

# Relational Aggression

(Adapted from *Mean Girls Workshop*, 2008, Youth Light, Kaye Randall presenter)

## *It's a Girl Thing*

Oh boy, “It’s a Girl”!!! From the beginning we think sugar and spice and everything nice! Or is it? It is tough to be a girl. Little girls grow up being taught, it’s much prettier to be “nice” and as a result when they become angry they resort to covert and at times even physical forms of aggression.<sup>1</sup>

The term, Relational Aggression, was developed in the early ‘90’s by Dr. Nicki Crick. She defines RA as “emotional violence and bullying behaviors focused on damaging an individual’s social connections within the peer group.” Though a relational aggression episode can occur over and over, it also can be a one time event.

Studies have consistently documented higher rate of aggression in males than in females. Crick and Nelson (2002) found that boys use physical victimization with their friends whereas girls use relational victimization. It seems that girls intend to inflict harm on others just as boys; however the difference is in how they express these feelings. Girls tend to be covert and boys overt.

Relational Aggression may be seen in many different ways such as emotional, verbal or physical. RA has two primary components: **an imbalance of power and the intent to harm**. Girls place a higher value on friendships and use this as a very effective weapon within the peer group. Trudy Ludwig, author of *My Secret Bully*, states “RA is putting conditions on a friendship, and it starts early.” “*You’ve heard of conditional love; this is conditional friendship.*”

Rosalind Wiseman, author of *Queen Bees & Wannabees*, states that our culture teaches girls a very dangerous and confusing code of behavior about what constitutes “appropriate” feminine behavior (i.e. you should be sexy but not slutty; you should be independent, but you’re no one without a boyfriend).

## *Statistics*

According to a study conducted by the University of Montreal, University of Quebec at Montreal and Laval University (2005) 80% of a child’s Relationally Aggressive behavior is due to environmental factors, such as poor parenting and negative peer influence.

Brigham Young University (2005) reports that girl bullying starts as early as preschool.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists: 22% of children between fourth and eight grades report academic difficulties due to peer abuse.

According to a November 2003 report released by the Center for the Advancement of Health and supported by the National Institute of Health, children are the targets of bullying about every 3 to 6 minutes from the start of kindergarten to the end of first grade.

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<sup>1</sup> Crick, N.R. & Nelson, D.A. (2002). Relational and physical victimization within friendships: Nobody told me there’d be friends like these. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 30, 599-607.

The number of girl's ages 10 to 17 arrested for aggravated assault has doubled over the last 20 years according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report. (*MSNBC.com, Newsweek Society, obtained June 5, 2005*)

Crick (2005) reported in the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* that 70% of girls have been mistreated by their friends.

### ***Different Types of Relational Aggression***

**Relational Aggression:** Behavior that is intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating his or her relationships with others.

**Covert Aggression:** Indirect, hidden acts of aggression, social isolation, and/or excluding.

**Physical/Overt Aggression:** Direct, blatant acts of aggression, can be physical or verbal. Harm through damage or threat of damage to another's physical well being.

**Verbal Aggression:** Obvious and hidden acts of aggression towards a child such as threats, putdowns and name calling.

**Reactive Relational Aggression:** Defensive response to provocation with intent to retaliate.

**Proactive Relational Aggression:** Proactive behaviors are a means for achieving a goal, for example, a girl may exclude someone to maintain her own social status.

### ***Mean Girls: The Realm of Teen Royalty***

**The Queen:** The aggressor, who chooses to hurt or damage a relationship. Her friends do what she wants. She isn't intimidated by any other girl. She can out argue just about anyone including adults. She's charming to adults.

She's manipulatively affectionate. She defines right and wrong by the loyalty or disloyalty around her. She won't take responsibility for hurting another's feelings. She seeks revenge. She feels power and control over her environment. She can be arrogant, materialistic, selfish, and superficial. Her value system and self esteem are tied to what she has. She may feel a "rush" from feeling superior.

**The Sidekick:** The sidekick is second to the Queen, but can also be a target (victim). She always supports the Queen because this is where her power lies. She is often a mirror image of the Queen. The two together present the impression of impenetrable force. The sidekick has her own personal agenda in which she uses relationally aggressive techniques. Several other characteristics of the sidekick are: she feels the Queen is the authority figure in her life telling her how to think, dress, and what to do; she allows herself to be pushed around by the Queen, and will even lie for her.

**The Gossip:** Extremely secretive, gossip-self-aggrandizing, good communicator, gives the perception of being a good listener and trustworthy. Seems to be friends with everyone, has a

need to be admired and to feel important. She is rarely excluded from the group. She is more of an actress. Seemingly nice, then uses confidential information to improve her position. She seems harmless but in truth she is intimidating. This girl is the confidant that cannot be trusted. She may even start a conversation with: “Don’t tell anyone I told you this but...”

**The Floater:** She moves freely among cliques. She has protective factors that enable her freedoms, such as being pretty but not too pretty, nice but not terribly sophisticated, and she avoids conflicts. She is more likely to exhibit higher self esteem because her sense of self is not based in just one group. She has the respect of the other girls because she is not trying to rule but does have influence. She does not want to exclude other girls. She is not trying to win all conversations. She is not competitive. While this individual does have some power it does not equal that of the Queen.

