

Sometimes Friends - Sometimes Foes Relational Aggression in the Spotlight

Everywhere we look, parents are looking for answers - and we want them fast. We want our kids to do well at school, to have good friends, and positive experiences. We try so very hard to give our children what they need. And so, it is perplexing to us when we see that look in our child's eyes – you know the look. It's the look of sadness. Someone has wounded our loved one. When that happens, we want to fix the problem - to get our children to turn that frown upside down.

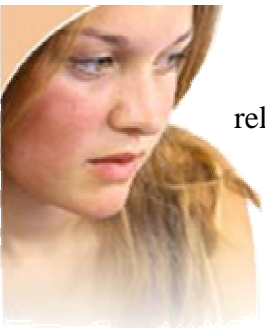
But it's not so easy when we are talking about rejection from peers. Many of us remember acutely what it feels like. One of the basic needs of humans is to belong, to be accepted by others. When our children are rejected, we spring into action: “ignore them” we say, “those people are mean, not the kind of people to be friends with anyway”. We tell them it will be ok, they will make other friends. But we as adults know there is more to it. It is not hard to imagine what it would be like if when you went to work a group of co-workers regularly gave you “the look”. Or how you might feel when, as you walked by the coffee spot or water cooler, and the voices get quiet until you pass – might you feel that their last remark was about you? And, oh yes, on Fridays when the group goes out to the new place for lunch – we find it very hard to convince ourselves that we really don't care that we weren't included.

As adults we have had more practice with rejection than our kids. So when your daughter Julie comes home day after day sad and in tears saying that no one wants to be her friend, your heart breaks. Every day for the last three weeks, she has been relating different stories about what the popular girls, Zoë, Melissa, and Jennifer, have been doing and saying to her. One day they spread a rumor that the only reason she got a good mark in math is because she cheated on the test. Yesterday they told all the other girls not to talk to her. Yet another time they told her that she was ugly and smelly. She tried to be friendly and talk with them, but as she approached their table they said: “that seat is taken. There's no room for you here”. Then Jennifer, the group leader, handed your daughter an invitation to her party. Your daughter is thrilled, “Mommy, they want to be my friend” she says... while she's thrilled about being finally included, you have mixed feelings. You're not so sure what the invitation means. You're not sure if you should encourage her to go or not – this might be an opportunity for those girls to hurt your precious daughter once again.

Every day in schools in Quebec, children and teens are threatened, teased, taunted and terrorized by their peers. Many children come to believe that there is no way around bullying – it is a sad fact of their life and no one can do anything about it. As parents, we have come to know more about bullying in general. However, it has only been more recently that relational aggression has been given more attention. We know that before we can seek to change anything, we first need to understand the world of relational aggression.

Those who spend their days in research have informed us that relational aggression is a type of bullying that affects a person's emotions and relationships. It occurs within social settings, but out of the view of adults. Research has shown that while both boys and girls use this form of aggression, the most relationally aggressive children are girls. An article in the National Post written by Pearson hit the nail on the head. It noted that relational aggression is “a specialty of girls... women compete with wits instead of weapons... They attack indirectly through social networks – slandering reputations, for example, or disrupting





relationships". This behaviour includes gossip, setting someone up to look foolish, excluding someone from a group, malicious rumor mongering, anonymous mean emails and hate clubs.

So enter into the girls' world ... a world where best friends become enemies overnight, a world when one look can make the difference between belonging and being all alone, wondering where you can go to hide your shame. What wouldn't you do to be invited to join the group? Sadly, for many the answer is "not much!"

Being invited to join "the group" can come with a heavy price tag. Relational aggression interferes with academic achievement. Girls who are caught up in these dramas are not thinking about their grades: If a student is being gossiped about, she can't concentrate on her math class. Some researchers have stated that experiencing relational aggression can set up a girl to accept abusive behavior, or to stay in abusive relationships with a man. The effects of using relational aggression are serious as well. Girls who use relational aggression experience both short and long term social and psychological maladjustment, including depression, isolation, social anxiety, and are also more disliked by their peer group. These girls learn that to feel better about themselves can only come at someone else's expense.

