

**WHY** **The Hidden Truth**  
**about the**  
**Pre-Teen Years**

**GOOD KIDS**  
**ACT CRUEL**

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 sourcebooks

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## CHAPTER ONE

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# SOCIAL CRUELTY

**W**alking down the crowded hall between classes the first day of middle school, Ellen unintentionally bumped another girl into a locker. Turning to apologize, Ellen saw the girl already talking to a couple friends. One of them angrily glared at her and said, “Why don’t you watch where you’re going, Hula Hips?” Then the other friend took up the call, “Watch out for Hula Hips!” And so, at the beginning of the year, a painful nickname was born from that casual encounter. By the end of the week, the name had stuck with repetition, picked up by other students, including a few she had known in elementary school and even some boys who thought it was funny to single her out for ridicule. “Watch out for Hula Hips!” they laughed. But it was not so funny for Ellen. The meanness of the teasing hurt. Welcome to middle school!

*Why* do many good children increasingly treat each other badly starting as early as late elementary school; *when* does this

meanness become most common; *what* are the objectives of this deliberate mistreatment; *how* is it typically delivered; and *what* can parents and teachers do to help children in response? These are the basic questions that I try to answer in this book, which is intended to be both descriptive and prescriptive—proposing how adult understanding and intervention can help stem the harm.

My term for this intentional meanness is *social cruelty*—aggressively attacking another child with words or actions directed to injure the victim’s well-being, to damage his or her standing, or to simply assert the aggressor’s dominance.

I believe:

- *Why* it occurs is rooted in early adolescence (roughly beginning around ages nine to thirteen) when the *insecurity* and *vulnerability* of separating from childhood is coupled with the desire for increased *social independence* to act more grown-up.
- *When* it is most problematic is during the middle school years, because almost all the students have been destabilized and challenged by early adolescent change by then.
- *What* motivates this behavior is the need to protect diminished self-worth by derogating the worth of others, to attack others to preempt getting hurt first, to defend after being attacked, to give payback for injury received, to assert dominance, and to claim or hold one’s social place.

- *How* it is typically acted out includes tactics of *teasing, exclusion, bullying, rumoring* (spreading rumors), and *ganging up*.
- *What* parents and teachers can do is become knowledgeable about the changing world of children at this vulnerable age, coach them in how to cope with social cruelty, help them develop a constructive code for treating each other, and get involved when significant acts of social cruelty occur.

The first step for adults is to understand how the potentiality of social cruelty in the lives of late elementary and middle school students is rooted in the dislocation, insecurity, and need for more social independence that comes with early adolescent change. The second step for adults is to stay sufficiently informed about the young person's increasingly independent social world so they can monitor and influence how early adolescents treat each other. The more youth groups are abandoned by significant adults (parents and teachers), the more social cruelty is likely to flourish due to the rigorous rules of social survival at this vulnerable age.

In addition, when adults ignore acts of social cruelty, they become complicit with the problem. The victim gets no support. The community of peers becomes more unsafe. And the victimizer learns to become more aggressive, more antisocial, and intentionally harmful while he or she grows. Such development can set the stage for psychological and

social adjustment problems later in life. This is another reason why adults must not leave early adolescents entirely alone to determine social conduct amongst themselves.

Staying informed, however, is not easy for adults, because young people's new sense of social independence works against involvement. Adolescents want to have a social world apart from adults, one that is private about what happens, and that includes incidents of social cruelty. In addition to young people's need for privacy, their pride in keeping up appearances, and their desire to keep adults out, there is also the "don't-tell-on-peers" code of the school yard that encourages secrecy and silence.

In fact, social cruelty is protected by this conspiracy of silence. Most acts of social cruelty go undetected by adults because they are unreported. Young people don't tell you, because to let adults know of these incidents, they would have to sacrifice some social independence and risk serious social payback. To quote what one middle school student told me: "Snitches get stitches."

So when a teacher asks the kids what happened out in the hall, they pretend they don't know. After all, it's safer to lie to a teacher than to tell on a peer, because reprisal from the other students can always come their way.

