

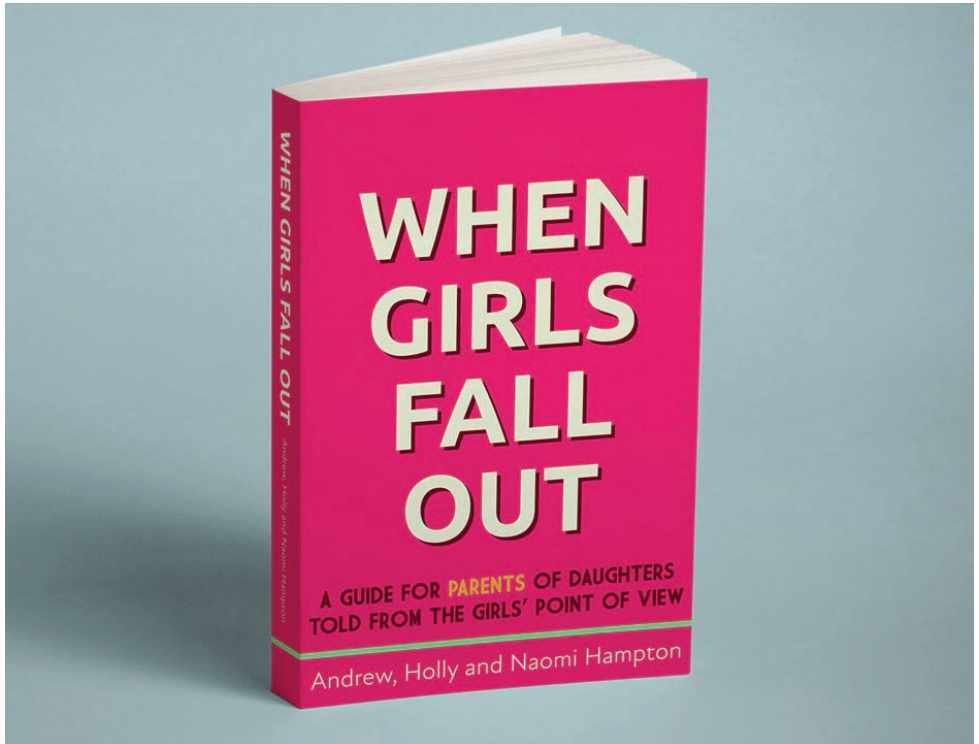


Parent Guide

Empowering girls aged 7 to 18
to navigate the choppy waters
of friendship problems

PANGBOURNE

— Independent, co-educational day and boarding school, ages 11-18 —



From When Girls Fall Out:

Your daughter wants you to be close but also respectful of her space.

She wants you to acknowledge her experimental identities but also to be unafraid to guide her when they go too far.

She wants you to defend her and be her champion, but not to embarrass her or become over-involved.

She will want time alone but to remain connected.

She wants freedom but not to be abandoned.

She needs you to acknowledge her existential pain but not be panicked by it.

When girls fall out, it can be especially tough.

On the whole, girls want to get on with everyone and be happy. However, they sometimes find that the search for trusting and reliable friendships is hard and that without such friendships they feel very unhappy. Their unhappiness is often displayed through tearfulness and even depression. Adults can help in only very limited ways because the problems within friendship groups are very fluid and difficult to express precisely.

“Early adolescence appears to be especially stressful on adolescent girls’ friendships and peer relations, signified by a sharp increase in indirect relational aggression. More

typical of girls and more distressful to girls than to boys, relational aggression, characterised by such behaviours as spreading rumours or threatening withdrawal of affiliation, appears to emerge as girls attempt to negotiate current power relations and affirm or resist conventional constructions of femininity.”

(The American Psychological Society)

Girls on Board sessions use a range of scenarios, role plays and discussion topics designed to evoke empathy. Fuelled by this empathy, girls in school are empowered to find resolutions to friendship turbulence for themselves, with teachers’ support.



The Model

"The classic girl clique is like a life raft for girls at school. Imagine you and your daughter on a cruise ship. Then girls start telling each other that the ship is stupid and boring and it's time to get off. As you watch helplessly, she leaves behind everything that is safe and secure, gets into a life raft with people who have little in common with her except their age, and drifts away.

Once she's on the raft, she's too far away from you and realises her survival depends on bonding with the other girls in the raft. She's desperately afraid of being cast out. We can see now how girls feel forced to act a certain way to be accepted by their peers."

(Rosalind Wiseman 'Queen Bees and Wannabes')

Girls feel a need to be on a raft with at least one other girl – a need so strong that it feels like they are drowning if they don't achieve this.

We call this the 'Existential Imperative'.



The Vocabulary

Words are important – they help us communicate across the void of generational and emotional disconnection that is common between young girls and their parents. Girls on Board offers some terminology that can aid insightful thinking. For instance, it can be useful to analyse the ways in which some girls behave. Some behaviours can foster good relationships, and others can be the source of conflict. This is NEVER about stereotyping, but an attempt to shed light on the way girls relate to each other.

