



Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls

Lyn Mikel Brown

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For some time, reality TV, talk shows, soap-operas, and sitcoms have turned their spotlights on women and girls who thrive on competition and nastiness. Few fairytales lack the evil stepmother, wicked witch, or jealous sister. Even cartoons feature mean and sassy girls who only become sweet and innocent when adults appear. And recently, popular books and magazines have turned their gaze away from ways of positively influencing girls' independence and self-esteem and towards the topic of girls' meanness to other girls. What does this say about the way our culture views girlhood? How much do these portrayals affect the way girls view themselves?

In *Girlfighting*, psychologist and educator Lyn Mikel Brown scrutinizes the way our culture nurtures and reinforces this sort of meanness in girls. She argues that the old adage “girls will be girls”—gossipy, competitive, cliquish, backstabbing— and the idea that fighting is part of a developmental stage or a rite-of-passage, are not acceptable explanations. Instead, she asserts, girls are discouraged from expressing strong feelings and are pressured to fulfill unrealistic expectations, to be popular, and struggle to find their way in a society that still reinforces gender stereotypes and places greater value on boys. Under such pressure, in their frustration and anger, girls (often unconsciously) find it less risky to take out their fears and anxieties on other girls instead of challenging the ways boys treat them, the way the media represents them, or the way the culture at large supports sexist practices.

Girlfighting traces the changes in girls' thoughts, actions and feelings from childhood into young adulthood, providing the developmental understanding and theoretical explanation often lacking in other conversations. Through interviews with over 400 girls of diverse racial, economic, and geographic backgrounds, Brown chronicles the labyrinthine journey girls take from direct and outspoken children who like and trust other girls, to distrusting and competitive young women. She argues that this familiar pathway can and should be interrupted and provides ways to move beyond girlfighting to build girl allies and to support coalitions among girls.

By allowing the voices of girls to be heard, Brown demonstrates the complex and often contradictory realities girls face, helping us to better understand and critique the socializing forces in their lives and challenging us to rethink the messages we send them.

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