Besides, most teachers don't know what is going on. Asked about their last class, most middle school teachers will likely remember how students responded to instructions and either

complied with or resisted their need for order. Ask students what happened in the same class, and they will describe another level of social interaction that teachers can miss. Teachers don't hear what the students whisper; they don't see the looks that are given; and they don't read the notes that are passed. They don't know the threats that are made, and they don't hear the harsh words that are said or the names that are called. They don't sense the jealousies; they don't notice the rivalries developing; and they aren't told the stories that are being spread around school. They don't witness the bumps and pokes that are delivered (until they explode into a fight). They don't pick up on who is not talking to whom today or who is fixing whom with a hostile glare. But it is in this second world, which is mostly hidden from adults, where social cruelty occurs.

As for parents, they may not know, because their child doesn't want them to know how he or she is fearful or friendless, or perhaps feels threatened or alone. Typically, if young people are on the receiving end of social cruelty, they will make this difficult situation even worse by blaming themselves for not fitting in, insufficient popularity, or inadequate toughness. In turn, young people end up blaming parents for their ignorance of the situation. The primary reasons young people cite for not disclosing the social cruelty they receive at school is that 1) they believe parents wouldn't believe that kind of thing goes on; 2) it might imply that something is wrong with them; or 3) adults will intervene in ways that will only make things worse.

To paraphrase one student's complaint: "My parents just don't get it! But if I told them, they'd think something's wrong with me. They haven't a clue what seventh grade is really like. They don't know what I face each day! My report card—that's all they care about. That's the least of my problems!" Actually, the child is mistaken. There's much more breadth of caring in his parents than he gives them credit for. His early adolescent determination to manage his own life at school causes him to keep them in ignorance of the harsh realities that can come with managing this independent social world.



My primary motivation for writing this book is to help parents "get it." If you learn about social cruelty and show you know what can go on in your adolescent child's social life, your beleaguered son or daughter will be much more likely to tell you what (if any) mistreatment is actually going on.

So, specifically what are the social cruelties that come to the forefront during the middle school years? Five categories of meanness repeatedly emerged in my discussions while counseling young people:

- *Teasing*
- *Exclusion*
- *Bullying*
- *Rumoring*
- *Ganging up*



Now, consider these categories in more detail to get a better sense of each.

## Teasing

A child can be a victim of *teasing* when given an insulting nickname, when put down for appearance or performance, when ridiculed for standing out or not fitting in, or when laughed at for what he or she says or doesn't know. *Teasing is the act of making fun of a difference in someone to criticize his or her traits, diminish his or her social standing, and set him or her apart socially.* The cruel message is "There's something wrong with you." Teasing is intended to humiliate with insults.

## Exclusion

A child can be a victim of *exclusion* when students ignore him or her in class, deny him or her a place at the lunch table, see that he or she is not included in gatherings outside of school, shun classroom contact so that he or she feels isolated, or expel him or her from membership in their group. *Exclusion is the act of refusing to let someone associate with others or join a group.* The cruel message is "You don't belong." Exclusion is intended to isolate with rejection.

## Bullying

A child can be a victim of *bullying* when possessions are stolen or vandalized, when threats are made “to get you after school” in person or over the phone, when he or she is verbally attacked over the Internet, or when the child is routinely hit or shoved or beaten up. *Bullying is the act of verbally or physically intimidating, injuring, coercing, or dominating another person.* The cruel message is “You can be pushed around.” Bullying is intended to frighten with threatened or actual harm.

## Rumoring

A child can be a victim of *rumors* when others circulate salacious notes, make up and tell malicious stories (in person, over the phone, or via the Internet) about a person to create a false impression he or she will have trouble living down, or reveal and distort a secret trustingly told in confidence. *Rumoring is the act of using gossip to spread lies or secrets about another person that demeans his or her social reputation.* The cruel message is “You can’t control the bad things that people say about you that others are ready to believe.” Rumoring is intended to slander with confidential truths or blatant lies.

