

The Queen Bee and Her Court

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In “The Queen Bee and Her Court,” an excerpt from *Queen Bees and Wannabees*, Wiseman divides and classifies young schoolgirls into various hierarchical social classes dominated by the “Queen Bee.”

■ Preparing to Read

How did the various cliques work in your elementary school and high school? What roles did you play within those cliques? Did the existence of cliques bother you, or did you regard them as merely a reflection of society as a whole?

We need to give girls credit for the sophistication of their social structures. Our best politicians and diplomats couldn’t do better than a teen girl does in understanding the social intrigue and political landscape that lead to power. Cliques are sophisticated, complex, and multilayered, and every girl has a role within them. However, positions in cliques aren’t static. Especially from the sixth to eighth grade, a girl can lose her position to another girl, and she can move up and down the social totem pole. Also, your daughter doesn’t have to be in the “popular” group to have these roles within her group of friends. Because girls’ social hierarchies are complicated and overwhelming in their detail, I’m going to take you through a general breakdown of the different positions in the clique. However, when you talk

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to your daughter about cliques, encourage her to come up with her own names and create roles she thinks I've missed. If you can answer yes to the majority of items for each role, you've identified your daughter. So, here are the different roles that your daughter and her friends might play:

Queen Bee
 Sidekick
 Banker
 Floater
 Torn Bystander
 Pleaser/Wannabe/Messenger
 Target

The Queen Bee

For the girl whose popularity is based on fear and control, think of a combination of the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* and Barbie. I call her the Queen Bee. Through a combination of charisma, force, money, looks, will, and manipulation, this girl reigns supreme over the other girls and weakens their friendships with others, thereby strengthening her own power and influence. Indeed, she appears omnipotent. Never underestimate her power over other girls (and boys as well). She can and will silence her peers with a look. If your daughter's the Queen Bee and you could spy on her, you would (or should) be mortified by how she treats other girls. 2

Your Daughter Is a Queen Bee If . . .

- Her friends do what she wants to do. 3
- She isn't intimidated by any other girl in her class.
- Her complaints about other girls are limited to the lame things they did or said.
- When she's young, you have to convince her to invite everyone to her birthday party. When she does invite everyone you want, she ignores and excludes some of her guests. (When she's older, you lose your privilege to tell her who she can invite.)
- She can persuade her peers to do just about anything she wants.
- She can argue anyone down, including friends, peers, teachers, and parents.

- She's charming to adults, a female Eddie Haskell.
- She can make another girl feel "anointed" by declaring her a special friend.
- She's affectionate, but often that affection is deployed to demonstrate her rejection of another girl. For example, she sees two girls in her group, one she's pleased with and one she isn't. When she sees them, she'll throw her arms around one and insist that they sit together and barely say anything to the other.
- She won't (or is very reluctant to) take responsibility when she hurts someone's feelings.
- If she thinks she's been wronged she feels she has the right to seek revenge. She has an eye-for-an-eye worldview.

She thinks she's better than everyone else. She's in control, intimidating, smart, caring, and has the power to make others feel good or bad. She'll make stuff up about people and everyone will believe her.

— ANNE, 15

Who was the Queen Bee in your junior and/or high school? (If you were the Queen Bee, it's okay to admit it.) Remember how much power she had? Keep in mind that Queen Bees are good at slipping under adults' radar (including parents, teachers, and myself). Some of the nicest girls in my classes, who speak the most eloquently about how terrible they feel when girls are mean to each other, turn out to be the most cruel.

We're like an army.

— AMANDA, 13

Most Queen Bees aren't willing to recognize the cruelty of their actions. They believe their behavior is justified because of something done to them first. Justifications usually begin with, "For no reason, this girl got really upset about not being in the group. I mean we told her nicely and she just wasn't getting the hint. We tried to be nice but she just wasn't listening." When a Queen Bee does this, she's completely bypassing what she did and defining right and wrong by whether the individual was loyal (i.e., not challenging her authority).

If that sinking feeling in your stomach is because you just realized your daughter is a Queen Bee, congratulate yourself. Honesty is the first step to parenting an adolescent successfully.

What Does She Gain by Being a Queen Bee?

She feels power and control over her environment. She's the center of attention and people pay homage to her.

What Does She Lose by Being a Queen Bee?

