

## GIRLS BULLYING AND VIOLENCE

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In recent years, schools and communities have experienced a rise in aggression, delinquency, and bullying among girls and young women. According to a recent report issued in 2008 by the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, “from 1991 to 2000, arrests of girls increased more (or decreased less) than arrests of boys for most types of [violent] offenses. By 2004, girls accounted for 30 percent of all juvenile arrests” (Zahn et al., 2008, p. 1). In 2007, a national student survey revealed that “33 percent of female students reported being bullied at school compared to 30 percent of male students” (Dinkes et al., 2009, p. 30). In 2009, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) found that “one in four adolescent girls has been the perpetrator of or has participated in a violent act in the past year” (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2009, p. 5). These violent and aggressive behaviors by girls and young women often lead to increasingly more dangerous behaviors for perpetrators and increasingly more harmful consequences for victims, including emotional despair and academic failure.

Prevention and intervention programs and activities can help to promote the health and well-being of girls and young women within schools and communities across the country. Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiatives can play a vital role in addressing this growing problem by implementing programs that emphasize and foster healthy relationships. This Prevention Brief provides information on: (a) why violence among girls and young women is on the rise; (b) what different types of female bullies and aggressors exist; (c) why girls engage in these behaviors; and (d) what evidence-based programs and best practices can SS/HS grantees use to address this issue.

### ***Why the Rising Numbers?***

Although national data show a marked increase in female delinquency and reported bullying, it remains unclear whether more girls are truly becoming more violent and aggressive. Some argue instead that changes in policy have created this perceived increase. For example, a large number of zero-tolerance policies and practices have been implemented in the public school system since the early 1990s (Verdugo, 2002). This nation-wide crackdown on violent behaviors and other policy changes in schools and communities has forced offenders to be held legally responsible for their actions. According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Justice, “policy shifts and changes in enforcement may have had a greater impact on arrest rates than have actual changes in the behavior of girls” (Zahn et al., 2008, p. 8). This evidence suggests that the perceived increase in girl delinquency and violence may actually be due, in part, to these more stringent policies rather than to a change in overall female behavior.

While there are many findings regarding direct and overt female violence, instances of indirect bullying are more difficult to document and evaluate. Indirect bullying includes *relational aggression* (RA), a type of bullying that causes harm through damage to relationships or social status within a group, rather than through the direct use of actual or threatened physical or verbal violence. Much of the available research on RA relies on self-reported data, thereby

adding to the difficulty of assessing whether the reported increases in female violence are based on the actual prevalence, the perception, and/or the reporting of violent behavior. While further research may be needed to clarify the exact nature of the reported increases in female violence, several factors have been suggested as potential contributors to increasing levels of female violence:

- **Social media:** Relational aggression has received more coverage in recent films, news, and other media outlets due to the devastating effects it can have on its victims. This broadened media coverage may normalize the issue of females who engage in RA (i.e., “mean girls”) and create an “everyone does it” mentality that may desensitize young girls to the negative effects of RA, make aggressors and bystanders less likely to feel shocked or distressed by this behavior, and lead to further instances of this type of aggression.
- **“Girl power”:** The “girl power” movement, which began in the early 1990s, was meant to empower young girls to be self-reliant, ambitious, and assertive. However, this new focus on assertiveness and being more competitive, if misinterpreted as providing a license to behavior violently, may promote heightened aggression in adolescent girls. Girls who play contact sports, for example, might use this form of competition to translate their anger or frustration into physical aggression (O’Neil, 2008, p. 5).
- **Mass technology:** As more girls gain access to technologies, such as cell phones and computers, they are more easily able to engage in cyberbullying. This ease, combined with the lack of accountability and anonymity of cyberspace, may make this form of bullying appealing to many girls who might otherwise not engage in bullying.

### ***A Closer Look at Bullying and Aggression***

Adolescents who bully engage in at least one of the three main forms of aggression: physical, verbal, or indirect bullying (including RA and cyberbullying). However, most data suggest that boys and girls differ in how they most often bully. As O’Neil (2008) states, “While boys tend to inflict bodily pain through physical forms of bullying (e.g., kicking, pushing), or via direct verbal aggression, girls most often, though not exclusively, display aggression through indirect means” (pp. 7–8).

