

Fifth and Sixth Grade Female Students' Perceptions of Female Aggression

by

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to identify fifth and sixth grade female students' perceptions of female aggression and their ideas about how school staff could help them with incidents of bullying. It has been found that girls tend to bully in different ways than boys. Roberts and Morotti (2000) reported that girls tend to use social alienation, verbal taunts, and aggression intended to damage one's peer relationships, self-esteem, or social status to bully other girls. According to Harris and Petrie (2003), defining bullying is one of the most difficult aspects in recognizing and preventing bullying. This study compared what fifth and sixth grade females identified as acts of aggression with what the research defines as bullying and female aggression. Students at a small, urban, Midwestern private school were invited to participate in the study. Surveys were distributed in the fall of 2005. The survey that was given to the students consisted of a checklist of acts of aggression, as well as several open-ended questions that asked students how their school staff could help them with bullying incidents. Descriptive

statistics were used to analyze the data from the checklist, and qualitative analysis of answers to the open-ended questions helped to answer the posed research questions.

Almost half of the participants reported witnessing relational aggression, and a little over half of the participants suggested communicating with the bully would be a beneficial way to help the bully, as well as a way to deal with acts of aggression that occur. It was found that several of the results of the study were linked to the current research in the area of female bullying.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

An estimated 15% to 30% of students are victims of bullying or are bullies themselves, thus making “bullying the most common form of violence in our society” (Cohn & Canter, 2005, para. 4). Currently, bullying is a hot topic for schools. With school violence occurring daily and harassment lawsuits being filed, districts are working to find ways to prevent bullying behavior on their campuses.

However, defining bullying can be a difficult task, as there are many varying definitions in the literature and from experts in the field. Not only do definitions vary in scholarly literature and other media, but adults and children seem to have differing thoughts on what truly is “bullying.” According to Harris and Petrie (2003), “gathering data about bullying incidents and properly defining what bullying is,” is one of the most difficult aspects of this topic (p. 13). These authors went on to explain that adults and children have different definitions of bullying, therefore making it difficult to help children who are victims of bullying. After all, before one can address and treat a problem, one must properly define the problem.

One thing that most people can agree upon is that males and females tend to bully in different ways. Males tend to be more aggressive; their actions are more physical (i.e. hitting, kicking, and punching). On the other hand, females tend to be more relationally aggressive, hurting each other through mean words, rumors, and exclusion. In a study conducted by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), 491 third through six graders were surveyed and it was concluded that girls were more relationally aggressive than boys (17.4% to 2.0%).

Girls tend to focus more on developing relationships by talking with each other. Goodwin (2002) completed an ethnographic analysis of girls' peer groups and found that girls preferred to play games where they were in "ecologically close huddles" (p. 399). In addition, she found that girls spend much of their time conversing about others, making future plans, and seemingly talking about just anything and everything. She found that while "clear hierarchies were absent, girls delineated their social groups through forming alliances against particular individuals" (p. 399).

Bullying is a broad topic and this study will look at one area that, being relational aggression among elementary age females. Although it is not clear exactly why females are more relationally aggressive, this study's purpose will be to identify what fifth and sixth grade girls perceive as acts of relational aggression and what they would like their school to do about the problem of bullying.

The responses to the survey will be compared with that of the research to see if they coincide. Are students' perceptions of what female aggression is, the same as what the literature states are acts of female aggression? As was mentioned earlier, one of the biggest difficulties is defining bullying. Adults, children, and the literature seem to have varying definitions. The school counselor plays a key role in bully prevention and education, and is often the person in the school building who the victim comes to see when there is a problem. Children and adults should be in agreement with what constitutes an act of bullying so as to provide consistency in education and discipline.

Relational aggression is often hard to identify because it takes place in close circles, out of the teachers' and supervisors' eye. Simmons (2002) wrote, "When she sees a perpetrating girl, a teacher has little or no incentive to stop the class. Taking the



time to address relational discord is not always as easy as yelling at a boy to remove his peer from the trash can” (p. 34).

This study will focus on bullying that occurs in schools between girls. It has been found that playgrounds and classrooms tend to be the most common locations for acts of bullying to occur in elementary schools (Harris & Petrie, 2003). The authors went on to list the most common acts of bullying at this age to be: being called names, teased, lied about, hit, isolated, threatened, having their things stolen, and being left out of activities. This list is inclusive of boy and girl bullying, as both types occur in the elementary school setting. On a typical playground the ratio of supervisor to students is very high, so being able to supervise all that is going on on the playground can be an almost impossible task. Being able to watch for kids who are being excluded or teased can fall to the curb when there are 50+ children to make sure are staying safe.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

As was mentioned earlier, relational aggression often takes place outside of the teachers’ and supervisors’ eye; it is also mostly verbal, so activities such as: excluding others, whispering rumors, and writing mean notes can be almost impossible for a teacher to see. Therefore, identifying female victims of bullying can be a difficult task. When an incident of relational aggression is reported, it often turns into a “she said, she said” matter, one student’s word against another student’s word. When acts of aggression take place in verbal form, it can be challenging to determine blame because there are often no witnesses and it is more often than not, only what has been told, not seen. It can be hard to prove who started rumors or gave mean looks. Schools and parents need information

about relational aggression so that they can intervene and help students to deal with the incidents of bullying that occur.

