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Girls Just Want to Be Mean

By MARGARET TALBOT FEB. 24, 2002

Today is Apologies Day in Rosalind Wiseman's class -- so, naturally, when class lets out, the girls are crying. Not all 12 of them, but a good half. They stand around in the corridor, snuffling quietly but persistently, interrogating one another. "Why didn't you apologize to me?" one girl demands. "Are you stressed right now?" says another. "I am so stressed." Inside the classroom, which is at the National Cathedral School, a private girls' school in Washington, Wiseman is locked in conversation with one of the sixth graders who has stayed behind to discuss why her newly popular best friend is now scorning her.

"You've got to let her go through this," Wiseman instructs. "You can't make someone be your best friend. And it's gonna be hard for her too, because if she doesn't do what they want her to do, the popular girls are gonna chuck her out, and they're gonna spread rumors about her or tell people stuff she told them." The girl's ponytail bobs as she nods and thanks Wiseman, but her expression is baleful.

Wiseman's class is about gossip and cliques and ostracism and just plain meanness among girls. But perhaps the simplest way to describe its goals would be to say that it tries to make middle-school girls be nice to one another. This is a far trickier project than you might imagine, and Apologies Day is a case in point. The girls whom Wiseman variously calls the Alpha Girls, the R.M.G.'s (Really Mean Girls) or the Queen Bees are the ones who are supposed to own up to having backstabbed or dumped a friend, but they are also the most resistant to the exercise and the most self-justifying. The girls who are their habitual victims or hangers-on -- the Wannabes and Messengers in Wiseman's lingo -- are always apologizing anyway.

But Wiseman, who runs a nonprofit organization called the Empower Program, is a cheerfully unyielding presence. And in the end, her students usually do what she

wants: they take out their gel pens or their glittery feather-topped pens and write something, fold it over and over again into origami and then hide behind their hair when it's read aloud. Often as not, it contains a hidden or a not-so-hidden barb. To wit: "I used to be best friends with two girls. We weren't popular, we weren't that pretty, but we had fun together. When we came to this school, we were placed in different classes. I stopped being friends with them and left them to be popular. They despise me now, and I'm sorry for what I did. I haven't apologized because I don't really want to be friends any longer and am afraid if I apologize, then that's how it will result. We are now in completely different leagues." Or: "Dear B. I'm sorry for excluding you and ignoring you. Also, I have said a bunch of bad things about you. I have also run away from you just because I didn't like you. A." Then there are the apologies that rehash the original offense in a way sure to embarrass the offended party all over again, as in: "I'm sorry I told everybody you had an American Girl doll. It really burned your reputation." Or: "Dear 'Friend,' I'm sorry that I talked about you behind your back. I once even compared your forehead/face to a minefield (only 2 1 person though.) I'm really sorry I said these things even though I might still believe them."

Wiseman, who is 32 and hip and girlish herself, has taught this class at many different schools, and it is fair to say that although she loves girls, she does not cling to sentimental notions about them. She is a feminist, but not the sort likely to ascribe greater inherent compassion to women or girls as a group than to men or boys. More her style is the analysis of the feminist historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who has observed that "those who have experienced dismissal by the junior-high-school girls' clique could hardly, with a straight face, claim generosity and nurture as a natural attribute of women." Together, Wiseman and I once watched the movie "Heathers," the 1989 black comedy about a triad of vicious Queen Bees who get their comeuppance, and she found it "pretty true to life." The line uttered by Winona Ryder as Veronica, the disaffected non-Heather of the group, struck her as particularly apt: "I don't really like my friends. It's just like they're people I work with and our job is being popular."

Wiseman's reaction to the crying girls is accordingly complex. "I hate to make girls cry," she says. "I really do hate it when their faces get all splotchy, and everyone in gym class or whatever knows they've been crying." At the same time, she notes: "The tears are a funny thing. Because it's not usually the victims who cry; it's the

aggressors, the girls who have something to apologize for. And sometimes, yes, it's relief on their part, but it's also somewhat manipulative, because if they've done something crappy, the person they've done it to can't get that mad at them if they're crying. Plus, a lot of the time they're using the apology to dump on somebody all over again."

Is dumping on a friend really such a serious problem? Do mean girls wield that much power? Wiseman thinks so. In May, Crown will publish her book-length analysis of girl-on-girl nastiness, "Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and other Realities of Adolescence." And her seminars, which she teaches in schools around the country, are ambitious attempts to tame what some psychologists are now calling "relational aggression" -- by which they mean the constellation of "Heathers"-like manipulations and exclusions and gossip-mongering that most of us remember from middle school and through which girls, more often than boys, tend to channel their hostilities.

