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**Girl Wars: Using Play Therapy to Address Relational Aggression With Middle School Girls**

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**Abstract**

Bullying among adolescent girls, or relational aggression, involves acts of exclusion from peers or groups, using threats or inappropriate gestures to intimidate, or defaming others through verbal attacks, spreading rumors or even posting slanderous comments on social media outlets. This paper demonstrates that bullying can elicit long-term effects on girls who are victimized and can prove to be more harmful than some physical abuse. Negative effects of relational aggression among adolescent girls are discussed and play therapy techniques that can be implemented in school and clinical mental health settings in order to assist these aggressors are examined.

**Introduction**

While growing up many of us were taught the old adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” When hurtful words are spoken, lies are told, and the rumor mill spins out of control, the emotional scars of words spoken can be as damaging as those proverbial “sticks and stones.” Digital natives may demonstrate cyber bravado, being insensitive to others while hiding behind modern technology such as cell phones, e-mails, blogs, text messages, and various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) in order to launch a digital war against others by using defamatory verbal attacks, isolating, or shunning in order to destroy the targeted girls’ self-esteem and reputations.

Reality television, which is increasingly popular among adolescent and preadolescent girls, has normalized relational aggression among females. These programs exploit physical and abusive behaviors toward cast members by showcasing catfights, fistfights, verbal attacks and gossip. Frequently, young viewers will not only initiate but imitate such behaviors in the school environments.
Studies have suggested that social aggression demonstrated by middle school females is manifested as part of their interactional system. This system is created within the female peer group in order to harm, expose or discard a female from the “in group,” or exclude the aggressors from seeking acceptance by members outside of the designated social network.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the negative effects of relational aggression among adolescent girls specifically relating to their academic, personal, social, and character development and to examine play therapy techniques that can be implemented in school and clinical mental health settings in order to assist these aggressors.

**What Is Relational Aggression?**

Relational aggression, or bullying, can be described as any acts or behaviors that can cause harm or damage, or the intent to harm relationships, friendships, or group inclusion (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

According to Nansel et al., (2001), female to female hostility has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. This research indicated that girls are more likely to become victims of bullying than boys starting in elementary school through middle or even high school. This study further revealed that 20% of female students demonstrate their aggression through socially manipulative acts and behaviors, including such conduct as spreading malicious lies or rumors, writing and passing defamatory notes, terminating friendships without cause, and using social exclusion.

Young, Boye, and Nelson (2006) stated relational aggression demonstrated by girls in middle and high school is mostly used in friendships or cliques in which one tries to dominate or control the group. Brown (2005) concluded that girls learn to intentionally sabotage their friendships and relationships with each other as a result of passing judgment or competing against one another in order to control the social circle.

In 2003, Underwood examined and described the roles of girls who demonstrated social aggression toward other females. He reported that in incidents of bullying or socially aggressive acts, the female aggressors acted out their duties and responsibilities as key members of a violence-driven cult-like network. Underwood identified five vital players who often participated in these violent acts of casting out members of the social system or hindering other girls from acceptance by their peers. He characterized the main member of the group as the Queen Bee, who was instrumental in creating the violent attacks toward other females. The Queen Bee is viewed as the Commander in Chief of the network and usually has several followers to support her cause and carry out her mission of lashing out at designated females. Underwood referred to the Allies or Sidekicks as second in command of the network because these participants were closest to the Queen Bee and carried out her commands and demonstrated a strong alliance as well as loyalty toward the Queen. Other members of the group included the Bystanders and the Floaters. Girls who served as the Bystanders of the group were charged with simply being the on-lookers. These members served as spectators who marveled in the violent acts toward other girls. Females who were considered the Floaters would move from member to member in order to preserve a connection with all the comrades.

Rosalind Wiseman, author of the book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (2002), provided her audience with a glimpse into the world of adolescent girls as well as
highlighting eight roles in the social network. The female roles in Wiseman’s book, which differed from the roles discussed in Underwood’s study, are: the Banker, the Messenger, the Target, and the Champion.