The purpose of this study is to identify fifth and sixth grade girls' perceptions of female aggression and their ideas about how school staff can help them with incidents of bullying. Data were collected through a survey that was distributed in the fall of 2005 at a small, urban, Midwestern private school.

### *Research Questions*

There are four research questions this study attempted to answer. They are:

1. What do fifth and sixth grade females identify as the top three acts of female aggression?
2. Who are students telling about incidents of bullying?
3. What do students identify as ways they wish school staff would handle incidents of bullying?
4. How do students feel about the way reported incidents of bullying are handled by school staff?

### *Definition of Terms*

The following terms will be used in this paper and will be used to provide clarity to the reader.

*Bullying:* "A person is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students" (Olweus, 1993, p. 9).

*Relational aggression:* Harming others “through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendships, or group inclusion” (Crick, as cited in Simmons, 2002, p. 43).

*Assumptions and Limitations of the Study*

This study assumed that the subjects completed the survey openly and honestly. Three limitations of the study are that the participants may not have responded openly and honestly because of the sensitive topic; secondly, the data collected from this study are only representative of the perceptions of girls in one school, therefore the results cannot be generalized for all fifth and sixth grade females; and thirdly, the instrument used in this study has no measures of validity or reliability.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will include a discussion of what makes female friendships so unique, a list of the varying definitions of bullying and relational aggression, and an exploration into why relational aggression is so damaging. It will conclude with a review of suggested programs and policies.

### *Female Friendships*

Female friendships are some of the most special and important relationships that are developed (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005). “The process of establishing and maintaining friendships with other women is a crucial aspect of psychosocial development” (Pipher, 2002, as cited in Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005).

According to a study conducted by Brigham Young University (Tomson, 2005), girls as young as four years old have the ability to form cliques and establish roles within that group. Clyde Robinson, coauthor of the study and a Brigham Young professor stated, “It is pertinent and somewhat disturbing...that by the age of four a substantial number of children have apparently figured out from their environment that relational aggression strategies can be used to their advantage and are rewarded with social status.” (p. 3D)

In both male and female cliques, there is a hierarchical structure that keeps the clique together, a leader and his/her followers (Adler & Adler, 1998). Often cliques are extremely exclusive and do not allow for new members to join. Adler and Adler (1998) studied adolescent peer groups (both male and female) and found that new members could be asked to join the clique by existing members, but the leader of the clique would have to accept the new members before they were truly a part of the special group.

Acceptance and inclusion are two key aspects in maintaining a functioning clique. This study found that the cliques they looked at were usually engaged in activities of inclusion and exclusion. Many of the clique members would treat other peers poorly, teasing and harassing them, while at the same time treating their own clique members poorly. One activity that was common was gossiping. In particular, one girl recalls teasing another girl who was not a member of her clique, and one day that girl took a necklace of hers, so she retaliated by getting all of the boys and girls in their grade against her, eventually the victim changed schools. “No one liked her. That’s why she moved schools, because she tore my gummy bear necklace off and everyone hated her. They [the other students] were like, ‘That was mean. She didn’t deserve that. We hate you.’” (p. 64). Simmons (2002) wrote that “ganging up against a girl” is one of the most common forms of relational aggression that females use (p. 43).

Complying with the leader of the clique is one of the ways members of group show their alliance. Adler and Adler (1998) gave an example of this as they described an activity that peer groups participate in. Group leaders would lead their groups in making phony phone calls; during this activity, a couple of group members would be directed to call certain other group members and make prank calls or tease the receiver. The researchers found that the members of the group took part in these hurtful activities, aware of the feelings of their friends, “because they were afraid. They became accustomed to living within a social world where the power dynamics could be hurtful and accepted it” (p. 68).

In the book, *Queen Bees and Wannabees*, Wiseman (2002) described seven roles that girls may take to form their clique. They were: Queen Bee: the girl who “reigns

superior over the other girls and weakens their friendships with others” (p. 25); the Sidekick: the girl who is “the lieutenant...closest to the Queen Bee and will back her no matter what because her power depends on the confidence she gets from the Queen Bee” (p. 28); the Banker: the girl who “creates chaos everywhere she goes by banking information about girls in her social sphere and dispensing it at strategic intervals for her own benefit” (p. 29); the Floater: the girl “doesn’t associate with only one clique...has friends in different groups and can move freely among them” (p. 30); the Torn Bystander: the girl who is “constantly conflicted between doing the right things and her allegiance to the clique...the one most likely to be caught in the middle of a conflict between two girls or two groups of girls” (p. 31); the Pleaser/Wannabee/Messenger: the girl who “will do anything to be in the good graces of the Queen Bee and the Sidekick...she’ll change her mind depending on who she’s interacting with” (p. 33); and the Target: the girl who is “the victim, set up by other girls to be humiliated, made fun of and excluded” (p. 34).

