

Relational Aggression: An Overview of the Complicated Behaviors of Girls

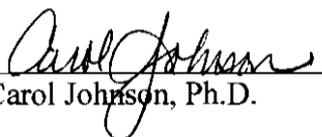
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ABSTRACT

Relational Aggression (RA) is a problematic behavior girls use to sabotage the friendships and relationships of others to their own benefit. By spreading rumors, gossiping, name calling, and excluding others from friendship circles, the mean girls use their power over others. When harming others, the bullies see this as enhancing their status in the clique. This type of bullying is very common in both middle school and high school, and although it is common, it is not a normal right-of-passage that all girls must experience. Relational Aggression may be discrete and difficult to detect. Warning signs include victims who miss school, avoid joining extracurricular activities or have few trusted friends. Without intervention, some girls choose suicide as an option to escape the trauma of being bullied. School counselors can serve as leaders in implementing bully-proof programs and then offer coping strategies to help with the emotional stress of relational aggression.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Relational aggression is a form of bullying, and is recognized as a complex behavior both males and females use when they want to intentionally harm another person by damaging their reputation through spreading rumors, gossiping, and calling hurtful names. This type of aggression may also involve exclusion from certain social groups and friendship circles, and is designed to hurt the feelings and break down the self-esteem of the victim while sabotaging meaningful friendships. According to Merrell, Buchanan and Tran (2006) “Relational aggression consists of manipulating relationships to exert control over another child, or harming another child by damaging his or her friendships.” (p. 346).

In the years that relational aggression has been studied, there have been many discussions regarding which gender most frequently uses behaviors of relational aggression. Researchers wondered whether girls are more likely to be both the victim and perpetrators of relational aggression with higher frequency than boys.

According to Merrell, Buchanan and Tran (2006) “Girls view relational aggression and physical aggression as equally hurtful, while boys view physical aggression as more hurtful.” (p. 347). The researchers further found when comparing the two genders regarding use of aggression, it has been reported that girls are more likely to use discrete relationship aggression than males, and boys tend to be more physically aggressive compared to females.

Although few, there are some studies on male social behaviors resulting in aggressive relationship-sabotaging among boys. More recent studies continue to support that boys exhibit more physical aggression behaviors than girls. Hennington (1998) found

that “second-grade boys are rated by peers as more relationally and physically aggressive than girls” (cited in Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006, p. 348). In the same study, it was also determined that preschool boys were perceived to be more relationally aggressive than preschool girls. Younger males seemed to use relationship aggression until they were older and more physically developed, then switched to more physically aggressive behavior. Another interesting concept from the Henington (1998) study was boys are perceived to be more aggressive in general than girls, and it is generally more socially acceptable for boys to exhibit some aggressive behaviors.

Although research has been presented regarding the differences between male and females use of relational aggression, other research documented similarities among boys and girls regarding rates of relational aggression. Crick, Bigbee and Howes (cited in Merrell, et.al. 2006), found that relational aggression among girls and boys from grades three through six was a “normative occurrence of behavior” (p. 348). In summary, both boys and girls used and received relationship aggression during their early developmental stages.

While it is important to understand gender differences and whether boys and girls experience relational aggression at similar rates, it is also necessary to distinguish the psycho-social adjustment in children and explore the connection with physical aggression. Crick and Grotpeter (cited in Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006) discussed the psycho-social adjustment of physically aggressive children, finding that aggressive children are more likely to be disliked, socially maladjusted, and were more likely to be rejected by peers. In contrast to children who lack social status, those who are popular,

well-liked and respected were less likely to use physical aggression and were more likely to use relationally aggressive behavior (Merrell, et.al. 2006).

In distinguishing certain characteristics of socially aggressive children, another essential aspect of the effectiveness of aggression is social status. Having power over others increases as the student's social status increases. According to Merrell, Buchanan, and Tran (2006), "A certain social status is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of relational aggression. Thus, those with increasing levels of social status can use discrete relational aggression more effectively." (p. 349).

Understanding characteristics of relational aggression from the bully's perspective is important but it is also helpful to understand how psycho-social adjustment experienced by the victim of relational aggression experiences. Owens, Slee, and Shut (cited in Merrell, et.al. 2006) conducted a study of 15 year-old girls from Australia who were impacted by relational aggression.