"My life is full of these ridiculous little slips of paper," says Wiseman, pointing to the basket of apologies and questions at her feet. "I have read thousands of these slips of paper. And 95 percent of them are the same. 'Why are these girls being mean to me?' 'Why am I being excluded?' 'I don't want to be part of this popular group anymore. I don't like what they're doing.' There are lots of girls out there who are getting this incredible lesson that they are not inherently worthy, and from someone -- a friend, another girl -- who was so intimately bonded with them. To a large extent, their definitions of intimacy are going to be based on the stuff they're going through in sixth and seventh grade. And that stuff isn't pretty."

This focus on the cruelty of girls is, of course, something new. For years, psychologists who studied aggression among schoolchildren looked only at its physical and overt manifestations and concluded that girls were less aggressive than boys. That consensus began to change in the early 90's, after a team of researchers led by a Finnish professor named Kaj Bjorkqvist started interviewing 11- and 12-year-old girls about their behavior toward one another. The team's conclusion was that girls were, in fact, just as aggressive as boys, though in a different way. They were not as likely to engage in physical fights, for example, but their superior social intelligence enabled them to wage complicated battles with other girls aimed at damaging relationships or reputations -- leaving nasty messages by cellphone or spreading scurrilous rumors by e-mail, making friends with one girl as revenge

against another, gossiping about someone just loudly enough to be overheard. Turning the notion of women's greater empathy on its head, Bjorkqvist focused on the destructive uses to which such emotional attunement could be put. "Girls can better understand how other girls feel," as he puts it, "so they know better how to harm them."

Researchers following in Bjorkqvist's footsteps noted that up to the age of 4 girls tend to be aggressive at the same rates and in the same ways as boys -- grabbing toys, pushing, hitting. Later on, however, social expectations force their hostilities underground, where their assaults on one another are more indirect, less physical and less visible to adults. Secrets they share in one context, for example, can sometimes be used against them in another. As Marion Underwood, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Dallas, puts it: "Girls very much value intimacy, which makes them excellent friends and terrible enemies. They share so much information when they are friends that they never run out of ammunition if they turn on one another."

In the last few years, a group of young psychologists, including Underwood and Nicki Crick at the University of Minnesota, has pushed this work much further, observing girls in "naturalistic" settings, exploring the psychological foundations for nastiness and asking adults to take relational aggression -- especially in the sixth and seventh grades, when it tends to be worst -- as seriously as they do more familiar forms of bullying. While some of these researchers have emphasized bonding as a motivation, others have seen something closer to a hunger for power, even a Darwinian drive. One Australian researcher, Laurence Owens, found that the 15-year-old girls he interviewed about their girl-pack predation were bestirred primarily by its entertainment value. The girls treated their own lives like the soaps, hoarding drama, constantly rehashing trivia. Owens's studies contain some of the more vivid anecdotes in the earnest academic literature on relational aggression. His subjects tell him about ingenious tactics like leaving the following message on a girl's answering machine -- Hello, it's me. Have you gotten your pregnancy test back yet? -- knowing that her parents will be the first to hear it. They talk about standing in "huddles" and giving other girls "deaths" -- stares of withering condescension -- and of calling one another "dyke," "slut" and "fat" and of enlisting boys to do their dirty work.

Relational aggression is finding its chroniclers among more popular writers, too. In addition to Wiseman's book, this spring will bring Rachel Simmons's "Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls," Emily White's "Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut" and Phyllis Chesler's "Woman's Inhumanity to Woman."

In her book, the 27-year-old Simmons offers a plaintive definition of relational aggression: "Unlike boys, who tend to bully acquaintances or strangers, girls frequently attack within tightly knit friendship networks, making aggression harder to identify and intensifying the damage to the victims. Within the hidden culture of aggression, girls fight with body language and relationships instead of fists and knives. In this world, friendship is a weapon, and the sting of a shout pales in comparison to a day of someone's silence. There is no gesture more devastating than the back turning away." Now, Simmons insists, is the time to pull up the rock and really look at this seething underside of American girlhood. "Beneath a facade of female intimacy," she writes, "lies a terrain traveled in secret, marked with anguish and nourished by silence."

Not so much silence, anymore, actually. For many school principals and counselors across the country, relational aggression is becoming a certified social problem and the need to curb it an accepted mandate. A small industry of interveners has grown up to meet the demand. In Austin, Tex., an organization called GENaustin now sends counselors into schools to teach a course on relational aggression called Girls as Friends, Girls as Foes. In Erie, Pa., the Ophelia Project offers a similar curriculum, taught by high-school-aged mentors, that explores "how girls hurt each other" and how they can stop. A private Catholic school in Akron, Ohio, and a public-school district near Portland, Ore., have introduced programs aimed at rooting out girl meanness. And Wiseman and her Empower Program colleagues have taught their Owing Up class at 60 schools. "We are currently looking at relational aggression like domestic violence 20 years ago," says Holly Nishimura, the assistant director of the Ophelia Project. "Though it's not on the same scale, we believe that with relational aggression, the trajectory of awareness, knowledge and demand for change will follow the same track."

