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Mean girls getting younger

U.S. psychologist says they are the result of years of empowerment

The Mean Girls made infamous in last year's film starring Lindsay Lohan and Rachel McAdams are actually the type of highly confident, empowered girls we have encouraged young women to become, a U.S. psychologist told Ontario educators yesterday.

Lyn Mikel Brown, author of *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls*, told 1,200 Ontario teachers, principals and school psychologists at a Mississauga conference that society is to blame for empowering young girls and then criticizing them for their outspoken behaviour.

"Why are we constructing the popular girls as Mean Girls?" she asked. "It's important not to vilify them for this because we set them up for it from day one."

Ms. Brown said young girls in North America have been raised to be self-confident, to voice their opinions and take ownership of their own image and accomplishments, and see such behaviour as the route to empowerment.

"We've been telling girls for years to stick up for yourself, be confident, and now that they are we call them mean," she said. "They're all after the same things. We can't just pathologize some of them."

What girls are after, Ms. Brown said, is to stand out against the competition, to be noticed by their peers, boys and adults in their lives.

But the media representations of such empowered young women sets them up as the evil nemesis of the "nice girl," the quiet, polite classmate.

"I think that we've constructed the Mean Girl as a particular kind of girl," she said. "Some girls do abuse that new-found power, but I don't think that's something we should blame them for. I think it's something we should help them understand and work with."

The Mean Girl phenomenon is not a new development, and most of the audience at yesterday's psychology conference described first-hand experience with the "Queen Bees and Wannabes" of their own classrooms.

"It's a fight to be visible, to be central instead of marginal," said Ms. Brown. "They turn their rage on each other because it's the easiest, safest target."

To demonstrate her point, Ms. Brown showed a magazine advertisement for Converse shoes that showed two teenage girls giggling at a table while another girl in a tight dress stands in the background.

"Carla and Rachel considered themselves open-minded people," the ad read. "But they agreed on one thing: Sarah was a tramp."

Young girls attempt to assert their superiority over others by rating themselves in three categories, said Ms. Brown: sexuality, attitude and body shape. In other words, ranking peers according to how pretty, nice and skinny they are.

This hierarchy is being taught to girls at a surprisingly young age, she added, and is evident even in popular cartoon shows like *The Rugrats* and *Jimmy Neutron*.

"All the young cartoon shows, even in the really educational ones, they have a bit of it," she said. "I think girls pretty early on are picking up on the fact that there's the nice girl and there's the mean girl, and the mean girl is the one who really has the voice and the power."

Ms. Brown showed the conference clips from several animated shows, in which the Mean Girl character, always pretty and well dressed, berated the weaker characters in the show.

The shows are trying to teach a lesson in tolerance, she said, "but they come at a cost to girls because it sets up a divide."

And the damage is often done before the girls reach high school, the time generally perceived as the most dangerous outlet for nasty behaviour.

"Middle school is more intense," Ms. Brown said of Grades 7 and 8. "By high school they generally have a few more options and their hormones have calmed down a bit. But it's hard not to lose them by then."

She related a story from one Grade 6 girl she interviewed who was part of a club dedicated to belittling an unpopular classmate.

The group had a special signal, a red X on their hands signifying their dislike for the girl, and would hold "Saturday meetings" during which they would talk about the student and draw disparaging pictures of her that would be distributed at school.

The film *Mean Girls* was meant to show the fallacy of such behaviour, but Ms. Brown believes many girls are missing the point and are learning to glorify competitive, nasty behaviour.

But Sonia Bricel, a 16-year-old student who attended the conference with four girls from her school, said girls would fight regardless of movie messages.

"It's not just the media. We buy into it," she said. "Every group has a hierarchy. I think it's jealousy. It's part of human nature."

Ms. Bricel and her friends have all seen the film *Mean Girls* and recognized the satirized cliques from their own highschool experience.

"It was hilarious," said Ms. Bricel. "I thought it was great."

MAKING PEACE

Lyn Mikel Brown's 12 Ways to Prevent Girl Fighting and Build Girl Allies

1. Do your own work: We can't help girls or offer them constructive ways to respond to their own anger and other girls' aggression unless we can negotiate these things ourselves. This means exploring the roots of our own anger, disappointment and jealousies.

2. Read the school culture critically: Provide girls some critical distance by giving them a safe space to discuss the climate of their school.
3. Encourage discriminating tastes in friendships: We need to rid ourselves of the fiction that girls should like and be friends with everyone. Encourage girls to choose people as friends who treat them well.
4. Address girl fighting when you see it: Talk with girls about relational and physical violence.
5. Engage girls' anger and hone a sense of fairness and justice: To express anger is human. Girls need guidance about how to stay centred in their disagreements and to make considered choices about how to express themselves.
6. Foster solidarity between girls and women: Avoid a "girls will be girls" message when what you really mean to say is that all girls are petty, mean or back-stabbing. Affirm girls' relational strengths.
7. Develop "hardiness zones" and safe spaces for girls: Offer girls opportunities to initiate ideas, to take action on issues that really matter to them and to work together.
8. Question the traditional romance story: The usual story of heterosexual romance places girls in subordinate relationships with boys. Question double standards and talk with girls about what they want.
9. Develop media literacy: Provide girls with the language and tools to be critical of the things they watch, read and hear.
10. Encourage her to play sports and build physical strength: Sports, self-defence classes and outdoor activities encourage girls to know their own strength and instill confidence.
11. Practise voice, encourage activism: Girls who appreciate that the world is bigger than the social dynamics of their school are less likely to be devastated by peer rejection.
12. Tell the truth: The truth is that there are consequences to taking yourself seriously and challenging the status quo. Telling the girls the truth about their lives, choices and actions helps them understand their own options.