

## **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<sup>1</sup> 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