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Relational Aggression in Middle School: Educational Implications of Developmental Research

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With increasing attention to school violence and aggression, it is argued that more covert, natured, subtle conflicts among students should be carefully examined and addressed to prevent negative outcomes. This article provides an overview of current knowledge on relational aggression including its definition, its link to a number of adjustment difficulties, and contexts contributing to the maintenance of relational aggression. Based on the review of empirical findings, educational implications for teachers and school administrators are discussed with an emphasis on an urgent need to promote a greater understanding of relational aggression and develop effective, innovative approaches in schools. The discussion also includes specific recommendations for prevention and intervention of relational aggression in middle school.

Keywords: relational aggression; middle school; peer relationships; school environment; early adolescence

With increasing media and public interest in conflict and violence in school, there have been many demands for creating positive, safe school environments that facilitate students' learning activities. Given that students' perceptions of physical and psychological safety precede their academic engagement and adjustment (Baker, 1998), these initiatives are a welcome sign. However, much of the current discussion in these efforts is limited to more noticeable forms of conflict such as school violence and physical bullying. For example, Elliott, Hamburg, and Williams (1998) offered a narrow definition of school violence: "Violence refers to the threat or use of physical force with the intention of causing physical injury, damage, or intimidation of another person" (p. 13). Although conflicts that involve threats and the use of physical force may warrant immediate attention because of possible serious

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physical harm, they are relatively rare in occurrence (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). Research further indicates that interpersonal conflicts in the form of physical violence are only part of school experiences and that there are various sources of subtle interpersonal conflicts that are beyond physical harm thereby inflicting psychological and emotional harm on victims (Batsche, 1997). It is clear that our efforts to create positive school experiences should target a wide range of conflicts that permeate students' social experiences.

In fact, researchers in developmental psychology have identified a set of interpersonal behaviors and attitudes among students that inflict serious emotional harm but go unnoticed by teachers and parents. Crick and colleagues (1999) defined relational aggression as "behaviors that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship or group inclusion" (p. 77). In contrast to physical aggression (i.e., hitting, kicking) that involves bodily injuries, relational aggression involves interpersonally manipulative behaviors (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). These behaviors include direct control (i.e., "You can't be my friend unless . . ."), social alienation (i.e., giving peers the silent treatment), rejection (i.e., telling rumors or lies about a peer so that others in the group will reject him or her), and social exclusion (i.e., excluding a peer from play or a social group) (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002). Relational aggression has been found in children as young as 3 years old (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999), whereas more sophisticated and covert forms of relational aggression have been found in middle childhood (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996) and adolescence (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Lagerspetz, 1994). In addition, forms of relational aggression have been found in romantic relationships (Crick et al., 1999).

Although many relationally aggressive behaviors are frequently reported and present significant concerns in middle schools, limited discussion exists regarding prevention and intervention issues that educators face. Also lacking in the literature is comprehensive understanding of relational aggression in developmental and environmental contexts such as peer, family, and school environments. The purposes of this article are to review current developmental research in relational aggression and to discuss its educational implications for teachers and school administrators.

Relational aggression was originally conceptualized as a form of aggression that may be more prevalent among females. Although the aggression literature primarily focused on overt aggression (i.e., physical), which is displayed more in boys than girls, the gender difference disappears when both relational and overt (i.e., physical or verbal) aggression are considered (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Rys & Bear, 1997). The hypothesis that girls, compared to boys, are more likely to engage in relational aggression received initial

support (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). However, more recent studies also reported that male and female students engage in the same level of relational aggression (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; Roecker-Phelps, 2001). A more consistent finding is that social and emotional effects of relational victimization are greater for girls than boys (Crick et al., 1996; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). That is, although boys and girls receive the same levels of relational aggression, girls perceive it as more hurtful than boys do.

Less explored is how relational aggression should be addressed. Of particular challenge to teachers, parents, and administrators is that they may not directly witness the act because of the covert nature of relational aggression. Students report that teachers are unwilling to get involved, although students do agree that teachers should intervene in relational aggression situations (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001). Teachers' low levels of involvement may reflect a widely accepted belief that some relationally aggressive behaviors are normative for adolescents (e.g., "middle school kids are just mean") and are transient (e.g., "they usually grow out of it").