**The Bully:** She may be deviant, outspoken and tough. She displays cruelty to weaker people. Bullying is most overt. For example, cursing at or about other girls, “accidentally” bumping into them or hitting. She will use physical violence more than relational aggression.

**The Bystanders (Witnesses):** The girls who are not aggressors or targets but are caught somewhere in-between. She is part of the social situation as a bystander. She finds herself having to choose between friends. She is the peacemaker (“can’t we all just get along?”). She has a hard time saying no. She does not feel that she can stand up to anyone and she may want to go undetected but still have access to the group.

**The Wannabees:** The Wannabee will do anything to be part of the inner circle of the Queen and the sidekick. She is a gossip and a pleaser and will go to great lengths to increase her position. She doesn’t have a personal opinion outside of what the Queen thinks. She is indecisive and reluctant to go against the group. She likes the feeling of belonging and not being a target, however she is often gossiped about and used by the Queen.

**The Target:** She often feels helpless to stop the other girl’s behavior. She feels excluded, like a loser or a no body. She is more isolated. She gives a defensive stance that is designed to shut people out in order to mask her hurt. Girls within the group could become a target if they question someone of perceived higher social status, for example the Queen or the Sidekick. She feels humiliated from the rejection she feels by other girls. She feels exposed and vulnerable resulting in temptations to change herself in order to fit in.

### *Short and Long Term Effects of Relational Aggression*

- Interrupted Identity Formation
- Poor Self Esteem
- Feelings of Powerlessness
- Hopelessness
- Inability to Trust
- Poor Relational Skills
- Loneliness/Isolation
- Anger
- Frustration
- Feelings of Rejection

- Helplessness
- Depression
- Teen Pregnancy
- Substance Abuse
- Self-Injury
- Eating Disorders
- Suicidal Ideation
- Delinquent Behavior
- Homicidal Ideation
- Poor Academic Performance
- Stress/Anxiety
- Separation Anxiety

Studies indicate the top 3 effects are: 1) depression 2) loneliness 3) suicidal ideation

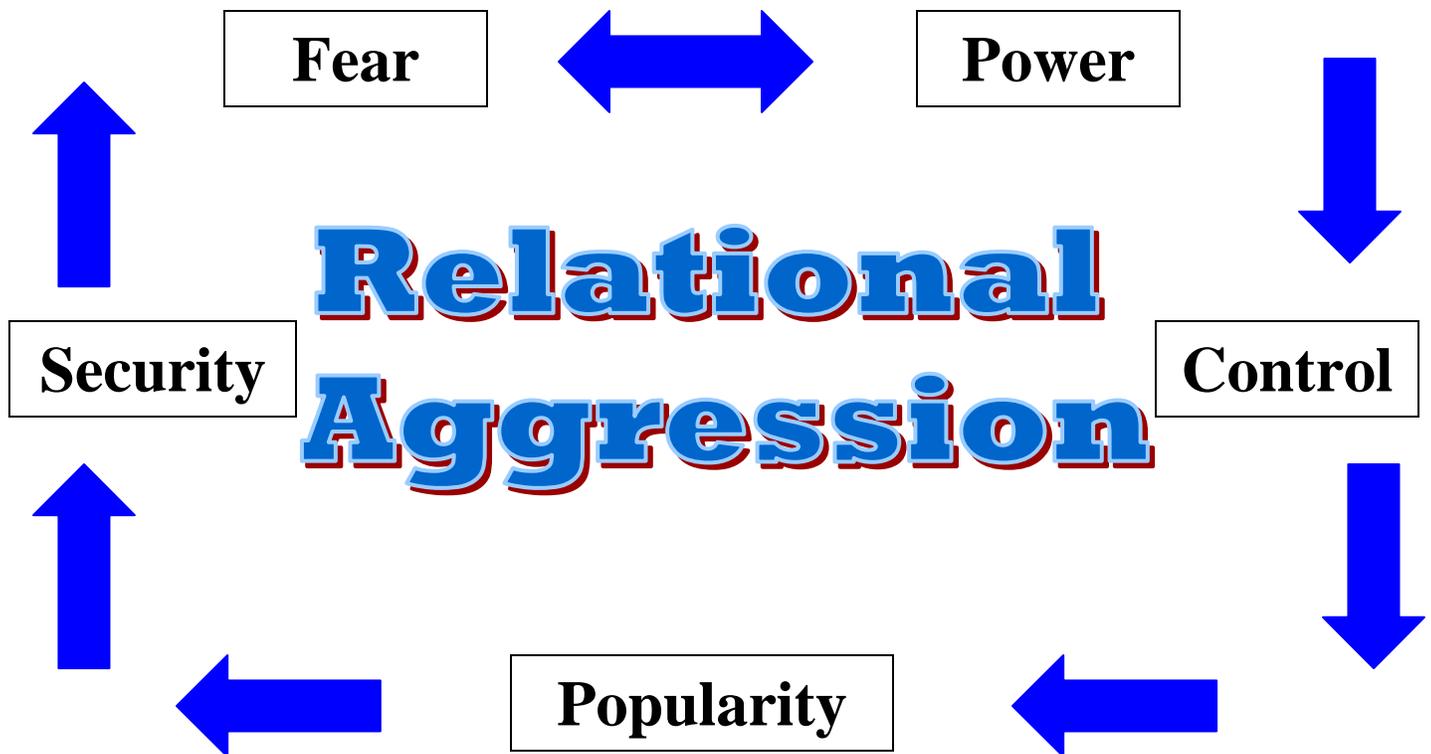
### ***Methods and Motivations***

Relationally aggressive girls are very creative in their ***methods*** of behavior and their ***motivations*** drive them to always be one up on everyone else.