A real sense of self. She's so busy maintaining her image that she loses herself in the process. She can be incredibly cynical about her friendships with both boys and girls ("They're only sucking up to me because I'm popular; they don't really like me."). She's vulnerable to having intimate relationships where she believes her image is dependent on the relationship. She may easily feel that she can't admit to anyone when she's in over her head because her reputation dictates that she always has everything and everyone in control. 10

The Sidekick

She's the lieutenant or second in command, the girl who's closest to the Queen Bee and will back her no matter what because her power depends on the confidence she gets from the Queen Bee. All girls in a clique tend to dress similarly, but the Sidekick wears the most identical clothes and shares the mannerisms and overall style closest to the Queen Bee. Together they appear to other girls as an impenetrable force. They commonly bully and silence other girls to forward their own agenda. These girls are usually the first to focus on boys and are often attracted to older boys. This is particularly true in seventh and eighth grade (and their behavior is even worse if they're physically mature and going to high school parties). The difference between the two is if you separate the Sidekick from the Queen Bee, the Sidekick can alter her behavior for the better, while the Queen Bee would be more likely to find another Sidekick and begin again. 11

Your Daughter Is a Sidekick If . . .

- She has a best friend (the Queen Bee) who tells her what to do, think, dress, etc. 12
- The best friend is your daughter's authority figure, not you.
- She feels like it's the two of them and everyone else is a Wannabe.
- You think her best friend pushes her around.

She notices everything about the Queen Bee. She will do everything the Queen Bee says and wants to be her. She lies for the Queen Bee but she isn't as pretty as the Queen Bee. 13

—MADELINE, 14

What Does She Gain by Being a Sidekick?

Power over other girls that she wouldn't have without the Queen Bee. She also gains a close friend (whom you may not like) who makes her feel popular and included. 14

What Does She Lose by Being a Sidekick?

The right to express her personal opinions. If she sticks around the Queen Bee too long, she may forget she even has her own opinion. 15

The Banker

Information about each other is currency in Girl World. The Banker creates chaos everywhere she goes by banking information about girls in her social sphere and dispensing it at strategic intervals for her own benefit. For instance, if a girl has said something negative about another girl, the Banker will casually mention it to someone in conversation because she knows it's going to cause a conflict and strengthen her status as someone "in the know." She can get girls to trust her because when she pumps them for information it doesn't seem like gossip; instead, she does it in an innocent, I'm-trying-to-be-your-friend way. 16

Her power lies in getting girls to confide in her. Once they figure out she can't be trusted, it's too late because she already has information on them, and in order to keep her from revealing things, girls will be nice to her. 17

—LEIGH, 17

The Banker is almost as powerful as the Queen Bee, but it's easy to mistake her for the Messenger. She's usually quiet and withdrawn in front of adults and can be physically immature in comparison to her friends. This is the girl who sneaks under adult radar all the time because she seems so cute and harmless. 18

Your Daughter Is a Banker If . . .

- She is extremely secretive. 19
- She thinks in complex, strategic ways.
- She seems to be friends with everyone; some girls even treat her like a pet.
- She's rarely the subject of fights.
- She's rarely excluded from the group.

What Does She Gain by Being a Banker?

Power and security. The Banker is very confusing to other girls because she seems harmless and yet everyone is afraid of her. 20

What Does She Lose by Being a Banker?

Once other girls figure out what she's doing, they don't trust her. With her utilitarian mind-set, she can forget to look to other girls as a trusted resource. 21

The girls can't oust the Banker from the clique because she has information on everyone and could make or break reputations based on the information she knows. 22

—CHARLOTTE, 15

The Floater

You can usually spot this girl because she doesn't associate with only one clique. She has friends in different groups and can move freely among them. She usually has protective characteristics that shield her from other girls' cruelty—for example, she's beautiful but not too beautiful, nice, not terribly sophisticated, and avoids conflicts. She's more likely to have higher self-esteem because she doesn't base her self-worth on how well she's accepted by one group. Because she has influence over other girls but doesn't use it to make them feel bad, I call her the Floater. Girls want to be the Floater because she has confidence, people genuinely like her, and she's nice to everyone. She has the respect of other girls because she doesn't rule by meanness. When backed into a corner, the Floater is one of the few girls who will actually stand up to the Queen Bee. While Floaters have some power, they don't have the same influence and impact as Queen Bees. Why? Because Floaters don't gain anything by sowing seeds of discontent and insecurity among the other girls; Queen Bees do. 23

I have always felt that many potential Floaters are either swallowed up by the popular crowd or choose not to identify with popular people at all and instead create their own groups. In every girl there is a Floater who wants to get out. 24

—JOANNA, 17

I don't think there are *real* Floaters. Maybe I'm just bitter, but most of the time they are too good to be true. 25

—LIZA, 17

Your Daughter Is a Floater If . . .

- She doesn't want to exclude people; you aren't always having fights with her about spending time with people she considers "losers." 26
- Her friends are comfortable around her and don't seem intimidated; she's not "winning" all the conversations.

