Relational Aggression and Bullying: It’s More Than Just A Girl Thing

Nancy Mullin-Rindler, M.Ed.

Working Paper Series

The goal of the Wellesley Centers for Women Working Paper Series is to share information generated by the Centers’ research and action projects, programs, and staff and to do so expeditiously, without the usual delay of journal publication. All papers in the extensive Working Paper Series have been peer-reviewed.

The Wellesley Centers for Women

The Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) conducts scholarly research and develops sound training and evaluation programs that place women’s experiences at the center of its work. WCW focuses on three major areas:

- The status of women and girls and the advancement of their human rights both in the United States and around the globe;
- The education, care, and development of children and youth; and
- The emotional well-being of families and individuals.

Issues of diversity and equity are central across all the work as are the experiences and perspectives of women from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. Since 1974, WCW has influenced public policy and programs by ensuring that its work reaches policy makers, practitioners, educators, and other agents of change.

The Wellesley Centers for Women is the single organization formed in 1995 by combining the Center for Research on Women (founded 1974) and the Stone Center for Developmental Studies (founded 1981) at Wellesley College. For more information, please visit: www.wcwonline.org.

Ordering Information

Working Papers and other publications of the Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW) are available for purchase through the WCW Publications Office. For a complete list of current publications, visit our online catalog at: www.wcwonline.org/publications.

Publications Office - Wellesley Centers for Women
Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481
Phone: 781-283-2510   Fax: 781-283-2504

Unless otherwise noted, the authors hold the copyright to their WCW publications. Please note that reproducing a WCW publication without the explicit permission of the author(s) is a violation of copyright law.
Relational Aggression and Bullying:
It’s More Than Just A Girl Thing

Nancy Mullin-Rindler, M. Ed.
Director, Project on Teasing and Bullying
Center for Research on Women

Suggested Citation:
Portions of this paper appeared in “Relational Aggression: A Different Kind of Bullying,” in the May/June 2003 issue of Principal; a condensation of that version will appear in the Fall 2003 edition of The Education Digest (Volume 69).

Please do not use or quote from this paper without proper citation.

The author wishes to acknowledge that the term relational aggression is based in a field of study not affiliated with the work of Jean Baker Miller Training Institute or relational-cultural theory.
Abstract

Recently, media attention and several popular books have focused on mean and aggressive girls. These sources would lead us to believe that this is a new unstudied phenomenon—the proverbial “new bully on the block”—and that it is on the rise. The spotlight has been on behaviors variably referred to as relational aggression, social cruelty, peer harassment, and relational bullying. Additionally, these behaviors are typically presented as part of a hidden culture that is allegedly unique to girls. *Relational Aggression and Bullying: It’s More Than Just A Girl Thing* looks at some of the recent assumptions that have been made about girls and relational aggression. Research suggests that relational aggression, like bullying, sexual harassment, and other forms of personal violence may be symptomatic of a larger pattern of societal violence that negatively affects both boys and girls. This paper refutes both the premise that aggression among girls is a new phenomenon and the notion that relational aggression, is unique to girls. In addition, this paper offers concrete strategies based in research and developmentally appropriate practice which can be used to improve aspects of school climate that perpetuate relational aggression and reduce its prevalence in elementary and middle schools.
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Relational Aggression?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Bullying and Gender</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Friendship and Empathy</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Development of Friendships</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impact of Empathy on Aggression &amp; Relationships</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Effects of Relational Aggression on School Climate</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for Improving School Climate</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Background

Lately, mean, aggressive girls have come increasingly under media scrutiny. We have been inundated with images such as the startling Northbrook, Illinois videotapes of the powder puff hazing incident (Bellevue MAQ-TV, May 2003), articles about mean girls (American School Board Journal, 2002; New York Times, February 2002, “Gamma Girls” (Newsweek, June 2002), and a spate of books portraying self-absorbed teen girls obsessed with popularity and social status, who torment their obsequious peers (Simmons, 2002; Weisman, 2002; Gianetti & Sagarese, 2001). We are led to believe that these behaviors represent a new unstudied phenomenon, and that it is on the rise.

The focal point of this media attention is a form of aggression variably referred to as social cruelty, relational aggression, peer harassment and relational bullying. The perpetrators of these behaviors are characterized as popular and pretty girls who possess a cold-hearted cruel streak that can wither a peer’s self-esteem with just a word or a look. These girls have been dubbed “Queen Bees” (Weisman, 2002) and identified as part of socially powerful “in” cliques. According to numerous sources, everyone wants to be like them; or, at least to be liked by them. Yet most of this literature does not shed light on this phenomenon in a way that expands our knowledge about the role relational aggression plays in girls’ lives, nor its significance to school climates.