#### *Methods*

- *Exclusion*
- *Ignoring*
- *Spreading Rumors*
- *Verbal Insults*
- *Teasing*
- *Intimidation*
- *Eye Rolling*
- *Taunting*
- *Manipulative Affection*
- *Three way Calling*
- *Cell Phones*
- *Cyber Bullying*

## ***Motivations of RA***



Relational aggression occurs when fear, security, popularity and power are used to coerce control.

Relational aggression is cyclical, like many dysfunctional behaviors (i.e. abuse, violence etc.). The way to stop RA is to break the cycle.

## School-Wide Interventions & Classroom Strategies

### *Kansas Anti-Bullying Legislation*

Senate Bill 68 (2007) mandates that all Kansas schools by 1/1/08 will:

1. Have an anti-bullying policy in place.
2. Have a plan for implementation in place.
3. Have a plan for training students and staff about the policy in place.
4. Upon request, the State Board (KSDE) will provide schools technical assistance relative to character development programs.

Please contact Kent reed ([kreed@ksde.org](mailto:kreed@ksde.org)) for further information.

### *Addressing District and School Administration: School School-Wide Support and Intervention*

## Positive Behavioral Supports<sup>2</sup>

A major advance in school-wide discipline is the emphasis on school-wide systems of support that include proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors to create positive school environments. Therefore it is important to consider the Positive Behavioral Support or PBIS model in regard to relational aggression in the schools. PBIS is an approach used to eliminate challenging behaviors and re-place them with pro-social skills.

There are several benefits in implementing PBIS:

- PBIS has shown that it is an effective strategy in promoting positive behavior in students and schools.
- This type of model decreases the need for more punitive actions.
- Schools report increased time engaged in academic activities and improved academic performance.
- PBIS can lead to dramatic improvements that have long-term effects on lifestyle, communication skills, and problem behaviors.
- Schools that employ system-wide interventions for problem behavior prevention indicate reductions in office discipline referrals of 20-60%.
- A review of research on PBIS effectiveness showed that there was over a 90% reduction in problem behavior in over half of the studies; the problem behavior stopped completely in over 26% of the studies.

Introducing, modeling, and reinforcing positive social behavior is an important aspect of a students' educational experience. Teaching behavioral expectations and rewarding students for following them is a much more positive approach than waiting for misbehavior to occur before responding (proactive vs. reactive). In terms of relation aggression and any other form of bullying behaviors, a school wide systems approach is necessary for creating a safe learning environment for our children.

To learn more about Kansas Statewide Positive Behavioral Support log onto <http://pbskansas.org/>.

### Tips for Educators

1. Take time to observe children in different settings such as the classroom, at lunch, in the hall, on the playground, and before and after school. Make note of the girls' interactions and the nonverbal reactions to peers.
2. During class meetings discuss different examples of relational aggression. For example, hateful words or manipulation, "She's such a slut, "Her Mom is a \_\_\_\_\_," "Don't play with her," or "You can't be her friend." Talk with them about starting rumors and gossiping. Define for them "covert" aggression and tell them that it is not acceptable.
3. Use role plays or literature writing to reinforce positive behaviors. Teach them good listening skills and help them to develop an emotional vocabulary to appropriately express their feelings.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from National Association of School Psychologists: <http://www.naspcenter.org>; <http://www.PBI.org/schoolwide.htm>

4. Help them to understand that conflict is common in relationships and show them better ways to resolve by being supportive of each other. Teach them about openness and honesty that is caring.
5. Most important! Believe the target. There may be times when it is hard to believe that a model student could be involved in RA. Girls who use relational aggression are skilled at what they do and at times adults are blinded by the appearance of a model student.
6. Consider your own behavior and how girls may be watching you. Do you model appropriate behavior?

### **Be a *M.O.D.E.L.***

Model Appropriate Behavior

Observe Girls

Don't Ignore Behaviors

Emphasize the Difference Between "Tattling" and "Telling"

Listen Emphatically

### **A Successful School-Wide Model**

It all starts with a school-wide commitment to end all types of bullying including RA. From there an effective approach focuses on changing classroom climates and addressing students that require individual attention. It is important to note that success comes with sustained programs that teach tolerance and always keep bullying in the fore front of everyone's mind.

According to the research based '*Bullying Prevention Programme*' designed by Dan Olweus the following items need to be addressed as guidelines.

- Use of a *Bully/Target* questionnaire
- Identify bullying in school
- A school in-service
- Increased supervision at break/transition times
- Class rules about bullying
- Regular class meetings
- Involvement of adults/volunteers
- Have a plan and know when to involve parents

In order to be successful, it is important for the school to have very clear limits regarding unacceptable behavior, and to make it a positive place where caring, pro-social behavior is encouraged and bullying is firmly discouraged. With this program bully/target problems have been cut by at least half and general anti-social behavior (i.e. truancy and vandalism) also reduced. There were also great improvements in discipline, student relationships and attitudes toward school work and the school in general.

