Dealing with Relational Aggression and Children: A Guide for Parents

1) What is relational aggression?

Many people think physical bullying is the only type of bullying that exists. We know now that there are other forms of bullying, such as gossiping, spreading rumors, teasing, ignoring, rejecting or purposefully trying to ruin other people's friendships. All of these acts are known as relational aggression. Studies on child development have shown that this is very common, especially among middle school students. Girls tend to use relational aggression more than boys, but all children are affected.

Unfortunately, this behavior can have lasting effects on all the students involved: victims, bullies and bystanders. Victims of relational aggression can become depressed, anxious, fearful of other people and can even develop eating disorders as a result of being bullied. Both aggressors and victims tend to show signs of low self-esteem. Also, both groups are at risk of early experiences with drugs and alcohol. In extreme cases, suicidal behavior can even be a result. These risks are not worth taking with our children. The good news is, as parents you have the power to help prevent and deal with relational aggression right from home with your own children!

2) How do I know if my child is affected?

The first step to addressing this issue is talk about it with your children. Ask them if this type of behavior is similar to what they see at school; they may not even know how to recognize it as something that should not be happening! If it is, let them know that it is OK to tell an adult about it. Teach them that they have a responsibility to tell someone they trust if they are being bothered by other students. Otherwise, the aggression may go unnoticed and will continue.
Warning Signs

Your child repeatedly talks about suffering from relational aggression. Take it seriously. Not only is it possible that he or she is the victim but he or she may be acting aggressively also.

Your child is friends with someone one week and “hates” them the next week.

Your child talks badly about certain people all the time. This could be a sign that he or she is experiencing relational aggression.

Your child seems depressed or lonely. Relational aggression can trigger depression. Ask questions about his or her friendships to make sure there are no serious problems.

Your child doesn’t want to go to school. This could signal that he or she is trying to avoid a situation there. Again, try to talk with your child about his or her friends to rule out relational aggression.

3) What **should** I do about it?

- Actively listen. Make the home a supportive place where your child gets unconditional love.

- Ask questions to find out the details. Who is doing it, how long has it been going on and if a teacher or other staff member knows about it.

- Talk to your child about switching classrooms or moving his or her seat away from the bully.

- Get your child involved in a new activity that will make him or her feel good. Be sure to choose something in which emphasis isn’t placed on physical appearances.

- Practice role-playing with your child. Give him or her assertiveness skills to stand-up to the bully.
• It's generally not a good idea to call the bully's parents. Parents often
view comments about their children as reflections of their parenting
skills. Plus, it is hard for the approaching parent to hide feelings of
anger towards the bully.

• Use the school’s staff as a resource. Teachers, counselors and
administrators will ideally work with you and your child to address any
situation at school.

• Separate your feelings from your child’s feelings. Make sure you are
responding to your child’s needs. Try not to respond based on your
own experiences in childhood.

• Often times children will not talk with their parents about what is
going on at school. Be sure to be open with your children and talk with
them about relational aggression even before they approach you.

• As a last resort, talk to your child about moving schools. This can be a
huge step but it can also make a world of difference.

4) What shouldn’t I do?

Don’t minimize your child’s feelings by saying that it’s only a phase. Instead,
recognize that it is painful and be empathetic. They will benefit from all the
support you can give them.

Don’t tell your child that you always disliked that friend. He or she must
figure this out on his or her own. In fact, your child is probably hoping to
make amends with the friend in the end, and not get rid of that person
altogether. Girls and boys place a lot of value on relationships and hate to
lose them.

Don’t assume your child is the cause of it. He or she is looking to you for
empathy and protection. Do try to work through the problem with your child
and help find solutions. If you feel he or she could use some help with
developing social skills, talk with the counselor and teachers.
Don’t jump to call the school. Ask your child if he or she feels comfortable with you talking with the teacher. If so, make sure you have the facts together. If you can, get other parents to talk with you.

Don’t trivialize it as “just being a girl” if your daughter is involved. Let her know that there is research to support this type of behavior. Discuss how girls are socialized and how to combat relational aggression.

References


