

Relational Aggression in Girls

What is Relational Aggression (RA)?

Relational aggression is described as any behavior that is intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating relationships with others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Unlike other types of bullying, relational aggression is not as overt, or noticeable as physical aggression. However, the effects can be long lasting.

Studies have shown that males tend to use more physical aggression and victimization than females. Both boys and girls intend to inflict harm but there are differences in how they express these feelings. Females tend to use more covert forms of aggression to express their anger. Many feel that our society places value on girls “being nice” and teaches codes of behavior about what is appropriate. These expectations can lead to finding more discreet ways to express feelings. While boys tend to be more direct and confront others or even get into physical fights, girls tend to avoid direct confrontation and instead tend to talk behind one’s back and spread rumors and try to develop an alliance against the particular person.

In pre and early adolescence, much value is placed on friendships and social connections. Thus, relational aggression is seen as most prevalent in these years. RA has been noted as early preschool age and can continue into adult workplaces. In the past, many of these behaviors were dismissed and seen as “rites of passage” or even normal behavior. However, the harmful effects are being recognized as anything but normal. In fact, the National Education Association reports that as many as 160,000 kids miss school every day out of fear of being victimized by such behaviors.

Research shows that students who have been the targets of RA have increased depression, lower self-esteem, lower GPA, increased anxiety and sadness, more anger, eating disorders and loneliness. Students who tend to be relationally aggressive have been shown to become increasingly more depressed, rejected, and withdrawn.

Types of RA

There are two types of relational aggression: Proactive and reactive. Proactive relational aggression is when behaviors are a means for achieving a goal. For example, one girl may need to exclude another girl from her group in order to maintain her own social status. Reactive relational aggression is behavior that is in response to provocation, with the intent to retaliate. For example, a girl gets teased in the hallways repeatedly and she may become a teaser in order to protect herself from teasing.

Methods & Motivation

While relational aggression can take many forms, some of the methods include:

- Cyber bullying
- Ignoring
- Malicious gossip and rumor spreading
- Taunts and insults
- Teasing
- Intimidation
- Manipulative affection
- Alliance building

Motivation for relational aggression can vary as widely as the methods. However, most motivation includes:

- Fear
- Power
- Control
- Popularity
- Security

Tips for Parents

- Involve girls in activities outside of school so they are exposed to different types of people
- Encourage relationships with adults and other children who appreciate them for who they are
- Be available to listen and do not downplay the importance of an incident
- Teach kindness and model that behavior
- Talk about both sides of an issue. Realize girls may tell you about being a victim but not talk about being the aggressor
- If your daughter is caught in the middle, encourage her to take the high road and support the victim, or at least not take part in the aggression
- Encourage activities that allow your daughter to feel confident and competent, thus helping build self-esteem

- Become computer savvy.
- Do not allow your child to have a computer in their room or other isolated area. If they have laptops, set guidelines for where they can use it and the length of time they can use it.
- Be aware of the online activities of your child
- Research filtering and parental control programs for your computer

This information was developed based on information from a workshop presented by YouthLight, Inc., entitled: Mean Girls—Working with Relational Aggression.

Further resources on RA:

Websites:

www.opheliaproject.org
www.relationalaggression.com
www.cyberbullying.ca
www.daughters-sisters.org
www.smartgirl.com
www.powerofhome.org

Books:

Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls. Rachel Simmons

Queen Bees & Wannabees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence. Rosalind Wiseman

Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls. Mary Pipher

Our Last Best Shot: Guiding Our Children Through Early Adolescence. Laura Sessions Stepp