

Tips for Parents

- Daughters and ‘Mean Girls’ -

Tip 1: Be interested, attuned and engaged.

If you raise or mentor a girl, be proactive in educating her to understand the world around her. Help her decipher, sort through, and challenge all the gender messages and gender stereotypes she sees, hears and accepts as fact. She needs to seriously consider what she is being asked *to do* or who she is being asked *to be*. Start as early as possible in her life to address issues that allow her to make more conscious choices about the girl and woman she would like to be in the world.

As a mom, you serve as the best model for your daughter to learn how to be a loving and compassionate person. Be engaged – be interested – ask questions . . . and lead. Lead with your compassion. Don’t try to follow what she does so you can be a “cool” mom. Believe it or not, parents lose credibility when they behave this way. Your daughter will closely observe everything you do in life; along with clothing, food, money, dating, marriage, work, friends, or self-discipline, she will notice how you handle your feelings and express yourself.

As a dad, your daughter will benefit greatly if you stay actively interested and engaged in what she is doing. Show her you are interested by setting aside time for the two of you to talk – ideally, on a regular basis. Your consistent support and interest will strengthen her. Ask how she is doing in all aspects of her life – school, dating, outside activities or hobbies, and also her friendships. Does she have friends she can lean on that she values and trusts? How are her friends treating her? By all means, take her seriously.

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Tip 2: Be a great observer.

If even we don't mean to be, we are always communicating something with our behavior. It's true for your daughter too. As a parent, it's important that you pay attention to all aspects of your daughter's behavior – what she says, how she says it and just as importantly, her behavior. Don't question or dismiss what you observe. Follow up by directly asking your daughter about the behaviors you see, and most importantly, don't be talked out of or accept your daughter "playing down" or saying "it's no big deal" about hurtful situations she describes to you. It is a big deal and the negative effects of being hurt over the long term often involve depression, assaults to self-esteem and/or poor or low quality relationships or friends in adulthood. Though some of these behaviors may seem common to adolescence and hormonal changes, it is important to check. Watch for major changes. Below are a variety of behaviors you can watch for as possible indicators that your daughter is struggling with or suffering bullying at school.

Fear of going to school, school avoidance or absenteeism from school

Appearing secretive, sullen, or moody

Anxiety, depression or sleeping problems

Eating disorders (losing weight/anorexia; bulimia; gaining weight/binge eating)

Rebelliousness

Social withdrawal / distancing from all friends

Self-mutilation (cutting, burning, picking, piercing, etc.)

Torn clothes and bruises

Excessive timidity

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Tip 3: Help your daughter learn how to handle unpleasant feelings.

With the anticipated challenges, frustrations, and conflicts that occur as a child ages, you can help provide your daughter an opportunity to practice handling unpleasant feelings and difficult conflicts simultaneously. Poor or ineffective handling of one's own feelings (especially anger, disappointment, embarrassment, competitiveness, jealousy or envy) is at the base of hurtful and bullying behavior. It is crucial, then, that a girl learns how to manage (tolerate) unpleasant and uncomfortable feelings so she doesn't take these feelings out on vulnerable and unsuspecting targets. Once she has achieved relative comfort or success doing so, then it's important to teach her how to more directly and effectively express angry or competitive feelings. Learning constructive responses to these feelings can prevent destructive expressions of anger outward (e.g. bullying) or inward (self-mutilation, eating disorders, or drug use).

One place to start is for you to model appropriate use of anger and direct expression of it within your own relationships (e.g. with your spouse/partner or friends); it can help girls understand more about how to handle their own angry feelings. It can also help girls understand that conflicts naturally occur in relationships and friendships and that these conflicts can be resolved in a direct and loving manner without damaging the friendship. Girls must also learn that revenge is not the proper response to an experience of having been "wronged."

Help your daughter talk about the whole range of painful feelings she experiences. Talking validates her experience and helps her better manage difficult feelings. Hard to talk? Suggest drawing or journaling as other outlets for expressing herself. She may have to go through the messiness of learning how to get the words out—even if it is uncomfortable.

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Tip 4: Help her learn how to express anger & handle conflict more effectively.

You will have multiple opportunities to observe girls be hurtful and hostile with friends and peers. The incidents between children (and there will be many) create opportunities to talk openly and forthrightly with your daughter about “girlfighting.” Using discretion, confront the behaviors when they occur. These are times to talk with your daughter about how relationships work and how she can build friendships that are enduring and authentic. Talk about how conflicts are a natural part of relationships, that all relationships involve learning to manage uncomfortable or unpleasant feelings (most notably feelings of anger, disappointment, jealousy, sadness), and that the healthiest and most effective means to creating authentic and enduring relationships is to tell the truth within them. It’s important to teach your daughter to express such feelings in a direct and compassionate manner, as opposed to engaging in undercutting, undermining, and hurtful or aggressive behaviors.