The idea of hierarchy is evident in many groups. Goodwin (2002) found that the girls she studied “delineated their social groups through forming alliances against particular individuals” (p. 399). Most functioning groups do have members with roles and there is a sense of leadership from one or two individuals. However, in some circumstances, certain group members take advantage of their assumed roles and this can cause problems to arise. The roles that girls can play are mentioned above, and although not every girl plays one of these roles, and not every clique functions with the seven roles, it does paint a picture of what a clique can look and function like.

Control is key for the “Queen Bee” of the social group; it keeps her in charge and feared. Being a leader is one thing, but when the leader becomes authoritarian in nature

(especially in adolescent peer groups), the followers can find themselves in an unhealthy friendship group and in danger of compromising what they believe to be morally “right.” Most everyone wants to feel a sense of belonging, so when someone who is popular invites another less popular person into her group, a sense of belonging and acceptance is gained and self-esteem can be increased. Belonging to a group that is kind and supportive is healthy for a child. However, children may find themselves in a group that “advocates, supports, or promotes bullying behavior” (Cohn & Canter, 2005, para. 8). Some of these children may not be comfortable with the bullying behavior that they are witnessing or engaging in, but desire to be a part of a group so strongly, that this uneasiness is ignored.

#### *Definitions of Bullying and Relational Aggression*

Defining *bullying* is a big challenge. To begin with, Olweus, an expert in the field of bullying, stated that a “person is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students” (Olweus, 1993, p. 9). Cohn and Canter (2005) defined bullying as, “an unacceptable anti-social behavior that is learned through influences in the environment, e.g. home, school, peer groups, even the media” (para. 1). Bullying may be physical, verbal, or psychological in nature, and the goal is for one person to gain power over another.

Roberts and Morotti (2000) also addressed teasing as it related to bullying. He stated that it is the matter, intensity, and incidence in which teasing is done towards the target that determines whether or not it is normal behavior or whether it is teasing or bullying. Harris and Petrie (2003) explained that young children, when telling of acts of

verbal aggression, will describe the behavior as “teasing” as opposed to “bullying.”

Young children also describe bullies as “people who do the teasing” (p.13).

Girls tend to bully in different ways than boys. Roberts and Morotti (2000) noted that girls are more likely than boys to use social alienation, verbal taunts, and aggression intended to damage one’s peer relationships, self-esteem, or social status. Relational aggression is the term two experts, Simmons (2002) and Wiseman (2002), use to describe the bullying that occurs between girls. These two authors have written books on relational aggression, the bullying that occurs between females. Girls tend to have more intimately close friendships than boys do, and engage in acts of bullying that harm the relationship or friendship. Simmons (2002) explained that the relationship becomes a weapon that is used to cause harm. Simmons further explained that relational aggression can be, “indirect aggression, in which the target is not directly confronted, and social aggression, which targets the victims self esteem or social status” (p. 43). Acts of relational aggression include: name calling, exclusion, writing mean notes, spreading rumors, and teasing. Girls tend to use these forms of aggression to hurt their friends/peers, as opposed to boys who use more physical types of aggression, such as hitting, kicking, punching, and pushing. “Girls fight with body language and relationships instead of fists and knives” (Simmons, 2002, p. 3).

In the documentary, *It’s a Girls World*, writer and director Lynn Glazier (2004) explored how girls bully, why their victims tend to be their friends, and the damaging effects to their friendship. When asked why she bullies and how she chooses who she bullies, one girl responded, “Hannah is easy, she won’t do anything back,” and went on to explain that she knows her weaknesses and that she can be easily picked on because



she does not fight back. In a roundtable discussion, several girls were asked what they did when they were mad at someone, they responded they would smile in a “mean way” and then went on to demonstrate a “mean” smile for the cameras. In addition, these girls were asked how they knew they could trust, they responded, “you don’t.” Some girls felt they did not know how to trust other girls and others admitted to not trusting their friends because of being hurt in the past. In the documentary, Simmons, a researcher and writer in the field of girl bullying stated, “girls don’t know how to be in conflict.” She went on to explain that in her research, girls do not have the skills to tell each other when they are mad or hurt, so instead they responds to their feelings in ways they know work – and that is where relational aggression comes into play. Instead of resolving conflict through talking about it, girls hurt other girls to make themselves feel better. Cole, Zahn-Waxler, & Smith (as cited in Conway, 2005) seemed to echo this thought, suggesting that some girls who have strong behavior problems might have learned they should “not express or experience anger and distress,” thus causing even stronger emotions to arise in certain situations (p. 336).

#### *Damaging Effects of Relational Aggression*

Bullying can have long and damaging effects on children. “Victims feel sad, afraid, anxious, and bad about themselves. They may have social problems, emotional problems, and academic problems” (Beane, 1999, p. 21).

Bullying can have social implications for its victims, such as engaging in at-risk behaviors at a young age. Students (males and females) who are not supervised are more likely to engage in inappropriate activities, such as smoking, drinking, acts of crime (Focus Adolescent Services, 2005). An increased risk of smoking cigarettes and

drinking alcohol is present for those who engage in acts of bullying and those who are victims, as well (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, Scheidt, 2001).