In the Owens, Slee and Shut study findings indicated that "relationally aggressive behaviors can lead to both physical aggression, and a cycle where girls are both the victim and perpetrator of relational aggression." (p. 349). They further explain that once the victim discovers that she is being excluded, gossiped about or upon hearing rumors, her first reaction is confusion, denying, and covering up the aggressive act. From the hurt caused by the bully-perpetrator, the victim may eventually feel self-doubt and loss of confidence. "As a victim of relational aggression, she may also experience rejection or paranoia and often will experience this in their future relationships" (Owens, Slee & Shute, cited in Merrell, et.al. 2006, p. 349). The anxiety felt by the victim may result in a

desire to leave school, or transfer to another district, or in severe cases may result in a suicide attempt.

In *Myths and Facts about Bullying in School*, (Juvonen, 2005) the author clarifies facts and explains myths regarding bullies in schools. The first myth is bullies suffer from low self-esteem and that is why they tend to target another person. This popular myth is false according to Juvonen (2005), as bullies tend to perceive themselves as better than other kids in a skewed misperception. “Recent evidence shows that bullies are less depressed, socially anxious, and are lonelier than socially adjusted youth who are uninvolved in bullying.” (Juvonen 2005, p. 36)

Another myth about bullies is that they are social outcasts. Juvonen suggested that bullies tend to be part of the more popular crowd in a school setting. “In our research on middle-school students, we found that classmates rate bullies among the ‘coolest kids’ in their classes” (Juvonen, 2005, p. 37). They are likely to have many friends; however, these friends may be classmates who are also aggressive. This in turn gives the bully some reinforcement when behaving either physically aggressive or relationally aggressive toward another person

When discussing relational aggression, it is noteworthy to understand how victims are targeted by their peers. Research by Owens, Slee, and Shute (cited in Merrell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006) identified two types of victims who are vulnerable to relational aggression. The first type of victim is one who is at fault, meaning that girls who have done something to provoke another girl, “... being annoying, or actually starting the conflict” (cited in Merrell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006, p. 349), whereas the other type of

victim is considered to be the vulnerable victim, often fitting the description of new student, perceived as the outsider with few or no friends yet.

It is important to note that Juvonen (2005) found most victims suffer in silence rather than retaliate. According to *Relational Aggression: More than Just Mean Girls* “Students who have been targets of RA (Relational Aggression) have increased depression, lower grade point average, increased anxiety and sadness, more anger, eating disorders and loneliness.” However, when the victim’s patience wears thin, when bullied repeatedly, victims may become very violent. When a victim feels helpless, has reported the incidence, and was ignored, they often consider ways to retaliate against the bully and the bystanders who did not speak up for them. In extreme cases such as school shootings, victims can do more harm to their tormentor and other classmates as a result of unresolved bullying.

According to research by Juvenon, (2005) there are two different types of victims receiving the brunt of bullying. There are the submissive victims and the aggressive victims. Submissive victims may have depression, social anxiety, and low self-esteem. Because victims view the main cause of being bullied as self-perpetuated, whether they are obese or they are of a different culture, victims tend to feel more distressed by the bullying, and may withdraw from class, and from friendships. Feeling unworthy and unappreciated, attending school becomes a daily challenge for the submissive victim.

Aggressive victims, which are characteristically a smaller group of targeted victims, will more likely retaliate or provoke hostility. These victims are willing to stand up for themselves and others and are willing to throw the first punch. Bullies seem to

know how to push their buttons and aggravate them to the point of violence. According to Juvonen (2005),

“Aggressive victims display a distinct profile of social-emotional and school related difficulties (they are extremely rejected by classmates and display academic problems) indicative of other underlying problems, such as emotion regulation problems typical of children who have attention deficit disorder” (p. 37).

The final myth suggests that bullying is just a natural part of growing up and it builds character and thick skin. Some parents take the stance, “boys will be boys.” It is imperative that school personnel and parents understand that bullying is not just a part of growing up. According to research by Juvonen (2005), the impact of being bullied increases vulnerability of the child, thus passive and socially withdrawn kids are unfortunately at a higher risk of being bullied. This may create a cycle as after youth were bullied they become even more socially withdrawn, becoming an even more tempting target for bullies.

Relational aggression can be difficult for an outsider to observe because it is discrete. A roll of the eyes, a heavy sigh, a snub in the hallway, or exclusion at the lunch table; are all subtle examples of discrete girl bullying. Hurtful graffiti on the bathroom walls, text messages, and spreading rumors and lies can destroy a girl’s reputation. These too are examples of relational aggression among girls. It is important to understand that this behavior can be a dangerous problem for young girls. School counselors need to have awareness of discrete aggressive tactics and develop strategies to help girls cope with the emotional stress of relational aggression.

