

Confessions of a mean girl

She was the one who made life intolerable for another girl in school. Then came her epiphany

BY JENNIFER LAFFIER, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 23, 2010

Jennifer Laffier is associated with the **Canadian Safe School Network** which can be accessed via www.canadiansafeschools.com. This website provides useful information for parents when helping children who are encountering social challenges



Actresses Lindsay Lohan, Amanda Seyfried, Rachel McAdams and Lacey Chabert in the 2004 film Mean Girls, which showed how nasty teenage girls can be.

Photograph by: Paramount Pictures, .

We were in Grade 5 and I was the leader of "Kool and the gang." It was an all-girls club with 12 members. It wasn't that hard to be a part of this prestigious club. All you had to do was be honest, like to have fun, be pretty, be popular, be loyal to the members -- and hate "Kim."

Kim was a girl in our school whom I disliked, so as the leader of the group I made it a condition that the other girls had to dislike her, too. They couldn't speak to her, play with her and most of all, couldn't say anything nice about her. We made Kim's life so intolerable for two years that she left the school.

I didn't realize it then, but now I do. I was one of the "mean girls" -- a pure bully. My weapons of power and destruction were cruel words, intimidation, ostracizing and taunting.

This was 27 years ago and today my weapons of power are awareness and advocacy. Today I am a professor of psychology and a therapist. I work with children who are either bullies or victims and run anti-bullying programs in schools and communities.

Many people ask how I made this drastic change and why I think I was a bully years ago. My transformation began in Grade 9. I was leaving Grade 8 as the Queen Bee, full of confidence and power. Then it struck me

Her name was "Darlene." She was in Grade 10 and she became my bully. For the first time I realized how it felt. How sad, scared, humiliated and hopeless I felt. Where were my friends now? Where was my confidence? This was not the only changing event in my life; it was a combination of things that slowly changed my views on power, control, confidence and empathy.

Shortly after I entered Grade 9, "Mrs. Black," a teacher from grade school, asked if I would like to help out on a volunteer project. The project was partnering older females with younger girls in Grade 3 to act as mentors. Coincidentally the three young girls I was mentoring were all victims of bullies. I had to give them advice and talk to them about their problems after school each week. I didn't realize it then, but Mrs. Black knew exactly what she was doing. I am so grateful to her for her insight and for taking a different approach to helping me stop bullying.

Bullying is a problem that affects all ages, from Grade 1 to the workplace. It is a phenomenon in the youth culture that both scares and mystifies adults. But the bottom line is, something needs to change. Enough is enough.

Children should be going to school to learn and socialize, not live in fear and dread of what the day holds. But how do we fight bullying? We have been trying for years with programs, interventions and awareness. Is it getting any better? Will it ever stop?

The first thing we need to do is get a better understanding of why children and youths bully. Not all bullies are the same and therefore we cannot put them in a neat little box of a definition. However, some characteristics are true for all bullies. They want power and control, maybe for different reasons but the underlying goal is there.

All children strive for some sense of autonomy and control in their lives. The less in control they feel, the more they will attempt to gain it back in other settings. As a child I

liked being in control at all times. It made me feel safe and secure. It also gave me a sense of power. I now call this "coward power;" an attempt to gain control and power through anti-social and easy methods.

It's not hard to make others feel bad about themselves. A quick dirty look or a nasty word ... they take only a second and they are powerful. But they leave you feeling empty. So you bully again.

When I became a mentor to the younger children in Grade 9, I experienced a whole new kind of power. One that made me feel happy and complete. I tell the children I work with who are bullies this is "hero power." Bullies need to know and be taught that there are different types of power. My teacher took a chance on me. She saw some kind of leadership abilities and channelled them into effective skills.

We also know bullies have poor communication and conflict-management skills. Looking back now I realize I never handled conflicts well as a child.

I competed when I should have collaborated and shut down when I should have been listening. We need to teach children and youth how to communicate effectively and handle conflicts in pro-social manners. We need to give them this power.

But "changing the phenomenon of bullying" is not going to come from the adults. It has to come from the youth.

Yes, finding your role and your place among your peers is a natural developmental task. There will always be pecking orders. But how you handle yourself in this quest is up to you. Will you do it through coward power, or hero power? Will you stand by and watch others be cruel when you know it is wrong?

Youth need to stand up for what they believe in. My peers in Grade 5 had more intervening influence over my bullying behaviour than the teachers who suspended me for it. I would have stopped if my peers had said to me "This is mean, we can't do this," or "so not cool."

But no one did; they laughed along and agreed to the terms. Children do this because it keeps the attention off them. It's better to be in the circle than outside the circle, right?

Well, not if that causes you to become a part of the bullying problem. Witnessing and tolerating bullying by others is just as harmful and cruel. So all children and youth need to stand up and say "I will not be a part of bullying."

I tracked down Kim 15 years ago and flew to the U.S. to apologize to her. She knew who I was the second I called her. People never forget their bullies.

Over lunch she told me how much my actions had hurt her and how far that hurt extended. Her biggest fear for her children was for them to become the victims of bullies

in school. This was not the power I wanted, nor the lasting impression I wanted to make on a person. As I listened with a heavy and sorry heart, I vowed to do what I could to help solve this social problem. I only ask that all youth consider the long-term effects of their behaviour and ask themselves, "What do I want to be remembered for?"

We have the power to make a difference and this is an area that needs everyone's help. Youth need to stand up to bullying and feel a hero's power.

Jennifer Laffier is a creative psychotherapist and a professor at University of Ontario Institute of Technology/Durham College.

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