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Abstract

There are differences in aggressive behavior between early adolescent boys and girls. Girls use relational aggressive methods to gain control over their peers. In general, schools do not directly address this form of aggression. School counselors are in the position to reduce relational aggression in schools. Assessment must first be performed in order to address the level of aggression in girls. This can be completed through questionnaires or focus groups. There are several prevention and intervention methods that be incorporated in schools. These methods can reduce relational aggression in early adolescent girls.

RELATIONAL AGGRESSION
IN EARLY ADOLESCENT GIRLS

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Sara M. Bucknam

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Abstract

There are differences in aggressive behavior between early adolescent boys and girls. Girls use relational aggressive methods to gain control over their peers. In general, schools do not directly address this form of aggression. School counselors are in the position to reduce relational aggression in schools. Assessment must first be performed in order to address the level of aggression in girls. This can be completed through questionnaires or focus groups. There are several prevention and intervention methods that be incorporated in schools. These methods can reduce relational aggression in early adolescent girls.

Relational Aggression in Early Adolescent Girls

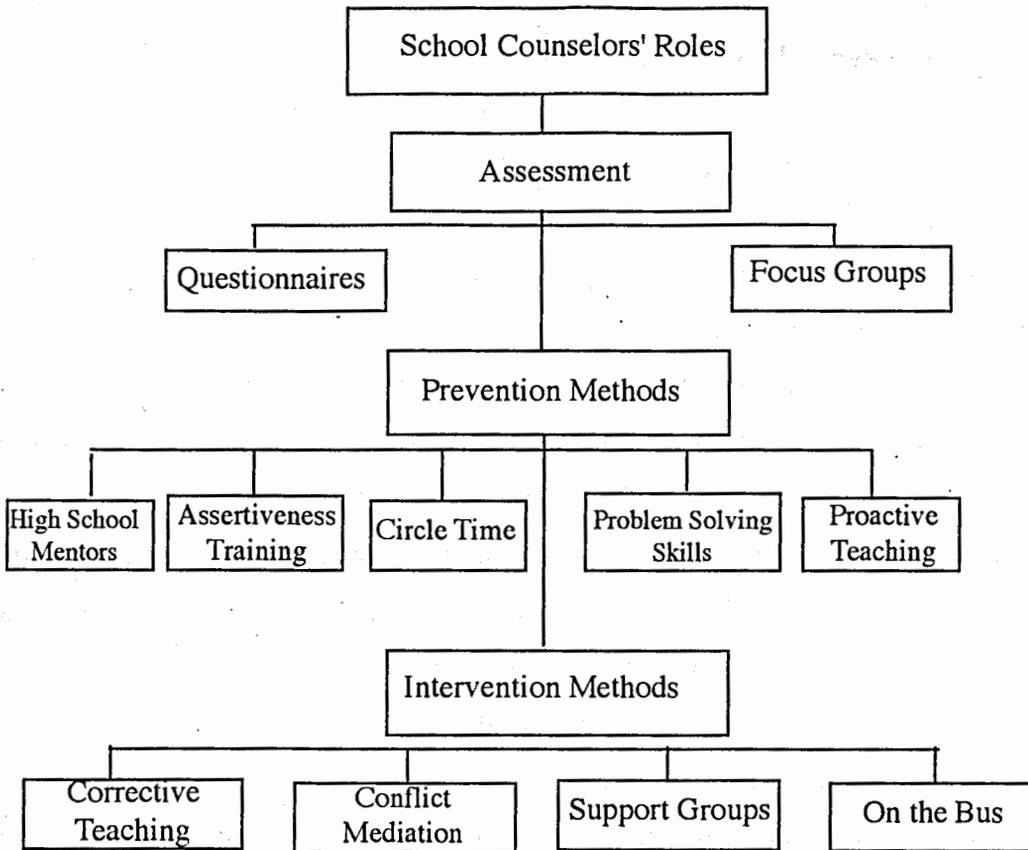
Ten to 20 percent of North American girls are in some form of crisis, either an on going physical, emotional, or mental situation that increases their stress hormone (cortisol) level to a degree which interferes with normal, healthy development (Gurian, 2002). Every child in the United States has a right to learn in a safe environment. However, in a 2001 study of sixth through tenth graders, 20 percent of the students reported being harassed by other students. This harassment can result in serious, long-term academic, physical, and emotional consequences (Lumsden, 2002). Most bullying occurs within the school environment (Ross, 1996). Typically, nonphysical harassment usually goes undetected by school personnel (Simmons, 2002), and thus, victims are subjected to repeated situations in which the aggression occurs. The majority of these harassment victims are considered to be submissive, that is, not actively causing the problems (Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

