

Little Girls Can Be Mean: Four Steps to Bully-proof Girls in the Early Grades

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Sarah & Marita

During 4th grade math class, Sarah's bra fell off her shoulder from under her tank top. Boys overheard Marita say, "Sarah! Your bra strap is showing!" Sarah was humiliated and enraged.

Group war:

- ⊙ Sarah told 3 friends; at recess, they excluded Marita.
- ⊙ Marita tried to apologize, Sarah kept running away.
- ⊙ Maddie felt torn b/c she really wanted to play with the group, but also wanted to be a friend to Marita.
- ⊙ Marita asked Maddie to be the go-between: tell Sarah that she hadn't meant to embarrass her; get Sarah to talk with Marita again. Maddie resisted putting herself in the middle.

Additional information:

- ⊙ Marita's parents are divorced; Marita lives with mom who is struggling financially.
- ⊙ Marita's home life is a source of stress and worry for her.
- ⊙ Sarah and Marita have been buddies since preschool.
- ⊙ Maddie is new and is a good match for Marita (intellectually and emotionally); Sarah may notice this and be jealous about it.

Following the Four Steps:

Observe:

- **Collect information** on ways the divorce/financial struggles are manifesting as stress.
 - Marita's shorter fuse
 - Her distraction from doing HW, whereas before she happily did it
 - Her need to try and control lots of things (b/c she feels out of control in other ways)
 - Not sleeping as well
 - Wanting to have play dates away from home as opposed to at home
- **Understand the context:**
 - Set up a meeting with the teacher to find out what signs of stress the teacher may be seeing at school
 - Think about how Sarah and Marita's friendship has evolved over time. Where is it now? In a good place? A tentative place?
- **Assess Marita's personality, and her other friendships:** Does she have many? Only a few? How is she feeling in general about her friends? What is Marita's personality in general? Passive, Aggressive?
- **New Girl Dynamic:** What is her relationship with Maddie? What is your sense of Maddie's role in this group?

Connect:

- **Noticing:** Any of the observations can be said as comments in connecting. For example, "I notice that before you used to love just coming home and doing your homework and now you really struggle with getting started. Is this something you've noticed as well?" Or, "It seems that lately you've wanted to do your play dates at other girls' houses. Is there something about our house that makes it hard to bring friends here?"
- **Talk about the Elephant in the Room:** "I know the divorce has been really hard on you. I can imagine it would leave you feeling kinda lonely sometimes. Has this been what you have been feeling?"

- **Share a story to forage a bond:** “I remember when I was your age, I got in a terrible fight with best friend. I felt really alone and didn’t know what to do about it. Is that similar to how you’re feeling right now about Sarah?”
- **Find out what is the biggest worry for your daughter:**
 - “So are you most worried about losing Sarah as a friend, or about being excluded from the group, or that you feel like Maddie isn’t standing up for you by not wanting to talk to Sarah on your behalf.”
- **Acknowledge that she has a right to feel this is a big problem,** but not an insurmountable one: “Wow. If I felt like I had lost my best friend and didn’t know if my new friend would stand by me in a fight, I might feel like I had a big problem that I was totally alone to try and solve.”
- **Congratulate her** for realizing that this was a big situation that needed support and tell her how brave she is to care enough about her friends to want to make things better.

Guide:

- **Get a list of possible solutions:** Any and every one. Be sure to solicit ideas, however wacky, from your daughter.
- **Decide on the urgency:** Can time and space heal this one, or does she need to choose a course of more direct action?
- **Support her to think of both public and private ways to move forward with each girl**
 - Private:
 - Role play how she could approach Sarah outside of the group of girls, and what she could say
 - Practice I statements and tone of voice for de-escalating
 - Work through the possible perspectives of both Maddie and Sarah without pushing one particular point of view
 - Get support to understand how bringing in girls on your behalf will escalate the fight and prevent the dyad from resolving their issues
 - Public:
 - Try and phone Sarah to either work it out on the phone or set up a time Marita can stop by
 - Write her a note of apology to deliver to her home after school
 - Make a friendship token as part of the apology
 - Plan an activity that is exciting and public (e.g., ice cream, a movie)
 - Own her part in the event
 - Use I statements to own what she did, but also state what was hard about how Sarah handled the situation
- **Give her back control:**
 - Support Marita Set up outside play dates so she has a “platform” to make connections at school.
- **Find support everywhere:** School can be so intense. Help your daughter find a place to get away from the intensity with pals at an afterschool activity or with family friends.

Support to Act:

- Marita chooses 1-2 things to begin with
- Parent becomes an interested but not overly invested observer
- Uses new events to circle back to the 4 steps and observe new things that happened, connect over these, fill in with more guidance/new ideas to list, where Maria will choose 1-2 new items to try