

To appear in 33 Things Every Girl Should Know, ed. by Tonya Bolden. Crown Publishers.

Why Boys Don't Know What Girls Mean and
Girls Think Boys Are Mean

Deborah Tannen

Girls say boys are mean, and boys say girls talk about every little thing forever--and it's hard to know what they really mean. Where do these attitudes come from, and what are their consequences?

These attitudes come, at least partly, from differences in the way girls and boys learn to play with their friends as children. Although there are always some girls who prefer to play with boys, and some boys who would rather play with girls, most children spend most of their time playing with other children of the same sex, and boys and girls tend to play very differently. Because of these different experiences growing up, older girls and boys (and, later, women and men), can have very different ways of getting their ideas across to others. The results can be frustrating for both and, in some cases, dangerous for girls.

Last term I taught a course to college students on the ways that boys and girls and women and men use language. I asked the students in the class to keep a log of their own experiences that related to the course. One young man, Anthony Marchese, wrote this:

This past Friday, two friends of mine went down to FAO Schwartz and bought a Leggo set and Jenga. Jenga is a game in which rectangular blocks are stacked in rows of three. We played with the Leggos for a while but we got bored so we played Jenga. We played about three or four games and then we started building things with the blocks. It was really fun because we felt like little kids again. There were three of us building our own little structures, two guys and one girl, Alicia. We had each built a unique design, when suddenly the other guy threw a block at my structure to knock it over. It only glanced my building, and for the most part it stayed up. I then threw a block at his building, which prompted him to throw a block at Alicia's. She put her arms around her building to shield it from the flying blocks. While my friend and I destroyed each other's buildings, we couldn't get hers because we did not want to hit her with the blocks. Another guy in the room said to her, "Why didn't you throw blocks at them?" She said she did not like to play that way and

she did not find our play very amusing. I did not want my building ruined, but I had a lot of fun throwing blocks at my friend's and destroying his.

Anthony realized he was playing the way he had played as a child: part of the fun was building his own structure, but another part was destroying someone else's. Both Anthony and the other young man did this; they both had the same idea of what was fun. But Alicia had a different idea of what was fun, and it didn't include destroying her friends' buildings. Anthony guessed, and I'm sure he was right, that when she was a little girl, that's not how Alicia and her friends played.

This explains what happens when boys and girls try to play together. The boys try to play the same way they always have--the way they think is fun, like coming in and destroying what the girls are building. The girls don't think this is fun; they think it's mean. So this difference explains something about why girls think boys are mean.

Now, what about boys' attitude that girls talk on and on about insignificant things, so it's hard to know what they're getting at?

Another student in my class, Aiyana Hoffman, took several other class members with her to attend her twelve-year old cousin's birthday party. There was a lot of commotion at the party because one girl (I'll call her Mary) said something that hurt the feelings of another girl (I'll call her Sue). Sue felt so bad, she went into the bathroom, crying. The other girls started going in and out of the bathroom to check on Sue, find out what was wrong, and try to make her feel better. Sue's best friend Kate seemed to be in charge, speaking privately with all the other girls, reporting on Sue's feelings, and even talking privately with Mary--the girl who had hurt Sue's feelings.

At the same time that the girls were caught up in this drama, the boys were playing video games and (as my student Cortney Howard put it) "goofing off." One boy (I'll call him Jason) was giving another boy (Joe) a hard time, and two other boys joined in. Their conversation (which Cortney wrote down) went like this:

Jason: So what's up with Karen? She's got you all whooped.

Joe: No, dude, she's just some girl, nothin' special. I ain't whooped.

Jason: Yeah, you've been calling her, I saw you talking to her on the playground after school last week, too.

Joe: What are you talking about? I was just getting the math homework, that's all.

Jason: Horse crap! You like her!

Sam: Look, man, he's turning red! You're turning red! Haha!

Jack: You wimp, you're red all over that ugly face of yours!

There are many ways that this conversation is different from the girls'. First of all, the boys are openly insulting Joe, and the other boys join in. When Mary said something to make Sue feel bad, she said it in private, and the other girls had to find out later what it was.

Another difference is how the boys and girls react when their friends show their feelings. When Joe reacts to the teasing by turning red, this show of emotion is another reason for the other boys to put him down. They call him a "wimp." Sue didn't have to hide the fact that she felt hurt: it actually became a kind of power when she cried in the bathroom. In a way, she became the most important person at the party, and the bathroom became her headquarters!

My students also noticed another difference between the boys and the girls at the party. When the college students came upon Kate and Mary whispering in the laundry room, the girls immediately stopped talking. They didn't want strangers to overhear their secrets. But when the college students were listening in on the boys' conversation, the boys "kind of acted up," playing up what they were talking about "as if they were playing in front of an important audience." This made me think of how many girls are reluctant to talk in front of others -- for example, in school -- while many boys actually compete to be called on in class, stretching out their arms and even waving them or calling out. The girls' ways of playing emphasize secrets, which have to be told in private, but the boys' ways of playing emphasize showmanship, which has to be done with an audience. Because the boys are used to playing out their rivalries publicly, they don't know what to make of the girls' private conversations about who said what to whom. That explains, at least partly, why the boys think the girls go on and on about unimportant things.

These two examples can help us understand what happens when boys and girls get together. At the birthday party, the boys and girls tended to play separately, even though they were all at the same party. But when boys and girls get older, they spend more and more time together, either in groups or in pairs. Like the college students playing Leggos and Jenga, they have different ideas of how to play together, and this makes things awkward or even dangerous, especially if the boys want to do something that the girls don't want to do.

When Anthony and his friend wanted to throw blocks and destroy each other's buildings, but Alicia didn't want to, she protected her building by shielding it with her arms. But it

isn't always that simple. What if a boy wants to do something that has to do with sex and the girl doesn't want to? In a book called The Difference, Judy Mann tells about a study that really made me think. In the study, two researchers named Marion Howard and Judith McCabe asked more than 1000 sexually active girls 16 years old or younger what they most wanted to have more information about. I would have expected them to say they wanted more information about contraception or the mechanics of sex. Not at all. 84% of the girls checked the answer: "how to say no without hurting the other person's feelings."

If a boy wants a girl to do something she doesn't want to do, this is what can happen: she is trying to balance what she wants with her concern about his feelings and what he wants. But he is concentrating only on what he wants and assumes that she will concentrate on what she wants. This imbalance is what can be dangerous. She probably doesn't realize that he is working by a different system, and thinks that if she gives him a hint that she doesn't want to do what he wants, he will pick up the hint and back off--without his feelings getting hurt. But if he isn't used to communicating that way, he won't be listening for hints. The result can be that she does something she doesn't want to do, and he may never realize how much she didn't want to do it.

This might sound like another way of saying that boys are mean: they're selfish and just go after what they want. But you don't have to look at it that way. If two people get together, and each one looks out for himself or herself, it's a fair situation--the kind of situation most boys are used to, because that's the way they've been playing all their lives.

Think back to the birthday party: remember how Sue's hurt feelings gave her so much power in the party, and how all the girls were concerned with her feelings? That example shows how girls learn, from early on, to pay a lot of attention to each other's feelings. But the boys' conversation at the same party shows how different their experience is: Joe was trying to hide his feelings, and when he let them show, by blushing, the other boys used it against him, calling him a "wimp."

Once girls understand the different ways that boys and girls come to these interactions, they should feel free to concentrate on what they want or don't want--to make that clear, and insist on it. It's fairer to themselves, and it's fairer to the boys, who often don't realize what the girls are getting at when they try to say no without hurting boys' feelings.