

# Bullying Prevention Resource Guide

FOR SCHOOLS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

## TIPS AND TOPICS FOR BULLYING PREVENTION SUCCESS

### RELATIONAL AGGRESSION: TIPS FOR PARENTS

#### *What is a relational aggression (RA)?*

The use of relationships to harm another person; for example starting rumors, spreading gossip, teasing, creating or joining cliques, and deliberately excluding another person. RA is not often clear-cut but consists along a continuum of mild to extreme. Females are more likely to be victims, bystanders and perpetrators of RA than males. Therefore, in this tip sheet we refer to the characters as female.

- RA is a learned behavior, not a phase. Many women can think of an example of this behavior in their recent lives.
- Relational aggression doesn't just happen in the most popular clique, other cliques experience it too.
- The characters in RA can switch roles; this usually happens at the beginning of the school year, when a new student arrives, or when physical development separates the girls from the young women.
- Relational aggression is flourishing online in the form of cyberbullying.

#### *What can a parent do to understand relational aggression?*

##### **First, understand your daughter's perspective.**

- Take into account the developmental stage your child is experiencing. During adolescence, kids want more freedom. As a parent, you need be involved, yet unobtrusive. Therefore, if you do decide to intervene, be mindful of how you do it. Adolescent girls prefer that parents maintain a hands-off attitude; "If my mom called up my friend's mom and told her to be nice to me, I'd just die," one teenager shared. "I'd never forgive her for invading my privacy," (Dellasega and Nixon, p. 99).
- Make sure you look at your own emotional baggage around the issue of relational aggression. Don't use your daughter's incident to relive your own. Always check your motives before responding to RA.
- Keep in mind, too, that what may seem trivial to you could feel vital to her (it is the end of the world to her if she gets kicked out of her lunch table). Don't disrespect her reality by treating it as insignificant.
- Realize that girls have a strict social hierarchy based on what our culture tells us about "ideal" femininity. At no time in your daughter's life is it more important to fit these elusive standards than in adolescence. Girls police each other on who is breaking the laws of appearance, clothes, interest in boys and personality. She processes this information with and through her friends. All of these factors influence the woman she will become.

#### *To prevent relational aggression:*

##### **Teach empathy.**

- Help girls form a positive self identity; that will lead to more supportive relationships with others.
- Emphasize that there is no middle ground; either you are against RA or you are for it (through passive support or direct aggression).
- Model the importance of taking care of your own friendships.
- Monitor your own gossiping; are you doing it in front of adolescents?
- Sensitize girls to be forgiving and accepting, while helping them maintain a sense of self-esteem and confidence.
- Give girls the basic skills to solve problems and resolve conflicts; without these skills, conflicts can get blown out of proportion and turn into RA fodder.
- Share your own instances of conflict and how you resolved it.
- Do role plays based on relational aggression scenarios to empower girls so they are prepared when it occurs in real life.

- Girls that are unsure of their morals are more likely to use RA. Address RA in the framework of morals; girls may be questioning their religious beliefs at this time so you could try focusing on universal morals as opposed to church doctrine.
- Catch her being kind and praise her; this is more effective than criticizing her when you catch her doing wrong.
- Ask her everyday, “who did you help today?”
- Talk about the role of boys in RA. Too often aggression between girls occurs because of a boy. Encourage girls to think about the dynamics of friendships when a romance is involved. Separate out who is responsible for what. Have the girls answer such questions as:
  - Should only the girl be blamed for dating a friend’s boyfriend or is the boy equally responsible?
  - How should a girl handle situations where a friend’s boyfriend flirts with her or asks her out?
  - When does a romantic interest override a friendship?
  - What is the best way to share information about a budding romance with a friend, when she has formerly been involved with the same boy?

***To intervene in relational aggression:***

**Stay connected.**

Be aware of school policies, attend school meetings, talk with parents and stay in touch with teachers. However, be mindful of your child’s need to figure some stuff out for herself in order to feel empowered. Maybe she can find the solution to a relational aggression situation by going through the school protocol herself (with you there in the background cheering her on and waiting patiently in case she needs you). Be there emotionally and physically when needed. Find a way to communicate (email, notes). If she rejects you, don’t take it personally. If your child is dealing with an RA situation, do something fun. You don’t have to discuss the situation right away, ease into the discussion after an activity.

**Step in early.**

The smallest RA incidents can be used as teachable moments to provide group learning and allow girls to share creative approaches to address these issues without aggression. When the conversations do turn to malicious gossip or slander, use the method of creating a distraction to get them off the subject. You could also assert yourself—tell them that what they are doing is inappropriate and hurtful.

**Hold her accountable for her behavior.**

“Don’t hesitate to call your daughter and her friends on behaviors that are relationally aggressive. Encourage her to catch you in the act too, then be careful she doesn’t.” (Dellasega and Nixon, p. 63).