Wiseman described the role of the Banker as the girl who withdraws or deposits information about other females in order to cause chaos. The Banker’s main goal is to convince other girls to trust and confide in her. The purpose of the Messenger differs from the Banker because the Messenger’s responsibility is to reconcile the participants as a means of establishing herself with the social group. The book identified the Target as the victim who succumbs to the violent attacks ordered by the Queen Bee. According to Wiseman (2002), females who become Targets are ostracized by the clique because these individuals are viewed as unacceptable due to behavior, appearance, beliefs, religion, or any difference that the Queen Bee deems to be intolerable. Lastly, the Champion demonstrates high levels of self-esteem and refuses to be dominated by the Queen Bee. The Queen Bee usually challenges the Champion as a means to destroy the Champions’ confidence, but the Champion is strong enough to challenge the Queen Bee and handle the criticism.

Similarly, Barbara Coloroso’s book, *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander* (2008), focused on these three concepts: the bully, the victims, and the witnesses, in order to illustrate the key assignments relating to relational aggression. Coloroso highlighted several aspects in her book that echoed the viewpoints found in Wiseman’s (2002) book and in Underwood’s (2003) research. Simply stated, “Relational bullying is at its most powerful in the middle school years, with the onset of adolescence and the accompanying mental, emotional, and sexual changes. It is a time when young teens are trying to figure out who they are and how to fit in.” (Coloroso, 2008, p.17).

Coloroso (2008) suggested that as a society we must look inward and behind the scenes of the bully, the bullied, and the bystander in order to study their life experiences and communities that impact the actions and behaviors associated with the physically violent acts and intimidation demonstrated by these youngsters. Coloroso argued that the absence of parental guidance, role models, and support systems, as well as the availability of social media or even guns, can influence the female aggressors’ participation in bullying.

What is the Impact of Relational Aggression Among Middle School Girls?

“Many kids, humiliated, embarrassed, battered, shamed, wear a mask of normality everyday, but underneath the fake nervous smiles and nervous laughter is crushing hurt” (Coloroso, 2008, p. 53). School communities have shown a recent increase in violent attacks, bullying, and delinquency among middle school females. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2009) presented an annual report that indicated there was an increase in the number of arrests of girls from 1991 to 2000 and a decrease in the number of arrests of boys during this same time frame. Additionally, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2009) discovered that one in four middle school-age girls has been the aggressor of, or has engaged in, violent acts in the past year. Such reported behaviors and violent acts demonstrated by these young girls have revealed a direct correlation to these same females engaging in more dangerous deeds. Artz and Nicholson (2002) explained that young females who are exposed to
abusive conduct in their environments, or who become victims of violent acts, often perceive abusive behaviors as a normal occurrence and welcomed these conditions within relationships.

In addition, other studies have underscored the emotional toll of socially aggressive behaviors or bullying among adolescent girls to include such serious effects as low self-esteem, eating disorders, depression and anxiety, drug and alcohol addiction, sexual promiscuity, social withdrawal, poor grades, sudden health problems (e.g., migraine headaches, stomach pains, hives, and rashes), truancy, or possible suicidal ideation.

Likewise, young girls who succumbed to physically violent acts or relational aggression often demonstrated feelings of powerlessness and insecurity. Oftentimes the result of this negative experience, for some females, can be manifested throughout the individuals’ adulthood that contributed to their feelings of depression, lack of confidence, anxiety, isolation, emotional eating, poor concentration, or performance as well as the inability to trust. Other cases indicated that adults who were bullied during middle and high school are more likely to suffer from emotional trauma that often plagued their adulthood with other mental imbalances.

In his online blog, Dombeck (2007) recounted his childhood experiences of being bullied. He wrote

I’m 40 years old now; it’s been something like 30 years since that sort of thing last happened. Still, the experience has not left me, it sucked so much. I don’t think about it much these days, but I know that having lived through those experiences has shaped me as an adult, and not for the better (n.p.).

Dombeck discussed the long-term impact of bullying on teens with those difficulties that these same victims, who are now adults, experience. His own comments as well as those in the comments section of the blog imply that some adult survivors of bullying have experienced a wide range of social and emotional complexities throughout life such as difficulty in maintaining a job; problems with socializing, making friends, or having relationships; low self-esteem, or issues relating to insecurity.

Girls who have been victims of bullying are at greater risk for mental illness, drug addiction, and delayed emotional, mental or even social development. Flashman (2003) suggested young teens who experience a traumatic event, such as bullying, often display feelings of being overwhelmed or depressed, especially when the individuals believe that their defense mechanisms can no longer protect them. Crick et al. (2001) explained that over the past 15 years, numerous studies have been conducted and revealed that females who were victims of relational aggression in school have trouble with peer relationships, social deficits, and social anxiety. Many of these students developed mental health disorders and some even committed suicide.

