Relational Aggression Among Students

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

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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 at school. 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 social activities. Her mother is concerned because Amy's grades dropped last quarter and Amy 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 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. This type of bullying tends to be manipulative or subtle, and it may not appear as typically aggressive behavior. In the past, relational aggression was viewed as a normal part of the process of socialization. Evidence suggests, however, that relational aggression may create just as much or even more damage than physical aggression among youth (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) and that it should be considered an important focus of bullying and aggression prevention and intervention in schools. Behavioral policies should include relational aggression in their definitions of aggressive behaviors to address the power of this type of bullying.

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

Identifying Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is difficult to detect. Starting a rumor is less visible than hitting or pushing and generally 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 relationally malicious and spiteful behavior as a stage that students will eventually outgrow.

The behaviors are subtle, and youth are often skilled at hiding them from adults, even when they use the Internet (e.g., cyberbullying). 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 if a student 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—it has been observed in preschoolers (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999)—but it requires verbal, cognitive, and social skills. During the preschool years, relational aggression is usually obvious and unsophisticated because of the language and cognitive development typical 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 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, which can make it more difficult to intervene.

Gender Differences

As children develop, they generally gain an understanding that physical aggression is more acceptable for boys than girls in our culture. It has been believed that girls tend to use relational rather than physical aggression and that boys use relatively equal proportions of physical and relational aggression, but 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, & Nelson, 2006, for a summary of these issues.)

Types

Relational aggression typically takes two forms: reactive and instrumental (Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003). Understanding the distinc-

tion between them can help adults understand why students are behaving 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 or through e-mail or social networking sites) when he or she feels wronged is engaging in reactive relational aggression.

Instrumental relational aggression is characterized as 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 some occasional relational victimization, and although it is distressing and painful, it may not be damaging in the long term. Ongoing or severe relational aggression, however, deserves a targeted, measured response because of the negative effects experienced by all 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 (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, but if the relational aggres-

sion 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 behaviors (Crick & Nelson, 2002).

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 (Crick et al., 1999).

Identification

It is difficult to identify relational aggression in the school environment.

Effects of Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is a form of bullying, and its consequences to victims and aggressors are similar to other forms of bullying.

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 to 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

Source: Crothers, L. M., Bell, G. R, Blasik, J. L., Camic, L. A., Greisler, M. J., & Keener, D. (2008). Relational aggression in children and adolescents: An overview of the literature for school psychologists. *NASP Communiqué, 36*(5).

Students who use relational aggression are often quite sophisticated and know how to 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 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 those that are have been created primarily for research, rather than for identification and intervention purposes. Educators and parents generally must 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. Assessments of relationship aggression typically include secondhand reports, such as rating scales that have been 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.

Secondhand reports. 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 some information about relationally aggressive behaviors. Those procedures focus on individual students who may have been referred for a specific behavioral, social, or emotional concern, however, rather than relational aggression. Further, teachers and parents who typically provide reports 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

Preventing and Stopping Relational Aggression

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

Primary Level Strategies

Primary 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

Secondary interventions 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 antiviolence 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, as well as families' shared leisure activities
- Hands-on instruction in the general education classroom.

Tertiary Level Strategies

Tertiary prevention programs 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.

Source: Crothers, L. M., Bell, G. R., Blasik, J. L., Camic, L. A., Greisler, M. J., & Keener, D. (2008). Addressing relational aggression in children and adolescents: Interventions and treatment programs. *NASP Communiqué, 36*(6). Adapted with permission.

Online Resources

Cyberbullying Research Center
www.cyberbullying.us
This 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
This 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
This site contains a thorough overview of relational aggression and resources for parents.

experiences of youth. Peer ratings, rankings, or nominations of students who are bullies or who are aggressive incorporate evaluations from all students in a peer group, thus contributing direct, multiple observations over time within the peer group. Obtaining parent permission to conduct this type of assessment may be difficult, however. (See Young et al., 2006.)

Research-Based Interventions

Many bullying prevention programs and interventions are available, but few programs and models have been thoroughly evaluated by rigorous research over time. Evaluations so far show that narrowly focused intervention programs tend to 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 and longer-lasting results.

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. Personalizing the school environment and creating a culture of mutual caring, support, and advocacy among students seems to be essential to effective intervention efforts. **P**L

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