



THE NEXT STAGE

The Wonder Years—Preschool • School Age

Girls Have Cooties!

Helping Young Children Understand Rejection from the Opposite Sex

Grade 1. I'm watching my little girl chase her new best friend around the playground. She is pretending she is going to kiss him—the other little boys gather around to save him from the girl. Soon I know, the boys will band together and it will no longer be cool to play with girls. Do I have to stand by helplessly and watch my sweet kid's first experience of rejection?



Thankfully no. That sense of powerlessness that many moms feel when watching these behaviours often echoes their own experiences of rejection. It hurts, it's bewildering, and little girls often wonder what they did to

cause it. These early wounds can run deep and inform our interactions for life. As with any other phase that our kids move through there is a two-step forward, one-step back movement here. So on Monday and Tuesday it is uncool to play with girls, but on Wednesday the easy play of earlier times is missed and girls are valued again. Girls may begin to develop the pattern of hope for connection followed by rejection that is so familiar in later life to abused women. So how can we help our kids to recognize what is going on here? Boys at a certain age seem to feel a need to bond, to form a tribe, to set themselves apart from girls. They want to explore or perhaps carve out their place in their mini-society, their competitive play tends to be rough

and tumble. Sadly there is little articulated support in our culture for the boys to do this, and because we live in a patriarchy the boy-bonding often occurs as a result of girl-rejecting.

What can we do to support our boy children as they shift into this developmental phase? We can encourage their tribalism, create spaces where they can be with other boys and help them develop the idea that the tribe needs rules to play by. We can guide them to uphold the inherent sense of fairness children feel. And we can teach them about how unkind words and deeds hurt their feelings and the feelings of others. We can remind them that mom is a girl, that girls are equally special in their own way, different from boys.

How do we support our girls? We can be proactive—warning them that soon the boys

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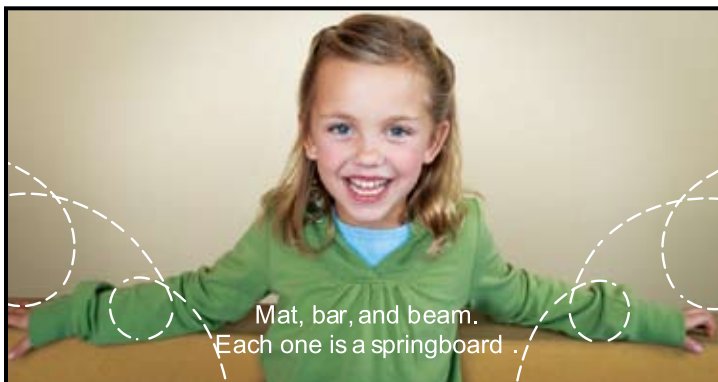
will move into a clump that may exclude them. We can support the inherent trustworthiness of our girls by letting them in on the way boys grow. We can coach them to support their friends that get upset about being rejected. We can normalize that this is what boys need to do and boys aren't always as smart as girls about not hurting people's feelings. We can celebrate the fact that girls tend to be more considerate of others, more mature. We can actively encourage our girls to play with their girlfriends. Some of us have kids that don't fit this pattern of course. I think of those kids as embodying what some aboriginal communities term "two-spiritedness." These are the boys who don't want to reject the girls, don't understand why they are meant to and

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may unhappily bow to peer pressure but not feel like it fits for them to do so. These are the girls that can enjoy rough and tumble play with the boys, then transfer that play easily to the girls without experiencing the rejection occasioned by the boy's exclusion. We can help these kids too by explaining how difficult it can be sometimes to hold true to what feels right for you in the face of peer pressure. We can celebrate the courage and integrity of the outsider. Just as this time may be an initiation for boys into the ways of men, so too can our girls be initiated into one of the best (or worst) kept secrets of our lives: that women (and girls) will often know more about what is going on for men (and boys) than

the males do themselves. We can assure our girls that their boy-friends secretly miss them but are not allowed to say so. We may even let them know that one day this will change again and many of the boys may be clamoring for the girls' attention. Watching these gendered patterns of behaviour emerge in our kids can be challenging. They will tend to trigger many parts of ourselves that react in familiar ways. The gift here is to become more aware of what has informed our own gender role, and for that awareness to then be able to guide how we support our children's transitions. We can instill the respect for each other that may have been absent in our own upbringing, and thereby support our own healthy families as well as our children's future families because, in the end, nothing matters more than your family.

Derek Scott is a London psychotherapist in private practice with over 25 years experience in the field. His biggest challenge is explaining what he does to his five year old daughter. If you can help, please visit him at www.yourtherapist.org.



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