RA includes any type of behavior that is meant to intentionally attack, damage, or manipulate a person’s relationships or friendships with others. Some examples of RA are spreading gossip and rumors, exploiting personal secrets, writing or saying hurtful things, and ignoring, alienating, and isolating others. One hypothesis is that girls’ traditional gender roles make them more likely than boys to employ RA (O’Neil, 2008, p. 4), as boys are traditionally taught to value physical dominance, while girls are taught to value their relationships with others. Research has shown that girls are most comfortable in dyadic relationships, where they are able to nurture their friendships and learn to read nonverbal cues (Ponsford, 2007, p. 18). When a girl becomes aggressive, rather than expressing her feelings directly and physically, she is more likely to do so in indirect and covert ways, such as attacking the targeted child’s peer relationships by spreading rumors and gossip. Girls who engage in RA also use various forms of nonverbal

communication (e.g., eye rolling, facial expressions, tone of voice) and indirect behaviors to hurt their victims mentally and emotionally.

Cyberbullying can be seen as an extension of this type of indirect and furtive bullying behavior. What draws youth to this form of bullying is the opportunity to act aggressively at a distance while avoiding the consequences of direct confrontation. Cyberbullying allows people to bully with the click of a button and gives them an arena to continue their bullying outside of school, without necessarily speaking to their victims or addressing them face to face. Teenage girls are much more likely to experience cyberbullying than teenage boys. According to a survey sponsored by the Cyberbullying Research Center (2010), approximately 26 percent of girls ages 12–18 years of age have been victims of cyberbullying in their lifetimes, as compared to 16 percent of boys. The type of cyberbullying children use also varies by gender—girls are more likely to spread rumors, while boys are more likely to post hurtful pictures or videos (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2010).

Cyberbullying is a growing phenomenon. As more youth use technology, it becomes easier to contact peers, friends, and enemies at any time of day. With the rising popularity of social media sites and the ready availability of cell phones and computers, bullies can continually harass their victims, sending harmful messages to them and spreading gossip to others. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that adolescents and teens are victimized by aggressive and harassing online behaviors at the following rates: 67 percent via instant messages; 25 percent via e-mail; 25 percent via chat rooms; 23 percent via Web sites; and 16 percent via text messages (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2009).

On the opposite end of the spectrum are girls who are physically violent, threatening, and intimidating. Often, these girls are located in larger cities or suburban counties, and may join gangs within these communities. One study found that girls are far more likely than boys to bully their siblings and parents (Zahn et al., 2008). Girls often express their physical aggression in more private arenas, such as home or school, and inflict less serious physical injuries. Since much of this abuse is not considered by law to be “aggravated” and occurs in personal settings, it is less noticeable or visible to the public and may lead to an underestimate of the prevalence of girl violence and bullying.

### ***Characteristics of Victims and Aggressors***

Whether aggression is direct (verbal or physical) or indirect, most aggressors target victims who are likely to submit and not retaliate, thereby posing less of a threat to the aggressors. Female victims of aggression are generally perceived to be less powerful and more vulnerable other girls. They may stand out from their peers in some way—by wearing unfashionable clothing, being newcomers to a community, having a different sexual orientation, or being generally less popular.

Girls bully and target other girls for a variety of reasons, including to gain attention, respect, or popularity; to punish or seek revenge for a broken friendship; for entertainment; to feel better

about themselves; and because others are doing it too (Girls Health.gov, n.d.). The characteristics of female aggressors vary by the type of aggression in which they typically engage. Girls who engage in RA tend to be popular, physically appealing, and socially skilled. In contrast, girls who are directly physically aggressive or violent are often insecure, and their aggression may stem from the social difficulties they face in school. These girls often do not have many friends or strong connections with teachers, or may be socially rejected by other students.

### ***Risk Factors***

Girls who show direct violence toward others tend to have one or more underlying risk factors, for example:

- Mental illness, such as conduct disorder or depression
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Delayed cognitive, moral, and social development, which can lead to school difficulties and social rejection (Artz & Nicholson, 2002, pp. 4–5)
- Lack of positive role models

Other risk factors are described in more detail below.

*Witnessing or being a victim of violence.* Many girls who exhibit violent behavior have learned this behavior at home or in the community (Artz & Nicholson, 2002, p. 3). Girls who witness abuse in their homes or communities, or who've been victimized in the past, often come to believe that violence is an acceptable form of behavior. These social experiences can also put girls at a higher risk of perpetrating this type of abuse in the future. According to a study conducted by the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, girls ages 9–15 are approximately 2.4 times more likely to engage in violence if they have previously been maltreated or assaulted or were victims of physical or sexual violence (Zahn et al., 2010, p. 9).