### *Statement of the Problem*

For school counselors it is important to understand human behavior and social development of young children and teenagers. Relational aggression is a common form of bullying among children and teenagers, and research has shown that “While boys and girls experience relational aggression, the negative effects may be more pronounced for girls” (Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006, p. 349). Girl bullies attack their victims through what girls value most, their friendships (*In The Know Zone*, 2005). Therefore, the problem becomes what can school counselors do to create safe environments that promote mutual respect and acceptance for all?

### *Research Questions*

This literature review will address the following research questions:

1. What is relational aggression, where do girls learn this aggressive behavior, and why are certain girls targeted?
2. What are the emotional responses felt by the victims when they are targets of relational aggression?
3. How can school counselors promote healthy female friendships with adolescent girls?

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to review a variety of literature about relational aggression among adolescent females. Understanding relational aggression and its impact on girls is important for school counselors to know. Why girls use aggression, how it can be prevented, and how school counselors can promote healthy relationships among adolescent girls will be addressed. This research may help school counselors when

working with middle school and high school students by offering suggestions for coping skills, effective communication, and effective resiliency skills to counter-act relational aggression.

Determining reasons for relational aggression, suggesting positive interventions, and developing social skills to help students communicate with their peers while learning resiliency from the hurt that accompanies relational aggression are the goals of this literature review.

#### *Assumptions and Limitations of the Study*

It is assumed that relationships for adolescent girls are highly emotional and appreciated. There is a need to ensure healthy relationships in young girls' life, due to the backstabbing, gossiping and fear of confrontation that girls experience with their friends. It is assumed that girls use relational aggression more frequently than boys do, especially in middle school and high school. Both boys and girls can be socially manipulative, however, since girls tend to value their social relationships more than adolescent boys, it is more likely that a young girl would be the victim of her friends relational aggression, and may have more severe emotional consequences than boys experience. Limitations further include the study of relational aggression only between girls because the research indicates "RA is more common in girls than boys." A final limitation is that the review will pertain to Relational Aggression in during the school years and not in the workforce. Literature was reviewed during the fall of 2008.

### *Definition of Terms*

*Relational Aggression-* psychological (social/emotional) aggression between people in relationships using lies, secrets, betrayals and other dishonest tactics to destroy or damage relationships and social standing of others in the group. (Wikipedia, 2007).

*Resiliency-* a dynamic process where individuals exhibit positive behavioral adaptation when encountering significant adversity or trauma (Luther, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

*Highly Aggressive Victim-* hot tempered, restless, and disruptive, they create tension and irritability in others and they are likely to fight back. (Lawrence & Adams, 2006)

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

This chapter will include analysis of behavior, and issues related to Relational Aggression (RA) among female adolescents. Perceptions regarding both the victim and the bully will be presented along with reasons why girls use relational aggression toward each other. Prevention programs that schools can use to promote healthy friendships, and what school counselors can do to help a bully and a victim will also be summarized in chapter.

“Asked to respond quickly, many of us would have trouble remembering what we had for dinner last Wednesday, what clothes we wore Monday, or what the weather was like three days ago. Asked to recount one incident from our childhood when a friend hurt our feelings, however, and we can describe the most minute detail---from a raised eyebrow to the actual inflection in the person’s voice. Despite the old adage about sticks and stones breaking our bones, it is actually the words that break our hearts and leave scars long beyond when our bones have healed up quite nicely” (Relational Aggression in Children, American Camp Association, 2008).

### *Understanding Relational Aggression*

Relational Aggression (RA) encompasses behaviors that harm others by damaging, or threatening to damage, one’s relationship with his or her peers. It includes spreading rumors, gossip or lies, or telling others not to play with a certain other child as a means of retaliation and purposefully ignoring someone when angry (Relational Aggression in Children, 2008). Relational aggression often includes: “exclusion,

withholding friendships, ignoring others, spreading rumors, gossiping, and eliciting peer rejection of another child” (Conway, p.334, 2005).

“It is where, beneath a chorus of voices, one girl glares at another, then smiles silently at her friend. The next day a ringleader passes around a secret petition asking girls to outline the reasons they hate the targeted girl. The day after that, the outcast sits silently next to the boys in class, head lowered, shoulders slumped forward; the damage is neat and quiet, the perpetrator and victim invisible.” (*Odd Girl Out*, 2005, p. 4)

### *Popularity and Cliques*

Working as a school counselor, school administrator, or a teacher, it is often easy to identify a child’s circle of friends. Depending on developmental level of females, friendship can either form with “Do you want to be my best friend?”, in the first grade to “That is a cool shirt, where did you get it?”, in the middle school, to “Do you want to go shopping with me this weekend?,” in the high school years.

