Relational Aggression in Schools: Information for Educators

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Relational aggression refers to harm within relationships that is caused by covert bullying or manipulative behavior. Examples include isolating a youth from his or her group of friends (social exclusion), threatening to stop talking to a friend (the "silent treatment"), or spreading gossip and rumors by e-mail. Relational aggression tends to be manipulative or subtle, and may not appear as typically aggressive behavior. In the past, relational aggression was viewed as a normal part of the process of socialization. However, evidence suggests that relational aggression may create just as much or more damage than physical aggression among youth (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) and should be considered an important focus of bullying/aggression prevention and intervention in the schools. It is important that schools include relational aggression when when they define aggressive behaviors and create antibullying policies in order to address the hurtful, painful experience of this type of bullying.

OVERVIEW OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

Although relational aggression can be just as harmful as physical intimidation and assaultive behaviors, this problem is often overlooked or given relatively little attention in schools where overt physical violence is better understood, more readily observed, and more easily confronted. School personnel need to recognize the consequences of relational aggression, its characteristics, and how to identify it in order to establish effective prevention and intervention strategies that will help maintain a positive school climate and student well-being.

Perceptions and Misperceptions of Relational Aggression

Educators, like much of society, tend to center their attention and interventions on physical aggression because these types of behaviors are usually easy to see. For example, starting a rumor is less visible than hitting or pushing. When caught, students who use relational aggression might say, "I didn't do anything. It's not against the rules to ignore someone!"

Adults often accept relationally aggressive behaviors as "just the way students are," especially during early teen years. School personnel may perceive relationally malicious and spiteful behavior as a stage that students will eventually outgrow. This perspective is similar to the adage, "boys will be boys and girls will be girls," which is not a satisfactory justification for hurtful behaviors.

Difficulties Identifying Relational Aggression

Because there is usually no physical evidence of the behavior and because the consequences are easily mislabeled as the normal pains of peer relationships, relational aggression is difficult to detect. Relational aggression is subtle and youth are often skilled in keeping these behaviors hidden from adults, even when perpetrated via the Internet (cyberbullying). For example, a group of students may exclude a peer who is not wearing a specific brand of shoes. School personnel may not be aware of the exclusion unless a child reports the behavior. Even if a child reports the behavior, adults have a tendency to minimize it and fail to recognize it as a type of aggression.

Developmental Characteristics

Relational aggression is not unique to adolescents; preschoolers have been observed to be quite savvy in their use of relational aggression (Crick et al., 1999). However, relational aggression requires verbal, cognitive, and social skills. Consequently, during the preschool years, relational aggression is usually

obvious and unsophisticated due to the language and cognitive development typical of this age group. For example, a child may refuse to play with a classmate. During elementary school years, the behaviors become more complex and children use covert strategies such as lying or spreading rumors. As students mature, they better understand how to target victims and how to strategize to achieve their goals. In addition, adolescents tend to believe that adults should not get involved in their social relationships or use of the Internet—that it's none of their business—which can make it difficult to intervene.

Gender Differences

As youth develop, they also gain a clearer understanding that, in our culture, physical aggression is more acceptable for boys than for girls. Girls tend to use relational rather than physical aggression, in contrast to boys who appear to use relatively equal proportions of physical and relational aggression. However, studies to date have not found consistent patterns of gender differences, and several have indicated that there is little support for calling relational aggression "girl aggression." (See Young, Boye, & Neslon, 2006 for a summary of these issues.)

Types of Relational Aggression

Relational aggression typically takes two forms: reactive and instrumental (Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003). Understanding the distinction between these two types can help adults understand why students are behaving aggressively and help adults plan and monitor interventions.

Reactive relational aggression. Reactive relational aggression is typically exhibited in response to provocation, such as using social manipulation in response to feeling threatened or angry. For example, a student who spreads rumors (often via e-mail or social networking sites) when she feels she has been wronged is engaging in reactive relational aggression.

Instrumental relational aggression. In contrast, instrumental relational aggression is characterized as manipulating relationships or using aggression (or threats of aggression) to get what one wants. For example, a child may threaten friends by saying, "I won't be your friend if you don't do things my way."

CONSEQUENCES OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

Some amount of occasional relational victimization is probably experienced by most youth and, although distressing and painful, may not be damaging in the long term. However, ongoing or severe relational aggression deserves a targeted, measured response because of the negative effects experienced by all those involved.

