

Taming the Media Stereotypes that Make Kids Aggressive

by: Lyn Mikel Brown, EdD

I think of the 2002 *New York Times Magazine* feature called "Mean Girls and the New Movement to Tame Them" as the official rebirth of an age-old stereotype: *the catty, deceitful, manipulative female*. A slew of popular parenting books and the clever movie *Mean Girls* followed, and before we knew it, relational aggression (RA, for short) was the "it girl" social crisis.

Nearly a decade later, mean girls show up on most popular TV shows for teens and are a staple of PG-13 movies; we have aisles of girl-centered book series with names like *Clique*, *A-List*, and *Gossip Girl*, and dozens of backstabbing women on reality shows. Like every other idea marketed to teens these days, this version of girlhood has quickly trickled down to tweens and younger. Even American Girl dolls are getting in on the action. Their history books now contain something much more compelling than World War II victory gardens and Red Cross fundraisers: a good catfight. Hey, girls, watch Chrissa face off against the "Queen of the Mean Bees!"

The impact is evident. I wish I had a dime for every time I've heard a version of the following conversation:

"Girls are so manipulative and backstabbing. Their fights are mean, too personal, and last forever."

"I know. Why can't they be more like boys; just get it out in the open, deal with it, and move on?"

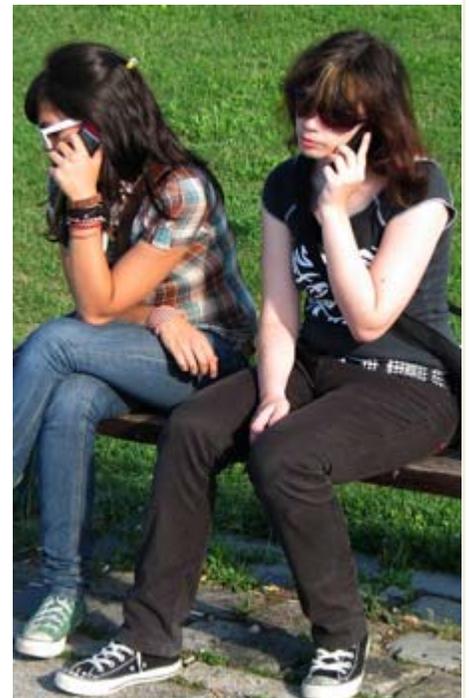
Too many teachers and parents say these kinds of things, and too many girls and boys believe them. But it's wrong and damaging in many ways.

The truth about fighting like cats and dogs

Let's consider what we really know about gender and aggression.

We know that 80 percent of physical assaults in this country are perpetrated by boys and men, most often against other boys and men. It just makes no sense to wish girls were more like boys when it comes to conflict resolution. "Dealing with it" isn't what we want if it means punching someone or calling them out. Sure, the interaction is over quickly, but it's naive to think there aren't lasting feelings of pain and humiliation.

Many research studies find that girls are more likely than boys to be relationally aggressive, but some studies show no gender differences at all, and some show that boys are just as



good at this form of aggression. These different findings relate, in part, to the age of the kids in the studies. Girls are more cued in relationally when they're younger because we socialize them to be and because their verbal skills mature a little earlier. As boys move into adolescence and become more socially tuned in and verbally sophisticated, they are as likely as girls to capitalize on the power that comes from talking about, excluding, or teasing someone.

While there's much hand wringing about the impact of video games and other violent media on boys, we don't seem all that concerned about relational aggression in girls' media. Yet, recent studies suggest girls are learning how to aggress relationally from all those backstabbing and gossip-filled reality shows, and that young women become more aggressive after watching scenes of "mean girl" behavior. No cautionary voiceover tells those watching these shows that the female contestants have been deprived of sleep to make them irritable or that editors have punched up the drama by slicing and dicing the videotape.



Certainly media encourages girls to connect popularity, sexiness, and mean behavior. But are girls *really* getting meaner? It's a complicated question, because too often we confuse being mean with being outspoken and assertive. In the early 1990s, after a five-year study [Carol Gilligan](#) and I led on girls' psychological and social development, published as [Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls Development](#)), we were worried about "the tyranny of nice and kind" that kept girls, especially white middle-class girls, from speaking their minds and going after what they wanted. We heard the girls in our study bury their opinions and saw them take their strong feelings underground because that is what good girls were supposed to do. We urged them to take risks, to bring their thoughts and feelings into the open, not only for their own health and well-being, but also so they could really learn and be intellectually challenged. There was a reason doing so was hard: they risked being called bad, selfish, and aggressive.