Although most research has been conducted at the elementary level and aggression, youth violence, and victimization in general decrease with age (Olweus, 1993), relational aggression in middle childhood and adolescence may be more salient because of developmental milestones in this period. Significant growth in cognitive and social areas takes place in middle school, and these developmental changes affect interpersonal relationships in quality and structure. We argue that these developmental issues should be taken into consideration in understanding the covert, manipulative nature of relational aggression. Adolescents seek independence from parents and have increasing interest in peers. As their social network extends to include both same-sex and opposite-sex peer groups, social status and acceptance in peer groups become more critical than ever. An important developmental task at this age is to effectively navigate through peer relationships and successfully resolve interpersonal conflicts through which they increase levels of social competence. In particular, peer relationships that involve emotional closeness and intimacy become an important part of their social life (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). In this developmental context, a possible attempt to hurt an intimate friendship or social reputation would be perceived as an enormous threat and is most likely to have significant implications in peer relationships. It has been also speculated that with increased needs for peer acceptance, relational aggression may be used as a way to fit in (Espelage & Holt, 2001).

In addition, advances in social cognition appear to be involved in relational aggression. For example, adolescents in general enhance their social understanding (Hill & Palmquist, 1978), which leads to more sophisticated

goal setting and complex social problem solving (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1987; Moshman, 1993). In addition, they become increasingly skilled at understanding the complicated process of subtle, nonverbal behaviors and their impact on interpersonal relationships (Selman, 1980). Developmentally, adolescents increasingly use negotiation and bargaining in resolving interpersonal conflicts and decrease their reliance on power assertion and detachment (Laursen, 1993). Increased social understanding and conflict resolution abilities are critical skills in developing and maintaining close peer relationships. Conversely, cognitively sophisticated adolescents might be best suited to engage in relational aggression, as they are most able to perceive manipulative and harmful methods for interacting. For instance, Sutton and Smith (1999) indicated that bullying behaviors involving relational aggression are most frequently committed by adolescents with highly sophisticated social cognition skills. It is also possible that relationally aggressive teens resort to power assertion and detachment methods in peer conflicts with better understanding of forms of aggression most hurtful to the victim (Hennington, Hughes, Cavell, & Thompson, 1998). These cognitive changes may explain the shift to more sophisticated forms of relational aggression in middle school (Crick et al., 1999).

It is possible that relational aggression decreases as teens' peer relationships become more mature and less conflictual (Seidman, Aber, Allen, & French, 1996). However, relational aggression has been reported beyond early adolescence in high school (Roecker-Phelps, 2001) and college (Werner & Crick, 1999). More importantly, relational aggression has been linked to a wide range of difficulties for both victims and perpetrators thus indicating that effective prevention and intervention are warranted for the pattern of behaviors that one may consider developmentally normal.

Adjustment Difficulties Associated With Relational Aggression

The social and psychological maladjustment associated with relational aggression is as far-reaching and stable as those of physical aggression (Galen & Underwood, 1997). Recent studies have found that victims of relational aggression tend to be more depressed, anxious, and have lower self-esteem (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Ladd & Ladd, 2001). In addition, children who are frequent targets of relational aggression are more rejected and less accepted by their peer groups (Crick et al., 2001; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001). Furthermore, victims of chronic relational aggression are more likely to view that they are the cause of mistreatment by others (Ladd & Ladd, 2001). That view may, in turn, render them to

repeated victimization, thus perpetuating their low self-esteem and overall adjustment difficulties. The pattern of social and emotional maladjustment from victimization appears to be more pervasive for girls (Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Given that, compared to boys, girls are more relationship oriented and place a higher value on intimacy (Tannen, 1990), experiences of relational aggression pose greater threats to girls thus resulting in more negative outcomes in their functioning.

Those who are relationally aggressive also experience poor outcomes. Relationally aggressive girls are more likely to experience externalizing symptoms associated with oppositional defiant and conduct disorders (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Relationally aggressive children are more likely to be disliked and lack prosocial behavior compared to nonaggressive children (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

There is a moderate relation between relational and overt aggression ($r = .60$ to $.75$; Crick et al., 2001), and a number of students exhibit both forms of aggression. The research suggests the poorest outcomes for this group compared to the nonaggressive and aggressive groups with one form of aggression. In a diverse adolescent sample, students who experienced both overt and relational victimization were most severely maladjusted and reported the highest level of depression, loneliness, and externalizing problems (Prinstein et al., 2001). Despite the moderate relation between the two forms of aggression, it is important to note that relational aggression makes a unique contribution to adjustment beyond overt aggression (see Crick et al., 2001).

Taken together, research findings indicate that relationally aggressive behaviors are linked to a number of concurrent and future adjustment problems for both victims and perpetrators and that the association is robust (Crick et al., 1999). Special attention is needed to address and prevent negative outcomes associated with perpetrators and victims of relational aggression. Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that relational aggression involves more than victims and perpetrators and may be shaped and maintained in various contexts.

