

ending the
MEAN GIRL
mentality



a Q&A with
ANNIE DOWNS

Author, blogger and speaker Annie Downs wants to inspire a revolution by calling on girls to use their words to "speak love" to one another, their families, leaders, even over themselves. Her goal: ending the mean girl mentality and bringing true freedom in Christ to teens everywhere.

Each chapter of her latest book, titled "Speak Love," addresses a different way girls can use their words to live out their identity in Christ.

Q: Was there one area of "speaking love" that surprised or particularly affected you while writing the book?

Because of my own personal testimony, I knew the importance of how we use our words toward ourselves. But really the part that people underestimate, and that I really love, is how we talk to celebrities. People think that celebrities don't listen to what the population says about them, but I think that's wrong. There are a lot of times that celebrities are scrolling through their @ replies on Twitter just like we normal people do. I think we underestimate the power our words have on people we don't know.

Q: Why do you use so many forms of social media – Instagram, Spotify, Pinterest – to encourage girls to "speak love"?

I want teens and college girls to get on the internet and accidentally run into us, to run into light in a seemingly dark place. I want to give teen girls as many opportunities as I can to share kind words with each other so we are filling up the internet as much as we can with that kind of content. All over the internet, Christians and non-Christians are looking for kind words that people say about them and that they can share with other people. We're just trying to meet them there and provide that for them.

Q: Do you think "being mean" is just the nature of the internet?

THE INTERNET
IS LIKE THIS MASSIVE
COMMUNITY WITH NO
LAW ENFORCEMENT.

It's bigger than any country and yet there is not a single "policeman" on the internet. So the girl who was picked on in high school, that never felt like she belonged, now can read the blog of someone she deems as popular or powerful where she isn't. She can say really ugly things in the comments and feel better about her-

self for a short amount of time, when really in the long run it won't make her feel better and probably the blogger doesn't care.

I get nasty comments and you just can't care. Those people don't really know me. They don't know my heart. They know the 15 minutes that the internet gets every day.

Q: What can a girl do if she encounters some of the cruel comments or even cyberbullying you write about?

One of the biggest things we all need to remember, especially teenagers, is that

WHAT OTHER PEOPLE
SAY ABOUT YOU ISN'T
WHAT DEFINES YOU.

That's not your identity. People are going to say unkind things and you just have to choose truth. You have to choose that what the Bible says about you, what God says about you, is actually what is true. Also, if a teenage girl is being picked on or bullied, she needs to get her parents involved.

Q: Do you think there are different

steps for dealing with mean girls who are there in real life versus only online?

It is different. Online, sometimes I just encourage girls to turn off the computer and remember that's not your real life. When it [bullying] is in real life, that's really hard. It still looks like getting adults involved, recognizing that God made you on purpose and the things about you that make you unique were His plan all along. He is still protecting you, even when it doesn't always feel like it. The Bible says He is a protector and we have to believe that.

Everyone is talking to the victim. Everyone is saying, "Hey, are you being bullied? Let us help you." And I think that's really important. [But] we're not talking to the mean girl, telling her to stop or asking her what she needs. There is a hole in her life that she wants to be filled. You and I know that Jesus is what fills that hole. Even the Christian girls who are mean girls – because there are Christian girls who are mean girls – they are missing a Jesus thing.

We're also not talking to the bystanders. We're not talking to the people who are watching and aren't brave enough to step into it.

Adult women: Are you being mean to women around you? When you get in the car after your family has been at the pool, are you talking unkindly

about the other moms in the pool? Because your daughter is listening to you.

Q: Have you seen any of this behavior in the girls you have led in small groups and churches? If so, how did you put an end to it?

For the last 14 or so years I've been leading youth groups or college students. I have seen a lot of mean girl behavior. There is an insecurity that comes with being a teenager and different people deal with it in different ways. There is a demographic of girls who deal with insecurities by picking on other girls. Just like there are some students who will deal with their insecurity by getting overly involved in relationships with boys, their sports teams, or looking for love in other places. There are all sorts of ways we try to meet that need of insecurity.

