GIRLS
ON BOARD

Parent Guide

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

NORWICH
HIGH SCHOOL
FOR GIRLS

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

Words are important – they help us communicate across the void of generational and emotional disconnection that is common between young girls and their parents. The **Girls on Board** approach creates a new and shared vocabulary which enables girls and adults to communicate accurately and with insight. The terms you see listed here refer to types of **behaviour**, not types of **girls.**

Membership Girl

Membership Girl is an ordinary girl who is a member of a raft with at least one other girl on board.

Girl-in-the-water

Girl-in-the-water is a girl who has no raft to be on either because she is a:

New Girl - new to her school and so has no friends.

Or a:

Casualty Girl - a girl who has been removed from her raft and has no apparent friendship group.

The Lonely Girl

The **Lonely Girl** is a girl who, for various reasons, seems unable to become a Membership Girl. Sometimes it is because she has not properly separated from her parents yet and does not feel the Existential Imperative as keenly as other girls; by the time she does feel the Imperative it can be too late to successfully negotiate herself onto a raft. A Lonely Girl can sometimes appear to be happy and be friends with lots of girls and lots of groups, but she fails to achieve 'full' membership of any group and is always an 'invitee' rather than a 'de facto' member. Friendship is based on **shared experience**, and it is therefore important for the girls to find things they have in common, or even create shared experiences by, say, going out to the cinema together. Adults can help the Lonely Girl by offering strategies but not by becoming directly involved.

Leaders

There are **True Leaders** who seem to have natural charisma and leadership comes to them often without the girl seeking the role for herself. And there are **Would-be Leaders** who try to assert themselves over other girls in order to try to gain control. If they can control the group then they need not fear ending up in the water – without friends. Some Would-be Leaders (and other girls) seek a Best Friend Forever – a single girl with whom they can form an unbreakable bond and therefore protect themselves from ever being friendless. But sometimes, in their efforts to bond with another girl, they show desperation which is an unattractive and needy characteristic which ironically leads them to fail in their quest.

The Peacemaker

The Peacemaker is a girl who just wants everyone to get on and is therefore happy to agree with whomever is talking to her. This can lead to some awkward situations when there is disagreement amongst her friends, but a Peacemaker is usually very adept at navigating a smooth passage between warring factions without losing face or damaging her integrity. A Peacemaker is often a very popular girl and much sought after as a Best Friend because she is easy going and does not cause conflict.

The Hopper

The Hopper is a girl every parent would want their daughter to be! She has legitimate membership of many rafts and can 'hop' from one to another without causing upset or jealousy.

The Messenger

The Messenger is a girl who cleverly relays secrets between groups in order to strengthen the trust between herself and other girls and therefore make her a more secure membership girl. This strategy can be successful in the short term but goes badly wrong when other girls find out their 'private' conversations have been leaked to others.

The Singleton

The Singleton is a girl for whom the whole idea of the Existential Imperative does not seem to matter. She is happy and content in her own company, though she will often have friends too. If her friends show relational aggression towards her, she just ignores it. It is important to understand, however, that a Singleton is born, not made. This is not a category of girl that parents can guide their daughter towards – unlike being a Hopper. The Singleton just seems to possess the ability to remain slightly disconnected from all the girls around her; this is both a strength and a burden since what she gains in avoiding relational aggression and not being prey to the Existential Imperative she loses in the absolute closeness of membership girl rafts. Singletons are rare.

