

# Loyalty in Girls' Friendships

## 5.1 Possessiveness, Loyalty and Independence

In addition to exclusion, the focus of Chapter 4, adults at Woodwell Green were also concerned about possessive behaviours, in which children tried to force particular peers to play with them. These were seen as problematic because they limited children's freedom to choose their own affiliations. For example, in an assembly for years 3 to 6 (ages 7 to 11 years), Mr Gardner, the head teacher, commented that friendships were important, but that the previous term he found that some children were being too possessive of their friends, 'acting like they owned them'. He continued that if a child wanted to sometimes play with someone else, it did not mean that they were no longer friends with their usual companions, since it was possible to have many friends.

On this occasion, Mr Gardner argued in favour of children's independence in the playground, in an effort to counter what he saw as problems with possessiveness. Year 5 class teacher Mrs Samson seemed to share his view. Concerned about her class's playground relations, she devised several 'problem cards', which she gave to groups of children to use as a basis for role plays. One card, which she gave to a group of five girls, read: 'Stephanie usually plays with Marie, Elaine and Shannon. Stephanie wants to have a change of friends today. She decides to play with Beth. Marie, Elaine and Shannon are very upset. They approach Stephanie in the playground to ask her why she isn't playing with them.' The wording

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**Table 5.1** Children's judgements of wrongdoing in exclusivity scenario

<i>Protagonist who was blamed</i>	<i>Number of children (N=122)</i>	<i>Percentage of children</i>
Katie	32	26
Sani	4	3
Jasmine	72	59
No one	31	25

Numbers add up to more than 122 because some children blamed more than one protagonist.

used to describe this situation expresses sympathy for Stephanie, who is described as wanting the freedom to play with someone different.

There was some evidence that children were sympathetic to teachers' valuing of independence and concerns about possessiveness and ownership. As noted in Chapter 4, one of the hypothetical scenarios I discussed with children in individual interviews concerned possessive behaviours:

Katie, Sani and Jasmine are in the same class. Katie and Sani are playing together in the playground. Jasmine comes up to them. Jasmine likes Sani but she doesn't like Katie. Jasmine keeps asking to play with Sani on her own. Then Katie turns to Sani and says, 'If you play with Jasmine, I won't be your friend anymore.'<sup>1</sup>

Table 5.1 summarises children's answers to the question, 'Has anyone in this story done something bad do you think, or have they been okay?' While 25 per cent of children thought that all protagonists had been 'okay', most thought that Jasmine's and/or Katie's possessiveness of Sani was wrong. These data suggest that, like Mr Gardner, children were ready to condemn possessive behaviour.

Nevertheless, acts of possessiveness were common at Woodwell Green; 39 per cent of the children interviewed reported having had an experience like this scenario, and I witnessed many examples during my research. As I analysed these examples, I began to realise that the value the head teacher and many children placed on choice and independence in the playground was in tension with two other values. One was the value teachers placed on inclusion, i.e. all children playing together (described in Chapter 4). The other was a value which I rarely heard teachers refer to directly: children's expectations

of loyalty from their friends. We might define one child's loyalty to another as their obligation to privilege their friendship over their other relationships and concerns. The form of privilege took various forms, such as lying to a teacher to protect each other or a willingness to help each other in class. In this chapter, I explore two types of loyalty that were important for children at Woodwell Green, and which could lead to claims of possession: the obligation to be available to one's friend, and the obligation to share a friend's enemies.<sup>2</sup> The case studies that follow focus on girls, among whom I witnessed most examples of loyalty and possessiveness, for reasons I discuss later in the chapter.

## **5.2 Loyalty in Best Friendship**

One form of loyalty that was widespread at Woodwell Green was associated with best friendship. A few children claimed to have more than one best friend but, more usually, best friends were pairs who made a mutual commitment above all others. One element of loyalty between best friends was availability; to be loyal to one's best friend was to be always available to him or her. Insofar as best friendship was ideally a two-way obligation between a pair of children, this form of loyalty bore some resemblance to the value of reciprocity.

This conception of best friendship is not unusual. Australian working-class children saw availability as part of what makes a good friend (Davies 1982), while best friends among an ethnically diverse group of teenage girls in London were expected to spend more time with each other than with anyone else (Wulff 1995). Similarly, teenage girls in Quebec saw being together as an obligation of friendship (Amit-Talai 1995).

The obligation to be available to one's best friend is most obvious when it is not met, as I discovered from year 4 girls, Navneet (Indian Sikh), Maria (Pakistani Christian), Zena (Black Caribbean Christian) and Erickah (Black African Christian). I met Navneet at the start of year 4, when she was 8 years old. At that time, she was usually to be found with a large loose-knit group of children (mostly girls) on the playground, but not with any one child in particular. Zena, Maria and Erickah all joined Navneet's class (and the school) over a period of two months during year 4. Maria was the first to arrive, in mid-February.

*5.2.1 Maria: 'I let her play with other people  
but why can't I play too?'*

During her first month at Woodwell Green, Maria spent time on the playground with different children in the class, usually in large groups. When Zena arrived in mid-March, she and Maria paired up almost immediately and became 'best friends'. In mid-April, Erickah started at the school. She quickly joined up with Zena and Maria. About a week later, Zena began to spend more time with other girls in her class, particularly Navneet. She remained friends with Maria, but they no longer spent much time as a twosome.

At this point, I conducted an individual interview with Maria in which I asked her who she liked most in her class. Maria named Zena and Erickah, amongst others, but when explaining why she liked them, she spoke of her distress about how Zena was behaving towards her:

MARIA: [explaining why she likes Erickah] Miss she's quiet and she, she always help her.

RW: What do you mean?

MARIA: I help her and she helps me. She says that I'm your best friend, I won't leave you, like Zena does, Miss she leaves me, one day she be's my friend and one day she doesn't. I like Zena but I don't like her when she goes like that. I tell Erickah all my secrets, not like my brother and sister.

MARIA: [explaining why she likes Zena] Just like her – so – so – I liked her more before.

RW: Is that because she goes off with other girls now?

MARIA: Yes.

RW: Why do you think she does that?

MARIA: Because – when she gets a new friend yeah, like she gets Anjali now, she becomes rude, and she only comes to me to pull faces, and I say don't be my friend, because I don't like it. Sometimes be my friend and sometimes don't, I don't like it.

Having developed a best friendship with Zena, Maria continued to expect her to be available to her. Zena, meanwhile, seemed keen to pursue other friendships in addition to Maria's. From Maria's perspective, this amounted to disloyalty, and she expressed her distress about Zena 'leaving her'.

In July, very near the end of their time in year 4, this dynamic was still causing Maria distress. It was lunchtime, and most girls in the class had

been playing their male classmates in a heated football game. Maria and Zena argued fiercely with several boys, kicking and swearing at them, and Mohamed threw a football at Zena's head. Zena started to cry and Mohamed was taken inside by the head teacher.

The whistle goes, indicating the end of lunch break, and the children make their way across the field to line up. Maria and Zena walk together near me. Anjali, Amrita and Louise approach them. Anjali puts her arm round Zena and talks with her closely. Maria is hanging back on the edge of the group, looking dejected. She comes over to me and asks 'Why does Mohamed hate Zena so much?' I say I don't know.

I hear Anjali say to Zena, 'You come with us now,' and then Zena, Anjali, Amrita and Louise walk off among the trees nearby, Anjali's arm still round Zena's shoulders. Maria runs after them, but soon comes back to me. She takes my arm and we walk along together. 'Why doesn't Anjali like me?' she ponders sadly. 'She always tries to take Zena away from me.' I say that Anjali probably does like her. She replies that when the five of them were standing together just now, Anjali had leaned into Maria's face and said loudly, 'BYE!' (Maria demonstrates this on me.) Maria didn't move, so then Anjali said to Zena, 'Tell Maria to go away.' Zena turned to Maria then and said 'Go away'.

I tell Maria that Anjali is like this with other children as well, not just her, but she seems convinced that she's the only one. 'What shall I do? Why doesn't Anjali like me?' she wails. I say not to worry about that, she and Zena are still friends and she just needs to let Zena have other friends too. 'I do,' she says in the same frustrated, aggrieved tone. 'I do everything for Zena. I play with her, I give her things. I let her play with other people but why can't I play too?' I find this hard to answer.