*Early onset of puberty.* Girls who experience early puberty develop adult-looking bodies much sooner than other girls and are forced to deal with unfamiliar and confusing emotions. They may be teased about the changes in their bodies, which can lead to issues with self-esteem and body image. They may receive unwanted attention from boys and men before they're ready to deal with it, and they often enter romantic or sexual relationships at an early age (Dixon Rayle, Hartwig Moorhead, Green, Griffin, & Ozimek, p. 13). These developmental changes may lead young girls to engage in aggressive or violent behavior.

*Lower socioeconomic status.* According to a report published by the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, instances of reported female violence are negatively correlated with average family income, with higher levels of violence associated with lower levels of socioeconomic status (Zahn et al., 2008, pp. 13–15).

## ***Long-Term Effects of Violent Victimization***

Physical violence and bullying can leave victims feeling powerless and insecure. In addition to the immediate consequences of victimization, these problems may persist throughout the adult years, damaging girls' self-esteem and contributing to a variety of behavioral and mental health problems, for example:<sup>1</sup>

- Difficulty focusing on tasks
- Isolation and loneliness
- Depression
- Decreased confidence
- Suicidal or homicidal thoughts
- A decline in academic performance
- Anxiety
- Eating disorders (O'Neill, 2008, p. 17)

Since many incidents of violence occur outside the home, it is extremely important for schools and communities to take preventive measures and intervene as soon as possible to minimize any long-term psychological damage.

Early intervention can also benefit perpetrators, stopping their violent behavior or at least preventing their problematic behaviors from becoming even more destructive. For example, physically aggressive girls usually exhibit other antisocial behaviors and can become isolated, leading to increasingly poor school performance and additional social and emotional problems. Girls who engage in RA or cyberbullying may become physically abusive, which can lead to their placement in the juvenile justice system.

## ***Schools and Communities***

From 1999 to 2011, 45 states have enacted anti-bullying laws. In addition, school systems are increasingly creating anti-bullying policies. While the earliest policies typically addressed only physical aggression and harassment, many schools have recently expanded their policies to include RA and cyberbullying. In addition, 9 states have created anti-cyberbullying laws or require their school districts to do so, and another 20 states are in the process of investigating or constructing anti-cyberbullying laws (Social Safety.org, n.d.).

Despite this new level of legal and policy-driven attention to the problem of indirect bullying, it can nevertheless be difficult for parents and teachers to identify instances of RA and cyberbullying. It is much easier to see evidence of physical violence, such as bruises and

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<sup>1</sup> These problems can occur for both girls and boys. More research is necessary to differentiate any mental health issues that may plague girls only (O'Neill, 2008, p. 17).

damaged property. Moreover, many victims of indirect aggression suffer in silence, believing the hurtful things an aggressor says about them or blaming themselves for the abuse.

In addition to parents, teachers, school personnel, and community members can each play a role in helping to stop violent and other aggressive situations. By creating an atmosphere in which aggression is not tolerated, and by educating youth about the dangers of these behaviors, students can learn to empathize better with others and discover healthy ways of socializing. According to the report *Relational Aggression: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Ripley & O'Neil, 2009, p. 21), schools can further aid their female students by:

- Including the concept of indirect bullying and RA in each school's definition of bullying
- Conducting an anonymous survey to measure the types of bullying that occur most frequently in the school
- Introducing, modeling, and reinforcing positive social behavior
- Using a restorative approach<sup>2</sup> to heal damaged relationships and enforce a culture of respect
- Teaching students how to avoid or deal effectively with instances of RA by incorporating examples into the curriculum through dramatic role plays, art projects, small-group discussions, and writing workshops
- Discussing cyberbullying and online safety with students

Artz and Nicholson (2002, p. 5) suggest additional ways to help prevent female aggression:

- Expose girls to positive social situations where they can learn how to interact with their peers in constructive and reasonable ways
- Ensure that a caring adult is present in their lives
- Provide opportunities for education, achievement, personal growth, and employment
- Help girls feel connected to their schools and local communities by engaging them in activities, such as organized sports, Girl Scouts, or community volunteer programs

### ***Positive Peer Pressure***

Many girls develop, manipulate, and exploit friendships in order to hurt others. However, this same focus on relationships can allow girls to become allies, rather than enemies, of victimized girls.

