

Relational Aggression:

What It Looks Like, What the Effects Are, and Programs to Help Stop It.

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Abstract

Relational aggression is a non-physical approach to bullying that can include behaviors, such as spreading rumors, social isolation, gossip, silent treatment, and humiliation. This paper explores the different segments of the definition of relational aggression, including: relational aggression versus social aggression, reactive relational aggression versus instrumental relational aggression, and sociometric popularity versus perceived popularity. Relational aggression is typically linked to middle and high school females; however research shows that these behaviors can begin as early as preschool and can affect the male population (Phillips, 2007; Young et al., 2011). Most students see or participate in relational aggression at some point in their lives and may go unharmed; this paper examines the serious consequences of long-term relational aggression on both the victim and the aggressor. The impact that technology is having on relational aggression is also explored. Finally, this paper looks at three programs available to address relational aggression within groups of adolescents, as well as entire schools. These programs work to prevent and stop relational aggression among youth.

Keywords: relational aggression, social aggression, covert bullying, verbal aggression, indirect aggression, cyber-bullying

Relational Aggression

Relational aggression, sometimes referred to as covert bullying, or social aggression, involves purposefully harming others through interpersonal relationships (Shoulberg, Sijtsema, & Murray-Close, 2011; Whitson, 2012; Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton, & Young, 2009). These behaviors can include, but are not limited to, social exclusion, humiliation, accusations, gossip, spreading rumors, and the silent treatment (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009; Field, Kolbert, Crothers, & Hughes, 2009). This is not to be confused with physical aggression and violence, which is more easily spotted and addressed. Arnold and Rockinson-Szapkiw reported “that up to three-fourths of adolescents have been bullied... [using tactics, such as] name-calling or gossip, with up to one-third revealing more violent and invasive forms of bullying, such as inappropriate contact or violence” (2012). These numbers are startling and show that both forms of aggression are of concern; however, there are a much higher number of students falling victim to relational aggression, which many times goes unnoticed by adults.

This paper will inform you about the many facets of relational aggression, as well as answer questions about its definition, what population is affected by it, and information on how technology has impacted this type of aggression. The lasting effects of relational aggression will also be explored. Lastly, there will be a discussion of ideas that counselors, educators, and school administrators can use to prevent or stop relational aggression among young people.

Relational Aggression

In the book, *Understanding Girl Bullying and What to Do About It: Strategies to Help Heal the Divide* the authors point out that some researchers define relational aggression and social aggression differently. They describe relational aggression as “behaviors that intend to

harm a person's friendships or feelings of belonging in a particular peer group" (Field et al., 2009, p. 9). They compared this to the definition some researchers have given social aggression: "those behaviors that seek to harm a person's social status through attacking her social or sexual reputation" (Field et al, 2009, p. 10). The primary difference noted is that relational aggression is done between friends, whereas social aggression occurs within a larger social community (Field et al., 2009). Since there is not a consensus among researchers, this paper will use relational aggression and social aggression interchangeably.

Other researchers separate relational aggression into two categories: reactive relational aggression and instrumental relational aggression. Reactive relational aggression is done as a response to a feeling or event. For example, a student who spreads a rumor in response to feeling threatened is using reactive relational aggression to retaliate. Instrumental relational aggression is used, instead, when a relationship is being manipulated to gain something. For example, a student may threaten a peer by saying, "You will not be invited to the party, unless you follow my directions" (Young, et al. 2011).

Relational aggression was first defined, in 1969, by Feshbach, who created the term to separate indirect aggression from direct physical aggression. It did not gain much media attention until the early 2000's. The topic of relational aggression and bullying exploded on bookshelves, television shows, and movies following the Columbine High School killings in 1999 (Phillips, 2007). Several popular books were released focusing on social aggression, including Simmons's "Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls" (2002) and Wiseman's "Queenbees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the Realities of Adolescence" (2002) (Field et al., 2009). Before the media attention, relational aggression was

looked at as either a phase an adolescent was going through or “girls beings girls” (Young, 2009). The behaviors were not viewed as damaging and were often overlooked.

Affected Populations

Although, movies, like "Mean Girls," and television shows, like "Gossip Girl," lead us to believe only females participate in relational aggression, males do as well. (Currie et al., 2009).

Debby Phillips is a leading researcher of “punking.” Punking includes both physical and verbal violence, as well as acts of shaming and humiliation, typically done by males to males (Phillips, 2007). The primary difference between relational aggression and punking is that punking is a combination of physical and relational aggression, and it is also done publicly. Girls primarily use relational aggression, instead of having physical contact, and do so in a subtle manner.

Females also tend to report being hurt by covert bullying more so than their male peers (Leadbeater, 2010)

Media leads us to believe that relational aggression begins when girls enter middle school or high school. The reality is young children participate in social aggression every day. They are just not as skilled. Preschoolers are limited by their language and cognitive development, so they are unable to be as secretive as older students. Typically, young children are obvious when using social aggression. For example, preschoolers may tell a peer that they do not want to play with them and the issue will be addressed by the teacher; however, this quickly changes. As students mature, they use more advanced strategies to cause harm to their peers and adult involvement decreases (Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton, & Young, 2011).