Bullying can have emotional effects on children, such as feelings of anxiety and humiliation. When students do not feel safe at school, they are not able to focus and concentrate on learning (Juvonen & Nishina, 2005). In a study conducted by the University of California – Los Angeles, researchers looked at bullying occurrences among sixth graders, and reported that children felt “emotionally affected” on the days they were bullied, both physically and emotionally. Juvonen and Nishina (2005) stated that on days that students experienced being bullied, they reported that they felt humiliated, and felt anxious when they were both a victim and a bystander.

Not only are there emotional effects on children who experience relational aggression (bullying in general), but also academic aspects of their lives can be affected. Children have enough struggles in life that coming to school should be a place of safety and of comfort, however, if a student is faced with harassment and treated poorly by his/her peers, he/she will not be able to reach his/her full educational potential. According to Pollack (1998, as cited in Effects of Bullying, n.d.) as many as 160, 000 students may stay home on a school day due to a fear of being the victim of bullying. School attendance is key for academic success, leading to future potential problems when it comes to passing classes/grades and graduating. Additionally, if a child is not in school, safety becomes an issue.

In a study of fourth through eighth graders, 22% reported having “academic difficulties resulting from peer abuse” (Beane, 1999, p. 5). If students do not feel safe at school, it is likely that they will be able to concentrate and focus on their schoolwork. In

a study by Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham (2000) it was reported that peer harassment and psychological adjustment difficulties had a direct impact on a student's GPA and school attendance. This study goes on to suggest, "school problems may be an antecedent to later psychological maladjustment" (p. 357). In other words, if students have poor grades and poor attendance, feelings of "loneliness, low-self worth, and depression" may result (p. 357).

Most of the research has examined the effects of bullying on both males and females; however, several researchers, (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Goodwin, 2002) are beginning to look into the social, emotional, and academic effects on females. Simmons (2002) provided numerous examples of adult women who have strong memories of being the targeted victim in incidents of bullying. Wiseman (as cited in Vail, 2002), an author on relational aggression, stated, "there's some suggestion that this type of bullying sets girls up to accept abusive behavior or stay in abusive relationships with men" (p. 15). Similarly, Beane (1999) stated that, "by the age of 30, 25% of the adults who had a criminal record, as opposed to five percent of the adults who hadn't been bullies" (p. 5).

In conclusion, several studies (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, et. al, 2001; Beane, 1999; Juvonen & Nishina, 2005) have shown that students who are engaged in acts of bullying and/or are victims of bullying are at a higher risk for poor academic performance (low grades), low self-esteem, being involved in abusive relationships later in life, committing crime, truancy, and smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. With the documentation of bullies, and victims of bullies, linked to these risky behaviors, it is important for parents and professionals to explore prevention methods for bullying behavior.

*Review of Suggested Policies and Procedures*

Most schools have policies and rules concerning physical bullying and sexual harassment, but very few have rules that address relational aggression issues, such as, name calling, teasing, exclusion, etc. In the case of *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (No. 97-843), it was argued that sexual harassment caused one child's grades to drop, and fear to be so great to go the gym or pass in the hall, therefore denying her right of equal participation in school programs, which violated Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (*Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*, 1999). Title IX protects against anyone in any educational institution from experiencing discrimination on the basis of sex. The case of *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* was the Supreme Court case that required a school district to stop sexual harassment between two students. This Court did not hold that school districts can be sued because of incidents of bullying and teasing; it did, however, find that Title IX is violated if "a school district fails to take reasonable action against serious, long-term student-to-student sexual harassment that the district employees clearly knew about and could have taken reasonable steps to stop" (Protecting your child from sexual harassment, n.d, para. 9). The Court wanted to make it clear that schools have a responsibility to try and prevent bullying behavior from occurring, especially when it can lead to students not being able to participate in school and school related activities.

Cohn and Canter (2005) offered the following suggestions for schools: implement "zero tolerance" policies and enforce them, whether the violations are acts of bullying or possession of a weapon; intervene early – teach social skills and alternative behaviors for aggression when children are young (preschool age); teach parents to reinforce their

children's positive behavior; and get rid of the attitude of "kids will be kids," bullying is not a healthy part of childhood, and should not be tolerated.

Lamb (as cited in Vail, 2002) offered the following, "the best way to deal with relational aggression is to bring it out in the open and find ways to channel it" (p. 18). Adults should teach girls that anger and aggression are a part of life, and that there are appropriate ways to deal with those emotions. Similarly, Simmons (2002) suggested that schools teach that "alternative aggressions" are not acceptable (rolling of eyes, sighing, excluding) and that by not ignoring those subtle behaviors, educators and parents would be "socializing girls away from them" (p. 250).

Many schools do have anti-bullying curricula in place and are actively trying to deal with the problem of bullying. However, teachers and staff often do not see acts of relational aggression and therefore do not deal with the situations. Girls go through the day feeling lonely and are fearful of such areas as the lunchroom and hallways because of the possible acts of covert aggression they may experience. What does relational aggression look like and how frequently are girls experiencing it? Knowing this is a key aspect in dealing with the problem of relational aggression and in helping girls to learn more effective ways of dealing with their aggression. This review of the literature on bullying and relational aggression illustrates gaps that need to be addressed. Only the surface of relational aggression has been explored; further exploration and research into what girls are thinking and doing is needed. In addition, a look into what girls themselves believe should be done to prevent this form of bullying has yet to be fully explored.

### Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter will include a discussion of the subject selection, as well as a description of the sample and the instrument that was used. In addition, data collection procedures and data analysis will be discussed. This chapter will conclude with the limitations of this study.

#### *Subject Selection and Description*

Twenty fifth and sixth grade, predominantly Caucasian female students, at a small, private, urban K-8 school in Midwestern were given a survey. The majority of the students in the school are from a middle class socioeconomic background, and the student body is composed of predominantly Caucasian students. Two other cultural groups are represented, those being Asian and African American. School officials were contacted and permission was granted. School officials were provided with the parental consent form (Appendix A), a copy of the survey (Appendix B), and a description of the intent of the study. All fifth and sixth grade female students were invited to participate in the study, and letters of consent were sent home with each individual.

#### *Instrumentation*

The survey used in this study was created specifically for this study, as a survey was not found that addressed the needs of this study. The survey was made up of a checklist as well as several open-ended questions. The checklist consisted of 12 situations or incidents; participants checked whether or not they had seen, had experienced themselves, or had done each situation to another student. The open ended questions asked who they would tell if they were being bullied and then asked for

suggestions as to how bullies should be dealt with and how they would like adults to help them with incidents of bullying. A copy of the survey is placed in Appendix B.

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

Permission from the school was obtained during the summer of 2005. Letters of consent were sent out to parents during the first week of October and were signed and returned to the student's teacher one week later. The researcher gave the survey to the fifth and sixth grade female students in a multipurpose room at the school. Each participant was informed that by completing the survey, they were implying consent to participate in the study. The participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

#### *Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data from the checklist. Frequencies were tallied for each of the 12 situations/incidents that were listed. Qualitative examination of the data from open-ended questions yielded themes voiced by the participants. The four research questions were answered using information from both types of items on the survey.

#### *Limitations*

A limitation of this instrument is that it has no measures of validity or reliability. Secondly, the results from this study are from a private, K-8 school, so generalizations about this age group (fifth and sixth grade) cannot be made. Lastly, a limitation is that the participants may not have responded openly and honestly because of the sensitive topic.

## Chapter IV: Results

This chapter will include a discussion of the demographics of the population surveyed, an item analysis of the questions asked, and will conclude with the findings from the proposed research questions.

### *Demographics*

The participants who were included in this survey were 20 females in the fifth and sixth grades at a small, urban, Midwestern private school. No other demographic information was gathered about the participants.

### *Item Analysis: Checklist*

Participants were given the opportunity to identify acts of aggression that were witnessed, experienced, and done to others. The data collected from the checklist are located in Table 1. In summary, items about bullying incidents witnessed, indicated that participants had seen the following acts of aggression: 60% had seen a girl being tripped in the hallway or on the playground ( $n = 12$ ); several had witnessed exclusion in the lunchroom (45%;  $n = 9$ ), as well as on the bus (35%;  $n = 7$ ). In addition, 40% had seen/heard another girl make fun of another's appearance ( $n = 8$ ); 40% had witnessed mean notes or emails being passed ( $n = 8$ ).



Table 1

*Number of Participants Reporting Acts of Aggression on Checklist*

Act of Aggression	Had Seen	Had Experienced	Had Done
Tripped her in the hallway or on the playground	12	8	3
Called her a mean name	7	9	2
Not let her sit by me on the bus	7	3	1
Not let her sit by me in the lunchroom	9	3	4
Made fun of the clothes she wore	3	7	2
Made fun of her appearance	8	4	2
Started a rumor that was not true	4	7	4
Written a mean note	2	2	2
Passed along a mean note	5	2	1
Whispered about her as she walked by	8	9	3
Given her the silent treatment	7	8	8
Written mean things on her personal property	3	3	0

Regarding bullying incidents they had experienced, the participants indicated they had experienced the following acts of aggression: 45% had been called a mean name by another girl ( $n = 9$ ); 45% had been whispered about by another girl ( $n = 9$ ); 40% had been tripped in the hallway or on the playground ( $n = 8$ ); 40% had been given the silent treatment ( $n = 8$ ); 35% had experienced others making fun of her clothes ( $n = 7$ ); 35%

indicated they had been the victim of a lie told by others ( $n = 7$ ). Also, 15% ( $n = 3$ ) had experienced exclusion in the lunchroom and on the bus.

Finally, participants indicated they had done the following acts of aggression: 40% had given another girl the silent treatment ( $n = 8$ ); 20% had excluded others in the lunchroom ( $n = 4$ ); 20% had told something that was not true about another girl to others ( $n = 4$ ); 15% had tripped another girl in the hallway or on the playground ( $n = 3$ ); 15% had whispered about another girl as she walked by ( $n = 3$ ). Ten percent indicated that they had made fun of another's clothes ( $n = 2$ ) and appearance ( $n = 2$ ).

