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Mean girls

 By [Kellie B. Gormly](#)
 TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tuesday, September 6, 2005

Girls are sweet and kind, and boys are pushy and competitive -- or, so society tells us.

Really?

As many young ladies would put it, *not!*

"Girls can just be really nasty, especially in high school," says Nicole Kandrats, 17, of North Fayette. She is a senior at West Allegheny High School, and has seen it all: cutting comments, two-faced friends, backstabbing and confidence breaching.

Whatever happened to sugar and spice and everything nice?

Girls are biologically and socially conditioned to be nurturers who bond with each other, experts say, but the relational aspect of femininity has a powerful dark side where sugar and spice can become curry and cayenne. When underlying insecurities and the resulting rivalries flare up, the culture of girls -- rather than one of supportive sisterhood -- can become vicious: Just like in the wild, it's kill or be killed, figuratively speaking.

"If I'm mad at one person, if I can get all the girls in the entire grade mad at the same girl -- that's power," says Shanterra McBride. She is the deputy director of The Empower Program, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that speaks out against youth violence and bullying.

Often, young female friends seem to have the power to destroy each other's social lives: whom, if anyone, you sit with at lunch - or when, if ever, your phone rings.

Resources

Sources for additional information about mean girls and bullying, for both parents and kids:

www.meangirls.net
www.mcgruff.org
www.stoppingschoolviolence.com
www.kidspace.org
www.teencentral.net
www.momcentral.com
www.ncfeaa.com
www.empowered.org
www.clubophilia.com
www.familylinks.org
www.respectgirls.com

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"It's really just a setup ... the anxiety of not knowing who your friends are," McBride says. "They prey on each other's weaknesses."

To elevate themselves and hurt others, girls hit each other where they know it hurts: their relationships. While boys tend to use more physical, in-your-face aggression, girls tend to be more subtle by gossiping behind each other's backs, excluding each other, making catty comments and turning on their friends. In this age, girl bullying has taken on a new dimension: Girls sometimes send fake and harassing e-mails and text messages, evidently from other senders.

Experts call this nonphysical behavior relational aggression, and a Brigham Young University study released in May discovered that girls as young as 4 often begin acting this way to secure their dominance in the social pecking order. The alpha girl changes, too: A girl can flip and flop between the role of lioness and gazelle.

When boys come into the picture in adolescence, experts say, the cat claws really start to pop out.

"All of it boils down to us being more relational," says Hayley DiMarco, author of "Mean Girls: Facing Our Beauty Turned Beast." "We want people to like us, we want the popularity, we want things to feel right.

"With boys, it's very visible -- with girls, it's emotional," says DiMarco, 39, of Nashville, Tenn. "The guys will just go up, have a fight and go play basketball afterwards. The girls can be so subtle that people at school don't notice it."

Traditionally, female aggression takes covert forms, compared to the male kind: Figuratively, boys may run at people and stab them in the heart, while girls may put their arms around each other while they slither a knife under the other's shirt.

Yet, even these traditional aggression roles are changing, says Dr. Herbert Mandell, medical director of KidsPeace, an Orefield, Pa.-based program that offers psychiatric and behavioral health care for children and adolescents.

During the past generation, about 15 to 20 years, Mandell says girl-to-girl physical violence has become more common -- not including the traditional feminine altercation of hair-pulling.

"The methods of violence have unfortunately evolved; women have begun to close that gap with the guys," Mandell says. "Aggression in girls and young women has gotten significantly more dangerous. Some young ladies actually are carrying around knives that they would not hesitate to use. "

Contributing factors to rising girl violence, he says, include glorification of violence in the media, including video games, and emotionally absent or abusive fathers, which can severely damage a girl's self-esteem.

Yet physical violence is not necessary to inflict deep pain on girls, experts and victims say. The old nursery rhyme about "sticks and stones" couldn't be more untrue: Sticks and stones may break bones, but words will break something far more delicate -- the heart.

Kaaren Radecki, 51, of Dormont, still hurts sometimes when she remembers a group of girls who tormented her in high school by calling her names, spreading false rumors that she was pregnant, making crank calls, and stealing things from her locker. Her grades and social life suffered.

"It got to where I was afraid to walk the halls, and I would take different routes to classes," Radecki says. "I would be laughing on the outside, but in my heart, I was crying."