We as leaders need to go after the root of what's going on. What is the heart thing going on causing the behavior? The mean girl mentality is not the root. It is the tree and fruit of what is going on. We need to dig into that in these girls' lives. When I deal with the girls in my real life, whether I see them telling a lie, or making something up, or going on dates with guys that aren't a good idea, or struggling with mean girl stuff, I always say "OK, so what's really going on here? Why?" If you just keep asking "why" enough you will get to the root. We as leaders have got to recognize

that these girls need us to help them navigate this season of their lives.

THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A GENERATION THAT HAS THIS MUCH POWER WITH THEIR WORDS.

We have the honor of being the generation above them that goes "OK, this is amazing what you could do with your words. Let's train you on what that looks like to do it well."

Q: What tools can youth leaders and mentors use to deal with any mean girl mentality popping up in their ministries?

If you're leading girls, an important concept is to train them on how to use their words and that can look like taking six weeks at the beginning of every school year and talk about "What are we going to do with our words this year?" I also think you could get really creative. If a small group wants to memorize a Bible verse, give them a verse and say "Turn this into a piece of art," they will.

Q: What can parents do if they see their teen is a victim of mean girls?

If your daughter is the victim of a mean girl, you need to talk to her about it. If you recognize it before she's telling you, there needs to be a conversation of "I'm here for you. I support you." If your daughter is being picked on at school, maybe let the school know, maybe move the daughter to a different class, in extreme circumstances move the daughter to a different school. If your daughter is being picked on in the youth group, you need to be involved there too.

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and we as adults can't stand by and go "it's OK, they'll figure it out." It's just not like that anymore. There is more to it than that.

Q: Do you think people dismiss it, saying "Oh, that's just how teen girls are"?

We've decided the mean girl is just part of our society and that's just how it is. We chalked it up like "Girls will be girls and will talk bad about each other." I don't think that's true. I don't

think we have to live like that.

Q: What if their daughter is the mean girl? Are there any warning signs that parents can spot?

I had a parent email me recently: "What can I do to make sure my daughter is speaking love?" The first thing I said is, "Are your eyes wide open to if your daughter is being the mean girl?" You need to identify, are there people in your daughter's life that feel like she is picking on them? Are there people in your daughter's life that think "I can't tell her things because she'll make fun of me" or "Her sarcasm really hurts my feelings."

Q: You talk about guarding our minds from lies and talking down on ourselves - to stop being our own mean girl. Why is that important?

We can't look at ourselves and say, "You really look disgusting today," and then walk out of the house and expect to be confident and expect to make a difference for Christ in the way that we could if we go "OK, I don't like the way this outfit looks. I'll just put on something else. It's not a game changer. It's not the biggest deal."

It's about starting to listen to that internal conversation and go "Oh man, I just told myself 'if you keep doing that you'll be alone forever.' No, you're not. That's not what the Bible says. That's not true." All those places where you are believing lies, start changing those

into truth. When I first started replacing these lies with truth, it felt like a full-time job. It felt like I was spending all day going "Is that true what I'm saying about myself?" But the longer you do it, the easier it gets. It doesn't go away, but it gets easier to do that.

I REALLY BELIEVE WE CAN GET
RID OF THE MEAN GIRL
MENTALITY IN THIS GENERATION.

I know it sounds crazy because she's everywhere. But the truth is we can train this next generation to use their words differently. We can use our words differently. I genuinely believe God wants our teen girls to be free of that mentality.



Annie F. Downs is an author and speaker based in Nashville, Tenn. Flawed but funny, she uses her writing to highlight the everyday goodness of a real and present God. Annie is the author of two books for teens: "Perfectly Unique" and "Speak Love." Annie also loves traveling around the country speaking to young women at Girls of Grace conferences, as well as at other retreats and events.