Whether this new hypervigilance about a phenomenon that has existed for as long as most of us can remember will actually do anything to squelch it is, of course, another question. Should adults be paying as much attention to this stuff as kids do

or will we just get hopelessly tangled up in it ourselves? Are we approaching frothy adolescent bitchery with undue gravity or just giving it its due in girls' lives? On the one hand, it is kind of satisfying to think that girls might be, after their own fashion, as aggressive as boys. It's an idea that offers some relief from the specter of the meek and mopey, "silenced" and self-loathing girl the popular psychology of girlhood has given us in recent years. But it is also true that the new attention to girls as relational aggressors may well take us into a different intellectual cul-de-sac, where it becomes too easy to assume that girls do not use their fists (some do), that all girls are covert in their cruelties, that all girls care deeply about the ways of the clique -- and that what they do in their "relational" lives takes precedence over all other aspects of their emerging selves.

After her class at the National Cathedral School, Wiseman and I chat for a while in her car. She has to turn down the India Arie CD that's blaring on her stereo so we can hear each other. The girl she had stayed to talk with after class is still on her mind, partly because she represents the social type for whom Wiseman seems to feel the profoundest sympathy: the girl left behind by a newly popular, newly dismissive friend. "See, at a certain point it becomes cool to be boy crazy," she explains. "That happens in sixth grade, and it gives you so much social status, particularly in an all-girls school, if you can go up and talk to boys.

"But often, an Alpha Girl has an old friend, the best-friend-forever elementary-school friend, who is left behind because she's not boy crazy yet," Wiseman goes on, pressing the accelerator with her red snakeskin boot. "And what she can't figure out is: why does my old friend want to be better friends with a girl who talks behind her back and is mean to her than with me, who is a good friend and who wouldn't do that?"

The subtlety of the maneuvers still amazes Wiseman, though she has seen them time and again. "What happens," she goes on, "is that the newly popular girl -- let's call her Darcy -- is hanging out with Molly and some other Alpha Girls in the back courtyard, and the old friend, let's call her Kristin, comes up to them. And what's going to happen is Molly's going to throw her arms around Darcy and talk about things that Kristin doesn't know anything about and be totally physically affectionate with Darcy so that she looks like the shining jewel. And Kristin is, like, I don't exist. She doesn't want to be friends with the new version of Darcy -- she wants the old one back, but it's too late for that."

So to whom, I ask Wiseman, does Kristin turn in her loneliness? Wiseman heaves a sigh as though she's sorry to be the one to tell me an obvious but unpleasant truth. "The other girls can be like sharks -- it's like blood in the water, and they see it and they go, 'Now I can be closer to Kristin because she's being dumped by Darcy.'" When I say stuff like this, I know I sound horrible, I know it. But it's what they do."

Hanging out with Wiseman, you get used to this kind of disquisition on the craftiness of middle-school girls, but I'll admit that when my mind balks at something she has told me, when I can't quite believe girls have thought up some scheme or another, I devise little tests for her -- I ask her to pick out seventh-grade Queen Bees in a crowd outside a school or to predict what the girls in the class will say about someone who isn't there that day or to guess which boys a preening group of girls is preening for. I have yet to catch her out.

Once, Wiseman mentions a girl she knows whose clique of seven is governed by actual, enumerated rules and suggests I talk with this girl to get a sense of what reformers like her are up against. Jessica Travis, explains Wiseman, shaking her head in aggravated bemusement at the mere thought of her, is a junior at a suburban Maryland high school and a member of the Girls' Advisory Board that is part of Wiseman's organization. She is also, it occurs to me when I meet her, a curious but not atypical social type -- an amalgam of old-style Queen Bee-ism and new-style girl's empowerment, brimming over with righteous self-esteem and cheerful cattiness. Tall and strapping, with long russet hair and blue eye shadow, she's like a Powerpuff Girl come to life.

When I ask Jessica to explain the rules her clique lives by, she doesn't hesitate. "O.K.," she says happily. "No 1: clothes. You cannot wear jeans any day but Friday, and you cannot wear a ponytail or sneakers more than once a week. Monday is fancy day -- like black pants or maybe you bust out with a skirt. You want to remind people how cute you are in case they forgot over the weekend. O.K., 2: parties. Of course, we sit down together and discuss which ones we're going to go to, because there's no point in getting all dressed up for a party that's going to be lame. No getting smacked at a party, because how would it look for the rest of us if you're drunk and acting like a total fool? And if you do hook up with somebody at the party, please try to limit it to one. Otherwise you look like a slut and that reflects badly on all of us. Kids are not that smart; they're not going to make the distinctions between us. And the rules

apply to all of us -- you can't be like, 'Oh, I'm having my period; I'm wearing jeans all week.'"