### **What YOUR School Can Do**

In order for your school to be successful in combating all forms of relational aggression use this step by step process to get you started.

Step 1. Start with a Relational Aggression to identify the dynamic of RA in your school.

- Step 2. Once the surveys have been completed compile the results with a team that has Developed to work on addressing relational aggression with in your school.
- Step 3. Conduct an In-service Day to share with all faculty and staff the results from the survey, don't forget to include the cafeteria staff, custodians and teacher assistants. Use this time to solicit help in developing policies and procedures or elaborating on the policy in place that addresses bullying. Most policies and procedures do not address RA specifically. Include a disciplinary policy addressing consequences for the behavior.
- Step 4. Remember, RA is very covert and can go undetected easily. You will most likely determine that it is necessary to increase supervision during break times, specifically between classes, in the lunchroom, on the playground, in the locker-room and restrooms.
- Step 5. Have each teacher discuss and implement classroom rules about RA.
- Step 6. Promote regular time for classroom meetings (very important for administrators to support teachers in order to be most successful).
- Step 7. Determine early on what the consequences are for girls who are involved in RA recognizing that the behaviors range from mild to very vicious and address each situation with consistency.
- Step 8. Utilize volunteers to facilitate groups with girls.
- Step 9. Decide when to contact parents of girls involved with an incident.

### **Develop a “School-Wide Anti-RA Day”**

The best schools develop anti-bullying (relational aggression) programs specific to their schools and the dynamics represented there. Design a day or an entire week that is devoted to teaching and raising awareness about relational aggression and its effects. Hold an assembly, have students participate in skits developed around RA. Have the students all wear a certain color for the best representation of an anti-RA scenario. At the elementary level have a guest speaker or author come in and talk with the children about bullying and its effects.

### **Keep a High Profile**

(All those banners and posters the students just created for your awareness campaign keep them up in your school all year long not just during the campaign!)

Don't forget that all forms of bullying, including relational aggression, thrive on secrecy. Therefore, the more publicity the better!

- Brochures- to all parents
- Handbook- a clear statement addressing the school-wide policies
- Posters- displayed around the school
- Newsletters- keeping them informed on a regular basis
- Bulletin boards creatively displaying information on RA

There are numerous approaches to addressing relational aggression school-wide. By implementing creative ways to promote a positive school environment all students can thrive emotionally and academically. It begins with a school-wide approach where there is support and encouragement from all faculty and staff.

### **RAK ‘Em Up!!! Random Acts of Kindness**

Implement a classroom/school-wide praise reward system to “catch a kid” doing something kind. Any school personnel can and should be involved in catching a student doing something kind. The administrator, teachers, support staff and everyone in between can give a student points for RAK. The system is based on cumulative points to be tracked by the homeroom teacher. Age appropriate rewards will be given on either a weekly or bi-weekly basis. Some rewards could be connected to their academics. For example within each school the reward could be a free homework pass to be used at the child’s discretion, or possible 2-3 points added to a test score or homework grade. A fun reward could be movie tickets, or gift certificates to a retail outlet or your local toy store. Many organizations will donate these items to your school. Speak to the local manager.

### **Notebook News**

Every school sends out newsletters relaying information concerning the school. While goods news is relayed here it seems to get lost in a small box along with all of the other news. Instead create a separate newsletter for ONLY good news. All parents love to read good news about their children. Feature several students in each edition throughout the year.

### **Hang Time**

Find a way to “hang out” with students. For example, sit with them at lunch, stand outside your class during class change, and invite a few to hang out with you during your planning period, after school or at sporting events. Research what is popular today. Such as music, movies, fashion, latest video games...in order to have topics to discuss with them in their world. Being prepared will make for less awkward moments.

### ***Emotional Literacy***

Many girls lack the vocabulary to appropriately express how they feel. This inability to express themselves creates feelings of low self-worth, inability to process choice consequence of their behaviors, manage feelings, and function in larger peer to peer relationships.

Emotional skills such as communication, cooperation and internal conflict resolution are needed. As rates of teen suicide, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and depression rise there is a pressing need for girls to have avenues to increase their self-confidence, improve their ability to think clearly, process and to manage distressing feelings.

Until we acknowledge and implement a better way for our girls to express themselves, school-wide fear and faltering education will continue. If students don't measure up emotionally they **WILL NOT** measure up academically. An Emotional Literacy Curriculum would include the following elements:

### **An Emotional Literacy Curriculum**

(adapted from [www.kidseq.com](http://www.kidseq.com))

*Self-Awareness*

*Decision-Making*

*Managing Feelings*

*Self-Concept*

*Handling Stress*

*Communication*

*Group Dynamics*

*Conflict Resolution*

*“Consider what would happen if you also incorporated an emotional literacy program for faculty and staff. It’s possible that even adults could benefit from learning to express themselves more appropriately.”*

### ***Caution: Misguided Interventions in Addressing Relational Aggression***

**Peer mediation of conflicts:** Bullying is not a conflict but abuse that involves an imbalance of power. There is no right and wrong on both sides. Having peers mediate a situation of RA implies a responsibility on the part of the target for the abuse.

**Groups made up of only one type:** i.e. queen bees, sidekicks, etc. The aggressive girls will begin to “one up” each other and will reinforce the behavior.

