



Good girl, interrupted

*'Mean girls' are one thing, but what of the 'good girls'? The latter, experts warn, are being pressured to embrace a vision of selfhood that stifles their power and potential, writes **Karen Fontaine***

It trips off the tongue a little too easily: “Good girl”. Two little words parents the length and breadth of the planet say to their daughters every day. They might be used to say thank you, to praise a job well done tying shoelaces, to express approval of an assignment completed, or simply to make a girl feel good about herself.

But do they?

It's not so much the words themselves that carry dangerous potency, it's the sentiments behind them: that girls need to be compliant and self-sacrificing to be of value.

In her bestselling book of 2009, *The Curse Of The Good Girl: Raising Authentic Girls With Courage and Confidence*, author Rachel Simmons opened a can of worms that are still wriggling today.

The curse of the good girl

The burden on today's girls to “be liked by everyone, generous to a fault and flawless at everything [they] do”, Rachel warned, is pressuring them to embrace a vision of selfhood that sharply curtails their power and potential.

Teaching a girl to be a ‘good girl’, Rachel wrote, is teaching them to be modest and teeth-gnashingly friendly – the upshot being that they are not so good at self-advocacy, saying no, putting themselves out there and dealing with constructive criticism.

Rachel suggests that pressure from parents, teachers, coaches, media and peers erects a psychological glass ceiling that begins to enforce its confines in girlhood and extends across the female lifespan.

The so-called ‘curse of the good girl’ erodes girls’ ability



to know, express and manage a complete range of feelings. It expects girls to be selfless, limiting the expression of their needs. It requires modesty, depriving them of permission to articulate their strengths and goals. It diminishes assertive body language, quiets voices and weakens handshakes. It touches all areas of girls’ lives and follows many into adulthood, limiting their personal and professional potential.

Indeed, psychologists say the distress of young girls can be seen in rising rates of mental health problems, binge drinking, eating disorders and the rampant growth of bullying in schools.

“Unerringly nice, polite, modest, and selfless, the Good Girl is an identity so narrowly defined that it's unachievable,” Rachel writes. “When girls fail to live up to these empty expectations – experiencing conflicts with peers, making mistakes in the classroom or on the playing field – they become paralysed by self-criticism, stunting



the growth of vital skills and habits.”

Rachel’s book develops ideas about the pressure on adolescent girls first introduced in the early 1990s by the researchers Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown. Their work *Meeting At The Crossroads* helped shine a light on the issue and ignite the popularity of contemporary girl-power programs.

Rachel’s lectures and books offer practical advice for charting a course between ‘mean girl’ and ‘good girl’. Rachel shows girls how to lower the drama: to understand the slip-sliding dynamics of friendships and to use precise emotional language. In her workshops, she sprays the room with words like excited’, ‘nervous’, ‘tense’ and ‘hurt’, offering girls a richer vocabulary than their customary ‘annoyed’, ‘angry’ and ‘whatever’.

If girls can resolve tensions with their friends, she believes, they will be positioned one day to ask for promotions and raises, and to be treated respectfully by those they love. In effect, they can become leaders of their own lives.

And so, next time you go to say ‘Good girl!’ for, say, unloading the dishwasher – pause for a moment and consider making your praise specific to what she’s done (‘thanks for helping out here’); not for simply being a ‘good girl’. One small step for parents; one giant step

A few tips on how to raise a ‘real girl’, not a ‘good girl’ or a ‘mean girl’, from those in the know:

“Girls need to be encouraged to value their own needs and feelings – and unlearn the belief that it is their role in life to make sure everybody else is happy.” Kasey Edwards, author of *30-Something And Over It*

“Surround girls with assertive, strong women as role models. It also helps to highlight their assertive, strong-minded behaviour so that girls grow up thinking that those qualities are valuable, and that they can possess them if they wish.” Michael Grose, author of *Thriving! Raising Exceptional Kids With Confidence, Character and Resilience*

“Teach your daughter to say: ‘That’s bullying – that’s not right.’ Of course that won’t always stop what is happening but it’s the first step. Tell your daughter clearly – and make it real – that she has a right to be safe and respected. The world has bullied women and girls for thousands of years. Standing up for yourself as a girl is part of an historic change, too.” Steve Biddulph, author of *Raising Girls*

And the last word must go to Rachel Simmons, author of *The Curse Of The Good Girl: Raising Authentic Girls With Courage and Confidence*: “The most critical freedom we can win for our daughters is the liberty not only to listen to their inner voice, but to act on it.”