The majority of girls participate in relational aggression. Exposure to relational aggression can have significant negative effects on adolescent girls. There is a significant relationship between the current level of depression in 13 to 15-year old girls and their history of being teased (Ross, 1996).

Figure 1 shows the various ways school counselors can get involved in order to reduce relational aggression in school. School counselors play an integral part of the prevention and intervention of relational aggression. A portion of the role of the school counselor involves assessment through questionnaires and focus groups to determine the level of relational aggression in schools. Once the relational aggression is identified amongst the girls, schools can implement prevention and intervention methods. These prevention methods include high school mentoring, assertiveness training, teaching of problem solving skills, and Circle Time.

Intervention methods include corrective teaching, conflict mediation, support groups and the On the Bus Program. The first step of reducing relational aggression is to understand the differences in aggression between boys and girls.

Figure 1



Differences in Boys and Girls

There are significant differences in the ways boys and girls “harass” or “bully” their peers. Boys tend to be more physical and verbally aggressive in their approach. In addition, boys usually bully others for power purposes or to show outward signs of their masculinity. They harass boys as well as girls and children

younger than themselves (Ross, 1996). Boys bully more than girls by a ratio of 3:1. However, the nonphysical forms of bullying that girls typically engage in usually go undetected, and thus unreported (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997).

In contrast, girls tend to only target girls their own age and who are members of their own peer group (Ross, 1996). Although both genders engage in aggression, girls are “more advanced” in their strategies of indirect aggression (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Rather than physically harass their victims, girls are more relationally aggressive. The relationally aggressive girl “uses a child’s relationship with another teen, or their friendship status, as a way of inflicting social harm (e.g. purposefully excluding a peer from social activities, threatening to withdraw’s one friendship, telling rumors or gossip)” (Prinstein, Boegers, & Vernberg, 2001, p. 479). Overt displays of aggression by girls is punishable by social rejection. To avoid this rejection, “girls retreat beneath a surface of sweetness to hurt each other in secret” (Simmons, 2002, p. 22). In response to relational aggression, girl victims tend to use subtle forms of coping, such as internalization and distancing, in order to deal with the situation (Phelps, 2001).

Primary Motivations of Relational Aggression

In order to understand the effects of relational aggression and why it happens, one must put it into context with developmental changes and cultural expectations. A girl’s self-concept during this stage in life is a result of feedback from others (Jaffe, 1998). Establishing a positive self-image is more difficult for girls than boys (LeCroy & Daley, 2001). Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs model suggests that in order for growth to be maintained, one needs the approval and love from others so that self-esteem and self-respect are formed and nurtured (Sullivan, 2000). As a result, relationships become the primary concern during this developmental stage.

Adolescents seek autonomy and independence away from their parents (Caissy, 1994). According to Erik Erickson's stages of psychosocial development, between the ages 13 and 18, young people are working on their self-concept and answering the questions, "Who am I?" and "Where do I fit in?". In this search for identity and independence, adolescents want to separate from their parents (Rice & Veerman, 1996). As a result, adolescents turn to their peers for support and approval (Caissy, 1994).

The importance of peer relationships, leads girls to form cliques (an exclusive group of girls who are close friends). According to Wiseman (2002), cliques impact girls the most when they are in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. In addition, when girls enter middle school or junior high school, girls are put into a new, strange environment. A group of peers provides protection and security during this transition in their lives (Rice & Veerman, 1996). This occurs at the same time "they're obsessively microanalyzing social cues, rules, and regulations and therefore are at their most insecure" (Wiseman, 2002, p. 38). Adolescents are well aware of the social pecking order (Rice and Veerman, 1996).