She pauses for a millisecond. "Like, we had a lot of problems with this one girl. She came to school on a Monday in jeans. So I asked her, 'Why you wearing jeans today?' She said, 'Because I felt like it.' 'Because you felt like it? Did you forget it was a Monday?' 'No.' She says she just doesn't like the confinement. She doesn't want to do this anymore. She's the rebel of the group, and we had to suspend her a couple of times; she wasn't allowed to sit with us at lunch. On that first Monday, she didn't even try; she didn't even catch my eye -- she knew better. But eventually she came back to us, and she was, like, 'I know, I deserved it.'"

Each member of Jessica's group is allowed to invite an outside person to sit at their table in the lunch room several times a month, but they have to meet at the lockers to O.K. it with the other members first, and they cannot exceed their limit. "We don't want other people at our table more than a couple of times a week because we want to bond, and the bonding is endless," Jessica says. "Besides, let's say you want to tell your girls about some total fool thing you did, like locking your hair in the car door. I mean, my God, you're not going to tell some stranger that."

For all their policing of their borders, they are fiercely loyal to those who stay within them. If a boy treats one of them badly, they all snub him. And Jessica offers another example: "One day, another friend came to school in this skirt from Express -- ugliest skirt I've ever seen -- red and brown plaid, O.K.? But she felt really fabulous. She was like, Isn't this skirt cute? And she's my friend, so of course I'm like, Damn straight, sister! Lookin' good! But then, this other girl who was in the group for a while comes up and she says to her: 'Oh, my God, you look so stupid! You look like a giant argyle sock!' I was like, 'What is wrong with you?'"

Jessica gets good grades, belongs to the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization and would like, for no particular reason, to go to Temple University. She plays polo and figure-skates, has a standing appointment for a once-a-month massage and "cried from the beginning of 'Pearl Harbor' till I got home that night." She lives alone with her 52-year-old mother, who was until January a consultant for Oracle. She is lively and loquacious and she has, as she puts it, "the highest self-esteem in the world." Maybe that's why she finds it so easy to issue dictums like: "You cannot go out with an underclassman. You just cannot -- end of story." I keep thinking, when I listen to

Jessica talk about her clique, that she must be doing some kind of self-conscious parody. But I'm fairly sure she's not.

On a bleary December afternoon, I attend one of Wiseman's after-school classes in the Maryland suburbs. A public middle school called William H. Farquhar has requested the services of the Empower Program. Soon after joining the class, I ask the students about a practice Wiseman has told me about that I find a little hard to fathom or even to believe. She had mentioned it in passing -- You know how the girls use three-way calling" -- and when I professed puzzlement, explained: "O.K., so Alison and Kathy call up Mary, but only Kathy talks and Alison is just lurking there quietly so Mary doesn't know she's on the line. And Kathy says to Mary, 'So what do you think of Alison?' And of course there's some reason at the moment why Mary doesn't like Alison, and she says, Oh, my God, all these nasty things about Alison -- you know, 'I can't believe how she throws herself at guys, she thinks she's all that, blah, blah, blah.' And Alison hears all this."

Not for the first time with Wiseman, I came up with one of my lame comparisons with adult life: "But under normal circumstances, repeating nasty gossip about one friend to another is not actually going to get you that far with your friends."

"Yeah, but in Girl World, that's currency," Wiseman responded. "It's like: Ooh, I have a dollar and now I'm more powerful and I can use this if I want to. I can further myself in the social hierarchy and bond with the girl being gossiped about by setting up the conference call so she can know about it, by telling her about the gossip and then delivering the proof."

In the classroom at Farquhar, eight girls are sitting in a circle, eating chips and drinking sodas. All of them have heard about the class and chosen to come. There's Jordi Kauffman, who is wearing glasses, a fleece vest and sneakers and who displays considerable scorn for socially ambitious girls acting "all slutty in tight clothes or all snotty." Jordi is an honor student whose mother is a teacher and whose father is the P.T.A. president. She's the only one in the class with a moderately sarcastic take on the culture of American girlhood. "You're in a bad mood one day, and you say you feel fat," she remarks, "and adults are like, 'Oh-oh, she's got poor self-esteem, she's depressed, get her help!'"

