

## Is Your Star Being Bullied By Other Athletes?

Sixteen-year-old Sarah, a swimmer who has qualified for state championships in her stroke--the butterfly-- doesn't get to enjoy her successes. Whenever she wins or does better than Wendy--one of her teammates--Wendy turns the other girls on Sarah.

Sarah, of course, is tempted to swim poorly in order to ensure her teammates like her and are nice to her.

In this situation, Sarah is the target of female bullying or what's called "relational aggression," says Cheryl Dellasega, a Ph.D. psychologist and author of numerous books about girls. "With females, relationship issues are often at the heart of athletic aggression. Anger, resentment, and jealousy get translated into subtle forms of meanness such as gossip, manipulation and exclusion," she explains.

Girls tend to approach competing differently than boys, Dellasega says. "Girls can learn a lot from boys about being part of a team, and working together to achieve a greater goal even if you don't 'like' the other girls you are grouped with," she says. Men and boys are more likely to channel their aggression into performing better--rather than being mean," she says.

"Many girls need to learn that competition is not a bad thing," she adds. "In fact, it can work to their advantage, as males learn early on when they're grouping up to accomplish a goal of winning/accomplishing, not proving one person better than another," she says. In this case, Sarah's parents need to talk to the coach, who should remind the team of the importance of teamwork.

"It sounds like all the girls in this situation are missing the major point that this is a swim team, not an individual competition," says Dellasega. "Those who come in first or second or third are earning points for the whole team--this is a good opportunity for the coach to have a talk about what life holds for those who can and cannot learn to work for the 'greater good.'"

At the same time, Sarah needs to rise above the girls' behavior and serve as a good role model for the team.

If your daughter, like Sarah, is bullied by teammates for succeeding, first talk to the coach to ensure the coach encourages team work. Second, ask your daughter to set a good example by serving as an exemplary team member. Help her focus on her task as a swimmer, rather than on the girls who are trying to hurt her. She's grappling with two of the main issues we discuss in youth sports psychology: Feeling distracted by teammates and seeking social approval.

When kids are distracted in this manner while competing, they need to find ways to focus their attention on the task at hand--in this case, swimming. They should concentrate on small goals: what they need to do to complete this stroke or this lap.