

# Making Family Mealtime a Priority

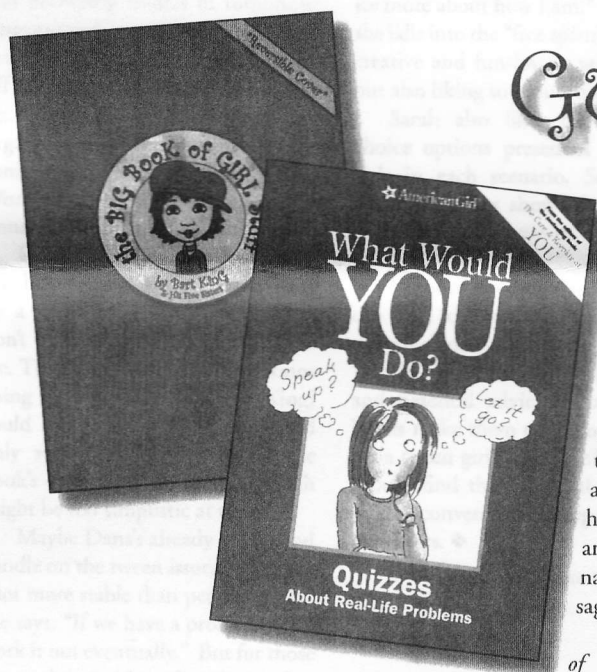
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## Guiding Girls Through Two books offer insight on making



If you believe the popular media, the “tween” years for girls, roughly ages 8 to 12, are fraught with mean girls and mood swings. How a girl manages to make her way through middle school with her self-esteem and capabilities relatively intact seems something just short of a miracle.

“I think it’s sometimes exaggerated,” says my 12-year-old daughter Dana about this tween stereotype. “We get upset at times but we’re not wicked evil.”

To be sure, there are challenges in early adolescence. Discovering who you are as an individual, working out friendships, taking a new look

at boys, and those surprising hormonal and physical changes can create a bumpy ride. But luckily, there are books available that can help tween girls and their mothers navigate this passage.

*The Big Book of Girl Stuff*, by Bart King and his five sisters (Gibbs Smith, 2006), offers practical advice with a light, humorous touch on a wide range of girls’ interests. The organization of chapters by topic is a little chaotic, but so is a tween girl’s room. Somehow, it’s all in there, from fashion to family, friends, and even what Dana refers to as “fluff”: just fun stuff like little-known holidays and practical jokes.

Tweens and parents will appreciate the tips on how a girl can be an in-demand babysitter, winning the hearts of young children with cool activities and impressing adults by cleaning up any messes. They’ll

also be grateful for the chapter on etiquette and manners, which might not be foremost on a girl’s mind but will help smooth out sticky social situations such as how to politely decline an invitation. Anyone within shouting distance will thank King for including cell phone etiquette.

A tween’s social life becomes increasingly important, and the chapter “Friends, Cliques, Secrets, and Gossip” covers many of the burning issues girls face. King profiles a range of girl types, so a tween can consider how to get along with the Goth Girl and the Drama Queen, even if she is the Silent Genius. He highlights a perceptive Hasidic proverb: “One who looks for a friend without faults will have none.”

The dark underside of friendships among tweens is when cliques exclude or bully other girls, often through spreading vicious rumors. This topic is covered more thoroughly five chapters later in “Lies, Mean Girls, and Jerks,” but the “Friends” chapter presents a fair discussion about having a tight group of friends (a clique), popularity, and how to handle the natural tendency of girls to talk about others. Gossip is a fact

of life. The trick is to keep it from turning nasty.

Dana thinks the book offers some useful strategies for issues she might face, like comebacks to mean girls and jerks. “They had a lot of important ways to deal with them,” she says.

