

**Tips for Parents** by Susie Kohl

## *Helping Children Navigate Social Relationships*

**W**E'VE ALL HEARD THE TERM "MEAN GIRLS" in recent years, a catchphrase that describes behaviors like exclusion, name calling, and attempts to dominate others. Attention to the nuances of children's relationships can be helpful, as long as we can approach the subject in a balanced way. Hearing that our child has been excluded or that someone was mean can trigger intense reactions, including wanting to go to battle with the child who left our child out.

The first studies of social aggression depicted girls as uncaring bullies, but later studies have shown that as boys get older, they also use social aggression. Thinking back to our own childhood and the ways we attempted to handle relationships can demystify this complicated area of life. Young girls are typically more verbal than boys so their ability to say things that help them get their own way may be more obvious. Girls' relationships also tend to be based on intimacy, and since it's difficult to kindle a feeling of emotional closeness with a whole group, especially for young children, the easiest solution is to set boundaries: "You can't play with us."

Adults are helpful when they actively acknowledge pro-social behavior like kindness and inclusion and coach children to problem-solve social issues at any age: "Could you tell your friend you'd like to play with her later?" It's important to be clear about our values – "We don't name call in our family" – but we have to understand that social learning is challenging and that children try out different behaviors to see how they work.

Perhaps the most important role we can play is limiting children's exposure to all the bullying and sarcastic characters so pervasive in the media, and making discussions about handling relationships in positive ways as part of family routines.

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