Context of Relational Aggression

Research on the etiology of relational aggression is limited to date. One promising area of recent investigation is parental influence in the family context. So far, parental conflict, coercion, and psychological control have been examined as possible links to the development of relational aggression. Parents may invalidate a child's feelings, threaten to withdraw love or affection, or use sarcasm and power-assertive discipline (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). For example, Nelson and Crick (2001) found that maternal coercive

control and maternal corporal punishment were significantly associated with relational aggression for boys. For girls, paternal psychological control was positively associated with relational aggression.

Another possible family context of relational aggression is sibling relationships. It is well established that physical aggression in sibling relationships has a strong influence on the acquisition of aggressive behaviors (Dunn & Munn, 1986; Patterson, 1986). Recent studies report that relational aggression is more frequently reported among sibling dyads than physical aggression (O'Brien, 1999) and that relational aggression in sibling relationships is linked to conflicts, depressive symptoms, and low self-worth (Updegraff, Denning, & Thayer, 2003). The direct link between relational aggression in sibling and peer relationships has not been documented yet. However, it is likely that levels of relational aggression in sibling relationships are most likely to play a role in levels of relational aggression exhibited in peer relationships given that sibling interactions serve as a model and training ground for learning social behaviors (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993; Patterson, 1982).

Peer group is another important context to consider, because victimization experiences occur in a group context (Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Victims in middle school are often teased and threatened by groups of students who assume different roles (i.e., leaders, bystanders, etc.), "not necessarily by one school yard bully" (Salmivalli et al., 1996, p. 3). Particularly, the peer context of relational aggression is unique, because the aggressive behaviors focus on manipulating and damaging interpersonal relationships in peer groups. For example, according to Grotjeter and Crick (1996), friends who are highly intimate and exclusive often behave more aggressively within the friendship than they do toward peers who are not their close friends. In addition, relationally aggressive students have perceived support from their peer group and report the same number of friends as those who are not relationally aggressive and report the same levels of intimacy and closeness with friends. These findings indicate that relational aggression may be endorsed and collaborated by other students in a peer group.

Meanwhile, the victims of relationally aggressive children report high levels of conflict and betrayal (Grotjeter & Crick, 1996). Consistent with this pattern, studies found that victims of relational aggression are repeatedly exposed to the same type of aggression over time. Along with other factors, victims may present themselves as more vulnerable in their relationships with perpetrators thus increasing chances of victimization because of a number of reasons such as the limited number of alternative friends and higher needs for intimacy (Crick et al., 1999).

Further research should examine the complex processes of peer influence including how individual group members participate in victimization of relational aggression as perpetrators, bystanders, and collaborators and how certain small peer groups deter or encourage relational aggression. For example, during early adolescence, cliques (small peer groups with an average of five to six individuals of the same sex and age) emerge based on shared activities and friendships and dominate social experiences. Given the intimate and exclusive nature of cliques, it will be interesting to explore the group dynamics of cliques in relation to relational aggression.

Similarly, classroom and school environments are other important contexts to consider. Growing literature on bullying and school violence points to classroom and school environments playing critical roles in the maintenance of students' aggressive behaviors (Barth, Dane, Dunlap, Lochman, & Wells, 2001; Song & Swearer, 2002) and overall adjustment (Yoon, 2003). A general attitude among teachers and school administrators has been that interpersonal aggression, or *meanness*, is a normative developmental feature of middle school students (Jeffrey, Miller, & Linn, 2001). This sentiment may explain teachers' indifferent perceptions and attitudes toward relational aggression. Specifically, teachers perceive relationally aggressive behaviors as less serious than verbal or physical aggression and are less likely to intervene (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000). When asked to respond to hypothetical situations that involve relational aggression, teachers are more likely to ignore or get less involved and are less sympathetic to the victims compared to overt aggression (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Teachers' passive approaches to dealing with relational aggression are disconcerting. Of particular concern that stems from the absence of a consistent effort to address relational aggression is its impact on the victims and perpetrators. When victims of bullying perceive their plight as going unnoticed, they are less likely to feel safe in their school environment thus possibly affecting their school experience (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Specifically, teachers' ignoring is likely to set an expectation for students by sending an inappropriate message that the behaviors are tolerated and even permitted.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

A review of the developmental literature suggests that (a) relational aggression is associated with a number of short- and long-term adjustment difficulties, (b) it should be understood in the larger picture of adolescent development, and (c) it is a manifestation of a complex interplay between

individual characteristics of victims and perpetrators and the contexts of family, peer, and school. Few intervention programs that specifically address relational aggression exist. Classroom curriculums for anti-bullying efforts have become popular, yet empirical support for these programs is limited. In addition, many programs focus on physical aggression and verbal threats and do not include relational aggression (i.e., McDonald, Billingham, Conrad, Morgan, & Payton, 1997; Walker et al., 1998). Furthermore, the programs are geared more toward elementary levels (see Mytton, DiGiuseppi, Gough, Taylor, & Logan, 2002, for a comprehensive review for elementary-level programs). *Bully Proofing Your School: A Comprehensive Approach for Elementary Schools* (Garritty, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 2000) and *Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program* (Committee for Children, 1998) are two examples of school-based, skill-building programs for youth designed to teach children ways to build more respectful and caring peer relationships.

