

ODD *girl* OUT

the
hidden
culture of
aggression
in girls

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A HARVEST BOOK
HARCOURT, INC.

orlando austin
new york san diego
toronto london

introduction

When I was eight years old, I was bullied by another girl. I remember very little about that year. My memory is fractured by time and will. I was in the third grade, wore pigtails, and had a lisp. I was known to my teachers as a "rusher," the girl who tore through long-division worksheets and map quizzes, making careless mistakes I was told I could avoid. But I loved to finish first.

So did Abby. She was my popular friend, not a particularly close one. I still don't know why she did it. First she whispered about me to my best friend, who soon decided she'd be happier playing with other girls. When we went to dance class after school at the local community center, Abby rounded up my friends and convinced them to run away from me. Into the center's theater I would sprint after them, winded and frantic, eyes straining in the sudden darkness. Down over rows of slumbering chairs and up on the stage, I would follow the retreating patter of steps and fading peals of laughter.

Day after day I stood in half-lit empty hallways, a stairwell, the parking lot. In all of these places I remember standing alone. In the early evenings before dinner, I cried to my mother while she cooked.

The sorrow was overwhelming, and I was sure I was the only girl ever to know it. This is what I remember most.

Sixteen years later, I was attending graduate school in England. It was raining the day I rode my bike to the library in search of answers about what had happened with Abby. Exactly what pulled me there is hard to say. Something about the memory seemed terribly off-balance to me. On the one hand, I could remember few details. On the other, the anguish of being abandoned by all of my friends and of losing my closest at Abby's hand felt real and raw. It was something that never receded gently with the rest of my childhood memories. I wanted—I needed—to fill in the blanks.

That day, I carried with me the memory of a late night at college, when a casual midnight snack led to six of us confessing that an Abby haunted our past. It was exhilarating to discover we'd all been through the same ordeal. Like me, my friends had spent years believing they were the only ones.

Armed with that knowledge, I pedaled carefully along the slick streets, certain there would be volumes of books waiting to explain how and why girls bully each other. When my first few computer searches turned up next to nothing, I chalked it up to rusty research skills, or rushing. Then I called the librarian over for help. As it turned out, I'd been doing just fine on my own.

In a sea of articles on boys' aggression and bullying, there were only a small handful of articles about girls. There were no accessible books. No guides for parents. No cute survival manuals for kids. As I sat reading the articles, I could not see myself or Abby in what most of these researchers called bullying. I was first surprised, then frustrated.

I sent out an e-mail to everyone I knew in the States and asked them to forward it to as many women as they could. I asked a few simple questions: "Were you ever tormented or teased by another girl? Explain what it was like. How has it affected you today?" Within twenty-four hours my in box was flooded with responses from all over America. The messages piled up as women told their stories into

cyberspace with an emotional intensity that was undeniable. Even on the computer screen, their pain felt as fresh and unresolved as my own. Women I never met wrote that I would be the first person ever to hear their story. It would be a long time before I knew it was because I was the first to ask.

Silence is deeply woven into the fabric of the female experience. It is only in the last thirty years that we have begun to speak the distinctive truths of women's lives, openly addressing rape, incest, domestic violence, and women's health. Although these issues always existed, over time we have given them a place in our culture by building public consciousness, policy, and awareness.

Now it is time to end another silence: There is a hidden culture of girls' aggression in which bullying is epidemic, distinctive, and destructive. It is not marked by the direct physical and verbal behavior that is primarily the province of boys. Our culture refuses girls access to open conflict, and it forces their aggression into nonphysical, indirect, and covert forms. Girls use backbiting, exclusion, rumors, name-calling, and manipulation to inflict psychological pain on targeted victims. Unlike boys, who tend to bully acquaintances or strangers, girls frequently attack within tightly knit networks of friends, making aggression harder to identify and intensifying the damage to the victims.

Within the hidden culture of aggression, girls fight with body language and relationships instead of fists and knives. In this world, friendship is a weapon, and the sting of a shout pales in comparison to a day of someone's silence. There is no gesture more devastating than the back turning away.

In the hidden culture of aggression, anger is rarely articulated, and every day of school can be a new social minefield that realigns itself without warning. During times of conflict, girls will turn on one another with a language and justice only they can understand. Behind a facade of female intimacy lies a terrain traveled in secret, marked with anguish, and nourished by silence.

This is the world I want the reader to enter. It is where, beneath a chorus of voices, one girl glares at another, then smiles silently at her friend. The next day a ringleader passes around a secret petition asking girls to outline the reasons they hate the targeted girl. The day after that, the outcast sits silently next to the boys in class, head lowered, shoulders slumped forward. The damage is neat and quiet, the perpetrator and victim invisible.

Public awareness of bullying has grown in recent years, propelled by the tragedies of youth gun violence. The national conversation on bullying, however, has trained its spotlight mostly on boys and their aggression. Defining bullying in the narrowest of terms, it has focused entirely on physical and direct acts of violence. The aggression of girls, often hidden, indirect, and nonphysical, has gone unexplored. It has not even been called aggression, but instead "what girls do."