Next to Jordi is her friend Jackie, who is winsome and giggly and very pretty. Jackie seems more genuinely troubled by the loss of a onetime friend who has been

twisting herself into an Alpha Girl. She will later tell us that when she wrote a heartfelt e-mail message to this former friend, asking her why she was "locking her out," the girl's response was to print it out and show it around at school.

On the other side of the room are Lauren and Daniela, who've got boys on the brain, big time. They happily identify with Wiseman's negative portrayal of "Fruit-Cup Girl," one who feigns helplessness -- in Wiseman's example, by pretending to need a guy to open her pull-top can of fruit cocktail -- to attract male attention. There's Courtney, who will later say, when asked to write a letter to herself about how she's doing socially, that she can't, because she "never says anything to myself about myself." And there's Kimberly, who will write such a letter professing admiration for her own "natural beauty."

They have all heard of the kind of three-way call Wiseman had told me about; all but two have done it or had it done to them. I ask if they found the experience useful. "Not always," Jordi says, "because sometimes there's something you want to hear but you don't hear. You want to hear, 'Oh, she's such a good person' or whatever, but instead you hear, 'Oh, my God, she's such a bitch.'"

I ask if boys ever put together three-way calls like that. "Nah," Jackie says. "I don't think they're smart enough."

Once the class gets going, the discussion turns, as it often does, to Jackie's former friend, the one who's been clawing her way into the Alpha Girl clique. In a strange twist, this girl has, as Daniela puts it, "given up her religion" and brought a witch's spell book to school.

"That's weird," Wiseman says, "because usually what happens is that the girls who are attracted to that are more outside-the-box types -- you know, the depressed girls with the black fingernails who are always writing poetry -- because it gives them some amount of power. The girl you're describing sounds unconfident; maybe she's looking for something that makes her seem mysterious and powerful. If you have enough social status, you can be a little bit different. And that's where she's trying to go with this -- like, I am so in the box that I'm defining a new box."

Jackie interjects, blushing, with another memory of her lost friend. "I used to tell her everything," she laments, "and now she just blackmails me with my secrets."

"Sounds like she's a Banker," Wiseman says. "That means that she collects information and uses it later to her advantage."

"Nobody really likes her," chimes in Jordi. "She's like a shadow of her new best friend, a total Wannabe. Her new crowd's probably gonna be like, 'Take her back, pulleeze!'"

"What really hurts," Jackie persists, "is that it's like you can't just drop a friend. You have to dump on them, too."

"Yeah, it's true," Jordi agrees matter-of-factly. "You have to make them really miserable before you leave."

After class, when I concede that Wiseman was right about the three-way calling, she laughs. "Haven't I told you girls are crafty?" she asks. "Haven't I told you girls are evil?"

It may be that the people most likely to see such machinations clearly are the former masters of them. Wiseman's anthropological mapping of middle-school society -- the way she notices and describes the intricate rituals of exclusion and humiliation as if they were a Balinese cockfight -- seems to come naturally to her because she remembers more vividly than many people do what it was like to be an adolescent insider or, as she puts it, "a pearls-and-tennis-skirt-wearing awful little snotty girl."

It was different for me. When I was in junior high in the 70's -- a girl who was neither a picked-on girl nor an Alpha Girl, just someone in the vast more-or-less dorky middle at my big California public school -- the mean girls were like celebrities whose exploits my friends and I followed with interest but no savvy. I sort of figured that their caste was conferred at birth when they landed in Laurelwood -- the local hillside housing development peopled by dentists and plastic surgeons -- and were given names like Marcie and Tracie. I always noticed their pretty clothes and haircuts and the smell of their green-apple gum and cherry Lip Smackers and their absences from school for glamorous afflictions like tennis elbow or skiing-related sunburns. The real Queen Bees never spoke to you at all, but the Wannabes would sometimes insult you as a passport to popularity. There was a girl named Janine, for instance, who used to preface every offensive remark with the phrase "No offense," as in "No offense, but you look like a woofing dog." Sometimes it got her the nod from the Girl World authorities and sometimes it didn't, and I could never figure out why or why not.

Which is all to say that to an outsider, the Girl World's hard-core social wars are fairly distant and opaque, and to somebody like Wiseman, they are not. As a seventh

grader at a private school in Washington, she hooked up with "a very powerful, very scary group of girls who were very fun to be with but who could turn on you like a dime." She became an Alpha Girl, but she soon found it alienating. "You know you have these moments where you're like, 'I hate this person I've become; I'm about to vomit on myself'? Because I was really a piece of work. I was really snotty."

