it might seem a subtle distinction, the way it plays out in classrooms (and hallways) can be dramatic. The powerful student mislabeled as popular can often be a negative force. In the classroom, this student can influence peers and decide if a lesson or activity is “uncool” and therefore not worthy of full participation. For nonpowerful students, the risk of engaging academically (even when they want to) can be daunting because it may mean contradicting those in power. The sad result of this disengagement is that it silences a student's voice in a space in which he once felt joy or experienced emerging confidence. As teachers, this is devastating to watch.

Outside the classroom, these dynamics are just as strong. A powerful student can decide something minor like what bands are in or what shoes are cool. He or she can also have major sway, deciding if a party hosted by another student is not worth going to and either offer an alternative activity to bleed students from the “yes” list or simply convince students to reply “no.” A student can be removed from a favored spot at a lunch table, or a group can decide someone has “changed” too much to keep hanging out with. A friend from elementary school may find phone calls no longer returned. Seating at bar and bat mitzvahs or other events can become an immense source of stress for everyone involved as efforts are made to have friends sit together and yet not create “power tables.” Decisions about dating and intimacy can be influenced by the actions and choices of a few powerful couples. The impact of power plays outside of



the classroom can create aftershocks that permeate the school walls quickly and with force.

Most students are unable to create and operate within distinct spheres that would allow for separation and containment of life in school and outside of school. Adults are conditioned to not allow the personal to bleed into the professional. Ideally, adults still go to work, give presentations, attend meetings, and fulfill professional duties even when confronted with their own challenging personal issues. Even though they are frequently told that their job is school, middle schoolers are unable to draw these firm lines, and as teachers, we must understand why. In school, all day, students negotiate the two spheres simultaneously—in effect, their personal and “professional” lives constantly overlap and collide. The former friend gets assigned as a gym partner, and an ex-girlfriend has all the same classes. Best friends opt to work together on a project only to become mortal enemies over something that happened on a Saturday night, yet the project is still due. This leads to teary moments during assemblies; blowout arguments on trips; friendships begun, ended, and restarted all in the same week (or day). The concept of professionalism, which gives adults language and boundaries to navigate similar situations, is inaccessible to even the most socially mature middle school student.

If the navigation tools of language and boundaries of professionalism aren't available, it is up to teachers to provide a framework for understanding the middle school social world. And it is up to teachers to offer perspective, tools, and resources to students. These offerings don't solve the problems of middle school, as facing them is a developmental milestone that often must be met head on. Instead, the assistance can help move a student or group of students forward. This yields positive returns for the student in the social arena but can also be equally beneficial in the academic sphere.

Below, we present and examine two familiar scenarios that briefly illustrate some of the ideas introduced above and approaches implemented in each case. These scenarios are, understandably, simplified. It is important to remember that before these situations arose, the teachers involved were already aware of complex family backgrounds, previous interactions between students, other kids involved, and additional teachers acting in the interest of these students. This quick dive into the lives of some students cannot fully reveal the depth of the prework done with each student. The success of conversations like the ones described below depends upon a teacher knowing a student, understanding the varied elements that go into a student's social worldview, and having an accurate understanding of the stu-

dent's social acumen and development. Since a brief scenario cannot give a full picture, our goal is to help show frameworks that we have used to explore and manage some manifestations of power in the middle school. The students described are composites of students that both of us have worked with over the years, and the methods used in these scenarios have worked with a variety of students.

It is important to note that progress in the middle school is not always readily apparent. If elementary school is preparing, planting, and nurturing a seed and high school is shaping the fruits of this effort, middle school is the cultivation of an elaborate root system. We can't always see the results of our guidance. Instead, we have to trust that the work being done is foundational and fundamental—it will yield benefits for a single student and a class over time. For adults, this delayed return on our efforts can be trying. But when we invest in this age group, we grow wiser and more patient with experience as we see students navigate high school in ways that reflect the deliberate work put in by teachers, parents, and students in middle school.

Most often, power plays out differently between boys and girls. The interaction between girls generally becomes more public, involves more teachers and parents, and can often sweep the whole grade into a she said/she said frenzy. By the time boys have reached the middle school grades, it is unlikely that they will allow their social struggles to unfold publicly—let alone in the presence of teachers or with parental involvement. Thus, we describe two situations, each intended to illustrate a particular aspect of the life of boys and that of girls in the middle school. It is clear, though, that descriptions and interactions attributed to boys or girls are often seen in the other gender and that many of these elements come into play in cogendered friendships and relationships.