- She's not exclusively tied to one group of friends; she may have a jock group she hangs with, then the kids in the band, then her friends in the neighborhood.
- She can bring another person into a group on her own with some success.

What Does She Gain by Being a Floater?

Her peers like her for who she is as a person. She'll be less likely to sacrifice herself to gain and keep social status. 27

What Does She Lose by Being a Floater?

Nothing! Count yourself truly blessed that she's your daughter. 28

If you're thinking this is your daughter, wait. It isn't that I don't believe you, but please read all the roles before making your final decision. We all want to believe the best about the people we love, but sometimes our love blinds us to reality. I've met countless parents who truly believe their daughters are Floaters, and they're not. It should go without saying that just because your daughter isn't a Floater doesn't mean she won't become an amazing young woman and/or that you haven't done a good job raising her. But if you insist on seeing her in a way that she isn't, you won't be able to be as good a parent as she needs you to be. 29

The Torn Bystander

She's constantly conflicted between doing the right thing and her allegiance to the clique. As a result, she's the one most likely to be caught in the middle of a conflict between two girls or two groups of girls. She'll often rationalize or apologize for the Queen Bee and Sidekick's behavior, but she knows it's wrong. She often feels more uncomfortable around boys, but can be very easily influenced by the clique to do what it wants (for example, getting together with a boy they decide is right for her). The status she gets from the group is very important, and the thought of standing up to the more powerful girls in the clique is terrifying. She's honest enough with herself (and maybe with you as well) to know that she doesn't like what the Queen Bee does but feels powerless to stop it. 30

Your Daughter Is a Torn Bystander If . . .

- She's always finding herself in situations where she has to choose between friends. 31
- She tries to accommodate everyone.
- She's not good at saying no to her friends.

- She wants everyone “to get along.”
- She can’t imagine standing up to anyone she has a conflict with; she goes along to get along.

She’s confused and insecure because her reputation is over if she doesn’t stick with the Queen Bee, but she can be really cool when she’s alone. 32

— ANNE, 13

What Does She Gain by Being a Torn Bystander?

By associating herself with more powerful girls, she has access to popularity, high social status, and boys. 33

What Does She Lose by Being a Torn Bystander?

She has to sacrifice a great deal. She may not try new things or she may stop doing things she’s interested in (plays, band, “geeky” clubs, etc.) because her friends make fun of her. She may dumb herself down to get along with others. This doesn’t mean her grades will suffer, although they could. Lots of girls hide their academic accomplishments from their peers for this reason. (“I know I totally failed that test.”) It more likely means that she presents herself as less intelligent than she is. This is merely irritating when she’s a teen, but literally stupid when she’s an adult in a job interview. 34

The Pleaser/Wannabe/Messenger

Almost all girls are pleasers and wannabes; some are just more obvious than others. This is one of the more fascinating roles. She can be in the clique or on the perimeter trying to get in. She will do anything to be in the good graces of the Queen Bee and the Sidekick. She’ll enthusiastically back them up no matter what. She’ll mimic their clothes, style, and anything else she thinks will increase her position in the group. She’s a careful observer, especially of the girls in power. She’s motivated above all else to please the person who’s standing above her on the social totem pole. She can easily get herself into messy conflicts with other people because she’ll change her mind depending on who she’s interacting with. 35

As a Pleaser/Wannabe/Messenger her security in the clique is precarious and depends on her doing the Queen Bee’s “dirty work,” such as spreading gossip about a Target. While the Banker gathers information to further her own causes, the Pleaser/Wannabe/Messenger does it to service the Queen Bee and get in her good graces and feel important. But she can easily be dropped and ridiculed if she’s seen as trying too hard to fit in. (One of the worst accusations you can make of a teen is to say she’s trying too 36

hard. In *Girl World*, all actions must appear effortless.) The Queen Bee and Sidekick enjoy the convenience of making her their servant, but they love talking behind her back. (“Can you believe what a suck-up she is? That’s so pathetic.”)

When there’s a fight between two girls or two groups of girls, she often serves as a go-between. Her status immediately rises when she’s in active duty as a Messenger. It’s also the most powerful position she can attain, which means she has a self-interest in creating and maintaining conflicts between girls so she doesn’t get laid off. 37

Your Daughter Is a Pleaser/Wannabe/Messenger If . . .