Yet women of every age know about it. Nearly all of us have been bystanders, victims, or bullies. So many have suffered quietly and tried to forget. Indeed, this has long been one of girlhood's dark, dirty secrets. Nearly every woman and girl has a story. It is time to break the silence.

I set out to interview girls between the ages of ten and fourteen, the years when bullying peaks. On my first day, I worked with several groups of ninth graders at a coed private school on the East Coast. My plan was to encourage an informal discussion guided by a list of questions I'd written down. Standing before each class, I introduced myself, explained my own history with bullying, and told the girls what we'd be discussing. Without fail, the girls would do a double take. *Talking about what? During class?* They snickered and whispered.

I started each session with the same question: "Do you think there are differences between the ways guys are mean to each other and the ways girls are mean to each other?" The whispering stopped. Then the hands flew like streamers. Suddenly, they couldn't talk fast

enough. Their banter was electric. The girls hooted, screeched, laughed, snorted, and veered off into personal stories, while notes flew around the room, accompanied by rolling eyes and searing and knowing glances.

It was exhausting. My carefully organized list of research questions grew stale in my hand.

Not a single one of my group discussions that day went according to plan. This, it turned out, was a good thing. I quickly understood that trying to box the girls' voices into my prearranged questions would make them think I was an authority figure, and this was the last thing I wanted to be. I wanted *them* to be the authorities. After all, they were living what I was trying to understand. It wasn't a tactic so much as an instinct.

The girls responded in kind. Over the months that followed, we traded e-mail and instant message handles, talked about music groups, new shoes, summer plans, and crushes. They showed and told me things their teachers and parents couldn't know about. We sometimes strayed from the topic at hand to talk about the pressures of school and family.

Over time, however, I realized there was another reason for the case we felt with one another. Most people who talk to kids about bullying approach the issue with the same message: Don't do it. Be nice to each other.

I came from the opposite place. My assumption was not that the girls ought not to be mean, but that they were; not that they should be nice, but that they weren't. I was there not to stop them, but because I wanted them to help other girls find a way to deal with it. If they wanted to participate in the group discussion, fine; if they didn't, they had to sit quietly and they couldn't bother the ones who did. Either way, I told them, they'd get a free snack out of it.

More often than not during the sessions, a girl would tell her own story of victimization. She might begin by replying to one of her classmates' remarks, and then, as though taken by surprise, slide into a slow, tearful remembering of her pain.

CHAPTER 0712

the hidden culture of
aggression in girls

The Linden School campus is nestled behind a web of sports fields that seem to hold at bay the bustling city in which it resides. On Monday morning in the Upper School building, students congregated languidly, catching up on the weekend, while others sat knees-to-chest on the floor, flipping through three-ring binders, cramming for tests. The students were dressed in styles that ran the gamut from trendy to what can only be described, at this age, as defiant. Watching them, it is easy to forget this school is one of the best in the region, its students anything but superficial. This is what I came to love about Linden: it celebrates academic rigor and the diversity of its students in equal parts. Over the course of a day with eight groups of ninth graders, I began each meeting with the same question: "What are some of the differences between the ways guys and girls are mean?"

From periods one through eight, I heard the same responses. "Girls can turn on you for anything," said one. "Girls whisper," said another. "They glare at you." With growing certainty, they fired out answers:

"Girls are secretive."

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"They destroy you from the inside."
 "Girls are manipulative."
 "There's an aspect of evil in girls that there isn't in boys."
 "Girls target you where they know you're weakest."
 "Girls do a lot behind each other's backs."
 "Girls plan and premeditate."
 "With guys you know where you stand."
 "I feel a lot safer with guys."

In bold, matter-of-fact voices, girls described themselves to me as disloyal, untrustworthy, and sneaky. They claimed girls use intimacy to manipulate and overpower others. They said girls are fake, using each other to move up the social hierarchy. They described girls as unforgiving and crafty, lying in wait for a moment of revenge that will catch the unwitting victim off guard and, with an almost savage eye-for-an-eye mentality, "make her feel the way I felt."

The girls' stories about their conflicts were casual and at times filled with self-hatred. In almost every group session I held, someone volunteered her wish to have been born a boy because boys can "fight and have it be over with."

Girls tell stories of their anger in a culture that does not define their behaviors as aggression. As a result, their narratives are filled with destructive myths about the inherent duplicity of females. As poet and essayist Adrienne Rich notes,² "We have been depicted as generally whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating."

Since the dawn of time, women and girls have been portrayed as jealous and underhanded, prone to betrayal, disobedience, and secrecy. Lacking a public identity or language, girls' nonphysical aggression is called "catty," "crafty," "evil," and "cunning." Rarely the object of research or critical thought, this behavior is seen as a natural phase in girls' development. As a result, schools write off girls' conflicts as a rite of passage, as simply "what girls do."

