

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My fourteen-year-old daughter seems to be a bit socially odd. She seems unaware of not fitting in with her peers. She is also unaware of social cues and doesn't seem to care about how she looks, what clothes she wears, how her social interactions with her peers are. Things are reasonably okay now; she is basically ignored at school, but I worry about high school. Are there steps I can take to help her?

ANSWER: At fourteen, your daughter's behavior does seem a bit "odd." I will answer in a general context without knowing your daughter's past, and without time to experience her in a counseling setting. In this short article, I will not address various mental disorders that could contribute to the issue.*

Normally, in suburban America, girls her age are intimately aware of social situations, of how they look, and of how they are perceived by their peers. Social interaction is everything! Remember, all behaviors (non-neurological or physiological) have a psychological function. At 14, there should have been ample opportunities to learn and experience social skills. **What is the function of remaining socially "odd" in looks and interactions?** What might have happened to her that would encourage adopting and/or embracing her present style of relating to her peers?

I would imagine that a large part of the functionality of her lack of care might be to help her remain "invisible" and, thus, emotionally safe. Either she hides and avoids her emotional pain, or she is effectively emotionally numb. Without much teasing or attention at this point in her life (surprising at the middle school level), the functionality of her behavior is probably working well for her, and there is little incentive to change. Once she enters high school, this behavior could lose its effectiveness. Sadly, **at that point, it might be very difficult to "catch up" in social skills.**

Often, young people who are functioning like your daughter, substitute other (safer) non-social or slightly social interactions for real social interactions. Video games, Internet use, movies, books, music, art, pets, and adult interactions (socially safe and pseudo-mature), all can be such substitutes for peer socialization.

The function of disregarding her appearance is also emotional (and social) safety. The off-putting effect of her physical appearance **assures that anyone who does notice and interact with her in a desirable way is, almost assuredly, emotionally safe.** They might be as socially awkward as she is. I would imagine her present appearance is working quite well for her in terms of restricting the character and number of peers who presently interact with her. This behavior is often consistent with other teens who are over-weight, self-mutilate, are excessively shy, dress outlandishly... all behaviors designed, adopted, and/or learned to keep others at arm's length.

In addition, your daughter might have had some powerful emotional and hurtful social interactions in the past. Hurt is a powerful motivator; avoidance is often the strategy employed. Your daughter may or may not be very aware of how her actions help her control and avoid the pain of social interaction. At this point in time, **her entrenched actions probably feel so much a part of who she is that they don't seem intentional or learned.** This motivation of avoidance, along with a hurtful past, is an issue that could be successfully addressed in counseling.

Your daughter needs some successes in social interaction so she can experience the joys of relationships. Help her look for, create, and seize these successes. As Christians, we are called to interact (individually and socially) with the world as we spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. You need to help your daughter put "her best social foot forward" not just for her sake, but for the sake of fulfilling God's plan and directive for us to transform the world. Self-protection (the desire for social safety at the expense of the giving of oneself) is, at its core, selfish by nature... not a culturally popular belief, I know.

The following are some ideas to consider as you speak with your daughter:

1. Have some on-going heart-to-heart talks and prayers with your daughter about your observations. **Realize change for her will be a difficult journey** that requires planning and courage.

2. Find some less threatening social settings **where your daughter can have success** and enjoy a taste of what social involvement can be. Celebrate when she has a success!

3. Talk to her about a “makeover.” I understand that people should be attracted to “what is on the inside,” but your daughter’s functional behavior needs to be dismantled. There’s a difference between obsessing over the external and looking nice and receptive to others.

4. Set some “social goals” with input from your daughter. **Find a social “niche” for her in the high school she will attend.** Now is the time for a fresh start and a social plan.

5. **Seek some professional help from a therapist** (young and female might be best) who can explore any social trauma as well as the functionality of her social “oddness” (i.e. self-protection). A good counselor can help with a doable and appropriate social plan.

*You might have heard about “Social Anxiety Disorder.” The behavior you have described does not fit this diagnosis. Although your daughter might indeed have some hidden anxiety about social interactions, from what you described, her behavior is more adaptive and functional than the product of a mental disorder such as social anxiety disorder. In addition, other disorders (A.D.D, A.D.H.D, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, a Mood Disorder and others) could contribute to your daughter’s behavior.

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