No matter how a friendship begins, emotional ties that are developed in friendship run deep. It is rewarding for a young girl to know that she not only belongs to a group but that she is also accepted by them as well. Belonging to a clique can be very important in young girl’s social life, because this not only allows her to feel involved and included by their school peers but it can make learning and attending in school an enjoyable experience.

However, depending on the group dynamic of the clique, friendship can also be a major source of stress for the girls. In the book, *Odd Girl Out*, author Rachel Simmons (2002), visited schools to research the political-social structure of friendships between

adolescent girls. She conducted interviews asking girls either individually or in groups about their stories of betrayed friendship, and the social politics that are present in the life of adolescent girls. Simmons (2002) addressed the issue of being “popular” and the political aspects it entails. From interviews she had with teenage girls, Simmons learned,

“Some girls can’t become popular unless they pay for it. Call it a dowry or hazing, a cover charge, or a sacrificial offering of loyalty: however you look at it, sometimes a girl has to squash a friend to rise above the mortals,”

(Simons, 2002, p.165).

While many girls dream of being part of the “popular” crowd, what they see is unfortunately not always what they get. To many adolescent girls it may seem like being part of clique will make their social life easier and more fun, unfortunately it may also present a lot of ups and downs and twists and turns along with a hidden agenda. Having interviewed girls from ages 10-25, Simmons (2002) found girls had very similar anxieties and experiences about being popular.

In a statement from a 10 year-old girl who demonstrated maturity and wisdom in understanding the maladaptive dynamics of a popular crowd, and how it can implode, she describes the fifth grade as being a mine-field; always watching how she dressed and what she said, because if “you do one stupid thing, people will never forget that. Then they could know you could not ever be a cool person. If you change, they don’t realize it because they think of that stupid thing you did before,” (Simmons, 2002, p. 170).

According to Simmons (2002), being in a popular group of friends, is not always a blissful and secure place that girls believe it to be. As an outsider looking at a group of popular girls, a young girl would observe perfectly content, attractive, and fun girls who

seem to be loyal to each other; however, the real story not witnessed is the anxiety and stress those girls experience each day because of the competitive nature of the group.

Another girl described being part of a popular social clique, “Everything changes in there. You compete with those five people every day. Who does things first? Who looks the best? It’s hard and competitive.” (Simmons, 2002, p. 176). Being part of a popular crowd is about competition. The perceived popularity of peers and the overt relational aggression indicates a pattern that “if relational aggression leads to perceived popularity for girls, then perceived popularity may lead to even greater relational aggression among girls as they attempt to enhance their status further,” (Rose, Swenson & Waller, 2004, p. 385). Thus the cycle continues. More popular girls use their power to bully and hurt others raising them higher in the social status at the expense of those they crush.

#### *Negative Impact of Cliques*

Hallinan’s and Smith’s (1989) research found that there is an impact on a student’s academic and social development as a result of being involved in a clique. The impact was influencing the girl’s attitudes towards school, socializing with or excluding other school peers, and changing the way they perceive themselves. Eventually the clique may influence each other so much that the girls in the clique change themselves to be more like one another. No one wants to stand out or stand alone.

Another negative impact of being a member of clique that Hallinan and Smith (1989) found was the importance of belonging to a popular group, and how it may negatively impact the girl’s social development. While it is no surprise that being publicly recognized as part of a clique is socially attractive to others, peers who are not

involved with certain cliques are viewed as less attractive. "Since popularity is of considerable importance to youth, exclusion from a clique is likely to damage students' self-confidence, and have a negative effect on their self-image" (Hallinan and Smith, 1989, p. 899).

They would say things behind my back so that I could hear them. Things like "She's such a bitch," and "she's a slut." I would go to school and I wouldn't say a word to anyone all day. One day at the end of January I sat down at the lunch table with Teresa, Sarah, Jenny, and some other popular girls who were sophomores and juniors. They all got up and left, so I was left sitting there all by myself. Not one girl in my class would have anything to do with me. Girls were mean to me. Even the less popular girls were mean because they looked up to Teresa and that crowd so much that whatever they said went. If they say "don't to talk to Kimberly," then they wouldn't talk to me (Slut! Growing up Female with a Bad Reputation, 2000, p. 123).