When I ask Wiseman to give me an example of something wicked that she did, she says: "Whoa, I'm in such denial about this. But O.K., here's one. When I was in eighth grade, I spread around a lie about my best friend, Melissa. I told all the girls we knew that she had gotten together, made out or whatever, with this much older guy at a family party at our house. I must have been jealous -- she was pretty and getting all this attention from guys. And so I made up something that made her sound slutty. She confronted me about it, and I totally denied it."

Wiseman escaped Girl World only when she headed off to California for college and made friends with "people who didn't care what neighborhood I came from or what my parents did for a living." After majoring in political science, she moved back to Washington, where she helped start an organization that taught self-defense to women and girls. "I was working with girls and listening to them, and again and again, before it was stories about boys, it was stories about girls and what they'd done to them. I'd say talk to me about how you're controlling each other, and I wrote this curriculum on cliques and popularity. That's how it all got started."

Wiseman's aim was to teach classes that would, by analyzing the social hierarchy of school, help liberate girls from it. Girls would learn to "take responsibility for how they treat each other," as Wiseman's handbook for the course puts it, "and to develop strategies to interrupt the cycle of gossip, exclusivity and reputations." Instructors would not let comments like "we have groups but we all get along" stand; they would deconstruct them, using analytic tools familiar from the sociology of privilege and from academic discourse on racism. "Most often, the 'popular' students make these comments while the students who are not as high in the social hierarchy disagree. The comments by the popular students reveal how those who have privilege are so accustomed to their power that they don't recognize when they are dominating and silencing others." Teachers would "guide students to the realization that most girls don't maliciously compete or exclude each other, but within their social context, girls perceive that they must compete with each other for status and power, thus maintaining the status system that binds them all."

The theory was sober and sociological, but in the hands of Wiseman, the classes were dishy and confessional, enlivened by role-playing that got the girls giggling and by Wiseman's knowing references to Bebe jackets, Boardwalk Fries and 'N Sync. It was a combination that soon put Wiseman's services in high demand, especially at some of the tonier private schools in the Washington area.

"I was just enthralled by her," says Camilla Vitullo, who as a headmistress at the National Cathedral School in 1994 was among the first to hire Wiseman. "And the girls gobbled up everything she had to say." (Vitullo, who is now at the Spence School in Manhattan, plans to bring Wiseman there.) Soon Wiseman's Empower Program, which also teaches courses on subjects like date rape, was getting big grants from the Liz Claiborne Foundation and attracting the attention of Oprah Winfrey, who had Wiseman on her show last spring.

Wiseman has been willing to immerse herself in *Girl World*, and it has paid off. (Out of professional necessity, she has watched "every movie with Kirsten Dunst or Freddie Prinze Jr." and innumerable shows on the WB network.) But even if it weren't her job, you get the feeling she would still know more about all that than most adults do. She senses immediately, for example, that when the girls in her Farquhar class give her a bottle of lotion as a thank-you present, she is supposed to open it on the spot and pass it around and let everybody slather some on. ("Ooh, is it smelly? Smelly in a good way?") When Wiseman catches sight of you approaching, she knows how to do a little side-to-side wave, with her elbow pressed to her hip, that is disarmingly girlish. She says "totally" and "omigod" and "don't stress" and "chill" a lot and refers to people who are "hotties" or "have it goin' on." And none of it sounds foolish on her yet, maybe because she still looks a little like a groovy high-schooler with her trim boyish build and her short, shiny black hair and her wardrobe -- picked out by her 17-year-old sister, Zoe -- with its preponderance of boots and turtlenecks and flared jeans.

Zoe. Ah, Zoe. Zoe is a bit of a problem for the whole Reform of *Girl World* project, a bit of a fly in the ointment. For years, Wiseman has been working on her, with scant results. Zoe, a beauty who is now a senior at Georgetown Day School, clearly adores her older sister but also remains skeptical of her enterprise. "She's always telling me to look inside myself and be true to myself -- things I can't do right now because I'm too shallow and superficial" is how Zoe, in all her Zoe-ness, sums up their differences.

Once I witnessed the two sisters conversing about a party Zoe had given, at which she was outraged by the appearance of freshman girls -- and not ugly, dorky ones, either! Pretty ones!"

"And what exactly was the problem with that?" Wiseman asked.

"If you're gonna be in high school," Zoe replied, with an attempt at patience, "you have to stay in your place. A freshman girl cannot show up at a junior party; disgusting 14-year-old girls with their boobs in the air cannot show up at your party going" -- her voice turned breathy -- Uh, hi, where's the beer?"

Wiseman wanted to know why Zoe couldn't show a little empathy for the younger girls.

"No matter what you say in your talks and your little motivational speeches, Ros, you are not going to change how I feel when little girls show up in their little outfits at my party. I mean, I don't always get mad. Usually I don't care enough about freshmen to even know their names."

