

Relational Aggression: Examples, Interventions & Self Defense.

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For many years anyone who spent time on a school campus equated aggression to the overt physical manifestations usually seen by boys. As a result, educators, counselors, school psychologists, and others thought that girls were more passive, less aggressive than boys. Ask any adult woman about her experience in school, middle school especially, and you will hear another story. According to Rachel Simmons (Talbot, 2002) unlike boys who tend to bully acquaintances or strangers, girls frequently attack within tightly knit friendship networks, making aggression harder to identify and intensifying the damage to the victims. Girls fight with body language and relationships, instead of fists and knives. The aggression we are talking about here is Relational Aggression (RA), girls bullying other girls through the use of relationships.

DEFINITIONS OF AGGRESSION:

Aggression has many different faces in the school system. It's important for school counselors, as well as all school staff, to understand the different types of aggression and know that regardless of the type of aggression, it can be as damaging to the student experiencing the aggression.

Peer Aggression: includes physical, verbal and relational aggression. All of these types of aggression affect both boys and girls.

Relational Aggression: behavior that is intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating his or her relationships with others.

Physical Aggression: harm through damage or threat of damage to another's physical well being.

Verbal Aggression: obvious and hidden verbal acts of aggression towards a child such as threats, putdowns, and name-calling.

EXAMPLES OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

- Spreading rumors
- Calling kids names
- Passing nasty notes
- Making fun of someone in class by rolling your eyes or making disparaging sounds
- Bumping into someone on purpose
- Poking or pinching someone in the hall
- Taunting someone in the hall
- Damaging someone's property
- Knocking books on the floor
- Making fun of someone's clothes, appearance, or weight
- Instant messaging rumors and gossip
- Getting friends to exclude someone you are mad at
- Revealing someone's secrets
- Talking behind other's backs
- Making mean jokes and then saying "just kidding"
- Letting out a loud sigh of disrespect
- Calling each other hos, wusses, wimps, sluts, sissies, loser

(Ophelia Project, 2002)

THE BULLY:

In middle school all of my friends thought that it would be funny to stick gum on the outside of my locker. I didn't mind—it became sort of a joke, and soon, even my guy friends were participating. Then my friends and I noticed a "not-so-popular" girl sticking her wad of gum on my locker. I immediately became upset that this girl had the nerve to apply her gum to my locker. My friends and I decided that we would show her that it was certainly NOT okay!

The next day, we each chewed about 4 pieces of gum, and stuck the huge wad around her lock, so that she would not be able to get into her locker. She was very upset that we had done this, and went to the principal. We were called into the principal's office but we actually justified sticking gum on her lock, and got away with it.

For a while, we would sit next to her in class and make fun of her, putting her down every chance that we got. Eventually, we forgot about what had happened, and left her alone. We had probably found a new "victim."

(Ophelia Project, 2002)

BYSTANDERS ARE THE SOCIAL NORM

- 70 – 80% of children are bystanders.
- Peers intervene in 11% of bullying episodes.
- When bystanders confront the bully, it stops 50% of the time.

The bystander is the one who actually has the power, but you have to teach them that they are the one with the power. If the neutral bystander is willing to stand up to the bully, they have a high effective rate. The bystander that is closest to the victim, will most likely not stand up to the bully due to her own fear of being targeted herself. The neutral bystander is the one that may, or may not, be in the group that is participating in the bullying, but she knows what is happening is wrong. The goal of a school that wants to effectively address RA is to empower the neutral bystander.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

There are many different ways that a school can effectively begin to address RA. Sarah Bradley (2003) has identified stages to address change in a school. The most important piece to the process of change is that the entire school needs to view RA as an issue and then change the culture of the school. All staff members must be trained, not just teachers, counselors and administrators.

Stages in Systemic Change Process

- Agreement: there is a problem
- Agreement: to do something about the problem
- Changes in attitude
- Identification of strategies
- Building support to implement strategies, commit to system-wide implementation
- Consistent and comprehensive interventions
- Changes in behavior
- New beliefs and values become part of the school culture.

Self Defense and it's role in RA Prevention

Another option in addressing RA is teaching all girls self defense. Not only is RA an issue with young women, their safety and well-being are also of great concern. Self defense is an effective tool to help a school change the culture because it will empower girls, and increase their feelings of self-competency. These are just a few reasons that self defense is an important piece of RA identification:

- A key factor in addressing RA is empowering the neutral bystander to intervene.
- Self defense will give the bystander clear verbal training in how to effectively intervene.
- Self defense will also give the victim clear skills in defending self against RA.

But not all self defense courses are the same. To use self defense as a tool in addressing bullying and RA with girls the following things must be part of the program:

- Verbal skill training
- Physical skill training
- Education components to raise the awareness of the students.
- Creating positive rapport amongst the girls and the trainer by having a low number of girls in each course – no more than 16 girls per trainer with 32 girls max.

Relational Aggression Resources:

Books

- Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, by Mary Pipher
- Odd Girl Out, by Rachel Simmons.
- Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search For Self, by Sara Shandler
- Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence, by Rosalind Wiseman
- Things Will Be Different For My Daughter: A Practical Guide To Building Her Self-Esteem And Self-Reliance, by Mindy Bingham and Sandy Stryker
- For All Our Daughters: How Mentoring Helps Young Women and Girls Master The Art Of Growing Up, by Pegine Echevarria
- Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut, by Emily White

Web Resources:

www.onewithheart.com/selfdefense.php - local Portland Organization

Self-defense skills are taught in manageable increments, using games, simple drills, mental visualization, and role-plays. The group experience is a unique and powerful component: participants share their experiences and inspire each other.

www.girlsinitiativenetwork.org - local Portland Organization

The Girls' Initiative Network is a community-based coalition of girls, young women, and their supporters united in creating social change through advocacy, education and activism. GIN will come to your school and do girls empowerment groups for an entire school year for a nominal fee.

www.bullying.org

A collection of stories, resources, and services on bullying from Canada.

www.edap.org

The National Eating Disorders Association site is filled with resources on eating disorders.

www.empowerprogram.org

This organization's mission is to work with youth to end the culture of violence and involves students, educators, and parents.

www.fullsteemahead.org - local Portland organization

Empowering adults to prevent risky behavior in youth and helping our children to thrive. Full Esteem Ahead will do trainings, lead reading circles, has yearly RA training for educators. They are a local Portland OR resource and are invaluable

www.girlsinc.org

An informative site on a host of topics, programs, and fabulous resources.

www.girlpower.gov

An interactive site for teens as well as their parents that includes adolescent-friendly topics & news

Bradley, S. (2002). Research on relational aggression reduction. Professor Portland State University.
Talbot, M. (2002). Girls just want to be mean. *New York Times Magazine*, February 24, 2002, 24-65.
Wellman, S. (2002). Relational aggression. Retrieved from www.opheliaproject.org on May 1, 2003.