Attention to girlhood aggression raises several important questions and red flags. One basic question is why this behavior is suddenly newsworthy? What societal issues are at play? Moreover, because the bulk of recent coverage has not been based on solid research, we need to challenge some of the assertions raised about relational aggression and its effects. Furthermore, claims that relational aggression is a new phenomenon or that it is a uniquely female experience need to be deconstructed. Finally, we need to ask whether this trend represents something more insidious in our culture and whether this constellation of behaviors represents an inevitable right of passage—i.e. behavior that schools, parents, and girls have to accept as normative.

In this post-Columbine era, schools have focused more closely on various types of aggressive behavior as potential contributors to school violence, along with a host of negative outcomes for students. In response, school districts and states across the country have rushed to mandate policies setting limits on aggression, and on bullying behavior in particular. As we go to press, fifteen states have adopted some sort of legislation about school bullying and others are considering following suit. It is important to note that few of these states have bolstered their policies with specific guidelines or funding to help schools implement these directives.

While many schools have implemented policies addressing at least some forms of physical aggression, few even acknowledge verbal assaults, name-calling, exclusion, or indirect forms of aggression. Unfortunately, indirect or covert aggression is the most common and insidious during the late elementary and middle school years (Björkvist, 1994; Crick, et al, 2001). The trend in education to hone in on physical forms of aggression is particularly concerning because, according to a Johnson Institute report (1996), indirect forms of aggression are often precursors to, or indicators of, the potential for physical violence in a school. While the National School Safety Survey statistics (2002) indicate that physical acts of aggression and assault have declined in recent years, the frequency of indirect
aggression has not been as well-documented. To improve school climate as a whole, it is necessary to address all forms of aggression—the subtle, indirect along with the obvious direct, physical acts (Olweus, 1993; Olweus & Limber, 1999).

Our understanding of the scope and breadth of aggressive behavior among both boys and girls has been hampered to some degree by a lack of communication and agreement across disciplines regarding definitions, terminology, and the scope and types of aggressive behaviors (Crick & Rose, 2000; Stein, 2001). Most of the research on relational aggression to date has been conducted by a small handful of individuals (such as Crick and colleagues) and has not made conceptual linkages to broader research about the sociological links to violence, to sexual harassment, or even to bullying.

Recommendations that provide a practical perspective on research for school personnel has also been generally absent—leaving schools either wondering what to do or grasping at advice based in misconceptions about what strategies are effective. Clearly, increased collaboration and additional research would greatly improve our understanding of the roots of aggression in our culture, its influence on the behavior of youth in our society, and information about effective practice.

Yet in spite of these limitations, there is currently research available to help us untangle the myths from facts about relational aggression and its links to gender. This paper will differentiate relational aggression from direct and indirect bullying. It will explore the role gender plays in this behavior and describe how it affects peer relationships and school climate. Finally, it will offer concrete suggestions about what can be done to ameliorate this pervasive problem in schools.

**What Is Relational Aggression?**

The following are actual examples of the way that relational aggression is expressed among students in elementary and middle schools.

*Allison, known to be the most popular girl in school, has agreed to be Nina’s friend and include her at lunch on the condition that Nina starts a mean rumor about Leah, Nina’s best friend from elementary school.*

*Todd has lived next door to Pete, a popular athlete, for years. Pete has often picked on or belittled Todd because he doesn’t perform well in sports. Recently, Pete’s teammate and new sidekick Aaron has been taking Todd’s lunch money and other possessions in an effort to impress Pete. Aaron has threatened to tell Pete and other classmates that Todd is gay if Todd “squeals” or refuses to comply with Aaron’s demands.*

On any given day, incidents like these are played among students across the nation—and not just among girls (Oliver, et al, 1994; Hazler, 1996; Craig & Pepler, 2000; Crick, et al, 2001; Espelage & Asidao, 2001). These are trends that have existed for decades—vignettes such as these are so powerful because they can also bring to mind similar experiences from our own youth.