The North American culture teaches girls that relationships have the utmost importance in their lives. During childhood, girls practice caretaking and nurturing on each other. Girls are expected to please one another in order to retain their femininity and to maintain their relationships (Simmons, 2002). Female adolescents prefer peers for friends who are cooperative and willing to share (Jaffe, 1998). As a result, girls do not learn to express feelings of anger directly, for fear of ostracism (Pipher, 1994). Instead, they express anger in covert forms (in order to be more "ladylike") (Helmich, 2002). These covert tactics may include purposefully excluding a peer from social activities, threatening to withdraw one's friendship, telling rumors, or spreading gossip (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001).

Therefore, “the prospect of solitude can be the most pointed weapon in the hidden culture of girls’ aggression” (Simmons, 2002, p. 27). Isolation from peer groups during early adolescence is devastating, particularly to girls. This is heightened by the imaginary audience phenomenon, which is an assumption that everyone is looking at them or thinking about them (Vernon, 1999). This anxiety is a result of the adolescent’s lack of self confidence and insecurity, which is heighten during the ages of 13 and 14 (Caissy, 1994). In particular, Low self-esteem has been reported in both early and late-maturing girls. It is believed that any deviation from “normal development” is related to psychosocial adaptation (Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

School’s Roles

Typical School Response to Relational Aggression

In general, schools seem to be making minimal effort to deter relational aggression. Many adults do not notice the nonphysical aggression in girls because relational aggression is more difficult to detect than physical aggression. Most educators are not trained to detect, intervene, or prevent the relational aggression in students. Teachers are too busy dealing with lesson plans, overcrowding classrooms, and outward behavior problems. They see this alternate form of bullying too complex and too time consuming to get involved (Simmons, 2002). As a result, the adults tend to ignore it, not fully knowing the effects that kind of aggression has on girls (Ross, 1996). This ignorance can have a serious impact on students. “When school adults ignore, trivialize, or tolerate bullying incidents the victims internalize the implied message that the adults have discounted their worth as individuals, and they carry this message forward into adulthood” (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997 p. 316). Since many educators neither see the relational aggressor nor choose to dismiss its importance, most schools do not have anti-bullying

policies that specifically address alternate forms of aggression (Simmons, 2002).

School Counselor's Roles

School counselors are put in a unique position to handle students' relationships and how their feelings are affected by them. Counselors, in addition to other school personnel spend a great deal of their time "putting out the fires" of students' problems. Although this is one aspect of their job, prevention of relational aggression is ideal. There are several steps that must be accomplished in order to prevent these types of relationship problems. In order to accomplish the goal of reducing relational aggression, a whole school approach must be emphasized (Ross, 1996).

Assessment

The first step in aggression prevention or intervention is to collect, organize, and present evidence that supports reasons to implement prevention programs. This step involves identifying the problem, which usually occurs as the result of a concern or question that comes from school personnel, parents, or students. Next, it is recommended to form a work group and assign leadership that will help to develop a program. Members of the group should consist of various people, including teachers, parents, administrators students, and other personnel with expertise in aggressive students. The last part of this organizational step is to define the mission for the group. For the development of this statement, it is helpful to think back to the original concern (Knowles, 2001). To begin with, school counselors can distribute surveys to students, school personnel, and parents to get some baseline data for how serious the relational aggressive problem is with students (Lumsden, 2002). When evaluating issues related towards aggression, it is important to address emotional, cognitive, and behavioral/coping components (Furlong & Smith, 1994).

Questionnaires and Focus Groups

Student questionnaires and student focus groups are two ways to collect data from the target population. The self-report questionnaire measures rates and changes in attitudes and behaviors. A focus group involves a structured discussion with 7-10 students, whose purpose is to obtain opinions on such topics like school prevention efforts, advice on new directions, safety issues, and administrative responsiveness to problems (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Knowles, 2001). Although both of these methods are inexpensive, there are several concerns, relating to validity and reliability.

There are five general ways to check the reliability of self-report questionnaires: comparison, multiple scores reliability, retest reliability, alternate form reliability, and split-half reliability. There are certain ways one can ensure a higher validity in questionnaires, including selecting judges to review all the questions and criteria referencing. With regards to focus groups, ways to increase the validity is to recruit widely for group member selection, establish a safe environment for disclosure of honest opinions, develop a clear set of questions to guide the group discussion and use the same questions with each group, elicit responses from all students, and retain facilitator neutrality (Knowles, 2001).