In this incident, Anjali, a strong, dominant girl (see Chapter 2), excluded Maria with Zena's help, and Maria was left struggling with Zena's failure to meet her expectations of loyalty. From Maria's perspective, Anjali was trying to 'take Zena away' from her and no matter what she did, Zena was slipping through her fingers. She gained no solace from my 'independence' solution, which did nothing to address her key concern: As Zena expanded her friendship network, why would she not take Maria with her?

A few months later, having moved into year 5, Maria expressed similar concerns, this time about Zena and Navneet. I was interviewing Maria about the hypothetical scenario about possessiveness (described earlier in this chapter). As I read out the scenario, Maria started to pace the room and all her answers were rapid and animated. Here is her answer to the first question, and our resulting discussion.

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- RW: How do you think Katie is feeling?
- MARIA: Bad cos, sad cos, cos she, if she's playing with Sani, like somebody, Miss I'll tell you one thing. When I play, when I used to play with Zena, Navneet always comes and take her away from me.
- RW: How did she do that?
- MARIA: Cos she hasn't got friends so she thought, I'm gonna take Sani away from Katie, I'm gonna feel very proud cos Katie won't play with me. Miss, you know today, you know Sarina, she's a bit rude to me. As I walked past the bookcase, Navneet was tidying it and she dropped a load of books on the floor. Sarina turned round and said, uuhhh, oohhh, Maria, pick them up, pick them up. I said I didn't drop them why should I pick them up, and she said pick them up, pick them up! I said Navneet did it and Sarina still said pick them up.
- RW: Did Navneet say anything?
- MARIA: Navneet always be rude to me. I said to Navneet, Navneet I know you're not my friend, and she said I *am* your friend. Then another time, again I ask her, Navneet are you my friend, and she said yeah, but I think Zena and Navneet, they don't like me. But Zena, does like me, and Navneet, a bit they do like me, but I don't know *why* they don't want me to play with them.

Maria still seemed to expect loyalty from Zena. She struggled to understand Zena's failure to meet that expectation, interpreting her behaviour as meaning that she and her new friends did not like Maria (although in questionnaires in years 4 and 5, both Zena and Navneet named Maria as a friend). In our discussion above, Maria seemed to see Navneet as the cause of the problem. For example, she claimed that 'Navneet always comes and take her [Zena] away from me'. The phrase 'taking away' refers to a triad: the one who takes away, the one who is taken away, and the one who is taken away from. For Maria, these are Navneet, Zena and Maria respectively. In this formulation, Zena and Maria are passive; it is Navneet who is actively removing Zena from Maria's company.

I was surprised, therefore, that when I asked if anyone had done anything wrong in the scenario, Maria said that Katie had, her reason being, 'She must say, come on Sani, let's play together'. I asked her if she had tried saying this to Navneet and Zena. She replied, 'Yeah I did, they said come and play with me yeah, but when I did, they don't talk to me'. It is unclear why Maria thought that Katie was to blame, given that her account of her own experience suggested blame of 'the one who takes away' – Jasmine in the hypothetical scenario – and given that she found

her own suggestion to play together ineffective. Possibly she meant to blame Jasmine, rather than Katie. Meanwhile, although Maria seemed to see Navneet as responsible for 'taking Zena away', Navneet herself had surprisingly similar concerns to Maria.

### *5.2.2 Navneet: 'She's running off with Sarina'*

As noted above, in late April, soon after Erickah arrived, Zena began to spend increasing amounts of time with Navneet. By the end of the month, Zena was often to be seen in a pair with Navneet, and Maria with Erickah. In June, I heard Zena tell Navneet, 'You're my best friend', and the following week, Zena told me, 'Maria used to be my best friend but now Navneet is'. Yet just a week after that, tensions erupted between the newly formed best friends. As Zena, Navneet and I walked together during a school trip, Zena told me, 'I'm not Navneet's friend anymore'. 'Why not?' I asked. 'Because I want to be Simran's friend and Navneet won't be Simran's friend so I'm not Navneet's friend,' Zena replied. Once I had grasped this (I had to get Zena to repeat it), I suggested, 'But you can still be Navneet's friend'. 'No, because I want to be Simran's friend more,' Zena replied.

According to Zena, Navneet issued her with an ultimatum: her friendship or Simran's. Navneet and Simran usually got along reasonably well with each other (Navneet named Simran as someone she liked during interviews in year 4, but Simran did not name Navneet), and I never witnessed them arguing (although Simran did tell me in year 5 that Navneet had once spread rumours about her). So it seems unlikely that Navneet's ultimatum was the result of a dispute between her and Simran. Rather, I suggest that it was triggered by Zena's desire to be friends with Simran, who was very popular (named by eight classmates as someone they liked in interviews during year 4, and by 11 classmates as a friend in questionnaires at the end of year 4 and again during year 5). Navneet seems to have felt her own friendship with Zena to be threatened by Zena's blossoming friendship with this high-status, popular girl, and so she tried to force Zena into an exclusive relationship with her, a tactic that backfired on this occasion. I saw a similar sequence of events later (when the girls were in year 5), this time with Sarina instead of Simran:

As Navneet and I walk over to the canteen together I ask, 'Why aren't you with Zena?' Until then we'd been chatting pleasantly, but now she switches instantly into a complaining, aggrieved tone, starting high pitched and sinking a little. 'She's running off with Sarina. I'm on my own and she

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didn't even come and ask me to play with them, or ask me if I was okay.' I ask Navneet if she asked to play with them. 'Yeah, and they just run off,' she replies.

We join the queue for lunch inside the canteen, next to Maria. Zena is further forward in the line, next to Sarina. Zena leaves Sarina's side and stands behind Navneet who is talking to me. I smile and greet her, but Navneet doesn't. Zena gently fiddles with Navneet's hair, but Navneet still does not respond, so Zena returns to Sarina. Navneet starts talking with Maria, who is next to her in the queue, and I talk to someone else. When I turn back, Navneet is saying to Maria, in a plaintive tone, 'She's my best friend.' Maria doesn't say much. The line moves forward. Zena drops back again to talk to me and so is near Navneet again, but Sarina waits for her. 'Zena!' she calls in a warm, friendly voice, and Zena and Sarina go through lunch together. Navneet clings to me fervently.

I sit with Navneet, Maria and Erickah, and Sarina and Zena sit at another table. During the meal, Navneet says to me in a resentful tone, 'See, she's sitting with Sarina.' 'She did come to stand with you in the line,' I point out and she says nothing. I suggest that this is a chance for her to play with someone different, and ask who, apart from Zena, she likes to play with. She says Maria and Erickah, so I suggest she plays with them today. She doesn't look inspired, and says she likes to play with Simran and Harpreet too. I suggest she plays with them. She adds that she plays with Maria quite often. 'Sometimes I play with Maria, sometimes with Zena and Maria.'

Like Maria, Navneet sought loyalty from Zena, which she did not get when Zena played with Sarina without her. The extract above shows that Navneet was distressed by Zena's actions, this time withdrawing from Zena rather than issuing an ultimatum. When I interviewed her about the hypothetical possessiveness scenario, she, like most children, blamed Jasmine (the protagonist who sought to play with one member of a dyad and exclude the other). When I asked if she had ever had a similar experience, she replied, 'I have with Zena'. However, contrary to my observations, she said her position was that of Sani (the child desired by both Jasmine and Katie). I asked what happened, and she explained:

NAVNEET: I don't remember, cos sometimes what it is I break up by, one friend says that, if one friend says that, say if I said shall we play Ring a Ring o' Roses, just pretend yeah, Zena says let's play [pause] had. Okay let's pretend that's [points to picture of Katie] Maria, and Maria says let's play Red Letter or Stuck in the Mud, and Maria says okay you have to vote for Red Letter or Stuck in the Mud, and we don't want to, so we go off

together, and Maria goes with someone else, Erickah. And Zena says that's a good idea actually, let's play Stuck in the Mud or Red Letter on our own and I say that's boring let's play Ring a Ring o' Roses or Cat's got the Measles<sup>3</sup> and Zena says that's boring, and she goes away from me. And Maria goes with Erickah.

This account did not fit my observations of Navneet and Zena in the playground, and it also did not fit the scenario which we had been discussing, and which Navneet seemed in her other answers to have understood very well. There is no claim to exclusive friendship, no attempt to exclude one member of a threesome, and no ultimatum in her tale, despite the fact that I knew from my fieldnotes that Navneet had experienced these issues. Her account did emphasise her friendship with Zena, and she mentioned how she and Zena, and Maria and Erickah, formed pairs. Perhaps Navneet found it unpalatable to recall her own friendship troubles here, and/or to explicitly acknowledge the vulnerability evident in my fieldnotes.