Various behaviors can be grouped under the rubric of aggression. These intentional negative acts perpetrated on others can occur among individuals who are of equal status or among individuals where there is an imbalance of power. Relational aggression, is characterized by both intentionality and power imbalance (Crick, et al, 2001). In spite of the similarities to bullying, sexual harassment, and partner or
child abuse, it is essential to differentiate between these acts and relational aggression (Stein, 1999). Unlike sexual harassment, hazing, or assault, relational aggression is not governed or defined by legal statutes, unless these behaviors cross certain lines. For schools, this suggests the need to develop alternative strategies, policies, deterrents, and rewards systems to deal with these different types of aggressive behaviors.

Relational aggression is directed at someone with the intent of damaging their relationships, reputation, or sense of inclusion in a peer group (Crick et al, 2001).

One day, Abby calls Robert, a shy third grader, “Loser” because he is overweight and wears “geeky” clothes. She convinces other kids in her group not to speak to Robert until he shapes up. Three months later, he’s become known as “Mr. L.” Even a few teachers use this “nickname,” not realizing that it is meant as a put-down.

Strategies involve a combination of direct, readily observable behaviors, such as physical harm or name-calling, paired with subtle forms of manipulation, threats, social pressure, or isolation and may include impugning someone’s reputation, verbal threats, spreading rumors about someone’s sexual orientation, scapegoating, forming intrigues, threatening social isolation if the victim doesn’t act in certain ways, or stealing a romantic partner. These actions can be variously accomplished through direct confrontation and/or the use of emissaries.

However, I propose that relational aggression be recognized for what it really is—a form of bullying. Bullying encompasses both direct and indirect actions that define relational aggression (e.g. name calling, physical or verbal attacks, or threatening gestures; spreading gossip and rumors, manipulating friendships, or intentionally excluding or isolating someone). Because relational aggression combines both direct and indirect bullying strategies to achieve its goals; the term “relational bullying” might be a more apt descriptor (this new term will be used interchangeably to relational aggression throughout this paper).

While definitions of bullying vary somewhat, all include some form of persistent negative interaction characterized by a power imbalance between the bully and victim (Olweus, 1993). This power imbalance, though not necessarily obvious to us as adults, makes it difficult for the victim to defend himself or herself. Factors such as age, size, appearance, abilities, gender, and who observes the bullying contribute to this power differential, as does the relative popularity, social class, ethnicity, and a host of other intangibles. These factors play an identical role in relational aggression. Like other forms of bullying, relational aggression typically occurs in public and often involves groups of students who gang up on the hapless victim(s) with friends against peers—further adding to the power imbalance and sense of shame and humiliation the victim feels. In addition, relational aggression may be particularly insidious because victims often allow themselves to be subjected to these acts in silence—often out of a combined desire to fit in and fear of further ostracization. It is essential that adults become aware and alert to this dynamic in order to better understand and respond to this form of bullying.

Relational Bullying and Gender

Recent media attention on suicides, assaults, and hazing perpetrated by girls has attracted a lot of public notice. Why are aggressive girls of such
interest? Their culture has been portrayed as a frightening society where a few powerful girls ride herd on less popular “wannabes” who will do anything to be accepted (Simmons, 2002; Weisman, 2002).

Are these behaviors on the rise, or is there simply more awareness about them? The concept of relational aggression is not a new phenomenon, nor a recently discovered trend. Admittedly, initial studies about aggression and bullying, which began in earnest in the 1970’s, focused on direct and physical forms of aggression, and looked almost exclusively at males. Until the 1980’s, most research about aggression focused on physical aggression typically perpetrated by boys. Research showed boys’ aggressiveness to be more overt, visible, and physical. Gender differences found in bullying behavior parallel gender patterns found in other forms of aggression (Ahmad & Smith, 1994; Bandura, et al, 1961; Björkqvist, et al, 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Olweus, 1993; Owens, et al, 1999; to name a few). Findings have shown that gender differences exist in both the incidence and type of bullying boys and girls tend to engage in; specifically, boys tend to bully more often than girls, and tend to be more likely to use direct or physical strategies.

Though our understanding about the nuances and impact of girlhood aggression has certainly lagged behind the study of aggression in boys, a body of research does exist. In the past ten to fifteen years, researchers in various fields have sought to expand our understanding of the role that gender plays in aggression. This has led to closer examination of the types of aggression and victimization common among girls as well as exploring the complexity of boys’ experiences—the study of relational aggression is part of that movement.