Prevention Methods

According to Knowles (2001), programs that are implemented too late, or after risk behaviors begin, are remedial rather than preventive. There are several key components of an effective prevention program: 1) ongoing, long-term sessions; 2) keep content developmentally appropriate; 3) part of a comprehensive school program; 4) accommodates multiple learning styles; 5) involves family and community and 6) allows for practice of skills.

High School Mentoring

One specific prevention method has been developed by the Ophelia Project, entitled "Creating a Safe Social Climate in Our Schools." The program is a half-day training program for school communities that want to address all forms of peer aggression, with an extra emphasis on relational aggression among girls. "Its purpose is to change the damaging social dynamics in a school community by encouraging staff, parents, and high school students to intervene in peer aggression" (Ophelia Project, 2002, p. 1). High school mentors are trained to use role plays, story telling, and group discussions to mentor younger students about various forms of aggression, the consequences of aggression, and positive alternatives (Ophelia Project, 2002).

Assertiveness Training

Another prevention method is assertiveness training. Some experts believe that girls would have less relational aggression with other girls if they learned to be more straightforward and honest about their feelings (Hellmich, 2002).

Assertiveness training programs help students to control immediate emotional responses of submissiveness and in responding in active (though not aggressive) ways (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Role play is used extensively with this approach. If this method is used in a small group setting, it is recommended to include students who are assertive and nonassertive. Students can learn to use "I" statements, learn to relax, focus on body language, agreeing with criticism, and masking out the insults. (Sullivan, 2000).

Problem Solving Skills

Teaching problem solving skills has become a key component in many prevention strategies. In problem solving programs/activities, one learns how to face new situations and create new solutions instead relying on previous responses.

“Problem solving is a complex skill for young people to learn because it requires the ability to tolerate ambiguity and develop patience for trial and error searching” (LeCroy & Daley, 2001). These skills can be learned through exposure to problem situations and guided practice. In the Elia and Clabby model (1992), the problem solving process is comprised of eight steps: look for signs of different feelings, tell yourself what the problem is, decide on your goal, stop and think of as many solutions to the problem as you can, for each solution, think of all the things that might happen next, choose the best solution, plan it and make a final check, and try it and rethink it (LeCroy & Daley, 2001).

Circle Time

Circle Time is a regular prevention activity in which students and their teacher or counselor spend from 15 to 30 minutes a week by sitting in a circle participating in games and discussion. The major purpose of circle time is to encourage the class to work as a team rather than being only an alliance of cliques. It is also a way of increasing mutual support, breaking down barriers, and encouraging the group to deal with difficult issues (Sullivan, 2000). “Circle Time can be used as a preventative tool for bullying in that it encourages children to get to know others outside of their normal groups... it teaches children to value diversity” (Sullivan, 2000, p. 93).

Proactive Teaching

Proactive teaching is a way to prevent problem situations by telling students what to do having them practice before they encounter a specific situation. This method is most effective when students are learning something new or when they have had difficulty in a past situation. It is recommended to use proactive teaching when students are calm and attentive, not after misbehavior or when the students are upset. The five steps for using proactive teaching include: 1) Introduce the skill

and discuss it with students; 2) Give a reason and talk about it; 3) Request acknowledgement; 4) Practice through role-plays and discussion and 5) Give a positive consequence (Davis, Nelson, & Gauger, 2000).

Intervention Methods

School counselors can implement effective interventions by having reliable, comprehensive developmental counseling programs in place. There are several general interventions that can take place that are related to aggression, including individual counseling, small-group counseling, peer facilitator training and projects, consultation, and coordination of counseling services. Individual counseling strategies for use in dealing with aggression include art therapy, music therapy, and poetry therapy. Sandhu and Aspy (2000) recommend a cognitive or cognitive-behavioral approach because they address irrational, illogical, and unrealistic thinking that typically accompanies aggressive acts. In a group counseling situation, 6-8 students are brought together for several sessions. Several group strategies that can be used in small-group counseling include role reversal, modeling, fishbowl technique, play groups, and sociodrama. In terms of consultation, school counselors can provide information for curriculum development and the selection of materials for aggression prevention and intervention. Peer mediation programs, also referred to as conflict resolution programs, are aimed to reduce interpersonal and intergroup hostility. During the peer mediation process, one or two trained student mediators sit in to arbitrate a conflict resolution between two other students who are having a dispute. The mediator(s) tries to reach a resolution between the two students (Sandhu & Aspy, 2000).