## Ganging Up

A child can be a victim of being *ganged up on* when no one is on his or her side or when multiple students verbally or

physically use any of the other four kinds of social cruelty to attack a single person. It creates a sense of solidarity between the attackers and extreme vulnerability in the object of their attack. *Ganging up is the act of the many using their greater numbers to torment one particular person.* The cruel message is “You have no friends to support you, only enemies against you.” Ganging up is intended to pit the group against the individual.

Of course, these five forms of social cruelty often overlap. At worst, they can all combine to extremely cruel effect—when someone is teased, bullied, rumored, ganged up on, and then excluded from the group. Those on the receiving end of such an onslaught truly feel that everyone has turned against them: *I don't have any friends!* these victims think. *Everybody hates me!*

Each kind of social cruelty preys on a different early adolescent fear:

- Teasing preys on the *fear of being inferior*: “Something is wrong with me.” It undermines self-esteem.
- Exclusion preys on the *fear of isolation*: “I have no friends.” It accentuates loneliness.
- Bullying preys on the *fear of weakness*: “I’m unable to stand up for myself.” It increases a sense of impotence.
- Rumor preys on the *fear of defamation*: “People say mean things about me.” It slurs reputation.

- Ganging up preys on the *fear of persecution*: “Everyone has turned against me.” It makes one feel like a social outcast.

It’s important for parents to understand that this is not a simple matter of “bad” kids treating each other badly. Rather, it is about good kids doing something they know is meant to survive a psychologically insecure time, within a more independent and uncertain social world. Social cruelty is antisocial behavior that serves a social purpose. It is intentionally hurtful behavior that young people engage in because there is something of social value to be gained—to assert dominance or protect against attack or to establish standing, for example. As discussed in the next chapter about early adolescent change, I believe the potential for social cruelty is rooted in the child’s development at this complicated age.



Though certainly aggressive, most acts of social cruelty are primarily compensatory, retaliatory, or preemptive in nature, attacking the vulnerabilities and insecurities of others to deny, safeguard, or divert the focus from the aggressor’s own insecurities. Young people tease about what they don’t want to be teased about. They spread rumors to create lies they don’t want told about themselves. They bully others partly to prevent being pushed around. They exclude others to protect their own inclusion. They gang up on someone to make him or her the victim

so they don't have to occupy that dreaded role. To help your child during this time, it will be important to understand this, as well as the other nuances of social cruelty.

First, there is some degree of difference in how boys and girls engage in social cruelty. From what I have seen, boys do somewhat more of the bullying and teasing, while girls do somewhat more of the exclusion and rumoring; however, both seem to do about the same amount of ganging up—though boys are more prone to enact it physically, and girls are more to prone to do it socially.

Because of how male and female children are still socialized growing up (boys are more competitive and performance-focused, and girls are more confiding and relationship-focused), there tends to be some degree of difference in how they engage in social cruelty. Boys often take more latitude for the direct expression of anger and aggression than girls, who often elect to be more indirect—hence the reputation of girls being more sneaky and manipulative than boys when it comes to social cruelty. Boys are often more “in-your-face” aggressive; girls are often “behind-your-back” aggressive. Both are equally aggressive, just in different ways. Girls are expected to mask their aggression more. As one teacher described it to me: “Girls are just ‘nicer’ about being mean. They can do the insincere smile. Few boys are good at that.”

All five kinds of social cruelty are expressions of social aggression through which the perpetrator or perpetrators seek

some kind of benefit—usually higher standing, more power, better association, or confirmed control. Sometimes, adults, teachers, and even parents will hold the victim responsible either for bringing it on or for not fighting it off. This is a mistake. When adults blame the victim for social cruelty, two kinds of damage are done. First, the victim is encouraged to blame him or herself—hence, statements such as “I deserved it,” “I brought it on myself,” “They’re right to treat me this way,” and “I’m just no good!” Secondly, the perpetrator is cleared of responsibility for the social aggression that he or she committed—hence statements such as “I was just having fun,” “She brought it on herself,” “She’s making a big deal over nothing,” and “I didn’t do anything wrong.” When parents or teachers ignore or condone this behavior, they only encourage its continuation.

