

## **When a Smile is Really a Stab in the Back**

*Surviving the Culture of Aggression in Girls*

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Mean girls are more than just entertainment portrayed in the movies or on TV. They are real and many of our daughters deal with them to some degree on a daily basis. These girls use their social skills to network negativity through lies, rumors, secrets, gossip, the silent treatment, betrayal and exclusion, to name a few.

Another term used is “relational aggression”, meaning any behavior intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating relationships. Whereas boys tend to use physical fighting, girls use relationships as weapons. Relational aggression is covert, comes in many forms, and is often not seen by adults. Although a focus of study is on adolescents, this behavior has been observed from preschool through the adult workplace.

Why are some girls so mean? The most common reasons are security, fear, power, control and popularity. Most girls are terribly afraid of losing relationships, so they work hard to control them and/or to avoid conflict. To the target of aggression it feels extremely painful. She often experiences exclusion, intimidation, insults, taunting, malicious gossip/rumor spreading, ignoring, alliance building, teasing, manipulation, and cyber-bullying (negative messages via texting, e-mail, social networking sites, etc.). It may be so severe as to cause withdrawal, school absenteeism, low self-esteem and depression.

Many girls don't tell their parents for fear of embarrassment or being seen as weak. The experience is often internalized as because of something done wrong and therefore justly deserved. Bullying is a deeply humiliating experience for any target. It can be one of the most painful things to watch as a parent. Many parents focus anger and blame on the aggressor, feel frustrated that their daughter won't take their experienced advice, or are embarrassed by her apparent lack of social skills.

What can be done about it? Talking to your daughter about relational aggression is critical. Validate her feelings and version of the events as you may be the only one who does. Take her word for it or you risk closing the lines of communication. We can start addressing this issue by teaching girls early on how to embrace alternative forms of conflict resolution, as well as prize her independent thoughts and unique strengths.