

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Making Everyone Feel Included

FLORIDA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT DENIS ESTIMON started a club this year called We Dine Together, an organization designed to reach out to students who might be eating lunch alone. Estimon and three other student-founders of the club all had previous experiences of feeling alone and were determined to prevent others from feeling isolated. Over the year, the club grew from four to 60 members, and news of its success at helping students to feel included has inspired the forming of similar organizations across the country.

This venture, which started with only a few high schoolers, represents a step forward in adolescent thinking. In our culture, teenagers typically form cliques in middle and high school, as part of a new stage of development. In adolescence, they have the ability to step outside themselves and compare themselves with others, allowing them to form a strong social identity.

“Hanging out” with someone who dresses like you or has the same interests bolsters your budding sense of self. Typically, the need to align with a particular group in order to define oneself outweighs the ability to feel empathic with those who don’t belong. Yet the Florida teenagers who started a new kind of club were able to organize themselves according to the common value of inclusion.

At our school, we try to nourish the value of including others starting in preschool, and the perspective that it’s important to make everyone feel included starts with adults—the examples we set. We can say things like “Let’s invite the new child in your class over for a playdate. We want her to feel welcome.”

March 22, 2017

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