**Intervention based groups:** These groups are a must because the reality is that RA exists. Unfortunately, these groups may show lower rates of success than prevention based groups. Confronting RA is necessary! Define RA, name it, call it out when seen and teach new behaviors.

(We are aware that there will be situations where these kinds of groups are a necessary means to the dynamic that you may be dealing with in your setting. However, we felt it important to provide information that may be useful when designing groups whether prevention or intervention in nature may be more effective.)

**Zero tolerance policy:** Policies of this type are created for disciplinary problems that warrant suspension or expulsion from school. Because of the extreme punishment, students and adults

alike are hesitant to report RA behavior. Suspension and expulsion may be necessary in some cases to protect other student's; however a zero tolerance policy should not be used as a RA policy.

### *Classroom Strategies*

It has been suggested that a significant number of children are bullied by their peers in the classroom. Bullying can happen in a very subtle manner of which the teacher may be unaware, but the effect can be just as serious as an overt physical act. It may be a mumbled threat, a passed note or just a look, but the victim may be significantly distressed by it and be unable to concentrate on what is being taught in class.

However vigilant a teacher is, it is impossible to prevent all bullying by relying on supervision alone. Teachers must create a classroom environment in which bullying is unacceptable and is openly discussed with students. If an incident of bullying does occur in a classroom, students need to know how a teacher will react if they decide to speak out. Students must feel confident that their concerns will be dealt with calmly and fairly.

Some teachers who bring the subject of bullying into their lessons will reflect on their own behavior towards their students and their colleagues. They will begin to think about the difference between teacher bullying, which is an abuse of power, and a consistent but fair discipline regime which contributes towards the creation of an orderly learning environment.

Using regular classroom meetings is crucial in the continued educational process of RA and all types of bullying. Teachers can use a number of strategies to implement this into the class curriculum.

### *Activities for the Classroom*

#### **Pass It On**

One person begins a chain of events. Use the analogy that as with gossiping and other harmful activities it doesn't seem to take long for it to spread like wild fire. Try having several students randomly draw names. They must do one kind thing for that person with a note attached that they must also pass on the kindness to someone else. See how long the students can get this to continue.

#### **Pair & Share**

Pair the student with someone who they do not know or would not normally hang out with. Have them interview each other about their feelings and ideas about relational aggression. Have them come back together and share one idea that will help their school decrease RA and bring more awareness to the school.

#### **Playground Etiquette**

Take the girls out to the playground and have a discussion about what good playground manners and bad playground manners are. Use a question and answer forum to educate the girls. Begin

by asking them is it okay to push someone on the swings, the answer is obviously yes, but would it be okay to push someone in the sandbox, “No.” Use several different questions based on the rules of your school. Through this process you are also helping them to begin to develop a moral value system. Another way to show this would be to have some older students demonstrate the wrong and right way to behave on the playground.

## **Empower to Prevent**

*Engaging girls to learn and power up appropriately.*

Help girls develop the belief that they are capable people who have many strengths and who can stand up for themselves by reinforcing constructive attitudes at every opportunity.

The Ophelia Project, a research-based program suggests that there are several key factors to a successful program addressing RA

- Challenge Behaviors/Beliefs
- Use Role Plays
- Behavioral Contracts
- Interactive Games
- Small Group Discussion

## **Teach Relationship Building Skills**

*Personal Strengths:* Help the girl you are working with to identify her strengths first. You can not expect girls to respond in the same way. By their very nature you may re-victimize them again by telling them “to stand up for yourself” or just say “no.” By empowering her first with her own personal strengths she is then able to use what comes naturally to her to respond to the situation.

*Teach Empathy:* Understanding the emotional pain of being bullied has been cited as one of the most effective ways to teach bullies about the pain inflicted on their targets. Service Learning and other volunteer opportunities are humbling and very rewarding in helping students develop empathy and compassion toward others.

*Explore Normative Beliefs:* Many girls have never had the opportunity to explore their internal value or moral system. Use the following questions when helping girls to begin to build a belief system that takes other people’s feeling into account.

1. Is it okay to talk bad about someone and spread rumors? What if someone else started it first- should you repeat the rumor?
2. Is it okay to make fun of someone and laugh at them?
3. Is it okay to do nothing and watch as someone else gets excluded or made fun of?

4. Is it okay not to let someone sit by you or join your group?
5. Is it okay to boss someone around and to say, “If you don’t do it my way then I’m not going to be your friend?”
6. Is it okay to ignore someone who is your friend, just so you can be in the popular group?

*Encourage Involvement in Extra Curricular Activities:* Provide girls with an alternate circle of friends, and a support system outside of the school. Extra curricular activities help children establish a strong sense of identity that will assist them in the face of RA. There are many programs in the community such as Girls Scouts, Youth Jaycees, YMCA tutors, recreation leagues and faith based programs. There may be after-school clubs they could become involved with as well.

*Communication Skills:* Teach the “art of communication.” Communication must be “fine tuned” in order to send and receive information accurately. We must help our girls understand that communicating is so much more than just what comes out of our mouth. Body language and tone of voice have a great impact in communicating a message, however many are unaware of their body language or tone of voice while in conversation. Another component of effective communication is listening. Actually hearing what another person is saying is of equal importance in good communication.