### Girl Scenario

Molly and Jamie are in the same class. They are sweet girls but have both had some trouble sustaining friendships. While at times they are close to one another, they both seem a bit adrift in the day-to-day interplay of students. Neither is the object of scorn or ridicule by their peers; instead, both fly fairly consistently under the social radar. Both girls' parents have expressed concerns about friendships but for differing reasons. Molly's best friend moved unexpectedly at the start of the school year. They were close and fairly insular. Had the friend stayed, they would have been in the same class. Jamie's parents worry that their daughter doesn't have close friends

or get invited to do things. She is social in classes and has people to sit with at lunch, but this doesn't translate to outside of school activities.

Laurie, perhaps the most powerful girl in the grade, is in class with Molly and Jamie. Students would classify Laurie and her group of friends as the popular crowd. Laurie, however, is often singled out as being mean, though this label is often based upon common though inaccurate student assumptions. She now has a large network of friends and, as a new student last year, her presence created rifts within long-standing friendships as students jockeyed to be close to her. Laurie is from a wealthier family and is fortunate to travel extensively. She is a fashionable, savvy young woman. She is also socially mature, close friends with many boys in the grade, and frequently the object of their attention. In class, Laurie works hard and is polite and friendly to her teachers.

Jamie and Molly reported being bullied by Laurie. They had already labeled her as a mean girl but soon began to describe her behavior as pointedly mean toward them. Molly and Jamie complained that Laurie whispered around them and rolled her eyes disdainfully. They approached their advisors and guidance counselor to report her behavior. Initially, the girls talked to their advisors individually but soon began leaving classes to see the counselor together.

Teachers had not reported seeing any problems between Laurie and the other two girls. Rather, it was reported that Molly and Jamie actively and aggressively vied for Laurie's friendship, sitting next to her whenever possible and making overt efforts to get her attention. Sometimes these efforts were disruptive to class as the girls fought for seats near Laurie or pushed to be in her group for assignments. One girl began to dress differently and started wearing more makeup to school. The other tried to do favors for Laurie, like offering to carry her books or lend her pencils.

At the same time that Molly and Jamie reported the bullying, they began hanging out together outside of school. Based on conversations each girl had with their advisors, it appeared their friendship was primarily centered around negative talk about Laurie. Both posted on Facebook and used Instant Messenger to discuss Laurie's "unacceptable" behavior with other peers. Molly's and Jamie's mothers also called the school, concerned with the reports their daughters were bringing home about Laurie.

Initial teacher conversations with Molly and Jamie focused on developing positive friendships with one another and other classmates. The teachers were empathetic to the girls' interest in Laurie but worked to open the

girls up to the idea that friendship with Laurie was not necessarily the best fit. They pointed out that the girls might find more in common with many of the other students in the class. They also cautioned Molly and Jamie that creating a friendship based on aggressively disliking a peer was not enough to sustain a positive relationship and that using social networking to talk badly about a peer was not acceptable, even if their feelings had been hurt.

The situation grew more complex when Laurie was friendlier to Jamie during a week they worked together in lab. Jamie, excited by this development, disclosed to Laurie every unkind thing that Molly had ever said about Laurie to students, to teachers, to the counselor, and to Jamie. Despite her power and confidence, Laurie was understandably upset by this. She felt many of the accusations were untrue and was unhappy that Molly attempted to spread rumors about her to classmates. Laurie went to her advisor to seek guidance.

This is a classic dynamic among seventh- and eighth-grade girls and illustrates several pieces of their social milieu. A new student is exciting, and the possibility of friendship with her can lead to disruption of social equilibrium set in place years ago. A new girl will sometimes be granted “tryouts” with each group—an invitation to a slumber party or some kind of social test to see where she fits. Other times, the new girl is easily identifiable as someone who can and will wield significant power. As in this scenario, the new girl can then become a force to be reckoned with, whether intentionally or not. Her invitation to one student might ripple through the grade and result in fights. She might be aware of her new status and take advantage of it, or she might quickly become wrapped up in preexisting competitions and rivalries, swept along by the already existing current.

