



Family Matters

Making Family Life Easier

Relational Aggression: Girls hurting Girls

A girl is taunted about her weight daily, pictures of pigs posted online. Another girl arrives into school Monday morning to find her best friend is ignoring her, by lunchtime all of her group of friends sit at a different table, and she is not invited to the sleepover that is taking place that weekend. Rumours are spread about another girl who talks to a boy one of her classmate's fancies, when she gets home she finds dozens of obscene messages on her social networking page. These common scenes are often dismissed as girls being girls, that they are mean and nasty, it's just the way they are, there is nothing we can do about it. These behaviours, however are not just girls being girls, they have a name; it's called relational aggression. Research indicates that girls are as aggressive as boys but that they express it in different ways; boys tend to fight with their fists while girls use their words as weapons.

Relational aggression therefore can be described as behaviours that hurt others by damaging or threatening to damage another person's relationships or reputation or any behaviour that hurts a peer's feelings. Giving the silent treatment, spreading rumours about someone who is not liked, gossiping and putting people down, excluding a person from a conversation or activity, name-calling, cliques, eye-rolling and sighing are just some of the weapons that girls use in their relationships. Relational aggression is a phenomenon that affects a young person's social and emotional development. It has been linked to problems such as depression, social isolation, loneliness, problematic relationships and low self-esteem.

Research shows that children begin to use relational aggression in playschool but that the behaviours seem to peak in the early teenage years, when a girl's social life, finding and keeping friends, becomes all important. To help young girls navigate their social world and deal with these behaviours, they need to be educated about them. As a parent you can provide this important information. To do this it is important to educate yourself on relational aggression. Armed with this knowledge, you can then have conversations with your daughter about relational aggression. It is important to start these conversations as early as possible. When talking to your child, explain what relational aggression is, how it hurts people, why it happens and what can be done about it. A great resource on this topic is *Girl Wars: 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying*, by Cheryl Dellasega and Charisse Nixon.

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