Just as studies of strictly overt or physical aggression have failed to describe the experiences of as many as 70% of victimized girls and 15% of victimized boys (Crick & Bigbee, 1998), it is a misconception and an over-simplification to assume that relational aggression is a uniquely female phenomenon. Both boys and girls are known to combine direct and indirect bullying (i.e., relational aggression) (Crick, et al, 2001; Rodkin, et al, 2000; Salmivalli, et al, 1996; The Oregonian, December 2002). In contrast to previous assumptions that boys relied totally on direct forms of bullying and girls on more indirect methods, research shows that although levels of overt aggression are higher in males, levels of relational aggression are more equal across gender lines (Björkqvist et al, 1992). These same researchers also found that, although this type of bullying is exhibited earlier by girls, boys catch up as their verbal skills increase. Additionally, Olweus (1993 and 2001) found that verbal bullying (which can be direct or indirect) accounts for most of the bullying perpetrated by both boys and girls—and remains the most common form of bullying over time. This use of verbal put-downs is often aimed at damaging peers’ social standing in a group.

Several recent studies indicate additional factors are involved in peer aggression during the middle school years (Bosworth, et al, 1999; Bukowski et al, 2000; Nukulkij et al, 2000; Rodkin et al, 2000). These studies theorize that as students move toward adolescence, they begin to view and value anti-social behavior more positively, become more attracted to aggressive peers, and seem to associate dominance and aggression with popularity.

While gender differences exist at different ages and stages of development, students seem to
prefer strategies designed to elicit the maximum effect within their peer groups. Research and anecdotal evidence indicate that boys and girls both perpetrate and fall victim to relational aggression, including efforts to marginalize peers. While their motivations may differ, they rely on these behaviors to manipulate social dynamics and to boost their status within their peer groups.

Although girls are commonly known to manipulate friendships, gossip or shun others as a means of jockeying for social position (Crick, et al, 2001), boys also experience rumors, scapegoating, and threats of isolation from their peers. For boys, taunts often zero in on physical stature, lack of athletic ability, or sexual orientation and are delivered with direct physical harm or threats.

Every day, Jason and his buddies corner Eric at his locker and make him recite a chant: “I am a worthless c—, fit only to lick your a——.” If he fails to do this to their satisfaction, which is frequently, they either stuff him into his locker or head-first into a trashcan. Afterwards, the other boys give Jason high-fives.

This fact reinforces views put forth by Kimmel (2000) and others (Stein, 1995 and 1999, Thorne, 1993) about the close connection between societal views about masculinity and aggression and suggests that societal values which emphasize a traditional male model play a role and that we might expect girls will emulate and follow that power structure.

Some anecdotal reports from teachers’ groups and other sources do seem to indicate that girls may be acting more aggressively, particularly behaving in ways more traditionally associated with boys. Some experts suggest that societal messages about masculinity feed into aggressive behaviors such as bullying (Kimmel, 2000; Stein, 1997 and 1999; and Dooley & Fedele, 1999). They rightly assert that our society normalizes views about aggression and acting out, and they point out the dangers of promoting attitudes about masculinity that value “power-over” behavior, taking pride in non-compliance and disrespect, and devaluing feelings in favor of logic. Stein (1997) also points out the links between bullying and its “older cousin” sexual harassment and states that when “left unchecked and unchallenged, bullying may...serve as a fertile practice ground for sexual harassment.” Indeed, one might appropriately conclude that sexual harassment, partner abuse and even child abuse might have roots in relational aggression.

The Role of Empathy and Friendship

Friendships contribute to a child’s sense of well-being and emotional health. The complexity of these relationships depends upon the age of the student and his or her developmental skills. Cultural stereotypes about aggression and gender can interfere with students’ efforts to make these essential connections with their peers. Having an understanding of how children develop empathy and friendships provides us with insights into how aggression and bullying can interfere with their relationships (Hartup, 1996; Kaukiainen, et al, 1999).

The Development of Friendship

Children’s first attachments are typically with family members and caretakers (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). These initial interactions set the stage for relationships with peers. Child care and school experiences provide opportunities for children to expand their social circles and potential to form relationships with peers. It is not until late in the preschool years that children tend to play more interactively. Preschoolers are
still learning to master controlling their impulses, attending to social cues, initiating contact with peers, and using social skills to get along with others. Because their boundaries about friendship are often linked to rigid and arbitrary rules, their own needs and wishes tend to take precedent. For example, they may feel justified in retaliating if someone hits or hurts them first (Coles 1997; Eisenberg et al, 1998 & 1997; and others).

