

Do Mean Girls Rule Your School?

Backstabbing and cruel jokes are all too common among middle-school girls and boys, say the experts behind The Ophelia Project, dedicated to stopping “relational aggression” in schools. Here’s their advice for reforming Heathers-esque tweens and teens.

By Jessica Rosevear

ATTITUDE PROBLEM #1:

“Bullying? Doesn’t that mean pushing people around?”

Why it’s Bad News: The kind of aggression that’s most dangerous, says Trudy Ludwig, author of *My Secret Bully*, is between friends, not enemies. Mean comments followed by “just kidding,” or laughing with a friend one day, ignoring her the next, are just as harmful as a hallway shoving match—but many middle schoolers don’t see it as bullying.

What You Can Do: Share scenes from novels (see sidebar) in which this kind of relational aggression is demonstrated. Afterward, challenge students to write their own definitions of bullying as it appears in the book and discuss.

ATTITUDE PROBLEM #2:

“This character assembly is silly. Teachers just don’t get it.”

Why it’s Bad News: While character assemblies are well-intentioned, kids often scoff. Then they’re left stranded when confronted with an actual bully.

What You Can Do: “Role play, role play, role play,” says Ludwig. But keep it real. Don’t oversimplify social situations by asking kids what they would do if someone made fun of them. It won’t compute. Instead, try reading a book that portrays realistic bullying, such as *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, by Chris Crutcher. Have students write skits that demonstrate how they would respond if they were the character being bullied—and then connect it to kids’ own lives.

ATTITUDE PROBLEM #3:

“It’s not cool to talk to teacher.”

Why it’s Bad News: Cliques in charge often come down on “snitching.” And while you can’t help but notice a schoolyard skirmish, a hurtful text message can go undetected.

What You Can Do: Patty Kelley Criswell, clinical social worker and author of *A Smart Girl’s Guide to Friendship Troubles*, recommends setting up a “communication box” in your classroom where students can drop short, anonymous notes. Want a 2007 approach? Create an e-mail account for your students and let them know that they can contact you at any time.

ATTITUDE PROBLEM #4:

“But we were just standing there. We didn’t do anything.”

Why it’s Bad News: Middle schoolers often have the idea that as long as they’re not the ones writing the nasty note, they’re not to blame—even if they’re the ones snickering at it.

What You Can Do: Watch a movie that illustrates all the players in the bullying game—the perpetrator, the victim, and the bystanders. *Odd Girl Out* is a good choice. Then dissect the dynamic with your students. Why do the perps bully the victim? How could the victim have defended herself? How could the bystanders have helped? Finally, apply the movie to what’s going on in your school. Challenge kids to speak up when they see “relational aggression” at work.