Social Status & Relational Aggression

In Wiseman's groundbreaking book, "Queen Bees and Wannabes," she explained how relational aggression is paired with social status. After listening to adolescent girls share their stories for over a decade, Wiseman named the roles commonly found in girl cliques. Each teenager plays a part in the social hierarchy, whether that is a *queen bee*, who is at the top of social ladder; the *target*, who is the victim; or somewhere in between. Wiseman discovered that these positions are not stable, especially in middle school, which makes all girls vulnerable to relational aggression (2002).

Researchers have begun to notice two distinct forms of social status, in relation to peers. There is sociometric popularity which is the measure of likability (Shoulberg et al, 2011). Wiseman called girls with high levels of likability, or sociometric popularity, *floaters* (2002, p. 31). The second type of social status is called perceived popularity. This type of status is linked to who is viewed as cool or socially significant within the group (Shoulberg et al, 2011). The concept of perceived popularity goes along with Wiseman's belief that a girl's social status can change, as well as the importance of perception (2002). The divide between the two types of social status begins in elementary school, but clearly peaks during middle school (Peters, Cillessen, Riksen-Walraven, & Haselager, 2010). The research also shows that perceived popularity is the type of social status linked to relational aggression (Shoulberg et al, 2011).

Some girls have a strong desire to increase their social status. Wiseman called these girls *wannabes*. She believes that "almost all girls are pleasers and wannabes; some are just more obvious than others" (2002, p. 33). Shoulbert et al. noticed that these girls, or wannabes, tend to use relational aggression in hopes of being noticed by the popular crowd. They also are victims

of this same aggression from the popular students. Unfortunately, girls, who are wannabes, typically do not have close friendships to offer social support (2011).

Technology's Influence on Relational Aggression

As technology has increased in availability, students have begun using it as a weapon against their peers. Relational aggression in schools is difficult to spot, but it is even easier for adolescents to attack behind the screen of a computer or cell phone without adults noticing. This extension of aggression on the internet is called "cyber-bullying." Most studies have found a positive correlation between cyber-bullying and traditional bullying, including relational aggression (Wang, Iannotti, and Luk, 2012).

Girls are using electronic media at an increasing rate to spread rumors and socially exclude their classmates (Burton, 2010). Using online communication seems to empower girls to be even harsher than they would be at school or in a face-to-face situation. Young females use more of a direct approach via the computer or cell phone by focusing on "gossip, criticisms of appearance, attacks on sexuality, declarations of disloyalty, and statements about desiring physical violence;" however, at school, these same students have a subtler approach to relational aggression (Burton, 2010).

In addition to using more severe words and actions, online communication allows for possible anonymity. In fact, thirty-three to forty-eight percent of cyber-bully victims cannot identify their online aggressor (Arnold et al, 2012). Being anonymous makes it easier for adolescents to engage in reactive relational aggression (Young et al, 2009). For example, a student, who was excluded in school, can spread a false rumor online without the backlash of her peers, since she can remain anonymous.

It should be noted, that technology can have a negative impact on some student's social status. Not all students have internet access at home or have a personal cell phone. These cause limitations to when they find out social information. This is especially true for students who attend a school where IM, or instant messaging, is a popular form of communication outside of the school day. In the book, "Girl Wide Web" one student shared that people without technology are not purposefully excluded; however, it is hard for them to quickly acquire the online gossip from the night before. Hence, they slowly get pushed from the in-crowd (Mazzarella, 2008, p. 194).

Effects of Relational Aggression

Victim

To some adults, relational aggression looks like girl drama and is overlooked. Unfortunately, victims of relational aggression can suffer from lasting, painful consequences, as a result of long-term bullying behaviors. Social aggression is difficult for girls to escape, since it is so closely linked with friendships, cliques, and peer groups. Because of this, a teen who is experiencing relational aggression may feel high levels of stress, as well as depression, loneliness, and low self-worth. Victims of relational aggression are at a higher risk for early pregnancy and self-inflicted harm, as well (Arnold et al., 2012; Young et al., 2011).

If the aggressor is close to the victim, the impact can have even greater implications. The victim may have a difficult time with friendships and these relationships tend to involve more undesirable aspects, like fighting and exclusivity. Adolescents who have experienced relational aggression may shy away from social situations, due to an increase in nervousness or fear. They are also less likely to initiate peer interactions, compared to students who have not been a target

of relational aggression. More severe implications of relational aggression involve “psychological distress, difficulties with self-control, and acting out behaviors” (Young et al., 2011).

Aggressors

Since relational aggression tends to be cyclical, many victims are also aggressors or vice versa. Teens who act as the aggressor can experience similar consequences as their victims. They may feel a sense of depression or loneliness. They tend to have unfulfilling peer relationships, and are at times rejected by their friends. Overall, perpetrators of relational aggression tend to have a poorer quality of life. Researchers have also discovered that students who use relational aggression typically have low impulse control, as well as partake in disruptive behaviors (Young et al., 2011).