By the time they start school, most children have gained the cognitive and emotional skills that allow them to take another person’s point of view—and thereby learn to negotiate conflicts. By the early elementary years, children’s friendships are fleeting and fickle. It’s not unusual, for example, for a kindergartner to announce, “You aren’t my friend anymore!” or to associate a peer with a particular situation or activity. Developmentally, they may not see a conflict in being friends with someone at home in their neighborhood and not even acknowledging that same peer at school (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Zahn-Waxler, et al, 1979; Hastings, et al, 2000). Between first and second grade, most children are able to use words instead of actions to negotiate a conflict (though they generally still need adult help with this process). This cognitive milestone moves them forward to being able to build friendships without the use of aggression to get their needs met.

Adults play a key role in helping young students develop social rules that include motivators for conduct and concrete ways to operationalize prosocial behaviors (e.g. I will share so others will want to play with me; I can be friendly by telling another child my name and asking them to play with me; friends apologize even when they hurt someone by accident). At this age, adult intervention is best focused on modeling prosocial and friendship-making skills, helping children distinguish intent (e.g., to differentiate between deeds done “accidentally” or “on purpose”) (Coles, 1997; Eisenberg et al, 1997 & 1998; Hartup, 1996; & others).

From grades three through the middle school years, students’ relationships with peers undergo tremendous growth and change. Their relationships with peers become increasingly more important over time. Concurrently, by the end of elementary school, students not only understand that retaliation is wrong, but they are able to make judgments about right and wrong based on intent rather than damage done. This change allows them to be somewhat more flexible in responding to slights and conflicts—and to employ assertive strategies rather than resorting to aggression (Coles, 1997; Hartup, 1996; and others).

By middle school, students’ friendships with their peers tend to be based on shared interests and mutual understanding. On one hand, they are motivated to treat peers kindly so that others will like them and want to be friends with them. In contrast, well defined social hierarchies and a somewhat rigid desire to fit in and conform to the standards with a particular group may cause them to treat a peer they view as lower in status poorly in order to improve their affiliations with the group and gain social status for themselves (Crick & Grotpeeter, 1995; Kaukiainen et al, 1999; Sabongui et al, 1998; and others).

The Impact of Empathy on Aggression and Relationships

Educator Robert Coles (1997) describes empathy as “the ability to see the world through someone else’s eyes, and acting on that knowledge with kindness.” This ability to understand another person’s feelings and thoughts requires thinking and feeling, as well as a response (i.e. an action that is more in keeping with what the other
person needs than what you might want or need at that moment).

Empathy allows us to form healthy relationships and to be resilient in the face of disappointment. It also helps us to respond to conflict without being aggressive or intentionally hurting others. In other words, when we understand at a visceral level the discomfort we cause by acting aggressively, we are less likely to act that way.

Failure to develop empathy during childhood can result in long-term negative effects. For example, individuals who lack empathy are more likely to act in aggressive ways and to hurt others without regard for their feelings: by responding with aggression, bullying, abusive behavior, or other forms of violence (Eisenberg & Fabes 1998; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Olweus, 1993).

Every day, Greg feels he must run a gauntlet through a group of older boys who cluster around the entrance to the school. They used to just make cracks about his hair or clothes but lately they have been cornering him at his locker, pasting obscene words on his back and locker and humiliating him in front of a girl he likes.

As their relationships become more subject to social pressures, bullying (including relational aggression) increases. In a national poll of nine to thirteen year olds conducted by Widmeyer Communications (2002), 33% rated bullying and students who verbally and physically threaten others as their number one concern.

As their relationships become more subject to social pressures, bullying (including relational aggression) increases. In a national poll of nine to thirteen year olds conducted by Widmeyer Communications (2002), 33% rated bullying and students who verbally and physically threaten others as their number one concern.

While social status within peer groups helps students establish and sort out their individual and social identities, shifts in status contribute to the power imbalances and intrigue that plague this age group. Relational bullying can adversely affect students’ social standing by keeping them frozen in their roles through the creation of negative expectations that become difficult to alter. When this happens, students tend to view a peer’s behavior filtered through negative expectations and consequently, the victim of relational aggression “cannot do anything right” (Thompson, 2001).
Tina and Mari have been friends for years. Now Mari has joined a new group of friends. Every time Tina tries to talk to Mari, she rolls her eyes and turns away, whispering and giggling with her new friends. Tina isn’t sure what she’s done wrong, but it seems like she can’t do anything right.

