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Some types of bullying are harder to spot than physical aggression, but they still damage students' self-esteem and impede academic success.

Relational Aggression Among Students

BY ELLIE L. YOUNG, DAVID A. NELSON, AMERICA B. HOTTLE, BRITTNEY WARBURTON, AND BRYAN K. YOUNG

From *Principal Leadership*

Early Monday morning, Principal Duggan receives a phone call from an upset mother whose daughter Amy is refusing to go to school. It seems that a number of girls in Amy's class started a rumor on Facebook that she had ratted on a classmate who had been stealing from other students' lockers. Her classmates responded by shutting Amy out of weekend plans and promising paybacks at school.

According to Amy, this is the latest in a string of incidents where students have targeted her with

rumors and efforts to keep her out of social activities. Her mother is concerned. Amy's grades dropped last quarter and she wants to drop out of the school chorus.

Principal Duggan is concerned about Amy, too, but he is also worried because this is the fourth such phone call he has received from different parents this quarter.

Relational aggression refers to harm within relationships caused by covert bullying or manipulative behavior. Examples include isolating a youth from his or her group of

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friends (social exclusion), threatening to stop talking to a friend (the silent treatment), or spreading gossip and rumors by email.

This type of bullying tends to be manipulative or subtle, and may not appear as typical aggressive behavior. In the past, relational aggression was viewed as a normal part of the socialization process. However, relational aggression may create as much or even more damage than physical aggression among youth and should be considered an important focus of bullying and aggression prevention and intervention. Behavioral

policies should include relational aggression in their definitions of aggressive behaviors.

Relational aggression is often overlooked in schools because overt physical violence is better understood, more readily observed, and more easily confronted. But it's important to recognize the consequences of relational aggression, its characteristics, and indicators so that school leaders can establish effective prevention and intervention strategies and maintain a positive school climate and student well-being. ►

Effects of Relational Aggression

VICTIMS

- Suffer negative consequences, such as depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem.
- Are more likely to be rejected by their peers.
- Avoid social situations because of anxiety or fear of negative experiences.
- Initiate peer interactions much more infrequently than students who are not victims.
- Have more negative friendship qualities, such as higher levels of conflict and exclusivity, particularly when victimized by their close friends.

AGGRESSORS

- Experience negative outcomes, such as depression and social isolation.
- Tend to be rejected by their peers.
- Have poorer quality friendships, characterized by high conflict and desires for exclusivity, when compared with nonaggressive children.
- Experience more negative life satisfaction, negative and unsatisfying relationships, and emotional instability over time.
- Engage in self-destructive behavior, experience maladjustment problems, and possess poor impulse control and anger management skills.

Identifying Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is difficult to detect. Starting a rumor is less visible than hitting or pushing and leaves no physical evidence, so students who get caught can always say, "I didn't do anything. It's not against the rules to ignore someone!" And adults often accept such behaviors as "just the way kids are"—especially during early teen years—and may perceive the behavior as a stage that students eventually outgrow.

The behaviors are subtle, and youth are often skilled at hiding them from adults. For example, if a group of students excludes a peer who is not wearing the right clothes or shoes, no one will know unless a student reports the behavior. And even then, adults tend to minimize it and fail to recognize it as a type of aggression.

Developmental characteristics—Relational aggression requires verbal, cognitive, and social skills. In preschool, relational aggression is usually obvious and unsophisticated because of the language and cognitive development of this age group. But as skills develop, it becomes more complex and includes such covert strategies as lying and spreading rumors. As students mature, they better understand how to target victims and achieve their goals.

Gender differences—As children develop, they gain an under-

standing that physical aggression is more acceptable for boys than girls in our culture. It is believed that girls tend to use relational rather than physical aggression and that boys use equal proportions of physical and relational aggression, but studies indicate that there is little support for calling relational aggression "girl aggression."

Types—Relational aggression typically takes two forms: reactive and instrumental. Understanding the distinction between them can help adults understand why students behave aggressively and how to plan and monitor interventions.

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 (in person, through email, or social networking sites) when he or she feels wronged is engaging in reactive relational aggression.

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

Consequences—Most young people experience occasional relational victimization, and although distressing and painful, it may not

Preventing and Stopping Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is usually treated using primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions.

PRIMARY LEVEL STRATEGIES

Can be used with all students to teach positive behaviors. They involve individual work, pair work, and group work:

- Individual work exercises promote the expression of inner feelings and enhance students' self-confidence, self-respect, and self-acceptance.
- Pair work exercises concentrate on mutual acceptance, mutual cooperation, tact, and the ability to fulfill the wishes of a partner.
- Group work exercises teach cooperation, helpfulness, sharing, kindness, and developmental pathways of emotions.