Corrective Teaching

One specific intervention technique is corrective teaching, based on the Boys Town Teaching Method. This method is “a systematic approach that you can

use to identify children's inappropriate behavior and guide them toward appropriate behavior" (David, Nelson, & Gauger, 2000, p. 50). Corrective teaching requires a balance among the following concepts: description, relationship, and consequence. This method works best when the students are not aware of the mistakes they are making. The description idea involves describing a behavior in either words or actions, role-playing, and practice. The relationship concept uses friendliness and warmth towards the student and involves helping the student to feel good about himself or herself. Lastly, the consequence notion uses praise, feedback, and a consequence for the inappropriate behavior (Davis, Nelson, & Gauger, 2000). Overall, "The teaching method allows you to deal consistently with students and provides young people the opportunity to learn positive ways to get what they want or to settle their differences with others" (Davis, Nelson, & Gauger, 2000).

Conflict Mediation

In terms of individual counseling, conflict mediation may be used as a means of intervention. The counselor can do this or train other students to conduct the mediation (Studer, 1996). It is best to discuss with the students involved in the aggression incident (aggressor(s)/victim) the events before sanctions are even considered. The method of shared concern is a popular way to counsel those involved in the aggression. Conflict resolution "provides a win-win process for managing anger by presenting alternatives to confrontation and revolving disruptions productively" (Sandhu & Aspy, 2000, p. 13-14). This method involves first talking with the student(s) who is the aggressor, and then talk with the victim. By seeing the "bully" alone, the aggressor will usually accept some responsibility for the distress that has been reported. Lastly, the entire group is brought together for a final mediation and resolution with the victim. The role of the school counselor here is to generate concrete suggestions from the bully and victim that

will help improve the situation. Implementation of the final proposal and the outcome need to be carefully monitored by school personnel (Rigby, 1995). School personnel who have used this approach, have reported an improvement in behaviors, in listening skills among students, and in overall general school climate (Studer, 1996).

Support Groups

Student support groups for victims is another option for intervention. It is recommended to have members of the group be of the same gender. An important function of the group is to provide reassurance that the victims are not alone and that help is available. Another major function of the group is to change behaviors in order to decrease the probability of being bullied or teased. Several techniques could be utilized during the sessions, including discussion/debate, role play, and modeling using videos (Ross, 1996).

On the Bus Program

Teaching students how to react in a harassment situation is the underlying principle for the On the Bus Program. This program was developed for secondary students and their teachers by Mary Cleary, a New Zealand principal. The program is a straightforward, action-based resource that involves eight steps. The various steps of the program are “designed to give students a better understanding of the nature of bullying, leading to the development of solutions for the particular bullying scenario, and the creation of a summary statement that provides a deeper knowledge and an overview” (Sullivan, 2000, p. 106). Step one of the program involves the teacher and students developing a bullying scenario; step two is when the scenario is discussed; step three involves developing strategies and solutions; step four is when feedback is provided; stage five includes improved strategies and solutions; step six involves repeating steps four and five until the participants are

satisfied with the strategies/solutions; step seven is when a statement of final recommendation is made; and step eight is when an analysis and commentary is given (Sullivan, 2000).

Conclusion

School counselors are in the unique position to make a difference in reducing relational aggression among female adolescents. To begin with, an assessment needs to be completed to determine how bad the problem is in the school. There are several interventions that can take place to deal with the current incidents of relational aggression. Lastly, there are many effective preventional methods that can take place in the schools to prevent future incidents.

In recent years, much attention has been given on violent aggressive acts in schools nationwide. Little thought has been given to the “lessor forms” of aggression. Schools need to take notice of the prevalence of relational aggression in today’s youth. They need to realize the short-term and long-term negative effects this type of aggression has on its students. Schools need to consider policy changes that specifically deal with relational aggression. In addition, the preventive skills that are learned at school need to be reinforced in the home and community.

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