

RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

Overview



What is relational aggression?

Relational aggression is behavior that is intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating his or her relationships with others. Unlike physical or verbal aggression, which are very overt in nature, relational aggression is usually much harder to see or identify.

Examples include: gossiping, rumor spreading, exclusion, alliance building, public embarrassment

We know that relational aggression:

- Has been observed among children as young as preschool age
- Peaks in middle school (ages 11-14)
- Affects both genders
- Is more psychologically stressful than physical aggression
- Remains stable without intervention – if not addressed, this behavior continues and often increases with frequency and intensity

What are some signs that a student may be the target of relational aggression?

- Appears anxious, nervous, depressed or withdrawn
- Frequent complaints of headaches or other physical ailments
- Appears to have few friends; often alone during lunch and other breaks
- Seems reluctant to participate in activities such as recess, clubs, etc.
- Takes “illogical” routes to school or other activities
- Drop in academic performance and /or attendance
- Exhibits signs of self-harm, such as cutting or other self-mutilation behaviors
- Begins bullying others or acting aggressively, talks about “getting even”

School-aged targets of relational aggression often exhibit:

- Higher rates of absenteeism
- Higher rates of depression and other mental health issues
- Increased somatic complaints (headaches, insomnia, etc.)
- Lower levels of academic performance
- Increased disciplinary problems

Relational aggression has been linked with:

- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse
- Social and psychological maladjustment
- Suicidal ideation

Can we do anything about relational aggression?

Research shows that intervention programs can produce both short-term and long-term results, with changes in student behavior evident two years after intervention.

The Ophelia Project advocates the use of a systemic model based upon restructuring the normative beliefs regarding relational aggression. By promoting pro-social skill development and successful intervention models for relational aggressive incidents, we believe that relational aggression can be drastically reduced and hopefully, one day, eliminated. We are dedicated to creating safe social climates.

Relational Aggression Fast Facts

48% of students are regularly exposed to relational aggression.¹ That's almost half of all students witnessing or being directly involved in RA 2 times a month or more!

90% of students reported being the target of bullying or relational aggression at one time or another.²

During the 2007–08 school year, 25% of public schools reported that bullying occurred among students on a daily or weekly basis.³

Students ages 11-15 reported that they were exposed to 33 acts of relational aggression during a typical week.⁴

Estimates on the prevalence of cyberbullying among youth vary from 10-40% or more.⁵

¹Davis, S., & Nixon, C.L. (2010). Youth Voice Project: National data set. Spring 2010. <http://www.youthvoiceproject.com/YVPNationalData%20.pdf>

²The Ophelia Project. (2007). Ophelia Facts: Relational Aggression Overview. Erie, PA: The Ophelia Project.

³Robers, S., Zhang, J., and Truman, J. (2010). Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010 (NCES 2011-002/NCJ 230812). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

⁴Coyne, S. M., Archer, J., & Eslea, M. (2006). “We’re not friends anymore! unless...”: the frequency and harmfulness of indirect, relational, and social aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, 32(4), 294-307. doi:10.1002/ab.20126

⁵Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J.W. (2010). Cyberbullying: Identification, Prevention, and Response. Cyberbullying Research Center. www.cyberbullying.us (Accessed: February, 2011)

OTHER SOURCES:

U.S. Dept. of Education, H.A.Y. (Helping America's Youth), Centers for Disease Control, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, PA Dept. of Health, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, The Ophelia Project, U.S. Dept. of Justice, National Association of School Psychologists, Stanford University of Medicine, Nixon & Naef, 2007, Dodge et al, 2003, Parker & Asher, 1998, Patterson, Capaldi & Bank, 1991, Rigby, 1999, Crick & Grotpeter, 1996, Austin & Joseph, 1996, Baumeister & Leary, 1995, Gilbert, 1992