So although they might not have acknowledged it, there were parallels between Maria's and Navneet's experiences. Both became best friends with Zena. Both were distressed and jealous when Zena spread her wings and played with other girls, and attempted to secure their own inclusion through what we might call possessive behaviour. They responded differently, Maria trying harder to win Zena over, Navneet punishing her by withdrawing and threatening to terminate the friendship. But the overall aim of both seemed to be the same: to induce in Zena the loyalty they expected from a best friend.

Despite Zena's resistance to Maria's and Navneet's demands both girls continued to expect loyalty from her, and to be distressed when they did not get it. This raises the question of why they did not withdraw from Zena and invest in friendship with someone else – perhaps even each other. The girls may have got caught in a vicious cycle. By being unavailable, Zena increased her desirability to Zena and Navneet, so they worked harder to maintain their friendship with her, making themselves more available and hence less desirable to Zena. In contrast, because she is not available to them, Maria's and Navneet's feelings of insecurity are likely to increase, leading them, again, to try harder and be more available to Zena.

Zena's desirability to Maria and Navneet was probably also a consequence of her increasing popularity. Sociometric data suggest that

Zena was quite popular, Maria less so, and Navneet seemed to become less popular over time.<sup>4</sup> One way in which girls demonstrate status is through their relationships (Eder 1985; Goodwin 2002; Hey 1997). Girls who have many friendships, particularly with other high-status, popular girls, accrue more status than do peers who have fewer friendships, or whose friends are mostly low status. So Maria's and Navneet's enduring loyalty to their relatively high-status friend Zena may reflect their desire to improve their own status.

### *5.2.3 Zena: Prioritising independence and popularity*

Zena's experience and perspective were very different from Maria's and Navneet's. She stated explicitly that first Maria and then Navneet were her best friends, but she seemed to have a different idea of what best friendship meant. As we have seen, she repeatedly resisted Maria's and Navneet's expectations of constant availability. Instead, she eagerly expanded her friendships with other girls, including, as we have seen, Anjali, Simran and Sarina.

In the process of friendship expansion, Zena sometimes seemed unconcerned about the impact of her behaviours on Maria and Navneet. For example, in November of year 5, Zena, Navneet and their popular classmate Harpreet started to make up a dance together on the playground. A couple of days later, Zena and Navneet quit together, and were replaced by Simran and Joanne. However, later the same day, Harpreet agreed that Zena could rejoin the dance. Upon learning this, Navneet began to cry, and she and Zena walked off to talk. At this point the whistle was blown indicating the end of lunch break. When I next saw them several days later, Zena was doing the dance with Harpreet, Simran and Joanne. I asked her what Navneet thought about that. 'She's with Sarina,' Zena replied, continuing cheerfully, 'I told her, I don't care if you're not in the dance! So she's gone off with Sarina.' The following day Navneet finally entered the dance group again, but it was with the help of her popular, prosocial classmate Harpreet, not Zena.

It would seem that loyalty was less important to Zena than it was to Maria and Navneet because of the high value she placed on independence. She wanted to be free to develop new friendships with peers of ever higher status. In doing so, she was acting to increase her own popularity and thus status.

*Choice and contingency friendships*

Freedom in one's peer relations is only appealing to children who have a choice about who to play with. Zena could take risks in extending her friendship network because she could always fall back on Maria and Navneet, who were what Davies (1982, p. 70) calls 'contingency friends'. Contingency friends have been observed in various school settings (Davies 1982; Griffiths 1995) and I knew of several children at Woodwell Green who had them. Harpreet had a friend in the year above her to whom she would go when she argued with girls in her class. And when I interviewed him about the hypothetical scenario in which a group excluded a lone peer (see Chapter 4), the girls' classmate Anil commented, 'I've got two sets of friends. Ones like Mohamed and that and one, when I have a fight with one and he has the ball then he probably won't let me play so then I play with my other friends'.

Contingency friends provide children with choice on the playground. This was clear in an interview with Zena in year 5, about the possessiveness scenario. She told me that she did not think any of the protagonists had done anything wrong, and went on to recount an experience of her own in which her position resembled that of Jasmine in the scenario:

- ZENA: When um I play with, no when Erickah plays with Maria, and Navneet's playing something else that I don't like. So I go to Maria and I don't want to play with Erickah cos I don't like her.
- RW: Why don't you like Erickah?
- ZENA: I don't know! Cos she swears all the time and I don't like it.
- RW: But loads of people swear in the playground.
- ZENA: Yeah but it's different, she swears in a rude way and the other people swear in a jokey way.<sup>5</sup>
- RW: How does it happen when you come up that Erickah goes away? Does Maria ask her to go?
- ZENA: No. She doesn't stand up, she just goes away.

In this extract, Zena explained that when she did not want to play with Navneet, she went to Maria and insisted that Erickah, the child already with Maria, had to go. Her actions in this account are almost identical to Jasmine's in the scenario. Zena expressed no remorse about excluding Erickah so she could play with Maria on her own. Unlike most of her peers, she did not see this behaviour as wrong. From Zena's point of view, the playground was full of choices and she was free to make whichever choices she wishes.

The connection between contingency friends and choice was also made during a group interview I held with Maria, Navneet, Zena and their classmates Ayesha, Kiran and Joanne when they were in year 5.

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Here is part of their discussion about the following hypothetical scenario: 'Abigail and Debbie both want to play with Priyanka, but Abigail and Debbie don't want to play with each other.'

- MARIA: Miss, if you've got more friends then why do you wanna play with er them [the protagonists in the scenario], they, they being rude to you, go play with other people.
- NAVNEET: But Priyanka might be the most popular.<sup>6</sup> [Navneet and Zena laugh]
- RW: So you think it would be best to go off and play with someone else?
- MARIA: [interrupting] Yeah. If somebody be rude, be rude to them just don't, ignore them and that.
- AYESHA: Yeah, go play with your other friends.
- KIRAN: [interrupting] Yeah, I know! [inaudible]
- JOANNE: [interrupting] I got an idea.

[Several girls talk at once, all inaudible except Joanne]

- JOANNE: What if you ain't got any friends, what if you ain't got any more friends?
- NAVNEET: Miss, while you're playing you can make up.
- AYESHA: You, you don't know [inaudible]
- ZENA: [interrupting] Let Priyanka choose who she wants to play with.

In this extract, Zena again prioritised freedom over other considerations by suggesting that Priyanka, the desired protagonist, should choose who she wants to play with. Maria and Ayesha also prioritised Priyanka's freedom by suggesting that she should choose neither girl but should play with her 'other friends' instead. Then Joanne highlighted a problem with this solution: 'What if you ain't got any more friends?' To consider this question, let us turn to Erickah's experiences.

#### *5.2.4 Erickah: Loyalty and loneliness*

Children with contingency friends have a safety net, protecting them from aloneness on the playground if their usual friends are unavailable. Corsaro (1985) argues that the avoidance of being alone is a powerful force motivating American nursery school children to develop stable relations with several playmates.

Being alone on the playground is a perennial fear among school children, and understandably so. Playgrounds are open places full of people, a

setting in which being alone has many negative connotations, including the knowledge that one has no friends and the very public nature of the aloneness, reminiscent of the vulnerability many adults feel when going to the cinema, restaurant or pub alone. American children as young as 5 and 6 years old define the term 'lonely' in a similar way to adults, referring to sadness, boredom, 'feeling left out' and feeling 'like no one likes you' (Asher et al. 1990, p. 255). Children feel vulnerable when alone at school (Davies 1982; Griffiths 1995), and there is evidence that friendless and isolated children are particularly liable to be bullied (Blatchford 1993). At Woodwell Green too, children were concerned about aloneness. When I interviewed children about the exclusivity scenario, 46 per cent of them spoke about one or more of the protagonists being alone, lonely or having no one to play with, often suggesting these as motivations for Katie's and Jasmine's attempts to secure exclusivity with Sani.

