Beyond "Mean Girl" Typecasting: Power, Popularity and Potential

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From the New York Times and the Washington Post to morning network TV shows, "Alpha Girls" and "Queen Bees" are the purported terror of middle school. Here, the authors examine the phenomenon firsthand - and come up with a much more nuanced, human take on the lives of girls in their early teens.

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This article was originally published in *Schoolbook: A Journal of Education* in 2003. It was updated in 2016.

Gossip, back stabbing, ditching friends, madly grasping for popularity...as middle school teachers, we see these things every year. We spend countless hours wiping tears, rehashing incidents where girls have mistreated each other, untangling endless webs of gossip. It comes as no surprise to us that some girls can be mean. For over ten years, literature in education and psychology has addressed the so-called "mean girl" phenomenon. Articles, books, videos, and websites show the devastating effects of "relational aggression" on the tender psyches of young girls coming of age.

Yet the most of what we see in the media and in the literature seems somehow too simplistic. Most materials we've seen leave out important factors in the world of middle school girls, to ignore what we see as the basic problem.

In the early 1990's there was a similar boom of literature on girls, weight, and their fear of speaking out in class. What no one seems to be pointing out, then or now, is that these two views of girls -- meek mouse and evil witch -- are merely different manifestations of the same problem: girls not feeling good about themselves.

The job of the adolescent girl is to figure out who she is. Along the way she must make the transition from the identity of a child, who sees herself as the center of the world, to the more flexible identity of a young person who can view the world from a multiplicity of perspectives. The process of leaving the fixed worldview of a child and learning to take the perspective of others often proves incredibly painful. During this transition a girl's identity may shift back and forth dramatically between egocentric and multiple perspectives, between the worlds of

adult and child, as she learns to negotiate the terrain between self and others.

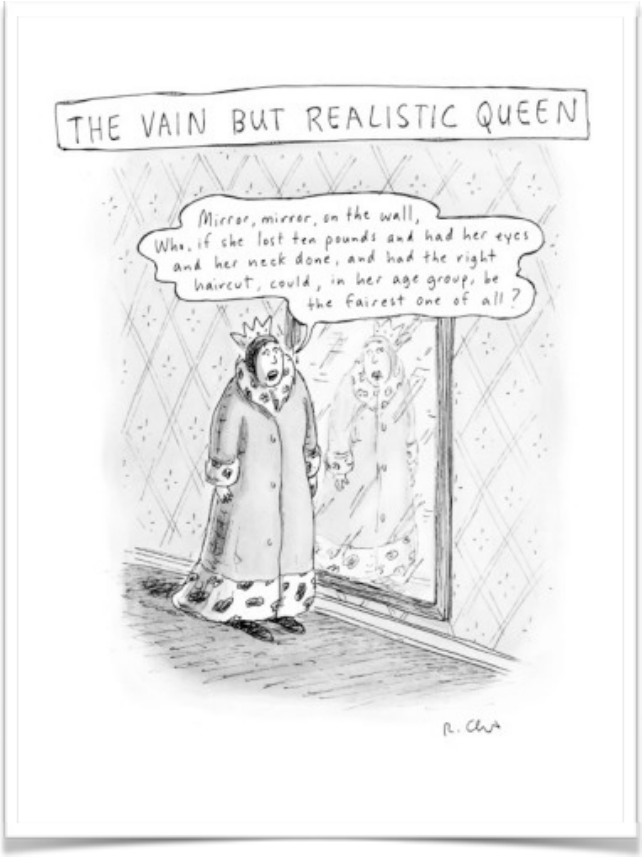
When her identity suddenly shifts to the outside, a girl may initially find herself in the unfamiliar and uncomfortable position of relying on others to show her who she is. At times, she can get stuck outside herself, lose connection with who she really is, and see herself only as she believes others see her. In effect, she watches herself being watched. Perhaps this is why teenaged girls so often become obsessed with mirrors. A mirror is a glimpse from the outside, a hint at what others see, and the uncertainty of this age often transforms that reflection into an unacceptable one. Jennifer can remember standing in front of a mirror in her seventh-grade classroom early one morning, wondering how she had become so heinously unattractive, whereas before she had not given much thought at all to her appearance.

