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The cool kids really are that mean

By Eryn Brown, Los Angeles Times

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It's something your teenage child already knows well: Those popular kids can be mighty mean.

But he or she might not be clued in to the conclusion drawn by a paper released Tuesday in the [American Sociological Review](#), which found that the more central you are to your school's social network, the more aggressive you are as well -- unless you're at the top of the heap, in which case you're more likely to give your peers a break.

“By and large, status increases aggression, until you get to the very top,” said the study's lead author, UC Davis sociologist Robert Faris. “When kids become more popular, later on they become more aggressive.”

The study asked boys and girls in three North Carolina counties to list their five best friends, five people they had picked on (physically, verbally, or indirectly through ostracism and the like), five people who had picked on them and a variety of other questions about socioeconomic background, dating habits and so on.

The more connected a student was, the more likely he or she was to engage in hostile acts, suggesting that students see aggression as key to attaining and maintaining status.

As to why the most popular kids were less aggressive, the researchers suggested that it could be simply because they're genuinely super-nice. But a more likely explanation, said Faris, is that the kings of the hill simply have nothing to gain by lashing out. Striving with claws bared just makes them look insecure and weak.

[Dan Kindlon](#), a Harvard psychologist and author of the books "Raising Cain" and "Alpha Girls," said he thought one of the most interesting opportunities the study offered was a way to assess teen movies of the past 20 years or so: Who really gets it right when it comes to the way high-status kids act? "Gossip Girl"? "[Mean Girls](#)"? "[The Breakfast Club](#)"? Or, taking into account the socioeconomic data pulled together by the research team, "[The Outsiders](#)"?

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