Although empirically proven treatment programs specifically targeting relational aggression are lacking at this point, current literature on anti-bullying and school violence intervention programs provides a broader discussion as to how socially aggressive, intimidating behaviors should be addressed in school (see Olweus, 1991; Swearer & Doll, 2001). Furthermore, this literature review on relational aggression clearly provides a number of critical implications for teachers and school administrators. First of all, there is an urgent need to promote a greater understanding of relational aggression and to develop effective, innovative approaches in schools. More importantly, drawing from an ecological perspective (Swearer & Doll, 2001), we argue that any systematic effort should include assessments of both participants' individual characteristics (i.e., victims and perpetrators) and the contextual variables that are at work in the development and maintenance of relational aggression (Olweus, 1993; Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001). The following discussion will focus on specific implications for prevention and intervention of relational aggression in middle school.

Teacher prevention/intervention strategies. A first step toward reducing relational aggression in the classroom involves educating teachers and school administrators on identifying signs of relational aggression and the potential deleterious effects of these behaviors. Teachers should investigate relational victimization as a possible source of social difficulties and school maladjustments among students, and they should learn how to identify relational aggressors in their classrooms. Students (both relational aggressors and victims) may benefit from support services (i.e., social support groups, skills groups, consultations) in school where they can learn to cope with vic-

timization, learn constructive means of conflict resolution, and assist in setting up proactive plans that reduce risks for destructive interpersonal interactions. In fact, research suggests that high levels of social support such as close friendships buffer children from negative outcomes of victimization (Prinstein et al., 2001). Then, promoting positive peer relationships is an important area of intervention.

Teachers with developed knowledge of relational aggression and victimization are more likely to identify, manage, and intervene during these destructive episodes. Craig et al. (2000) found that witnessing and recognizing relational aggression and possessing levels of empathy were predictors of intolerant attitudes toward relational aggressive behaviors. These researchers also found that prospective teachers were less likely to identify social isolation as bullying behaviors, and they tended to feel that physical bullying behavior was the most severe and warranted intervention as compared to relational bullying. According to interview data (Simmons, 2002), students reported that teachers are either unaware of what is going on or uninvolved in helping students have better social experiences. Unfortunately, teachers' mishandling and lack of involvement in relational aggression behaviors can be interpreted as condoning the behaviors thereby creating a hidden curriculum that reinforces bullying behaviors (Yoon & Kerber, 2003).

Indeed, teacher education and training programs on relational aggression should be included in anti-bullying efforts currently underway in many schools. To best reduce the negative impact of relational aggression in middle school, teacher education and training programs should (a) enhance the knowledge of relational bullying behaviors, (b) improve skills for identifying and assessing behaviors associated with relational aggression in their classrooms, and (c) produce attitudinal changes toward intervention and prevention of relational aggression. Formal sociometric assessment may be burdensome or unnecessary, but classroom-wide anonymous surveys of students and/or observation can be used to better understand students' peer relationships and perceptions about school. Once the concerns are identified, problem-solving processes can be facilitated by teachers through class discussions. Doll, Siemers, Nickolite, and Song (2003) demonstrated how teachers and a consultant examined a classroom environment using the ClassMap procedure and facilitated discussions among middle school students. Although it does not directly address relational aggression, teachers can use similar approaches in addressing a wide range of negative peer relationships including physical and relational aggression.

In addition, educational efforts on building constructive teacher-student relationships and establishing respectful classroom environments are also recommended for curbing relational aggression in middle school. For exam-

ple, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, an empirically proven program, promotes improvements in teachers' instructional styles, classroom routines, and settings to develop more harmonious and effective learning environments (Taylor-Greene et al., 1997). The teacher component may be particularly important given recent student reports that some teachers and other school staff model hostile behaviors (Song & Swearer, 2002).