#### *Status and Power*

For most young girls in the middle school years, being popular can be very appealing. Girls in the popular crowds are validated by the attention that other girls give them. For some girls, popularity is magical as popularity conveys an illusory sense of power (Wiseman, 2002). However, with those idealist cliques, there are usually some girls, or one girl in particular, that seems to be the head of the group; the Queen Bee, the girl that wields the power over the other girls who will do anything to please. The book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (Wiseman, 2002), describes status roles that cliques have:

“Cliques are sophisticated, complex, and multi-layered, and every girl has a role within them. However, positions in cliques aren’t static. Especially from the sixth to eighth grade, as a girl can lose her position to another girl, and she can move up or down the social totem pole” (Wiseman, 2002 p. 24).

Wiseman (2002) described the different types of status and role that each girl can represent in a clique including: Queen Bee, Sidekick, Banker, Floater, Torn Bystander, Pleaser, Wannabe, Messenger, and Target. This study will focus on the Queen Bee and the Target status.

### *The Queen Bee*

The Queen Bee status is obtained when popularity is gained out of fear from her peers, and her desire to control situations and friends sets her apart as the group leader. The Queen Bee has a combination of characteristics. While being very charismatic, she can also manipulate others to hurt and weaken friendships. For example, she will spread rumors about someone who appears to be a threat to her or someone she just dislikes. The Queen Bee will give her peers and friends a glare which will often silence their opinions, thoughts, and ideas if she does not value the same ideas herself, which will often intimidate the other girls in her clique. The pleasers and bystanders in the group bow to this intimidation and follow the tone of the Queen leader to accommodate her (Wiseman, 2002).

The Queen Bee is further described as not being open with her other peers or as emotionally available as the other girls in the group. She will not tell her friends her personal thoughts, secrets or emotions but instead expects that her friends will divulge their self-disclosures to her thus giving her the power of knowing confidential

information about others. This information can be used against girls in the clique who are not cooperative or do not support the directives from the Queen Bee. This power-trait characteristic has also been identified in a similar study from Grotmeter and Crick (1996).

Grotmeter and Crick (1996) determined that “relationally aggressive children did not report high levels of self-disclosure to their friends, but rather preferred that their friends self-disclose to them” (p. 2337). Relationally Aggressive individuals use power over others by telling their secrets, sharing confidential information or intimidating or threatening to share the inside information to humiliate the victim. Queen Bees often willingly acknowledge the impact of her cruelty, but she will justify her behavior because of something someone else did to her first.

When a Queen Bee is manipulating her environment she feels in control and powerful. She feels good that she is the center of attention and that her peers and friends will do anything to be with her. If the Queen Bee loses her status, she will lose a complete sense of self, and since she is busy maintaining her image all the time, she will not admit that she is vulnerable because her reputation indicates that she has everything and everyone in control (Weisman, 2002).

### *The Queen Bee Stings*

The Target role is another descriptor in a clique of girls also known as the victim according to Weisman (2002). A girl may become the Target if she does not wear the appropriate clothes that the other girls feel that she should wear, or she may have different hobbies and interests, or behaviors that are outside the norms of the social clique (Crothers, Field, and Kolbert 2005). The Target often receives nasty treatment from the other girls which may include, being excluded, having rumors spread about her, being

made fun of, and being humiliated. The harmful words and the mean girls who exclude the Target sting the victim emotionally. This girl then becomes the outcast of the clique because she has challenged someone in the group with a higher social status or has challenged the Queen Bee herself.

#### *Motivation for Relational Aggression*

According to research Hatch and Forgays (cited in Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005), "Girls are expected to maintain harmonious relationships with others, and if they are concerned about the potential negative impact of the expression of anger on others they will likely temper their reactions" (p. 349). Because overt physical and verbal confrontation toward another female does not fit with feminine gender role identity, girls who follow this standard will use more indirect and manipulate behaviors to express anger toward another person. Instead of verbal confrontation toward a friend, girls will use gossip, exclusion, slander, and spreading rumors against the girl with whom they are angry (In The Know Zone, 2005). All of these tactics are used in discrete forms of bullying which can be hard to detect by parents and school personnel.

When explaining why girls use relational aggression toward each other, Crothers, Field, and Kolbert (2005) hypothesized that adolescent girls who identified with traditional feminine gender roles would be more likely to use relational aggression in order to assert power and control when resolving conflicts among their groups of friends, often using emotional control as a discrete, non-physical violent approach.

Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005) reported that, "the use of relational aggression is most likely a symptom of the systemic oppression of women through sexist practices" (p. 353). They also noted that when adolescent girls use indirect forms of behavior by

spreading rumors, exclusion and manipulation of others, the girls are asserting power and control in their relationships, in a non-physical manner.

