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## Are Girls 'Hard Wired' to be Mean to Each Other?


Are girls mean to each other in gender specific ways? If so, what should we do about it and how is it shaping our view of how girls treat one another? These questions are being examined by Dr. Marnina Gonick, Canada Research Chair in Gender at Mount St. Vincent University. GlassSKY caught up with her this month to understand her research and the cautions she raises for parents and teachers.

**GlassSKY:** How has the concept of 'mean girls' evolved?

**Dr. Gonick:** Early studies about bullying focused on boys and personality traits, and were centered on physical aggression. At the time, it was thought that girls did not show aggressive behavior. But in the 80s the question of sexual harassment in schools began to surface, and in the 90s the focus shifted to girls and the supposed 'mean girl'. The concept of Relational Aggression was introduced that proposed a type of behavior thought to be unique to girls – spreading rumors, excluding a person from a peer group, basically using relationships to hurt each other.

**GlassSKY:** Is this a theory that continues today?

**Dr. Gonick:** Yes, it does. But it's very problematic. This sort of aggressive behavior is not so easily divided by boys and girls. There is new research out of Sweden that shows boys exhibit these characteristics too, which means we could miss bullying behavior because of binary thinking that says boys bully differently than girls. The other, perhaps more important, issue to consider is that somehow the physical form of boy-bullying is preferred and seen as less damaging than the way girls were portrayed to bully.



“HOLLYWOOD HAS SOLIDIFIED IN THE SOCIAL IMAGINATION WHAT A MEAN GIRL IS....MATERIALISTIC, OBSESSED WITH LOOKS, AGGRESSIVE TO OTHER GIRLS. IT'S TIME WE TAKE A MORE CRITICAL LOOK AT THESE STEREOTYPES.”

Dr. Marnina Gonick

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**GlassSKY:** What is your latest research showing?

**Dr. Gonick:** Interestingly, a whole market has exploded around ‘mean girls’ with the development of girl-specific resource material for teachers that is heavily marketed to schools. I examined these resource materials and also interviewed teachers, principals and self-identified former mean girls. The findings are concerning. Much of the teacher resource materials use evolution and biology to explain ‘mean girl’ behavior, insinuating that girls are hard-wired to compete with one another – all to be more attractive to males for reproduction. It reduces girls to their biology and implies girls are constantly competing with each other to win a male’s attention, and that they are constantly thinking about having babies. This is how teachers are being guided to think about girl bullying. The worksheets and exercises concentrate on encouraging girls to exhibit very traditional feminine characteristics conforming to cultural expectations. There is no support for helping to work through conflict, except to be nice, acquiesce and sacrifice one’s own goals. Also, there is limited-to-no discussion about non-traditional roles for girls.



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Our interviews with teachers and principals show how wide spread this notion of girls using psychology to bully, and boys using physical attacks has become. Yet, we see a rise in girls being physically intimidating, which tells us this theory is inadequate. It becomes a no-win for girls. There is really no way for them to fit in either scenario, yet physical aggression by boys continues to be seen as the norm, and as quite an acceptable way to work out differences. When girls use it, it is seen as pathological.

**GlassSKY:** So what’s the answer?

**Dr. Gonick:** We need to think about the pressure we put on girls these days and the contradictions they are presented with. We promote Girl Power and tell them they can do anything they want, but they still need to look a certain way and be liked by everyone. It’s enormous pressure for young girls to balance all of the mixed messages. I propose five areas for parents and teachers to focus the conversation:

1. Help girls identify and negotiate these types of contradictions. For example, find ways to help girls be assertive and direct in a socially acceptable manner.
2. Pay attention to social dynamics and how your child responds to mean-ness by girls as well as boys. Identify these openly and discuss them with your child so that she can deal constructively with challenging situations.
3. Move away from the notion of Relational Aggression and recognize that both girls and boys can use relationships to harm. One type of aggression is not better than another.
4. Create better teacher resources. For example, parents and teachers need to think about the idea of ‘belonging’ and how to create communities and inclusive public spaces so no one feels socially excluded.
5. Stop negative language that perpetuates the stereotype of girls being vicious and catty. Damaging labels create a psychological ceiling – just another barrier they need to overcome. Instead, we need to help girls identify their strengths and the types of personality traits they can amplify.

*Our thanks to Dr. Gonick, Canada Research Chair in Gender, Mount St. Vincent University*

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