

Dear Dr. Avie,

I am writing about a very painful subject. My daughter started middle school this year and, at that time, her relationship with the girls with whom she has been friends all of her life changed. It seems as though overnight, the sweet, innocent girls – who just last year played baby dolls and shared secrets – turned into makeup-wearing, boy-crazy teenagers. What's worse, many of them turned into mean girls. My daughter cries herself to sleep most nights because of the way these "friends" treat her. They tell her (because she is choosing not to act the way they are acting) that she is immature; and, they pick on her constantly. I think my daughter is normal, and I am proud she is still acting like a little girl. The truth is that she is a bit more immature than some of the girls, but I think that is a good thing – at least for now. I am trying to help her, but I don't know what to do. I want to speak to the parents of these used-to-be friends of hers, but my daughter says that would make her life even harder. What should I do?

~ Heartbroken Mom

Dear Heartbroken,

Your question opens the door on a rarely-talked-about topic: girls as bullies. There is an amazing transformation that happens when girls begin to get a bit older (notice I did NOT say more mature). The one-on-one, best girlfriend, small-group economy changes to nothing short of a pack mentality. It's like a time warp exists between grades six and seven and girls aged from 12ish to 16ish, while the poor guys are clueless! Girls either join the pack or are ostracized for being in some way different (e.g., lingering childhood weight, not dressing cool, etc.). It is a brutal dynamic.

Guys do pick on one another, but it's usually just word wars. And, the "true" hierarchy comes out on the ball field. If you're good at sports, you're cool. If you're not good, you still have a chance – if you're funny. The only thing young boys love more than sports is laughing at stupid stuff... and maybe spitting on things. Girls, on the other hand, tend to get vicious, using things like alienation, ostracism, exclusion and rumor. A pecking order emerges based on popularity and "fitting in."

While it seems like everyone is trying to become an individual, kids are doing so within a rather constrained set of rules. If you look closely, each has his "unique" way of expressing himself. One kid's identity might be always wearing a particular band's t-shirt. There will be others who try to fit in, but they choose the "uncool" band. A guy wears something "stupid" and his friends will just call him a dork and go on with the day; but girls are going to use the opportunity to differentiate themselves from the odd girl out. The other girls laugh at her behind her back... or to her face.

So, Mom, are you part of the problem by not letting your child grow and change? Is it hard for you to see her wear lip-gloss and cool clothes? Are you having trouble letting your little girl transform herself into a young woman? It's time to let go. Be the "cool mom" who teaches her how to put together hip outfits and how to do make-up. If you don't know about these things, ask her older sister or cousin or some else you trust for help.

As to your inclination regarding speaking to the other parents: DONT DO IT. These girls know that what they are doing is wrong. If confronted, they will at least minimize it to their parents – if not outright deny it – and then your daughter will be "the-one-with-the-Mom-who-ratted-on-us" to all the other girls. Your daughter needs to have a "gentle confrontation" with the leader of the pack. There will be one who sways the group most of the time. Your daughter might be successful in talking with this leader (taking a friend with her for moral support and a gentle show of strength), expressing how hurtful it is to be excluded, and asking why she is being treated this way. The hope is to appeal to the emotional side of this peer while "buttering her up" – letting the leader know she wants to be in the group and will be a loyal group member. She might even go so far as to ask what she must do to "become cool like you." This is, however, risky. The leader might respond wonderfully and begin to bring her into the group. OR, she may use the experience to ridicule and embarrass your daughter. Another tactic is for the "out" girl to try to become friends with several non-leader girls, being allowed into the group through that route. What must be avoided is a public confrontation that calls the leader's actions into question. If the leader is willing to bully for petty reasons, the entire process will worsen if she is scorned or embarrassed.

Your daughter may also need to develop new friendships with a different set of girls. Another avenue of acceptance is to get involved in something at which she excels – drama, sports, dance, music – something that will help her create her own identity. The kids who are worth having as friends will grow to respect her in her niche.

If all of these things fail, it will be very difficult for your daughter. If she isn't going to be accepted into the group, she will at least have to learn how to stand up for herself. She may need to see your family's psychologist to help her gain self-worth in other ways, develop other friendships, and learn to cope with the bullying more effectively.

~ Dr. Avie



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