Girl-in-the-water

Girl-in-the-water is a girl who has no raft to be on either because she is a:

New Girl – new to her school and so has no friends. Or a:

Casualty Girl – a girl who has been removed from her raft (or has removed herself) and therefore has no apparent friendship group.

Lonely Girl behaviour

Lonely Girl behaviour is seen when a girl seems unable to sustain friendships. Sometimes this is because she has not yet achieved age-appropriate independence from her parent and does not feel the Existential Imperative as keenly as other girls; by the time she does feel the Imperative it can be too late to successfully negotiate herself onto a raft. A girl behaving like this can sometimes appear to be happy and be friends with lots of girls, but she fails to achieve 'full' membership of any group and is always an 'invitee' rather than a 'de facto' member. We know that friendship is based on shared experience, and it is therefore important for girls to find things they have in common, or even create shared experiences by, say, going out to the cinema together. Adults can help address Lonely Girl behaviour by offering strategies but not by becoming directly involved.

Leadership behaviour

Leadership behaviour can be characterized by natural charisma. Sometimes leadership comes to a girl without her even seeking the role – sometimes she may have put herself forward to be, say, the captain of the football team. Leadership is to be applauded wherever we see it because there is often social risk involved in leading others. It takes courage to lead.

Peacemaker behaviour

A girl who behaves as a **Peacemaker** is a girl who just wants everyone to get on and is often happy to agree with whomever is talking to her. This can lead to some awkward situations when there is disagreement amongst her friends. A girl who adopts peacemaking behaviour is usually very adept at navigating a smooth passage between warring factions without losing face or damaging her integrity. This behaviour can make her a very popular girl and much sought after as a best friend because she is easy going and does not cause conflict.

‘The Hopper’

‘The Hopper’ describes a form of behaviour that allows a girl to have many friends. This is because she can ‘hop’ from one group to another without causing upset or jealousy.

Messenger behaviour

When a girl cleverly relays secrets between groups in order to strengthen the trust between herself and other girls it can make her feel more secure. This strategy can be successful in the short term but goes badly wrong when other girls find out their ‘private’ conversations have been leaked to others.



‘The Singleton’

‘The Singleton’ behaviour leads a girl to possess the ability to remain slightly disconnected from all the girls around her; this is both a strength and a burden since what she gains in avoiding relational aggression and not being prey to the Existential Imperative, she loses in the absolute closeness of girl friendships. This form of behaviour is rare.

Queen Bee behaviour

Queen Bee behaviour leads some girls to exert power over other girls which is not always wanted or appropriate. It may lead her to form very close bonds with one girl for a week or two and then equally as suddenly pull away and move on to someone else. This behaviour can be characterized by the manipulation of other girls to ensure their friendships never fail. It is about control, and it can be useful to view this form of behaviour as stemming from insecurity.

Bullying

Bullying is usually a rare thing but does happen. Often driven by deep-seated jealousy and insecurity, this behaviour is characterized by relational aggression that ‘crosses the line’. By this we mean that adult observers can clearly identify forms of behaviour that fulfil the criteria of bullying – a sustained attempt to make one child feel put down and uncomfortable. Using the ‘Girls on Board’ model can be a very effective way of getting girls who behave like this to self-correct and tone down their behaviour. No girl wants to be seen as a bully and when they are shown the effect of their behaviour on others they make the necessary adjustments. These adjustments come about partly because they are driven by adult authority which carries the threat of sanctions, but also because the exposure of bullying behaviour will lead to a loss of friends and therefore the Existential Imperative kicks in.

Group / Raft Sizes

It is common for girls' groups to be configured in pairs, threes, fours and sometimes more than four.



Pairs

Pros: pairs' stability lies in co-dependency: 'Don't reject me because without me you would be alone too.' Pairs can achieve a closeness that is not always possible for bigger groups.

Cons: If a girl's one friend is ill that day then she has no one to be with. Not only that, but two good friends may not be in the same classes; one may be in the sports team and the other not, one in the choir – the other not, and so on.

Pairs often offer temporary membership to Girls-in-the-Water as a safe haven. This may appear altruistic but actually it can earn kudos from the wider group of girls.

The emotional fallout from strong pairs splitting can be significant and it is one of the few areas where the adults can offer guidance. Precepts of tolerance, forgiveness and understanding can help to heal wounds and soften the blow.



Threes

Pros: with the right personalities, threes can be stable and strong. The number is not so large as to create natural splits. Because there is a risk of one girl being left out, the girls in a trio have to look after each other and be fair in the distribution of their attention.

Cons: threes can be tense and stressful because the possibility of being excluded feels always present. Desks and buses have seats in pairs! Each girl in the three can feel the other two are closer to each other.



Fours

Pros: fours can split into two pairs easily.

