



Commentary Transcript: *Big Little Lies*

Clip 5: Season 1, Episode 5

Renata and Gordon's daughter, Amabella, is being bullied at school. Mom and Dad have just learned that Amabella has been bitten.

Let's watch the scene.

[PLAY SCENE]

Some intense emotions there. Renata seems to be so focused on herself that she's losing sight of the needs of her daughter. Gordon is far less dramatic, but he's also not doing a great job of focusing on Amabella's needs.

Let's break this down.

PAUSE: "Just tell us!"

Kudos for Dad here. He's holding his daughter's hands, he's down on her level, he's calm, and starts by gently saying, "Share with us." He's focused on the *child*, not on himself or his feelings about what's happening.

Mom is having a harder time managing herself and her big reaction. She's focused on her own feelings. She's literally yelling and points her frustration at her daughter with, "Just tell us!"

If this were a more skillful interaction in real life, Mom and Dad might have worked through their feelings together before including Amabella so they could present a united—and calm—front. That would have allowed them to focus their efforts on seeing things from Amabella's perspective. She must have a reason for keeping quiet and it would be helpful to understand that reason before deciding how to continue the conversation.

That might sound like, "Is there a reason you don't want to say who did it? Maybe because you don't want them to get in trouble, or they might hurt you more if you do tell on them?"

Another option might be something like, "Honey, we're really sad that someone is hurting you. You're so bright and shiny and lovable and you deserve to be treated with care. It's hard to know what to do in a situation like this, but we want to protect you. Can you please tell us who is hurting you? We promise we'll do everything we can to make sure they never hurt you again."



PAUSE: “Someone is biting our daughter...”

Renata is so lost in her upset that she misinterprets what Gordon means by, “All right.” He’s saying it to try to calm Renata down and reassure the child. He is definitely *not* saying that he doesn’t mind that Amabella is being bullied. But that’s how Renata hears it. Her ears aren’t working because she’s screaming. She can’t ask questions because she’s driven by her emotions. She feels a lot in this moment and is not doing well managing it.

When Gordon says, “Just keep your voice down” it seems to amplify Renata—she is not recognizing the effect her reaction is having on her daughter or her husband. She is approaching this like, “If you aren’t freaking out too, you must not care! Let me tell you what’s happening because you’re so *calm* that you seem to be missing it! Someone is biting our daughter!”

If Mom were calmer, she might be able to engage with her child with curiosity. That might sound something like, “I feel really concerned about what’s happening to you Amabella. It’s OK if you don’t want to tell us who did it right now. But, I feel worried that we may not know the whole story. Is there more you can tell us? Do you feel scared when you’re at a school? What has it been like for you?”

PAUSE: “Because someone is bullying you.”

This statement isn’t actually true, and I think in real life, a child would feel it. Mom is upset about the *situation*—not about Amabella’s pain. Any child who has experienced sincere support knows that it never includes yelling. This is counterfeit support—and Renata is saying, “I’m yelling because I care” which is very different than hugging Amabella because Renata cares.

Real support might look and sound more like Gordon’s earlier approach: Mom might take a few deep breaths to calm down, get on her knees in front of Amabella, take her hands and gently say, “Darling, you are so precious to me and I never want anyone to hurt you. You deserve to be treated with love and care. I apologize for yelling. Mommy is having a hard time not feeling angry that this is happening—but I’m not angry at you. I’m so sorry you’re experiencing this and I want to help.”

PAUSE: “Do you hear me?”

A quick reflection here. Mom turns to Amabella with an angry tone and aggressive posture; getting in Amabella’s face with, “You never let a bully win.” But, isn’t that exactly what’s happening in this scene? *Mom* is bullying Amabella about not being bullied. And Mom is winning. Amabella is a kid. She has no chance against Mom’s tornado of anger, so maybe she feels that she has no chance in the face of other forms of bullying. Mom is teaching Amabella to endure bullying. Mom needs to calm down if she wants to help her child.



PAUSE: “Have to be a big girl and use your voice in this world...”

More aggressive tone and body language here. Renata is taking the tone a parent would use to punish their child. But Amabella hasn’t done anything wrong. She’s been on the receiving end of poor treatment at school, and now she’s receiving poor treatment at home.

If you want your child to “use their voice,” know that they need to be taught how to do it. They need to see that behavior modeled in real life conflicts, or receive specific lessons on what it means to use their voice. Kids can’t just “protect themselves” without having been taught how. They walk a fine line—they’re supposed to do what they’re told and not talk back. So how do they know when, or how, to talk back to a bully? They need to know when the “go along without complaining” rule no longer applies—they need to know when it’s *essential* to talk back, and what words to use to do it.

There are a lot of reasons kids might not stand up to bullies. One important factor is how they are treated at home. If Mom considered her own behavior, she might see that her aggressive treatment of Amabella could contribute to the girl’s acceptance of mean or hurtful behavior from others. Amabella might think, “If my mom treats me that way, and she’s supposed to love me, I guess other people can treat me that way, too.”