#### *Item Analysis: Open-Ended Questions*

Participants were given the opportunity to respond to six open-ended questions. All responses for each of the six questions can be found in Appendix C. In response to the prompt "If I were being bullied, I would tell..." participants identified five different people they would tell if they were being bullied. Eleven participants indicated they would tell a teacher if they were being bullied, 6 identified the principal as the person they would go to. Four of the participants stated they would tell their parent, 3 identified they would tell a trusted adult, and 3 said they would tell a friend. Several participants indicated they would tell more than one person (i.e. both a teacher and a parent).

In response to the prompt "Here are some suggestions for ways I would like adults to help my friends and me with incidents of bullying," the largest number of responses (6 of 14) indicated that communication was important and that talking about bullying would be helpful. Allowing the bully and the victim to share with each other their thoughts, talking to the principal and teachers about to find the root of the problem, and talking about situations when they occur were other written suggestions. One

response was to punish the person who was doing the bullying, another was to be nice to them and not be mean back. A suggestion that one participant offered was for staff to supervise more on the playground.

In response to the prompt “Have you ever gone to a teacher/administrator about a bullying incident?” 35% of the 20 responses indicated they had gone to a teacher/administrator about a bullying incident ( $n = 7$ ). However, 65% indicated they had not gone to a teacher/administrator about a bullying incident ( $n = 13$ ). Further, in response to the prompt “If yes, how was it resolved?” 7 who responded wrote they had gone to a teacher/administrator about a bullying incident, 4 reported that it was resolved through talking. One responded that the incident was resolved by going to the principal’s office.

In response to the prompt “Here are my suggestions as to how bullies should be disciplined” 42% suggested that bullies should have to talk to the principal or the teacher ( $n = 8$ ). Other responses included: sending a letter home to the parents about the incident, the bully receiving a detention, taking the bully’s favorite thing away from her, and having the bully apologize to the victim and the entire school for the incident. One response was to have the bully apologize to the victim and have them understand how much her bullying hurt.

In response to the prompt “Here is how I think students/teachers could help those who bully” 53% responded that talking about bullying would help those who bully ( $n = 8$ ). Other responses included: being nice to them ( $n = 2$ ), befriending them, and having the bully receive counseling. Two participants thought it would be helpful if the bully

could see what their bullying behavior did to the other person – putting herself in another's shoes.

### *Research Questions*

The following four research questions were posed for the study. A summary of the data for each question will follow.

*What do fifth and sixth grade females identify as the top three acts of female aggression?* Overall, tripping in the hallway or on the playground and whispering about others were in the top three acts of aggression under each heading (had seen, had experienced, had done). Excluding others, giving the silent treatment, and saying untrue things about others were identified under at least two of the headings. These findings seem to concur with what the research is stating as acts of female aggression (Simmons, 2002; Roberts, 2000; Glazier, 2004).

*Who are students telling about incidents of bullying?* The majority of the participants (55%) report telling a teacher about incidents of bullying. Thirty percent of the participants' report they would tell the principal about an incident of bullying. Concluding, the majority of the participants are telling school staff about incidents of bullying. Four of the participants (20%) stated they would talk to their parent(s) about a bullying incident. Several of the participants report they would tell more than one person (i.e. a teacher and a parent).

*What do students identify as ways they wish school staff would handle incidents of bullying?* Communication appeared to be the theme when it came to participants identifying ways in incidents of bullying was handled. Responses included: allowing the bully and the victim to share with each other their thoughts, talking with the principal

and/or teachers to try to find the root of the problem, and talking about incidents when they occurred. Giving the bully a warning ( $n = 1$ ) and sending her to the principal's office ( $n = 1$ ) were two suggestions that were also offered.

*How do students feel about the way reported incidents of bullying are handled by school staff?* After the all of the responses were reviewed and analyzed, it was determined that the data did not indicate findings to answer this research question.

In conclusion, answers to the research questions were drawn from descriptive statistics that were used to analyze the data from the checklist, as well as frequencies that were tallied for each of the 12 situations/incidents that were listed. A qualitative examination of the data from open-ended questions yielded themes voiced by the participants.

## Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter will include a summary of the study, a review of the limitations of the study, conclusions about the study and how it relates to current research, and finally, recommendations for the future of research in this area, as well as for educators and parents.

### *Summary*

The purpose of this study was to identify fifth and sixth grade girls' perceptions of female aggression and their ideas about how school staff can help them with incidents of bullying. Data were collected through a survey that was created specifically for this study, and was distributed in the fall of 2005 at a private, urban, K-8 school in Minnesota.

Defining bullying and compiling information about incidents of aggression can be a difficult task (Harris & Petrie, 2003). In addition, identifying female victims of bullying and incidents of female aggression can be an even more difficult task, because this type of bullying often takes place in verbal form, which is less easy for outsiders (school staff and parents) to detect. This study identified what fifth and sixth grade female students witnessed, experienced, and had done to others through a checklist. Forty-five percent had witnessed exclusion, and 40% had seen/heard teasing between girls, both forms of relational aggression. In addition, participants were given an opportunity to answer open-ended questions about who they were telling about incidents of bullying and were able to offer suggestions about what to do about the incidents. Forty-two percent suggested talking with the bullies after an incident occurred, and 53% thought that talking about bullying with those who bully would be beneficial. Both responses showed that communication was important to the participants.

