

6 Things Everyone Needs to Know About Girls and Cliques

Here's how to help your child survive the ins and outs of her social scene.

By Lisa Freedman

Photo by Keith Negley

One day your child feels like part of the gang; the next she's been elbowed out of the lunch table or left off the invitation list for a birthday party. Here's what you need to know to get her through the clique years—and endless exclusive photo tagging—with fewer scars.

1. Cliquishness is ingrained—and it starts early. “We come from a hunter-gatherer society,” says Julie Paquette MacEvoy, an assistant professor of psychology at Boston College who studies children’s social and emotional development. “There was a greater chance of survival if you were part of a group. The urge to form cliques is evolutionarily ingrained.” By toddlerhood, this behavior starts to show up. A 2014 study published in *Psychological Science* showed that children as young as two will mimic their behavior to match that of their peers so they don’t stand out from the crowd. And not long after toddlerhood, we’re able to pinpoint the person in our group with whom we’re closest. “I don’t think we ever stop using that label [best friend],” says Rosalind Wiseman, a parenting educator and the author of *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (\$10, [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)). Why are we so attached to it? “We need to have the sense that we matter. If we have a best friend, that means we count to someone.” And though children today certainly won’t perish if they don’t have a core group of buddies, there are benefits, like a boost to self-esteem and a sense of belonging, says Wiseman. Also, it just feels good to be included. That’s why it’s so painful to be left out.



2. There are two types of dominant personalities. They typically emerge during middle school: one is positive and fun to be around, and the other is influential but also manipulative, says Brett Laursen, a professor of psychology at Florida Atlantic University. If your child hangs out with a manipulative leader, she may feel demeaned fairly frequently. What helps: emphasizing the importance of thinking for herself and being her own person, not merely the sidekick of a bossy pal. “Have conversations about when it’s OK to give in and when it’s not,” says MacEvoy. For example, it’s fine to let the group’s leader decide which movie to watch if you don’t care, but it’s not OK for the queen bee to determine on her own who’s invited to go to the movie. If you happen to have a child who’s the leader of her clique, you can help her cultivate empathy by regularly asking her how her friends are feeling and doing.

3. Cliques can be physically painful. Research shows that exclusion triggers activity in the same part of the brain that controls physical pain, says Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. For some kids, ejection from a friend group can be more painful than being rejected by a crush because that pain involves only one person. “When you’re pushed out of a clique, that’s an entire group of people who don’t value you, care about you, or want to hang out with you,” says MacEvoy.

4. Your child’s pain is easy to downplay—but don’t. Yes, you know clique trouble is a universal experience and we pretty much all survive. But it’s important to take your child’s grief seriously. If the situation seems to demand it, ask teachers for help in making sure the exclusion isn’t overt or cruel. (Have them keep an eye out for bullying and name calling.) At home, listen to your child’s daily recaps (if she’s willing to share) and empathize, says MacEvoy. Tell her you understand why she’s so upset and that you would be, too. But don’t go that extra step of disparaging or belittling other kids. As much as it may feel good to both of you in the moment, it sets the wrong example and could make reconciliation difficult for your child later.

5. Role play at home will make school easier. To help make the days ahead feel surmountable, ask your child if she would like to talk through hypothetical social scenarios. What should your child do if she has to eat lunch by herself? (Maybe she can read a book while she eats, or you two can talk about who else she could approach.) What should she do if one of the girls says something mean to her? (Walk away.) For younger kids (up to around age 11 or 12), this exercise tends to feel empowering, says MacEvoy. Teenagers may find it cheesy; offer them an ear instead. If there’s potential for your child to patch things up or make amends, discuss the reasons for the exclusion in the first place. “Often it involves a member of the opposite sex—especially in adolescence—or just sheer jealousy,” says MacEvoy. If your child offended just one member of her clique (and the rest of the girls are excluding her as an act of solidarity), encourage your kid to talk to the person with whom there’s a real problem. If they can make up, it may be possible for the whole group to get back together, albeit with a bit of tension in the ranks.

6. Sometimes you just have to find new friends. When a group has truly caused pain—or formally ousted your child—she may have no choice but to leave it behind and seek out new friends. If she’s feeling intimidated (and who wouldn’t be?), talk about trying to make just one new friend rather than entering a whole new clique. Think about it: There’s a world of difference between eating lunch alone and eating lunch across from someone else. Having additional friends is great, too, but children are much less lonely when they have even one supportive friend, says Steven R. Asher, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina. It’s ultimately up to your child to find this new buddy (or buddies), but you can lay the groundwork. Nudge her toward a club, a sport, a volunteer activity, or even an after-school job where she can meet peers with similar interests. And take heart in the knowledge that this lonely state isn’t forever. Faris and his colleagues conducted an eight-week study in which they asked kids in the 8th through 12th grades to name their best friends every few weeks. “We found a shocking amount of turnover,” he says. In other words: Your child may feel excluded on Friday, but that doesn’t mean she’ll still be on the outs come Monday morning.