Erickah was among those children at Woodwell Green who did not have the luxury of a contingency friend. She was unpopular, named in questionnaires at the end of year 4 by only one classmate as a friend (Maria). She was very quiet, shy and serious looking when she joined the school, which some children interpreted as superiority or unfriendliness, and we saw above that, according to Zena at least, she was not competent at the playful aggression so valued by children at Woodwell Green. Zena and Navneet both told me that they disliked her. When I interviewed her about her friendships in year 4, Erickah told me that Navneet shouted insults at her and Zena told others not to be her friend.

Erickah did have a strong friendship with Maria. The two named each other as a friend in both the interviews during year 4 and the questionnaire at the end of year 4. By the time I distributed the questionnaires in year 5, Erickah had left the school (her family moved to a different part of the UK), but in an expression of loyalty, Maria still wrote her name down and told me that they were emailing and phoning each other.

For unpopular Erickah, loyalty from Maria was the one thing that stood between her and isolation on the playground. This placed a lot of pressure on their friendship and may have led Erickah to value loyalty more than any of the other three. Yet that same loyalty threatened to stifle them, limiting their opportunities to interact with other classmates and to develop a broader range of friendships. In addition, Erickah's lack of contingency friends may have rendered her overly eager to please Maria, allowing Maria to take her friendship for granted. When I asked Erickah why she liked Maria, she explained, 'She's um, nice friend, and she, when she says she not your friend, she come back and say sorry and be your friend again. She's friendly'. Her reply hints at a situation in which Erickah had no

option but to allow Maria to come and go, since she had no contingency friend to fall back on. Like any child at the periphery of a friendship group, she was vulnerable (Svahn and Evaldsson 2011).

Consequently, Erickah was sometimes alone. This seemed to result from two different sets of circumstances. For one thing, she was often excluded from girls' playground football games, in which Maria was normally included (see Chapter 4). For another, Maria continued to make herself available to her former best friend, Zena. As we have seen, when Zena wanted to play with Maria, Erickah was shunted out and left to walk around the playground alone. Without contingency friends, Erickah was vulnerable to Maria's ongoing loyalty to Zena. No wonder that when I interviewed her about the possessiveness scenario, she blamed Jasmine, the protagonist whose position was most similar to Zena's, explaining, 'Katie is sad because she took away um, the friend, so this one [Jasmine] has done wrong'. However, Erickah claimed not to have had a similar experience herself, either for this scenario or the following one, which involved exclusion from a group, so she may have understood her situation differently from how I have presented it here.

### *5.2.5 Multiple values: Reconciling loyalty with freedom and status*

This case study has shown that girls encounter the value of loyalty not in isolation but in the context of at least two other values, freedom and status. We have seen that freedom, or independence, which was the value promoted by some school staff, was in tension with loyalty. So girls like Zena, who placed a high value on freedom, were likely to prioritise this over loyalty. In contrast, girls who did not value freedom as highly (typically because, like Erickah, they did not have a choice of friends to which to apply their freedom) were more likely to prioritise loyalty. Indeed, a girl without contingency friends is liable to find freedom threatening in that if her friend chooses freedom over loyalty, she will be left alone. So a girl's popularity had a bearing on her commitment to loyalty via its implications for her orientation towards freedom.<sup>7</sup>

The extent to which girls valued loyalty was also related to their status, and that of their best friend. I noted earlier that girls often demonstrate status through their relationships with one another, such that a girl can move up the hierarchy by developing friendships with higher-status peers. This seemed to be what Zena was doing, as she expanded her friendship network and cultivated friendships with high-status peers like Simran and Anjali. Friendships with lower-status girls like Maria did not

aid her status; if anything, they decreased it. Therefore for Zena, loyalty (to Maria) and status were in tension with one another. This tension has been noted among the white working- and middle-class British secondary school girls studied by Hey (1997).

However, it is also possible for concerns with status and loyalty to support one another, when the loyalty is directed towards a higher-status peer. Thus, if Maria were concerned to improve her standing in the peer group, this would add to her commitment to Zena rather than detract from it. In other words, concerns with hierarchy can either promote or undermine loyalty concerns, depending on the relative positions in the hierarchy of the girls involved.

Girls will not necessarily consistently value loyalty or independence. A girl might forsake loyalty to a current best friend in order to solicit a best friendship with another, higher-status peer (see Hey 1997 for an example). Alternatively, girls may 'over-commit' themselves, seeking loyal relationships with more than one girl at a time. This seems to be the case with Maria, who was loyal towards her current best friend, Erickah, and her former best friend, Zena. Zena's account suggests that when these came into conflict, Maria prioritised her loyalty towards the more popular Zena, by allowing her to interrupt her play with, and exclude, Erickah (perhaps because Maria was motivated to improve her own status through her friendship with Zena).

Girls may also be inconsistent in the loyalty they demand from their friend, and the loyalty they are willing to show their friend in return. In other words, children may prioritise loyalty when it comes to their friend's obligations to them, but prioritise independence when it comes to their obligations to their friend. Children are likely to exert pressure on each other to equalise these (Davies 1982), but if these pressures fail, then the friendship is unbalanced, which is likely to lead to jealousy and possessiveness. My analysis suggests that such a situation is likely to occur if the members of a best friendship differ substantially in popularity and/or aspirations regarding status.

Loyalty obligations need not lead to the exact formation we have seen here, involving four core children. The form it takes will depend on the number of children connected by loyalty demands, and the willingness of each child to fulfil them. For example, another possible formation was the unstable threesome, where two children compete for the loyalty of the third, desired child. I saw this dynamic quite often (see, for example, Joshua's and Sarah's struggle over Joanne, described in Chapter 4), and it is also documented by other researchers (Davies 1982; Hey 1997).

In summary, the extent to which a girl values loyalty (as availability) in a specific friendship is (partly) dependent on her popularity (which affects how much she values freedom and independence), on her status relative to her friend, and on the extent to which she wants to improve or maintain her status. Tensions may arise when best friends differ in how much they value these various concerns and, thus, the extent to which each is willing to meet the obligations the other makes of them. Best friendships, then, will generally be more stable and less fraught when they are between children of similar popularity and with similar aspirations regarding status.

### **5.3 Loyalty through Sharing Enemies**

Another form of loyalty that was important to children (especially girls) at Woodwell Green was the obligation to share the enemies of one's friend. For example, during an interview in year 4, Zena told me about an argument she had had the previous day with her classmate Anjali, 'And we still didn't make up, even today!' I asked her if she thought they would make friends soon. 'Never,' she replied. 'Anyway we never made up when I came to this school.' 'What, you weren't friends before this anyway?' I asked. She confirmed this, explaining that when she started at the school, 'I couldn't be friends with her. She wasn't friends with Maria and Maria was my best friend at the time'. Similar expectations of loyalty have been described among white working-class teenage girls in northern England and girls of varying ethnicities at a Swedish elementary school (Evaldsson 2007; Griffiths 1995).

The obligation to share enemies usually faded into the background during peaceful periods but appeared forcefully as soon as two girls fell out with each other, especially when those girls were popular and/or influential, like Harpreet and Anjali.

#### *5.3.1 'She'll say if you talk with Anjali I won't be your friend': Taking sides*

I met Harpreet (Indian Sikh) and Anjali ('other ethnic group', Christian) at the start of year 4, when both were 8 years old. Harpreet was a very popular girl, named by 13 of her classmates in interviews during year 4 as someone they liked, and named as a friend by nine and seven classmates at the end of year 4 and partway through year 5 respectively. The equivalent figures for Anjali were three, one and two respectively. Both

girls were dominant and influential in the peer group, although in different ways. As we saw in Chapter 2, Anjali was an assertive, aggressive girl, receiving the most nominations in her class in year 5 for the question, 'Which girls in your class get into arguments or fights the most?' Harpreet was more sensitive (see Chapter 2), but nevertheless a leader among the girls in the class, often organising games and inviting peers to join in, offering to care for upset, lonely or sick children, and with a reputation among her friends for being bossy.

