

HOT TOPIC: FRIEND POACHERS

editor: Leigh Belz



spirited away

Other girls threatening your entourage? You're not alone. Celia Shatzman reports on friend poachers.

Rebecca thought she'd always be able to count on her best friend, Melissa.* But as soon as they started high school, Melissa began getting closer to another girl, Amy.* "Melissa and Amy were in a lot of the same classes," says Rebecca, sixteen, from New Hyde Park, New York. "When the three of us got together, it was clear that Amy and I were competing for Melissa's friendship. Soon they had inside jokes with each other, and Amy never invited me when the two of them went out."

For reasons innocent or calculated, Melissa was "friend-napped"—and Rebecca never saw it coming. Sites like Facebook don't help matters; they encourage "friending" your buddies' pals, blurring the lines even more. "If you go on Facebook and see ➤

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different girls and groups of friends, you can just message them," says Amanda, eighteen, from Naperville, Illinois. "It allows friend poaching to happen because you have easy communication."

Purloining pals is often used as a means of social climbing. "Girls think, I don't have enough to make me popular, so if I can get with people who are popular, I'll look better," says Ann Kearney-Cooke, Ph.D., director of the Cincinnati Psychotherapy Institute and a psychologist specializing in adolescent girls. "These people tend to be manipulative. At first they are very friendly with everyone, but as time goes by, they may start to invite your friend out without you, which could lead to you feeling used."

Q Amanda says she has a classmate, Jen,* who strategically befriends cool kids as a way to boost her social standing. "Jen has had a different BFF every year," Amanda says. When a new girl, Michelle,* started at their high school and instantly became popular, Jen was jealous. "She went out of her way to constantly make plans with Michelle and try to be with her at all times," Amanda says. Jen even started hanging out with girls in Michelle's circle. But Jen's plan backfired when word got out about her power plays—and Michelle stopped hanging out with her. Most of her old pals, like Amanda, now no longer trust her.

Sometimes friends are ushered away unintentionally. Remy, a nineteen-year-old from Winnetka, Illinois, was caught in a conflict between her longtime friend Liz* and new friend Jamie* during her senior year of high school. Liz lived in Chicago, while Remy and Jamie lived in neighboring suburbs, so it was hard for Liz to meet up with them on weekends. When Liz confronted Remy about being excluded, the three of them got into a huge fight. Eventually, Remy realized that Liz was hurt about being left out and just missed her company, so they patched things up.

Being the one left behind, like Remy's friend Liz, is tough, but it doesn't have to stay that way. "Tell [your original friend] what she's doing, and suggest that in the future she say, 'Let's all go out together,'"

Kearney-Cooke says. "Then go to the girl who is stealing your friend and discuss it with her." And if you've accidentally done the poaching yourself, make a point to include the left-out party in the group's plans.

Afraid someone is trying to steal you? Keep an eye out for the warning signs. "If a friend is isolating you from the group and wants to hang out all the time, it's a pre-poach—she's setting the stage," says Jessica Rozler, coauthor of *Friend or Frenemy?* (HarperCollins).

Another red flag is if she constantly only asks questions about you and doesn't share anything about herself. "Look out for someone who doesn't have a consistent bunch of friends or who hops from one group to another," says Rozler's coauthor, Andrea Lavinthal. "And be aware of how she works her way into the gang—one month she's hanging with one person and then the next

month with someone else. You can tell when someone infiltrates and moves in."

Whether you're in a full-on poaching battle or suspect you're about to be, keep everything off the Internet. "Facebook can really take an innocent situation and blow it up," Lavinthal says. "IMing spreads everything too. If you have a core group of friends, you should feel secure in those relationships. But if someone is threatening a friendship, don't take things online."

If you get caught up in a pal snafu, just remember, you're not alone. "I think friend poaching is becoming pretty common," says Kachina, 20, from Albuquerque, New Mexico. She's been involved in two skirmishes herself, both as the victim and the instigator. "Women change groups frequently. You're lucky to find the one or two people you stay friends with for a really long time. You might fall in with girls you get along with better at some point." Lavinthal agrees: "In some cases, you just have to accept that certain people will hit it off more than others do."

"I think everyone encounters interlopers, whether they fall victim or they are the hunter," Remy says. "In the end, getting caught in a friendship triangle taught me about social personalities—and how close to get to people." □

**Name has been changed.*

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—Andrea Lavinthal,
author