### *Limitations*

There were several limitations of this study. The first limitation was that the instrument that was used had no measures of validity or reliability. Secondly, the results from this study were from a private, K-8 school, so generalizations about this age group (fifth and sixth grade) cannot be made. Lastly, a limitation was that the participants may not have responded openly and honestly because of the sensitive topic.

### *Conclusions*

This study gathered fifth and sixth grade female students' perceptions of female aggression. Of the 20 fifth and sixth grade female students, 20 participated in the study. Several conclusions were made that link the data gathered from the study to the current research in the area of female bullying.

The participants identified acts of female aggression that they had witnessed, experienced, and/or done to others using a checklist of acts of aggression. Tripping in the hallway or on the playground and whispering about others were the top acts of aggression under all three of the headings. Excluding others, giving the silent treatment, and saying untrue things about others were identified under at least two of the headings. These findings seem to concur with what the research is stating as identified acts of female aggression (Simmons, 2002; Roberts, 2000; Glazier, 2004). As was stated earlier, Harris & Petrie (2003), stated that defining acts of female aggression can be a difficult task, however, the participants from this study were able to clearly identify acts of aggression that were occurring in their school.

Overall, communication seemed to be the theme throughout the open-ended questions. When the participants were asked ways in which adults could help with

incidents of bullying, 6 of the 14 responses had to do with communicating, having the bully and the victim talk to each other, as well as school staff talking to the students to find out the root of the problem from which the incident occurred. Also, when participants offered suggestions about how bullies should be disciplined, 42% thought that talking to the principal or teacher was important. When it came to offering suggestions for how to help those who bully, 53% offered that talking about bullying, with those who bully, would be helpful.

It is interesting to see the connection between how girls bully and how they would like to deal with those who bully – it is both verbally. Girls can hurt each other verbally, (i.e. through silently excluding others and saying untrue things about others to others), but at the same time, state that the way to help them deal with issues of bullying is to talk about it and to have the bully and the victim talk to each other.

One participant suggested that there be more supervision on the playground when asked about how adults should help with bullying incidents. It can be challenging to observe relational aggression since it takes place within a relationship. Excluding certain girls, spreading rumors, and writing mean notes can all be difficult for teachers to observe in the classroom and on the playground. However, if school staff is aware that these types of behaviors are actually acts of aggression, they may be more aware and be able to intercede when incidents occur.

### *Recommendations*

Recommendations for the future include research that needs to be done and suggestions for parents/educators. In the field of research, more needs to be explored in the area of female aggression and relational aggression. Acts of aggression that females



engage in and experience have been documented, both in previous research and backed by this study, and now researchers must look into what can be done about this type of bullying. Looking into why girls struggle to communicate with each other when problems arise and why they turn to hurt those closest to them are two areas that need to be researched further.

Girls stated in this study that communication was important to them, so parents and educators need to be exploring ways to help girls express their feelings and frustrations with each other in a more appropriate and productive way, instead of hurting each other through bullying. The lines of communication between parents and daughters, and school staff and female students need to be opened. Adults need to facilitate conversations about healthy ways to deal with feelings and teach appropriate ways to deal with situations that arise between friends, so that acts of relational aggression do not emerge.

In conclusion, bullying is a serious problem facing our nation's schools. It is parents' and educators' responsibility to help students learn that bullying is wrong and from there, teach appropriate ways to communicate feelings of anger and frustration. It should be taught that those feelings are normal and okay, but that there are appropriate ways to deal with them, and deal with them in a safe way that does not hurt others, especially one's closest friends.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

To the parent(s) or guardian(s) of a 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade student:

My name is Kari Erickson and I am a graduate student in the Guidance and Counseling program at the University of Wisconsin – Stout. Each masters student researches an area of interest in the field of education. With bullying being a “hot topic” in schools, I have chosen to study girl bullying, and will be conducting research with 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade female students to learn what their perceptions are of the acts of aggression among girls in their school. For this study, students will be asked to voluntarily fill out a short survey, about girl bullying and how they feel the school handles incidents of bullying. This study will be anonymous and of course, voluntary. The students will not put their names on the survey, so the responses will not be connected to any one student.

It is my hope that you will allow your child to participate in this important study. The information gathered from this study will be given to teachers and administrators at North Heights Christian Academy, as well as made available for your review by contacting the school office. I hope that some insight into the way girls bully can be gained from this study and that the staff at North Heights Christian Academy can use the information that is gathered to better the educational experience for your child. If you have any questions or concerns please contact Mr. Jeff Taylor, principal, at (651) 255-3834 or me.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Wisconsin – Stout’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding the rights of the research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

Thank you!

