

## Girls, Aggressive?

### Peggy Patten

Society's attention on aggression in children has focused primarily on boys. Many of us assume boys are more aggressive because their forms of aggression are more visible. We see them hitting or fighting on the playgrounds or in our homes. In fact, much of the research on aggressive children has focused on the more overt, physical types of aggression characteristic of boys.

Researcher Nicki Crick of the University of Minnesota and her colleagues argue that research has overlooked aggressive behavior in girls because the patterns of aggression in girls are different than in boys. Most definitions of aggression include behaviors that are intended to hurt or harm others. Nicki Crick and her colleague Jennifer Grotmeter elaborate on that definition by adding that aggression also includes behaviors that “best thwart or damage goals that are valued by their respective gender peer groups” (Crick & Grotmeter, 1995, p. 710). Boys generally harm others with physical or verbal aggression because this behavior is consistent with the physical dominance peer group goals of boys. Girls, on the other hand, are more apt to focus their aggression on relational issues with their peers. This behavior is consistent with the social peer group and intimacy goals of girls. This kind of aggression, which Crick and her colleagues call “relational aggression,” is more characteristic of girls, though not exclusive to girls, and is done with the intention of damaging another child's friendship or feelings of inclusion within a social group (Crick & Grotmeter, 1995, p. 711).

Girls' relational aggression includes a range of behaviors such as excluding another child from a play group as a form of retaliation, intentionally withdrawing friendship as a way of hurting or controlling a child, and spreading rumors about a child to persuade peers to reject her (Crick &

Grotmeter, 1995, p. 711). Patterns of relational aggression are seen in girls as young as 3 to 5 years of age (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997, p. 585) and appear to be relatively stable over time (Crick, 1996, p. 2326).

Should parents be concerned about girls who engage in this kind of aggression? Does this kind of behavior cause any real harm? The answer to both questions is “yes.” Relationally aggressive girls have more social and emotional problems and experience more loneliness, depression, negative self-perceptions, and peer rejection than others. Those who are victims of relationally aggressive behaviors also experience adjustment problems and report more depression, anxiety, and emotional distress than their nontargeted peers (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997, p. 579).

Problems with peers affect children in multiple ways. Gary Ladd's Pathways Project, a long-term study of children from kindergarten through junior high school, looks at aspects of family and school that affect children's academic success. Ladd found that the kinds of relationships children form with peers once they get into school matter a great deal. When children have difficulty with their peer group at the start of school, they do less well on measures of learning and achievement. Similarly, children who are consistently victimized—teased or hit—are more likely to develop negative views of school, are more lonely, have more physical complaints, and display higher levels of school avoidance (Patten, 1999).

Children who are rejected by their peers continue to experience problems later in life, such as dropping out of school, juvenile delinquency, and mental health problems (Asher & Williams, 1993). Furthermore, antisocial behavior in girls during their childhood and teen years is found to persist into adulthood with higher rates of criminality, teen pregnancy,

and adult depression (“Antisocial Behavior in Girls,” 1999, pp. 1, 7).

What, then, should parents do if they observe relationally aggressive behaviors in children? First, parents can recognize that relationally aggressive children are at risk for adjustment difficulties, just as overtly aggressive children are.

Second, parents can use opportunities to develop children’s social skills. Ladd’s Pathways Project found that parents help children develop effective social skills in a number of ways: for example, by inviting friends over and arranging for children to join in group play with other children; by talking to their child about what it means to be a host and how to look out for the other child’s needs; and by intervening when problems arise in play groups and talking to their child about fairness, turn taking, sharing, and resolving dilemmas through compromise and discussion. In all these ways, Ladd says, parents are teaching social competence—how to make and maintain a friendship with another child (Patten, 1999).

Research tells us that aggressive behavior during childhood predicts later social adjustment problems (Crick, 1996, p. 2317). While boys and girls may exhibit their aggression and cruelty in different ways, the effects can be equally damaging.

### For More Information

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