



## Parent Guide

An approach to help girls aged 8 to 18  
navigate the choppy waters  
of friendship problems





# Girls are no problem, no problem at all...

On the whole, girls are good and want to obey the rules, get on with everyone and be happy. However, they sometimes find that the search for trusting and reliable friendships is hard and that without such friendships they feel very unhappy. Their unhappiness is often displayed through tearfulness and even depression.

Adults can help in only very limited ways because the problems within friendship groups are very fluid and difficult to express precisely.

“Early adolescence appears to be especially stressful on adolescent girls’ friendships and peer relations, signified by a sharp increase in indirect relational aggression. More

typical of girls and more distressful to girls than to boys, relational aggression, characterised by such behaviours as spreading rumours or threatening withdrawal of affiliation, appears to emerge as girls attempt to negotiate current power relations and affirm or resist conventional constructions of femininity.”

(The American Psychological Society)

However, we can use a model and a common language to aid communication and give insight. That’s where the Girls on Board approach comes in...



# The Model

*“The classic girl clique is like a life raft for girls at school. Imagine you and your daughter on a cruise ship. Then girls start telling each other that the ship is stupid and boring and it’s time to get off. As you watch helplessly, she leaves behind everything that is safe and secure, gets into a life raft with people who have little in common with her except their age, and drifts away.*

*Once she’s on the raft, she’s too far away from you and realises her survival depends on bonding with the other girls in the raft. She’s desperately afraid of being cast out. We can see now how girls feel forced to act a certain way to be accepted by their peers.”*

*(Rosalind Wiseman ‘Queen Bees and Wannabes’)*

Girls feel a need to be on a raft with at least one other girl – a need so strong that it feels like they are drowning if they don’t achieve this.

**We call this the ‘Existential Imperative’.**





## **The Vocabulary**

The Girls on Board approach creates a new and shared vocabulary which enables girls and adults to communicate accurately and with insight.

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# Group / Raft Sizes

It is common for girls' groups to be configured in pairs, threes, fours and sometimes more than four.

## Pairs

Pros: stability lies in co-dependency. 'Don't reject me because without me you would be alone too.'

Cons: Pairs appear strong and generate envy. A girl with weak membership of another group may attack to try to replace a pair member. A bigger group may worry that the pair is attracting members from its group and might suddenly turn into a three or four thus leave some as Casualty

Girls. The bigger group may then campaign generally to make the pair look socially outside the norm so that no one is tempted to join them. Relational aggression shown

to a pair is proportionate to the strength of its bonds – the stronger the friendship the more they are attacked. Pairs often offer temporary membership to Girls-in-the-Water as a safe haven. This may appear altruistic but actually it allows them to create allies and also appear less stable than they really are and therefore attract less aggression. The fallout from strong pairs splitting can be significant and it is one of the few areas where the adults can offer guidance. Precepts of tolerance, forgiveness and understanding, as handed down by adults, can help to heal wounds and soften the



blow of ruptures in a strong pair. This is the exception to the rule forbidding micro-management and is allowable because the rupturing pair usually is experiencing turbulence because of emotions that are associated with the wider human experience and not just the Existential Imperative. Some girls crave being in a pair beyond what is reasonable and will feel insecure despite being in a relatively stable group of three or more. Her desire to have a BFF will create instability in a group of three or more as she constantly tries to create a pair between herself and one other and dislodge others as a consequence. Such a girl is

often too insecure to form a strong pair because she lacks the maturity to create a trusting friendship.

### **Threes**

Pros: with the right personalities threes can be stable and strong. The number is not so large as to create natural splits and the girls can often negotiate their friendships successfully.

Cons: threes can be tense and stressful because the possibility of being excluded is always present. Desks and buses have seats in pairs! Each girl in the three can feel the other two are closer to each other.



## Fours

Pros: can split into two pairs easily. Desks and buses have two chairs. Threes are less stable and so there is a self-serving need to maintain the status quo of a group of four.

Cons: tend not to entertain Girls-in-the-Water and so can be inflexible.

Fours can be quite large and therefore a bit unwieldy from the point of view of organising themselves. If one girl can't make it, do the other three go to the cinema?

