



# INTRODUCTION

As parents of former young adolescents, we knew firsthand how cruel kids can be to one another. We spent many an hour tending to the emotional wounds our own children suffered and endured during the middle school years as victims, and what they witnessed as bystanders of bullying. And, on occasion, we dressed down our own kids about words they used or actions they participated in that hurt, scapegoated or intimidated others.

Before the terrible high school massacre at Columbine, the issue of cliques and bullying was often dismissed as “part of growing up”. It was primarily parents like us who had to deal with it along with school counsellors. Afterwards, however, everyone began to take the root causes of school violence – bullying and social exclusion – more seriously.

As parenting co-authors, experts and online hosts, we had been discussing and advising innumerable parents on how to reassure their children and try to repair bruised egos. Clique dramas and bullying complaints topped our message boards on sites we worked for including TimeWarner’s *ParentTime* and iVillage’s *Parent Soup*. Eagerly we took the initiative to co-author *Cliques: 8 Steps to Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle* (Giannetti & Sagarese, 2001).

Writing that book gave us the opportunity to address many, many communities. We often visited a school where parents and educators read our *Cliques* book beforehand, followed by our visit and presentation, and a special program for middle years children titled *With Friends Like These ... A Friendship Skill-building Workshop*.

We found parents receptive. Additionally, we realised that educators, including teachers, counsellors and administrators, were eager to learn all they could about how to thwart bullying in all its forms, from exclusion to cyber-tactics.

## WHAT'S FAVOURITISM GOT TO DO WITH BULLYING?

Popularity ... a caste system ... kids trying to climb a social ladder ... what's this got to do with cliques and bullies? Everything! The way middle years children rank one another is the basic building block of their social world ... and their social self-image. A social hierarchy topped by popular children who enjoy the respect of peers and the recognition of teachers becomes the foundation upon which inclusion and exclusion stand. The children judged to have least "likeability" and hence, status, are the likeliest to be victimised by cruel remarks or become the butt of endless jokes.

Think of the popular clique as an institution of prejudice. The latest research on bullying behaviour affirms that the classic bully is not who we previously thought. The typical bully turns out to be not the oversized male loner, but usually an attractive, athletic and popular boy. These well-liked bullies taunt their targets out of the earshot or the visual range of teacher supervision. When caught in the act or reported to be teasing or torturing, these young adolescents don't receive the punishment they deserve. They escape repercussions because teachers either don't believe the charges, given the student's outstanding reputation, or the golden child is given extra slack!

Consider the news that bullying most often occurs in groups. A school's social leaders command who escapes the slings and arrows of teasing and who doesn't. Many children essentially follow orders dreamed up by socially superior girls or boys. Those deemed inferior pay the price. When teachers get caught up in popularity dynamics, they endorse this caste system and sentence all students to institutional discrimination. They nourish a chosen few (who already receive ample validation and support) at the expense of many who go unrecognised and neglected.

## THE RULES AS WRITTEN BY YEAR FIVES

Where does this pecking order of popularity come from? Developmentally speaking, early adolescence is a time when children move away from their families and seek the support of peers. For a child, to have one friend is good; to have more is better. To qualify as the person everyone wants to hang out with is the best. And so popularity turns into the currency used by young adolescents between the ages of 10 and 15. Young children instinctively know the worth of being popular. They recognise its power and prestige. While not all boys and girls like the popularity game, they know that it rules their social world. Where they and everyone else rank in the pecking order is as clear as the school bell. Go into any middle years classroom where kids choose their seats. A diagram of the social caste system unfolds. Whatever student labels exist in your school all are neatly categorised at separate tables with daily regularity. Middle schoolers know better than to take a seat at random.

## CRAFTING A CLASS-LESS CLASSROOM

There are so many things you can do to jumble, disrupt and dilute the caste system in your own small domain.

***Appoint a mix of students unfamiliar with one another for a group assignment.*** Many opportunities exist in the cooperative learning environment of middle school. Use them.

***Select two students from different worlds to assist you rather than one.*** This facilitates their working together one on one. Democratise – rotate through a class list for assistance. Whether it's putting out materials or other tasks, make up a master list and have children tick off their "service".

***Ensure that all club memberships include social variety.*** As club advisor, instruct students to design a "new member campaign" to bring in students who differ from the usual suspects, aka the popular set. Be on the lookout among your students and steer particular ones to a club they may be reluctant to join even though qualified by skills or potential to excel.

***Curry sympathy and exact equal standards*** for all your students because all bear "popularity deficits". While popular clique kids enjoy their status, they may harbour insecurities about losing their cool, thus putting them at risk of drug and alcohol abuse in social situations. Wannabes fear rejection as they long for friends among those who do not care about them. Independent clique kids feel more secure in their friendships but battle disgust at the unfair rule of the popular kids. Loners suffer in solitude.