What would it mean to name girls' aggression? Why have myths and stereotypes served us so well and so long? Aggression is a powerful barometer of our social values. According to sociologist Anne Campbell, attitudes toward aggression cry-

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highlight sex roles, or the idea that we expect certain responsibilities to be assumed by males and females because of their sex.³ Riot girls and women's soccer notwithstanding, Western society still expects boys to become family providers and protectors, and girls to be nurturers and mothers. Aggression is the hallmark of masculinity; it enables men to control their environment and livelihoods. For better or for worse, boys enjoy total access to the rough and tumble. The link begins early: the popularity of boys is in large part determined by their willingness to play rough. They get peers' respect for athletic prowess, resisting authority, and acting tough, troublesome, dominating, cool, and confident.

On the other side of the aisle, females are expected to mature into caregivers, a role deeply at odds with aggression. Consider the ideal of the "good mother": She provides unconditional love and care for her family, whose health and daily supervision are her primary objectives. Her daughters are expected to be "sugar and spice and everything nice." They are to be sweet, caring, precious, and tender.

"Good girls" have friends, and lots of them. As nine-year-old Noura told psychologists Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, perfect girls have "perfect relationships."⁴ These girls are caretakers in training. They "never have any fights... and they are always together.... Like never arguing, like 'Oh yeah, I totally agree with you.'" In depressing relationships, Noura added, "someone is really jealous and starts being really mean.... [It's] where two really good friends break up."

A "good girl," journalist Peggy Orenstein observes in *Schoolgirls*, is "nice before she is anything else—before she is vigorous, bright, even before she is honest." She described the "perfect girl" as

the girl who has no bad thoughts or feelings, the kind of person everyone wants to be with.... [She is] the girl who speaks quietly, calmly, who is always nice and kind, never mean or bossy.... She reminds young women to silence themselves rather than speak their true feelings, which they come to consider "stupid," "selfish," "rude," or just plain irrelevant.⁵

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"Good girls," then, are expected not to experience anger. Aggression endangers relationships, imperiling a girl's ability to be caring and "nice." Aggression undermines who girls have been raised to become.

Calling the anger of girls by its name would therefore challenge the most basic assumptions we make about "good girls." It would also reveal what the culture does not entitle them to by defining what *nice* really means: *Not* aggressive. *Not* angry. *Not* in conflict.

Research confirms that parents and teachers discourage the emergence of physical and direct aggression in girls early on while the skirmishing of boys is either encouraged or shrugged off.⁶ In one example, a 1999 University of Michigan study found that girls were told to be quiet, speak softly, or use a "nicer" voice about three times more often than boys, even though the boys were louder. By the time they are of school age, peers solidify the fault lines on the playground, creating social groups that value niceness in girls and toughness in boys.

The culture derides aggression in girls as unfeminine, a trend explored in chapter four. "Bitch," "lesbian," "frigid," and "manly" are just a few of the names an assertive girl hears. Each epithet points out the violation of her prescribed role as a caregiver: the bitch likes and is liked by no one; the lesbian loves not a man or children but another woman; the frigid woman is cold, unable to respond sexually; and the manly woman is too hard to love or be loved.

Girls, meanwhile, are acutely aware of the culture's double standard. They are not fooled into believing this is the so-called post-feminist age, the girl power victory lap. The rules are different for boys, and girls know it. Flagrant displays of aggression are punished with social rejection.

At Sackler Day School, I was eating lunch with sixth graders during recess, talking about how teachers expected them to behave at school. Ashley, silver-rimmed glasses snug on her tiny nose, looked very serious as she raised her hand.

"They expect us to act like girls back in the 1800s!" she said indignantly. Everyone cracked up.

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"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, sometimes they're like, you have to respect each other, and that other people how you want to be treated. But that's not how life is. Everyone can be mean sometimes and they're not even realizing it. They expect that you're going to be so nice to everyone and you'll be so cool. Be nice to everyone!" she mimicked, her suddenly loud voice betraying something more than sarcasm.

"But it's not true," Nicole said. The room is quiet.

"Anyone else?" I asked.

"They expect you to be perfect. You're nice. When boys do bad stuff, they all know they're going to do bad stuff. When girls do it, they yell at them," Dina said.

"Teachers think that girls should be really nice and sharing and not get in any fights. They think it's worse than it really is," Shira added.

"They expect you be perfect angels and then sometimes we don't want to be considered a perfect angel," Laura noted.

"The teacher says if you do something good, you'll get something good back, and then she makes you feel like you really should be," Ashley continued. "I try not to be mean to my sister or my mom and dad, and I wake up the next day and I just do it naturally. I'm not an angel! I try to be focused on it, but then I wake up the next day and I'm cranky."

In Ridgewood, I listened to sixth graders muse about what teachers expect from girls. Heather raised her hand.

"They just don't..." She stopped. No one picked up the slack.

"Finish the sentence," I urged.