All too often, we hear girls in our classes talking of diets and exercise regimens, makeup and new outfits (the more expensive, the better) — anything to change that reflection in the mirror, that negative view they are convinced others have of them. So is it any wonder, then, that these same girls are perpetually afraid of being rejected? Staving off that fear of rejections is, we believe, the primary motivator for their “mean” social behavior. It is not that girls are born mean, or have become that way since society began trying to bolster their self-esteem; girls are hurt and scared. As with all human beings, even animals in the wild, when they feel that they are under attack, they lash out.

Before going into the ways they lash out, let’s look more at the reasons they act out their anger in gossip, back stabbing, and quiet rejection of one another. Despite the strides that have been made in cutting through gender stereotypes in the last half century, girls are still under the impression that to be accepted

they must be nice. A glance at the treatment of Hillary Clinton is quick confirmation: If you are a woman and you are direct, you are considered bitchy, shrill and and irrational. So girls all over run from these labels by attempting to mold themselves into the opposite.

This cloud of “nice” is a dense and powerful one. Complying with the conventional standard of what a girl should be means being consistently happy, supportive of one’s friends, pleasing the adults around you, and always swallowing your anger. Where is the outlet? Where does the anger go? Where is there room for a bad day? And if you are constantly creating a perfect image to smile back at you from the mirror, where has your true self gone? And, tragically, if you have buried your true self under this hazy cloud of “nice”, how can you have the thing you most crave: authentic friendships with other girls? The answer is you can’t.



That is why during any middle school lunch period you can see small clumps of girls gathered to talk about other girls -- whose outfit looks “slutty,” who sent a mean text the night before, who called and canceled a shopping date at the last minute, whose dancing was too sexual at the last party. This is where the anger goes. This is the release.

So how do all these things connect -- the low self-esteem, the need to be nice, the ways girls are mean? As girls enter the upper elementary grades, there is pressure to leave behind that confident tomboy self, to start liking boys, to dress to attract attention, to have zillions of girlfriends, and to always be nice. So, as Carol Gilligan, Mary Pipher, and so many others have pointed out, the girls’ real identities get pushed underground, and they begin to search for an identity on the outside: influenced by *Seventeen* magazine, the Jenner/Kardashian family, Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, and that unforgiving mirror. They are hollow, looking for approval for a self that is

submerged under a conventional image. They have hidden away their true selves for fear of rejection, and instead they are pretending to be something they think they should be rather than expressing the truth of their inner experience. This mismatch between affect and behavior causes an internal disconnect and compromises a sense of integrity that is essential to self-esteem and healthy relationships. Caught in this web of pretense, some girls are unable to form the authentic friendships they crave. Instead, they opt for superficial relationships based on fear and power.

Because girls feel a great deal of hurt in early adolescence, yet feel unsafe expressing negative feelings directly, they get power through several channels: gossip, rejection, and boys. As one eighth grade girl puts it, “When I’m mean and gossip, it’s usually because I’m mad at the person I’m gossiping about because they did something to me....so for me, gossiping is a way of letting out my anger.” We are constantly amazed at girls’ willingness to talk about each other, to pass on information, and to even tell the person being gossiped about all the mean things that are being said.

Gossip is also power. What could be more reassuring to a girl questioning her self worth than a crowd around her, hanging on her every word? As one seventh-grade girl puts it, “I’m sometimes mean to girls because I want to be in the middle of the gossip. If I don’t know what’s going on then I feel left out, and I hate to feel that way...If it takes being mean to someone in order to get in the middle of things, then sometimes I’ll do it.” Another girl simply says, “If I’m mean, it’s because I want to be accepted by other people.” The crowd is the antidote for the mirror.

Another weapon girls use in this war against each other is boys. Attention from boys, whether it comes from skimpy clothing, seductive dancing, or sexually-laden conversation and text messages, is power. Word that a girl has been asked out travels around campus at warp speed. And while there is power in this

attention, there is also a sense of unease. One eighth-grade girl describes it this way, “I want boys to look, but when they do, I feel uncomfortable.” What the girls ultimately want is real friendships with each other and with boys, confirmation that they are good. Another seventh-grade girl says, “I depend on attention from boys because of the insecurity I feel with my female friendships. If I had a girlfriend I could count on, I wouldn’t need attention from boys.”

How can teachers deal with “mean girls” in the classroom and in schools? Over the years, we have developed several strategies for dealing effectively with this problem. And, while girls in our classes still gossip and back stab, over the course of the school year, we see the frequency and intensity of these behaviors lessen. We believe girls come out of our program with a greater understanding of why they do these things and, ultimately, a greater appreciation of who they are. Many girls emerge from our program with a sound basis for forming solid, supportive friendships with both girls and boys.

