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Why do girls fight? Read the book

By LYNN ASCRIZI, staff writer

“Mean Girls,” the hit movie with its message of bullying young women, makes the recent book, “Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls” (New York University Press), seem even more timely.

There is “growing evidence that fighting and troublemaking behavior are on the rise for girls,” said the book’s author, Colby professor Lyn Mikel Brown of Waterville.

Brown’s book, however, is a clear departure from the film’s stereotypes about dumb, mean, backstabbing girls. Her study, after five years of research, is based on interviews of 421 girls from widely diverse backgrounds, many of whom are working class girls from Maine.

“The title is provocative. It’s not about girls but about behavior,” Brown said.

Yes, girls do use gossip and exclusion, shunning rituals and relational violence, she said. In her book, we hear girls speak of “the pain of being excluded, picked on, or talked about. . . .”

But what causes the infights? Is it all biological? Just a bunch of women gathering in groups like primates, competing for alpha males?

Brown thinks the cliquish aggression comes from cultural pressures. Girls are caught in a conflict between nice girl and nasty, she said. They are pressured by the media to fulfill unrealistic expectations and are squelched by a society that still enforces narrow stereotypes.

“TV and movies project a ‘normal’ range of acceptable girl behaviors against which media-savvy girls are pressed to compare or distance themselves. . . .” she said, in “Girlfighting.”

“Too often, the various persecutions girls visit on other girls arise out of either their desire to meet unattainable feminine ideals — to get a boy, to be loved — or their resistance to such ideals and their denigration of femininity — to be one of the guys, to be taken seriously. Both paths . . . lead girls to compete with and judge other girls. . . .” she said.

Brown wants to fend off the negative messages and develop healthy outlets that help girls become allies who appreciate their own strong voices.

“When we talk about girlfighting, we don’t want to throw out the baby with the bath water. It’s important that girls find their voice. Girls are called mean for speaking out. I want us to hold in girls a sense of entitlement and constructive anger, for them to be strong. On the other hand, I don’t want the negative focus,” she said.

Brown, who lives in Waterville, is associate professor of education and women’s, gender and sexuality studies at Colby. She and her husband Mark Tappan, professor of education in Colby’s education program, have been married for 20 years and have a daughter Maya, 9.

“I’m trying to raise her to be smart, strong and brave,” she said.