Wiseman rolled her eyes.

"Why would I know their names? Would I go out of my way to help freshmen? Should I be saying, 'Hey, I just want you to know that I'm there for you'? Would that make ya happy, Ros? Maybe in some perfect Montessori-esque, P.C. world, we'd all get along. But there are certain rules of the school system that have been set forth from time immemorial or whatever."

"This," said Wiseman, "is definitely a source of tension between us."

A little over a month after the last class at Farquhar, I go back to the school to have lunch with Jordi and Jackie. I want to know what they've remembered from the class, how it might have affected their lives. Wiseman has told me that she will sometimes get e-mail messages from girls at schools where she has taught complaining of recidivism: "Help, you have to come back! We're all being mean again" -- that kind of thing.

The lunchroom at Farquhar is low-ceilinged, crowded and loud and smells like frying food and damp sweaters. The two teachers on duty are communicating through walkie-talkies. I join Jordi in line, where she selects for her lunch a small plate of fried potato discs and nothing to drink. Lunch lasts from 11:28 to 11:55, and Jordi always sits at the same table with Jackie (who bounds in late today, holding the little bag of popcorn that is her lunch) and several other girls.

I ask Jackie what she remembers best about Wiseman's class, and she smiles fondly and says it was the "in and out of the box thing -- who's cool and who's not and why."

I ask Jordi if she thought she would use a technique Wiseman had recommended for confronting a friend who had weaseled out of plans with her in favor of a more popular girl's invitation. Wiseman had suggested sitting the old friend down alone at some later date, "affirming" the friendship and telling her clearly what she wanted from her. Jordi had loved it when the class acted out the scene, everybody hooting and booing at the behavior of the diva-girl as she dissed her social inferiors in a showdown at the food court. But now, she tells me that she found the exercise "kind of corny." She explains: "Not many people at my school would do it that way. We'd be more likely just to battle it out on the Internet when we got home." (Most of her friends feverishly instant-message after school each afternoon.) Both girls agree that the class was fun, though, and had taught them a lot about popularity.

Which, unfortunately, wasn't exactly the point. Wiseman told me once that one hazard of her trade is that girls will occasionally go home and tell their moms that they were in a class where they learned how to be popular. "I think they're smarter than that, and they must just be telling their moms that," she said. "But they're such concrete thinkers at this age that some could get confused."

I think Wiseman's right -- most girls do understand what she's getting at. But it is also true that in paying such close attention to the cliques, in taking Queen Bees so very seriously, the relational-aggression movement seems to grant them a legitimacy and a stature they did not have when they ruled a world that was beneath adult radar.

Nowadays, adults, particularly in the upper middle classes, are less laissez-faire about children's social lives. They are more vigilant, more likely to have read books about surviving the popularity wars of middle school or dealing with cliques, more likely to have heard a talk or gone to a workshop on those topics. Not long ago, I found myself at a lecture by the best-selling author Michael Thompson on "Understanding the Social Lives of our Children." It was held inside the National Cathedral on a chilly Tuesday evening in January, and there were hundreds of people in attendance -- attractive late-40's mothers in cashmere turtlenecks and interesting scarves and expensive haircuts, and graying but fit fathers -- all taking

notes and lining up to ask eager, anxious questions about how best to ensure their children's social happiness. "As long as education is mandatory," Thompson said from the pulpit, "we have a huge obligation to make it socially safe," and heads nodded all around me. He made a list of "the top three reasons for a fourth-grade girl to be popular," and parents in my pew wrote it down in handsome little leather notebooks or on the inside cover of Thompson's latest book, "Best Friends, Worst Enemies." A red-haired woman with a fervent, tremulous voice and an elegant navy blue suit said that she worried our children were socially handicapped by "a lack of opportunities for unstructured cooperative play" and mentioned that she had her 2-year-old in a science class. A serious-looking woman took the microphone to say that she was troubled by the fact that her daughter liked a girl "who is mean and controlling and once wrote the word murder on the bathroom mirror -- and this is in a private school!"

I would never counsel blithe ignorance on such matters -- some children are truly miserable at school for social reasons, truly persecuted and friendless and in need of adult help. But sometimes we do seem in danger of micromanaging children's social lives, peering a little too closely. Priding ourselves on honesty in our relationships, as baby-boomer parents often do, we expect to know everything about our children's friendships, to be hip to their social travails in a way our own parents, we thought, were not. But maybe this attention to the details can backfire, giving children the impression that the transient social anxieties and allegiances of middle school are weightier and more immutable than they really are. And if that is the result, it seems particularly unfortunate for girls, who are already more mired in the minutiae of relationships than boys are, who may already lack, as Christopher Lasch once put it, "any sense of an impersonal order that exists independently of their wishes and anxieties" and of the "vicissitudes of relationships."