Mothers of a certain age may remember poring over Ellen Peck’s *How to Get a Teenage Boy, and What to Do with Him when You Get Him*, the 1969 classic that advised girls to not scare boys away by talking too much in school, and reminded them that a woman’s job is to make men’s lives easier. Thankfully, *The Big Book of Girl Stuff* addresses the “Boys” topic in a healthier way. This is one chapter in which King’s gender is a plus. Who could better decipher boys’ communication and mysterious habits to girls than another guy?

The “Boys” chapter may be too edgy for young tweens, but it provides valuable insight into annoying boy problems, friends who are boys versus boyfriends, how flirting works, and other common concerns girls have about the opposite sex. Dana agrees, “I think these are interesting questions to ask.”

# The Tween Years

## it through middle school *By Susan Spencer*

And in a 21st-century rejoinder to Peck, King acknowledges that while some boys avoid smart girls because they are competitive and don't want to be seen as "losing," he says, "If a boy can't accept that a girl can be intelligent, you really don't want to be around him anyway."

"Girl Power" is both a theme of the book and a chapter on staying strong, recognizing discrimination, and becoming leaders of tomorrow. This message is critical in light of research showing that girls tend to back off of their accomplishments as they go through puberty. A handy list of organizations with volunteer opportunities, and "Wise Words from Wise Women," a collection of hip, inspirational quotes, reinforce the message.

Despite the sisterhood-is-powerful theme, "You can tell it's written by a man," says Dana. "Guys just don't understand how complex girls are. They don't have 6,000 emotions going on every day. I guess [King] could relate, but it kind of seemed only skin deep." She thinks the book's direct and amusing approach might be too simplistic at times.

Maybe Dana's already got a good handle on the tween issues. "Girls are a lot more stable than people think," she says. "If we have a problem, we'll work it out eventually." But for those times when a girl needs to learn what to do when she tears the seat of her pants out in public, or tell her parents bad news, there's *The Big Book of Girl Stuff*.

Tweens just starting on the road to self-discovery will enjoy another book, *American Girl's What Would You Do?* by Patti Kelley Criswell, MSW (Pleasant Company Publications, 2004). This collection of quizzes about real-life problems helps girls sort out strategies for coping with family matters, friends, school, stress, and other issues.

We enlisted 10-year-old Sarah to help review this book. Sarah thinks the problems presented about friends were realistic. In fact, she has been in a similar situation to one described in the questions, which deals with how to handle two friends who don't like each other.

"I thought it made me more aware of myself," she says about the quizzes. "At the end it made me realize more about how I am." Sarah says she falls into the "free spirit" category, creative and fun-loving with friends but also liking to spend time alone.

Sarah also likes the multiple-choice options presented by actual girls in each scenario. Seeing different responses shows that there is more than one way to approach a problem.

"A lot of my friends like *American Girl*, so I would recommend it," she concludes.

The down-to-earth perspectives and practical advice in both these books make them good companions for a tween girl's library. Moms, too, should find them helpful for keeping the conversation going with their daughters. ♦

**Want to know how to talk tween? Here are some excerpts from *The Big Book of Girl Stuff's* slang glossary:**

**Adorkable:** Adorable and dorky.

**Bi-phonal:** Being able to talk on more than one phone at a time.

**Cutiful:** Between cute and beautiful.

**Face-mail:** Talking to someone in person.

**Jim-jams:** Pajamas.

**Juice:** Gossip.

**Prat:** British slang for a foolish or stupid person.

**Shimmy:** To dance.

**Stink eye:** To give someone a dirty look.

**Trout pout:** The weird lips a girl gets if she uses too much lip plumper.

**Whatever (What-EV-er):** The perfect comeback line to someone who is annoying you. Or an extremely annoying word to hear from someone you're talking to!

**Wicked:** Really good. Example:

"That actress who played the witch was wicked."

**Yayness:** When you want to say "Yay" in a different way.

Example: "I aced the test! Yayness!"

*Susan Spencer is a freelance writer who lives in Breuster and Whitinsville, MA, with her husband, tween daughter Dana (12), and tween son Colin (10). Dana and her school-mate Sarah contributed to this article.*