



Bullies for you

LEGIONS OF MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN STILL SECRETLY SUFFER THE EMOTIONAL SCARS OF CHILDHOOD GIRL-ON-GIRL TORTURE



It was 1974. We liked the Carpenters and the Bee Gees, wore flared corduroys and striped turtlenecks. I didn't know this, as we skipped at recess together in Grade 7, but my childhood would soon end.

I can flash back in an instant to that moment 34 years ago when a group of schoolgirls waged psychological warfare on me. There was the queen bee, Eileen, whose tousled blond locks and angelic countenance belied a more sinister personality; her aide-de-camp, Jackie; and several guilty bystanders whose fear for their own emotional safety precluded giving a whit about mine. As the new girl in their country school in Smithville, Ont., at first I was granted access to this elite pack that moved as one in the schoolyard. Then one day as I approached them before the morning bell, they literally turned their backs on me in unison, snickering all the while, and refused to speak to me. It was a carefully planned, synchronized form of girlhood torture, the kind that can be meted out only by tightly knit cliques and best-friend dyads.

Psychologists call it "indirect" or "social" aggression. I called it hell. My body heated up with shame and I was devastated by the exclusion. Some part of my 12-year-old self still hasn't fully recovered.

I am not alone. Legions of middle-aged women still suffer the emotional scars of girl-on-girl bullying. The dirty looks, nasty notes, taunting and shunning they suffered in puberty often carry an imprint into adulthood and beyond. Embarrassed, these women will admit the calculated nastiness of these Nellie Olesen types has had a profound effect on their grown-up sense of self. Research shows that women who were bullied as girls have a greater propensity to suffer from low self-esteem, self-doubt, perfectionism, social

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anxiety, heightened sensitivity and depression, and are even vulnerable to re-victimization.

Much of this resonates with me. I survived the mean girls by chumming with another girl on the margins. But groups of alpha females can still make me nervous. I tend to look for allies on the periphery. Sometimes I wonder if certain women are really true-blue friends. I'm easily slighted if I perceive I've been left out, and will agonize if I think I've done the same to someone else. Because I once was one, I identify with the underdog.

In researching her book, Rachel Simmons, the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based author of *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, says she was overwhelmed by the number of women still affected by the social bullying they experienced decades earlier. "Women in their forties and fifties carried with them the vestiges of victimization. They told stories with unusual clarity: They could remember the clothes they wore, the food they'd eaten, the words spoken on the hardest days of their girlhood," she says. "These women reported lives filled with troubled relationships with other women. Even when the women had close friends, they reported a nagging feeling that these friends might at any moment and without explanation abandon them."

This uncertainty can drive underground such negative emotions as anger, resentment and jealousy. "Women have a biologically based need for affiliation with one another, but we risk the relationship when we speak our mind," says Tracy Vaillancourt, an associate professor in the department of psychology, neuroscience and behaviour at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont. "So how do you have opinions and still be liked? What happens is that women aren't healthy with one another."



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The childhood cruelty she endured from female peers has had a profound effect on Brandi Jasmine. "For the longest time I just avoided other women," she says. "I still have a strong discomfort around teenagers — the sound of teen girls giggling is like fingernails on a chalkboard to me." The 45-year-old web designer in Ontario's Niagara region remembers herself as "always off in some fantasyland." Living in her imagination beat the reality of daily taunts such as "fat cow" that other girls slung her way. The verbal abuse lasted for years. "I remember hugging the walls at school and just wanting to disappear," she says. "No one wanted to be friends with me." In order to cope, she learned to shut off her emotions. "It wasn't until I turned 40 that I realized all the things I hated about myself could be traced back to childhood bullying."

The prospect of having children who might suffer the way she did was one of the reasons Jasmine decided to remain childless. Her heart still goes out to her mom who witnessed her teen agony. "To watch it happen to someone you love is the worst kind of helplessness. She tried her best for me, but there was really nothing she could do."

Any mother who has been bullied herself is likely to be hypervigilant to the threat of a pack of girls circling her daughter. Suzy Sebeslav, a 43-year-old teacher with a blended family of six kids in Hamilton, remembers feeling panicky when her 15-year-old daughter, Maggie, reached the age Sebeslav was when her own bullying began. "Once, when I walked into her high school after she began Grade 9, I couldn't believe my reaction. There were kids hanging out in the halls, and suddenly I felt so small and insignificant. All those bad, old feelings came right back and there was that knot in my stomach again. I kept telling myself, 'They're just kids.'"

