CULTURAL STUDIES

The Playground Gets Even Tougher

By PAMELA PAUL
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Correction Appended

SCARLETT made for a good target. The daughter of a Williamsburg artist, she wore funky clothing to her East Village school, had a mild learning disability and was generally timid and insecure. Lila, the resident "mean girl" in Scarlett's kindergarten class, started in immediately.

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Anat Even Or

Scarlett, she sneered, couldn't read. Her Payless and Gap shoes weren't good enough. She wasn't "allowed" to play with certain girls. Lila was forming a band, and Scarlett couldn't be a part. One girl threatened to physically hurt her. During recess, Lila would loom over Scarlett, arms crossed, and say, "I'm watching you."

"I was in middle school before things got as awful as they did for Scarlett," said Scarlett's mother, Annelizabeth, who asked that her last name not be used to protect her daughter. "I understand that children are maturing much faster, but to see such hostility at this young age, wow. It was really shocking."

Mean-girl behavior, typically referred to by professionals as relational or social aggression and by terrified parents as bullying, has existed for as long as there have been ponytails to pull and notes to pass (today's insults are texted instead). But while the calculated round of cliquishness and exclusion used to set in over fifth-grade sleepover parties, warfare increasingly permeates the early elementary school years.

"Girls absolutely exclude one another in kindergarten," said Michelle Anthony, a psychologist and co-author of the new book "Little Girls Can Be Mean." When her own daughter was manipulated by a "friend" into racing down a slide booby-trapped with mud, making it appear to a group of boys as though she'd soiled her pants, Dr. Anthony was taken aback. "You don't expect to run into that level of meanness in a 7-year-old."

But at a time when teenage cyber-bullying is making headlines, parents fear that the onset of bullying behavior is trickling down. According to a new Harris survey of 1,144 parents nationwide, 67 percent of parents of 3- to 7-year-olds worry that their children will be bullied; parents of preschoolers and grade-school-age children are significantly more likely to worry than parents of teenagers. Such fears may be justified. One recent survey of 273 third graders in Massachusetts found that 47 percent have been bullied at least once; 52 percent reported being called mean names, being made fun of or teased in a hurtful way; and 51 percent reported being left out of things on purpose, excluded from their group of friends or completely ignored at least once in the past couple of months.

In Washington, at a "Bullying Prevention Summit" in August, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced stepped-up efforts in elementary schools, noting, "Bullying starts young — and we need to reach students when they are young with the message that bullying is not O.K."

Capt. Stephanie Bryn, a Public Health Service officer overseeing the government's "Stop

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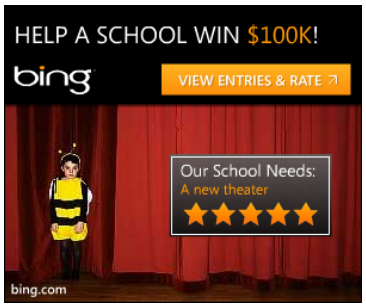

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Within months of starting at a private elementary school in suburban St. Louis, Caroline, now 9, was waking up with night terrors, sleepwalking and crying excessively. When her mother, Karen Port, met with Caroline's teacher, she learned that her daughter was being ostracized. "I was very upset," she said. "Why hadn't anyone told me?"

Five birthday parties passed, without any invitations. No one would play with Caroline. She sat with the boys at lunchtime. "I hate myself," she would tell her mother when she came home. She was 7 years old.

Ms. Port sought help from a school counselor, which improved matters briefly, but the scorn and ridicule persisted. One day, Caroline came home from school carrying a little blue rock that her counselor had given her, a treasure she had presented to her class. "They asked if it had Caroline Disease," she told her mother. "It's starting again."

Is there really a fresh spate of mean little girls? Social scientists who study relational aggression point to a dearth of longitudinal data. It could just be heightened awareness among hyper-parents, ever attuned to their children's most minuscule slight. It could be a side effect of early-onset puberty, with hormones raging through otherwise immature 8-year-olds. Or it may be that an increase has yet to be captured; relational aggression wasn't a focus of academic research until the mid-1990s, making longitudinal study a bit premature. Most studies still leapfrog from preschoolers to early adolescents.

Nicole Werner, a psychologist who studies bullying at Washington State University, said that she hasn't seen research "to indicate that these forms of hurtful behavior are increasing in younger kids."

"However," she continued, "I have to expect that the amount and type of media kids are consuming at younger ages is having an effect."

