

# *Girls Will Be Girls Takes on New Meaning*

I want to begin by saying that other women are my favorite choice of friendship and I value those friendships dearly. One of my friends has been in my life since I was 13 years old and I treasure her. These are the relationships that give a life stability and depth. They are the resources that give strength and meaning to life. Although, I must confess that not all female relationships offer healthy connection or nourish the soul.

The other night I watched a movie that was supposed to be a comedy, and it bears out that at the core of all comedy lay dark messages regarding ourselves and our society. The movie was titled, *Mean Girls*, most certainly adapted from the books *Odd Girl out: the Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* and *Odd Girl Speaks Out*, by Rhodes Scholar, Rachel Simmons. The movie follows a teenager who is new to a community, and had spent her whole life home schooled in Africa by protective, intellectual parents. The girl, intellectually superior to her classmates and physically attractive, tries to penetrate the clicks of the alpha groups. After many attempts to belong to the group, she joins them, blow for blow, creating as much emotional pain for others as they had bestowed upon her.

In the *Odd Girl* series of books, while far from being a comedy, explore hidden aggression in middle class white girl's ages ten and up, although the author cites that even kindergarteners and first graders exhibit this hidden aggression. In addition, the phenomenon occurs in passive males and gay men, and I will say more about that later. So, why predominately middle class white girls? Because they were trained to not say what they mean by well meaning parents. They were trained to be nice, not make waves, and not get angry, to play out their aggression indirectly. These girls use passive ways to express themselves, venting their aggression, alleviating themselves of the need to strike out physically and collecting group power like so many green stamps.

Why white girls and not girls of ethnic backgrounds? Mainly because girls from other socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds have different rules about saying what they mean directly. The same goes for traditional men. They tend to be more direct, because they live by different rules. They have the rules of war and sports to guide their aggression. But not all men that seem traditional act out in the same way. For example, many years ago, I worked with a team of track maintenance men who seemed pretty traditional on the surface. Over time, the inability of the team to function properly lead to team building exercises which pointed to the need for some assertion training. Complaints of hostility and hyper aggression from one of the workers had the rest of the team acting out with poor attendance and other typical behaviors.

When examined more closely, it wasn't one sided, all of the team members had a problem with communication. Most of the team didn't like the more aggressive male because he yelled when he got angry and slammed around the workstation. The vicious cycle began and was perpetuated by the group interaction. The unsophisticated aggressor lacked tools to deal with the onslaught of behaviors from his peers. On the surface, the rest of the team seemed like victims in the little drama. They didn't seem to notice how they contributed to the process. How did they contribute to the problem?

First, they were an established male click (yes, they have them too) who didn't want to let the other male in, because he was too different from them. When he rebelled in the only way he knew how to, by acting out aggressively, they were too passive to tell the aggressor what they thought of his behavior or what they needed from him to function as a team member. This is critical; *individuals need to talk directly* to the other person about how they perceived the behavior, not the group as a whole. When taken on as a group, it seems more like a set up. Directly stating what is seen and how it affects them helps the aggressor to see why he needs to change. When he or she hears it from the group, it points out that the behavior was discussed in some depth. This creates an open door for the individual that needs to change his or her behavior to disown the process.

Why? Because the perception is that they colluded behind his back, and indeed they did, whispering, snickering and providing their slanted view of things to their boss and anyone who would listen. Perception is everything in these cases. Whether there is another side to the story is not relevant, because by the time the other side is presented there is so much distortion that no one knows what is real. In this case, it helped to ruin his reputation and any chance of promotion, and disempowered the message that the group hoped to send to the person regarding his behavior. After a workshop in assertion training, the whole group understood that they all played a part in what kept their functioning painful and ineffective. The aggressor finally retired, but he did so feeling sabotaged. This and his own behavior created extreme guilt that he felt belonged only to him. He felt like a monster treading on victims in a drama he had no control over. The truth is that they all shared in the responsibility, because it was a *group phenomenon*.

Using a masculine example (a true story), shows the process of hidden aggression from a different light. Oddly enough, this rather normal group behavior is not hard to redirect, if caught fairly early on, because group is able to own what is more up front, although feelings are painful on both sides. When nice girls use subtle games, the process is so insidious that it wreaks havoc within groups, and it usually only affects the targeted victim emotionally. The process is so subtle that there is no open discussion, because it is so hard to admit that it happens. There is a *sport* about it with healthy doses of rationalization that exempts the perpetrators from any responsibility. Gossip and distortion of fact fuels the fires of perception, creating a whole new, dark persona about the targeted girl that is largely myth.

The practice damages relationships, self esteem, and leaves a swath of painful memories that sometimes colors the rest of adulthood. This process is so subtle that teachers sometimes refuse to believe that it happens, while others call it normal development that kids will eventually outgrow...but parents know. They see the effects but don't know what to do about it. They see their child run to their bedroom in tears, grades slip, outgoing and active kids go underground, or worse, turn to drugs or food to escape the painful emotions.

Many times the targeted girl is kept off kilter, by the pretense of friendship. This is damaging in and of itself, because the child is unable to distinguish true gestures of friendship. The group never lets the targeted girl know that she is selectively disliked or that anyone has a problem. In fact, that is part of the drama of hidden aggression; they must keep the illusion of friendship alive to enjoy the game. The targeted girl seems like part of the group, and the group goes out of their way to include and prepare her, and this secret joke is savored by all. Eyes sparkle, smiles abound and the collusion is complete at the expense of the targeted one. The group enjoys talking about the target, planning the process of deception, sometimes over several years. They go through clucking gyrations over how anyone could be so oblivious to their plan, even though they go to great lengths to keep the secret. Sometimes one or two of the girls take pity, secretly liking the target and there is a dance and a shuffle as they try to figure out which direction to take the pseudo friendship.

There are times when there is a great shift in the group and the girls switch roles, the victim becomes the persecutor. Many times this doesn't happen until much later, as with a move to another town. The girl realizes the only way to protect herself is to take on the role of aggressor in the hidden aggression drama as the processes moves itself full circle.

When these behaviors progress to adulthood and it does, it drains companies and groups by reducing work output, creating confusion and strain between teams that reduces effective functioning. We all know deep inside that it is one thing to have a guy not like you down the hall, but a completely different thing to have a woman down the hall not like you--that send shivers down your spine. A female group leader typically leads the rest to a target female that is the brunt of the subtle acts of sabotage. The insidiousness of not knowing what might come next creates distractions in the workforce that drains the healthy ebb and flow of production.

The game of winning or obstructing others from winning is far more important than the work. But not more important than the target of the group, which is usually an up and coming, highly visible, high achieving woman. Does excessive competition happen in groups of male? Certainly it does, but the difference is in the process. Competition is more open and aggressive from the subtle, insidious, collusion of female groups. The goal is to win, not to destroy and sabotage the person. Taken from the rules of the

*Family Business*, for men it's more about going to the mat, it's not personal, it's business.

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