Additionally, a girl labeled a bully or mean girl is often the object of aggressive friendship courting by the very girls labeling her. Less socially adept girls will begin morphing their language, dress, attitudes toward boys, and more in an effort to mirror what they see in the powerful student. Quick changes in attitude become apparent in the classroom, and often odd decisions and choices are made. We have seen students sit on the floor near the popular lunch table rather than sit at an emptier table nearby. These efforts to mirror and to create proximity can be uncomfortable to watch because they generally signal trouble down the road. When advances are rebuffed and feelings hurt, the developmentally typical (though not helpful) response is to point out all the negative traits of the powerful girl

or to magnify and persevere on every negative interaction to anyone who will listen.

Likewise, oppositional friendships are common in these situations. These friendships are born out of the maxim, "My enemy's enemy is my friend." As history teachers, we recognize Kautilya's edict to his king at play. As teachers of middle school students, we frequently see these complex diplomatic situations, and potential nightmares, brewing. Friendships based on mutual dislike of a third party are short-lived and often more destructive than the initial resentment of the powerful student.

Another common pitfall illustrated in the scenario is the willingness of a student, who has labeled someone a bully, to jump into a quick and frenzied friendship with the "mean girl" if it is proffered. The result is often secrets divulged and other friends abandoned. Even with adult cautioning, extensive conversation and exploration of this potentially destructive decision, it is inevitable that some students are drawn into these friendships, since the potential gain of power feels worth the risk. At times, the powerful girl might genuinely want a friendship with the aforementioned less powerful student. But sometimes, this reaching out can be a cunning strategic move designed to pit friends against one another or to separate friends that together spread rumors about the powerful girl. Susing out the motives and expectations of all students involved is only the first step, and it is a seemingly impossible one at times.

Jamie's teacher explored with her advisee the choices she was making. They discussed how friendships carry a responsibility to honor confidences and foster trust. While Laurie might be a great new friend, it wasn't necessary or productive to share everything Molly had said with her. The qualities Jamie said that she wanted in a friend were mirrored back as standards she should set for herself. The teacher encouraged Jamie to consider that she could be a good friend to each girl simultaneously. The teacher also began a gentle conversation about managing expectations for a friendship with Laurie specifically. The teacher explored how Jamie would feel if she and Laurie were suddenly not close again and what choices she would need to make to avoid more drama and hurt. In truth, Jamie continued to struggle that year. It is often the case that girls continue to fall into patterns of unhealthy behaviors and decision making surrounding friendships. It was critical to start the conversations early and to maintain an open dialogue about Jamie's perceptions and feelings about her friendships.

Molly's teacher explored with Molly her reasoning for wanting to be

friends with Laurie. They discussed the challenges of making a new friend and why someone like Laurie was an appealing friend. They also discussed Jamie's decisions and how they hurt Molly. It was not ignored that Molly had made unkind statements about Laurie, but latitude and gentleness were apparent in the approach. Simply scolding her for doing something wrong or pointing out the hypocrisy of her actions would not be productive. Helping Molly honor Jamie's desire to be friends with Laurie and acknowledging the challenge of being rejected by people you want to be friends with was a crucial step. Molly's teacher also discussed how she could maintain a healthier friendship with Jamie by setting boundaries and looking for more substantial things they shared in common than disdain for Laurie. The teacher also worked with Molly to think about other students in the class with whom she might share interests.

Laurie's teacher had already had several conversations with Laurie about the challenges and responsibilities of social power. The initial conversation between Laurie and her advisor focused on exploring Laurie's understanding of her status in the grade.

Discussions of the opportunities of power—to create positive change and to be a leader in the grade—were ongoing. In this situation, Laurie was content with the level of closeness she had with both girls and felt that it was unfair for her to be expected to be friends with everyone. The teacher helped Laurie see that she did not have to be friends with every girl in the grade, but she did have to be civil. Laurie admitted that she had been short at times with both girls and that she probably had rolled her eyes when they visibly fought for her attention. The conversation was not about Laurie being mean or being a bad person. Because of earlier discussions, the teacher could push Laurie to see that her eye rolls carried more weight than she might realize. Thus, the conversation became about patience and civility, both wonderful traits to help a student develop.

