



12 Ways to Prevent Girlfighting and Build Girl Allies

1. DO YOUR OWN WORK

We can't help girls see or deal with girl bullies or offer them constructive ways to respond to their own and other girls' anger and aggression unless we can negotiate these things ourselves. This means exploring the roots of our own anger, disappointment, jealousies; refusing to engage in slander and gossip, confronting the fears and anxieties that standing up for ourselves, speaking truth to power, or feeling excluded or talked about invoke.

2. READ THE SCHOOL CULTURE CRITICALLY

Helping girls read the school culture and the messages it conveys about power and privilege (who's important and who isn't) can give them some critical distance and explanatory power so that they don't take sexist messages personally. Providing safe spaces for girls to discuss the climate of their schools is important; more important is encouraging them to develop ways to move beyond discussion and giving them room and power to initiate change.

3. ENCOURAGE DISCRIMINATING TASTES IN FRIENDSHIPS

We need to rid ourselves of the fiction that girls should like and be friends with everyone. Encourage girls to choose people as friends who are affirming, who listen to them and treat them well. It's okay not to be friends with someone as long as you treat that person respectfully. Most important, mistreatment is *not* a quality of friendship.

4. ADDRESS GIRLFIGHTING WHEN YOU SEE IT

Talk with girls about relational and physical violence. Relational aggression has very real consequences and often precedes physical aggression. There is, however, little training for teachers and school administrators to spot and understand the near invisible cycles of popularity and isolation among girls. Encourage your school to provide teacher education on relational as well as physical forms of aggression and to understand how and why girls and boys express their anger and aggression differently.

5. ENGAGE GIRLS' ANGER AND HONE A SENSE OF FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE

To express anger and aggression is human. Used constructively, both can be real sources of power. Girls need guidance about how to stay clear and centered in their disagreements and they need support for not giving up their convictions to maintain a false relational harmony. Help girls to know and own the real sources of their strong feelings and to make considered choices about how to express them and to whom.

6. FOSTER SOLIDARITY BETWEEN GIRLS, BETWEEN WOMEN, BETWEEN WOMEN AND GIRLS

Avoid a "girls will be girls message" when what you really mean to say is that all girls are petty, mean or back-stabbing or that all girls engage in exclusive cliques and clubs. Instead, affirm girls' relational strengths and the potential for collective action and help girls identify things that they can change to make their environments better places. Model healthy, honest, committed relationships with women.

7. DEVELOP "HARDINESS ZONES" AND SAFE SPACES FOR GIRLS

Hardiness is a concept that describes people who thrive in stressful circumstances. You can help to develop hardiness by offering girls opportunities to initiate ideas, to take action on issues that really matter to them, to experience the challenge of changing their schools and communities for the better. Provide safe spaces for girls to get together to practice their critique of a media rife with damaging stereotypes and negative voices. In these spaces girls can talk, plan and organize for social change, write poetry, critique sexism, and practice sisterhood.

8. QUESTION THE TRADITIONAL ROMANCE STORY

The usual story of heterosexual romance places girls in subordinate relationship with boys. When you see such stories, question them. Question connections between male desire and violence; refute the line that boys chase, hurt, kick girls because they like them. Question double standards about sexual activity and prevailing assumptions that boys only want sex and girls only want relationships, or that boys are ruled by their hormones and so it's up to girls to control them. Talk with girls about what they want.

9 DEVELOP MEDIA LITERACY

Provide girls with the language and tools to be critical of the things they watch and read and hear. Practice the four-step model proposed by Dr. Janie Ward in her book *The Skin We're In*:

Read it—help her break down racist/sexist/classist experiences by exploring the images/situation with her. Help her make connections and see larger patterns.

Name it—acknowledge the presence of racism/sexism/class bias and bring its reality into full consciousness, however painful this might be.

Oppose it—help her consider constructive forms of resistance tied to a healthy and positive sense of herself and her values.

Replace it—help her put something new and affirming in the place of the feeling, attitude, or behavior being opposed. Encourage her to take a stand for fairness and justice, reinforce personal integrity and the power of acting on her beliefs.

10. ENCOURAGE HER TO PLAY SPORTS AND BUILD PHYSICAL STRENGTH

Awareness of and comfort with our bodies centers us, connects mind and body. Fully inhabiting our bodies as subjects rather than objects radically alters our relationship to the public world. Sports, self-defense classes, and martial arts offer girls a chance to know their strength, instill confidence and full awareness of what their bodies can do, and encourage girls to take up space.

11. PRACTICE VOICE, ENCOURAGE ACTIVISM

Provide girls with different venues and opportunities to voice their thoughts and feelings: drama, debate clubs, discussion groups, book clubs, mentoring programs. Civil rights teams can be great places to expand consciousness and work toward justice. Connect with nonprofits that do programming for girls, offer alternatives to media images, and encourage girls to be strong, independent and confident.

Girls who appreciate that the world is bigger than the social dynamics of their school are less likely to be devastated by peer rejection. Rather than spend time playing girl-targeted video games in which she shops, decorates a house, or designs clothes, encourage her to investigate who makes the clothes she wears and what those workers' lives are like. Rather than read magazine articles that encourage dieting or looking perfect, encourage her to do something to support those who "go without" in her community. Connect her with human rights organizations to find out how she can make the world a better, more caring and just place.

12. TELL THE TRUTH

What happens when women and girls get together to fight sexism or other related "isms"? Can they cross race and class lines? Can they address heterosexism and homophobia? Can they make real changes? The truth is both that it's very hard *and* that it's worth the struggle. The truth is that there are consequences — real dangers -- to taking yourself seriously and challenging the status quo. Telling girls the truth about *our* lives, choices, and actions helps them understand their choices, prepares them for the consequences of their actions, and reminds them that conflict and disagreement are not only inevitable but important.