We believe the problem underlying relational aggression in girls is, at its root, a systemic social problem that results in an insecurity with self. To address girls’ feelings we start in the personal realm with a focus on self awareness of feelings. Then we incorporate systems awareness through introducing activities, discussions and articles to help them see they what they are experiencing is not only a personal problem, but the manifestation of large-scale social conditioning.

In our experience, we have found that girls need help expressing anger in healthy ways. If anger is not expressed directly, it goes underground and becomes a way to get power, a way to cover up the deeper emotion, which is almost always hurt. And underneath the hurt is always the most basic human need - the need for loving connections. If we can get Alma to see that the reason she now turns her back and whispers about Nancy, her former best friend, is because Alma still feels hurt by Nancy’s new friendship with Delilah, then we are getting somewhere. If we can get Diane to admit that the reason she is avoiding Julie is because she is scared by Julie’s sadness over her parents’ divorce and doesn’t know how to console her, Julie

can see that she is not inherently unlikable and that she doesn't need to get her new friends to gang up against Diane. We ask girls to examine their vulnerabilities and identify their feelings. We ask them to go beyond the mask of pretense, to penetrate the cloud of "nice"; we ask them to accept their anger and negativity, and to express the hurt and insecurity they feel. We ask them to disclose the deeper parts of themselves to others and communicate their feelings honestly. Finally, we ask them to express to each other what they really want, to ask each other for the kind of supportive relationships they need in order to grow. We see this kind of expression cut through the superficial level of identity that makes girls mean. We find that when the girls learn to express their shadow feelings, the shadow lifts and underneath is the power to truly care. It is this transformative power that we strive to bring out in girls.

We do this simply by getting the girls to talk directly to one another, to express their anger, and eventually their hurt. What they generally find is that they are all deeply afraid of losing each other and being left alone. They discover that they want nothing more than to be loved and accepted. Some classes in our middle school call these conversations "conferences;" some call them "goal groups" or "advisory meetings," but whatever the name, the idea is to get kids to be honest with themselves and each other about the deeper motivations for their behavior. If they can feel accepted by a supportive peer group when they are being emotionally honest, they can start to see that their identity may lie within, where they have the ability to truly love, rather than somewhere outside. Acceptance for their deeper feelings by peers often results in a greater degree of self-acceptance. We see them begin to develop compassion for themselves, as well as for others, whose perspective may be new to them.

We have learned that girls who have experienced an event in their past that has left them with a feeling of having been

abandoned are more vulnerable to the intentional and unintentional hurts they encounter in the middle school social milieu, and are therefore more likely to protect themselves by lashing out. After all, when a loss is suffered at the time a girl is still in the egocentric developmental stage of childhood, she will assume it is her fault, no matter how illogical that belief, and she will carry that belief forward until it is challenged. The girl whose much-older sister abandoned games of “fairy” to hang out at the mall with friends believes that she was left because she was not good enough. The girl who was adopted as a newborn is convinced that the reason she was ‘given up’ by her birth parents is because something in her is flawed. The girl whose father moved away after divorcing her mother assumes it was to get away from her. The girl whose best friend changed schools in second grade believes it was because she wanted to find a better friend.

Because we have seen this important dynamic at play, we know that it is an important dynamic that is often overlooked. Jessica, referred to in the 2003 *New York Times* article “Girls Just Want to Be Mean,” was used as an illustration of the classic “mean girl,” ruling her clique with an iron fist. At the end of the article, almost as an afterthought, the reporter mentions that her parents divorced when Jessica was three years old, after which her mother took a job in which she traveled extensively, leaving Jessica suddenly without either parent several days a week. The picture of Jessica is incomplete, the solution nonexistent, if you do not look at the reasons Jessica needs power and control. Jessica experienced a great loss at a very young age. On a deeper and more important level, she may feel that something central to who she is caused her to be abandoned by her parents. The need for power and control is a substitute for a deeper and more important need: the need for love.

After experiencing a traumatic loss, each slight encountered in the normal day of a teenager -- not being invited to a party, not being asked to dance, not being included in a conversation -- is seen as confirmation that something is truly wrong with the person she is. An important part of what we do is getting girls to look back at those earlier times they’ve been left, let them feel the pain they have been avoiding, and then to see that they are

not at fault; nothing is wrong with them; they are not the reason bad things happen. They are able to see themselves more accurately, more compassionately, as the hold of their egocentric consciousness is lessened through reflective processing.