Other experts agreed. "The research literature on aggression is very clear that with relational aggression, it's monkey see, money do," said Tracy Vaillancourt, who specializes in children's mental health and violence prevention at the University of Ottawa. "Kids mirror the larger culture, from reality TV to materialism."

We no longer live in the pigtailed world of Cindy Brady where a handful of channels import variations on sugar and spice, with prompt repercussions for the latter. "So much of what passes for entertainment is about being rude, nasty and crass," said Meline Kevorkian, who studies bullying at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale-Davie, Fla. "What we see as comedy is actually making fun of other people."

Nicole Martins, a professor of telecommunications at Indiana University, has conducted a study linking aggressive behavior to shows with stars she deemed socially aggressive, like "Hannah Montana" and "The Simple Life." "There was no effect on aggression on boys, but in girls, there was an increase among those who watched socially aggressive female models on TV," Dr. Martins said.

Then there is the tendency of children to grow older younger (a trend with its own acronym: G.O.Y., bandied about by parents and educators). Six-year-olds go to see Erin Munroe, a school guidance counselor in Boston, complaining that So-and-So won't play with them because they like the Jonas Brothers and the "It girls" like Miley Cyrus. She sees first-graders pulling their hair out, throwing up before school and complaining of constant stomachaches. "It's not cool to not have a cellphone anymore or to not wear exactly the right thing," Ms. Munroe said. "The poor girls who have Strawberry Shortcake shirts on, forget it."

Nobody wants her daughter's penguin kicked out of the igloo on Club Penguin. But too many parents are too quick to take their daughter's side, without fully exploring her role in the fracas, said Rosalind Wiseman, the author of the anti-mean-girl bible, "Queen Bees and Wannabes." Sometimes, she points out, the victim may turn out to have been the initial provocateur.

While peer influence is no doubt a factor, veteran teachers and school counselors say parents are often complicit. "Parents think it's really cute when their 2- and 3-year-olds are doing 'Single Ladies' or singing the Alicia Keys/Jay-Z song," Ms. Wiseman said. "But it's not so funny at age 8, when they're singing along to Lady Gaga and demanding a cellphone."

A kindergarten teacher at one of New York City's top private all-girls schools observed, "The mean girls are often from mean moms." She was thrown back by the "venom" among 5-year-olds. They'll say, "You only read 'Biscuit,' and we're all reading chapter books." Or, "Why don't you brush your hair? You don't look nice today." And they're not

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a series of exclusive clubs in which girls could be kicked out for various infractions. “I was surprised by the fierceness,” Ms. Pfau said. “But I was more surprised at the other parents. Rather than nip it in the bud, they encouraged it.”

Eileen O'Connor, a lawyer and mother of five girls in the Georgetown section of Washington, has also witnessed trickle-down meanness in her daughters' classrooms. “To be honest with you, the parents not only enabled it, they engaged in it,” she said. “The parents of mean girls often think, Great, our daughter is so popular!”

Across town, in southeast Washington, Rosalyn Rice, the associate principal of a public elementary school until last year, continually held mediations among young grade-school girls. “They were reporting deeply held grudges from the first grade,” she recalled. One first grader was shunned because she didn't have the “in” classroom supplies — sparkly glue and a Powerpuff Girls carrying case. She stopped going to school because her parents couldn't afford them. “The other girls kept accusing her of stealing theirs, which wasn't true,” Ms. Rice said. Children who didn't have their uniforms regularly laundered or had to borrow one from the school office were mocked mercilessly. Even at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, “Girls were judging how much people cared about them based on what they owned.”

Ms. Rice and several other experts point to a shift in childhood play, with a focus on controlled environments, techno-goodies and material objects. Instead of working out issues themselves during free play outside, children are micromanaged by parents who step in to resolve conflicts for them. Debbie Rosenman, a teacher in her 31st year at a suburban Detroit school, said that helicopter parents simultaneously fail to provide adequate authority or appropriate forms of supervision.

“The girls who are the victims tend to be raised by parents who encourage them to be more age appropriate,” Ms. Rosenman said. “The mean girls are 8 but want to be 14, and their parents play along. They all want to be top dog.” And so the nastiness begins.

Correction: October 12, 2010

An earlier version of this article misidentified the title of Capt. Stephanie Bryn, who oversees a government bullying program. She is a public health service officer, not a military officer.

A version of this article appeared in print on October 10, 2010, on page ST12 of the New York edition.

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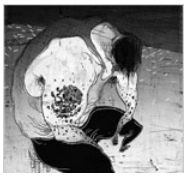

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