Desks and buses have two seats.

Threes are less stable and so there is a self-serving need to maintain the status quo of a group of four.

Cons: Fours are quite large and therefore a bit unwieldy from the point of view of organising themselves. If one girl can't make it, do the other three go to the cinema / have a sleep-over?

Fours can stifle individuality as norms are hard to agree on with so many girls. Girls feel a strong need to 'blend' at this age and blending with three others can be tricky.

More than Four

Groups of more than four spring up from time to time and are common in big schools. They are often characterised by the fluid arrangements by which smaller groups can exist within the bigger whole



Strategies

Things that can help now,
and for the future.

In school:

Share the model with the girls

Simply sharing the model with girls in school is effective at both preventing problems occurring and also helping to solve issues between girls and groups of girls where problems have arisen.

Role-play with the girls

Simple, short role-play scenarios are very powerful in coaching girls how to negotiate power relationships. The girls instantly recognise the issues presented in a role-play, and the exercise allows them to create a dialogue and debate about fairness, inclusion, empathy and bullying.

For example: take a simple scenario of three girls in a friendship group getting onto the school minibus and they realise straight away that there will be one of them sitting on their own. By acting out this scene the girls can be guided towards effective ways to include each other, offering mutual reassurance and support. Role-play reveals the important subtext of every potentially conflictual situation and shows girls how to negotiate with each other without the need for relational aggression.

At home:

Don't try to micro-manage unless bullying is REALLY happening

If things are not going well, making that all-important judgement about the stories your daughter is telling is hard: is this bullying or not? First of all, you have to ask yourself whether the relational aggression apparently being shown towards her is a) real b) just part of a 'conflict' and friendship turbulence.

Remember:

You can always come and share your concerns with teachers without necessarily asking for action or intervention. Once the school is aware of what might be happening we can make gentle and discrete enquiries and try to get to the bottom of things to prevent bullying. But remember on the whole, bullying is rare.

Model good relational attitudes to fellow human beings in front of your daughter. It is a good idea to check the way in which you, as parents, talk about other people. Is the language you use and the attitude you project what you would want your daughter to replicate?



When she comes home after a difficult day

When your daughter comes home after a difficult day at school she will want to share her story. The story she tells may not be the whole truth, because the whole truth may include things that she got wrong and she doesn't want to be told off by you. She may also feel that the events she is describing will seem too trivial for you to take seriously; that may lead her to exaggerate or dramatise. So, while being aware that her story needs to be screened for signs of bullying, you should pay most attention to the emotional sub-text of what she is saying. She is most likely telling you that her search for trusting and reliable friendship is not going well right now. She wants you to listen and validate her feelings.

Three steps to help her

1. First of all, she just needs you to listen. Don't interrupt or give advice; just say things like, 'That sounds really hard for you,' or 'Poor you, that sounds tough.' Remember: **she is telling you her story not because you need to know, but because she needs to tell you.**
2. That first stage may take quite a long time to work through so don't try to cut it short. But when she is starting to wind down you should step in with the second stage: **affirmation.** Tell your daughter just how much you love her, how amazing she is and how proud you are of her. She can't hear enough of that!
3. Then distract her. Think of something you can do together that will mean the two of you can have some quality time together. Maybe take the dog for a walk, or do some cooking together, watch a movie or do some crafting. This will allow her to feel re-connected to you and help re-establish her self-esteem.

If there is advice you feel it is essential to share with her, perhaps do that the next day or at a time later when she is not so upset and can take on board what you are saying. But try not to lecture her! If you have said it before and you are saying it again, it can come across as patronising.

The school's best advice is:

Make sure you have the password to all your daughter's social media accounts (she may have more than one). It is important to allow her some privacy but check her text messaging if she is behaving strangely and won't tell you why. Take your daughter's mobile phone away at night; if your daughter objects to her phone being taken away at night – ask her why.

She'll get through this – just sit with her, and hang on!

Sometimes, despite the best efforts of the school and you, as parents, things won't seem to be improving with your daughter's friendships. But remember that things **WILL** get better – you just need to hang on. Support her, love her, listen to her and she will find her own way.



Parenting types

Queen Bees and Wannabes by Rosalind Wiseman is highly recommended and this guide finishes with her 'take' on parenting styles. The titles she gives these styles speak for themselves; she endorses only one style; all the others are problematic. They are:

The Lock-Her-In-A-Closet Parent

The Best-Friend Parent

The Hip Parent

The Believe-Everything-She-Says Parent

The "You Mess With My Kid,
You Mess With Me" Parent

The "Let's Let Them Work It Out" Parent

The Pushover Parent

The Benign Neglect Parent

The No-Excuses Parent

The Private Parent

The No-Privacy Parent

The Don't-Ask, Don't-Tell Parent

The Overbearing Parent

The Helicopter Parent

The 'You MUST tell me' Parent

The only style she endorses is called:

The Tough-love Parent







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