Stopping mean behavior does not mean stopping anger. Whatever your role, you need to tolerate and be responsive to the anger you witness or hear. If anger is the only response she has, help her identify and be in touch with the issues and hurt hiding underneath her anger. There may be important concerns to address. If her anger seems appropriate to the situation but her aggressive response is not (or she has been a target of such aggression), then this is a perfect opportunity to help her effectively express feelings of anger.

Be interested and responsive to your daughter’s anger as this anger is about self-respect and indicates a girl is taking herself seriously; using it for bullying is really about displaced anger or about other displaced uncomfortable feelings. When you respond to her anger it can also help

your daughter develop a sense of fairness and justice. And if you observe hurtful and hostile behavior, you can use these opportunities to model respect and caring and to address other important issues (e.g. how to stand up for herself, expectations of friendships).

Generally “mean girls” are ridiculed and isolated. Think about and talk about both sides of the situation—who is/was the aggressor and who is/was being hurt. Why were mean or excluding behaviors chosen as the means for dealing with the situation? Go after the deeper issues involved with meanness as a strategy for problem solving and the cost to relationships and authenticity.

Finally, challenge and confront the angry and aggressive behaviors that girls turn inward. If you observe signs that suggest girls are behaving in directly self-destructive behaviors (e.g. eating disorders, self-mutilation), understand that these actions represent anger and aggression turned inward. They are acts steeped in self-hatred.

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Tip 5: Help her learn how to evaluate the messages she see and hears.

A girl learns “how to be a girl” very early in life. As your daughter grows up, you can help make her aware of the subtle and not-so-subtle influences on what she is being asked to value, how to behave, what she aspires to, and who she is encouraged to become. To these ends, you can help your daughter learn how to think critically about all the different ways she is influenced in her life. Awareness leads to greater choice, even in youth and adolescence.

Help her learn to critique the messages to which she is almost endlessly exposed. This skill requires becoming media literate. What is *media literacy*? The *New Mexico Media Literacy Project* (www.nmmlp.org) describes media literacy as the ability to critically consume (watch, read, or listen) and create media.

Media literacy helps girls understand the obvious (or superficial content) of each media message and the less obvious messages and meanings (the subtext) that are hidden beneath the surface. Drawing directly from *The New Mexico Media Literacy Project*, here is a sampling of some of the media skills one can develop, regardless of age:

1. Understand how media messages create meaning
2. Identify who created a particular media message
3. Recognize what the media maker wants us to believe or do
4. Name the “tools of persuasion” used
5. Recognize bias, spin, misinformation, and lies
6. Discover the part of the story that’s not being told
7. Evaluate media messages based on your own experiences, beliefs, and values

Help your daughter become an informed consumer. When she is media literate, she can effectively decipher the complex messages she sees and hears from all forms of media (e.g. TV, radio, recorded music, Internet, newspapers, magazines, books, videos/DVDs, video games, games and toys and other media, or marketing through TV ads, billboards and packaging). Such knowledge can help her decide how she wants to spend her time, energy and money.

Learn how to watch and listen with critical eyes and ears. Whether it is on radio (from Ryan Seacrest to Rush Limbaugh to Howard Stern to National Public Radio or Pacifica Radio), or on TV or film, look and listen for the deeper messages. First, take time to think about your daughter's viewing and listening patterns . . . what does she watch? Who does she listen to? Second, have her pay attention to the issues or content on which they commonly focus. What consistent themes do they address? Who supports their programming? What do they want her to believe or buy? Third, encourage her to be less emotionally involved as she watches or listens to particular programs. Have her step back. Can she be less invested in each of the character's lives? See some of the programs like the *Bad Girls Club* more as a situation comedy. Lastly, have her think about it . . . are these girls and women people she truly wants to emulate? What messages are they conveying about girls? About women?

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Tip 6: Change the culture and take the fun out of bullying.

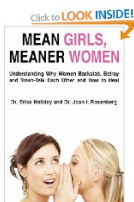
Media influence is heavy and often emphasizes popularity through dominance rather than through kindness, humor, helpfulness or acceptance. You can help change our culture to a more accepting one as you stand up and demand something different and better for your daughter.

Here are a number of other possibilities:

You can meet with the parents of the child/children who are bullying your daughter. This is an option regardless of your daughter's pleas not to (e.g. she doesn't want to be embarrassed). You are in charge of your daughter's protection. Short-term embarrassment or anger is much better than long-term psychological scars or other emotional problems. Likewise, engage responsible school authorities and make sure they are aware of and responding to the problem.

Schools need to systematically address bullying. A "no tolerance" policy should be in effect. Rules need to be clearly stated and consistently enforced with predictable consequences made known. It's critically important to empower peers who are bystanders to respond to bullying without risking their own safety, especially if the bystander comforts the bullied peer. Equally as important is empowering the bystander to report the bullying to a trusted adult - - bullying requires adult intervention.

Finally, remove your daughter from the damaging environment if the problem is unrelenting. Her long-term mental health and well-being requires it.



To learn more see [Mean Girls, Meaner Women](#) online