Alice,

I am over 26 years old but I still am an undergraduate student. I find myself constantly hanging out with people much younger than I am and I sometimes feel out of place. Is it wrong to hang out with a younger college crowd?

Sincerely,
Old undergraduate

Answer

Dear Old undergraduate,

Wherever you find yourself, having the social support, connection, and fun that comes with having friends is special. By that token, there’s nothing right or wrong about hanging out with a younger crowd unless it bothers you. It sounds like your current situation does bother you at times, though. It may be worth considering what it means for you to make pals with younger folks and exploring your feelings a bit further. You might also look into finding community and connection that fits with you, rather than the other way around.

Depending on your surroundings, you may have a lot in common with the people you connect with, or you may come from very different backgrounds and life experiences. With this in mind, being friends with a younger group may have its perks. Perhaps it helps you reclaim part of young adulthood, maybe you serve as a mentor for some of them, or maybe they're just plain fun to be around. But it’s also possible that pal-ing around with your younger classmates may not be meeting your needs for friendship. Perhaps you feel as if they can’t fully relate to your experience or they can't form as deep of a connection with you as you would like. Maybe there are even cultural references that they miss (or that you miss) because of the age differences.

In addition to considering what you get out of your relationships with your younger peers, when you feel out of place hanging with them, have you thought about why you feel that way? If not, it might be worth taking the time to identify what might be behind your perceived social divide. Do you feel included in your younger peers’ activities or conversations? Are you familiar with the topics they typically discuss? Do you share interests? Are you able to find common ground in
your values or beliefs? Do you feel like they can relate to your experience in school and life (and vice versa)? Do they check in with you to see how you're doing and do you do the same? Do you typically seek out group happenings or do you prefer smaller groups or one-on-one hang time — and are you able to spend time with them in your preferred manner? Thinking through some of these questions may help you pinpoint why you feel the way you do and maybe even inform how you can start looking for community on campus (or beyond) that meets your wants and needs.

The good news is that colleges and universities usually offer a number of opportunities for connection with other folks on campus. One great place to start is looking into student organizations — what do you like to do outside of class? Look for groups who are getting into activities you can get jazzed about. To that end, it could be a good idea to keep a look out for flyers on campus or check online for a student organization or activity that you're interested in and attend a meeting or event. Try a few out and keep going back to ones you enjoy. Not finding a club or organization that piques your interest? You might see about how you can create one! Then, you'll have opened up the doors to other potential pals who may be in a similar buddy bind. You might also try to scope out the spots where older students hang out, and go there rather than where the typical undergraduates go if you'd like to be around folks your own age. Lastly, you could also try checking out a meet-up through websites such as meetup.com [2] or others that facilitate bringing together folks with shared interests beyond the confines of campus.

Here's hoping this provided some friend-making fodder for you as you continue your time on campus. Whether you stick with your younger peers or look in other places and spaces for friendly folks, it's never a bad idea to consider expanding your horizons a bit and making some new friends who can complement the ones you already have.

Good luck!

Alice!

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Published date:
Jan 27, 1995
Last reviewed on:
Jun 22, 2018

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