Telling a child she has to be a big girl and use her voice is not the same as teaching a lesson in healthy self-protection.

That healthier lesson in real life would first need to deflate all the aggression Renata is demonstrating. In a kind and loving tone, she might say, “I know it can be hard to figure out what to do when someone is mean to you. Especially if you want them to like you or you don’t want to get them in trouble. One thing you can do is say, “You can’t treat me like that” and walk away from them. Then, you can seek out someone you feel safe with. Always do your best to stay away from anyone who hurts you on purpose. And always, always, tell a safe adult if you’re being hurt. They can help protect you, and maybe they can do it without the person that hurt you knowing that you told on them.”

PAUSE: “I had to learn how to fight back with a bully”

Now we see why Renata is so upset. It’s not about this situation, this moment, or her daughter... it’s about what *Renata* experienced.

Mom walking away angry after throwing around all those words and aggressive gestures is a great example of not recognizing the lesson she’s teaching. Let’s sum it up from the child’s perspective: I was hurt. Mom reacted by yelling, screaming, ignoring Dad’s encouragement to calm down, getting in my face and telling me to stand up for myself. Mom has not asked a single kind question, she has not touched or comforted me, she has made it all about her emotions, her reaction, and her experience.”



In this scene and in real life, it's unlikely that any child would take this kind of interaction as a positive experience. That child would be less likely to tell Mom if they're being hurt in the future, to spare themselves from Mom's reaction. The child may also learn that their pain doesn't really matter—they can't expect to receive comfort when they are hurt. Those kinds of lessons can last a lifetime and influence a host of behaviors and choices that lead to negative outcomes.

PAUSE: "You wouldn't want that, huh?"

With the tornado out of the room, Gordon can take a more tender approach. He gently turns Amabella's face to his, he has a soft tone. But he misses his opportunity to focus on Amabella by guilting her into telling because someone else may be getting hurt, too. That might work on an adult—we may see the truth in the statement and protect others like we may not protect ourselves. But, a child is going to notice that the parent is still not engaging with the *child's* experience. This is a form of coercion, not comfort.

A more thoughtful approach would maintain his body language and tone but sound something like, "I'm sorry this is happening to you, sweet pea, and I'm sorry your Mom was so upset. She cares about you and sometimes has big reactions. But this is important to all of us. You don't deserve to be hurt, and we can stop it together. We need to know who is doing it to make it stop. Why don't you want to tell us who's hurting you?"

PAUSE: "You're too kind for that, huh, right?"

The actress playing Amabella does a great job with her facial expression here.

Dad clearly cares, he wants to help, but it's another miss. He may as well say, "Mom's already pointed out that you're not a big girl, even though you're enduring abuse. Now, I'm going to tell you that you're not a kind person if you don't tell on the bully because letting other (imaginary) kids get hurt is wrong." Oof. This poor kid. No wonder she doesn't know what to do.

In real life, it's a great idea to avoid tying your kid's behavior to their character. You can be a kind person and not fight injustice. You can be a big girl and still not know how to stand up for yourself. Behavior is separate from character—we are not "bad" because we don't know how to handle something skillfully. We are not "weak" because we don't know what to do.

A more thoughtful approach here may have been to piggyback on the previous, more skillful, line. Gordon may have put her on his lap and held her tenderly, adding something like... "I know this is hard and it's OK to not know what to do. But we need to figure something out so you aren't being hurt anymore. We need to know who is hurting you, Amabella. Please tell me. If you do tell me, I promise I'll protect you—they won't know you told on them. But, if you're not ready to tell me now, that's OK, too. We'll keep you home from school for the next week to make sure you're safe; and we can talk more about it."



If she tells him, he needs to keep his promise and protect her from the consequences of outing the bully. And, if she isn't ready to tell him, he needs to keep her safe in the meantime, loving her up and showing how precious she is to her family. Eventually, she may decide to tell.

This is a big scene. Abuse is too common in schools, workplaces, and the world in general. It's a serious subject that deserves far more attention than we can give it here.

But, if you're engaging with your child after they've been hurt, remember that it's not about you or your feelings. It's not about other kids. It's about your child—the one that's being hurt. Your child needs you to show them that they deserve to be treated kindly. They need you to *teach* them words and strategies for handling situations created by mean people. They need you to prove to them that you will stand by them even if they aren't ready to talk about what's happening. And they need to experience these things without you bullying or shaming them. They need to hear you recognize how painful it is to be hurt on purpose and how confusing it can be to receive abuse in a context where they should have a realistic expectation of safety.

One other tip here for parents. If your child says they're being bullied, molested, or otherwise mistreated, be really careful to *turn toward* your child. Ask questions about what happened, how they are feeling right now, what they feel confused about, how they responded and if they would have liked to be able to respond in a different way. They may never tell you all the details but you can address their emotions and fears without those details.