***Develop empathy for and focus on your least favourites.*** Before you automatically call upon or choose a charming or familiar face, select one whom you like less than others. Look for something in that individual to appreciate.

***Strive to know something out of the ordinary about each of your students.*** Every child is unique, we always say. Find that unique aspect of every student. This is an excellent way to get to know each individual more fully and then be able to showcase that special trait or talent to his or her peers. In that way a child gets individual recognition and a rise in social worth.

***Illuminate the shy, invisible student.*** Every class has at least one student, usually more than one, who is virtually invisible. A quiet temperament resembles classroom camouflage, problems at home or being new to the school. These might cause a child to withdraw and essentially disappear in a crowd. Poverty, appearance issues – no one explanation fits the profile of all invisible students. Find a way to make camouflaged kids visible.

***Create a Bastille Day.*** The essence of this revolutionary day is for all students to act and socialise outside their ordinary comfort zone. Enlist students' help in outlining activities and rituals. Have them, for example, hang with kids from another class or clique, and sit elsewhere in the canteen.

***Get feedback about the democratic nature of your class.*** Survey or poll students – if you dare.

→ **What you can do:** Focus on celebrities who have worked hard to get where they are. Sponsor a career day where local celebrities come in and talk to your students about how they achieved success. Talk about your own career, how you were inspired to become a teacher, where you went to school, what you studied, how hard you worked to become good at what you do. Your students may believe you just landed in your classroom from outer space! Let them know you have never been a slacker.

**Celebrities acting out.** Let's face it. Most celebrities have too much money and too much time on their hands. They may go long stretches between jobs. In between, they will spend their hours shopping and partying, and their antics will show up in the gossip pages. Many of these stars are too young to drink legally, yet they will be shown drinking and are often photographed drunk.

→ **What you see:** All the public service advertisements cautioning against alcohol and drug abuse have little weight with an impressionable middle years student who then sees the stars he idolises having fun while flouting the laws.

→ **What you can do:** Tell your students that this is the worst time to douse their brains in alcohol. Their brains are growing by leaps and bounds, busy comprehending and storing information. The ability to plan and formulate complex judgments evolves throughout these years. Drinking damages the brain's capabilities and prevents those skills from fully developing.

**Celebrities becoming violent.** Because they are celebrities, they are followed by the paparazzi, and ugly incidents often follow. We see stars spitting, making obscene gestures, swatting bystanders with handbags or actually running them down with a car. Behaviour that in any other context would seem unacceptable somehow becomes tolerated.

→ **What you see:** Your "star" student may not be stalked by the paparazzi, but when someone "gets in his face", he may deal with the person in a similarly violent fashion.

→ **What you can do:** Let a child know if their behaviour becomes demanding or arrogant, insensitive or selfish. Point out the opposite virtue called for, be it patience, consideration, humility or modesty. It's a cruel world. We need to spend more time doing kind deeds and helping our children to follow suit to make the world a kinder place. Community service should be on everyone's agenda.

**Fight for your man.** Starlets have been known to get into physical battles over a man. (Mariah Carey even depicted this situation in one of her music videos.) It seems it's not proactive enough to merely nurse a broken heart. Now it's necessary to break an opponent's bones.

→ **What you see:** Girls are no longer shy about becoming violent, especially when it comes to battling for a boy. Often these fights break out where teachers are least likely to see – in the bathroom, locker room, stairwells, or to and from school.

→ **What you can do:** While girl violence seems to be on the rise, some experts believe it's the reporting of that violence that has improved. Girls still prefer to hurt the old-fashioned way, by targeting opponents with teasing, name-calling, rejection or spreading rumours. Keep your eyes open for the girl who seems withdrawn and sad. She may be a target.

Have you ever been bullied online by a classmate?  Yes  No

Did you tell an adult?  Yes  No

If no, why did you not tell? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, what did the adult do? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever done any of the following online? (Tick all that apply).

- Passed along gossip about a classmate.
- Said something hurtful to a friend or classmate.
- Pretended to be someone else by stealing a screen name or password.
- Broken up with someone.

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Do you think the school does enough to discourage cyber-bullying?  Yes  No

What else should your school do? (Tick all that apply)

- Talk more about it in school.
- Punish students who hurt others online.
- Run articles in school newspaper and newsletter.
- Talk about cyber-bullying more to parents.

Other suggestions \_\_\_\_\_

Do you know anyone who has been targeted for bullying online?  Yes  No

Did you tell anyone?  Yes  No

If yes, who did you tell?

- Parent
- Teacher
- Classmate
- Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_