### **Choices: Making the Right One**

Girls themselves are powerful weapons. Teens listen to other teens. Help girls understand that conflicts are a natural occurrence in friendships and provide them with an opportunity to practice being supportive of one another. Encourage them to honestly resolve problems through open discussion and compromise. Use these role plays to challenge girls to reframe their way of thinking and choose positive ways to respond.

**Some comments we make can put people down- even if we don’t mean what we say. Sometimes people are not aware of how sarcasm hurts other people’s feelings. Often people will say “just kidding” or “I didn’t REALLY mean it” or “stop being so sensitive!” Below are some typical scenarios that could cause major friend problems. Role play each scenario and then discuss it with the group.<sup>3</sup>**

#### *Role Play #1*

You are wearing your new outfit to school- your best friend tells your other friend that it’s ugly. When you confront her, she says “I was just kidding. Can’t you take a joke?” Would you confront her? If so, what would you say?

#### *Role Play #2*

Your friend tells everyone that you made out with the boy you like after school and you totally didn’t. She tells you that she heard you did and what’s the big deal if she told people, she thought she was helping your popularity. How would you react? Would you retaliate?

#### *Role Play #3*

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Taylor, J. (2005). *Salvaging Sisterhood*. Chapin: SC. YouthLight, Inc.

You like a boy in class who is not very popular. When you confess to your friend she exclaims, “He is SUCH a dork! Why do you like him? I so cannot talk to you if you two are going out!” When you get upset, she says, “I wasn’t being serious, get a grip!” Would you still like him? Would you get mad at your friend?

*Role Play #4*

You have nothing to do on Saturday night and overhear two friends talking about going to the mall and having a sleepover. When you ask if you can come, one girl says, “Sure, only if you promise not to talk, SIKE!” They are mean to you for the rest of the day. Would you still go? Would you ask another friend to talk to both of them and see what is going on?

*Role Play #5*

Your friends are laughing at you and won’t play with you. When you ask them why they won’t play with you they say because you and your outfit are ugly. What would you do? Would you tell your teacher?

*Role Play #6*

Your friend says you aren’t invited to her birthday party. How does it make you feel? What would you do?

***The A.C.T. Approach<sup>4</sup>***

Reforming the behavior of relationally aggressive girls will not prove itself an easy task, however, giving them positive, practical approaches to change will help them to stay focused on making better choices. Use the acronym ACT to implement ideas for change.

***CHOOSE HOW YOU***

***Always  
Control your  
Texting***

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<sup>4</sup> Randall & Bowen (2007) Mean Girls: 101 ½ Creative Strategies and Activities for Working with Relational Aggression. Chapin, SC. YouthLight, Inc.

## *Positive Peer Influences*

### **New Directions: Young Women's Leadership Forum**

Develop a positive peer forum to provide opportunities to address and express issues or concerns that girls believe are relevant. This group would be compiled of girls chosen anonymously by the school counselor or teacher who would lead the group. The individual would be approached with the opportunity to participate in the group, however they must choose to be a part and respect the rules of the group as well as the other members. Inform them that they will be treated as professionals, they will have equal opportunities to express their view point and that the information shared must remain confidential. Should information from the group get out then the members of the group will decide what the consequence will be. One of the primary rules of the group would be that they will commit to not being relationally aggressive with each other. Be specific to include mild behaviors such as eye rolling to more aggressive behaviors such as ridiculing someone's ideas or threatening to expose. The short and long term goals for the group can be decided once the group is formed

### **Peer Helpers**

When students experience frustrations, worries, concerns, or other life events, they typically turn to their friends, not professionals, for help. Many times students who have experienced difficulties can make great peer helpers. They understand many of the problems students face at school and personally.

With proper training peer helpers can effectively reach their peers when no one else can. These students do not act as counselors or advise their peers. They are trained in how to actively listen and respond. The National Association of Peer programs ([www.peerprograms.org](http://www.peerprograms.org)) provides training and guidelines for peer helping programs and can help you get a program started at your school. Be mindful that this is not peer mediation.

### **Power Up Troupe**

In middle and high school form a group of girls where they can become ambassadors for girls in the lower grades. These girls possess leadership skills and abilities to act as role models for younger girls. They create drama skits, monologues, songs or use other talents they may have and perform for the younger groups. Try to enlist college students to serve as leaders for high

school girls. These girls possess the positive power that serve as a catalyst for appropriate behaviors.

## **Encourage girls to Take a Stand**

After taking time to educate girls about RA behaviors and empowering them to find within themselves their own personal strengths in combating RA give them this quick summary to follow.

- ♀ know your own personal strength
- ♀ do not jump on the bandwagon
- ♀ refuse to be an ‘audience’ for a bully
- ♀ walk away and get help
- ♀ do not laugh while someone is being picked on
- ♀ do not participate in gossip
- ♀ do not participate in on-line hostilities
- ♀ DO NOT join in with the abuse<sup>5</sup>

## **Individual Interventions**

The goal of individual intervention is to encourage every girl to seek value and power in healthy, appropriate ways of showing respect for her self and others.

Individual interventions apply to every girl. We have discussed how all girls have the potential to fall into any of the roles in the realm of teen royalty. Regardless of the role she may be “playing” we must intervene to help her focus and find her true self.

Activities to help her should include focus on various issues associated with girl empowerment such as:

- ♀ valuing who she is
- ♀ strengthening friendship skills
- ♀ learning healthy strategies to deal with being a target of bullying behavior
- ♀ prompting to review her own behavior and make changes
- ♀ building empathy.