The ability to cope with these changing relationships helps galvanize skills that can predict how well students will cope with and adapt to social situations as adults. When students are not able to connect with peers, are aggressive or disliked, they risk developing difficulties in coping with social dilemmas and with forming healthy relationships as adults (Hartup, 1992).

**The Effects of Relational Aggression on School Climate**

Based on the latest statistics from the US Department of Education (Coy, 2001), bullying constitutes a major discipline issue for schools today. In addition, sources suggest that victimization by peers is an important variable in determining whether they may become violent—the combination of aggressive behaviors and being victimized are thought to act as a stressor and potential trigger for violent behaviors. Both boys and girls are more likely to use relational strategies to bully as they get older—with efforts peaking during the middle school years. Eighty percent of middle school students in several studies (Espelage & Asidao, 2001) reported at least one act of bullying in the past month and a substantial number reported bullying others even more frequently. These behaviors not only affect students’ social and emotional well being, they are also associated with school performance and academic outcomes and adjustment (Hartup, 1992).

There is evidence that students may perceive or respond to different types of bullying in unique ways related to their gender. However, social bullying is on par with physical bullying and intimidation in terms of its damaging effects on individual students, academic performance and school climate as a whole (Olweus & Limber, 1999; see also Bukowski & Sippola, 2001). In addition, when bullying occurs at school, students report lowered satisfaction, difficulty paying attention in class (even if they are not the victim) and may feel that adults don’t care and are not in control (Olweus, 1993, 2001a, 2001b).

The effects of bullying are complex and vary according to the role each student plays in a given incident. Bullying, whether direct, indirect or relational has an impact on everyone. Victims suffer higher rates of absenteeism, anxiety, depression, and are at risk for long-term mental health problems including thoughts of suicide (Olweus, 1993; Owens, et al, 1999). Some studies show bullies to be more likely to become involved in illegal behaviors or to persist in conduct disordered forms of behavior into adulthood (Olweus, 1993). Relational bullies have difficulty forming genuine friendships, except as a means to an end—i.e. friends offer a medium for control or a way to gather intelligence (Crick & Grotputer, 1995). In addition, because relational bullies are skilled at orchestrating events to minimize discovery and blame, they may be even more resistant to accepting responsibility for their actions.

While attention is most often directed at the experiences and traits of aggressors and victims, the majority of students (75-80%) are bystanders. These students play a key role in all types of...
bullying situations. Bystanders tend to feel anxious and afraid, and report that bullying interferes with their own learning (Froschl, Sprung, & Mullin-Rindler, 1997). Finnish researchers Salmivalli, et al (1996) found that 87% of student bystanders had a specific role as assistant, outsider, reinforcer, defender, etc. Bullying expert Olweus has also outlined similar roles (1999). While a Canadian study (Pepler, et al, 1993) found that 90% of students reported observing bullying was unpleasant, as many as 65% of bystanders don’t actively get involved (Olweus & Limber, 1999). Students reported that they failed to act because they felt the incident was none of their business or were uncertain about what to do.

Although students may argue that not getting involved is safer, Hazler (1996) found their inaction results in bystanders experiencing feelings of anxiety and powerlessness similar to that of victims (see also Jeffrey, et al, 2001). As a result of their passive or complicit participation in bullying, bystanders may have a tendency to justify, rationalize or minimize their role. Studies also show that over time, bystanders’ sense of empathy for the victim of bullying is diminished, which tends to lead them to side with the bully (Olweus, 2001b).

Overall, these factors work collectively to create a climate of fear and disrespect where learning is no longer the primary concern of students. We know from various research studies both internationally and more recently in the US, that at least 10% of all students are bullied on a regular basis (Olweus, 1993;Nansel et al, 2001). Because its outcome is less visible and direct, the incidence of relational aggression may be even higher. Though this behavior is pervasive for students between fourth and eighth grades, it need not be considered a normal right of passage for them. Adults need to become actively engaged to try to stop it.

What can be done to improve this situation? The following strategies, based in research and developmentally appropriate practice, may be useful for school personnel.

