

Daughters

For Parents of Girls

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LET'S TALK

Can She Stand Up for Herself?

By Andy Steiner

Dad: What's wrong, honey? You seem a lot quieter than normal.

Sarah: Well...some boys at school were really, really mean to me.

Dad: Did you try telling them to stop being mean? Or did you talk to a teacher?

Sarah: I don't know what to say! And people would think *I* was rude if I said something back to them.

When Drew McLellan's usually talkative 11-year-old daughter clammed up a few months ago, he knew that something must be troubling her. She finally confided in him about a frustrating incident at school that left her feeling shamed and silenced. "She was getting a lot of really mean, rude remarks from a pair of boys who for some reason targeted her, probably because she gave them the reaction they wanted," McLellan says. "She would come home hurt and embarrassed and she didn't want to go to school."

At first, McLellan was surprised that this normally confident girl wouldn't stand up to her harassers. "She's very comfortable stating her case at home," he says; sometimes she's even "borderline arrogant," he adds with a chuckle. But as McLellan reflected further, he observed that his daughter's level of passivity increased around her schoolmates—especially boys. "When in her element, my daughter can be sharp witted and quick on the draw," he says. "But when she isn't feeling confident—like

right after one of her classmates calls her ugly—she can't find her voice."

Shrinking back from out-and-out rudeness is just one part of a lack of assertiveness that affects many girls, particularly around ages 9 to 14. Sometimes poor assertiveness skills spark disturbing behavior patterns, with girls seeming chronically unable to stand up to mean or unfair treatment from anyone, or even to lay claim to a variety of things they need and deserve. Steadily drooping self-confidence can snowball, affecting everything from grades to friendships.

It's true that, overall, girls have learned to be more assertive, with significant advances in academics and athletics to show for it, says Cheryl Deep, a Northfield, Michigan-based assertiveness instructor. But despite their successes in the world at large, many girls are still reluctant to stick up for themselves when the chips are down, Deep notes. When pressed for reasons, girls typically state that they fear facing peer—or even adult—disapproval.

The idea that *nice girls don't make noise* still looms large, Deep explains. Because of this, it's important for parents to pay attention to subtle messages we send our children and to show approval for girls' assertive behavior. "Even though we know better, many parents still treat girls differently without realizing it," Deep says. "Society at large still treats girls

differently. Somehow they get the message that passive and nice is the way girls should be."

Practice with Role-Playing

It didn't take long for McLellan to realize that his daughter's reaction to the bullies was similar to what his own might be. "It's probably true of all of us," he admits. "When someone pulls the rug out from under us, we get as tongue-tied as she did." He decided that the best way to help his daughter stand up for herself was to give her time to really explore the problem and how it made her feel—and then role-play possible solutions.

"We came up with things to say," McLellan says. "Like when the boy might say, 'Geez, you are so ugly,' she could reply, 'Wow, you sure have been thinking about me a lot. Do you have a big crush on me?' Because she thought it was funny, and because we practiced, she was able to deliver the lines perfectly.

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And the boys about died of embarrassment when she turned the tables. She understood our goal—never to attack them back or sink to their level—but she *could* twist what they said to reflect back on them. They haven't bothered her since."

Deep teaches similar assertiveness strategies in her classes, which she has presented to hundreds of girls

between the ages of 6 and 17 in the Detroit area. "I do a lot of role playing," Deep explains. "I introduce the girls to different communications styles. Because so many of them are young, I keep it really simple. I teach them the difference between aggressive communication, passive communication, and assertive, direct communication."

Deep believes that confusion about the differences

FIVE ASSERTIVENESS BOOSTERS

DO AS I DO: Like McLellan, parents need to check their own behavior for signs of weakness in the face of adversity. When such situations arise, modify your behavior, and then make a point of showing your daughter how you've chosen to stick up for yourself.

"Role-modeling is very important," Deep says. "If you as a parent—especially a mother—are not feeling very good about yourself or are unhappy with your role, your daughter learns that women are powerless to change an unsatisfying life situation."

BATTER UP: Encourage your daughter to take part in athletic activities, especially team sports. Beyond Mansfield's single-sex confidence theory, there's also the physical—and emotional—benefit of working with a team toward a common goal. "Sports are a great way for girls to build physical confidence that manifests itself in a sense of personal confidence and assertiveness," she notes.