Parents sometimes discount social cruelty when their child is acting as a participant, denying the truth of what happened to defend their son or daughter, or even themselves. “Our daughter wouldn’t act that way. We don’t believe it. We’ve taught her better.” Teachers can condone social cruelty when they believe confronting it will likely create more classroom trouble. “We just need to let the incident go, put it behind us, and move on.” Both groups of adults are shirking their responsibility to become involved.

In social cruelty, frequency of occurrence makes an enormous difference. Once started, it is more likely to happen again

in the future. And when incidents are repeated, the magnitude of the harm inflicted is vastly increased. Thus, when teasing routinely leads to attaching a hate name to someone, when systematic exclusion leads to shunning a person, when relentless bullying becomes stalking, when widespread rumoring destroys someone's reputation, and when constant ganging up creates ongoing persecution, then social cruelty can have devastating effects. For instance, ganging up can become a morning recreation for some eighth graders on the bus who start their day wondering who can get that little sixth grader with glasses to cry. In this case, "fun" for the many is agony for the one.

Social cruelty can also shape future conduct in both victim and perpetrator alike. Adolescents are tomorrow's adults, so as today's adults (parents and teachers), we need to train them to treat each other safely and respectfully while we still can. When allowed to continue, social cruelty can influence the formation of both the victim and the perpetrator, because present experience shapes future behavior. A victim of teasing can become more guarded; the person teasing can become more sarcastic. A victim of exclusion can become less socially confident; the person excluding can become more socially manipulative. A victim of bullying can become more anxious; the bully can become more coercive. A victim of rumoring can become more distrustful; the person rumoring can become more inclined to spread lies. A victim of ganging

up can become more easily overwhelmed in social situations; a person participating in ganging up can become more easily swayed by peer pressure.

At worst, victims who take ongoing mistreatment to heart can be at risk of serious psychological harm. In the extreme, protracted torment at the hands of peers can drive victims into emotional devastation that is concealed from even those who know them best. Then, young people who have had “enough” can bring violence to school to act out unsuspected shame and rage, or they may bring their self-loathing home and act destructively after school against themselves. These acts of revenge punish the hostile world or attempt to put an end to personal suffering. Thankfully, such drastic incidents are the exception and not the rule, but they inform the adult world about how these students’ acts of desperation can follow wherever social cruelty reigns. For persistent victims, social cruelty is angering, depressing, demeaning, frightening, humiliating, isolating, hurtful, and shameful. *Significant social cruelty has serious emotional consequences.*



Then, of course, there is the immediate academic cost. If a young person is constantly anxious about the classroom, the hallway, the lunchroom, and the playground cruelty they suffer at the hands of peers, or the mistreatment on the bus to and from school, concerns for social safety are going to take



precedence over his or her motivation for classroom learning. *Because social cruelty undermines the victim's social safety, it often reduces academic focus and school performance.*

More importantly, the cost of social cruelty is not limited to the student harmed. Everyone knows that what happens to one can happen to all. It only takes witnessing one dramatic incident of social cruelty for bystanders to start worrying: "What if that happens to me?" And now they invest emotional energy in being on guard, being watchful, being careful, and being afraid as they cope with their school day. It's not that students don't learn to deal with this lack of safety—they do—but the price of this adjustment is precious energy and attention diverted from learning, not to mention the toll it takes on their peace of mind.

*Every act of social cruelty not only endangers the victim, but puts everyone on guard by undermining the social safety of all; each act is an example of what can happen to anyone who is not careful.* This is why everyone is victimized. As one twelve-year-old told his friend who was pushed around by some older kids on the school bus: "What they did to you they could do to me." Perhaps the cruelest part of social cruelty, especially for those on the receiving end, is seeing how friends are indirectly impacted and how they will not stand up for you. It is the same principle of domestic abuse. Any violence against one member of the family by another threatens the safety of all.

Thus, schools must do more to face this issue head-on. Some believe addressing students about social cruelty is a waste of instructional time, because this investment of attention is at the expense of academic learning. However, I say that academic learning will suffer if schools do not address these issues. I believe the most academically successful schools, particularly during the middle school years, are those in which students feel emotionally and physically safe, where there are no daily worries about getting hurt, and where it is not necessary to take precautions to protect oneself from possible harm. During the middle school years, a time when performance drops for so many students who are derailed by the demands of adolescent change, schools must act to limit the incidents of social cruelty and the distracting sense of jeopardy they can in turn create.