When girls feel angry toward their friends, they often want to avoid conflict by repressing their emotions. Brody (1999) proposed that “socialization practices of parents, teachers, and peers may contribute to the development of sex-typed emotional expression” (p. 337). Thus indirect aggression allows girls to maintain the traditional non-physical feminine gender identity role while meeting the expectations of teachers and parents, because they are not engaging in covert physical conflict.

### *Relational Aggression in Schools*

As much as children want to believe that name calling, gossiping, and rumor spreading should not hurt them, it does. While working at a school, teachers, counselors and administrators will often identify overt forms of bullying such as kicking and shoving in the halls and fighting; however, relational aggression behaviors are far harder to observe as gossip, rumors and lies are less obvious than overt bullying. Girls often work behind the scenes by excluding others, glaring, whispering and spreading hurtful rumors. It is difficult for school personnel to track the sources of these harmful remarks.

According to Perry, Kusel, and Perry (cited in Lawrence and Adams, 2006) there are two types of victims. They include low-aggressive victims and high-aggressive victims. Low-aggressive victims, also known as passive victims, often display behaviors that include being anxious, insecure, sensitive, and quiet. They will do nothing to provoke or resist the bully. Their reactions to the behaviors from the bully will often include, crying or withdrawing from the situation. An example of the low-aggressive victim is to ignore, walk away, or leave the situation without comment. This is often the

strategy offered by parents and other concerned adults. The options to leave, don't take it personally, or just ignore the comments are very common options for the low-aggressive victim.

High-aggressive victims may have stronger reactions to the situation and to the bully. This type of victim may be hot-tempered, restless, and disruptive, often creating tension and irritability in their classmates (Lawrence & Adams, 2006). For example, if a student is being taunted by others, she may slam a door, shout back, make threats, and then leave the situation. Upon noticing that the high aggressive victim had a strong reaction, this in turn may further fuel the desire for the Queen Bee to continue to target the girl.

#### *Emotional Issues of Discrete Girl Bullying*

When characteristics of victims of relational aggression were studied, researchers noted victims who suffer from poor self-esteem will often blame themselves for being bullied, and may view themselves as being failures, unattractive, unintelligent, and insignificant (Smokowski and Kopasz (2005). In cases where victims withdrew and were passive, it was found they were less likely to report the abuse. "The link between victimization and internalizing disorders is particularly strong for adolescent girls," (Smokowski and Kopasz, 2005, p. 104). Internalizing disorders often include depression, loneliness, anxiety, and in some cases attention deficit disorder. Holding in feelings of sadness, anxiety, and loneliness may impact the girl's ability to function at school. Counselors, parents and teachers need to be aware of these warning signs.

Because the victim is constantly monitoring her environment, and is anxious about the situation, it is noteworthy for teachers and counselors to recognize that victims

may experience signs of attention deficit disorder because they are not able to concentrate in the classroom or on their studies. Being intimidated, living in fear, and worrying about the next step can be distracting for the girl trying to do her best at school. Providing opportunities for girls to talk with trusted adults about relational aggression is important. “Because the bullying most often occurs at school, many victims are reluctant or afraid to go to school, and may develop psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches or stomach pains in the morning” (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005, p. 104). This may lead to an increase in absenteeism, arriving late to avoid confrontation, or not participating in extracurricular activities.

Since the victim experiences the bullying during school, she may also suffer in her academic performance, experience chronic absenteeism, and have increased feelings of apprehension, loneliness, and feelings of abandonment and in some cases will experience suicidal ideation. “Relational victimization also added significantly to the prediction of loneliness, depression, social anxiety, and social avoidance beyond that predicted by overt victimization alone” (Crick & Grotpeter cited in Phelps, 2001, p.240).

The book *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002) cites stories told by young girls and women who later understood they were being abused by their once-friend, and to this day remember their painful memories of what they went through, and how it had affected them. One example includes Natalie and Reese who grew up together and their mothers were also good friends. The two girls’ friendship blossomed during preschool and elementary school. Natalie appreciated her friendship with Reese and it was about the third grade when Reese started to turn on her.

Reese had started telling stories about Natalie that were untrue. In addition, Reese started criticizing Natalie's bedroom decor and outfits whenever she would come to Natalie's house. Natalie thought that if she changed her room and wardrobe, Reese's criticizing would stop, however, it did not. Reese then began to ignore Natalie at school and around other girls; however whenever they were at home together, Reese was still her best friend (Simmons, 2002).