Harpreet was part of a large, loose-knit group of mostly girls. Anjali spent most of her time in the playground with Louise (Indian Christian), Amrita (Indian Sikh) and sometimes Farah (Pakistani Muslim). However, quite often these two groups joined and intermingled, and Anjali was particularly friendly with the two most popular girls in the large group, Harpreet and Simran. Occasionally, Harpreet and Anjali could be found as a twosome. For example, they made up a dance together for their class's Christmas show, and refused to let another classmate join in. Occasionally they argued, and when that happened, each girl expected her friends to demonstrate loyalty by 'breaking up' with the other, leading to the polarisation of this normally fluid group of girls into two gangs. Here is an example, which occurred one lunchtime when the girls were in year 5:

I walk into the playground and Zena and Navneet run up and hug me. They are breathless and excited. 'Guess what just happened!' Zena exclaims. 'What?' I ask. 'Anjali and Harpreet just had a cat fight!' They tell me that Anjali stabbed Harpreet's hand with a pencil in class, so Harpreet did the same back, got told off by their teacher and cried. Out in the playground the girls apparently fought and swore at each other's parents. Now the fight is over and Harpreet is standing in a corner of the playground with Simran. Zena, Navneet and I go over but she won't talk to us and wants to find Mr Gardner, the head teacher, to tell him about the incident. Zena says dramatically to Navneet, me and a couple of others, 'Yesterday was there any fights? Was there swearing or punch-ups? No, and Anjali wasn't here yesterday!' She makes a gesture of mock despair and smiles.

We go to the canteen and, while lining up outside, someone tells Kiran what's happened and she begins to tell me excitedly, until someone else tells her I already know. In the canteen, Anjali, Louise and Amrita sit together, and at the next table sit Simran, Zena, Navneet, Farah, Sarina, Joanne and Kiran. A place has been saved for Harpreet on this table, and she comes and sits down, but almost immediately gets up again and moves to another table further away from Anjali. All the others get up and follow, except Kiran, who asks me to sit with her. After I sit down with Kiran,

Navneet comes over from the other table and asks me if I would come and join them. I tell her I'm already sitting with Kiran, so Navneet asks Kiran if she would come over too. She agrees readily. As Kiran and I get up to move to the other table, Anjali beckons me over, and I tell Kiran and Navneet I will be over in a minute and go to talk to her.

Anjali tells me that poking Harpreet with the pencil was an accident and she didn't even think the pencil hit Harpreet. She says that she is worried that she will get in trouble and I try to reassure her. While Anjali and I are talking, Farah comes over from the other table, stands between Anjali and me so that her bag prevents us from being able to see each other, and asks me to come and sit with them. When I have finished talking to Anjali, I do so.

When they have finished eating, the girls leave in small groups until only Zena, Navneet and a couple of others remain. The canteen is almost empty and as I help canteen staff to stack chairs, Zena and Navneet hover around me. 'Don't blame me if I'm still a little bit Anjali's friend,' Zena says, and Navneet agrees. 'That's okay, I'm not blaming anyone,' I say. Then Zena says something about Harpreet not being her friend that I don't hear properly. 'Did Harpreet say she won't be your friend if you're friends with Anjali?' I ask. 'No but she will,' Zena replies. 'She'll say if you talk with Anjali I won't be your friend.'

Zena and Navneet leave the canteen slightly ahead of me, and I watch them approach Anjali, Amrita and Louise, who are hanging about nearby. I walk up to them, and Zena and Navneet leave together just as I arrive. Anjali looks pleased. 'At least I've got two of my friends back!' she says. We walk over to the playground. Harpreet is playing a game called Red Letter with Simran, Sarina and several other children. After a while Anjali, Amrita and Louise approach and sit on a bench very nearby. A few minutes later, the whistle goes for the end of lunchtime. As the children begin to make their way to their lines, Sarina comes up to the bench, leans towards Anjali and says, 'Oi Anjali, Simran said she's not your friend!' Simran is standing close by and on hearing this, whirls round to face Sarina and shouts, 'When did I say that? I didn't say that!' Sarina giggles and turns away without saying anything. 'Don't stir Sarina,' I say, then turn to Anjali, saying that it wasn't true. Anjali smiles wanly, saying of Sarina, 'She always does that.' I say that she can trust Simran, and Anjali replies, 'Yeah I know Simran's my friend. She's always on both sides.'

Harpreet's and Anjali's fight triggered a situation in which every girl was expected to demonstrate allegiance to one of the two. Thus, Zena commented of Harpreet, 'She'll say if you talk with Anjali I won't be your friend'. Consequently, girls who were normally friendly with both Harpreet and Anjali (such as Amrita, Louise, Zena and Farah) chose their side and terminated their friendship with the other. Sometimes this

termination of friendship had a ripple effect, such that friends of Harpreet ended their friendships with friends of Anjali (this happened with Zena and Farah in another similar dispute, in which Zena took Harpreet's side, and Farah took Anjali's).

Allegiance was demonstrated primarily by the physical location of the girls, as we saw with Harpreet's desire to sit as far as possible away from Anjali, and with Zena's and Navneet's decision to discreetly make friends with Anjali out of Harpreet's sight. Location was probably important because physical proximity enables communication – for example, Anjali telling me that she did not stab Harpreet with a pencil, and Farah attempting to prevent our conversation with the physical obstacle of her bag.

The result was two gangs. In this particular incident, Harpreet's gang was much larger than Anjali's. On another occasion, they were more evenly distributed, with Harpreet, Zena, Navneet and Erickah in one group, and Anjali, Amrita, Louise, Simran and Farah in the other. The numerical size of the two geographically separated groups was a clear symbol of the relative popularity and strength of the warring girls.

No wonder, then, that in these situations dominant girls worked hard to manoeuvre more submissive peers into their gang and away from the opponent. In the extract above, Navneet and Farah even attempted to get me into Harpreet's gang, a move I resisted by talking with Anjali. As an adult, I was relatively protected from censure for doing this, but it was much more difficult for the girls to remain 'on both sides'. In the argument described above, only Simran succeeded in doing so, reacting to Sarina's allegation swiftly and angrily with 'When did I say that?' Simran, a popular, assertive girl (see Chapter 2 for examples of her assertiveness), was the only girl I witnessed directly resisting the pressure placed on her to commit to one side in situations like this. It was much more common for girls to allow themselves to be manipulated.

### 5.3.2 *'Sarina wanted to talk to me but Anjali kept saying no': Submission and possession*

Most examples of loyalty through shared enemies I witnessed involved a hierarchical relationship between dominant and submissive children. When dominant children like Anjali and Harpreet argued, their submissive peers were expected to take a side, whereas the converse was not necessarily the case (i.e. if two more submissive children argued, the rest of the peer group would not necessarily feel obliged to demonstrate their allegiances). The obligation from submissive to dominant children was so strong that even without doing anything at all, submissive children

found themselves involved and assigned to one or other of the gangs. Of course, some children willingly took a side. For example, Sarina usually sided with Harpreet. This was not surprising because Sarina and Anjali had a longstanding dislike of each other. However, the quieter, more submissive girls did not actively choose a side but allowed themselves to be manoeuvred into one by more dominant peers.

In individual interviews, some of the quieter girls referred to this phenomenon. For example, when I asked Louise what she did when her friends argued with each other, she replied, 'I just stay out of it'. But when I asked if they tried to get her to 'take sides', she agreed, with a smile of recognition, recalling a recent example: 'Cos Sarina wanted to talk to me but Anjali kept saying no.' Similarly, Louise's classmate Ayesha said of a recent dispute between Anjali and Sarina, 'Miss you know what? Me and Amrita don't say anything, it's Anjali and Farah'. She said of herself, Amrita and Louise, 'We don't usually say anything, we just follow them'. I asked her why she didn't go away and leave them to it, but she said this was because she wouldn't have any other friends to play with.

The passive approach of girls like Ayesha and Louise allowed more dominant girls to possess and manipulate them. This was evident in Harpreet's account of another dispute between herself and Anjali. During an interview with Harpreet in year 4 about her friendships, I asked her 'What about Anjali, what do you think of her?' 'Well, she's very annoying,' Harpreet replied. When I asked her why, she proceeded to give me a lesson on possession and power:

'Well, because Miss you have to listen to me cos I'm the teacher.' As Harpreet says this she finds a board pen and positions herself in front of the whiteboard. I'm sitting at the desk nearby taking notes, in a bizarre reversal of roles. Harpreet complains that Anjali always has to be boss of everything. She begins, 'I was playing with Louise, Simran and Navneet, what happened was' and breaks off to draw two small circles next to each other [which, she explains, represent herself and Simran], and a short distance away, two more circles, also next to each other [representing Louise and Navneet].