School-wide prevention/intervention strategies. Peer relationships characterized by relational aggression must be viewed from the perspective of the bully and the victim, and therefore, interventions must be developed and implemented to address both parties in the interaction. Too often, prevention and intervention strategies focus only on changing the behavior of the bully, yet it is the bully-victim and occasional witness relationship that must also change. Developing and implementing a cookie-cutter approach to reducing relational aggressive behaviors will not result in positive interactions among the participants in the future. It is not effective to target intentional aggression by bullies without focusing on victim behavior, as well. Therefore, developing and implementing the prevention and intervention plan requires a conscious effort to target the context of the relationship and situations in which relational aggression occurs. More importantly, the entire school climate or culture that condones relational aggression must be clearly identified and changed. It is well documented that the perceived school climate affects students' psychosocial and academic functioning (Baker, 1998; Shouse, 1996; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996).

For these reasons, school-wide prevention/intervention strategies may be more appropriate. School-wide strategies, if implemented in a comprehensive manner, are designed to affect all aspects of the school community including the teaching staff, administration, support staff, parents/guardians, and student body. School-wide initiatives should include changes in school policies and procedures, staff development, bullying assessments, curriculum support, and programming initiatives. For example, conflict resolution programs are implemented in many schools such as the Second Step Program for prekindergarten and 9th-grade students (Flannery, Huff, & Manos, 1996) and the PeaceBuilders for grades 1 through 5 (Grossman et al., 1997) with some success in improving school climate. These programs should include discussions of specific examples that involve relational aggression through which students not only learn to successfully resolve conflicts but also build a climate of disapproving it. Raising awareness within schools and educating students about the detrimental effects of rumors, peer isolation, and other interpersonal manipulation may be an important part of a systematic approach. This would further promote peer mediation, not necessarily

teacher-directed intervention that may not be highly desired by some students. Consistent with the systematic approach in creating a positive school climate, class and school rules should reflect strong disapproval of relationally aggressive behaviors and should be clearly communicated to students and parents.

Others recommend that schools should address relationally aggressive behaviors by promoting the respect of individual differences among students (Espelage & Asidao, 2001). Early adolescents' social worlds center around small, intimate peer groups (i.e., cliques) that are often formed on the bases of shared interests and activities (Ennett & Bauman, 1996). In this process, they are more likely to seek similarities and affiliation. However, as these groups become more distinctive, their memberships become more exclusive by nature thereby highlighting differences and an us-versus-them mentality. Given this developmental context, promoting the genuine respect of individual differences may be a challenging but very critical one to be persistently pursued.

Barton (2003) suggested that the hallmarks of American schools contribute to the isolation and segregation of students thereby allowing relational aggression to flourish. Kipnis (1999) further argued that schools condone bullying, teasing, and cliques by dividing and labeling students according to their academic and/or athletic gifts. Students are likely to continue these lines of separation and maintain their position within the school hierarchy (Barton, 2000). Barton (2000) recommended that school-based programs target "belief systems and teach tolerance, acceptance, and respect through effective communication and constructive resolution" (p. 108). Unnecessary divisions and hostile relationships (e.g., teacher-administrator relationships) would create an organizational climate that perpetuates disrespect and intolerance among students.

Schools should also include parents/guardians in programming efforts to reduce the expression of relational behaviors. It is critical to provide parents/guardians with opportunities to improve their knowledge, skills, and attitudes on relational aggression and its deleterious impact on child development, as these destructive behaviors may be modeled by family members. Teacher conferences and whole-school assemblies are wonderful methods for highlighting the seriousness of relational aggression and outlining the school plan for reducing these destructive relationships. Again, these methods are intended to promote a positive school environment through parent-school collaboration and have been effective in reducing more direct bullying (Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003). Educational training in constructive conflict resolution methods may also be offered by the school for interested parents/guardians as a component of the whole-school intervention

program. For example, the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support Program requires a collaborative approach between families and professionals to alter problem behaviors and create support systems for the student (Todd, Horner, & Sugai, 1999).

Creating a school environment that guarantees physical safety and psychological security of students is an important task to promote academic, social, and emotional competences. We argued in this article that relational aggression is a complex phenomenon that undermines many important aspects of student adjustment. The covert nature of interpersonal conflicts should not be ignored in our examination of school violence. The research findings support that relational aggression is maintained and further perpetuated in many different contexts (i.e., family, peer, and school). A thorough assessment of each context and multilevel prevention and intervention programs are recommended for relational aggression as well as violent behaviors among students. The timing of these intervention efforts seems critical in middle school. Espelage and Holt (2001) found that after the transition to middle school, the 6th graders reported more use of teasing and other bullying behaviors than 7th and 8th graders. As they establish new social structures and strive for their own social standing, any systematic intervention effort may be more needed and cost-effective for the purpose of prevention.

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