



A few months ago I heard Mitch Prinstein on the *Art of Manliness* [podcast](#) and then read his book *Popular: The Power of Likability in a Status-Obsessed World*. I reached out to him and asked him about his thoughts on popularity's linkage to promotions in the military, our penchant for Facebook, and some advice on raising kids.

J: When I first heard about your book, Popular, I immediately thought of it in the context of high school, but you argue that popularity plays a role in our adult lives. Could you explain that?

M: Most of us would love to forget all about the high school hijinks and humiliations. But research suggests that many of the same popularity dynamics we experienced back then are

still playing out today, decades later. We don't talk about it as "popularity" usually, but every team, group, and social gathering still plays by the same rules. That's probably why research says that those who are not popular growing up tend to have ongoing difficulties throughout their lives. Most people don't realize that there are two types of popularity and we should be focusing on the one that really matters.

J: What do you mean two types of popularity? And which one should we focus on?

We should focus on the first kind, likability, which we start experiencing, believe it or not, as young as when we're three years old. When you ask a three year old who's the most popular, they pick the kid who's the most likable. Someone that makes them feel good, someone that they enjoy spending time with, and that likability factor continues to be a form of popularity that is important for the rest of our lives. But our adolescent brains turn us onto this brand new form of popularity that starts at around the age of 11 or 12 and that's the second kind, status. The reason why it's really important for people to pick up on these two very different types is because they lead to completely opposite outcomes.

J: In your book, you cite a study about the the strongest predictor of a Soldier's functioning in the military was how popular they were in high school. Why is the linkage important?

M: Kids who were disliked were more likely to be dishonorably discharged, and this effect was more powerful than the effects of soldiers' childhood IQ, delinquent behavior, and even histories of mental illness. The result is probably due to the fact that kids who are low in likability (that's the kind of popularity that is most important) tend to miss out on all kinds of learning opportunities while growing up. Every social gathering is a chance to learn interpersonal and team-building skills. Without these skills, kids become even more rejected, producing a cycle that has life long consequences, according to research.

J: I've observed that popularity plays a role in evaluations, which lead to future promotions.

What advice would you give to someone who has to navigate the social landscape of the military as well as the performance landscape?

M: Those who are most likable will be more likely to get hired and promoted. We are biologically attuned to popularity and more likely to favor people we like. I would advise folks to do all they can to be seen as likable, which usually involves leading others in ways that make them feel valued, included, and happy. Of course, there are many ways to do that, but all of the ways boil down to how we make others feel about themselves.

J: I'd like to shift gears on the last two questions. Because we move around so much, most of us typically use Facebook to stay in touch and keep up with our friends and their families from previous assignments. A lot of times I find myself scrolling for hours, reading status updates and admiring pictures from family vacations. Is there a danger in this?

M: No, not at all. Facebook and other social media platforms are great for helping us stay in touch with people we care about. What can be problematic, however, is when people use Facebook just to try and get “likes” from others. This reflects that second type of popularity called “status,” and it’s concerning because research says that those moments of feeling high in status feel good, triggering powerful neurochemical reactions in our brains. But those who those who have high status actually do pretty poorly in the long run. So we have to be careful we don’t get addicted to something online that will harm us in the end.

J: As parents of “military brats” we want our children to fit in wherever they go to school (my son is 7 and on his 2nd elementary school because of moves). Can parents affect their children’s popularity (the good kind)?

Absolutely! In the book, I review a ton of ways that we can help our kids achieve likability, yet avoid the powerful temptation to seek status. Parents have a remarkably strong influence on their children, even as their children become adolescence. It is critical now more than ever that parents are helping kids focus on the kinds of interactions that really

matter!

Want to learn more about Mitch and Popularity? Check out his book [Popular: The Power of Likability in a Status-Obsessed World](#)

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