## **Beginning the Intervention**

### *Assessing the Student/Client*

In working with a student/client it is important to assess and gather information about her and her world in order to most effectively meet her needs. Bob Myrick in his book, *Developmental Guidance and Counseling: A Practical Approach* asks us to consider the following:

1. **PHYSICAL:** Review her physical appearance- posture, affect/facial expressions, and energy level.

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from [www.relatonalaggression.com](http://www.relatonalaggression.com))

2. **SOCIAL:** Assess her ability to connect easily with others. Consider the level of her ability to communicate and relate to others- does she have good friendship skills? Is she awkward in social situations?
3. **COGNITIVE:** Evaluate where she is developmentally with her thinking- rational vs. irrational, does she understand behavior and consequences?
4. **CULTURAL:** Consider any religious, cultural, or environmental factors that have influence on the person's thinking, feeling, and behaving.
5. **SUPPORT SYSTEM:** Tune into the support system in the girl's life- friends, family, school- and the messages that these support systems are sending.
6. **HISTORY:** Review if there has been any particular event's that may have contributed to the problem of difficulties such as family changes, death, traumatic events, problems within social circle, picking/teasing, etc.
7. **FUTURE PERSPECTIVE:** Evaluate her viewpoint of life- pessimistic or optimistic, does she see the problem as solvable or not?
8. **THE PRESENTING PROBLEM:** Assess her ability to pinpoint the problem.

When we consider each of the above areas, then we begin to understand the girls and her world. With this understanding, we can begin to know her strengths and weaknesses in order to create an effective plan of action.

### *"It's Her Story"*

Have the girl think of someone she knows who has been the victim of RA. Have her write a story about the victim using the outline below.

Chapter 1      What do you think of her/

Chapter 2      Why do you think she is a victim?

Chapter 3      If nothing changes, how will her story end?

Chapter 4      What could you do to help her?

How could you contribute to her situation in a positive way? (Make this suggestion A reality!)

Chapter 5      Now how will her story end?

### **Suggestions and Tips for Parents**

- Spend time with your child. Have a special time together either at meal time or bed time to talk and be there for her. Watch TV together- even her shows for an opportunity to understand her world.
- Be consistent about discipline. Hold your child responsible for negative or hurtful behavior, not through put-downs or punishment but through her understanding the consequences of her actions.

- Know your child’s friends. Allow kids to gather at your home, chaperone trips, and provide transportation for your daughter and her friends.
- Help your child seek other points of view and develop empathy for others. Take time to ask: “Who did you help today?” When watching a TV show or movie that involves bullying and relationships, explore the different roles and perspectives.
- Be a positive role model. Actions speak louder than words. Try positive gossips at the table- looking for the good in people.
- Involve girls in activities outside of school so that they are exposed to different groups of people.
- Encourage relationships with adults and other peers who appreciate them for who they are.
- Always be available to listen and talk to your child about what is going on in her life.
- Teach kindness and model this behavior. Be aware of your own inadvertent aggressive behaviors in relationships.
- Closely monitor TV, computer activities, and music. Be aware of all of the influences in our society for some may not be in agreement with your value system. In addition, too much media involvement and too little “real life” social interaction and engagement stifle the development of social skills necessary to relate in a caring, responsible way.
- Remember that while girls may tell you about being the victim of an incident, they often won’t tell you about being the aggressor. Talk to your child about both sides of the issue.
- If you daughter is the “girl in the middle”, firmly but lovingly encourage her to take the high road and support the victim, or at least not take part in the aggression.
- Encourage your daughter to keep a journal of what happens, who is involved and if any actions were taken. This may help schools act if needed.
- If needed, seek professional counseling.

### **Suggestions on How to Listen to Your Daughter<sup>6</sup>**

When our children are upset our emotions automatically “kick-in”! It is important to first calm down and be in control of your emotions. Caution yourself not to let your own personal bullying experiences from you past influence your ability to help. The following provides tips for parents to support their daughter when she is upset:

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Senn, D. (2007) *Bullying in the Girls’ World*, YouthLight, Inc. Chapin SC., [www.relatonalaggression.com](http://www.relatonalaggression.com) .

1. Be careful you don't take over and try to "solve" the problem (Love and Logic refers to this as the "helicopter parent") as this sends the message she is not strong enough to handle the situation on her own.
2. Be careful you don't send a blaming message by asking, "What did you do wrong? What are you doing to cause this?" as this can add to feelings of low self worth.
3. Be a good listener, listen without distraction of the computer, newspaper, phone etc.
4. Ask questions that invite information such as, "What happened next?" or "...so how did you respond?"
5. Listen to the whole story encouraging her to share details. Allowing your child to talk in details to vent and get out the story can be therapeutic.
6. Repeat back what you are hearing your daughter share. This can help clarify the situation. Ex. "So you're saying that the girls wouldn't allow you to sit with them and told you not ever sit with them again."
7. Don't over empathize- empower her. Compliment her on her abilities. Ex. "I know this is hard. You're amazing to be able to express yourself about this."
8. Ask is she can think of something to say or do that would be helpful. Encourage assertiveness. Role play for practice. Help her rehearse the messages in her head to build confidence.