- Other girls’ opinions and wants are more important than her own. 38
- Her opinions on dress, style, friends, and “in” celebrities constantly change.
- She can’t tell the difference between what she wants and what the group wants.
- She’s desperate to have the “right” look (clothes, hair, etc.).
- She’ll stop doing things she likes because she fears the clique’s disapproval.
- She’s always in the middle of a conflict.
- She feels better about herself when the other girls are coming to her for help, advice, or when she’s doing their dirty work.
- She loves to gossip — the phone and e-mail are her lifeline.

What Does She Gain by Being a Pleaser?

The feeling that she belongs; she’s in the middle of the action and has power over girls. 39

What Does She Lose by Being a Pleaser?

Personal authenticity — she hasn’t figured out who she is or what she values. 40
She’s constantly anticipating what people want from her and doesn’t ask herself what she wants in return. She feels insecure about her friendships — do girls really like her, or do they only value her for the gossip she trades in? She has trouble developing personal boundaries and the ability to communicate them to others.

She’s insecure and you can’t trust her.

— CARRIE, 14

41

The Target

She's the victim, set up by the other girls to be humiliated, made fun of, excluded. Targets are assumed to be out of the clique, one of the class "losers." While this is sometimes true, it's not always the case. Just because a girl is in the clique doesn't mean she can't be targeted by the other members. Often the social hierarchy of the clique is maintained precisely by having someone clearly at the bottom of the group's totem pole. Girls outside the clique tend to become Targets because they've challenged the clique or because their style of dress, behavior, and such are outside the norms acceptable to the clique. Girls inside the clique tend to become Targets if they've challenged someone higher on the social totem pole (i.e., the Queen Bee, Sidekick, or Banker) and need to be taken down a peg. 42

Your Daughter Is a Target If . . .

- She feels helpless to stop the girls' behavior. 43
- She feels she has no allies. No one will back her up.
- She feels isolated.
- She can mask her hurt by rejecting people first, saying she doesn't like anyone.

This role can be harder to figure out than you would think, and your daughter may be too embarrassed to tell you. She might admit she feels excluded, or she might just withdraw from you and "not want to talk about it." 44

Targets don't want to tell their parents because they don't want their parents to think they're a loser or a nobody. 45

— JENNIFER, 16

What Does She Gain by Being a Target?

This may seem like an odd question, but being a Target can have some hidden benefits. There's nothing like being targeted to teach your daughter about empathy and understanding for people who are bullied and/or discriminated against. Being a Target can also give her objectivity. She can see the costs of fitting in and decide she's better off outside the clique because at least she can be true to herself and/or find good friends who like her for who she is, not for her social standing. 46

What Does She Lose by Being a Target?

She feels totally helpless in the face of other girls' cruelty. She feels ashamed of being rejected by the other girls because of who she is. She'll be tempted to change herself in order to fit in. She feels vulnerable and unable to affect 47

the outcome of her situation. She could become so anxious that she can't concentrate on schoolwork.

I didn't understand why I was so unhappy in sixth grade. I couldn't have told my parents that girls were being mean to me. 48

—ERIN, 17

Girls will almost always withdraw instead of telling a parent. 49

—CLAIRE, 14

If a girl's stuck in a degrading clique, it's the same as when she's later in a bad relationship. She doesn't expect to be treated any better. 50

—ELLEN, 15

OK, now you know the different roles girls play in cliques. The next questions are: How were these roles created in the first place? Who and what determine these positions and power plays? Why are girls able to get away with treating each other so badly? 51

It isn't really that big a secret. As girls become teens, the world becomes a much bigger, scarier place. Many girls go from a small elementary school to a much larger, more impersonal institutional school. 52

In elementary school, students are usually based in one room, with one teacher. The principal sees them on a daily basis and parents are often active in the school's activities, going on field trips, bringing food for bake sales, and volunteering in after-school programs. By the end of fifth or sixth grade, girls are beginning to prepare to leave this safe, comfy haven of elementary school. They alternatively look forward to and dread moving on to middle school or junior high. 53

Then comes the first day at the middle school or junior high—and everything changes. Adults, in our profound wisdom, place them in a setting where they're overwhelmed by the number of students, and they become nameless faces with ID security cards. If you ever want to remember what it feels like, go to your daughter's school and hang out in the hall when the bell rings right before a lunch period (you probably have lots of times to choose from since most schools have so many students that they need multiple lunch periods, which means some students eat their midday meal at ten A.M.). When the bell rings, walk from one end of the hall to the other. It's hard enough simply navigating through this noisy throng. Now imagine navigating the same hallway and caring what each person thinks of you as you walk by. 54

We put our girls in this strange new environment at exactly the same time that they're obsessively microanalyzing social cues, rules, and regulations and therefore are at their most insecure. Don't underestimate how difficult and frightening this is for girls, and give your daughter credit for getting out of bed in the morning. 55