"They expect you to be nice like them, like they supposedly are, but..."

"But what?"

"We're not."

"I don't go around being like goody-goody," said Tammy.

"What does goody-goody mean?" I asked.

"You're supposed to be sitting like this"—Tammy crossed her legs and folded her hands primly over her knees—"the whole time."

"And be nice—and don't talk during class," said Torie.

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"Do you always feel nice?" I asked.
"No!" several of them exclaimed.
"So what happens?"

"It's like you just—the bad part controls over your body," Tammy said. "You want to be nice and you want to be bad at the same time, and the bad part gets to you. You think?"—she contorted her face and gritted her teeth—"I have to be nice."

"You just want to tell them to shut up! You just feel like pushing them out of the way and throwing them on the ground!" said Britney. "I wanted to do it like five hundred times last year to this girl. If I didn't push her, I just walked off and tried to stay calm."

Try as they might, most girls can't erase the natural impulses toward anger that every human being knows. Yet the early research on aggression turned the myth of the "good," nonaggressive girl into fact: The first experiments on aggression were performed with almost no female subjects. Since males tend to exhibit aggression directly, researchers concluded aggression was expressed in only this way. Other forms of aggression, when they were observed, were labeled deviant or ignored.

Studies of bullying inherited these early research flaws. Most psychologists looked for direct aggressions like punching, threatening, or teasing. Scientists also measured aggression in environments where indirect acts would be almost impossible to observe. Seen through the eyes of scientists, the social lives of girls appeared still and placid as lakes. It was not until 1992 that someone would question what lay beneath the surface.

That year, a group of Norwegian researchers published an unprecedented study of girls. They discovered that girls were not at all averse to aggression, they just expressed anger in unconventional ways. The group predicted that "when aggression cannot, for one reason or another, be directed (physically or verbally) at its target, the perpetrator has to find other channels." The findings bore out their theory: cultural rules against overt aggression led girls to en-

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in other, nonphysical forms of aggression. In a conclusion uncharacteristic for the strength of its tone, the researchers challenged the image of sweetness among female youth, calling their social lives "unlithless," "aggressive," and "cruel."⁷

Since then, a small group of psychologists at the University of Minnesota has built upon these findings, identifying three subcategories of aggressive behavior: relational, indirect, and social aggression. *Relational aggression* includes acts that "harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion."⁸ Relationally aggressive behavior is ignoring someone to punish them or get one's own way, excluding someone socially for revenge, using negative body language or facial expressions, sabotaging someone else's relationships, or threatening to end a relationship unless the friend agrees to a request. In these acts, the perpetrator uses her relationship with the victim as a weapon.

Close relatives of relational aggression are indirect aggression and social aggression. *Indirect aggression* allows the perpetrator to avoid confronting her target. It is covert behavior in which the perpetrator makes it seem as though there has been no intent to hurt at all. One way this is possible is by using others as vehicles for inflicting pain on a targeted person, such as by spreading a rumor. *Social aggression* is intended to damage self-esteem or social status within a group. It includes some indirect aggression like rumor spreading or social exclusion. Throughout the book, I refer to these behaviors collectively as *alternative aggressions*. As the stories in the book make clear, alternative aggressions often appear in conjunction with more direct behaviors. . . .



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relationship and loss

At first glance, the stories of girls not being allowed to eat at the lunch table, attend a party, put their sleeping bag in the middle, or squeeze inside a circle of giggling girls may seem childish. Yet as Carol Gilligan has shown, relationships play an unusually important role in girls' social development. In her work with girls and boys, she found that girls perceive danger in their lives as isolation, especially the fear that by standing out they will be abandoned. Boys, however, describe danger as a fear of entrapment or smothering. This contrast, Gilligan argues, shows that women's development "points toward a different history of human attachment, stressing continuity and change instead of replacement and separation. The primacy of relationship and attachment in the female life also indicates a different experience of and response to loss."¹⁰ The centrality of relationship in girls' lives all but guarantees a different landscape of aggression and bullying, with its own distinctive features worthy of separate study.

To understand girls' conflicts, one must also know girls' intimacy, because intimacy and anger are often inextricable. The intensity of girls' relationships belongs at the center of any analysis of girls' aggression. For long before they love boys, girls love each other, and with great passion.

Girls enjoy unrestricted access to intimacy. Unlike boys, who are encouraged to separate from their mothers and adopt masculine postures of emotional restraint, daughters are urged to identify with the nurturing behavior of their mothers. Girls spend their childhood practicing caretaking and nurturing on each other. It is with best friends that they first discover the joys of intimacy and human connection.

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Yet ours is a culture that has ignored the closeness of girlfriends. Many people believe girls should reserve their true emotions for boys, and that girls should channel their caretaking toward husbands and children. Anything up to that life stage is assumed to be practice, if not insignificant.¹¹

In fact, it is the deep knowledge girls have of relationship, and the passion they lavish on their closest friends, which characterizes much of their aggression. The most painful attacks are usually fashioned from deep inside a close friendship and are fueled by secrets and once-shared weaknesses.

