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Health

## Fight Club: Bully Advice

by [Eva Chen](#) November 16, 2009



Name-calling, social isolation, rumor-spreading--when does bullying go too far? *Teen Vogue* reports on the mean girl epidemic.

Like any new freshman, Katie\* knew that the seniors in high school could be intimidating, but she had no idea just how bad they could be. "Two weeks after starting school, I decided to crash an older girl's party and maybe make some new friends," recalls the fourteen-year-old Maryland native. But before she even stepped foot in the door, Clara,\* a senior, made it clear to Katie--and all of the first-year students--that her kind wasn't allowed: She slapped Katie in the face and shoved her into some nearby bushes, much to the amusement of the upperclassmen and horror of Katie's friends. "Clara is the queen bee," says Elisa,\* a sophomore at their school. "Everyone knows she's the meanest person in school, and no one really likes her. But we're all so scared of her that we try to be her friend."

Bullying is nothing new and certainly not rare--nearly 30 percent of teens are bullied or admit to being bullies, according to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center. As fourteen-year-old Boston native Natalie\* puts it, "High school is Darwinian. When it comes to girls bullying or being catty and competitive, it's survival of the fittest." But when does it go too far? "This girl in my class had sex with someone for the first time last year," recalls Stella,\* sixteen, from New Jersey. "Well, the next day she told her best friend, and that was it. It got out to the entire school. Everywhere she went people were yelling and screaming and calling her a slut and a whore. She had to transfer schools." When Seema\* from Toronto, Canada, was in the eighth grade, her classmates ganged up on her and teased her for months. Depressed, she switched schools, only to find that it happened again. "When I got to my new school, I was part of the popular group for a while, but then they all turned on me," she recalls. "They made fun of me for having short, dark hair and called me a boy--just because my hair isn't blonde and long."

--EVA CHEN and CHARLOTTE RUDGE

Talk to any girl, and chances are you'll hear about an experience like Stella's or Seema's. In the last year alone, several high-profile incidences of serious bullying have also made front-page news. In Connecticut, a seventeen-year-old student is suing her former school, Miss Porter's, alleging harassment and hazing from a group of students that called themselves the Oprichniki (the name of a historic Russian attack squad). In one New Jersey township, parents of students at a top public school are protesting the annual tradition of female seniors putting certain girls on "slut lists." And in a town just outside Chicago, a fifteen-year-old boy deemed "emo" by his fellow students committed suicide after years of bullying.

"It's not just kids being kids anymore," says Joseph Wright, M.D., M.P.H., senior vice president of Child Health Advocacy Institute at Children's National Medical Center, in Washington, D.C. "Nowadays, the playing field has changed through technology like texting and social media like Facebook and MySpace. It's easier for people to target others anonymously. I've seen many teens in the emergency room who are victims of intentional injuries. There's also convincing medical research that links being the victim of bullying to mental health problems--especially in females--like depression and suicidal thoughts."

Girls, he says, are most often the victims of what he calls indirect bullying. "Direct bullying is most often associated with boys: shoving, punching, and fights of a physical nature," explains Wright, who adds that he's seeing increased incidences of this behavior in girls as well. "On the other hand, indirect bullying--like rumor-mongering, isolating people from their social groups, name-calling, just to list a few--is all about damaging emotional bonds." That type of abuse, he notes, is especially dangerous: "Boys usually fight and get over it. But with girls bullying is insidious because the consequences can stick with them for many years, if not their lifetime."

It's particularly hurtful when it's your friends inflicting the damage. "Often the bullies aren't your rivals," adds Megan Kelley Hall, author of *Sisters of Misery* and *The Lost Sister* (Kensington Books), which explores the themes of difficult friendships. "They're your best friends. It makes sense: Your friends have

the most information about you, and they know what buttons to push. When someone whom you've confided in turns on you, it can hurt the most, since they have the most ammunition--and they've violated your trust."

Indeed, teens report that they're often most harshly bullied by those closest to them: "One of my best friends started being mean to me my senior year of high school. She tried to ruin my life," says nineteen-year-old Daria\* from Virginia. "After I won all-star at cheerleading and got the lead in the school play, she'd say nasty things to me. If I ate a donut, she'd look at me with disgust and say, 'I can't wait until you get fat.' When we graduated and I won scholarships, I could see her rolling her eyes and whispering to everyone. I couldn't believe that she was treating me that way."

"In the past five years, friend-on-friend bullying has skyrocketed. And now it's even worse because it's taken over cyberspace," says Erika Karres, Ph.D., author of *Mean Chicks, Cliques, and Dirty Tricks* (Adams Media). "Girls feel it's okay to be cruel since it's been legitimized in books, movies, and TV shows. The more vicious you are, the cooler you are in the eyes of your friends." Kelley Hall asserts that the media concentration on female celebrity feuds have contributed to a rise in girl fights and bullying. "Sensationalistic news--whether it's Lindsay Lohan trashing Paris Hilton or spats between Miley Cyrus, Selena Gomez, and Demi Lovato--make the tabloids money. So fighting and being really hurtful to one another gets glorified. And stars keep being nasty to one another because it gets them press." Daria\* agrees, "Even regular girls are dying for attention and would do anything to be in the spotlight. They don't care if it means making a huge scene in public by bitching out a friend. It can be pretty ridiculous."

But girls are also becoming savvy to the fact that nasty behavior often masks a host of insecurities. "A lot of the time, girls put each other down to make themselves feel better or because they're envious," says sixteen-year old Violet\* from New York City. "I've made fun of people and talked about them because I secretly wish I had as much guts as them or a certain trait or talent." High school sophomore Ariana,\* admits, "I know it's wrong, but the freshmen who I have an easy time being awful to are the ones that I am jealous of."

Mostly, bullies pick on girls whom they perceive as less powerful than themselves. Take, for instance, Kristi,\* a self-described "bookish but not nerdy" sixteen-year-old from Maryland: "Every day, while I was in middle school, a girl from the most popular group would wait for me in the bathroom and then call me 'geek' or 'loser' and laugh at me. One time, her friends kicked in the stall door so hard that it almost hit my face. Then, she splashed water on me," she recalls. "Their words stung so much, but I tried to keep my head held high." Remember that bullies are fundamentally insecure, says Kelley Hall. "They'll lash out at anyone who is different from them," she says. "Usually it's because they see something they're lacking in themselves--whether the victim is smarter, more artistic, better at sports, or more popular with boys. They don't need a lot of reasons to bully."

Experts agree that the best strategy to deal with abusive classmates is to keep yourself busy with school activities and ignore them. "Be proactive. Tell them to stop it, and act like their insults roll off you," says Karres. "They'll move on when they see that you won't tolerate it." However, Karres is also quick to point out that if the teasing turns physically abusive in any way--or lasts longer than a few weeks--you should write all the incidences down, print out nasty e-mails or save ugly texts, and report it to school authorities. "Identify the adults who you think are understanding and sympathetic at your school," says Wright. "Ideally, you can talk to a parent about the situation, but that's not always the case--some parents actually think responding to a bully is a badge of honor. So having a friendly ear at school is crucial. Don't feel like you're being a snitch or putting yourself out there--you need to talk to someone."

And it may sound clichéd, but one way to ensure you don't become someone's punching bag is to treat your peers the way you'd want to be treated. "What goes around comes around," says Violet. "It's karma."

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