Sebeslav traces her anxiety back to being part of a cabal in which her status was never assured. "I was always trying desperately to fit into the popular group. Sometimes they accepted me and sometimes they didn't. Once they told me a certain boy liked me and wanted to meet me after school. I showed up and of course he wasn't there. But those girls were there and they all laughed at me. It was humiliating." Nevertheless, she still sought their approval, going along with whatever they suggested, whether it was smoking at 13 or, later, sneaking out of the house at night to go drinking. She still has concerns about fitting in. "I tend to resist getting involved in groups and I avoid women who are really strong or controlling." As for her daughter, she says Maggie doesn't have the same

need to please that she once did. "She's a different person entirely from me at that age. She's a lot stronger and not nearly as concerned about fitting in. Still, my radar is always up for her."

Simmons, the N.Y.-based author, observes that many women relive their trauma watching their daughters suffer the way they did. "Because it hits so close to home, a great many of these women are unable to respond rationally, and do a disservice to their kids," she says. "Rather than allowing her child to negotiate a situation and figure things out on her own, a mother who was a victim might respond inappropriately — by angrily confronting a girl's parents or even the girl herself — out of her own sense of injury."

Anita Riddell of Rycroft, Alta., knows the pain of seeing one's daughter targeted. At 11, her daughter changed from being a "bubbly young girl" to someone who shut herself in her room and cried all the time. Other girls made fun of her for being tall and for not wearing the right labels. "She didn't fit with the 'in' crowd and became alienated," says Riddell. "I had to face the nightmare of having my own child go through the same thing I went through in school." When her daughter was 13, a group of girls stole her bra during gym class and ran it up the flagpole. "That was the last straw. My daughter marched into the principal's office and told him she'd had enough. After that she didn't walk around being scared anymore. She found her strength."

But her 40-year-old mother never did. Growing up in Regina, Riddell says her school life was a *Lord of the Flies* existence from Grade 1 onward, except with a mostly female cast. Riddell was an easy target — she had a speech impediment, wore thick glasses and was one of a handful of mixed-race kids in the school. "My family was

poor and my mom bought us clothes from the thrift shop." She remembers walking into the classroom and seeing such messages as "Anita is a loser" and "Anita should be dead" written on the board. "The other girls would tell me I stank and should go home and take a bath. They'd steal my boots in the winter and give them to the boys who would pee in them. I cried a lot and couldn't focus on my schooling. There was nobody who could accept me for me." Eventual speech therapy and eye surgery made her stand out a little less, but the damage had been done.

Childhood experiences of the sort Riddell endured can set the tone for the type of intimate relationships one has in the future, says Vaillancourt from McMaster University. "Early relationships are prototypes for future relationships, and these sorts of experiences cause trust issues, both with other women and with men."

Vaillancourt recently completed a research project that links childhood peer victimization with adult perfectionism. "If they were singled out as kids, these girls will often try to deal with their plight by being perfect so they won't get picked on again." Such girls can grow into women with "maladaptive" perfectionism — driven by fear of failure and hyperconcerned with disappointing others.

As the victims grow up, so too do the bullies. Adult female bullies can have a heyday in the workplace, where they are often rewarded for their aggressive management style. "When these women encounter other women who are competent and socially adept, they immediately feel threatened, especially if they work in a place where there are very few women at the top and other women are seen as competition," says Ruth Namie of Bellingham, Wash. She should know. Ten years ago, after be-

ing hired as a substance abuse therapist inside the psychiatry department at a large hospital, her female supervisor began to pick on her — criticizing her in meetings and escalating to yelling at her in the hallways. "I'd reinvent myself every day to try and figure out what she wanted. I had always received positive job reviews but I got to a point where I'd slink along and try to hide from her. I began to think there was something wrong with me. She destroyed my confidence and I felt so ashamed." Namie was put on administrative leave before being terminated. She struggled with depression for a year after the incident. But then she was galvanized by the experience. She and her husband, a social psychologist, became national activists in the American workplace anti-bullying movement, writing two books on the subject and founding the non-profit Workplace Bullying Institute.

Her experience shows how it's possible for some good to come out of this kind of persecution. In fact, it's a common response among women who have been bullied in childhood to stick up for the underdog, says Simmons. "Some women who are victimized can come away from the experience with a sense of perspective. They may have a strong sense of justice and will stand up for others who are being hurt. Their memory serves as a touchstone."

But all too often those girls become women who learn to internalize the negative messages they received from their peers, and view themselves as somehow flawed. "Some women spend their whole lives trying to determine what's wrong with them to have caused them to be treated this way," says Simmons. "Hopefully they will be confident enough in who they are to choose the right relationships. They shouldn't have to hide who they are." **M**