

What is relational aggression?

Counselors who work with girls tell horrifying stories of girls' cliques and their behavior toward other girls:

- Rosalind Wiseman, author of *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (the book *Mean Girls* was based on), describes a ninth-grade girl who feared for her life. It all began when she started receiving anonymous threatening text messages from girls at another school warning her that she would be physically harmed because she dared to like a boy at their school.
- Julia Taylor, another school counselor and author, describes a girl who was terrorized by a clique — girls she thought were her friends. They shoved crumbled-up peanut butter cookies in her face and asked her to smell them, knowing she was allergic to peanut products. When her mother complained to the school, the administrator's reaction was "Oh, they probably didn't know she was allergic."
- A mother of an 11-year-old writes in to GreatSchools, complaining that girls are teasing her sensitive daughter because she hasn't developed. They taunt her with comments like "You're flat as a board."

Alexandra Sabina Bender, a 12-year-old Connecticut girl, was so appalled by the destructive power of cliques she witnessed firsthand that she decided to write a book titled *When There's a Clique, You've Got to Think Quick* to teach understanding and tolerance to her peers. The most important lesson she wants girls to learn? "We don't have to be friends, but we don't have to be enemies either," she says.

Where does it come from, and why do they do it?

The destructive behavior can start as early as preschool but tends to be most pronounced in early adolescence. In *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, Wiseman, describes the clique as a life raft for adolescent girls. "Imagine you and your daughter on a cruise ship," she writes. "Girls start telling each other the ship is stupid and boring and it's time to get off. As you watch helplessly, she leaves behind everything that is safe and secure, gets into a life raft with people who have little in common with her except their age, and drifts away."

Once she's on the raft, she's too far away from you and realizes her survival depends on bonding with the other girls in the raft. She's desperately afraid of being cast out. Wiseman uses this analogy to show the fear girls have and how they feel forced to act a certain way to be accepted by their peers.

"Cliques are self-reinforcing," writes Wiseman. "As soon as you define your role and group, you perceive others as outsiders. It's harder to put yourself in their shoes, and it's therefore easier to be cruel to them or watch and do nothing."

Of course, not all girls are nasty and belong to cliques. But whether or not they are "in" or "out," all girls will be affected by the actions of cliques because these behaviors are all around them. They need to understand how this social pecking order works, how they can act differently in their relationships and rise above it.

Technology makes the problem worse

Many parents downplay the problem of cliques, says Wiseman, and think, "Oh well, it's not a big deal. We had these problems when we were growing up." But Wiseman counters that it is a much bigger problem now. "We didn't have the Internet and cell phones when we were growing up," she notes. "We didn't have text messaging, instant messaging and MySpace." Technology makes it easy for kids to be anonymous in their meanness, and spread rumors and gossip like wildfire far beyond the school grounds.

Julia Taylor, a school counselor in Raleigh, North Carolina, and author of *Salvaging Sisterhood* and *Girls in Real Life Situations*, two curriculum guides for middle and high school girls, is equally concerned. "With the Internet and cell phones, with one click, they can ruin lives. And with the ease of use, they don't realize what they are doing, and they can't take it back."

What can parents do?

How parents behave makes a difference.

The first thing parents can do is recognize that what they say and how they treat other adults and children has an enormous influence on how their own children behave. "Every Queen Bee girl or Dominator Boy is hatched from a hive," writes Wiseman in her follow-up book, *Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads*. "The first lessons our children learn in creating their own social hierarchies are the ones they glean from us and the culture at large. The first step toward helping our kids cope with bullying in any form is recognizing the degree to which we're still immersed in those same battles for power."

Why are girls mean to each other? Very often it's because they've seen this behavior at home. Have you been known to say nasty things about your mother-in-law, the neighbor next door, or your child's teacher? Careful — your daughter is listening and assuming that kind of behavior is OK because she has seen you do it. "If parents aren't educated about their own behavior, it's not going to work trying to change their daughter's behavior," says Taylor.

Realize that it's not just other children who behave this way.

As children start to drift away in middle school, they are less likely to tell their parents everything that happens at school. Many parents are surprised when they hear about the mean behavior of cliques because their daughters haven't volunteered the information. And they may be even more surprised when they find out their own daughters are playing a role.

Stay engaged with your child.

Have discussions with your daughter about what's happening at school, Wiseman advises. Start with a general question by asking your daughter about her opinion of cliques rather than her personal experience with them. Once she has opened up about what she sees, she'll be more likely to share her own experience.

Avoid the temptation to fix the problem.

"Don't tell her what to do," Wiseman writes in *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, "Instead, describe the behavior you respect. Work with her as she comes up with a plan that describes specifically what she wants to happen differently, and how she can make that happen."

Kathy Masarie, a pediatrician, counselor and creator of the support program, Full Esteem Ahead, in Portland, Oregon, says, "The best lesson a parent can teach is that your life is a result of your choices. Let kids know that there are consequences for their actions and for what they say."

Keep an eye on Internet and cell phone activity.

Keep the computer in public view at home, such as the family room or kitchen, Davis advises, so you can see what sites your child is frequenting and keep tabs on her activity. Have discussions about what is acceptable behavior on social networking Web sites and text messaging, and know what online activities you child is involved in. Let your child know that using these technological tools is a privilege and don't hesitate to take them away if they are not used properly.

Helpful books

- *Queen Bees and Wannabes* by Rosalind Wiseman (Three Rivers Press, 2002)
- *Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads* by Rosalind Wiseman (Crown Publishers, 2006)
- *Salvaging Sisterhood* by Julia Taylor (Youthlight, Inc.)
- *Girls in Real Life Situations* by Julia Taylor and Shannon Trice-Black (Research Press, 2007)
- *Schools Where Everyone Belongs* by Stan Davis (Research Press, 2007)
- *When There's a Clique, You've Got to Think Quick* by Alexandra Sabina Bender (Crown House Publishing Limited, 2007)
- *Mean Girls: Facing Your Beauty Turned Beast* by Hayley DiMarco (Revell, 2004)