

Frenemies: Taking Back Control

By Jill Kuhn, Ph.D. and Hannah Kuhn-Gale (age 10)

According to Wikipedia a Frenemie (or Frienemie) is an enemy disguised as a friend. Frenemie refers to the bullying behavior that comes from someone a girl thought was her friend. For the victims of this behavior, it is even more confusing because the frenemie may sometimes be nice. Many girls are understandably confused and rather than standing up for themselves hope that things will just work out and the frenemie will stop the hurtful behavior.

Hannah's story: I am always open to making new friends. In 5th grade however I started dealing with a friendship situation that I eventually realized was seriously messed up. I made friends with Sarah* who was part of a large group of my friends. She started off with some mean words directed at me that took me by surprise. I often just walked away or tried to ignore her. But her mean words continued and within a few weeks things escalated to the point where Sarah was physically hurting me (e.g. sitting on my feet or a bent leg) and she was regularly calling me names or attempting to exclude me from the group. I wished my friends had stood up for me. I found myself worrying about being around Sarah and sometimes ending up in tears.

At some point I talked to my mom and realized that in dealing with a frenemie that sometimes it is good to just take a break and realize who your real friends are. Another thing that helped was realizing that I was well liked in my Gifted and Talented class. Riding my scooter at home allowed me to think through my situation. I did eventually realize that Sarah was not or could not be a good friend to me, and that everything that had gone on was about her and not about me!

Jill's story (Hannah's mom):

A while back Hannah shared several situations with me about her "friend" acting mean and calling her names, with the result that Hannah was feeling badly and crying. Hannah initially hesitated to do much to address the situation for fear that her "frenemie" would be even more mean; a valid concern. However, as we talked, eventually Hannah seemed to feel her own power and instead told Sarah, "That was not a very nice thing to say" or "that was mean." Sarah did not know how to respond, which had the intended effect for short stretches of time. I saw Hannah become a strong young lady who stopped blaming herself! Newer research has suggested that the ways boys and girls bully and cope with being bullied is not all that different, so it's also possible that a frenemie could be a boy.

In addition to being Hannah's mom, I am also a psychologist. As a psychologist, I want to help girls be able to know when they are being bullied and what to do about it. Frenemie attacks can be verbal (name-calling or threats), physical (hurting your body in some way) and include cyber bullying/over the phone (mean things being said about you over the

internet/e-mail/phone/texting). These attacks can also happen outside of school. All these effect how we feel about ourselves. How to know if your frenemie has gone too far:

1. You are afraid to go to school or avoid places the frenemie hangs out.
2. You are feeling sadness, hurt feelings, loneliness and maybe even depression.
3. You feel alone, as if no one understands what you are feeling, and maybe even frustrated that your friends have not stood up for you or worry that your family might not understand what you are going through.
4. You skip school or really want to skip school to avoid the frenemie and/or your grades may be dropping or just general loss of interest in school or other activities you used to enjoy.
5. If you have new physical pains (e.g. headaches or stomachaches) and anxiety (excessive worrying) or have trouble sleeping or want to sleep more than usual.
6. Feeling badly about your body (poor body image), low self-esteem and even eating disorders (when teased about your weight).
7. You are feeling so badly that you think the world would be better off without you. You may have even thought about suicide.

If you find yourself agreeing to any of the above, after being bullied by a frenemie, they are several things you may be able to try:

1. Change the subject or joke around with the frenemie. Sometimes that gets them “off track” and also can empower you to stick up for yourself in the future.
2. Talk to your closest friends and tell them what has been going on and how you feel. Ask them to stand up for you and let them know you will also stand up for them.
3. Spend time with your true friends so you can remember how well liked you are and that there are people who accept you just the way you are.
4. Engage in activities, sports, or hobbies that you enjoy to remind you that you have lots of talents and special things about you.
5. If your frenemie situation has gotten really bad (and especially if you are thinking about suicide and remember, suicide is only a question, but never an answer), then it’s important that you find an adult you can talk to whether it’s a parent, a teacher, school counselor, another relative or a friend’s parent. Show them this article if it will make it easier to start a conversation and let them know you need their help. Don’t give up. Finally, it is also important to remember that it is NOT your fault! You have done nothing wrong, nor have you caused this!

Books for Girls

Cohen-Posey, K. (1995). How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies: A Book that Takes the Nuisance Out of Name Calling and Other Nonsense.

Mattern, J. (2009). The Real Deal: Bullying. Heinemann Library. Chicago: IL.

Sprague, S. (2008). *Coping With Cliques: A Workbook to Help Girls With Gossip, Put-downs, Bullying and Other Mean Behaviors*. Instant Help Books. Oakland: CA.

Websites for Girls

<http://www.girlshealth.gov/bullying/>

<http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/kids/>

*All names have been changed, except the authors.

Hannah is a 5th grader in Northern Colorado and was recently published in the book, “She’s Out There: Essays by 35 Young Women Who Aspire to Lead the Nation: The Next Generation of Presidential Candidates [(Amy Sewell and Heather Ogilvie (Editors), 2009].” She was also recently named one of “25 Beautiful Girls: Celebrate Your Inner Beauty” by New Moon Girls Magazine (July 1, 2009).

Jill Kuhn, Ph.D. is a Psychologist, writer/author, wife and mother to Hannah and her 6-year old sister.