**Strategies for Improving School Climate**

Most school personnel agree that students need opportunities to resolve social conflicts on their own. However, schools often inadvertently promote bullying and violence (Conoley, et al, 1998). All cases of bullying require adult support and intervention to compensate for the power imbalance between bully and victim. Even students in middle school and high school may require adult help to deal with intense or complex social dilemmas. Students of all ages may feel convinced that adult intercession will make bullying matters worse—and unfortunately this perception is often borne out by adults’ ineffective or inappropriate responses to bullying behavior (Mullin-Rindler, 2003). It is a common myth that these behaviors occur when adults aren’t around. Although students are skilled at timing or manipulating bullying acts so they are not caught, most bullying happens in the presence of adults (Pepler & Craig, 2000). Due to its more covert nature, it may be easier to miss or minimize signs of relational aggression, though we may be more aware of the resulting distress. However, adults can substantially reduce bullying by becoming more attuned and vigilant to it in all its forms and to recognize and acknowledge its seriousness.

While opinions about best practices to handle relational aggression vary, it (like other forms of
Relational Aggression and Bullying

bullying) won’t subside without direct involvement and intervention from adults. Here are some suggestions to help a school respond more effectively.

- **Identify factors that contribute to bullying and relational aggression:** Pinpoint potential situations, times or areas where victims are likely to be viewed as easy targets and improve supervision to minimize problems. Identify values or assumptions that might put particular students at risk (e.g., do victims tend to be new students or those seen as non-traditional in terms of socially prescribed gender roles?).

- **Improve adult connection with students:** Emotional warmth and a relationship with at least one caring adult have been shown to be key elements in reducing bullying (Olweus, 1993). Making sure each student is personally greeted each day and identifying an adult contact for every student is one effective way to approach this.

- **Establish clear rules and policies about indirect as well as direct forms of bullying and aggression:** As long as bullying behaviors are considered normal and accepted, they persist. Identifying and naming bullying behavior is an important first step. Creating rules against exclusion, ignoring, disrespecting, or making comments about someone’s reputation or character can help students get out of the habit of acting in these ways. The result is the creation of a more positive school climate. However, zero tolerance is not the answer to stopping bullying. Rather, policies that provide escalating and developmentally appropriate consequences, which provide positive rewards for prosocial behaviors, as well as sanction aggression with negative consequences are more effective.

- **Involve all adults:** Resolving bullying requires a team effort. Evaluate supervision plans and responses at “hot spots” and be aware of students who lack friends or who are chronically left out. Leadership from administrators and faculty is vital, as is involving parents and key community leaders in tackling the problem. Offer training, ongoing information and support. Raise awareness in “feeder” schools (so intervention begins with students in earlier grades who will move up into your school).

- **Discuss bullying openly:** Bringing the issue of bullying out into the open and making it a high-profile concern among staff, students and parents does not reflect poorly on the character of the school. On the contrary, when the issue approached directly, adults are more in control, and students get the message that this isn’t accepted behavior. Continue to be alert to trouble spots, power imbalances, friendships and alliances. Be sure that bullying is neither ignored nor accepted.

- **Bring the discussion into the classroom through structured meetings or lessons.** Engaging students is an essential element in this undertaking. Involving all students—not just victims or bullies, but
the majority of students who are bystanders, too. To be successful, the focus of stopping relational and other forms of bullying needs to move beyond individual interventions to changing the climate that allows bullying to continue. Change requires finding ways to mobilize and reinforce active participation on the part of bystanders. Good programs don’t simply stop bad behavior; they also encourage prosocial behavior. Strengthen your efforts by using literature, academic themes, and role plays to analyze power imbalances, set new norms, practice options and empower bystanders. Explore ways that bystanders can realistically work together to help stop bullying.

- **Provide therapeutic intervention for individual students at risk for being bullied or for bullying others.** Students who are chronically excluded or picked on respond well to group situations where they can get emotional support and can expand their opportunities for social contacts with other students who might become friends. Encourage involvement in activities outside of school so these students have opportunities to interact with different groups of peers and to participate in new kinds of activities (e.g., so the focus of relationships is not just on popularity). By contrast, students who bully should be seen individually, rather than in groups. The focus for these students should be to establish firm limits on their behavior, encourage ways to make amends, and ultimately to redirect their aggressive tendencies. Help them identify roles where power and leadership are constructive (e.g. invest energies into causes they care about, express feelings through theater, etc.). At-risk students may also benefit from structured same-gender discussion groups with prosocial peers (i.e. selected groups of all boys or all girls) to build positive solidarity and discuss common issues like anger and aggression, social pressures and expectations, appropriate ways of interacting with the opposite sex, etc.