Moreover, the relationship itself is often the weapon with which girls' battles are fought. Socialized away from aggression, expected to be nice girls who have "perfect relationships," many girls are unprepared to negotiate conflict. As a result, a minor disagreement can call an entire relationship into question.

What do I mean by this? In a normal conflict, two people use language, voice, or fists to settle their dispute. The relationship between them is secondary to the issue being worked out. But when anger cannot be voiced, and when the skills to handle a conflict are absent, the specific matter cannot be addressed. If neither girl wants to be "not nice," the relationship itself may become the problem. And when there are no other tools to use in a conflict, relationship itself may become a weapon.

Since relationship is precisely what good, "perfect" girls are expected to be in, its loss, and the prospect of solitude, can be the most pointed weapons in the hidden culture of girls' aggression.

During her interviews with adults, sociologist Anne Campbell found that where men viewed aggression as a means to control their environment and integrity, women believed it would terminate their relationships.¹² I discovered identical attitudes in my conversations with girls. Expressing fear that even everyday acts of conflict, not to mention severe aggressive outbursts, would result in the loss of the people they most cared about, they refused to engage in even the most basic acts of conflict. Their equation was simple: conflict = loss.

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Like clockwork, girl after girl told me twenty variations on the following remark: "I can't tell her how I feel or else she won't want to be my friend anymore." The corollary works like this: "I just don't want to hurt anyone directly, because I want to be friends with everyone."

Fear of solitude is overpowering. In fact, what victims of bullying recalled most to me was their loneliness. Despite the cruel things that happened—the torrents of vulgar e-mail and unsigned notes, the whispered rumors, the slanderous scribbles on desks and walls and lockers, the sneering and name-calling—what crushed girls was being alone. It was as though the absence of bodies nearby with whom to whisper and share triggered in girls a sorrow and fear so profound as to nearly extinguish them.

Girls may try to avoid being alone at all costs, including remaining in an abusive friendship. "You don't want to walk alone at recess," a sixth grader explained when I asked why she wouldn't stay away from a mean friend. "Who are you going to tell your secrets to? Who are you going to help and stuff like that?" An eighth grader, recalling a television documentary, remarked plaintively, "If a female lion is alone, she dies. She has to be part of the group."

As girls mature, the prospect of being seen alone by others becomes just as daunting. They know that "perfect girls" have "perfect relationships." "Walking through a hall and feeling like everyone's looking at you is the worst," a Linden ninth grader told me. "People who are alone are pitied and no one wants to be pitied. They're secluded. Something's wrong with them. Being seen as a loner is one of our biggest fears." Driven by the fear of exclusion, girls cling to their friends like lifeboats on the shifting seas of school life, certain that to be alone is the worst horror imaginable.

Every child, boy or girl, desires acceptance and connection. Most boys would not prefer or even tolerate being alone. Yet as girls grow up, friendship becomes as important as air, and they describe the punishment of loneliness in dramatic terms. "I was so depressed," Sarah explained. "I sat in class with no friends. Everything I cared

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about completely crumbled." A fifth grader said of her solitude, "It was like my heart was breaking."

it's just a phase

When thirteen-year-old Sherry's friends suddenly stopped speaking to her, her father, worried for his devastated daughter, approached a friend's mother to find out what happened. She was overwhelmed. "Girls will be girls," she said. It's typical girl behavior, nothing to be worried about, a phase girls go through. It will pass. "You are making a mountain out of a molehill," she told him. "What are you getting so upset about?"

Her remarks echo the prevailing wisdom about alternative aggression between girls: girl bullying is a rite of passage, a stage they will outgrow. As one school counselor put it to me, "It's always been this way. It will always be this way. There's nothing we can do about it." Girl bullying, many believe, is a nasty developmental storm we have no choice but to accept. Yet the rite-of-passage argument paralyzes our thinking about how the culture shapes girls' behavior. Most importantly, it stunts the development of anti-bullying strategies.

The rite-of-passage theory suggests several disturbing assumptions about girls. First, it implies that there is nothing we can do to prevent girls from behaving in these ways because it's in their developmental tea leaves to do it. In other words, because so many girls engage in alternative aggressions, they must be naturally predisposed to them. Bullying as a rite of passage also suggests that it is necessary and even positive that girls learn how to relate with each other in these ways. Rites of passage, after all, are rituals that mark the transformation of an individual from one status to another. So the rite of passage means that girls are becoming acquainted with what is in store for them later as adults. Because adult women behave in this way, it means it's acceptable and must be prepared for. (Many despairing mothers I spoke with, as well as those who shrugged off the

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bullying, confided a sense of consolation that their girls were learning what they'd come to know sooner or later.)

The third assumption emerges directly from the first two: it suggests that because it is universal and instructive, meanness among girls is a natural part of their social structure to be tolerated and expected. And there is one final assumption, the most insidious of all: the abuse girls subject each other to is, in fact, not abuse at all.