When the teachers saw that Reese and Natalie were friends, they would pair them up together in class and Natalie would clam up and freeze around Reese because her teasing and belittling became very hurtful. Because Reese had such a good reputation in class, it was hard to identify that her behavior was cruel and affecting Natalie because she was devious and discrete about it (Simmons, 2002).

Natalie said she was scared to speak out against Reese because she was afraid to make her angry; however, when Natalie showed resistance towards Reese, Reese would manipulate the situation, and make everybody think that she was fine and that it was Natalie who was the crazy one. Natalie never told her mother about it because she thought she was a social failure. Reese's hurtful aggression affected Natalie and her ability to trust her peers again (Simmons, 2002).

"It has affected me just a little. I use to be loud and funny and everything, but now I barely talk. I use to be the funny person with my friends and everyone would laugh at me. I use to stand out wearing funny clothes but I don't do that anymore because I am afraid that Reese or somebody would make fun of me or talk about me." (Simmons, 2002, p. 65)

The emotional impact of discrete girl bullying often called Relational Aggression (RA) is a common occurrence in both middle school and high school. Parents, counselors and teachers need to be aware that it is very common, often hard to detect, and requires action on the part of the adults. Awareness of the issue of relational aggression is important to the safety and mental health stability of young girls.

#### *Implications for School Counselors*

“Counselors can encourage children to develop productive coping mechanisms and other appropriate methods for managing the anxiety that accompanies trauma,” (Carney, 2008, p. 184). Since avoidance may be one option a student uses to help alleviate the distress that she feels from bullying, counselors should recognize avoidance as a red-flag for coping with the stress and anxiety of discrete bullying.

A thorough assessment of victims who are experiencing the trauma associated with bullying is important when helping the victims cope with anxiety associated from bullying. Counselors should be aware of a girl’s circle of friends, and notice when she isn’t included any longer to check in with them to see how things are going. Having bully-proofing programs in place is a proactive way to raise awareness, and cut down on discrete and overt bullying. Counselors may wish to consider offering support groups for those suffering at the hand of the Queen Bee.

According to Douglas, Craig, and Baum (cited in Carney, 2008) “Intrusive thoughts may be very stressful to individuals experiencing this type of traumatic reaction, and uncontrollable intrusive thoughts have been linked to the development of mental health issues such as depression and lower overall level of well-being” (p. 184). School

counselors can work together with students, parents, the school nurse, and teachers to monitor the mental health of students who are bullied by others.

In conclusion, students may be helped when a school counselor, teacher or parent detects early recognition of the trauma that a student is experiencing relational aggression, and offers solution-focused approaches that will in turn teach the student to cope with their anxiety while terminating the power of the bully.

## Chapter III: Summary and Recommendations

### *Summary*

Relational aggression is a problematic behavior girls may use to assert their anger, annoyance, or jealousy toward their peers. This behavior is hurtful, demeaning, and it is not a normal rite of passage that girls must experience. Relationally Aggressive individuals use power over others by telling their secrets, sharing confidential information and intimidating or even threatening to share inside information to humiliate the victim.

### *What School Counselors Can Do*

Since relational aggression is a covert form of bullying which may harm girls emotionally, it is important that school counselors are aware of these types of hurtful behaviors that girls display toward each other, and help all students develop strategies to report, seek support, and develop anti-bullying coping skills to use when students encounter these problems in their social circles.

Since the emotional trauma from relational aggression can be intense, it is important to acknowledge that this type of behavior is unacceptable. School counselors should implement intervention programs, and develop styles of counseling that research indicates will be most beneficial for victims of aggressive girls.

### *Intervention Programs for Schools*

Professor Dan Olweus from the University of Bergen in Norway conducted a large-scale research and intervention program to help identify needs of both the bully and victims while clarifying the issues and related problems of Relational Aggression. The findings from his research resulted in the prevention program called the Olweus Bullying

Prevention Program. It is now used in some schools throughout the United States, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

This program is designed to identify the risk factors for bullying, causes and characteristics of bullying, and helping strategies for victims. The Brown University, Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter (2005), states that an assessment of the bully's personality may include traits such as, "impulsive, hot-headed, dominant, lack of empathy, difficulty conforming to rules, low-frustration for tolerance, and positive attitudes toward violence" (p. 4). Other risk factors according to the Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter (2005) include family background, attitude toward violence, and the bully's attitude toward school, and whether he/she is indifferent or accepting of the teachers' and students' attitude toward bullying.