The rise of the so-called mean girl has accompanied the rise of the strong and outspoken girl, the rise of the girl who has challenged boys for top honors, closed the gap in math and science scores, and outnumbered boys in college classes. Challenging traditional gender roles requires breaking free of the tyranny of nice and kind. As Rachel Simmons, author of [The Curse of the Good Girl](#), says, "Girls often perceive two choices...either they're nice all the time and everyone likes them, or they're mean. There is no alternative, no third way or positive identity for an assertive, truth-telling girl."

What about boys?

As girls are challenging gender conventions, boys are naturally anxious about where they fit in. In [Packaging Boyhood](#), Sharon Lamb, Mark Tappan, and I discuss two different choices we saw repeated in boys' media: over-the-top tough, aggressive winners or funny, underachieving slackers. Neither choice says it's cool to do well in school. Is there a

relationship between these media messages targeting boys and their school achievement? We want and hope for a third option for them as well, a positive identity for a smart, competitive, and caring boy.

What we can do

Here are a few things parents and teachers can do to undermine these gender stereotypes about aggression:

1. **Instead of labeling kids, address their behavior.** It's our job as adults to help children get beyond labels and treat one another as complex human beings. How many times have we caught ourselves referring to the school "bullies" or "mean girls"? Why contribute to the name-calling we're trying to address? Labels stick, but if we focus on just their behavior, we offer children a chance to learn and change.
2. **Move beyond gender to see the bigger picture.** To understand why and how a child uses aggression toward others, it's important to understand their complex realities, including the kinds of attention and resources they receive, where they fit in, whether they feel marginal or privileged in school. Listen, observe, and be compassionate.
3. **Invite critical thinking about stereotypes and advocate for media literacy.** Provide girls and boys with the language and tools to be critical of the things they watch, read, and listen to. If media perpetuates gender, race, religious, or social-class stereotypes, use lessons in media literacy to uncover this stereotyping. Adolescents don't like to be duped or played, so help them see how media messages do just that.
4. **Be proactive.** Rather than react to problems, create opportunities for kids to be leaders, affirm their relational strengths, invite complexity, and let them know you believe they can do good, brave, remarkable things. Emphasize coalition-building and becoming an ally to those who are different.
5. **Challenge bully prevention programs to better reflect good research on aggressive behavior, bullying, and harassment.** Too many programs simply accept gender stereotypes for the same reasons marketers promote them: simple messages are easy. It's also true that mean girl mania sells. Just like American Girl's Mean Bees storyline sells Clarissa and her friends, promises to reduce an RA or mean girl epidemic sell books and draw people to webinars and conferences.

All these movies, books, toys, and even school-based programs suggest that we know what girls and boys are *really* about. This may make us feel like smarter parents or more in-control teachers, but it comes at a big cost to children. When even young girls are told that their friendships are marked first and foremost by how they can hurt; when boys' relational and emotional lives take a back seat to their "get it over with" fights, it's time to step back, take a deep breath, and rethink.

***Lyn Mikel Brown, EdD**, is professor of education and human development at Colby College, Waterville, Maine, a founding member of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development, and co-creator of the nonprofit Hardy Girls Healthy Women. Her solely or coauthored books include Raising Their Voices, Girlfighting, and Packaging Boyhood.*

Resources

Hardy Girls Healthy Women (HGHW) - A nonprofit organization dedicated to seeing that all girls and women experience equality, independence, and safety in their everyday lives by creating opportunities, developing programs, and providing services that empower them.

From Adversaries to Allies: A Curriculum for Change is a book available from HGHW that deals specifically with such topics as cliques and clubs, girlfighting, and media literacy.

VP: Reducing Sexism and Violence Program - RSVP is a student-based, train-the-trainers violence prevention program that empowers students to effectively recognize, respond to, and prevent violence and sexism. It is being evaluated by **Boys to Men**, a nonprofit organization that provides positive mentoring experiences to boys and young men.

Girls Leadership Institute (GLI) - GLI teaches girls assertive self-expression, emotional intelligence, and relationship expertise for success in leadership and life by working with girls, their families, and school communities through camps, after-school programs, and in-school resources.