SECONDARY LEVEL STRATEGIES

Can be provided individually or within established school-based social competence programs. Secondary interventions may be adapted to reach groups of students who need more-directed skills development and support. They often consist of:

- School-based social competence and anti-violence curricula.
- Activities devoted to developing students' empathy, perspective-taking, emotion regulation, anger management skills, social problem solving, and assertiveness.
- Techniques for use at school that also transfer to the home environment.
- Efforts to reinforce positive family and sibling relationships, such as closeness and emotional support, and families' shared leisure activities.
- Hands-on instruction in the general education classroom.

TERTIARY LEVEL STRATEGIES

Provide treatment for students who are involved in or are at risk for engaging in or being victimized by relational aggression. Most programs are designed for girls and emphasize:

- Creating safe environments to learn about prosocial relationship skills and methods of gaining social support.
- Teaching students about relational aggression and the harm it can cause, relating it to incidents in students' own lives while simultaneously exploring alternative behavioral strategies, and integrating what students have learned into their own friendships.
- Providing structured group interventions that offer opportunities to learn constructive approaches to conflict.
- Addressing objectives pertaining to relational aggression, assertion, conflict resolution, social skills development, and perspective taking.

be damaging in the long term. Ongoing or severe relational aggression, however, deserves a targeted, measured response because of the negative effects experienced by those involved.

Victims—Being a victim of relational aggression may result in peer rejection, social anxiety, loneliness, depression, a lowered sense of self-worth, and acting out behaviors. Physical fights at school often follow incidents of relational aggression that occurred between the students. Having a close friend may provide a buffer for students experiencing relational aggression, but if the relational aggression occurs between close friends, the consequences can be more severe and may include social anxiety and avoidance, loneliness, psychological distress, difficulties with self-control, and acting out behaviors.

Perpetrators—Students who use relational aggression tend to have both internalizing difficulties (e.g., depression or social anxiety) and externalizing difficulties (e.g., disruptive behavior or poor impulse control) and tend to be consistently rejected by peers. But the tendency to use relational aggression depends on the social context, age, and reputation of the student. Psychosocial maladjustment may be a predicted outcome for both boys and girls who use relational aggression.

Identification—It is difficult

to identify relational aggression. Students who use relational aggression hide their behavior from adults. Perpetrators 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 and may be interpreted as isolated incidences of rude behavior.

Identifying youth who use relational aggression is not a clear-cut process. Educators and parents must rely on changes in behavior—such as withdrawal, sadness, anxiety, or increased aggression—to identify when youth are bullying others or being victimized. Assessments of relationship aggression typically include secondhand reports, such as rating scales, or sociometric procedures.

Secondhand reports or behavior rating scales, such as the Behavior Assessment System for Children (the Pearson Assessment) and the Child Behavior Checklist (the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment); social skills assessments; and interviews with students, parents, and teachers provide information about relationally aggressive behaviors. Those procedures focus on students who may have been referred for a specific behavioral, social, or emotional concern, however, rather than relational aggression. Further, teachers and parents who provide reports may have limited,

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indirect information about the feelings of the students involved, so adult perceptions may not provide a complete picture of the situation.

Sociometric measures directly consider the views and experiences of youth. Peer ratings, rankings, or nominations of students who are bullies or aggressive incorporate evaluations from all students in a peer group, thus contributing direct, multiple observations. Obtaining parent permission to conduct this type of assessment may be difficult, however.

Research-Based Interventions

Many bullying prevention programs and interventions are available, but few have been evaluated over time. Evaluations so far show that narrowly focused intervention programs have limited effectiveness. Models that focus on system change to develop positive, responsive, caring environments that value learning (e.g., positive behavior support, see www.pbis.org) have more successful, longer-lasting results.

Schools where adults are approachable, alert, and helpful in meeting the needs of students may be especially effective in developing intervention and prevention programs. Personalizing the school environment and creating a culture of mutual caring, support, and advocacy among students seems

essential to effective intervention efforts. ■

Online Resources

Cyberbullying Research Center

www.cyberbullying.us

Site has research-based information about cyberbullying; the use and abuse of technology by teens; and resources for all stakeholders.

The Ophelia Project

www.opheliaproject.org

Project is devoted to the awareness and prevention of nonphysical aggression and offers strategies and tools for preventing and responding to relational aggression.

Mean Girls—Realities of Relational Aggression

www.spsk12.net/departments/specialed/Relational%20Aggression.htm

Site contains an overview of relational aggression and resources for parents.

Stuttering Gets the Royal Treatment

King George VI, whose live broadcasts of hope and inspiration kept the spirits of the British people alive during the dark days of World War II, met the challenge of stuttering with courage.

For more information on how you can meet your challenge, contact us.



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StutteringHelp.org
800-992-9392

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