The Oweles Prevention Program suggests that school counselors use behavior modification, counseling and bullying information in sharing sessions in the school. School counselors meet with victims, bullies and their parents individually after information about the situation is carefully retrieved and evaluated. School counselors should consider providing an information packet to the parents about bullying and details regarding the school policy and consequences for bullying. The parents and students could participate together in regular meetings about negative aspects of bullying and how to develop healthy peer relationships.

The Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire is to be completed with anonymity by the students. Once the survey results are collected, the staff in the school can coordinate a Bullying Prevention Committee to provide training, and develop school-wide rules

against school bullying, safe ways to report incidents, and provide a system of supervision during passing times and break times during the school day.

For classroom interventions, holding classroom meetings to provide information about bullying and healthy peer relationships was also found helpful. This included grade-level parent meetings, as parent involvement is critical to reducing the incidents of bullying. While this intervention strategy is a “proven way for a school to intervene, it is important to keep in mind that students may have many reasons for not speaking out about bullying” (Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter, 2005, p. 6). Offering online reporting or other confidential reporting options may help too.

School personnel should try to explore more options and seek ways to help students speak out against bullying so that school counselors, administrators, and teachers can help intervene. School-wide efforts may help reduce bullying.

#### *Implications for Parents*

It is understandable that watching a child go through the misery of being a victim is painfully heartbreaking. No parent wants their child to do harm to another or bully others. It is important that parents are involved in their children’s lives during all stages of development. It is also important for parents to actively listen to their children and try to problem-solve appropriate ways to handle the child’s bully. In the book *Odd Girl Out*, the author addressed right, wrong, and better ways for parents to approach their children when they come to report bullying.

An example of expressing the wrong way of listening to a child is “This is the way girls are so you may as well get used to it” (Simmon, 2002, p. 245). This would be the wrong approach bullying because it sets a negative generalization of girls. Simmons’

further stated that “Teaching her to fear and hate other females, of course, is a mistake and yet mothers who were once victims of girls’ aggression often voice this sentiment,” (Simmons, 2002, p. 245).

Another poor approach is “What could you be doing to cause this?” (Simmons, 2002, p. 242). Because girls already blame themselves, and search for reasons they are outcast, teased, or having rumors spread about them, this statement would validate feelings that something is wrong with her, even though it is not her fault. If a girl were to change what she was doing, wearing, or communicating, often times the bullying will not stop.

Effective ways to approach Relationship Aggression is to ask the teen questions about the situation; for example “How do you know they are not joking?” If the teen does not want to be friends with the girls, encouragement to join another community of people, find a job, or join the track team or acting club may deflect the bullies. Adults should encourage girls to talk about relational aggression, while listening to how she feels instead of trying to fix the situation. Encouragement to find friends who will like her for who she is may help keep the victim’s self-confidence strong (Simmons, 2002).

It is important for parents to try to come up with appropriate problem solving methods to help reduce anxiety. However, if they cannot provide information that may be helpful they should encourage their daughter to seek a professional counselor or mental health provider.

In conclusion, relational aggression is a harmful and unproductive way of dealing with anger. It is important to inform students, parents, and teachers about this form of bullying. Working together as a team, educators and parents may help teens grow up in a

healthier environment with positive role models, and a strong and safe support system both at home and at school.

#### *Recommendations for Further Research*

With the increase in technology use at home and at school, cyber bullying becomes a modern online version of Relational Aggression. If a student snaps a digital photo of a half-naked girl dressing for the school play, and then later posts the picture on the internet, it can be damaging to the victim. With new forms of Photo Shop and editing tools, parts of a body can be edited, and added to another making it look like promiscuous activities are occurring, thus causing further damage. Research should follow the technology trends, and evaluate the damage and legal issues pertaining to technology and cyber bullying as forms of covert relational bullying.

Further research may be necessary to determine if more boys are beginning to experiencing relational aggressive behavior as their friendships are being sabotaged also. One example is that athletes and non-athletes may have different perspectives of relationally aggressive behavior. Could students in a gay relationship also experience relational aggressive roles too?

New students who are learning the English language may not understand all the racial slurs or aggressive behavior toward them. Additional relationship research could include cultural relational aggressive behavior. As newer research based programs become available to schools, research could be performed on the effectiveness of the new bully-proofing programs.

Finally, another recommendation for further research might include following the career and academic paths of girl bullies and Queen Bees who enter college, join

sororities or select female prevalent career paths and with a longitudinal study investigate the impact of adult female Queen Bees on the college campus or in the workplace.

Additional research may further develop understanding of the bully and victim thus reducing the number, and severity of incidents making schools and the work place a healthier environment for all.

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