In order to address relational aggression in our schools, the serious harm that this imposes on our children needs to be acknowledged. Some schools are using one of the central interventions in dealing with bullying, the concept of a "school wide plan", to address relational aggression as well. This means creating a whole school climate, a "caring community", where all students can feel safe. School wide intervention includes educating all adults who work with children in the dynamics of relational aggression. It also means raising the awareness of students and creating opportunities for them to reflect on their relationships and the power they have to impact those around them. It is important to keep in mind that effectively intervening with relational aggression is more challenging than with the more overt physical aggression typically seen with boys. Girl's aggression is done in more sneaky ways, so it is more difficult to detect and address.

Even in 2005, we still expect boys to be aggressive, domineering, and competitive, and we expect girls to be cooperative, nurturing, and nice. Girls are socialized to smile when they are mad, to act nicely and to be good. Left to their own devices, our girls improvise, "If you don't do it my way, I'll tell Sara that you told everyone she was stupid" or "You have to do what I say, or I won't play with you." Children as young as preschool have been observed excluding peers by saying "Don't let her play" or using retaliation: "She was mean to me yesterday, so she can't be our friend."

Our girls need us to teach them to "fight fair", "don't hit below the belt" and "to stand your ground". They need to learn how to keep their conflicts brief and to the point. Many girls say that their conflicts last for weeks. One ten year old girl from Montreal recently related an event that took place in her community. She said that the boys on her street had a big fight, "and then it was over"; when the girls on her street had a fight they didn't talk to each other for weeks. Then, when they finally started speaking again, they were so glad to be friends again that they did not revisit what they originally fought over. And so the cycle continues: the reasons for the original conflict never resolved, will go underground to erupt at another time. Another broken heart, another pair of sad eyes reflecting the shame of being unwanted.

Girls need help understanding that conflicts are a natural occurrence in friendships. They need to be provided with opportunities to practice being supportive and honest with each other and learn to resolve problems through open discussion and compromise. Sometimes Friends – Sometimes Foes focuses on discussion, games, and role playing. The focus is to get girls to think about themselves



in the context of power – how they behave in this context, how they compete for power and how they define themselves.

As with all forms of bullying, adults are the key in changing these dynamics. Research shows that children need the emotional warmth, caring and guidance from caring adults at home and at school. At home, parents can be helpful in changing these dynamics. They can help their girls by being willing to spend time listening to their feelings and encouraging them to feel their sadness, loss and disappointment, so that they can be open to new relationships. We need to help them own their anger, and to learn to let go of things they cannot change. We need to help them focus their energy on creating positive relationships, and in reaching out to other girls. We need to help them to find ways to build solidarity with their peers rather than looking toward the center of their social circle at the high-status girls. Our girls need to start choosing friends who are not mean to them.



In the school setting, adults who understand these dynamics create safety nets for all children. It is helpful to identify adult contacts for students at risk for becoming, or continuing to be, the target for bullying behavior. However, for some children, this will not be sufficient. Even when we do it all right, some children will benefit from additional support beyond what parents and schools can realistically provide. Children who are chronically excluded or picked on can get emotional support through therapeutic intervention. Sometimes we all need someone to turn to ... Sometimes it helps to talk to someone you can trust.



Editors Note:

DM Family and School Services offers anti bullying programs, including “Sometimes Friends Sometimes Foes” specifically on girls aggression, in the community to students, parents, teachers, support staff, lunch monitors, daycare operators, and early childhood educators. Individual, couple, and family counselling, as well as therapy through play for young children, is also available. For more information, contact DM Family and School Services / Deb Kellman or Mona Segal at (514) 483-9339 www.dmfamilyschool.com.