Targets of Relational Aggression

From preschool through adolescence, being a victim of relational aggression may result in peer rejection, social anxiety, loneliness, depression, lower self-worth, and acting out behaviors (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002). Physical fights at school often follow incidents of relational aggression that have already occurred between the students. Having a close friend may provide a buffer for students experiencing relational aggression. If, however, the relational aggression occurs between close friends, the consequences tend to be more severe and can include social anxiety, social avoidance, loneliness, psychological distress, difficulties with self control, and acting out behavior (Crick & Nelson, 2002).

Perpetrators of Relational Aggression

Students who use relational aggression tend to have both internalizing and externalizing difficulties, and tend to be consistently rejected by peers. However, the tendency to use relational aggression depends on social context, age, and reputation of the child. Psychosocial maladjustment may be a predicted outcome for both boys and girls who use relational aggression (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999).

IDENTIFYING RELATIONALLY AGGRESSIVE CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Identification of relational aggression in the school environment can be a difficult task. As mentioned earlier, students who use relational aggression are often quite sophisticated and may know how to hide their behaviors from adults or consider the behavior none of the adults' business. Youth may use threats of retaliation if the target reports the incident to authority figures or may deny involvement, which is easily done because the behaviors are often not observed by others and may be interpreted as isolated incidences of rude behavior.

Identifying youth who use relational aggression is not a clear-cut process; few developed measures are available, and most measures that have been created are used for research rather than identification and intervention purposes. Educators and parents tend to rely on changes in behavior such as withdrawal, sadness, anxiety, or increased aggression to identify when youth are bullying others or being victimized by peers. In addition, assessment of relationship aggression typically includes second-hand reports such as rating scales completed by teachers or sociometric procedures, a peer nomination process that asks students to confidentially nominate, rank, or rate the social standing or acceptability of peers.

Second-Hand Reports

Behavior rating scales (e.g., Behavior Assessment System for Children; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004; Child Behavior Checklist; Achenbach, 2001), social skills assessments, and interviews with students, parents, and teachers provide some information about relationally aggressive behaviors. However, these procedures focus on individual students who may have been referred for a specific behavioral, social, or emotional concern rather than relational aggression. Furthermore, teachers and parents who typically complete these forms may have limited, indirect information about the internal feelings of the students involved. If so, adult perceptions may not provide a complete picture of the situation.

Sociometric Measures

Another option for identifying students who engage in relational aggression is to use sociometric measures, which directly consider the views and experiences of youth. Peer ratings, rankings, or nominations of children who are bullies or who are aggressive provide evaluations from all students in a peer group, thus contributing direct, multiple observations over time within the peer group. However, obtaining parent permission to conduct this type of assessment may be difficult (see Young et al., 2006).

RESEARCH-BASED INTERVENTIONS

There are bullying prevention programs and interventions available for educators. However, many of these programs and models haven't been thoroughly evaluated by rigorous research over time. Evaluations so far show that narrowly focused intervention programs tend to have limited effectiveness. More successful and long-lasting results tend to be achieved by models that focus on system change to develop positive, responsive, caring environments that value learning (e.g., positive behavior support, see http://www.pbis.org).

Schools where adults are seen as approachable, alert, and helpful in meeting the needs of students may be especially effective in developing intervention and prevention programs. Creating a culture of mutual caring, support, and advocacy among students seems to be critical to effective intervention efforts.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES
Print

Dellasega, C., & Nixon, C. (2003). *Girl wars: 12 strategies that will end female bullying*. New York: Fireside.

Merrell, K. W., Gueldner, B. A., Ross, S. W., & Isava, D. M. (2008). How effective are school bullying intervention programs? A meta-analysis of intervention research. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 23, 26–42.

Online

Cyberbullying Research Center: http://www.cyberbullying.us

This research-based website has current information about cyberbullying including the nature, scope, reasons, and consequences of cyberbullying. The website contains a comprehensive clearinghouse of information about the use and abuse of technology by teens and resources for educators, counselors, law enforcement, and parents to help respond to and prevent cyberbullying.

The Ophelia Project: http://www.opheliaproject.org

The Ophelia Project is a group that is devoted to the awareness and prevention of nonphysical aggression. They have a goal of creating safer social climates in homes, in schools, in workplaces, and generally in the lives of all age groups, not just children. This site provides users with strategies, tools, solutions, and ideas for preventing and responding to relational aggression.

Suffolk (VA) Public Schools, *Relational aggression*: http://www.spsk12.net/departments/specialed/Relational%20Aggression.htm

This website provides a thorough overview of the purposes and roles of relational aggression. This site can help parents see where and how children might use relational aggression and alert them to signs that a child is a target. Ideas about how to respond are incorporated into the information.

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