
The Beacon

Guiding You through the Process of Change

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Friend or Foe? Understanding Relational Aggression

What is Relational Aggression (RA)?

Relational aggression is the use of interpersonal relationships and emotions to hurt a peer, such as by damaging their social status. Relational aggression can make life miserable for girls, particularly during adolescence when close friendships provide girls with support and acceptance vital to their developing sense of identity. Relational aggression begins as early as the preschool years, and continues throughout life. It peaks during the middle-school years, when girls are honing their verbal and social skills. Although boys may also engage in RA, boys tend to use more direct or physical forms of aggression towards one another. Relational aggression exists on a continuum from teasing and gossiping to verbal taunts/threats, spreading rumors, the "silent treatment," and exclusion from cliques. In any RA situation, there is an aggressor/ bully, a target/victim and a bystander(s). It is not uncommon for girls to alternate roles over time, depending on their social status. The internet and texting ("cyber-bullying") are often incorporated into relational aggression. Relational aggression generally occurs outside of adult supervision (e.g., the school hallway/cafe/terrace/playground, social gatherings) and the quiet, insidious nature of RA makes it hard to detect. Feelings of fear and shame often deter children from enlisting the help of their parents or teachers when they need it most.

What is the Cause of Relational Aggression?

The girls who engage in RA, whether as the aggressor, target, or bystander, typically suffer from some underlying insecurity. They may be afraid of losing their social status or having some weakness exposed. They may have low self-esteem and believe that they somehow invite or deserve the abuse, or they may be afraid to take a stand for fear of being the next target. Conversely, girls who are confident in their abilities and value as a person and who possess strong social skills (e.g., empathy, assertiveness) are less likely to be involved in RA.

What is the Danger and What Can Parents Do?

When RA is allowed to continue without intervention, it can have an insidious effect on girls' development and psychological adjustment. Relational aggression is associated with anxiety disorders, depression and suicidal behaviors, social withdrawal/isolation, eating disorders, conduct problems, school avoidance, academic decline and other serious mental health problems. Parents can reduce the likelihood of your daughter being involved in RA by first learning about it and discussing it with your children. Cheryl Dellasega and Charisse Nixon, in "Girl Wars, 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying," encourage parents to teach their daughters early on about how to treat others with an attitude of "confident kindness." It is important for parents, as children's most influential role models, to demonstrate positive social interactions in their own lives, and teach their children to value and accept differences in themselves and others. Parental expectations about the appropriate treatment of others should be made clear to

children from a young age. Children need to learn how to solve their own problems and resolve interpersonal conflict in an assertive but not overly aggressive manner. They need to be held accountable for their behavior, and to see their parents being held accountable as well. Parents should be aware of, and attempt to combat, pervasive media messages equating looks, money and social status with success and happiness. One way to do this is to help girls develop their natural abilities and interests, such as through involvement in team sports, art or music. Additionally, when girls interact in multiple social contexts besides school, such as through volunteerism and community clubs and organizations (e.g., Girl Scouts), there is an opportunity to feel connected to something larger than themselves and their immediate peer group. Such activities also provide additional opportunities for social support and mentoring relationships. Most importantly, parents need to stay actively involved in their child's life by getting to know their teachers, friends, and friends' parents, and by expressing curiosity about their thoughts, feelings and interests in a supportive, but not intrusive manner.

What Do You Do If Your Daughter Is Involved in RA?

Step in early when your daughter relates problems with RA or you see the signs of it, such as sudden changes in behavior or personality, self-denigrating comments (e.g., "I'm a loser"), avoidance of school or social withdrawal. It is important to stay calm and help her communicate her feelings and formulate a plan to solve the problem, such as by telling her aggressors what they are doing, how it is making her feel, and that they must stop or be held accountable. Be supportive, listen carefully, and take notes documenting your daughter's experience and the steps you take to address the situation. If the problem persists or she is unable to resolve the problem herself, or if there is any threat of physical harm, then it is time to intervene on her behalf. Approach the school or other parents with the facts and an attitude of concern and collaboration. Avoid making accusations or taking over the situation yourself. Relational aggression is a group problem and it needs to be addressed with a team approach, including children, parents, and school personnel. Psychotherapy is a particularly beneficial way to help girls understand and process their experience of RA, and feel supported as they develop the coping skills and self-esteem necessary to minimize future involvement in RA.

Reference List

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By Jill Shalan, Ph.D.

Beacon Behavioral Services, LLC
(860) 676-9350 x54

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Beacon Behavioral Services, LLC
1-888-422-8801

Avon

40 Dale Road
Avon, CT 06001
860-676-9350

Bloomfield

34 Jerome Avenue
Bloomfield, CT 06002
860-243-5024

Glastonbury

200 Oak Street
Glastonbury, CT 06033
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Visit us on the Internet at:

www.beaconbehavioral.com
email@beaconbehavioral.com

Beacon Behavioral Services, LLC

40 Dale Road, Suite 201
Avon, CT 06001