Harpreet tells me that Anjali 'pushes away' her and Simran, and as for Louise and Navneet, she 'pulls them to her'. As she explains she adds two sweeping lines, one starting at Simran and herself, and the other starting at Louise and Navneet. 'Do they let themselves be pushed and pulled?' I ask, carefully copying her diagram. 'Well Miss there's a gang,' Harpreet explains. 'Used to be Ayesha, Amrita, Navneet and Louise, but now she's [Anjali] losing some people because Ayesha is out of the gang.' I ask why. 'Because she doesn't like Anjali because Anjali bosses her around. Louise is out of the gang. Amrita used to be out of the gang but she came back into the gang.'

'Now about that pushing problem,' she continues, rubbing out her first diagram. She draws a second, with four equidistant circles in a horizontal line (representing herself, Simran, Louise and Navneet), and a scribble to the left of them, representing Anjali. She draws a curved line from Anjali to Louise and Navneet, another line leading from Navneet away from the circles, and an arrow above Louise and Navneet pointing to the right. This represents Anjali approaching and 'taking away' Louise and Navneet from Harpreet and Simran.

'Does Anjali actually *pull* them, or does she *act* like she's pulling them?' I ask. By way of explanation, Harpreet draws below this diagram, two dots, arranged vertically, which she labels as Navneet and Louise. Then she draws two huge arms, with their hands touching the two dots. 'Do you like my arms?' she grins. 'Navneet nearly fell over Louise but she doesn't care.'

'About the pushing stuff again,' she announces in an authoritative tone, cleaning the board. 'She does it in the playground.' Harpreet redraws her second diagram again (minus the arrow), and writes 'in the playground' alongside it.

The dispute Harpreet described here culminated in two gangs, one led by Anjali, the other by Harpreet, with Harpreet's 'Bubblegum Club' writing a letter to Anjali on a small whiteboard during wet play, which read: 'Anjali, We hate you. You are a stupid fool. We have copied your dance and we have already told Mr Gardner [head teacher] on you. Hatred from the Bubblegum Club.'<sup>8</sup> Anjali took the whiteboard to Mr Gardner and Harpreet and her gang got into trouble. The following day the girls wrote 'a sorry letter' to Anjali, and most of them made friends soon after.

This intriguing lesson reveals how dominant girls like Anjali and Harpreet sought to possess other girls during disputes, and also how this process of possessing was very physical, with girls pushing and pulling each other from one gang to another (hence Harpreet's drawing of arms). The result of these physical processes of possession was that submissive girls unwillingly found themselves in one gang and not the other. By handing over their agency and responsibility for who they affiliated with, they became pawns to be possessed by their more dominant peers.

Even though they did not take direct responsibility for their affiliations, they were sometimes still held accountable for these by others. When telling me about a dispute that Anjali and Farah were having with Sarina, Ayesha commented, 'You know Farah and Anjali, they keep telling Sarina that they're her worst enemy. She thinks that it's us [Ayesha, Louise and Amrita] too'. So according to Ayesha, Sarina assumed that quieter girls shared the views of their more dominant, vocal friends.

At other times, they were seen as unwilling members (and might therefore also be seen as less culpable). For example, in another interview, Harpreet told me about a dispute between Anjali and Sarina, and how she and Sarina devised various strategies to gain the advantage. One of these strategies was, 'We were trying to get Louise out of their gang, trying to bring her here', so that Louise could tell them what Anjali and her gang had been saying. Here, Harpreet seemed to see Louise not as a committed member of Anjali's group but as a pawn who could be a useful resource on Sarina's side.

Why did girls like Louise and Ayesha allow themselves to be manipulated by their more dominant peers? There are several possible reasons. They may have enjoyed being fought over and desired. They may have felt, as Ayesha did, that they did not have any one else to play with. However, this does not explain why Ayesha and the other girls not involved (such as Louise) did not go away together. The quieter girls seemed to feel unable to leave their group leader, in this case, Anjali, even when this drew them into a dispute.

The submissive girls' behaviour makes more sense when we bear in mind that these girls demonstrated loyalty through shared enemies. Simran's experiences are instructive. I noted earlier that she was the most successful at remaining friends with both Harpreet and Anjali during their disputes. However, she worked hard to achieve this. She boldly countered Sarina's attempt to alienate her from Anjali, and she also experienced problems when she tried to leave the 'Bubblegum Club'. According to Simran, she was not involved in the letter to Anjali, and when she found out about it, she told Harpreet that she wanted to leave the gang. She told me that Harpreet was annoyed, saying, 'Fine then, go away'. 'Because she thinks you don't want to be her friend anymore?' I asked, and Simran agreed.

Simran's wish not to take sides was challenged, I suggest, because it defied girls' widely accepted understanding of loyalty, according to which friendship is demonstrated by sharing enemies. If we accept this definition of loyalty, then we must see Simran's refusal to take sides as jeopardising her very friendship with Harpreet. It may be that some submissive girls allow themselves to be possessed by one side because they accept this definition of loyalty and are afraid of losing their friendship with a dominant peer. This is the explanation suggested by Griffiths (1995) for why girls took the side of their group leader during a dispute that did not involve them. Alternatively, they may simply feel unable to carry out the bold, assertive behaviours that Simran required in order to maintain her independence.

The only alternative open to girls who wanted to remain on both sides but disliked direct confrontation was to pursue friendship with their friend's enemy in secret, a strategy pursued by several girls. For example, Sarina told me that she and Louise were 'secret friends', 'Cos she, she doesn't want Anjali and that to know'. According to Zena, even bold Simran employed this tactic sometimes. She wrote the following story, entitled 'Play ground fight', which she later told me was true at the time:

When its play time at school me Simran and Harpreet always play football. like most of the kids but sometimes Simran goes off to Anjali. So Harpreet doesn't really like it you see Harpreet isn't really Anjali's friend so she gets quite angry. One day when Simran was playing with Anjali Harpreet got fed up because she thought Anjali was taking Simran away. So Harpreet said to Anjali 'Anjali I'm quite fed up with you trying to take Simran away! So why cant we be friends.' 'Yes Anjali why cant you be friends with Harpreet because you wont have any friends left.' I said. 'Oh shut up I will have friends and I'm never going to be Harpreets friend the only time I'm going to be Harpreets friend is over my dead body. Even ask Simran she doesn't want to be your friend isn't that right Simran!' said Anjali in a loud and annoying voice. 'Ya I'm not your friend Harpreet I think,' said Simran in a confused voice. Next morning Simran went to Harpreet and asked her. If she can be her friend. Harpreet said yes but secretly Simran some times plays with Anjali. But with out Harpreet knowing. Till today the secret playing with Anjali goes on. The End.

Maintaining secret friendships was a short-term measure for coping with friends who were enemies. This might work quite well for friends of Harpreet and Anjali, whose disputes tended to be short-lived. For most girls, loyalty as sharing an enemy arose sporadically, when dominant girls argued. But for some girls at Woodwell Green, this aspect of loyalty became a defining feature of particular relationships. In other words, some friendships seemed to be *predicated* on sharing an enemy.

### 5.3.3 *Toxic loyalty: Friendship through sharing enemies*

The assumption that being 'with' one person meant being 'against' another seemed to underlie some of the most unstable friendships I observed at Woodwell Green. I saw several instances where triads of girls were almost constantly divided, two against one, with the members of each side endlessly changing. It was very rare in such triads for all three girls to be friends at the same time, suggesting that their friendships relied on alienation of the third.

### *Loyalty in Girls' Friendships*

Anjali, Farah and Sarina were caught in this dynamic. I documented six changes in their affiliations during one week in year 4:

*Tuesday morning, classroom:* Anjali and Sarina approach me together, Anjali complaining that Farah is 'stirring up trouble' between herself and Sarina.

*Tuesday lunchtime, playground:* Farah tells me that previously, she and Anjali were friends and Sarina was not, but today, Sarina said to her, 'Anjali isn't your friend anymore and I'm not either.'

*Wednesday lunchtime, playground:* Sarina, upset, tells me, 'I fell out with Anjali and now she, Amrita, Louise, all that lot keep coming up to me.' When Harpreet, Sarina and I approach Anjali's group [which includes Farah] to challenge them, Farah retorts that Sarina kept approaching them, shouting insults, and running off.

*Thursday morning, computer room:* While lining up to leave the room, Sarina moves from near the front of the line to stand next to Anjali. Back in class, Farah and Sarina share a worksheet, and Farah turns to me and whispers, smiling, 'We're friends now!' pointing from herself to Sarina and back again. 'That's good!' I whisper back. Later in the lesson she whispers to me, 'We're all friends, even Anjali!' I ask her when it happened and she says in the computer room.