- **Use “teachable moments” more effectively to intervene whenever bullying occurs.** Although follow-up with individual students is not realistic for every incident of bullying, adults can respond immediately at the heat of the moment in ways that are more effective. Provide support for victims in a way that helps them maintain emotional control and save face publicly. Be firm but matter-of-fact-with bullies. Include bystanders and provide guidance and clear expectations rather than dismissing them from the scene.

- **Help students develop empathy and friendship skills and strategies for resolving conflicts assertively:** Students of all ages need help setting limits and dealing directly but kindly with someone they don’t like, dealing constructively with anger, and acting assertively rather than aggressively. They also need help learning how to be a good friend: e.g. relational give-and-take; the difference between friendship and popularity; and the qualities of being a friend. Middle school students in particular need assistance balancing individuality with conformity, and exploring boundaries and unwritten rules that determine where peers “belong” or fit in. Adults at home and school can lay groundwork for students to learn and practice ways of successfully negotiating social situations. Responses and
interventions should be adapted to a student’s developmental needs and ability to use words to describe feelings, to read body language and social cues, to initiate interactions with peers in pleasing ways, to demonstrate kindness and empathy, and to deal with conflicts. Bear in mind that students are ready to learn these skills and may even be able to talk about “the right thing to do” well before they are able to put skills into practice or to master them.

- **Make more effective use of group learning situations to build or strengthen new social alliances:** Make the process of forming the group part of the assignment. Define and assign alternative types of roles (e.g. questioner, problem-stater, communicator, information gatherer, synthesizer, etc.) that aid in building group collaboration and teamwork.

- **Provide activities at a school-wide level that promote team building and connection:** School-wide events, large scale team projects, cross-grade activities, or other activities that emphasize collaboration and connection rather than competition. Activities which challenge students to examine implicit boundaries (such as Teaching Tolerance’s “Mix it up Day” or weekly seating lotteries in the cafeteria) can be used to address problems in specific trouble spots. Some schools find that having anti-bullying mottos or contracts helps to formalize student commitment to the process.

- **Improve adult awareness of the problem:** Look at adult examples of bullying within your workplace and discuss behaviors you want to see changed. Practice intervening. Be good role models for positive social behavior (e.g. don’t engage in gossip or backstabbing).

**Conclusion**

When relational aggression is viewed as a form of bullying that impinges on the social and emotional development of boys and girls alike, we can more completely understand and effectively respond to it. When we ascribe this problem only to girls, we ignore the serious impact this behavior has on all students. The purpose of highlighting the existence of gender differences in bullying is not to characterize either girls or boys as being meaner or nastier, but to begin examining more closely the roots of these behaviors. If we fail to see its connection to the broader context of our society’s value and acceptance of violence and aggression, we will not be able to address these behaviors when they progress to more dangerous forms of aggression. In short, relational aggression, as other forms of bullying, when practiced over time, may be linked to behaviors such as sexual harassment and partner abuse.

One crucial element is to address the negative impact all forms of bullying have on school culture as a whole, not just focus on its effects on individual students. There are many ways that schools inadvertently promote violence in schools (Conoley, et al, 1998). Suggestions such as those included in this paper can assist schools in taking a broader view of bullying prevention and promoting elements that help create a positive climate for students where bullying is less likely to occur.

To date, work on relational aggression has come predominantly from developmental psychologists...
and from a clinical perspective focused on the specific traits of victims and aggressors. We would benefit from learning more about the balance between environmental and individual risk factors, as well as protective factors. In addition, more focus on practical and realistic ways that schools can work towards positive outcomes is needed to provide interventions that go beyond reducing bullying and victimization and that focus on school climate as a whole.
\footnotesize

State Statutes: CA, CO, CT, GA, IL, NH, NJ, NY, OK, OR (1/04), RI, VT, WA (8/03), WV. States with Program Initiatives: ME, MA, PA.
References


Coy, Doris Rhea (2001). Bullying. ERIC Digest 459405.


Greener, Susan and Crick, Nicki R. (1999) Normative beliefs about prosocial behavior In middle childhood: What does it mean to be nice? Social Development, 8, 3 351-363


Kriedler, William J. (1996) *Smart ways to handle kids who pick on others.* Instructor 105 (2) 70-74.


Olweus, Dan (1993). *Bullying At School: What We Know and What We Can Do.* Oxford: Blackwell.


Widmeyer Communications (Nov. 25, 2002, Press release) *New Survey Suggests Parents Underestimate the Bullying Kids Face; Serves as a 'Wake-Up Call' to Modern Tween Reality, Researchers Say*. Washington D.C.