According to research conducted by the University of Florida (Keen, 2009), girls appear more likely to respond to offensive behavior and defend themselves if they believe that is how their parents, friends, and teachers expect them to act. Girls are also more likely to intervene when the message comes directly from a friend (Keen, 2009). In addition, 85 percent of girls (as

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<sup>2</sup> This approach, inspired by the philosophy and practices of restorative justice, emphasizes repairing the harm done to relationships and people rather than assigning blame and punishing aggressors.

opposed to 66 percent of boys) said that their best friend would expect them to defend or help a bullying victim. These social pressures, when guided in a positive way, can prevent girls from engaging in bullying and encourage them as bystanders to speak out against offensive behavior.

Schools and communities can further foster the idea of “positive” peer pressure by placing an emphasis on positive reinforcement for those girls who stand up for their friends and classmates. Rather than solely giving attention to or demonizing those who exhibit unwanted behaviors, adults can reward girls who promote healthy relationships and encourage them to become active contributors to bullying prevention in their schools and communities.

## RESOURCES

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### ***Best Practices and Promising Programs***

- [Olweus Bullying Prevention Program](#)
- [Steps to Respect](#)
- [Friendly Schools](#)
- *Allies in Action: Building Healthy Relationships Between Girls*  
This evidence-based RA prevention program and curriculum engages girls as change agents, providing them with a vocabulary to describe their relationships, a critical lens to analyze the cultural forces shaping their relationships, and skills to effectively navigate conflict and articulate boundaries. The curriculum is distributed by the Girls' Initiative Network, Portland, Oregon, and can be accessed on the [United Way of Siouland Web site](#).
- [Get Real About Violence](#)

### ***Other Anti-Aggression and Anti-Bullying Strategies***

- [Bibliotherapy](#) (providing therapy through books)
- Moral therapy (encouraging children to incorporate morals into their perceptions, choices, feelings, and actions, toward both themselves and others)
- [No Bullying](#)
- [Wheel of Wellness](#)

### ***Tools for Children Engaging in RA***

- [Ophelia Project](#)

### ***Web Sites for Parents and Teachers***

- Teachers and Families  
[www.teachersandfamilies.com/index.html](http://www.teachersandfamilies.com/index.html)
- Girls Bullying Girls: An Introduction to Relational Aggression  
[www.teachersfirst.com/getsource.cfm?id=7617](http://www.teachersfirst.com/getsource.cfm?id=7617)
- Stop Bullies  
[www.stop-bullies.com/](http://www.stop-bullies.com/)
- Relational Aggression in Children  
[www.acacamps.org/parents/expert/0334realte.php](http://www.acacamps.org/parents/expert/0334realte.php)
- It's a Girl's World  
<http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/sg/100303.pdf>
- PBS: Parents/Teachers  
[www.pbs.org/parents/itsmylife/resources/bullies.html](http://www.pbs.org/parents/itsmylife/resources/bullies.html)
- National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center: Bullying  
[www.safeyouth.org/scripts/topics/bullying.asp](http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/topics/bullying.asp)
- Stop Bullying Now  
[www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov)
- National Crime Prevention Council: Girls and Bullying



- [www.ncpc.org/topics/bullying/girls-and-bullying](http://www.ncpc.org/topics/bullying/girls-and-bullying)
- Girls Health.gov (also available in Spanish)  
[www.girlshealth.gov/parents/parentsbullying/index.cfm](http://www.girlshealth.gov/parents/parentsbullying/index.cfm)
- Bullying Affects All Elementary School Kids  
[http://family.samhsa.gov/teach/elementary\\_bullies.aspx](http://family.samhsa.gov/teach/elementary_bullies.aspx)
- EduGuide  
[www.eduguide.org/](http://www.eduguide.org/)
- Eyes on Bullying  
[www.eyesonbullying.org](http://www.eyesonbullying.org)

### ***Web Sites for Youth***

- Facts for Teens: Bullying  
[www.k12.wa.us/SafetyCenter/HarassmentBullying/pubdocs/bullying-factsforteens.pdf](http://www.k12.wa.us/SafetyCenter/HarassmentBullying/pubdocs/bullying-factsforteens.pdf)
- Club and Camp Ophelia  
[www.clubophelia.com/clubophelia/home.php](http://www.clubophelia.com/clubophelia/home.php)
- Empowered Gal  
[www.empoweredgal.com/bethechange.php](http://www.empoweredgal.com/bethechange.php)
- Girls Health.Gov  
[www.girlshealth.gov/bullying/](http://www.girlshealth.gov/bullying/)

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