



Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is different from other forms of bullying in that most bullying occurs outside the peer group while relational aggression occurs within the peer group. However, it is similar because it can be repeated, aggressive, harassing and severe. It is destructive not only for the victim but for those who exhibit bullying behaviour.

Increasing numbers of children and youth are demonstrating mean behaviour in a variety of ways. In particular, girls display 'hidden' and 'indirect aggression' in the form of rumour spreading and/or social exclusion. Verbal violence through electronic media such as the Internet, e-mail and cell phone is also increasing.

Bullying is a learned behaviour. The behaviour generally develops over time and almost always involves an imbalance of power. Relational aggression, however, can involve bullying or other types of conflict between two parties that can be of equal power.

Relational aggression is typically covert (not observable) and indirect. Examples can include:

- Shunning;
- Excluding;
- Ignoring;
- Gossiping;
- Lying;
- Spreading false rumours; or
- Disclosing another person's secrets.

Just like physical or more overt forms of bullying, relational aggression has both short term and long term emotional impacts.

Facts:

- Girls demonstrate a higher level of indirect aggression at every age than do boys. [R. Tremblay, "The Origins of Youth Violence," *Isuma*, 1, 2 (2000): 19-24.]

- Indirect aggression increases with age for both boys and girls. [Human Resources Development Canada, *Growing Up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* (Ottawa, ON: 1998).]

**Need to talk to someone about bullying?
Call 1-888-456-2323 (24 hours, toll-free in Alberta).**

Children and Youth Services and Education are proud to lead Alberta's Cross-Ministry Strategy for the Prevention of Bullying.





Addressing Relational Aggression

Strategies should include education about healthy self-esteem and relationships, encourage respectful schools and communities, and encourage conflict resolution at an early stage.

Overall strategies to address relational aggression are similar to the general approach to bullying:

1. Include the concept of relational aggression in the definition of “bullying”.
2. Teach kids how to resolve conflicts at a young age.
3. Educate people about relational aggression and its serious and negative impacts.
4. Create a culture where interactions are constructive and avoid intentional emotional harm to others.
5. Use specific resources around relational aggression to supplement general bullying prevention practices.
6. Set up additional strategies that address cyberbullying, such as creating some clear and preventative rules at school and home around expectations of conduct, access to and use of technology.

Relational Aggression Online

Online bullying has been found to be more extreme and direct than in the real world, focusing on gossip, criticisms of appearance, attacks on sexuality, declarations of disloyalty, and statements about physical violence. Female cyberbullies tend to be more direct and aggressive online because they can be anonymous.

Examples include:

- ‘Flaming’ (overt attacks on a person);
- Harassment;
- Cyber stalking (use of the Internet to ‘stalk’, threaten or harass);
- Put-downs;
- Masquerade (pretending to be someone you’re not);
- ‘Outing’ (publicizing that someone is gay);
- Trickery (misrepresentation intended to take advantage of someone); and
- Exclusion from online or ‘real life’ groups.

In extreme cases cyberbullying can lead to stalking, death threats and suicide.

For more information on strategies to prevent and deal with cyberbullying, please see the “Cyberbullying Fact Sheet” available for download online at www.bullyfreealberta.ca.

Trends:

- Recent studies on girls’ aggressive behaviour have produced consistent findings: girls are aggressive toward each other but usually in more covert, indirect ways, which are motivated by the relational goals concerned with the making and breaking of friendships. [Archer & Coyne, 2005; James & Owens, 2005]

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