You might want to say well-intentioned and protective things about, "Talking to that nasty little bully's parents so they can punish him" or "Shooting that molester." You might think statements like demonstrate a dedication to protecting your child. But, a hurting child doesn't need to know that you're willing to do something violent because they were hurt. They don't need you to focus on the person who hurt them—or on your feelings of outrage—they need you to focus on *them*. After all, they are the one who was hurt, and is still hurting. They'll carry this experience for the rest of their life; it's up to you to help them learn how to carry it without undermining their faith in themselves or their trust that they can tell you what's happening and receive empathetic support.

A few more thoughts about this exploration...

Sometimes we use extreme emotion to convey the depth of our feelings because we don't have the skills to slow down and figure out how to use words, tone, and touch instead. This scene—and others with Renata—made me wonder if she's written as a character who believes that extreme emotion is how you show you care about something.

If anger is being used as a means of conveying care in this scene, it would mean that Mom thinks that her freaking out and yelling about it, "Not being alright" will be received by her child



as a form of love or concern and not aggression. Children can't make that distinction. Anger and love aren't the same thing.

Parents prone to extreme emotional reactions might want to consider that children are constantly trying to figure out how to behave in ways that don't result in them being yelled at, minimized, or hurt. Amabella seems more aware of her mother's emotions than Renata in this scene—and is unlikely to say anything that may further trigger her mother—including telling the truth.

Related to Renata's directives about, "Being a big girl, using her voice, and not letting bullies win."

Kids are not little adults—they don't yet know the things that time and experience will teach them. Parents can be more skillful in giving children what they need by learning more about the typical psychosocial abilities and limitations of certain developmental stages. Developmental science has come a long way in the last 20 years and has identified important milestones and skills that, if achieved "on time" can make every later developmental stage more successful. Even if you don't look into that research, know that it is unrealistic to expect your child to understand directives about how to behave in a difficult situation if you've never taught them how.

Also keep in mind that adults can be bullies, too—and many *adults* don't know how to skillfully handle that behavior. It's complicated, situational, and demeaning. None of us are really awesome at handling poor treatment by others, so it's unkind to expect anyone—especially a child—to navigate abuse without loving lessons in how to protect themselves with words, body language, and the support of safe others.

Children come into this world wired differently, but every child learns *at home* how to be loved, what support feels like, and what to accept from relationships. When I mentally flash forward to future intimate relationships for a child like Amabella, I wonder if she would accept all sorts of abuse, and turn away from relationships that offer authentic support, because she never learned that love can—and should—be conveyed without aggression. Parents can do their best to protect their children's future by teaching them healthy lessons about what love does—and doesn't do.

Love...slows down, gets curious, self-soothes or co-regulates to keep from hurting others with extreme emotions, it asks questions, keeps a tender tone of voice, touches gently, looks others in the eye, and works with what's true from a place of curiosity.



Love doesn't... yell and scream, get in someone's face, pour emotional reactions all over others, minimize other's feelings, or use physical or emotional violence to make others walk on eggshells.

There are many ways to set your child up for success. Here are a handful of them related to this exploration:

- Teach them how to protect themselves in healthy ways; healthy self-protection is a skill we learn through modeling and supportive experiences.
- Model healthy self-soothing and coping behaviors.
- Slow down and use words—instead of extreme emotions—to convey thoughts and feelings.
- Help them process difficult emotional experiences so that the lessons they take away are positive, constructive, and make them less likely to accept abuse or neglect in the future.
- Keep your reactions in check to make it more likely that children will trust you to calmly handle whatever they need to tell you.

We're all learning as we go and there is no perfect way to think, feel, be, or communicate. This commentary is not meant to criticize the writing or characters; after all, entertainment is meant to be dramatic. The lesson here is that parents who keep their cool are more capable of navigating difficult situations, demonstrating care for children who are hurting, and teaching lessons in healthy self-protection.

Here are a few questions parents might consider if they are in a situation similar to this scene:

- If this is hard for you to understand and deal with, how much harder must it be for your child, who is living through it?
- How can you vent or process your anger and fear about this situation away from the child so you can approach the child gently and not increase their pain or secrecy with your dramatic reactions?
- What messages might your child need to hear to know that they are worthy of care and that you will do everything you can to ensure their safety?
- Do you know the whole story? Have you asked what else might be going on that you don't yet know or understand?
- How can you behave in this situation to show your child that they can trust you to calmly handle anything they have to say?
- What does your child need to learn about healthy self-protection? How can you help them learn those lessons?
- How can you touch back to these lessons over time so that support isn't a one-shot-deal, but recognizes the long-lasting effects of abuse?



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This is tough stuff. For parents and children. Remember to be gentle with yourself—and your family—as you navigate tricky emotional situations.

OK, that's it for this heavy exploration. I hope you found some tidbits that you can apply in your own life.