

Mean Girls- Realities of Relational Aggression

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

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.

Who is affected?

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.



In pre and early adolescence, much value is placed on friendships and social connections. Thus, relational aggression is seen as peaking 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 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 Students who tend to be relationally aggressive have been shown to become increasingly more depressed, rejected, withdrawn and delinquent.

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, Sarah may need to exclude Cindy 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, Sam gets teased in the hallways repeatedly and he may become a teaser in order to protect himself from teasing.

Methods & Motivation

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

Exclusion

Ignoring

Malicious gossip and spreading rumors

Manipulative affection

Taunts and insults

Intimidation

Cyberbullying

Alliance building

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

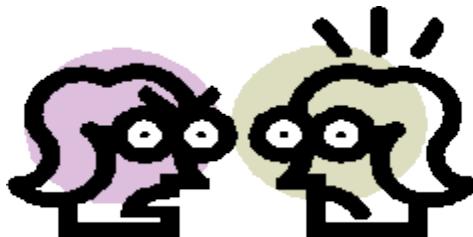
Fear

Power

Control

Popularity

Security



Roles

Adolescent social structures can be very complex and sophisticated. Within the hierarchy of relationships, some roles have been identified as being prevalent in most group situations. While the names may be different, the roles are the same. Within the group, roles and positions are not static, they can change frequently. The roles are: Queen, Sidekick, Gossip, Floater, Torn Bystander, Wannabee and Target.

The Queen



- Her friends do what she wants
- She's not intimidated by other girls
- She can be charming to adults---a female Eddie Haskell
- She's manipulatively affectionate
- She won't take responsibility for hurting another's feelings
- Defines right and wrong by the loyalty or disloyalty around her

The Queen loses her sense of self by working so hard to maintain her image. Sometimes, she can be extremely cynical about others, feeling they don't really like her but are using her popularity. The Queen believes her image is dependent on her relationships and she gives the impression that she has everything under control.

The Sidekick



- Feels the Queen is the authority---tells her how to dress, think, feel, etc.
- Allows herself to be pushed around by the Queen
- Will lie for Queen

The Sidekick rarely expresses her personal opinions. Her power depends on the confidence she gains from the Queen. The sidekick and the Queen may seem very similar; however, the sidekick can alter her behavior for the better, while the Queen would likely just find another sidekick and begin again.

The Gossip

- Extremely secretive
- Seems to be friends with everyone
- Good communicator---gives the impression of listening and being trustworthy
- Seemingly nice, but uses confidential information to improve her position
- Seems harmless, but in truth is intimidating
- Rarely excluded from the group

The gossip tends to get girls to trust her because when she gets information, it doesn't seem like gossip. She gets girls to confide in her and then may casually mention information in a conversation. Once girls figure out what she's doing, they don't trust her.



The Floater

- Moves freely among groups
- Doesn't want to exclude people
- Avoids conflicts
- More likely to have higher self esteem, as her sense of self isn't based on one group
- Not competitive

The floater usually has some protective characteristics that help her to avoid other's cruelty. She may be pretty, but not too pretty, nice, but not too sophisticated. People genuinely like the floater. She may actually stand up to the Queen and she may have some of the same power as the Queen. However, the floater doesn't gain anything by creating conflict and insecurity as the Queen does.

Bystander

- Often finds herself having to choose between friends
- Accommodating
- Peacemaker---wants everyone to get along
- Doesn't stand up to anyone she has conflict with--goes along to get along

The bystander may be conflicted with doing the right thing and her allegiance to the group. She often apologizes for Queen's behavior, but she knows it is wrong. The bystander may miss out on activities because she's afraid her friends will make fun of her. She may even hide her accomplishments, particularly academically, to fit into the group.



The Wannabee

- Other girls' opinions and wants are more important than hers
- She can't tell the difference between what she wants and what the group wants
- Desperate for the "right" look (clothes, hair, etc.).
- Feels better about herself when others come to her for help, advice
- Loves to gossip---phone and email are vital to her

The wannabee will do anything to be in the inner circle of the Queen and sidekick. She may enthusiastically support them no matter what and she's motivated by pleasing the person who is above her in the social totem pole. The wannabee often gets stuck doing the dirty work of the Queen and sidekick. She may be dropped if she is seen as trying too hard to fit in. For the wannabee, she hasn't figured out who she is or what she values. She likely feels insecure about her relationships and has trouble setting boundaries.

The Target



- Helpless to stop other girls' behavior
- Feels excluded and isolated
- Masks hurt feelings by rejecting people first
- Feels vulnerable and humiliated and may be tempted to change to fit in

The target is the victim of the group. Girls outside the group may tend to become targets just because they've challenged the group or because their style is different or not accepted by the group.

The target may develop objectivity, which may help her see the costs of fitting in and decide she's better off outside of the group. She may choose her "loser" group, and know who her true friends are.

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 don't downplay the importance of an incident.
- Teach kindness and model that behavior.
- Talk about both sides of an issue. Girls may tell you about being a target but not talk about being the aggressor themselves.
- If your daughter is caught in the middle, encourage her to take the high road and support the victim, not be a bystander, and not take part in the aggression.
- If necessary, seek professional counseling.
- Become computer savvy.
- Set guidelines for computer use- where they can use it and the length of time they can use it.
- Be aware of their online activities- research filtering and parental control programs for your computer.

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