When an isolated incident occurs, show your daughter support and encourage her to figure out her own solutions. If the behavior occurs a second or third time, she needs to be encouraged to act on her own behalf. When bullying persists or is extreme, it's time to intervene. Don't take action behind her back, if you're going to make contact with the school make sure she knows ahead of time.

### **Cyber-Bullying Tips for Parents**

- ▶ Become computer savvy. Kids are more technologically advanced than most adults. Take a computer class to educate yourself on terminology and how to navigate a computer.
- ▶ DO NOT ALLOW your child to have a computer in their room or other isolated area. If they utilize laptop computers set guidelines for where they can use it and length of time they may be on the computer. Always keep home computers in family rooms, kitchens or other rooms that everyone spends time.
- ▶ Be aware of the online activities that your child participates in. The Internet has many positive purposes; however it also makes access to inappropriate sites very easy.
  - Hang out with your child while on the computer and talk specifically about cyber-bullying. Ask your child if they have ever been cyber-bullied or would tell you if they had cyber-bullied someone else. Remember your response to their answers will either buy you more time with them or cut them off completely.
  - Educate yourself and your child on cyber-stalking, or other legal or troublesome on-line behavior. Ask your child if they know of anyone who has been the victims of such behavior.
  - Define for your child the effects of cyber-bullying and that it is unacceptable. Talk with your child to come up with a family plan for responsible choices and consequences for irresponsible internet use.
- ▶ Inform your child that you will respect their privacy while on the computer, however their safety is most important and that you will intervene if you feel it necessary.

- ▶ Inquire about filtering and parental control programs to install on your computer. There are great programs but do not rely on them to be your only protection against cyber-bullying or other predators.

## Handling Relationally Aggressive Parents<sup>7</sup>

We can not change relationally aggressive parents, but we can learn how to cope with them and the effects of their behavior.

- When interviewing a RA parent never sit behind your desk. Move your chair out from behind the desk and place it close to and in front of the parent. This sends a strong assertive message to the one being interviewed. It says, “I am comfortable and confident in this situation.” That’s just the message you want to send.
- Listen attentively.
- Respect the parent and always expect respect in return. Settle for nothing less.
- Remain calm. A calm cool response to an angry verbal barrage can neutralize a RA experience.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Don’t argue or interrupt, just listen.
- Don’t accuse or judge, just state how you feel about the situation.
- Do not allow them to bully you, model appropriate behavior by stating, “I’m sorry but I don’t allow people to treat me this way. Perhaps we can continue this when you have calmed down.” Then slowly and calmly walk away.
- If they continue to bully you a powerful response would be to PAUSE...LOOK AT THE PERSON, WITHOUT EMOTION...TURN AND WALK AWAY. It works!
- Selective silence is an effective way to deal with RA parents. It is easy to use and very low threat. When parents are being difficult, they are often seeking attention and power. When you respond verbally to their bullying behavior you are giving them attention and power they desire. When you use selective silence you deny them both attention and power. You are basically ignoring them and no one likes to be ignored.

## Other Creative Approaches<sup>8</sup>

### Journaling

Journaling can provide a record of personal experiences, observations and reflections. Encourage the student to express in writing her thoughts and feelings about her day to day events, the ups and downs of friendships, her dreams and goals. Journaling can be therapeutic through the simple process of writing. It can be reviewed to help clarify thoughts and feelings and can be used to record progress towards a goal.

### Mapping

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from: Moore, M. (2003), 14 Steps to Teacher Assertiveness How to cope with difficult parents, principals and staff members. *Teachers.net.Gazette*, 4, 5. Retrieved October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005 from <http://www.teachers.net/gazette/may03/moore.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Randall, & Bowen (2007) Mean Girls: 101 ½ Creative Strategies and Activities for Working with Relational Aggression. Chapin, SC. YouthLight, Inc.

Have students draw a map of the school. Identify the area's that are safest and not so safe. They can use colors to identify the spaces (i.e. red= unsafe territory; green= no problems; blue= OK, but some concerns).

**“HAND”ling It**

Have the students trace their hand. On each finger have the child write the name of a person they can turn to if they feel bullied.

**Emotional Bank Account<sup>9</sup>**

<u><b>Deposits for Me</b></u>	<u><b>Withdrawals for Me</b></u>
What we appreciate. Ex. Kindness, compliments, favors, quality time, acts of service, sharing, listening etc.	What we don't appreciate (triggers negative reaction). Ex. Gossiping, disrespect, violation of trust, disrespect, inconsiderate, selfishness sarcasm, harsh criticism etc.
<u><b>Deposits for Others</b></u>	<u><b>Withdrawals for Others</b></u>
What attributes do you provide others (positive/proactive strategies)? Ex. Help, willing to listen, giving of your time, responsible, compromise, motivation, validation	What are my triggers to others? Ex. I am too demanding, over committed, I have too high expectations, can't say no.

**Relational Aggression Bank Account<sup>10</sup>**

<u><b>What Do You Need to See in a Friendship to Feel Secure?</b></u>	<u><b>What Could Occur in a Friendship to Hurt Your Feelings?</b></u>
<u><b>What Do You Do in a Friendship that Creates a Feeling of Security?</b></u>	<u><b>What Do You in Friendship that Creates a Feeling of Insecurity?</b></u>

<sup>9</sup> Randall, K. *Mean Girls Conference*, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid #9.