By focusing on the early adolescent middle school years, I am not saying that younger children do not sometimes deliberately hurt each other. Of course they do. Left unsupervised on the playground, young children will use varieties of social cruelty to determine the social pecking order of dominance, exercising power in crudely brutal ways, such as saying, “The reason you can’t play with us is because nobody likes you!” Nor am I saying that social cruelty cannot occur in high school; it can and does. By then, however, it is no longer driven by

developmental insecurity but has become culturally endorsed behavior of a more serious kind, behavior that can ultimately lead to harassment, hate naming, sexual molestation, physical assaults, and intergroup violence. Now there is danger of real physical harm. All the more reasons for parents and teachers to educate, monitor, and intervene in the middle school years in an effort to instruct students in the humane social treatment of one another as they create constructive rules of conduct within their independent community of peers.

This window of opportunity for adults to influence an early adolescent's social behavior usually closes by the end of middle school when young people have formed enough sense of personal identity and claimed enough social security that they are now more comfortably set in their adolescent ways. By high school, the norms and habits of interpersonal conduct between peers have become socially established. It is in late elementary school and particularly middle school when parents and teachers have an opportunity to impact those norms of social treatment that young people develop with each other. These salient adults will never have such an opportunity for social influence again.

*So the caution is simply this: If adults allow social cruelty to go uncorrected during the middle school years, worse damage will likely follow in high school.*



In considering the five types of social cruelty—teasing, exclusion, bullying, rumoring, ganging up—I take a somewhat different approach from other writers on this topic. (For some excellent books on the subject, see my list in the Recommended Reading section.) I believe these acts of social cruelty are *symptoms* of an underlying emotional discomfort that largely originates in a common *cause*: the social dislocation and developmental insecurity of early adolescent change. In this sense, I follow a “medical” model in this book. I believe parents and school staff are best advised not only to address the symptoms but also to treat the cause.

Therefore, to give you an adequate understanding of each aspect of social cruelty and how to address each with your child, I take the following approach in this book. Chapter Two describes the *cause*, namely how early adolescent change begins to separate the young person from the old definition of child and relationship to family, creating developmental insecurity, personal vulnerability, and the need for social independence in the company of peers. I suggest strategies that parents can use at this critical juncture to stay connected with their son or daughter and retain beneficial influence as adolescence starts causing parent and child to grow apart.

Chapters Three through Seven each describe one of five kinds of social cruelty that are *symptoms* of the underlying cause. Each kind of social cruelty is explained in terms of its own psychological dynamics, and, within each chapter, I

suggest how parents can help reduce the harm whether the child is the receiver or giver of mistreatment.

Chapter Eight describes *what the school can do* instructionally (the teacher), supportively (the counselor), and administratively (the principal), in collaboration with parents, to prevent, address, and decrease social cruelty among students. In conjunction with parents, these adults can do much to encourage students to create a school community in which it feels safe to learn.

As I have stated, early adolescence creates a window for adult influence during the middle school years (which closes come high school) that allows parents and teachers to help young people learn how to treat each other well at this socially independent age. Essentially, this book describes what social cruelty is, how it works, why it occurs, the damage it can do, and the various ways parents and school staff can stop some of the harm.

Adolescence is a challenging period of growth. It is a process of gathering power—from dependence at the beginning to independence at the end. The job of adults, at home and at school, is to help young people gather this power in appropriate ways. Social cruelty (teasing, exclusion, bullying, rumoring, ganging up) is an *inappropriate* way to gather personal and interpersonal power in the exercise of social independence. Adults need to help young people find better ways to relate to each other. *When it comes to moderating social cruelty,*

*there is no substitute for adult awareness, involvement, and intervention in the early adolescent world.*

Hopefully, this book will help parents and school personnel in both public- and private-school settings better understand the problem and decide how to address it.