ONE-ON-ONE. Schedule time to be alone with your daughter, suggests Lynn Grasso, a Washington, D.C.-based occupational therapist and facilitator of an after-school group for fourth and fifth grade girls called S.T.R.O.N.G. (Self-Awareness

Training for Responding to the Ongoing Needs of Our Girls). This way you can hear about the challenges your daughter is facing and suggest strategies early on for tackling any problems. "Our fourth-to-sixth grade girls really need us around," Grasso says. "She may not offer one bit of personal information about her day, week, friends, or bullies, but the more time you spend just hanging out, the quicker those conversations will start to happen."

HOME FREE. Let your daughter know that her home—where everybody will accept her no matter what—is the best place for her to practice her assertiveness skills. Family meetings are a good way to provide a regular assertiveness practice session (see p. 13 for more information). And even without family meetings, make sure to solicit her opinions regularly. "Ask her views on any topic—political, religion, whatever," advises Doug, a dad of girls who sees some non-assertive girls in the youth bowling program he heads. Formulating and defending her view is great practice for doing the same outside the family circle.

GET HER SOME HOW-TO. *Stick Up For Yourself! Every Kid's Guide to Personal Power and Positive Self-Esteem* (Free Spirit, 1999) is a girl-friendly step-by-step guide, with

easy techniques to hone her assertiveness. Here are a few key tactics, according to authors Gershen Kaufman, Lev Raphael, and Pamela Espeland:

- Use a notebook to write down the different kinds of feelings and emotions—such as fear, joy, distress, anger, shame—that you experience. Knowing your feelings helps you understand them, tell other people about them, and make choices about them. Also write down your needs, such as a need to belong, to feel worthwhile, to be different, and to have power. Finally, write down your expectations—what you wish to have now and in the future.
- Try making different choices that make you feel better about the emotions you have and circumstances that happen. For instance, if you are shy or being bullied, try to start each day with a simple goal. Perhaps, "Today, I'll say hi to at least one person in the hall," or, "Today, if James teases me, I'll tell him to stop."
- When you are in a situation that isn't fair to you, write down possible alternatives and follow through on better choices. For example, if a friend doesn't come over or call when she says she will, you can talk to her about the problem and ask for changes, stop expecting her to be reliable, or make new friends.

between assertiveness and aggression is what makes many girls afraid to use an assertive approach when challenged by peers. In her classes, she focuses on confident, direct communication that helps a girl understand how to firmly state her case while still acknowledging the needs and feelings of others. If an empathetic form of assertiveness isn't taught to girls, she cautions, they risk falling into the very bullying behavior that tripped them up in the first place.

"I like to call it civilized assertiveness," Deep says. "I emphasize empathy and respect. In my classes, we talk a lot about appropriate feedback, how to get your point across and look out for our own feelings while still being aware of the feelings of others. We teach girls to assert themselves without saying, 'That was stupid. I didn't like that.'"

Create Spaces for Practicing Assertiveness

Sometimes even the most confident girls can have a hard time standing their ground against the teasing and aggressive classroom behavior of boys. Leigh Mansberg, English department chair at St. Mary's Episcopal, an all-girl college preparatory school in Memphis, Tennessee, says single-sex education can help young women feel more confident with the public expression of their naturally assertive sides.

"When I taught at a co-ed school, the girls there would defer to the boys even when I knew they knew the answer," Mansberg says. "At a girls' school, they aren't deferring to anyone."

But not all parents can afford to send their girls to private school—and many believe that exposure to boys is a part of life that can't be ignored. Mansberg believes that even limited all-girl experiences—like Girl Scouts or book clubs or athletic teams—can be essential to boosting girls' confidence, because a boy-free environment gives girls an equal chance to take on leadership and be valued for their contributions. Working closely with a group of other young women, she says, gives girls an important time free of the social pressures and expectations that can come with the presence of boys.

Most of all, we can listen closely as our daughters tell us how powerful they feel—or not—in any situation. As we help her make her case in any setting, she'll be well-trained to do the same in the years to come. ★

Andy Steiner is the author of a book on breastfeeding, Spilled Milk (Rodale, 2005), and mom of two spunky girls.

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