I think I would have found it dismaying if my middle school had offered a class that taught us about the wiles of Marcie and Tracie: if adults studied their folkways, maybe they were more important than I thought, or hoped. For me, the best antidote to the caste system of middle school was the premonition that adults did not usually play by the same rigid and peculiar rules -- and that someday, somewhere, I would find a whole different mattering map, a whole crowd of people who read the same books I did and wouldn't shun me if I didn't have a particular brand of shoes. When I went to college, I found it, and I have never really looked back.

And the Queen Bees? Well, some grow out of their girly sense of entitlement on their own, surely; some channel it in more productive directions. Martha Stewart must have been a Q.B. Same with Madonna. At least one of the Q.B.'s from my youth -- albeit the nicest and smartest one -- has become a pediatrician on the faculty of a prominent medical school, I noticed when I looked her up the other day. And some Queen Bees have people who love them -- dare I say it? -- just as they are, a truth that would have astounded me in my own school days but that seems perfectly natural now.

On a Sunday afternoon, I have lunch with Jessica Travis and her mother, Robin, who turns out to be an outgoing, transplanted New Yorker -- born in Brighton Beach, raised in Sheepshead Bay." Over white pizza, pasta, cannoli and Diet Cokes, I ask Robin what Jessica was like as a child.

"I was fabulous," Jessica says.

"She was," her mother agrees. "She was blond, extremely happy, endlessly curious and always the leader of the pack. She didn't sleep because she didn't want to miss anything. She was just a bright, shiny kid. She's still a bright, shiny kid."

After Jessica takes a call on her pumpkin-colored cellphone, we talk for a while about Jessica's room, which they both describe as magnificent. "I have lived in apartments smaller than her majesty's two-bedroom suite," Robin snorts. "Not many single parents can do for their children what I have done for this one. This is a child who asked for a pony and got two. I tell her this is the top of the food chain. The only place you can go from here is the royal family."

I ask if anything about Jessica's clique bothers her. She says no -- because what she calls "Jess's band of merry men" doesn't "define itself by its opponents. They're not a threat to anyone. Besides, it's not like they're an A-list clique."

"Uh, Mom," Jessica corrects. "We are definitely an A-list clique. We are totally A-list. You are giving out incorrect information."

"Sooooorry," Robin says. "I'd fire myself, but there's no one else lining up for the job of being your mom."

Jessica spends a little time bringing her mother and me up to date on the elaborate social structure at her high school. The cheerleaders' clique, it seems, is not the same as the pom-pom girls' clique, though both are A-list. All sports cliques are A-list, in fact, except -- of course" -- the swimmers. There is a separate A-list clique for cute preppy girls who "could play sports but don't." There is "the white people

who pretend to be black clique" and the drama clique, which would be "C list," except that, as Jessica puts it, "they're not even on the list."

"So what you are saying is that your high school is littered with all these groups that have their own separate physical and mental space?" Robin says, shaking her head in wonderment.

When they think about it, Jessica and her mom agree that the business with the rules -- what you can wear on a given day of the week and all that -- comes from Jessica's fondness for structure. As a child, her mom says she made up games with "such elaborate rules I'd be lost halfway through her explanation of them." Besides, there was a good deal of upheaval in her early life. Robin left her "goofy artist husband" when Jessica was 3, and after that they moved a lot. And when Robin went to work for Oracle, she "was traveling all the time, getting home late. When I was on the road, I'd call her every night at 8 and say: 'Sweet Dreams. I love you. Good Night.'"

"Always in that order," Jessica says. "Always at 8. I don't like a lot of change."

Toward the end of our lunch, Jessica's mother -- who says she herself was more a nerd than a Queen Bee in school -- returns to the subject of cliques. She wants, it seems, to put something to rest. "You know I realize there are people who stay with the same friends, the same kind of people, all their life, who never look beyond that," she says. "I wouldn't want that for my daughter. I want my daughter to be one of those people who lives in the world. I know she's got these kind of narrow rules in her personal life right now. But I still think, I really believe, that she will be a bigger person, a person who spends her life in the world." Jessica's mother smiles. Then she gives her daughter's hair an urgent little tug, as if it were the rip cord of a parachute and Jessica were about to float away from her.

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Do mean girls wield that much power? Wiseman thinks so. In May, Crown will publish her book-length analysis of girl-on-girl nastiness, "Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and other Realities of Adolescence." "I don't want to be part of this popular group anymore. I don't like what they're doing.' There are lots of girls out there who are getting this incredible lesson that they are not inherently worthy, and from someone -- a friend, another girl -- who was so intimately bonded with them.