

Words Will EVER Hurt Me

Girls as Bullies

By Kelly Burgess



It seems that every woman has a story. For Susan Wellman it was the "truly awful" adolescence of her daughter, who was victimized throughout middle school. For Rachel Simmons, it was the emotional scars left by an aggressive third grade classmate who decided that 8-year-old Rachel was to be her victim in a vicious campaign of exclusion. Neither woman had words to tell their stories, so they made them up and made them part of the lexicon.

The words are "relational aggression," and they describe a sneaky form of bullying that experts say is much more common than what we think of as "traditional" bullying, which is when boys



physically aggress against other boys. Relational aggression can start as early as second grade and reaches its peak in middle school. It's perpetrated by girls against other girls, and the wounds it leaves often never heal.

Unlike traditional bullies who tend to stand out for their boisterous or anti-social behavior, the girl bully is often one of the prettiest, smartest girls in her class, beloved by teachers and administrators alike. Most adults have trouble even thinking of her as a bully because she's so very feminine. She usually has perfect hair, cool

clothes and is either a cheerleader or involved in some equally prestigious activity.

She travels in a pack of at least two other girls, and she's in charge of where they all sit, stand and who is allowed to join them. The members of the clique change at her whim, and those who are "out" at the moment are often tortured by the "in" girls in ways that vary from the subtle – ignoring her at lunch – to the overt, such as making up lies and spreading them around the school. Sometimes, encouraged by their leader, the entire pack will turn on a third party, perhaps the school loner or a new girl, making her miserable while maintaining such an ingratiating façade that no adult would ever guess that their school was a veritable abattoir of female emotion.

Speaking Out

They're getting it now, though, thanks in part to a recent spate of books and articles on the subject. Rachel Simmons, who recovered sufficiently from the tortures of her youth to graduate from Vassar and become a Rhodes scholar, turned her lingering pain into the book, [Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls](#).

This sudden focus on the problem of female bullies has brought a wave of media attention to the subject. Recently, both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* ran extensive articles about relational aggression that, among other things, showed how often parents, usually mothers, encourage this type of bullying because it gives their daughters a leg up on the "competition."

Although many of these books and articles give the "leader of the pack" girls catchy names such as Alpha Girls, RMGs (Really Mean Girls) and Queen Bees, Susan Wellman dislikes those terms. She likes calling a spade a spade or an aggressively mean girl just what she is – a bully.

Wellman is the founder of the [Ophelia Project](#), one of the first programs to name relational aggression and find ways to counteract it. Another program is the [Empower Program](#), founded by Rosalind Wiseman. The difference between the two programs is that the Empower Program uses a more confrontational approach between warring peers, an approach that has been criticized for teaching girls even more hurtful tricks, whereas the Ophelia Project, based in Erie, Pa., uses older teen mentors to work with younger girls to try and stop relational aggression before it starts.



"My daughter had a terrible adolescence, one that scarred her so badly that it was years before she recovered," says Wellman. "What I didn't realize was that what she went through is so pervasive in our society and is devastating emotionally to many of our young girls. As soon as I started talking about it, people began sharing their horror stories with me, but what was most distressing was that it quickly became apparent the problem is getting worse."

Redefining Bullying

The reason for the escalation is simple – there has been no intervention in girls' aggression as there has been for that of the more physical aggression of boys. Because girls' aggression doesn't disrupt classrooms, leave anyone bleeding in the halls or result in broken bones, it's generally ignored. The result is an escalation of the emotional bullying in much the same way physical aggression would escalate if it were not nipped in the bud.

Finding a solution for the problem of relational aggression was Simmons' goal when she first came up with the idea for a book about how girls bully other girls. Originally, it was conceived as a children's book, but it evolved as she discovered that there were no books on the subject at all. "I wanted to write a powerful, accessible book to tell women's stories and show that we can survive this type of abuse and grow up to have wonderful lives," she says. "I want girls to read these stories, not just adults, because everyone will see themselves here."

Simmons, who has worked with both Wellman and Wiseman, thinks that both the Ophelia Project and the Empower Program are good approaches, simply because there is nothing else out there. At this point, both programs are experimental, and only time and research will tell which method, or which combination of methods, is most effective in combating relational aggression.

Girls as Mentors

Wellman has plenty of evidence that an on-site mentoring program can make a difference. In 1999, the Ophelia Project initiated a pilot program called "How Girls Hurt Each Other" to test peer strategies for dealing with relational aggression. Recruiting high school girls from Erie's McDowell High School, Wellman and her staff trained them as mentors to conduct workshops in middle schools. Using role-playing and small group activities, the mentors' task was to make these young girls aware of their conduct and how potentially devastating their actions were.



Ellen Anderson was one of the first volunteers. "At first I wasn't sure it was doing any good, and the stories we

were hearing from these girls were just heartbreaking," recalls Anderson. "Then I started to hear things from some of the girls as I ran into them outside of the workshops. They would come up and tell me that thanks to us, someone had written them a note of apology and were no longer targeting them or had realized they were a bully and had stopped. I realized that we were really helping a lot."

Anderson returned the following year, and now, as a three-year veteran, is training the girls who will continue her work. Some of those girls were in middle school when Anderson started and attended some of the first workshops she gave. She's pleased with the ripple effect her work has had and notes that they are now training permanent mentor teams for several schools in her area. She sees that as the future of the program and plans to continue her work as a college student.

Currently Wellman is busy with her efforts to take the program nationwide. In the meantime, while she is grateful for the recent media focus on this problem, she hopes interest in solving it doesn't wane as the media turns to other subjects.

"We have to have special programs to help the average girl recognize how much power they have to change this situation, while at the same time, identifying those girls that are highly aggressive and continue to bully on a regular basis," says Wellman. "Our little program won't make a dent in those girls, but if we can educate the entire school, educate their parents and educate our society, they will no longer have free rein."

Preventing Relational Aggression

- Be a good example for your child. Don't gossip about or denigrate friends, neighbors or co-workers.
- Become aware of your child's position in the school/peer hierarchy. Try to determine if she is a victim or an aggressor. Many girls are "in the middle" and are merely passive observers of the situation. Help those "middle girls" to understand that, while ignoring both parties is easy, the moral high road is to support the victims and discourage the aggressors.
- Aggressors should be shown how hurtful their behavior is. Often they don't realize it and are quite contrite when it is brought to their attention.
- Victims need advocacy. Speak to school officials. Many guidelines and programs are available to guide the process and educate those who are unfamiliar with the problem.
- Examine your school's bullying program and encourage administrators to include programs on relational aggression. Many traditional anti-bullying programs ignore this important subject.
- Encourage your daughter to be involved in a variety of activities where she meets peers and adults from all walks of life. Encourage hobbies that build self-esteem and a sense of personal accomplishment.