**Investigator**

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*Please return to your child's teacher by October 11, 2005.*

\_\_\_\_\_ has my permission to fill out a survey on 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade girls perceptions of girl bullying within the school. I understand that this is voluntary, and that the students' identity will be kept confidential. I also understand that the information gathered from this study will be shared with teachers and administration at North Heights Christian Academy, and available for my review if I so choose..

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of parent/legal guardian

## Appendix B: Survey

**This research has been approved by the UW-Stout IRB as required by the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46.**

## BULLYING SURVEY

*A survey to identify fifth and sixth grade female students' perceptions of female aggression*

Please answer the following questions by placing a check mark in the box that best fits your experience. You may decide to stop at any time. Turning in your completed survey lets us know that you allow us to include your information in the bullying study.

	I have done	I have seen	I have had done to me
Tripped her in the hallway or on the playground			
Called her a mean name			
Not let her sit by me on the bus			
Not let her sit by me in the lunchroom			
Made fun of the clothes she wore			
Made fun of her appearance (example: hair style, skin color)			
Told something that was not true about her to others			
Written a mean note			
Passed along a mean note			
Whispered about her as she walked by			
Given her the silent treatment			
Written mean things on her notebook, locker, or personal property			

If I was being bullied, I would tell \_\_\_\_\_

Here are my suggestions for ways I would like adults to help me and my friends with incidents of bullying:

Have you ever gone to a teacher/administrator about a bullying incident? Yes No

If yes, how was it resolved?

Here are my suggestions as to how bullies should be disciplined?

Here is how I think students/teachers could help those who bully:



## Appendix C: Responses to open-ended questions

*If I were being bullied, I would tell* \_\_\_\_\_

My mom, my teacher, and my best friend (unless she was the one doing it to me)

My friend

Ms. Johnson

An adult

My parents and teacher

An adult

Sometimes teacher

Mr. Taylor (our principal)

A trusted adult

My teacher

My friends

My teacher

Mr. Taylor

Mr. Taylor (principal)

Mr. Taylor or Miss Molley

Mom and Mr. Taylor

Miss Molley

Teacher

Mom, teacher, and principal

The Teacher

*Here are some suggestions for ways I would like adults to help me and my friends with incidents of bullying:*

No response

What to do with they bully me; what to say; what to think; what I should not do

No response

Don't bully, put yourself in their shoes and see how it feels

Don't know

Bring that person out to the hall with me and my friend so we can share what we say and they can share what they say.

No response

No response

To be nice to them and not mean back.

To punish the person who's doing the bullying.

To talk to the principal and make he/she to tell all the bullying.

Talk about it with teachers and try to get to the root of the problem.

I would tell them to watch us sometimes on the playground.

No response

By talking with the person who bullies me

Go tell a teacher

To tell them to stop and not bully anyone anymore

Have me pray, tell them to stop, ignore them and stay away from them

To talk to me and my friend to figure out the problem we have

*Have you ever gone to a teacher/administrator about a bullying incident? Yes No*

N

N

Y

Y

N

Y

N

N

N

N

Y

N

N

Y

Y

N

N

N

Y

N

*If yes, how was it resolved?*

The teacher talking to the students

One of my friends was getting bullied from a girl from our class

By going to the principals

They were talked to

I told her and she talked to the kids

They would just ask me a few questions and tell me to stop, and apologize

Mr. Taylor talked to them and they pulled tallies

*Here are my suggestions as to how bullies should be disciplined:*

They should have to talk to the principal and the teacher and if they did it again they would have another talk and if they did it again they would be suspended for one day.

I think they should say sorry and forgive them, then miss a little bit of break.

Telling a teacher and the teacher talking to the student.

Go to the office, or call their parents

Apologize to whoever they did it to.

It depends on how serious if it's not just a tallie but if its is, principal's office

No response

Get sent to the principal's office; be grounded; sit in a corner all day

Maybe bullies should get a referral, get a deep talk with the principal

First, be told not to do it (warning), if they keep doing it than suspend them or put them in detention

They have to apologize and promise never to do it again and they understand how much their bullying hurt.

Tallie

I think they should write a letter to the girl she was bullying and one to the girls parents saying what she had been doing, why she did it, and that she is sorry.

Being talked to and maybe go to Mr. Taylor

Have them sit with an older adult, or take their favorite thing away

They should go to Mr. Taylor's office and get talked to.

I think a bully should have to [say] sorry to each person like in front of the whole school.

A teacher talking to them about it.

Talk to their principal, or pull a tallie

We should call their parents, and bring them to the principal

*Here is how I think students/teachers could help those who bully:*

No response

I think they should talk to them what they did wrong.

Include them and befriend them.

Put yourself in their shoes and see how much it hurts.

Don't know

By talking to them after school.

*No response*

*No response*

They should have the bully go see what they really did to a person whom they've bullied.

Talk to them about it.

Talk with them and find out what they're thinking.

Be kind.

Try to be nice to them.

I think we should all get along and be kind to one another and talk about it at school.

Ask them if they would like to have it done to them, and a few other questions.

They should get some counseling and get some help.

Just talk to them because they might not even know it that they are bullying.

*No response.*

Tell them that it is wrong.

*No response.*