

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My daughter, who is twelve, transferred this year (sixth grade), from a small, private school to a large public middle school. She is an excellent student. I became close with one of her teachers this year, when I volunteered to help with a long school project. This teacher cares very much for my daughter, and recently wrote me an e-mail about her concerns. It seems that my daughter has been befriended by the two "queen bees" of the sixth grade. These girls are very "popular," but also quite mean and manipulative. They have snubbed and insulted many girls in the class, and this teacher has observed that they are starting to turn against my daughter, too. She recommended to me that I do what I can to try to align my daughter socially with some other bright, nice girls in the class, and to turn her attention from these queen bees. However, my daughter is of an age when my advice about her social life might not be well received. She has not told me about any of this "beehive" activity, or about any mean behavior from her so-called friends. I am thinking about contacting some of the nice girls' mothers, to perhaps form friendships with them in the hopes of then having opportunities to bring our daughters together. Any suggestions?
Signed, Worried

Dear Worried,

You letter makes me sad (a little sick to my stomach actually), though I'm not surprised that mean-spiritedness and "queen bee" behavior begins as early as the 6th grade. Queen bees are girls (and, later, women) who defy the nursery rhyme that insists, "Girls are made of sugar and spice." Not here. Mother Goose must never have attended middle school. And don't underestimate just how cruel these backstabbing Barbies can be. This "queen bee syndrome" is the female form of bullying. While boys are whipping each other's butts in the hallways, these girls are excluding others, shunning many, making fun, and running a gossip mill that would put *The National Enquirer* to shame. Both being pummeled and being socially ostracized leave scars. Some children are relegated to the lowest part of the social totem pole – the pariah caste -- in middle and high school, and their pain and loss of self-esteem, is as great as those who come home from school with torn shirts and bloody noses. According to the experts, these cliques tend to be at their worst in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

Most kids (most adults, too) want to be well-liked, popular, and part of the "in-crowd." The question though, is at what cost? Make sure your daughter understands your values. Let her know that you believe that people should be judged on their own merit, and not because they wear the fashionable clothes, are physically attractive, popular, or come from the right side of the tracks. Most importantly, make certain that you model that behavior in your own life. (Remember, kids are far more influenced by what you do, than by what you say.) If you are a classist or spread gossip, it will not matter what you tell your daughter about these behaviors. On the other hand, if she sees that your own friendships include a variety of people of different races, classes, and

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levels of success, she will have a powerful example of how important it is to embrace people for who they are.

Sit down and talk with your daughter. Let her know that she is old enough to select her friends, but that you want to make sure that – no matter what – she is never mean to other kids who aren't quite so popular. Encourage her to get to know a variety of people in her school. Look for common links. She may be enjoying basking in the glow of acceptance by the popular girls, but there are kids who excel in other areas, who might be of interest to your daughter. Encourage her to get involved in athletics of some kind. It's been my observation that queen bees rarely like to break a nail and thus, are unlikely to be out there sweating on the Lacrosse field or the basketball court. Make sure that sleep-overs, birthday parties, and other events are designed to include more than just a few others, as there is a danger that your daughter might invite only the bees. Help your daughter to feel empowered and accelerate her self-esteem by praising her for the things she does so well (e.g., excellent grades).

I don't know that your friendship with the mothers of the nice girls will be of great importance to your daughter. It's great if you like these women and want to develop a friendship with them for yourself, but by age 12, your daughter is not going to buy into playdates that are merely convenient because you and the other child's mother are friends.

You really cannot tell your daughter who to like and what crowd to fit in with. What you can do is make clear that certain behaviors (e.g., gossiping, being mean to others, hurting people's feelings) are not acceptable within your family value system.

An excellent resource for understanding this and other perils for teens and pre-teens is Rosalind Wiseman's book, *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*. Back matter offers extensive resource listings including fiction and nonfiction titles, movies, helpful organizations, and their Web sites. With author appearances on *Dr. Phil* and the *Today Show*, it seems that Rosalind Wiseman has tapped into a zeitgeist, a "buzz" if you will, about Queen Bees and other bullying tactics among adolescents. You can also check out more about Wiseman's work at: www.empowered.org.

A recently released movie – called *Mean Girls* -- starring Lindsay Lohan (*Freaky Friday*) is based on Wiseman's book. I might start the conversation with my daughter over a pizza after seeing this movie together. This is a gentle and non-threatening way to begin to ask if your daughter has seen any of this kind of behavior in her school. Then listen carefully and let her know that you are always there to help her.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.