I have heard schools decline to intervene in girls' conflicts because they do not want to interfere in the "emotional lives" of students. This philosophy makes two value judgments about girls' relationships: it suggests that unlike aggressive episodes between the sexes, which are analyzed by lawyers and plastered on evening news programs, problems between girls are insignificant, episodes that will taper off as girls become more involved with boys.

Second, it trivializes the role of peers in children's development, turning into school policy the myth that childhood is "training for life," rather than life itself. A strategy of noninterference resists the truth of girls' friendships, remains aloof from the heart of their interpersonal problems, and devalues the emotional intensity that leaves permanent marks on their self-esteem.

Yet there is an even simpler reason why schools have ignored girls' aggression. They need order in the classroom. On any given day, the typical teacher is racing against the clock to meet a long list of obligations. She must complete her lesson plans, fulfill district and state standards requirements, administer tests, and occasionally find time for a birthday party. Like an emergency room doctor, the teacher must perform triage on her discipline problems. Disruptions are caught on the fly and met with swift punishment. Generally, boys are more disorderly. Girls, ever the intuiters of adult stress, know that passing a nasty note or shooting mean looks like rubber bands is unlikely to draw the attention of an exhausted teacher who is intent on completing her lesson plan.

When she sees a perpetrating girl, a teacher has little or no incentive to stop the class. Taking the time to address relational discord is

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is not always as easy as yelling at a boy to remove his peer from the trash can. As a sixth grader explained to me, "Teachers separate the boys." Relational problems, however, demand attention to someone that is more complex. Invariably, the teacher is far more concerned with the boys flinging balls of paper and distracting the other students.

Schools lack consistent public strategies for dealing with alternative aggressions. In the absence of a shared language to identify and discuss the behavior, student harassment policies are generally vague and favor acts of physical or direct violence. The structure of school days also complicates teacher intervention: in many schools, for instance, lunch aides supervise at recess, when bullying is rampant.

Since alternative aggressions have been largely ignored, their real-life manifestations are often seen through the lens of more "valid" social problems. For example, at many schools, the threat "do this or I won't be your friend anymore" is considered peer pressure, not relational aggression. In academic writings, researchers explain girls' manipulation of relationships as a form of precocity or a way to "establish central position and to dominate the definition of the group's boundaries." Some psychologists classify teasing and nasty jokes as developmentally healthy experiences. They call rumors and gossip spreading "boundary maintenance."¹³

Also common is the assessing of the targets of meanness among girls as having a social skills deficit. According to this school of thought, bullied children are obviously doing something wrong if they are attracting the social abuse of others. This usually puts the onus on the victim, who must toughen up or learn to integrate socially. Perhaps she is responding to social situations inappropriately, failing to "read" the feelings and attitudes of others correctly. Perhaps she needs to pay more attention to clothing trends. Perhaps she is too needy, daring, as one book lamented, to say "Let's be friends" instead of the more subtle "Let's go to the mall this weekend."

Relational aggression in particular is easily mistaken for a social skills problem. When a girl is nice one day and cruel the next, or is

possessive, or overreacts to another child, the behavior can be interpreted as a sign of delayed development. This is an especially insidious problem because the victims may be encouraged to show patience and respect to their perpetrators. In the course of things, the aggressive aspect of the behavior is lost, and the perpetrator is left alone.

Most disturbingly, what the victim understands to be true about her own feeling of injury is denied by adults. Since perpetrators are often friends, girls, ever compassionate, spring easily to the rescue with their endless understanding shown human mistakes. Annie, who is profiled in chapter two, remembered Samantha, the girl who made her cry all night, with whom she was still friends. "Right now Samantha has a lot of friends and is more socially skilled," Annie explained. "But back then she wasn't really... If she had a friend, and if they said some slight thing to her, she would think that it was the most offensive thing that anyone's ever said to her. I don't think I really ever said [this was wrong]. I think she was trying to keep the friendship just as she could have it." In order to be a good friend, Annie showed compassion for Samantha's social limitations while shelving her own painful feelings.

Misdiagnosing bullying as a social skills problem makes perfect sense in a culture that demands perfect relationships of its girls at any cost. Social skills proponents claim that the best interactions are situation appropriate and reinforced by others, reflecting abilities in which girls are already well schooled. Indeed, the majority of female bullying incidents occur at the behest of a ringleader whose power lies in her ability to maintain a facade of girlish tranquility in the course of sustained, covert peer abuse. She also directs social consensus among the group. As far as the social skills school is concerned, then, girl bullies appear from the outside to be doing A-plus work. At one school trying the social skills solution, for example, the mean girls were simply urged to be more "discreet."

The trouble with the social skills argument is that it does not question the existence of meanness, it explains and justifies it. As a result, it has helped alternative aggressions to persist unquestioned.

