

Mean Girls  
Lyn Mikel Brown, Ed.D.

I grew up in the 70's, on the downward slope of the women's movement, too late for consciousness-raising groups or bra-burning protests at the Miss America pageant. I just missed *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Gloria Steinem at her most daring, and only heard war stories of the gargantuan effort it took to confront sexist laws and attitudes. But I do remember the first *Ms. Magazine*, the push for the Equal Rights Amendment, and the legalization of abortion. I relished the benefits of Title IX—new uniforms, new sports, new levels of competition. I was “nice” enough but I was still called selfish for wanting what I wanted: for postponing motherhood for graduate school and career, for keeping my name when I married, for wanting my child to have my last name instead of her father's. And now I have a daughter—a funny, irreverent whirling dervish who moves through her eight-year-old world with spirited abandon. I want her to live fully, to care deeply for other people even as she cares a little less than I did about how others respond to her choices. I tell her, like millions of mothers across the country: “You can be anything you want to be.”

I say this, but inside I have my doubts. I know too much. I've been researching girls' development now for twenty years. I witness the erosion of civil liberties and reproductive freedoms. I read the statistics documenting a rise in domestic assaults, telling us that high school age girls are the group most vulnerable to battery by boyfriends. Like some kind of perverse cultural poem, the books on my shelf lay open the world girls are moving into. Titles like *Bitch*, *Slut!*, *Cunt*, *Fast Girls*, *Promiscuities*, *Dilemmas of Desire*, *Fat Talk*, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*, *Odd Girl Out*, *Flirting with Danger* speak to the realities they face, the battles left to fight. This is not the social air I want my daughter to breathe.

This explains in part why every morning I scan the newspaper and clip out stories I find where a girl does something bold and daring, where she keeps her wits in perilous circumstances, joins with other girls to fight danger, uses her head or her strength to confront a bad situation. It's slim pickin's, as my mother would say. But now and then I strike pay dirt: a nine-year-old convinces her captor that she's ill and he lets her go, but not before she memorizes his cell phone number so the police can capture him. Her daughter safe, the mother says, “I taught my daughter to be observant and strong.”

When they exist, these stories usually make headlines, in part because they're exceptions to the sea of cautionary tales about girls and women as victims to violence of some kind. But sometimes they're hidden away in the back pages of the newspaper, not much more than a paragraph or two; just enough to remind us that girls too carry the courage gene, and fighting back—alone and together—is possible, necessary, and sometimes successful. I cut them out and read them to my daughter; we talk about them and I put them in a pile beside my desk. They are talismans, like the three round rocks we collected this summer, made smooth and beautiful by the pounding of the Maine surf, examples of strength and balance to offer a girl moving toward the unbalanced fray of early adolescence.

In the far corner of my office sits a different stack of clippings, articles about “mean” girls. It's a much, much bigger pile. In case you've missed it, the past few years have offered a steady stream of popular books, magazine, and newspaper stories about the nasty ways girls and women treat each other. This media hype has us worrying that today's girls are overly aggressive bullies, vicious, and cruel, in need of micromanaging, controlling and taming. We now have labels for such

girls, like queen bees and wannabees, and new ways of rating them, such as alpha, beta, and gamma girls. I've been interested in these reports because my third book—on this very issue of girls fighting and betraying one another—has just come out. I've been taking the pulse of the current coverage and I don't want to contribute to what feels like very bad news for girls: a resurgence of old stereotypes about bitchy, catty, deceitful, manipulative women thinly disguised as the latest crisis. I don't like the self--satisfied tone of the articles I read ("I knew it, you knew it, now we all know it and so let's fix them"), the voyeuristic hype about girls gone wild, and the implication from some corners that the women's movement is to blame.

I'm not a (too) suspicious person by nature, but I don't think it's a coincidence that just as girls and young women begin to believe they really can be and do anything, just as they start to take themselves seriously, speak out and fight back, along comes a media frenzy about mean girls with tips about how to tame them, make them nicer, quieter, easier to deal with. And just as girls feel they have a right to be the subject of their own experience along comes a tsunami wave of sexual objectification: Big breasted Fly Girls and Cheerleaders, Bootie videos, Comedy Central's *The Man Show's* Juggy Squad, *Extreme Makeover*, and endless *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire* clones. I don't know about you, but when I told my daughter she could be anything, I didn't envision the naked girl sandwiched between two boys advertising Abercrombi & Fitch, *FCUK* cologne promoted in *Seventeen*, or *Dirty Girl* and *Slut* Shampoo marketed at a favorite store.

Okay, part of me thinks, this is the cost of doing business. When we said *anything*, we opened the door to the good, the bad, and the ugly.