An important element of these conferences is getting the girls, whether they are best friends or merely acquaintances, to tell each other why they value one another. When a girl discloses her insecurities, particularly when the insecurities are based on past trauma, we see the other girls in the group rally to her defense and counteract the negative opinion she has of herself. In this way, she begins to see the good in herself through another's eyes, not the bad on which she perpetually ruminates.

We teach social/friendship skills in "teachable moments" when conflict arises, but also through direct instruction. A common scenario that comes up in conferences is one in which a girl feels hurt that she was not included in a conversation when she approached a friend talking to someone else. More proof, she tells herself, of being unworthy. In reality, it may be because her friend has never been taught how to negotiate this situation. Think of the difference, we tell them, between having a back turned to you versus having your friend grab your hand and say, "Hold on one sec; we're just talking about this math problem," or turning to the friend and saying, "I have to talk to Lynn right now, but can I meet you in the classroom in two minutes?" Girls' eyes invariably light up with this new idea. True, girls can be mean, but it is also our responsibility to teach them how to be considerate, to see the situation from another point of view.

Girls need to be taught how to negotiate doing things as a pair of friends or including others; they need to be taught how to keep their friendships strong, even once relationships with boys begin; they need to be taught how to act when they meet new people; they need to be taught how to treat each other's parents and siblings; they need to be taught how to get angry at each other, and how to

tell each other the truth. We ask girls to make agreements to be supportive of each other. We explain to them the value of trusting friendships, the importance of female solidarity. We talk to them about gender politics, about the destructive tendency of oppressed populations to act out their aggression against each other. While girls' relationship patterns are important to look at, we can't just look at their behaviors and label them as "mean" without looking at the root of the problem. One root is hurts of the past. Another is sexism. While we have made great strides in the struggle against sexism, we still have a long way to go. These girls are inheriting a world in which a great deal of gender inequity still exists. We can't expect them to learn all the complexities of growing up female on their own.

Girls need each other. They need supportive relationships that will buffer them from the inequities they will inevitably face (and may have already faced). They need respect and a sense of inner integrity. They need to learn to stand up for themselves, and they need to stand up for each other. They need to know that they stand together.

At the same time, they must learn not to misuse their power; and the honest relationships they form with each other serve to keep them in check. As girls become more confident in expressing their anger and indignation when they feel they have been mistreated, we see their self-confidence increase.

The other missing piece in much of the literature, perhaps even that which came out in the 1990's, is a focus on the good there is in girls. Adolescent girls are not simply little balls of insecurity or raging fires of meanness. These are merely the shadow sides of most adolescent girls, albeit shadows that will haunt the girls who carry them until they learn to negotiate the difficult terrain of their anger, fear and hurt and learn to give it outward expression, honestly and directly. It is important for them to learn to do this, and from what we see happen with girls, there is cause for great hope. Girls have a strong and healthy desire

for inner integrity and healthy, loving relationships with each other. A girl in our program writes in a story about her struggle with her identity as a female:

> *I am a girl, but I am more than just a girl. I am a girl who is learning who she is, and I am strong and weak, even when I don't show it. Under the bossy girl, under the feminist, I am sad and scared and hurt and angry, but I am also loving. I love myself sometimes. And I know that I am hurting myself by not being who I am.*

There is also tremendous empathy in girls of this age, a kindness and consideration, a desire to work for the good of the group, a resilience, and a real strength that must not be ignored. When a girl is talking with a teacher in her office, it is not at all unusual that one of her good friends will knock on the door, wanting to make sure she's okay. With just a little instruction, girls learn to be incredibly trusting and supportive of each other. We often hear them encouraging each other to "speak up" in conferences, to "take a risk" and "tell the truth." In fact, our school's wildly successful girls' mentorship program was initiated by high school girls who had a genuine desire to help smooth the rough path of middle school for other girls.

We think an important part of our job as teachers of girls this age is to help them see their goodness. So many times a girl will tell us through tears that she hates being so sensitive. We try to convey how important that sensitivity is, the gift it carries. It is this same sensitivity that makes her a great friend, we point out, and will make her a wonderful life-partner, mother, and co-worker. It is also this same sensitivity that can make her lash out when she's been hurt. But we really do a disservice to these girls and those they with whom they cross paths if we adhere to this simplistic view of them as mean. Girls are vastly more complicated, interesting, and wonderful than that.