As they try fiercely to be nice and stay in perfect relationships, girls are forced into a game of tug-of-war with their own aggression. At times girls' anger may break the surface of their niceness, while others it may only linger below it, sending confusing messages to their peers. As a result, friends are often forced to second-guess themselves and each other. Over time, many grow to mistrust what others say they are feeling.

The sequestering of anger not only alters the forms in which aggression is expressed, but also how it is perceived. Anger may flash on and off with lightning speed, making the victim question what happened—or indeed whether anything happened at all. *Did she just look at her when I said that? Was she joking? Did she roll her eyes? Not mine the seat on purpose? Lie about her plans? Tell me that she'd invited me when she hadn't?*

Girls will begin summoning the strength to confront alternative expressions when we chart them out in their various shapes and forms, overt and covert. We need to freeze those fleeting moments and name them so that girls are no longer besieged by doubt about what's happening, so that they no longer believe it's their fault when it does...

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Relational aggression starts in preschool, and so do the first signs of child abuse. The behavior is thought to begin as soon as children become capable of meaningful relationships. By age three, more girls than boys are relationally aggressive, a schism that only widens as children mature. In a series of studies, children cited relational aggression as the "most common angry, hurtful... behavior enacted in their peer groups," regardless of the target's sex. By middle childhood, the leading researchers in the field report that "physical aggressors are mostly boys, relational aggressors mostly girls."

Relational aggression harms others "through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion."¹⁴ It includes any act in which relationship is used as a weapon, including manipulation. First identified in 1992, it is the heart of the alternative aggressions, and for many girls an emotionally wrenching experience.

Relational aggression can include indirect aggression, in which the target is not directly confronted (such as the silent treatment), and some social aggression, which targets the victim's self-esteem or social status (such as rumor spreading). Among the most common forms of relational aggression are "do this or I won't be your friend anymore," ganging up against a girl, the silent treatment, and non-verbal gesturing, or body language.¹⁶

The lifeblood of relational aggression is relationship. As a result, most relational aggression occurs within intimate social or friendship networks. The closer the target to the perpetrator, the more cutting the loss. As one Linden freshman put it, "Your friends know you and how to hurt you. They know what your real weaknesses are. They know exactly what to do to destroy someone's self-worth. They try to destroy you from the inside." Such pointed meanness, an eighth grader explained to me, "can stay with you for your entire life. It can define who you are."¹⁵

[REDACTED]

Today's girls come of age in a world that has replaced the glass ceiling with a space station. The twenty-first-century girl is a pro ballplayer, a CEO-in-training, a fighter pilot. She is anything she wants to be. Today, girl power is a cultural juggernaut.

And yet. The message that modesty and restraint are the essence of femininity persists. Contemporary feminist research shows that our culture continues to pressure girls to be chaste, quiet, thin, and giving, denying the desire for sexual pleasure, voice, food, and self-interest.²⁴

In schools, the American Association of University Women found "the lessons of the hidden curriculum teach girls to value silence and compliance, to view those qualities as a virtue." Journalist Peggy Orenstein found that girls value in each other social characteristics of "sweet" and "cute," a term she found interchangeable with "deferential," "politic," or "passive." The good girl, Orenstein concluded, "is nice before she is anything else—before she is vigorous, bright, even before she is honest."²⁵

Small wonder that singer Ani DiFranco is telling her legions of young female fans that everyone secretly hates the prettiest girl in the room. Or, she might have added, the most popular, the smartest, the thinnest, the sexiest, or the best dressed. Because, girl power or not, most girls know deep down that standing out can get you in big trouble. In *USA Today*,²⁶ a Virginia high school teacher warned of a dangerous trip wire for girls at his school. Although a new student is usually ignored, he wrote, "as soon as she becomes a threat, especially if guys like her, she'll get ripped apart."²⁷

Researchers have nailed down some broad ideas about what makes girls popular, but they remind me of my mom out to dinner without her reading glasses: She knows what restaurant we're at, but she can't read the menu. When a prominent research team observed students at an Ohio public elementary school, they witnessed the most pronounced sex differences in popularity politics. For girls, they concluded, success was having money, good looks, and "social development," which they defined as the "early attainment of adult social characteristics."²⁸ Which most mothers could have told them without the trouble of a formal study...

As parents with a pulse know, popular girls get maximum access to the booty of womanhood. The cool girls are the first to discover makeup and boys. They get the parents born without genes for party supervision, bedtime setting, and credit card control. They look and act like they just stepped off the pages of a Delia's catalog. They do just about everything and anything to simulate womanhood.

But here is the truth about girls and popularity: It is a cutthroat contest into which girls pour boundless energy and anxiety. It is an addiction, a siren call, a prize for which some would pay any price. Popularity changes girls, causes a great many of them to lie and cheat and steal. They lie to be accepted, cheat their friends by using them, steal people's secrets to resell at a higher social price. It is an accepted fact of life, an eleven-year-old advised me, that "if girls have a chance to be popular, they will take it, and they wouldn't really care who they were hurting."