*Thursday lunchtime, playground:* Anjali and Farah play with a few other girls [but not Sarina]. When the whistle goes [for their year group to go to the canteen], Farah tells me in an injured tone that Anjali said she wasn't Farah's friend. We discuss what Farah should do, and Farah adds hopefully, 'Maybe she was only joking.'

*Thursday hometime, corridor:* Sarina shows me two bracelets that Anjali has just given her. Farah, lingering nearby and sounding hurt, says they are from a jewellery-making set she recently gave Anjali.

*Monday playtime, playground:* Sarina is off sick. I see Farah chatting with Anjali and Amrita.

*Monday lunchtime, playground:* Farah informs me, 'We're not friends with Anjali.' I ask why not and she says Anjali is telling everyone that Sohaib [a boy in their class] and Sarina 'had S-E-X'. 'I feel sorry for Sarina,' she adds.

In this short space of time, we see alliances between Anjali and Sarina, Anjali and Farah, and Farah and Sarina, plus a brief interlude when all three were (according to Farah) friends together. This dynamic extended both before and after the one-week window I have provided here and was summed up nicely by Farah in an interview, when I asked her whom she argued with most often. She named Sarina, explaining, 'If Anjali's not my friend and I'm not Anjali's friend, Sarina come up and says, I'm not your friend because you're not Anjali's friend'.

Are the friendly relationships that children forge in unstable triads like this really friendships? That, of course, depends on how the children concerned define friendship. When she was in year 6, I told Anjali about my analysis of the data above, which, at the time, I saw as evidence that she was sometimes friends with Sarina. She disagreed strongly with this claim, saying, 'I was never friends with Sarina. I don't know why you wrote that, I was never friends with Sarina'. Anjali's and Sarina's relationship with each other was notoriously fraught, and so it makes sense that Anjali did not see occasional periods of friendliness as signs of friendship *per se*. In interviews during year 4 and questionnaires at the end of year 4 and during year 5, Anjali never named Sarina as a friend. Similarly, Sarina never named Anjali, so it is likely that she did not interpret these moments of friendliness as signs of friendship either. However, Farah's experience was a little different. In her year 4 interview, she named both Anjali and Sarina as friends, although neither named her. In questionnaires at the end of year 4, she named neither girl (and neither named her), but during year 5, she and Sarina both named each other. These data suggest that for some girls in unstable triads, friendliness constitutes actual friendship. Note, though, that such friendships are fragile and fluctuating.

We might ask why children enter and engage in such an unstable dynamic, which was clearly upsetting for the alienated one (evident in Farah's distress when Anjali used a gift from her to make a gift for Sarina). But it was also a source of excitement and intrigue, and every time a girl reformed a friendship and pushed another into the 'enemy' position, she got affirmation. Similar dynamics have been observed elsewhere too. Goodwin (2002) describes how elementary school girls in California marked the boundaries of their friendship groups by forming alliances against others, and Hey (1997) argues that being 'with' one girl and 'against' another is a key aspect of girls' friendships. At Woodwell Green, however, this dynamic seemed to be more important to some girls than others. Some children (like Ayesha and Louise) only had an occasional need to demonstrate loyalty through shared enemies. For other children, this type of loyalty seemed so central to their idea of friendship (or at least, their relationships with some peers) that it was an almost constant preoccupation.

#### **5.4 What About Boys' Loyalty?**

The head teacher of Woodwell Green told me that possessive behaviours were more common among girls than boys. He confessed that he sometimes struggled to understand girls' disputes and occasionally asked the

(female) deputy head to clarify and intervene. My fieldnotes include many more instances of possessiveness among girls than boys, and when asked if they had had an experience similar to the possessiveness scenario (in which two children competed over the possession of a third child), 65 per cent of the girls answered in the affirmative, compared with only 29 per cent of the boys. Other researchers have found that what they term 'relational aggression' (of which possessiveness is an example) is more common among girls than boys (Blatchford 1998; Crick and Rose 2000).

It is not that loyalty was unimportant to boys. Rather, it generally took different forms that seemed less prone to lead to possessiveness. Take loyalty as availability. Most boys at Woodwell Green played football regularly in fairly stable groups in the playground. Since friends were likely to be playing the same game of football together, expectations of availability were less of an issue, and because football is a group game, expectations of exclusivity inappropriate. Most girls, on the other hand, did not engage in such regular activities. Their groupings and locations were more varied, making the issue of exactly who plays with whom more significant, and making fear of loneliness a perennial concern.

Loyalty as sharing enemies was also important for boys. But because boys expressed hostility through physical aggression more often than girls, this form of loyalty often translated as willingness to enter a fight on the side of one's friend. For example, in an interview about his friendships, Farhan named his classmate Amar as a friend. One of his reasons was, 'On the field, if someone pushes me over, Amar goes up and kicks them'. He proceeded to recount several examples of Amar joining fights on his behalf. Similarly, Zak said of a couple of his friends, 'He sticks up for me, and I stick up for him'. This 'sticking up' involved a range of behaviours for Zak, including not telling a teacher if he broke school rules. But it could also involve supporting him in a fight.<sup>9</sup>

Sharing a friend's enemy during a physical fight made possessive behaviours unlikely, because it would be physically difficult for a boy involved in a fight to force friends to join in. In addition, in order to demonstrate toughness and status, a boy needs to show he can stand up for himself (see Chapter 3). Encouraging friends to join in a fight on one's behalf may undermine a boy's show of strength. In contrast, girls in a range of settings have been found to demonstrate status through their relationships (Eder 1985; Goodwin 2002; Hey 1997). It is not surprising, then, that during a dispute girls are eager to get as many peers as possible 'on their side'.

This does not mean that boys *never* experienced loyalty in the form typical of girls. For example, we saw in Chapter 4 how Joshua struggled to secure an exclusive friendship with Joanne. In addition, year 4 boy

Idris told me in an interview about a classic case of loyalty through shared enemies involving himself and two other boys, Sam and Ali. He was telling me about an argument he had had with Sam a few days before. 'But Ali, I don't know why he's had a fight with me, just because he wants to stick up with Sam. But if I make up with Sam, I dunno I might, he's [Ali] gonna be sad like I am now, cos he's with Sam now, and then I'll be with Sam,' he mused. I asked Idris if it was true to say that if he was Sam's friend, then Ali would not be Sam's friend anymore, and Idris agreed. A few months later, when he was in year 5, he brought up a similar issue in response to the hypothetical possessiveness scenario.

- RW: Have you ever been in a situation like this?  
IDRIS: I think, I don't know, I think I been in this situation before.  
RW: What happened?  
IDRIS: Like Miss me yeah, I was like Katie, I don't know why I said this but I said if you go with her, then I won't be your friend. But everyone does this Miss, they just say I'm not your friend for this day and then they make friends again.  
RW: Was it a boy or a girl?  
IDRIS: A boy.  
RW: Why did you say I'm not your friend?  
IDRIS: Because Miss that might make you feel to go back to me, and not go to the other boy.  
RW: And what happened?  
IDRIS: I think Miss we just left each other for some days or till lunchtime, and then we just came back together.

Idris's experiences suggest that there is overlap between the forms of loyalty that girls and boys expect of their friends. Nevertheless, the kinds of loyalty that led to possessive behaviours did seem to be more common among girls than among boys. So it is with a focus on girls that I turn to consider the implications of loyalty for schools.

## **5.5 Implications for Schools**

Adults at Woodwell Green viewed girls' possessive behaviours as a problem and countered them with the principle of freedom, encouraging children to associate freely with whomever they wished on the playground, a principle promoted in other UK schools too (Hey 1997). From the school's point of view, independence and freedom are laudable values for the playground, and possessiveness is purely

negative. Adults at school may well have valued loyalty, at least in some forms, but I rarely heard them talking about it with children, suggesting that it was a relatively silenced value.