It was also important to approach Laurie with the same sense of compassion and openness that was granted to the girls who reported being bullied. While these talks affirmed for Laurie that having people talk about her was hard and unfair, they also encouraged her to not retaliate in these situations. Laurie was also asked to reflect on her motivation for pursuing a friendship with Jamie.

It is crucial in situations like these that the teachers involved not write off a powerful student as a mean girl. Even the savviest person in the grade is still a 13-year-old and cannot be expected to act like an adult and exhibit adult judgment. Additionally, it is important not to underestimate the very

real burden of being the recipient of constant attention and competing efforts for friendship and affection. Often, we assume that life is easier for the popular or powerful kid. It is important to always remember that middle school is not easy for anyone. For the popular or powerful student, it can mean that every choice and action is scrutinized by a large network of (often competing) peers and that each decision is on display for all to see. Where a powerful student sits and does not sit can easily become the source of significant drama. Is the drama of being overly admired or envied better than the drama of being ignored or scorned? Perhaps. But that doesn't mean it is easy or that it doesn't have its own long list of challenges and difficulties. Most adults, teachers included, experienced middle school as the average student, not the powerful one. As teachers, we can never make assumptions based upon our own middle school experience and dismiss the popular/powerful girl as mean and therefore not worthy of our efforts. We must also be on guard for parents who project their own middle school social history upon their children. While who we were in middle school matters, it is not who we are destined to be forever. The same is true for our students.

By the time boys have reached the middle school grades, it is unlikely that they will allow their social struggles to unfold publicly—let alone in the presence of teachers. Of course, they experience their own kind of social drama, but it rarely finds expression in large group blowout fights on display for all to see or crying in the hallways. There are fewer windows into their lives. Most boys are also less willing to share their feelings with adults—and if they do, the talk is usually accompanied by strict instructions to the adult not to say or do anything about the problem. Finding ways to mediate boys' social struggles can be tricky. Teachers and adults need to find authentic and subtle ways “in” to help steer boys through their social obstacle course.

As boys navigate adolescence, they may experience a shift in their friendship group based on emerging interests, attitudes, and even stages of development. This shift can happen gradually or suddenly. We have seen boys who have been friends since kindergarten slowly drift apart as soon as it becomes unacceptable for their parents to arrange their social calendar. Other times, a boy may suddenly find himself out of the loop, uninvited to hang out with a long-time friend who has found new companionship. Some boys take it upon themselves to pull away from their established friendships because they want to experience something different or find new friends who seem to fit more comfortably with their emerging identities. It is also common to see boys test the waters of a completely different crowd as they flirt with the latest conception of themselves. Some boys,

abandoned by old friends who have moved on to other people, are simply forced to redefine themselves and where they fit in. Often, boys like this are most vulnerable. The friendships that once seemed solid are no longer reliable, and they must come to grips with the reality that they will need to reach out and find some new friends. The prospect of making new friends in the midst of adolescence is difficult enough, but the harsh culture of middle school boys can make this challenge even more daunting.

The cultural landscape for middle school boys can be quite treacherous. Frequently, they are cruel to one another—often insulting or teasing even their best friends as a form of sport. Building an effective offense or defense often means identifying other boys' insecurities and targeting their vulnerabilities—size, weight, looks, stage of puberty, athletic skill (or lack thereof) are all fair game. Quick-witted boys capable of launching humorous, clever, or sarcastic responses generally fare well. Some boys just make themselves invisible to avoid potentially damaging interactions altogether, while others find ways to creatively navigate their way through this social minefield. This kind of joking can easily slip into bullying. But boys quickly learn that they can choose to develop a thick skin and absorb the insults, fight back and assert themselves, or try to avoid the game altogether and risk becoming a target. In this way, words are significant, and those with a command of language can become powerful. A quiet boy often sees “flying under the radar” as his best course of action for survival.

It is important for middle school teachers to understand this dynamic between boys. Since everything is fair game for insult, boys can feel on guard at all times—in the halls, the locker room, in the cafeteria, on the field, and in the classroom. Protective armor is worn at all times, and trying to get middle school boys to expose some vulnerability can take time and effort. Still, boys crave a safe space and appreciate opportunities to be themselves. While public parental intervention into this sphere almost always backfires, teachers willing to tread carefully can often influence boy culture without rejection. By identifying the social dynamics of their students, teachers can help create safe space for socially insecure boys to reach out and take more risks, while simultaneously providing an opportunity for popular, powerful boys to use their influence positively.