Women have long relied upon their affiliations with others to enhance social status, and at its core, popularity is a mean and merciless competition for relationships. When women lacked earning power and equality, they were especially inclined to "marry up: to marry men who are taller, richer, older, stronger, with at least the promise of more social clout."³⁹ Despite the advent of girl power, many girls today cut their friendships from the same cloth. Lexie remembers the thrill of having a popular friend. "It meant so much for me and my self-esteem," she told me. "I used to drop her name in conversation with friends or write her name in my schoolbooks because I wanted people to know that Susan K., one of the cool girls, liked *me!*" Jessie Johnston, a sixth grader, explained, "It's pressure you put on yourself. I wish she was my best friend because she's really popular and that would make me popular, too." A high school junior put it more bluntly: "You use people to advance up the hierarchy."

The truth about popularity

It may come as a surprise, but once a girl gets her coveted status, popularity is no walk in the park. Competition and insecurity are rampant. When popular girls talk about their social lives, many of them talk about losing themselves. Their feelings closely mirror the conclusions psychologists associate with girls' loss of self-esteem.

Corinna, a sixth grader, was devastated when she lost one of her close friends to the popular clique. The girl and her new friends would "talk and walk very close together, and if one of their other friends said hi, they won't, they don't, they can't hear," she remembered. Corinna set out to be included in the popular group

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and eventually won her way in. Once she was the one excluding her other friends from the popular crowd, Corinna felt dislocated and strange. "I know that I am kind of excluding [my other less popular friends] and I don't want to do that. But I feel like it's literally a bubble or something, and you get sucked in and then when you go out and stuff, it's just like so weird." She paused. "It's like, you go in, it's like, all of this talk and I don't know what else. They talk about boys and all these things. They have inside jokes that I don't really get."

I asked what it felt like inside the bubble.

"It kind of feels good because I'm like included, but then again I know these aren't the best friends for me," she explained. Here Corinna echoes the observations of Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan: she has sacrificed her connection to her true feelings in order to remain in less authentic relationships with others.⁴⁰ In the process, she becomes disconnected from herself.

"I belong but I don't belong," she continued. "I fit into a lot of groups but I'm not part of any group. I'm walking around alone at recess. Sometimes I feel like I have so many friends but sometimes I feel like I have none, and everyone likes me or maybe they're just being nice." And sometimes, she said later, "sometimes I'll get sad and go into a shell even though I'm a happy-go-lucky person."

At Linden, Alexis, an extremely popular freshman, confided how hard it can be to keep up with other girls. "You don't trust anyone. You're totally insecure. To everyone you look fine, but it's very fake." Her friend Sarah agreed. "Are you my friend because of me or because I know this guy? False friendships are kept up for image all the time."

Now a sophomore, Lily Carter told me, "It takes so much more effort to be a part of that group than not to because when you're in that group it's so intense. It's like every second of every day you have to be perfect. You need to be perfect, your makeup needs to be perfect, you need to be wearing the perfect clothes. Your whole presence needs to be perfect, the way people look at you, the way you look at yourself. You know, I mean, what you say, everything you

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how the guys treat you, everything has to be perfect. . . [The whole part] is that you're not perfect. That you're not doing everything perfectly. And that one day, you're going to wake up and you're just not going to be popular. And you're not going to have those friends anymore."

The closer they edge toward the center of the clique, the more some girls are urged to silence their own authentic voices. A few spoke to me wistfully of wanting to appear less "hyper," while some mentioned friends who warned that boisterous play was inappropriate and unattractive. These girls feel like they are no longer entitled to "be myself."⁴¹

When the politics of popularity devastate girls' relationships, the loss is multilayered. A girl is abandoned by someone she loves and trusts. The loss signals her low social value, an event that shrinks her self-esteem and for which she blames herself. She learns a new, dark understanding of relationship as a tool. And where the abandonment is public and followed by cruelty, there is public scorn and shame. For the newly popular girl, there is the danger of losing herself as she moves on and up into the "bubble."

The rules of popularity require that the girl who has arrived police herself as harshly as others do to maintain her status. The myth that popular girls are blissfully content couldn't be more wrong. The closer you get to the epicenter of popularity, the more perilous it gets. "Even though it looks secure, it's the most insecure thing in the world," Erin told me. "Everything changes in there. You compete with those five people every day: who does things first, who looks the best. It's hard and competitive. There's so much insecurity and fighting because you're selfish."

Game over. In a culture that cannot decide who it wants them to be, girls are being asked to become the sum of our confusion. Girls make sense of our mixed messages by deciding to behave indirectly, deducing that manipulation—the sum of power and passivity—is the best route to power. The media reinforces this culture of indirection, prompting duplicity and evasion in girls.

The culture of indirection reflects a desire to have it both ways—to give girls the world but keep them on a leash. It is *yes, but*; *yes*, you may be anything you want, *but* only if you don't stray beyond the parameters of what is acceptable.