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The Buzz On Parents

You Thought the Kids Were Mean and Cliquish. Meet The Adults of the Species

By Sandra G. BoodmanWashington Post Staff WriterTuesday, March 28, 2006; HE01

The silent treatment. Whispered gossip. Cliques. For those who thought they'd left such torments behind in adolescence, becoming a parent can mean enduring them again.

Rosalind Wiseman, a 36-year-old Washington educator whose 2002 bestseller "Queen Bees and Wannabees" deconstructed the minefield that is middle school, has written "Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads" (Crown, $25), a field guide for adults.

The book, published this month, explores the treacherous terrain of what she calls Perfect Parent World. It proposes techniques parents can use to navigate relationships with each other and with the teachers, coaches and counselors who, the book's ominous subtitle notes, "can make -- or break -- your child's future."

Meet the intrusive "Hovercraft Mom" and the "Starbucks and Sympathy" type whose solicitousness masks her true goal: intelligence-gathering. Fathers do not escape, particularly the Kingpin Dad, who's

used to calling the shots.

Wiseman translates coded messages parents use -- like the fatuous "My biggest priority is my children" -- and provides useful scripts for handling common problems: the control freaks who have commandeered the PTA, the bullying coach who refuses to play your child, the one-upping parent who asks what you're doing to secure a place for your child in the gifted and talented program -- or at Harvard. Following are excerpts from a recent question-and-answer session with the author:

What is Perfect Parent World?

Although many adults don't realize it, peer pressure is just as pervasive for parents as it is for kids. Perfect Parent World is a set of behaviors, a construct, about things you have to be and how you conduct yourself, that symbolizes that you are a good parent, that you belong to the group and that your opinion matters.

Sometimes being part of Perfect Parent World, especially in Washington, is having a powerful job. But what you see in communities outside of Washington or Boston or Chicago is that there's this whole thing about women who don't have to work. Then the hierarchy is that the woman who works is lower than the woman who doesn't.

Some things are the same in Perfect Parent World. You have to be thin, no matter how many pregnancies you have. And you have to have the right kind of car.

Who joins a mom clique and why?

This is not about mean girls growing up to be mean moms, but rather about how all of us are inevitably going to get into conflict with other adults and how things like groups influence whether we go through problems well or badly.

What I see with mom cliques is that they are most prevalent with women who used to work and went home because they wanted to make this sacrifice for their children. I think many of them feel that they lost their public voice when they left their work, and our culture doesn't respect women's voices when they are at home as much as when they are at work.

So they miss those feelings of respect, of confidence, the feeling that their voice matters. And when they're in a fight with a teacher or a coach or another parent, they are fighting for a sense of being a competent person.

I went up against some of those moms and it was scary -- it was one of the few times I didn't want to continue my work.

Dads are very much in groups, but they are less likely because of work to be in a clique.

What is the Washington version of the Queen Bee Mom and the Kingpin Dad?

The Queen Bee Mom is highly socially and academically intelligent. You throw in the Southern thing and she can make you do things and you don't even know that she's done it because it's so subtle -- often in the guise of being complimentary. She's appropriately dressed, often in the conservative Washington style, but not dowdy. She's effortlessly perfect. Queen Bees can be amazing leaders, but they always have to be in control of everything.

A Kingpin Dad does not come to things at the school unless he is mad about something or it's a politically advantageous thing for him to do, like the school auction. He takes up room. If he's a lawyer, he thinks that threatening a lawsuit is an excellent way to resolve conflict.

How do baby boomer parents differ from Generation X parents in their attitudes toward conflict?

Boomer parents want a feel-good answer that solves the problem with no messiness. They don't want their kid to experience pain. Their issues are more about not wanting to say no to their children.

Gen X parents have a herd mentality which you really see when it comes to technology. They don't ever question why you shouldn't have it or whether it's a good thing for their kid to be using, like a cellphone.

The one thing about Gen X people is that they feel like they can become experts on any subject if they read it on the computer. They go into the school and they have become an expert on anything. Their attitude is, "I read it, therefore it's true, and I now know more than you do even though you've been working with kids for 15 years."

What factors make it hard for parents to communicate with each other?

In Washington, the issues of race and social class are really complex and very alive, but no one talks about it. Religion can be a filter. Even these humongous houses people live in can be a filter.

From my conversations with parents, what emerges is that there's a really unspoken thing going on between white parents and black parents, and parents from other countries.

There's an assessment by a lot of [nonwhite] people I've heard which is, "I don't trust white parents because they don't know how to get their kids under control." White parents often think black parents are too hard on their own kids.

Too often these differences are never discussed, or even acknowledged.

What are the biggest mistakes parents make in dealing with other adults, such as teachers and coaches?

Parents should not act like everything is a life-and-death problem -- from a bad grade to not playing on the team to not getting a part in the play. If somebody is going to die in the next five minutes, then you move. If not, then you sit down and you figure out what you are going to do.

Teachers often feel like parents do not respect their professionalism. That makes them feel mad and unsafe. They do not like parents who threaten them with a lawsuit, who fight the fights for their kid, or who think that whatever has happened to their child trumps everything else.

When should parents confront each other?

I get that it's important to pick your battles, but at a certain point you do have to pick a battle. The thing is that you really must demand of yourself and other people that they treat each other civilly. Parents should not be allowed to be in a parent meeting and get away with treating other people badly.

You need to strategize about when and where you speak to the person, because that's just as important as the content of your words. The process involves breaking down how you articulate when things are going wrong for you, what you don't like, what you need, and then actually doing it.

If you don't speak up, then the parent who is being rude or uncivil sets the agenda for the school, because your voice is not there demanding civility. If we want our kids to stand up, we've got to do it ourselves. ·

Comments:boodmans@washpost.com.Join author Rosalind Wiseman online Wednesday at 3 p.m. to field questions and comments about her new book, "Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads."

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