# Definition and Impact of
Relational Aggression

What is Relational Aggression?

Until recently, the word "bully" conjured up images of sullen, physically aggressive boys with social problems and low self-esteem. While this type of bully does exist, reality is much more complicated. Many bullies have well-developed social skills, high self-esteem, and are masters at manipulating adults in order to appear innocent. As Rachel Simmons states in her book *Odd Girl Out*, "Covert aggression isn't just about not getting caught; half of it is looking like you'd never mistreat someone in the first place," (2002).
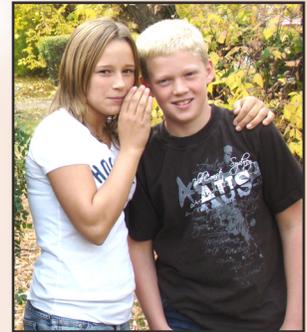
This type of bullying is called relational aggression, and it refers to psychological (social or emotional) aggression between people in relationships. It can take many forms, but it usually involves using "the group" as a weapon to hurt someone by damaging his or her relationships or reputation. This is devastating to a victim's self image because it undermines some of the most significant personal needs and goals of youth: the need for social inclusion, a positive sense of esteem and identity, and the development of meaningful friendships.
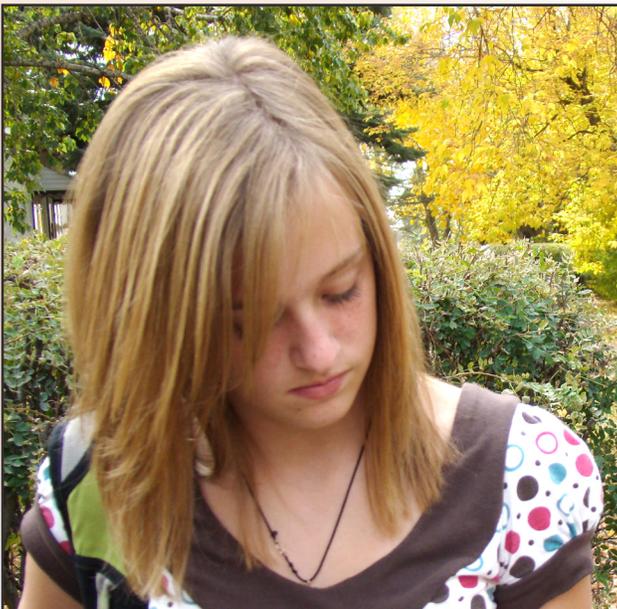
Short-Term Impact

Both bullying and victimization are associated with problems such as anxiety and depression, eating disorders, and poor academic performance. In some cases, relational aggression can result in a student refusing to attend school or seeking a transfer in order to escape the bullying.

Long-Term Impact

The damage caused by relational aggression can last a lifetime. Victims and aggressors are both at risk of developing problems that persist into their adult lives. This can lead to difficulties with relationships, depression, and even suicide.

How you can prevent
Relational Aggression

What Schools Can Do:

- Increase awareness among school staff so they know what relational aggression is, and discuss ways to combat it.
- Observe students in the classroom, at lunch, in the hall, and on the playground. Note their nonverbal reaction to peers, and consider the following: Who spends most of his/her time alone? Who is a group leader? How do his or her followers act?
- Discuss relational aggression with students in order to make sure they know that starting rumours, ridiculing others and any form of covert bullying is unacceptable.
- Believe the victim; relationally aggressive youth are often skillful at concealing their actions, and many educators may be reluctant to believe a model student is engaged in bullying.
- Find assistance for the victim and the aggressor. Contact a parent or work with staff to foster their social and emotional development.

What Parents Can Do:

- Talk about bullying before it happens, and let your child know that he or she can talk to you about any problems.
- Teach your child to be compassionate and model appropriate behaviour (avoid gossip yourself; children learn what is acceptable by watching their parents).
- Encourage your child to form and maintain friendships based on mutual interests rather than social status.
- Don't excuse your child's behaviour, but don't overreact either; respond with disciplinary strategies that help your child develop the skills and capacity to become a healthy adult.
- If necessary, seek counselling from a psychologist, school counsellor or social worker if your child is involved in bullying and the behaviour persists.

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Relational aggression can involve a range of behaviours, which may include the following:

- Rumours and Gossip
- Verbal Insults
- Social Exclusion
- Manipulative Friendships
- Alliance Building
- Negative Body Language
- Cyberbullying