**How Can Play Therapy Benefit Girls Displaying Social Aggression?**

According to the Committee on School Health (2004), evidence reveals that the demand for students receiving mental health services has reached a crisis level. The American Counseling Association, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, and School Social Work Association of America
(2006) remarked that the mental health needs of children should include interventions that are evidence based. Therefore, mental health professionals and school counselors play a vital role in empowering parents, teachers, schools, and communities by promoting prevention and intervention programs that address the health and safety of adolescent girls who have experienced bullying in order to deter, as well as address and reduce, the increasing number of relational aggression occurrences. Four concepts should be included in any intervention or treatment of relational aggression. These four domains consist of having girls develop a sense of safety, establishing experiences to insure trust, providing girls with support as they reassemble their narrative in order to create true meaning, and rebuilding the link between victim and peer support.

Thus, young girls who demonstrate aggressive acts can benefit from counseling sessions which incorporate play therapy. Such sessions provide a direct correlation to meeting the needs of the young ladies, who desire the need to feel safe, accepted, and trusted: the same domains included in the development of interventions and treatment plans or curriculums that focus on relational aggression or bullying among adolescent girls.

Play therapy can be distinguished from traditional child’s play. The Association for Play Therapy (2013) defines play therapy as "the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development" (Play Therapy Defined, para. 1).

“In the play therapy experience, toys are like the child’s words and play is the child’s language” (Landreth, 2012, p. 133). During the therapeutic relationship, the helping professional utilizes play therapy with young children, teens, and even adults in order to help these individuals convey and settle feelings of emotional turmoil while providing insight, fostering appropriate problem-solving techniques, amending unhealthy thoughts, and teaching various ways to communicate with others. Play therapy in school counseling sessions can begin the healing process for students who are the bully, the victim, or the onlooker.

What Does Play Therapy Look Like in the School Setting for Socially Aggressive Girls?

There is a plethora of therapeutic play techniques available to school counselors including Jungian play therapy, psychoanalytic child therapy, filial therapy, and child centered or non-directive play therapy. However, the example to be discussed in this paper will be child-centered and non-directive which can be connected to the four domains as well as the prevention and treatment of relational aggression among girls. Child centered play correlates to the prevention and treatment of relational aggression among adolescent females. According Landreth (2012), the overall goals of child centered play therapy are (a) promoting self-worth, (b) enlisting positive decision-making and determination, (c) demonstrating self-control, (d) promoting self-reflection and consciousness, (e) accepting greater responsibility for self, (f) obtaining self reliance, and (g) developing trusting relationships with others and self.

Child centered play therapy presents the idea that children can develop and mend when a positive and nurturing environment is provided for them. Child centered play
therapy is the child’s personal journey of self discovery. “The child’s behavior is viewed as being goal-directed in an effort to satisfy personal needs as experienced in the unique phenomenal field which for the child constitutes reality” (Landreth, 2012, p. 56). Landreth argued that the purpose of play therapy in schools is to help students benefit from the learning venture afforded. Although characters and the roles of the females identified in the previously mentioned books, *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander* (2008) and *Queen Bees and Wannabees* (2002) lacked many of the goals mentioned by Landreth (2012), adolescents (and their parents) are able to relate to the characters in the book and possibly visualize the roles they portray within their school environments.

Virginia Axline wrote, “There is a frankness, and honesty, and a vividness in the way children state themselves in a play situation” (Axline, 1993, preface). Further, “Play therapy offers a direct route to engage children on their terms, in their world, giving them a chance to play through what adults talk through” (Homeyer, 2003). The goal is to identify and address themes that arise in the course of play, although children’s relative strengths and weaknesses do become apparent in terms of cognitive processing and social skills. (Lawver & Blakenship, 2008, p. 24).

