

Recent headlines about teenage girls posting cruel gossip on Facebook or sending malicious texts have parents wondering: Are girls meaner today than when we were kids? It can feel that way. But when I ask other mothers about their experiences, almost everyone remembers a childhood moment of meanness, such as teasing or being excluded from a group. What *has* changed is the public and permanent nature of meanness among girls. In past generations, we passed a nasty note around class. Now, texts, pictures, and videos can be sent far and wide, and electronic anonymity makes it easy to fuel the fire. The desire to protect our daughters from this new meanness combined with our own memories can produce a sense of angst. But by understanding why girls sometimes mistreat each other even as early as kindergarten, and learning the steps for dealing with it, you can help prepare your daughter to navigate her social world.

THE ELEMENTARY MIND

All kids can be mean. That's a fact that many of us don't like to face. It can be particularly difficult to accept with little girls, who we like to think of in terms of sweetness and kindness. When it involves our own daughters mistreating others, it can be even more bewildering.

Most cruel acts among very young kids are unintentional. They are committed by children who are still too young to understand how to see another person's point of view, or empathize. Their "mean" actions, such as excluding another child, usually stem from the desire to be part of the "in" crowd—not to hurt another. It's all part of trying to learn how to make and manage friendships.

Among girls, however, the pain of being mistreated can seem especially acute. Girls (and women) in general seek close-knit relationships. We love to develop intimate bonds that offer support, comfort, and companionship. Yet ironically, this intimacy also puts girls in a position of being hurt by the very same people who matter to them the most.

In the early years, adults are generally available to step in and resolve differences or help young children understand the results of their actions. But there are also times when girls are caught up in meanness repeatedly, whether as victim or aggressor, that you may not be aware of. Studies show these girls often display physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches. If you suspect something is up with your daughter, start by talking with her (see the four steps on the next page) to learn more and plan appropriate action.

INTENTIONALLY MEAN

By third grade, girls' ability to empathize matures, but a few girls may intend to do harm. Sometimes these "mean girls"

are trying to show off. Sometimes they're experiencing unrelated anger or frustration and don't know how to deal with it. Sometimes they're jealous of the girls they're mean to. They strike out at others emotionally or try to embarrass them. This is a form of bullying called relational aggression, or social cruelty.

Make no mistake—there are girl bullies out there. But a



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majority of the mean behavior in elementary school comes from good or nice girls who are trying to fit in and unintentionally cross the line to aggressiveness or meanness. Additionally, because most of these incidents happen between close friends, girls are often hesitant to talk to parents and teachers, in part because we may brush off social struggles. "She'll be nicer tomorrow," we say. Or "Ignore her, play with someone else."

Whether your child is a target of meanness or has stepped over the line herself, you can help her navigate this tricky social world early on. The following steps offer guidance.

Step 1: Observe your child to find out who she is socially. Is she passive? Aggressive? A self-starter? Listen to her choice of words and sensibility, and trust your instincts. Parents are often able to detect that something is not quite right, even without their daughters saying a word. For instance, you may notice changes in the way she acts toward you or her siblings or that she rejects favorite activities. A typically early riser may slump over her cereal, while a child that's always loved school might suddenly

complain about boarding the bus. Having this information will help you to better navigate the next steps.

Step 2: Connect with her without taking over. This means asking questions and doing your best to empathize. Think about replacing your standard "How was your day?" with more socially focused questions, such as, "Who did you play with on the playground?" "Did you make any new friends today?" As you listen to your daughter, restate what she tells you in your own words. For example, "It sounds like you were angry that Jenna did not save you a seat on the bus." This will help her know that you are on her side before you switch into problem-solving mode.

Step 3: Guide her as a teammate. Work together to brainstorm possible solutions until you find a few you both agree on. Simply seeing that there are numerous possible solutions to a seemingly impossible problem is empowering. Another powerful strategy is to tell her a story from your own life that mirrors her experience. Your daughter will be eager to hear that she is not alone in facing social setbacks and disappointments.

Step 4: Support her to act on one of the solutions. Remember, she chooses her actions and follows through,

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not you. If she's nervous, role-playing can help build a sense of comfort and confidence to face difficult social scenarios. Remind your child that there is no single right way to approach or resolve a complex problem.

Not every situation requires all four steps. And in some situations, you may need to revisit each step more than once. Observing and connecting with your child on a regular basis will often allow you to see patterns or notice that your child is unhappy. If your daughter or another child is in physical or emotional danger or placing someone else in danger, of course, it's best to act immediately and involve the proper supports and authorities.

By following these steps, you'll let your daughter know that whatever the outcome, she has you at her side to help her understand, regroup, and try out new strategies. **P&C**

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Safe in Cyberspace

To reduce the chance of your child being cyberbullied, consider these tips:

KEEP COMPUTERS in open spaces at home. Supervising eyes can keep her "private" discussions public.

SHARE ACCOUNTS (such as e-mail) as long as possible. Kids are less likely to send harrasing messages if parents will see them.

ALWAYS KNOW your child's usernames and passwords. Prohibit private accounts. You trust her; you don't always trust her friends or strangers.

IF YOUR child has a cell phone, set expectations for usage and restrict text messages to family only.



A quick guide to helping young girls deal with gossip and rumors www.Scholastic.com/parents/meangirls