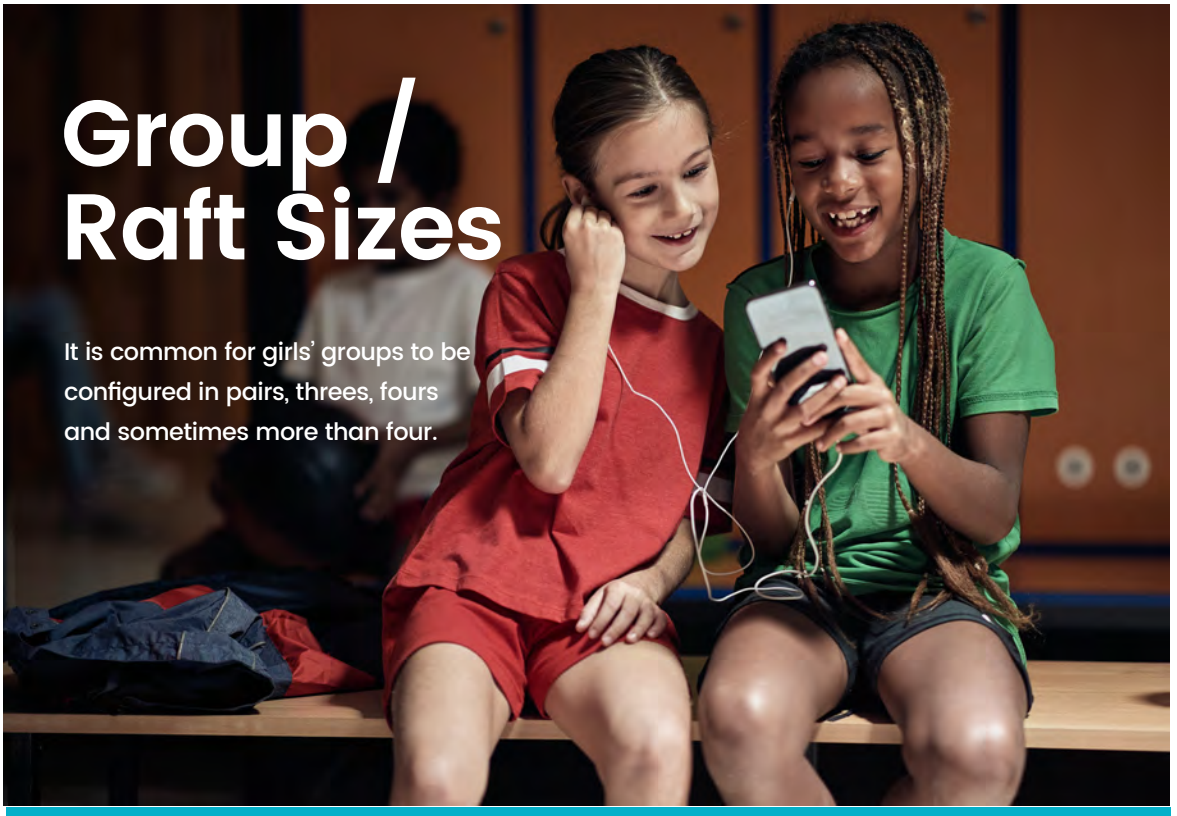
The Queen Bee

The Queen Bee is a girl whose behaviour seems to exert power over other girls which is not always wanted or appropriate. She may form very close bonds with one girl for a week or two and then equally as suddenly pull away and move on to someone else. They manipulate the girls and adults around them to ensure their friendships never fail; they like to stay in complete control. Queen Bees behave like this because, like every other girl, they are insecure. In the case of the Queen Bee, they are particularly insecure and it helps us understand their challenging behaviour to remember that.

The Bully

The Bully is a rare thing but they do exist. Often driven by deep-seated jealousy and insecurity the Bully stands accused of relational aggression that 'crosses the line'. By this we mean that adult observers can clearly identify forms of behaviour that fulfil the criteria of bullying – a sustained attempt to make one child feel put down and uncomfortable. Using the 'Girls on Board' model can be a very effective way of getting such girls to self-correct and tone down their behaviour. No girl wants to be a bully and when they are shown the effect of their behaviour on others they make the necessary adjustments. These adjustments come about partly because they are driven by adult authority which carries the threat of sanctions, but also because the Bully will quickly realise that once she is exposed as a Bully she will lose friends and therefore the Existential Imperative kicks in. In her book '*Queen Bees and Wannabes*' Rosalind Wiseman points to 'learned behaviours' from home and urges parents to model generosity of spirit and kindness towards humanity when talking in front of their daughter.

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.

Model good relational attitudes to fellow human beings in front of your daughter. As mentioned above, it is a good idea to check the way in which you, as parents, talk about other people. Is the language you use and the attitude you project what you would want your daughter to replicate?

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). Shut down the internet at home at night by simply unplugging the modem. 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.

Parenting types

Queen Bees and Wannabes by Rosalind Wiseman is highly recommended and this guide finishes with her 'take' on parenting styles. The titles she gives these styles speak for themselves; she endorses only one style; all the others are problematic. They are:

The Lock-Her-In-A-Closet Parent

The Best-Friend Parent

The Hip Parent

The Believe-Everything-She-Says Parent The "You Mess With My Kid, You Mess With Me" Parent

The "Let's Let Them Work It Out" Parent

The Pushover Parent

The Benign Neglect Parent

The No-Excuses Parent

The Private Parent

The No-Privacy Parent

The Don't-Ask, Don't-Tell Parent

The Overbearing Parent

The Helicopter Parent

The 'You MUST tell me' Parent

The only style she endorses is called:
The Tough-love Parent

GIRLS ON BOARD

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GIRLSONBOARD.CO.UK
info@girlsonboard.co.uk

@GirlsonBoarduk