### Boy Scenario

James and Danny are in advisory together. They aren't friends but are friendly to one another and have been placed together in work groups over the years (partially because teachers trust James to be kind and know that



Danny is comfortable working with him). James is mature (both socially and physically), well liked, and comfortable with himself. He is, by all accounts, both popular and powerful—due in part to his sense of humor and sharp wit. When he chooses, James can be at the center of attention but doesn't need acknowledgment to bolster his ego. Like most eighth-grade boys, James oversteps boundaries on occasion but generally wields his power responsibly and with good intention. Danny is an introverted, slightly awkward, less developed eighth grader. Although he has had several good years of social and academic growth at school, he is still essentially invisible within his class. He is not actively bullied but is nevertheless vulnerable—an easy target for both playful teasing and more cutting remarks. The combination of Danny's shyness and slower processing speed prevents him from being able to engage with the other boys in any of the typical ribbing and verbal roughhousing. He is essentially defenseless and has no choice but to take the hit whenever a joke is made at his expense. When situations like this arise, Danny's only strategy is to try and remove himself unscathed.

Advisory in our school can frequently offer an unstructured but observable setting for student interaction. As the advisor got to know the students and observe their behavior, an interesting dynamic between James and Danny emerged. As the advisory grew closer, James and the other boys began to include Danny in their poking fun of one another. While the majority of the remarks were designed to be inclusive, they nevertheless had enough potency to shut Danny down. James was accustomed to playfully dishing out healthy servings of far more biting insults with his own friends. In his mind, this kind of teasing had always created a sense of camaraderie. But he was unaware of the reality that his good-natured comments were, in fact, not helping Danny to feel more connected but, rather, pushing him out.

The advisor took advantage of the fact that James was mature enough to talk about the situation discreetly and sought a way to both protect Danny and provide James with an opportunity for leadership. Pulling James aside, the teacher confided in him, pointing out that Danny seemed to be a bit more sensitive about even good-natured teasing than some of the other boys. James indicated that he was unaware that these words were cutting so deeply and that it was never his intent. Once the point had been made that impact and intent do not always match up, the advisor requested James's help in looking out for Danny: "You are both in the same advisory, and everyone in the advisory should look out for one another. I'm not

always going to be around, and I was hoping that as someone respected by your classmates, you could do me a favor and step in to redirect your friends if they start to make jokes that target Danny.” James, initially hesitant to acknowledge his power within the grade, was flattered by the act of trust shown by his teacher. Yet, it was the teacher’s responsibility to build enough of a relationship with his advisee to openly address James’s significant influence in the grade, help him to understand ways to use his power constructively, and establish the necessary trust for ongoing and open dialogue. Through this arrangement, James was able to use his power and popularity to set a kinder tone in the advisory. Danny was provided with a social alliance he would not have been able to negotiate on his own and without obvious, and potentially embarrassing, adult intervention. He benefited from some social buffering that offered a bit more breathing room for him to find himself with less risk. Just as the advisor had a responsibility to help protect Danny and give him space to grow, James’s needs must also be met. In this scenario, James, rather than simply being reprimanded for teasing another student or asked to lead without guidance, benefited from the opportunity to step into a leadership role safely and with the guidance of a trusted adult.

Neither the boy nor girl scenario was explosive. Neither resulted in major disciplinary action. We selected them for just that reason. What we advocate is a preemptive strike. Rather than waiting to deal with the trickier dynamic of students in chaos, we prefer to initiate conversations and lay frameworks that can often successfully preempt more volatile situations from developing. Permanent solutions and peace were not necessarily achieved, but in both cases, students were given language and perspectives to help guide future decisions.

Much has been written, and justly so, about social aggression and bullying in middle schools. When left untouched and unchecked, small tremors and rumblings can become situations that build into more explosive dynamics. Unfortunately, many schools do not or cannot provide a means for teachers to intervene before situations reach a boiling point. Often, this is because opportunities for conversations, like the ones described above, between teachers and students about social dynamics are not prioritized. If schools truly hope to educate the whole child, the social development of the individual and the group must be an integrated part of that education.