

Relational Aggression: Recommendations for Teachers, Administrators, and Parents
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Relational aggression is a general term applied to non-physical forms of bullying. Name calling, teasing, and gossiping are just a few forms of this type of aggression. Individuals who engage in relationally aggressive behaviors intend to negatively harm their victims, often using their bullying to increase their own social status. While both girls and boys engage in relationally aggressive acts, girls tend to exhibit this behavior more often than boys.

For Teachers/ Administrators:

Understand relational aggression's impact on your students' daily lives. The media often over emphasizes events like school shootings and other violent occurrences in the schools. However, relational aggression is much more pervasive than school violence. If left undetected, it also may contribute to other forms of aggression.

Do not tolerate relational aggression. Many victims of relational aggression feel that adults don't care enough to stop their perpetrators. Communicate to the school community that any form of bullying (relational aggression, physical, etc.) will not be tolerated. Focus instead on building a community of caring and respect.

Set up a system for reporting acts of relational aggression. Teasing, taunting, gossiping, and other forms of relational aggression are most likely to happen outside of the classroom. Therefore, students are the best source of information. Set up a drop-box in your classroom or office where students can report incidents of relational aggression.

Emphasize the values of diversity, empathy, and respect in your classroom lessons. Choose lessons that reflect these values through literature or other media. Work through problem solving situations that force students to think about consequences to actions. Relate these lessons to the students' everyday lives. Consider the opportunity for students to develop these skills by volunteering in the community.

Involve all responsible parties when handling incidents of relational aggression. Acts of relational aggression rarely involve just the victim and the bully. Students who witness teasing, deliver notes, or laugh at cruel jokes also contribute to the problem. Involving all students helps prevent such incidents from reoccurring.

Let the students decide how to handle situations of relational aggression. Involving students in the decision making process not only gives them a voice but makes them think more deeply about the consequences to their actions. As a result, they are more confident and flexible to change.

Look for acts of relational aggression at early ages. Preschool-aged children begin to develop patterns of relational aggression during their playtime at school or during play-dates. It's never too early to watch for patterns of relational aggression.

Role-play situations involving relational aggression. If a child is unable to effectively handle bullying situations or unsure of how to handle herself when faced with relational aggression, consider practicing coping strategies through role-playing situations.

Establish school-wide mentorship programs. Allow older students to model positive behavior to younger students. Older students will participate in positive leadership positions and younger students will benefit from having an older role model to go to for advice.

Adopt a curriculum for preventing relational aggression. One example of such a curriculum is the Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum. Another alternative is to integrate prevention activities into an already existing curriculum.

For Parents:

Be attentive to your child's mood and behavior. Sudden changes in mood or behavior are often, but not always, related to relational aggression. These include: depressed mood, lack of motivation to do school work or attend school, frequent angry outbursts, or feelings of fear toward social situations.

Work to build your child's self-esteem. Both the victims and perpetrators in relationally aggressive incidents may suffer from a lack of self esteem. Praise your child for his or her unique qualities and frequently present him or her with challenges he or she is able to overcome.

Monitor your child's access to the computer and TV. Many TV shows popularize relationally aggressive behavior, while computers give easy access to victims. Instant messaging and myspace.com pages decrease face to face contact and make bullying easier.

Don't trivialize your child's problems. Issues your child brings up may seem unimportant from an adult perspective but are extremely important in his or her life. Allow your child to express her feelings without dismissing their importance. Keeping an open line of communication between your child and yourself is helpful in order to prevent further problems.

Emphasize higher social values. Instill values of respect and diversity by modeling such values yourself. Deemphasize relationally aggressive behavior.

For Students:

Choose your friends carefully. Friends who attempt to control your behavior, exclude you from activities, gossip behind your back, tell your secrets, tease you, or display such activities toward others aren't true friends. Surround yourself with supportive friends who accept you unconditionally.

Don't hesitate to report incidents involving relational aggression. If you witness a relationally aggressive act, or are a victim yourself, tell a teacher, parent, counselor, or administrator immediately. Telling an adult will prevent such incidents from happening in the future.

Be strong enough to stand up for your own values. Relationally aggressive individuals thrive on putting down others. By standing up to cliques and mean behavior, you are taking away their power over others.

Engage in positive activities. Volunteer in your community or participate in leadership programs. These programs will build the self-esteem needed to stand up to relationally aggressive students.

Understand you cannot please everyone. While it is important to try to be well-liked by everyone, you should not compromise your values in order to become well-liked. You are not expected to be friends with everyone. Rely on your other friends, parents, or other adults for support in such situations.

Resources:

Coping With Cliques. (August 2005). Retrieved October 18, 2006 from Teens Health. Website: www.kidshealth.org.

The Current State of Relational Aggression (2006). Retrieved October 18, 2006 from The Ophelia Project. Website: www.theopheliaproject.org.

A Different Understanding of Violence. (2006). Retrieved October 18, 2006 from The Empower Program. Website: www.empowered.org/facts.htm.

Don't Be A Victim. (2006). Retrieved October 18, 2006 from Names Do Hurt: About Relational Aggression. Website: www.namesdohurt.com/411_2/html.

Fischio, Tonya (2006). Mean Girls Start in Preschool. *Families, Systems, and Health*, 28.

Iyer, Vidhya (2006). Relational Aggression: A Focus on Causes. Retrieved October 18, 2006 from www.namesdohurt.com.

Mean Girls: How to Combat Bullying. (November 2005). Retrieved October 18, 2006 from Pioneer Thinking. Website: www.pioneerthinking.com/ara-meangirls.html.

Vail, Kathleen (2002). How Girls Hurt. *American School Board Journal*, 189, 8.

Wiseman, Rosalind (2002). *Queen Bees and Wannabees*. New York: Three Rivers Press.