Fours can stifle individuality as norms are hard to agree on with so many girls. Girls feel a strong need to 'blend' at this age and blending with three others can be tricky.

## More than Four

Groups of more than four spring up from time to time and are common in big schools. They are often characterised by the fluid arrangements by which smaller groups can exist within the bigger whole.



# Strategies

Things that can help now, and for the future.

## **In school:**

Share the model with the girls

Simply sharing the model with girls in school is effective at both preventing problems occurring and also helping to solve issues between girls and groups of girls where problems have arisen.

## **Role-play with the girls**

Simple, short role-play scenarios are very powerful in coaching girls how to negotiate power relationships. The girls instantly recognise the issues presented in a role-play, and the exercise allows them to create a dialogue and debate about fairness, inclusion, empathy and bullying. For example: take a simple scenario of three girls in a friendship group getting onto the school minibus and realising straight away that there will be one of them sitting on their own. By acting out this scene the girls can be guided towards effective ways to include each other, offering mutual re-assurance and support. Role-play reveals the important subtext of every potentially conflictual situation and shows girls how to negotiate with each other without the need for relational aggression.

## **At home:**

Don't try to micro-manage unless bullying is REALLY happening

If things are not going well, making that all-important judgement about the stories your daughter is telling is hard: is this bullying or not? First of all, you have to ask yourself whether the relational aggression apparently being shown towards her is a) real b) just part of a 'conflict' and friendship turbulence.

## **Remember:**

You can always come and share your concerns with teachers without necessarily asking for action or intervention. Once the school is aware of what might be happening we can make gentle and discrete enquiries and try to get to the bottom of things to prevent bullying. But remember on the whole, bullying is rare.



Acknowledge that your daughter is changing  
She is likely to be as driven as any other girl by the Existential Imperative and so don't be naïve about what she might be doing to protect her friendships. It can be hard to acknowledge – but girls do lie at this age, and parents and teachers are often used as pawns in the game. Although it is true that she's telling you things that are going on in her life, don't assume she's telling you everything.

Stay connected but don't push it, don't pump for information

Your daughter is growing up and learning to separate herself from you in preparation for adulthood. For a daughter and her parents this can be both exciting as well as painful. She is still your daughter and you are still her parents, responsible for her emotional and physical well-being. But give her SPACE, allow her to make mistakes, to try on 'different hats', to come at issues from different angles. If she is experiencing relational aggression the more you try to get information out of her, the more likely she is to find herself distorting the truth in her favour. Friendship groups are fluid and complex and parents should not try to micro-manage them from home.

Above all, your daughter will naturally be reluctant to tell you the whole truth if she is going to be told off by you for the behaviours she got wrong.

Be there for her; listen and comfort but try hard NOT to offer solutions

Let her try out her anger with you, listen to her railing but don't amplify it.

“Don't tell her what to do,” Wiseman writes in *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, “Instead, describe the behaviour you respect. Work with her as she comes up with a plan that describes specifically what she wants to happen differently, and how she can make that happen.”

Monitor social media, internet activity, mobile phone messages

The big difference between now and 20 years ago is that the issues of friendships get picked up out of school far more readily than they used to.

Texting, and social networks allow girls to continue to 'discuss' their issues at all times of the day and night. It is very common for girls to confront each other via text: e.g. “What have you been saying about me to the boys?”

FOMO - 'Fear of Missing Out'

If you can, come to an agreement with the families of your daughters' friends that phones and devices will be switched off at a certain moment in the evening during the school week. That way no girl feels she is missing out.

**The school's best advice is:**

Make sure you have the password to all your daughter's social media accounts (she may have more than one). It is important to allow her some privacy but a good idea to check text messaging if she is behaving strangely and won't tell you why. Take your daughter's mobile phone away at night; if your daughter objects to her phone being taken away at night - ask her why.

She'll get through this – just sit with her, and hang on!

Sometimes, despite the best efforts of the school and you, as parents, things won't seem to be improving with your daughter's friendships. But remember that things

WILL get better – you just need to hang on. Support her, love her, listen to her and she will find her own way.







**Happier girls  
do better**