

The Dilemma: Adolescent Girl-to-Girl Bullying in Schools

Adolescent girl-to-girl bullying, or relational aggression, includes behavior that harms others through damaging relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendships or group inclusion, and most often occurs among girls compared to boys (Crick et al., 2001). Behaviors associated with relational aggression include gossiping, spreading rumors, excluding, isolating or alienating others, writing notes or talking about someone, alliance seeking, stealing girlfriends or boyfriends, and terminating friendships (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005). More direct behaviors which can cause interpersonal damage may include excluding a peer from one's group, deliberately ignoring another, or withholding emotional support (Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). The consequences to female perpetrators and victims of relational aggression are well documented and include immediate and future potential problems for personal, academic, and career development (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Percy, 2003), including increased stress, eating disorders (Crawford & Unger, 2000), psychological disturbances (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Grills & Ollendick, 2002), self-destructive behaviors (Olafsen & Viemero, 2000), social maladjustment, deficiencies in physical wellness (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005), lower self-esteem, and higher rates of school absenteeism (Casey-Cannon et al.; Grills & Ollendick).

Negative Effects Among Adolescent Girls

Relational aggression within schools increasingly is a problem for administrators, parents, and counselors who must find innovative ways to confront this growing trend (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004). Recent surveys indicate that between 10% and 17% of middle and high school adolescents report some form of mistreatment by their peers

(Eisenberg et al., 2003) and 23% of female victims report being bullied by other girls (Fekkes et al., 2005). The problem does not end with graduation; in fact, female relational aggression is relatively stable over time and relationally aggressive girls experience social maladjustment into adulthood (Crick, 1996). Female relational aggression develops in part due to a variety of factors including norms for feminine socialization processes, interpersonal relationship expectations for adolescent girls, socialized developmental tasks of peer attachment, and assimilation of gender identity.

One factor that contributes to the problem of relational aggression is the typical feminine socialization process perpetuated by families, schools, and communities; it appears that females' relational aggression often is related to how adolescent girls ascribe to specified gender roles and identities. Gilligan (1982) first recognized feminine socialization processes which encourage girls to conform to socially prescribed gender roles and adopt stereotypical feminine characteristics, such as emphasizing interpersonal relationships, nurturance, dependence, and passivity. Such norms for female development involve rigid expectations for female behavior in interpersonal relationships and may predispose adolescent girls to become involved in relationally aggressive behavior (Casey-Cannonet al., 2001). For example, girls with traditional gender identities match their preferences, attitudes, and behaviors with traditional feminine roles (Bem, 1981; Gilligan, 1982). Because girls are expected to maintain harmonious relationships with others, they often temper their reactions when confronted with situations provoking their anger (Hatch & Forgays, 2001). However, adolescent girls who do not learn appropriate ways to directly confront others in conflictual situations may resort to utilizing subversive tactics such as manipulation to assert power

and control over others. Girls may use manipulative, covert expressions of anger, conflict resolution, and dominance by using the traditional female desire for connectedness as leverage against others (Crick & Rose, 2000), such as when girls know each other's secrets and divulge them in moments of anger.

Another factor related to interpersonal relationship expectations involves girls' tendencies to be attuned to others' needs and desires and maintaining relationships with high levels of interpersonal sensitivity, intimacy, and intensity (Rudolph, 2002). In conjunction is the normal adolescent developmental task of moving away from parents toward independence during which peer relationships and influence are very strong and girls especially, rely on peer feedback and approval for measures of self-worth, attractiveness, and self-esteem (Gilligan, 1982). Thus, development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships become central to girls' psychosocial development and well-being, but may also predispose girls to participating in and being victimized by relational aggression (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). Although research indicates that being a victim of overt or covert peer harassment may be particularly harmful to the individual, engaging in peer harassment also may be a way to be popular and fit in with peers (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Despite its form, the overall effects of relational aggression affect three developmental areas for adolescent females: personal and social development, academic development and success, and career development.