**Teach her to analyze the behaviors.**

The very first time you see a girl involved in RA, start a dialogue with her about what you observed. Sort out roles and motivations of participants. “Breaking down situations will help girls see themselves through the eyes of others and begin to identify ways to change their own behavior,” (Dellasega and Nixon, p. 82). To do that, ask her: Who holds the power? Who makes the rules? How could the outcome be changed? What would help a bystander take a stand? Whose responsibility is it to change RA behaviors? Is it okay to stand by and watch if you aren’t actively involved in RA?

**Figure out who needs what.**

“Aggressors need to learn to build self-esteem in more effective ways that don’t belittle others, while bystanders or girls in the middle need to put their fears aside and develop the courage to take action when RA occurs,” (Dellasega and Nixon, p. 83).

**Recognize when a girl needs professional help.**

Look for depression, loneliness, anxiety, peer rejection, acting-out behavior, delinquency and disordered eating. If these are occurring, get professional help.

### *To follow-up and move forward:*

After an RA episode it is important that your child process what happened and find ways to go on with life. This includes putting the incident into perspective, and helping your daughter use this experience to become a strong, confident young woman.

- **Soothe and support.** “Whether a girl is a victim, a bystander, or an aggressor, she feels isolated and alone, sure that no one else is like her or can appreciate the unique obstacles she faces, be they bad skin, excess weight, flat chest, or big nose. To provide her with the emotional support she needs, concerned adults need to address both her low self-esteem and her sense of being unlike – or different from – others,” (Dellasega and Nixon, p. 143).
- **Reframe hurtful behaviors.** “Certainly not every cruel behavior can or should be overlooked. However, young women who are secure in themselves are freed from the obsessive need to be like everyone. If they understand that aggression comes from a place of insecurity and fear, “they can often ‘disarm’ potential tormentors by not allowing their verbal arrows to hit a target. Some girls are naturally capable of such self-confident behavior, while others can learn to react confidently through preparing, processing, and practicing,” (Dellasega and Nixon, p. 124).
- **Discuss alternatives.** Once the initial comforting of a target has occurred, problem-solve effective responses to the situation in case it happens again. Let her know the importance that she act when she sees RA - it only takes one girl to change the dynamic. Share your own stories. Better yet, have girls 1 to 2 years older share their stories. Empower girls to problem-solve. Tap into girls’ creativity and let them create their own techniques to intervene in relational aggression. Some examples: giving compliments, changing the subject, or switching to positive gossip. If you have to, change the environment; discussing alternatives such as moving or home-schooling if the RA is severe.
- **Prevent her from brooding over the situation.** Help girls to develop skills that do not involve others, such as listening to music, exercising, and keeping a journal. Curb the tendency to rehash and rehash the situation by limiting telephone or computer time and substituting other activities. Make sure you are modeling these positive behaviors yourself.
- **Help her establish relationship boundaries.** Ask, what would you do in the name of friendship? Examples: Would you allow someone else to control your decisions? To verbally disrespect, threaten, harass you? Help the girl determine where the line is drawn that she will not cross and reinforce her determination to stick to her principals. Have girls take time to figure out what they believe in and what they need.
- **Make sure she has a variety of places to make friends, not just school.** Team sports are a good place for that. However, sports like swimming and dancing, that focus on bodies and individual competition, can promote RA. Places like your church, 4H club, Girl Scouts or Boys and Girls Club are also good places to make a variety of friends. Volunteering is another good way for adolescents to make friends of all ages and walks of life.

### *Dad's behavior is important, too!*

- Men need to model *cooperation*, not competition, in work and personal relationships.
- Patiently wait around for your daughter to talk and then listen without being judgmental.
- Present your wisdom in a credible manner so she won't blow you off and think your opinions are outdated and irrelevant. *Through your relationship with her, you can teach her that her relationships with men must be mutually respectful and caring.*
- Don't be afraid to look foolish or show your emotions. Share the “boy perspective,” and communicate your concerns without coming across as controlling and dogmatic.

### **Summary**

- Teach healthy alternatives to relational aggression. Provide support, tools and accountability to do so successfully.

- Boys play a part in relational aggression. Don't let them off the hook. Men need to help youth deal with relational aggression, too.
- Recognize when a child needs professional help, and take action to get them the help they need. If RA is severe, talk to your child about moving, home-schooling, or switching schools.
- We can create a culture that brings out the best in adolescents. To create social change, we must change the perception that relational aggression is acceptable.

**Resources:**

Dellasega, Cheryl and Nixon, Charisse. *Girl Wars: 12 strategies that will end female bullying*. A Fireside Book, published by Simon & Schuster. 2003.

Simmons, Rachel. *Odd Girl Out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*. A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc. 2002.

Wiseman, Rosalind. *Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends, & other realities of adolescents*. Three Rivers Press. 2002.

**Bullying Prevention Initiative Common Elements:**

- Partnerships
- Positive Youth Development
- Interventions for Students (bully, bullied, and bystander)
- Cultural Competency
- Sustained Climate Change

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