In 1949, Axline noted there is a positive connection between play therapy and a child’s mental ability and cognition. She concluded that child-centered play allowed the youngster to conquer emotional obstacles that hampered or blocked a display of the youngster’s full potential. Consequently, therapists who implement directive play therapy techniques encapsulate theories of purposeful objectives and goals during the helping relationship in order to meet the specific needs of individuals. Helping professionals use such skills in order to help the clients focus on specific outcomes, change their thoughts and behaviors or lifestyle patterns. One of the most commonly used theoretical approaches to directive play therapy is cognitive behavioral because the therapist takes charge of the sessions by setting the objectives and directing the individual’s choice of activities. In counseling sessions, this approach “brings conflict and problems into verbal expressions for the child, using therapeutic time and relationship to help the child make connections between words and behaviors” (Schaefer, 2003, p. 180)

Play therapy has become an increasingly popular technique among school counselors. A large number of counseling practitioners in the school community recognize that play therapy is age appropriate and meets the needs of a diverse population of students. Yet incorporating play therapy and some of its techniques in the middle school setting is challenging for a site-based school counselor or a mental health professional that provides counseling services within the school setting. According to research, some administrators as well as teachers questioned the effectiveness and usefulness of play therapy due to their lack of knowledge or understanding of this particular theory.

Likewise, studies indicated that play therapy is supported by research, aligned with current best practices, and beneficial to all students. The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (2008) the framework in which school counselors utilize national standards to drive counseling practices and topics in order to address the immediate concerns of individuals. Therefore, counselors in middle and high schools should implement play therapy into the school counseling curriculum, including the use of storytelling, art therapy, games, role-playing, etc.
Yet the success of play therapy in the school setting is based upon several factors such as administration, supplies, materials, funding, faculty buy-in, and training opportunities. Nevertheless, the feasibility of school-based play therapy should outweigh any obstacles or distractions that can prevent students from being successful.

Hence, Siegel (1999) explained that the art of storytelling is at the core of play therapy. When children and adolescents use puppets, sand-trays, artwork, and other expressive modalities in order to communicate verbally or nonverbally during play, the individuals begin to unveil their inner thoughts as unspoken conversations take place. As students navigate their way through the counseling process, the use of telling stories in play therapy provides meaning and organization to occurrences that may have appeared as random views or events.

Play therapy can be used as a catalyst in order to facilitate change in girls by helping them to overcome and confront their struggles or stressors, as well as troubling encounters, by engaging them in opportunities in which they delve into their inner selves through imaginative expressions. Thus, storytelling not only assists students in examining, recognizing, and undertaking hindrances, it also provides them with meaning as well as methods to address their past issues or circumstances. Simply stated, students who participate in storytelling in play therapy have a better understanding of their past experiences as they review or recapture those moments during play.

Another effective intervention for girls who are bullies or who have been bullied is the implementation of journal writing. Journal writing enables teenage girls to self-reflect, discover, and seek clearness regarding their emotional scars and encourage personal growth and healing. When individuals express their emotional “baggage” on paper, the experience provides opportunities for them to attain closure, which can have far-reaching effects.

Lawrence, Condon, Jacobi, and Nicholson (2006) argued that the use of structured and non-structured journaling such as activities found in *The Games Girls Play Journal* (Lawrence, Condon, & Nicholson, 2004) provided adolescent females with the opportunity to engage in creative activities or exchanges during play therapy that allowed them to explore, develop, and reflect upon the similarities and differences of appropriate and inappropriate friendships and behaviors.

School counselors, who incorporate journal writing activities as part of the play therapy process for adolescents, provide an invaluable adjunct to the helping relationship. Participants in one-on-one, small group, and even group sessions reap the benefits of having a safe outlet in which the individuals recount previous events in order to gain understanding as well as modify behaviors.

All in all, teenage girls must be taught alternative and positive methods in order to solve problems, resolve conflicts or interact within friendships and social relationships. According to Stopbullying.gov (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d) state and local lawmakers nationwide have established anti-bullying laws, policies or procedures. Across the U.S., school districts are charged with creating and implementing safeguards in order to protect students. Even with some states and school systems having the strictest measures and laws in place, for too many students fall prey to bullying. Often times, these students are undetected because victims of relational aggression suffer from emotional scars and bruises rather than physical attacks.
Nonetheless, the school community, parents, teachers, students, other support systems, and networks must educate teenagers and create intolerance for social aggression. Educating students regarding the dangers as well as the warning signs relating to bullying are crucial in deterring these behaviors. More importantly, school leaders must believe in incorporating themes of creative play as a means to assist students and facilitate change within the school settings. School counselors and the school community must provide trainings, seminars, workshops, role-playing, and other activities in order to teach students and their parents regarding the impact of bullying.

References


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