



Subtle but serious

HOW YOUNG GIRLS USE SOCIAL AGGRESSION TO BULLY OTHERS AND WHY STOPPING IT EARLY IS KEY

by Suzanne Marie Fanger

In the popular movie *Mean Girls*, two cliques of teenage girls become socially aggressive toward each other in school. They play spiteful tricks and say and write cruel things behind one another's backs. While the movie is a fictional comedy, there is a large degree of truth in the groups' cold-blooded behavior: Girls sometimes deliberately mistreat other girls within their own peer groups.

Many people assume that boys are more aggressive than girls. In fact, girls are equally as aggressive, they simply use different methods to express it. Boys generally act out their aggression physically—typically by hitting, shoving, or kicking. Girls tend to utilize subtler expressions, in-

cluding those exhibited in the movie—gossiping, group exclusion, and rumor spreading. Researchers call this “relational aggression,” which includes any behavior that intentionally harms another person’s self-esteem, friendships, or social status. It can occur between close friends or in ways that harm a person’s relationship with a larger group of peers—and it begins early.

The mean girls phenomenon is most frequently associated with girls around 11 or 12 years old. In truth, bullying is commonly witnessed in children (of both genders) as young as 3. But social aggression is tricky to deal with. Adults often don’t see it because it’s hard to

UNDERSTANDING AGGRESSION

Here are some signs and questions that can help you identify your child's social role:

Victim

- She rarely fights with friends. Does she give in to avoid conflicts rather than stand her ground over something important?
- She is too eager to please. Does she usually do what others ask of her, whether it's in her best interest or not?
- Her friends dominate her. Do they make most of the decisions and tell her what to do?

Bully

- She is a good leader, but will not follow. Does she always direct games and tell others what to do?
- She seems unaware of others' feelings. Is she consistently unable to interpret the feelings of other children?
- She is unresponsive to compromise and needs to go first in games. Does she frequently avoid situations in which she is not completely in charge?

LEARN MORE

These Web sites provide more information on relational aggression.

www.opheliaproject.org

The Ophelia Project is committed to healthy peer relationships for all youth.

www.girlsinc.org

Girls, Inc. is a nonprofit dedicated to helping girls become strong, smart, and bold.

www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services runs this anti-bullying Web site.

www.relationalaggression.com

Information and resources regarding relational aggression.

detect. They also tend to underestimate how distressing it is for the children involved, particularly because both the victim and the aggressor downplay its significance. And even when teachers or parents do suspect something serious, they are often at a loss as to how to resolve the situation.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Relational aggression brings a host of problems. Victims suffer self-esteem damage and are lonelier, more submissive, and more socially anxious than other children. Ironically, the aggressors suffer some of the same problems. As with all bullies, research shows they feel lonely, have low self-esteem, and are likely to become socially rejected or victims themselves.

During the preschool years, when relational aggression first appears, adults are naturally more attuned to physical bullying. And rightfully so: the wounds from hitting and kicking at that age may be more serious than those from exclusion and gossiping. But the seeds of the destructive behavior are planted early. Consider this scenario between three 6-year-old girls:

Maya sits quietly at the classroom arts table. Next to her, Chantal and Zoe draw with colored pencils. "I'm drawing a whole field of flowers in front of my house," says Chantal.

"I'm wearing a fancy pink dress in this picture, Chantal, 'cause I'm going to your birthday party," says Zoe. She turns to Maya. "You can come to Chantal's party, too ... if you follow the rules."

Maya nods, and looks down at her empty paper. After a pause, she looks up at her best friend and says, "Zoe, I really do have to go to the bathroom! Please?"

Zoe shakes her head. "It's time to draw. You can't go while we're drawing. Those are just my rules. You have to follow them if you're our friend. Right, Chantal?"

The girls' teacher walks over. She sees Maya's blank paper. "Maya? What are you doing? If you don't start your work I'm going to have to put your name on the board."

What's going on? Zoe has made Maya the victim of her "covert" bullying, and compromised Maya's ability to take care of herself. In addition, Maya is unable to focus on her work.

Unfortunately, an easygoing child such as

Maya will likely continue to be bullied during adolescence. Research shows that the victim role becomes stabilized by the time a child is 5. Girls who use relational aggression as effectively as Zoe may continue their behavior as well because they have developed habits of friendship, interaction, and fighting that are hard to break. Indeed, as children mature, and their social skills improve, the methods of hurting each other become more sophisticated and painful.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Developing well-balanced friendships is key to a child becoming neither a victim nor an aggressor. Therefore, it's important for you to help your children learn healthy social skills in the preschool years, when the nature of friendships is first being explored.

Compliant children, such as Maya, tend to think of others' needs before considering their own. Maya's parents can help her by ensuring her own needs are met, and by encouraging her to value and express her own opinions. Her feelings must be respected, as well. In addition, finding an activity she loves, and identifying her skills, will increase her self-confidence and give her something positive to focus on.

Girls like Maya also tend to avoid conflicts. Parental support during disagreements with friends and siblings helps ensure that problems are solved fairly and teaches children that conflict situations are healthy learning environments. But Maya may also have trouble forming healthy relationships. So it's important for her parents to teach her how to recognize a true friend: one who is respectful, trustworthy, empathic, loyal, and cooperative.

More dominating children, such as Zoe, should be helped to see things from another child's perspective so they can learn to empathize and compromise with friends. Zoe's parents can help her find more appropriate places to be in control and feel powerful, such as on the athletic field, for example.

By learning how to effectively handle difficult situations with friends, children can take care of themselves and develop healthy relationships. The time to start is early in life. **P&C**

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