Yet we have seen in this chapter that many girls (and some boys) strongly valued loyalty, a selective, enduring allegiance to particular peers, in the form of availability and/or sharing enemies. Loyalty has been shown to be important to working- and middle-class girls in various countries (Amit-Talai 1995; Davies 1982; Griffiths 1995; Hey 1997; Wulff 1995). While some valued it more highly than others, almost all the girls I studied acknowledged to some extent loyalty obligations they held towards their friends. These obligations often led to possessive behaviours. In the case of best friendship, a child whose best friend refused to fulfil the obligation of availability might issue ultimatums, threaten to withdraw friendship, become upset and/or withdraw from her. If one accepts the obligation of availability, then these 'possessive' behaviours can be seen as reasonable acts designed to encourage the best friend to fulfil her obligation. In the case of sharing a friend's enemy, possessive behaviours might be seen as reasonable measures to ensure that friends demonstrate loyalty appropriately, with the additional benefit of strengthening one's own side and weakening the other, and demonstrating status through popularity.

In other words, the meaning of possessive behaviour shifts dramatically depending on one's priorities. If one prioritises independence and freedom, then possessiveness and, to some extent, loyalty itself, look negative. If, however, one prioritises loyalty, then independence and freedom represent betrayal, irresponsibility and selfishness.

Not only do adults and children tend to differ in their priorities, but individual children do too, with some much more invested in loyalty than others, who are more preoccupied with independence and/or status. These differences made it much harder for some children than for others to conform to the school's 'freedom of association' position. By promoting freedom on the playground, teachers inadvertently support popular children who enjoy independence and high status, and undermine unpopular children who, lacking contingency friends and choice, are more likely to value loyalty.

Things were complicated still further for children by adults' concerns about exclusion, which led them to encourage children to play altogether, indiscriminately (see Chapter 4). This value, of inclusion, is in tension with both the values of independence and loyalty. Loyalty, as a selective association with *some* other children, sits between the two adult values of independence and inclusion, pleasing neither.

What can adults in schools take from this analysis? They must begin by acknowledging the importance of loyalty to children, and recognising that it is in tension with the value of freedom promoted by teachers. They might also consider different responses to loyalty demands and possessiveness depending on which type of loyalty these emerge from – loyalty as availability, or as shared enemies. I discuss these in turn below.

### *5.5.1 Loyalty as availability*

The loyalty that best friends show each other is, in many circles, seen as a desirable thing (a key component of social competence in middle childhood according to education researchers Pellegrini and Blatchford 2000, p. 17). While it can clearly cause distress, especially in cases of imbalance between best friends, it may also have a positive side, with availability constituting a form of care and commitment. If so, then perhaps schools should accept this form of loyalty as a legitimate value for children. This means adjusting the ideals of playground association that adults at school promote to children, since neither ‘freedom’ nor ‘inclusion’ acknowledge loyalty.

If we accept children’s expectations of loyalty as availability, then we probably also have to accept some possessive behaviours as unavoidable. Nevertheless, schools might take steps to reduce them. In other words, it seems possible to accept the inevitability and positive aspects of loyalty as availability whilst still working to curtail its more negative aspects. One focus could be on the place of loyalty to protect unpopular children from loneliness on the playground. Fears of loneliness may motivate some children to demand that their friend be available to them. The idea of providing resources for children who are alone in the playground (e.g. an adult-supervised structured play area, buddy bench) is not new, but my analysis suggests it could help unpopular children like Erickah to cope with failed loyalty demands. The difficulty with such schemes is to avoid them becoming stigmatised.

Children might also benefit from class exercises or discussions of relevant literature<sup>10</sup> that increase their awareness and understanding of their own expectations of loyalty, and how these are mediated by freedom, choice, popularity and status. This might help best friends to better understand their own and their friend’s behaviour, and perhaps to find more creative solutions to tensions between best friends of differing popularity levels. Such exercises might also help them to cope with possessiveness, insecurity and jealousy when they arise. In addition, by helping children recognise how ubiquitous these issues are, such exercises

might help to destigmatise ventures designed to support children having problems with loyalty, such as buddy benches.

Loyalty as availability was, on the whole, less of an issue among boys who played in large, stable groups (as in football). On average, on school playgrounds, girls form smaller groups (Benenson 1994; Hartup 1983) and spend more time 'hanging out' and talking (Boulton 1992) than boys. If girls spent more time in large, stable games, then provided both members of a best friendship participated in the same game, availability claims would be less relevant. For example, if most girls in their class played skipping together every day, then Maria and Navneet might not worry so much about whom Zena is playing with (although loyalty obligations and acts of possession could still occur in other settings, such as the canteen).

Finally, it is possible that Woodwell Green's relatively high turnover of children may have contributed to the prevalence of problems with possession. If group membership of a particular class did not change over the course of several years, children might be more likely to settle into stable friendships than if class membership is constantly changing. Of course, friendships still evolve and shift even among a stable group, but it may be that schools with lower turnovers will not need to focus on possessiveness as much as schools like Woodwell Green.

### *5.5.2 Loyalty as sharing enemies*

Unlike loyalty as availability, this form of loyalty necessarily involves a harmful act of alienation. Therefore schools may want to act more decisively against this type of loyalty.<sup>11</sup> Most crucially, schools could challenge the very need to demonstrate friendship through sharing enemies, and challenge children's assumptions that being *with* one means being *against* another. Children could learn conflict resolution skills that support them in allowing arguments to unfold without any obligation for others to become involved. Additionally, as suggested above for loyalty as availability, girls might be encouraged to play large-group, stable games in which loyalty as shared enemies is harder to enact.

Another area that schools could address is the issue of power and responsibility. We have seen that submissive girls claimed not to be involved in their dominant friends' disputes, yet became so because they allowed themselves to be physically manoeuvred into one group. Once there, and without even saying anything, they could be interpreted as 'for' one girl and 'against' the other. Thus, their failure to take responsibility for what dominant girls did with them had serious repercussions

for them, and also tended to allow the dispute to escalate, as more and more children became involved, and girls vied to possess these more submissive girls. This is another form of allowing dominant children to make decisions on their behalf (see Chapter 4). If submissive girls could be empowered to take responsibility for decisions about whom they affiliate with, then many possessive behaviours would no longer be possible.

## Notes

1. Half the children heard this version, involving three girls, and the other half, three boys, Adam, Matthew and Hinesh.
2. It is possible that possession sometimes arose from other motivations, but this chapter focuses on cases where loyalty appeared to be a key cause of possessive behaviour.
3. 'Ring a Ring o' Roses' and 'Cat's got the Measles' are songs with actions. 'Had' and 'Stuck in the Mud' are chasing games. 'Red Letter' is a game in which one child calls out letter names and the other children move forward according to the frequency of that letter in their name, with a penalty for children who move when the 'red letter' is called.
4. In interviews during year 4, Navneet, Maria and Zena were named by eight, four and three classmates respectively as someone they liked. Seven classmates (five of whom were girls) were interviewed before or in the same week that Maria joined the school, and this was true of 12 classmates (ten of whom were girls) in the case of Zena. So while Navneet was certainly popular in these interviews, Maria and Zena were actually well liked considering the smaller number of possible nominations available to them. At the end of year 4, and again during year 5, children were asked to name up to four friends in questionnaires. Navneet, Maria and Zena were named by seven, three and six children respectively in year 4, and by two, two and five children respectively in year 5.
5. The distinction Zena makes here recalls the subtle and fine line that Woodwell Green children walked between playful and hurtful aggression, described in Chapter 2.
6. Navneet's comment here supports my argument that her loyalty to Zena may have been partially motivated by her desire for friendship with a relatively high-status, popular peer.
7. By 'freedom', I mean the freedom to affiliate with whomever one wishes. There are, of course, many other domains of life to which the concept of freedom also applies, where popularity is irrelevant. Girls who valued freedom in the domain of playground companions need not necessarily value it in other aspects of life, and vice versa.
8. Spelling mistakes have been corrected for clarity.

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9. Interestingly, Zak's friends may not have felt the same compulsion to intervene if Zak's enemy was a friend of theirs. Zak had just told me that he and Mohamed stuck up for each other. I asked what he meant and he explained, 'Like, if I get in a fight, yeah, he helps me and hates the person. But if he likes him, like if it's Faizel, he tries to break it up'.
10. My thanks to the head teacher of Woodwell Green for the suggestion that children's literature could provide a way to address children's loyalty concerns.
11. This is a challenge in itself because loyalty as availability can lead to demands to share enemies if a particular peer is seen as a threat to the best friendship. For example, we saw earlier that, apparently feeling threatened by Zena's blossoming friendship with popular Simran, Navneet gave her an ultimatum: her friendship or Simran's.