

THE MEAN GIRLS: Nasty and vengeful from an early age, they're coming under new scrutiny

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She's the bossy one. She decides who's in and who's out. She's the savvy manipulator. And if you don't play by her rules, well, you just don't play.

A hard-nosed business executive? Hardly. This is a preschool girl. A queen-bee wannabe. Tomorrow's mean girl.

Girls -- and women -- can be mean to each other, no doubt. But what's surprising is that a growing body of research suggests that these behaviors begin as early as age 3. This knowledge, borne out of research conducted in the last decade, raises questions about just how some girls get this way, and what parents and other adults can do to prevent it.

How sophisticated are these preschoolers? Enough to exclude certain children from play groups, to demand that other children not play with a child or to threaten to withdraw friendship unless demands are met, according to research from Brigham Young University.

Jan Wright sees it at the preschool program she runs in Southfield, and staff members there work hard to help kids settle differences, teaching them ways to resolve conflicts that arise.

"Most of the time, there's a leader. The odd thing is they will allow her to lead for so long and then they'll start to resist, and that's when the conflicts start," said Wright, director of the Kingdom Kids Day Care Center at Christian Tabernacle Church.

By the time these girls reach middle school, they'll be pros at the behavior, coined relational aggression. They spread rumors, gossip, ostracize, isolate, make fun of and call names.

Some girls "are just fake," said Marisol Ortiz, 15, a sophomore at Avondale High School in Auburn Hills. "They can be a friend in a minute, then turn around and say something mean about you, then they're your friend again."

This behavior "has become the norm," said Susan Wellman, founder of the Ophelia Project in Erie, Pa., which works with schools to prevent such problems with students.

"This is how kids treat each other. And it's worse, because when no one intervenes, more and more kids do it," Wellman said.

Taught to be nice

Boys are capable of this behavior, but it's more prevalent in girls -- and that's tied to the way boys and girls are socialized.

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Girls are taught to be nice. Not to fight. Not to be physically aggressive. So they figure out other ways to be aggressive, covert ways that won't get them into trouble. Because girls value relationships with other girls, the way to hurt is by damaging those relationships, said Nicki Crick, professor and director of the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota.

So a girl might tell her friends not to hang out with another girl because of a conflict. Or she might refuse to invite a friend to a birthday party. As adults in the workplace, women can be their own worst enemies in the push to get ahead.

"If a woman is my good friend at work and then she does me dirty, it's thoroughly painful and significant to the woman who's been done wrong," said Pat Heim, an author who has researched gender issues in the workplace. And the response? "I will get her in ways she won't even imagine."

In her book, she writes about a male manager of a department of four competent women employees who found himself dealing with a merger and needed to promote one of them to take over some of his duties. He did, and "all hell broke loose," said Heim, whose books include "Hardball for Women."

So much so that the boss, and the woman he promoted, decided he should un-promote her. "She went back to being one of the peers. And everything was fine. But a woman was un-promoted because of other women. Do you see the consequences?" Heim asked.

Born or learned?

Some people conclude this type of behavior is just "girls being girls."

"Well, if you use that logic, then I guess we would tell parents it's OK to emotionally abuse your children. It will toughen them up, right? Does that make any sense?" Wellman asked.

Children can be deeply hurt by this kind of aggression, just as much as they would if they were victims of physical aggression, experts say.

"If you spread a rumor about someone and it sticks with them in their high school career, that's pretty damaging," said David Nelson, senior author of the Brigham Young study, which was published in May.

Crick said parents should be concerned about extremes: children who are constantly the victim of aggression, and those constantly the aggressor. Victims tend to be depressed, lonely and unhappy.

Research on aggression in girls still hasn't answered one crucial question: Are girls born this way or is it learned behavior? Researchers are studying the genetic link between girls and relational aggression. But many also believe it's cultural. They say kids learn the behavior from their parents and from older siblings and friends.

Particularly, they say, children whose parents use psychological control -- withholding love to get the child to do what they want, manipulating the way their children think, using guilt to get what they want -- learn this is the way to treat their peers.

Ways to respond

Girls teased Marisol, the Avondale High sophomore, because they considered her overweight. And because the taunts hurt, Marisol did what many girls end up doing: She turned around and teased other girls. But sometime in middle school, Marisol decided it wasn't worth it. So she stopped.

"You're going to be a bigger and better person in the long run," she said.

Ashleigh Gehrke, 19, who just graduated from Avondale High, also was teased because of her weight, and because she was held back a year in middle school.

But Ashleigh had good friends who supported her. And, she figured that if someone else was teasing her, "they always had a bigger problem than I had."

And Ashleigh, influenced partly by her work at the Boys and Girls Club in Auburn Hills, found an effective way to respond.

"Don't retaliate," she said. "It always made me feel better not to stoop to that level."

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Quiz: Are you a mean girl?

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1. When you walk down the hall, most of the time you are:

- a. alone
- b. with your gang
- c. with your best bud

2. Sometimes you:

- a. get laughed at by other girls
- b. make fun of the not-so-popular girls' clothes
- c. hang with your friends and have so much fun you forget it's time to go

3. You know how it feels to:

- a. be gossiped about
- b. make someone look bad so you look good
- c. care for a friend who is hurt

4. You spend hours:

- a. worrying about how not to be seen by other girls
- b. thinking about how to get even with someone
- c. helping your friends through tough times

5. When you go to school you are:

- a. afraid to go to the bathroom alone
- b. loving life
- c. counseling your friends about all their problems

6. Your parents:

- a. would say you worry a lot about going to school
- b. know that you are happiest when you are with your friends

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c. taught you how to care for others

7. At least once a week:

a. another girl laughs at you or picks on you

b. you talk about another girl in a way that puts her down

c. you try to make your friend feel really good about herself

8. You have cried at school:

a. many times

b. only occasionally when a guy is a jerk

c. not really at all, because you save that for your bedroom

Now, add up your scores this way: A=3; B=2; C=1.

Results:

- 18-24 points: You have mean girl problems
- 11-17 points: You have mean girl tendencies
- 8-10 points: You aren't a mean girl at all!

Source: meangirls.net, the Web site of Hayley DiMarco, author of the upcoming "Mean Girls: All Grown Up."