

- [/ News](#)
- [/ UK News](#)

# UK NEWS

## Hard luck, cool kids — the geek shall inherit the earth

Louise Callaghan Published: 6 July 2014

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Millie Mackintosh says cool kids from her school are now stuck in dead-end jobs (Mike Marsland)

THERE is good news for geeks. Cool kids at school are less likely to succeed later in life, according to a new study.

Academics at the University of Virginia tracked the lives of 184 adolescents from the age of 13 for a decade and found those considered less popular at school were outperforming their popular peers by their early twenties.

The study, published in the journal *Child Development*, found those considered popular in their early and mid-teens were more likely to suffer drug abuse problems and social isolation as they grew older.

The perception of what was “cool” also changed over time. Boys aged 13, for example, who exhibited “pseudo-mature behaviour” such as kissing girls and committing minor vandalism were seen as popular by their peers but a decade later many of them found it difficult to make friends and enjoy meaningful relationships.

The interplay between cool and geeky teenagers has been the subject of many Hollywood films. These include *Mean Girls*, starring Lindsay Lohan, which charts the fall from grace of a group of pupils obsessed with image and popularity when their true personalities are exposed.



Rebecca Humphries says she struggled to fit in with the ‘cool crowd’ at school

Professor Joseph Allen, lead author of the study, said he had been surprised to discover that “the group of young people who seemed to be on the fast track in adolescence . . . ended up more like a dead end”.

He said he hoped the findings would be a comfort to parents who worried about their geeky children. “Young people who get a lot of reinforcement and praise and attention for superficial kinds of qualities are at risk,” he said. “They come to depend on these, which don’t have much appeal in the wider, adult world.

“Parents are often worried that their kids are behind because they aren’t indulging in this sort of behaviour . . . but it’s trying to appear older that’s the problem.”

The report used a variety of variables to judge how “cool” the subjects were both at around 13, then in their early twenties. In their early teens, precocious behaviour such as kissing gave them a “cool” rating, along with stealing from their parents. The extent to which the subjects valued popularity was also rated.

The study found that by 23, the cool kids had a 45% greater rate of problems arising from alcohol and marijuana use than their more socially stunted peers. They were also 24% worse at getting along with others.

Dr Faeza Khan, lead clinician at the Priory Hospital Cheadle Royal in Cheshire, said she had helped young British teenagers whose pseudo- mature behaviour had led to problems later in life.

“They are trying to impress people about how they are socially, rather than being emotionally mature,” she said. “Their interpersonal skills don’t develop over time. They continue to use the same skills . . . which can lead to involvement with the criminal justice system, or antisocial peer groups, because they’re so keen to be accepted.”

Millie Mackintosh, the fashion blogger and former star of E4’s Made in Chelsea reality TV programme, said she had felt an outsider at boarding school in her early teens but later blossomed. “I didn’t fit in. It took me ages to find friends . . . At lunchtime, I used to hide and eat instant noodles or Marmite on toast in my boarding house,” she said.

Mackintosh, who is married to the rap star Stephen Manderson, who goes by the name Professor Green, believes there is long-term value in being an outsider. “It’s not good to be a sheep. Most of the cool, beautiful kids who teased and bullied me at school have totally lost their looks and are stuck in dead-end jobs,” she said.

The actress Rebecca Humphries, 26, from Norwich, has had a similar experience. “I probably secretly was desperate to go and hang out on the high street and have stories to tell on Monday, but I never did . . .”

Humphries, who is taking her comedy show Dizney Rascal to the Edinburgh Fringe next month, added: “You’ve got a choice to either be really comfortable with who you are or beat yourself up.”

Aaron, 23, from Sussex, was perceived as cool in his teenage years and described his school days as “the best years of my life”. Now a mechanic and single father of one, he said: “At school we were all happy mucking about causing trouble, but now you feel a bit stupid for it. The ones that tried harder at school are probably earning more money now.”

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