Shirley Levendosky, 39, says a group of girls in high school regularly called her filthy names, pulled her hair and slammed her into her locker. The resident of Scottsdale, Westmoreland County, sometimes resorted to waiting in the bathroom until the bell rang.

"I've always had a standoffish approach with women," Levendosky says. "I

tend to see the cattiness."

Some girls, hurt and wary of trusting each other, turn to guys for safer friendships, says Jordan Welch, 17, of Homewood, a junior at Sewickley Academy. Back-stabbing, she says, can be a girl's best friend.

"Girls aren't usually satisfied when someone else looks better than them," Welch says. "The only way for them to feel that they are OK is to beat down on the girl who supposedly looks better."

The problem of girls hurting each other has been dramatized by several books, movies and television shows, particularly last year's movie, "Mean Girls." Many professionals have started programs aimed at solving the problem.

Cheryl Dellasega, Ph.D., a professor in the Department of Humanities at Pennsylvania State University's College of Medicine who specializes in psychosocial aspects of relationships, founded the Camp Ophelia program in 2002. The five-day, day camp based at Harrisburg Area Community College aims to teach girls how to build positive relationships with each other.

Dellasega, author of "Surviving Ophelia," "Girl Wars," "The Starving Family" and "Mean Girls Grow Up," also founded the camp's cousin, Club Ophelia, a three-month, weekly group that is available to middle schools.

"We've given girls such a message that they need to be competitive with their peers, and that other girls are not their friends," Dellasega says.

In greater Pittsburgh, FamilyLinks, a Shadyside-based nonprofit social service agency, offers separate support groups for girls and boys in kindergarten through the 12th grade. The girl groups address struggles, such as with self-esteem and anger management, and bullying.

"They're really trying to understand who they are," says Kaethe Ward, school services coordinator for FamilyLinks and a licensed social worker. "Often they try to figure that out at the expense of other girls."

Courtney Macavinta, co-author of "Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect & Dealing When Our Line is Crossed," says female empowerment and loving sisterhood must be taught to youngsters.

"You can be the next Oprah Winfrey, president of the United States or head of the United Nations," says Macavinta, 30, of San Jose, Calif. "But you don't have to climb your way to the top by leaving stiletto marks in someone's forehead."

IT'S NOT COOL TO BE CRUEL

Experts say parents and kids have more power than they think to prevent and remove the sting of queen bees, otherwise known as mean girls. Consider the following tips.

For parents:

- Focus on building your daughter's self-confidence. Not only do girls who feel good about themselves feel little need to be cruel to others, but they also are less likely to be the target of someone else's cruelty. Make sure to challenge the message society gives them about the source of a female's worth -- looks, for instance -- and about the role of women's friendships.
- Show your daughter that you value other women by nurturing sincere friendships.
- Teach your daughter compassion for others, and demonstrate how to treat people appropriately. If you think your daughter might be bullying others, reach out to her and find out what might be bothering her, and consider whether someone in the family is setting that example. Make it clear, lovingly, that her behavior is not acceptable.
- Get to know other parents in your daughter's school. This helps foster

communication and support, and gives you connections for tackling a cruelty problem. If peer harassment becomes severe, do not hesitate to get involved, even if your daughter is a teenager.

For girls:

- Choose your friends wisely, based on character. The most beautiful, popular or tough girls seem like attractive companions, but if they also treat people badly, it is likely they will do the same to you.
- If you're the victim of rumors or are otherwise hurt by another girl, confront the source calmly, preferably when she's alone, tell her how hurtful the behavior is and ask her to stop. Bring a friend with you for support, if possible.
- In the age of cyber-bullying, take steps to protect yourself such as never giving out your e-mail password, no matter how much you trust a friend.
- Practice clever comebacks, for instance: "How sad that you have nothing better to do than talk about my love life. Sounds like *you* need a hot date."
- Be a leader, even if you risk being ostracized by your friends. Do not participate in bullying behavior and take steps to be a peacemaker. Many people will respect you for standing up to them.
- Not only *can* you break up with a girlfriend, but you *should* if you realize she is mean or if the friendship otherwise is dysfunctional.

Sources: *Tribune-Review* research

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