Response to Relational Aggression in Schools

Seventy-nine percent of bullying takes place within the school walls. This means, that all teachers, administrators, counselors, and staff of a school need to be aware of the varying types of aggression or bullying. Unfortunately, relational aggression is often overlooked since it does not have a large impact on the total learning environment. That is not true for the victim; however, who may have a difficult time learning in an environment that feels unsafe (Winslade & Williams, 2012).

Whitson suggests setting up a supportive network, for girls, that encourages an open dialogue about what a real friendship looks like in early elementary school. She believes that by providing young students the opportunity to practice skills addressing conflict, as well as anger,

will prepare them for the relationship challenges that are common in middle and high school (2012).

Young et al. take a different approach to relational aggression (2011). This team of researchers believes that there should be a three-level strategy, within the schools, to prevent and stop relational aggression (Young et al., 2011). This format is similar to the response to intervention (RTI) approach, which is used in many school systems. Young et al.'s strategy may be a good choice for schools that already have an RTI program in place, since administrators, counselors, and staff members are familiar with a tiered response and prevention format.

The first, or primary level, of this strategy can be used with all students through individual, partner, and group work. The individual student would complete exercises that encourage the expression of feelings, as well as increasing self-worth, self-respect, and self-confidence. In the pair and group work, students would focus on gaining cooperation skills, learning to accept others, and show kindness, among other skills. The second tier, or level, focuses on individuals or groups of students that need more help building the skills discussed in the first level. These activities involve "developing students' empathy, perspective-taking, emotion regulation, anger management skills, social problem solving, and assertiveness" (Young et al., 2011). Counselors give students support as they transfer the skills learned in the small group at school to their relationships in and outside of school. This level takes a more personal approach and focuses on the family and sibling relationships, as well. The third level of Young et al.'s strategy focuses on students, who are involved or at a greater risk for taking part in relational aggression, either as a victim or perpetrator. Typically, these groups are focused on females. A safe environment is created to teach students about relational aggression, the effects it

has on everyone involved, relationship skills, and possible behaviors to use instead of aggression, as well as ways to integrate the lessons into their lives and friendships (Young et al., 2011).

Another variation on handling relational aggression and bullying, in general, is from Winslade and Williams's book, "Safe and Peaceful Schools." The authors suggest taking a "no blame" approach and, instead, use a narrative performance method. Their overall belief is "The person is not the problem; the problem is the problem" (Winslade et al., 2012, p. 128). This approach invites six to eight students to take part in an undercover anti-bullying team. The team should consist of two students, who are aggressors, and four or five students that the class respects. The victim, as well as the counselor and teacher, help select the undercover team. The school counselor shares the anonymous victim's story about being targeted, as well as the effects that relational aggression has had on the victim. The selected students are then invited to join the secret undercover anti-bullying team. The counselor will stress the importance of keeping the team a secret, as well as explaining the mission of the team (Winslade et al., 2012).

The team's goal is to stop the aggression from taking place. Being on the team simply involves helping the victim, whose name is now revealed, get through this tough time. The team is encouraged to help by being friendly or kind to the victim, but they are not asked to befriend the target. The team then develops a plan to stop the aggression, towards that student, and brainstorm ideas to effectively act on the plan in a secretive manner. The students, on the team, are also given an incentive to work towards, like a coupon for an ice cream in the cafeteria, as well as an award from the principal. These rewards are only given if the mission of the undercover team is successful and remains a secret. As the team works on ending the relational aggression, the counselor checks in with both the victim and the team members. Only the target of the aggression is able to decide when the bullying has completely stopped. Once the victim

decides that he/she is no longer being targeted with relational aggression, the counselor has the team meet to receive their certificates, as well as create a long term plan (Winslade et al., 2012).

This program, which was briefly summarized, was carefully designed based on Vygotsky's theory of the "zone of proximal development." With the support of the counselor and the classroom teacher, students are able to try out new, more safe, ways to interact with peers. They also learn the effects of bullying behaviors, like relational aggression, and ways to prevent or stop them among their classmates (Winslade et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Relational aggression, a more subtle approach to bullying, is taking place every day. Research has shown that this type of aggression starts at a very young age and continues through high school, and beyond. Studies have also acknowledged that relational aggression is not just taking place in girl's personal lives, but males can also be victims or perpetrators too. The implications of relational aggression can be quite serious and need to be addressed.

With programs, like the ones presented in this article, as well as others available, the seriousness of relational aggression is being addressed; however, there is still a great need for adults to be more aware of relational aggression among adolescents. This is especially true since most victims will not tell an adult about their peers' behaviors (Arnold et al., 2012; Leadbeater, 2010; Winslade et al., 2012). There is also a need for more research based program that focus on the male population. Many of the programs available focus on female peer interactions. Overall, all school staff members need to be better equipped to acknowledge and handle relational aggression. Schools need to be a safe environment, not a stage for relational aggression.

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