But I think it's more than that. I think the mean girl hype reflects our deep, lasting anxiety about female aggression. We don't quite know how we feel about outspoken girls and strong women and so we endure the pendulum swings. Ten years ago we were concerned about girls' loss of voice; now we fear their aggressiveness (Could they have changed that much?). Ten years ago Hillary Clinton took a beating for her independence, now she rides the wave of her bestselling autobiography (Did *she* change that much?). Jessica Lynch is a poster girl for courage and *Time* Magazine includes a woman soldier on their people of the year cover, while newspaper articles fret about women deployed to Iraq. There are an unprecedented number of women CEOs but there are also "Bully Broads Groups" designed to help those women act nicer, moderate their voices, become mistresses of the "soft touch." Strong women, assertive women, are more visible than ever before but so are the signs of uncertainty. The *Stepford Wives*, that feminist movie of the 70's, has been remade with a happy ending. Feel good magazines like *Lucky* are all the rage. Botox promises to make those frowns and angry expressions go away.

Girls watching us—and they *are* watching us---can't help but be confused. What do we want from them? It must feel like taking a high stakes multiple-choice exam where none of the options fits.

For my book *Girlfighting*, I listened to over 400 girls talk about their conflicts with other girls. They had a lot to say. Tomboys dissed girly girls; nice girls complained about mean girls, sexually inexperienced girls distanced themselves from sexually active girls, poor girls gossiped about rich girls, girls of color scoffed at white girls—vice versa and back round again. They described the power of clothing, hair, skin color, body size, attitude, and sexual behaviors to position a girl as "in" or "out." Other girls were ho's, sluts, bitches, backstabbers, wusses, complainers. At times no one was safe and nothing was stable; victims were sometimes perpetrators, perpetrators sometimes victims. It was a whirlwind dance that reminded me of a quotation from Margaret Atwood's *Cats Eye*: "An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness."

Girls don't come out of the womb knowing the effects of calling someone a slut or bitch. These

words have always been used to control women; to warn, threaten, keep them in line. When girls use them, they do so for the same reasons boys do: to experience power over someone. They want this power. We told them they should have it. But in this case the power comes from joining with the status quo, with the hope that this shaky alliance doesn't come around tomorrow to bite them in the derriere. Because a girl who uses these words perpetuates the very sexism she's trying to avoid; in the rush to protect herself or look good by blaming other girls, the boyfriend who cheats on her, the teacher who makes sexist comments, or the media that tells her she's ugly or stupid is off the hook.

My exercise partner, Deb, thinks that because girls' aggression and meanness is such a hot topic we need to have conversations with each other, our daughters, and the other girls in our lives about what's really going on and what our responses ought to be. I agree; we can't roll over and let the media define this issue for us. We need to figure this one out for ourselves. Deb wants her two daughters to be able to say no if beer-drinking friends press them to get into a car; to be bold enough to refuse things that are toxic—whether its gossip or drugs or lessons about how to throw up in the bathroom. Make no bones about it. It's exactly this kind of refusal that gets girls (and women) labeled "mean." Being the one who stands up for herself or someone else, who refuses to be part of the group or sucked into negativity is the one likely to be targeted as the "bitch."

The sexual bartering on display in *The Apprentice* notwithstanding, these are also the qualities she'll need to be a CEO. The problem isn't the resistance. It's the anxiety the resistance invokes in others. What if everyone refused? Some girls, like Sarah, are "waiting for the day when all the girls will start standing up for themselves, so I won't look like such a bitch."

Clearly we shouldn't throw out the baby with the bath water. Not all conflict, not all aggression, is bad. Books like *The Secret Lives of Girls*, *Behind The Mask*, and *It takes Ovaries* assure us that anger and aggression are vital to girls and women. Anger is a sign that a girl takes herself seriously. Constructive aggression is the embodiment of that self-respect. This is why philosophers and psychologists alike refer to anger as the "essential political emotion." Maybe the anxious response to girls' "meanness" has something to do with social change. Maybe Sarah has a point.

Listening to those 400+ girls, I also heard something else, something lost in all the attention to "mean and nasty." In spite of the encouragement to sell each other out for popularity or boys, girls here and there paused to wonder aloud, to ask "what if." There was eleven-year-old Lilly, who said, hope flickering: "If we could put all our talents together, we can't, but if we could, we'd like, you know, it'd just be no holding us back." There was fourteen-year-old Maritza who paused between stories of betrayal to recount a fairytale she wrote about an unconventional princess who wasn't beautiful but rocked her world by starting "a noble-peasant exchange group." And there was sixteen-year-old Naomi, who proclaimed that jealousy between girls was "the worst thing on earth" and "a waste of time." These girls know that spending their energy thrashing about in relational quicksand, scrambling to pull themselves out by throwing some other girl in, does nothing to change things. It just shifts the ground, repositions the landmines.

Adrienne Rich once said, "Connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic and the most potentially transformative force on the planet." But only if we get our act together, stand up for ourselves and each other. More and more these days I find that I want to spend my energy supporting Lilly's flicker of hope, Maritza's irreverence, Naomi's insights. I think the answer is not micromanaging the meanness, but listening to the fear and frustration that underlies it; not shutting down anger but helping girls hone and channel it in positive ways; not

talking about the separations and betrayals, but creating avenues for connection, alliances and coalitions among girls and between girls and women. This is very hard work. Just ask “mean girls” Gloria Steinem and Angela Davis.

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