Relational Aggression in School-Age Children and Adolescents:
Implications for a Comprehensive School Counseling Program
A Literature Review
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Abstract

Violence is a current concern among school professionals. Physical aggression is not the only type of aggression occurring in our schools. Although relational aggression has not received the widespread attention as physical aggression and other types of bullying, it can be just as damaging to children and adolescents. This literature review will provide an overview of relational aggression, discuss factors that contribute to the use of relational aggression, and the impact of relational aggression on the victim and aggressor. Finally, this literature review will discuss implications for a comprehensive school counseling program in addressing this form of aggression within our schools.
Chapter I: Introduction

In recent years the overwhelming accounts of school violence have shocked educators and parents alike. Though the accounts of physical aggression and other types of violence in the schools are newsworthy it is not the only type of aggression occurring in our schools. Although relational aggression has not received the wide spread attention as physical aggression and other types of bullying, it can be just as damaging to children and adolescents. Nearly 30% of school-aged children reported being involved in moderate to frequent bullying episodes which includes relational aggression (Jacobsen & Baumen, 2007).

The bullying behaviors that receive the most attention from educators tend to be hitting, kicking and other forms of physical aggression as evidenced by the implementation of zero tolerance policies towards violent behaviors (Jacobson & Baumen, 2007). The behaviors of physical aggression are easily identifiable as are the scars and bruises left in its aftermath. On the other hand, relational aggression is typically more difficult to identify and respond to because the behaviors that encompass this form of aggression are often covert, such as gossiping and spreading of malicious rumors (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004).

Research exists that identifies the overlap between relational aggression, social aggression and indirect aggression. Some believe that they are essentially the same construct, although slightly different in their definition (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Gossens, Buriez & Niemiec, 2007). In studying relational aggression it is important to understand the depth of the similarities and differences between the three forms of aggression because relational aggression can include behaviors that are exhibited in other forms of aggression (Coyne, Archer & Elsea, 2006). Relational aggression may also be difficult to identify and respond to because different terms are used to describe forms of aggression that are similar to, but are not relational.
aggression. Terms such as social aggression and indirect aggression are often times used synonymously with relational aggression (Gommes, 2007). Due to the similarities in the above forms of aggression educators may be confused about what behaviors are encompassed by relational aggression.

Research indicates the difference between the three forms of aggression is in the intent of the act and the scope of behaviors. Indirect aggression can include behaviors that are meant to harm another in a circuitous manner. This is often done through a third party to avoid being identified as the aggressor, or have it known that the act itself was aggressive (i.e. rumor spreading). Whereas social aggression is either a direct or an indirect form of aggression that is meant to harm another’s social status within the group (i.e. eye rolling, verbal rejection), relational aggression is when an imbalance of power exists within the relationship and the relationship itself is used to harm another (Gommes, 2007).

Though there are several terms considered synonymous to relational aggression it has been set apart as a unique form of aggression (Gommes, 2007). In this literature review the term relational aggression will be used to describe behaviors that involve harming others through the use of peer relationships (Crick & Gropeter, 1995). The term bullying will be used to describe aggressive behaviors that occur repeatedly over time. These behaviors can be verbal or non-verbal and either direct or indirect in nature. Research on relational aggression as a form of bullying will be incorporated in this review.

Research on relational aggression is relatively new. Specific contributing factors are starting to be explored but it is not a fully understood form of aggression as of yet. Research continues to be conducted on this form of aggression and the importance of continued research is evidenced by the fact that this type of aggression occurs more often than parents, educators, or
children and adolescents may think. It is such a pervasive part of our culture that children and adolescents are exposed to 10 times more relational, indirect and social aggression on television than at school during peer to peer interactions (Coyne, Archer & Elsea, 2006).

The high level of exposure to aggression particularly relational aggression in popular media brings up a number of concerns regarding how relational aggression is identified. Due to the covert nature of this type of aggression identification and intervention may be a daunting task. Clarification of what relational aggression is necessary. As stated the defining characteristic of relational aggression is “harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationship” (Crick & Gropeter, 1995).

It is also necessary to be aware of the broad range of behaviors that are exhibited within the context of relational aggression. Overt, verbal behaviors such as name calling, malicious gossip, verbal intimidation and rumor spreading are all types of relational aggression. Covert, non-verbal behaviors include but are not limited to withdrawal of friendship, rejection, social isolation, and eye rolling (Crick & Gropeter, 1995). Though these types of behaviors are exhibited with other types of aggression as well, the key to the identifying the type of aggression is to determine the intent of the aggressive act.

As with all forms of aggression it is imperative to be able to identify and respond to relational aggression effectively. To further the study of relational aggression researchers found it necessary to develop ways to measure it. Crick and Gropeter (1996) developed The Children’s Social Behavior Scale or the CSBS scale peer and teacher form that allows for peer and teacher nomination as a way to identify aggressive behavior in individuals. The CSBS consists of three scales overt (physical) aggression, relational aggression and pro-social behaviors. From the
administration of these scales it was determined that peer and teacher nominations are an accurate way to identify relational aggression in individuals (Werner & Crick, 1999).

Beyond peer and teacher nomination other methods to identify relationally aggressive behavior have been used. Structured and naturalistic observations have been employed with limited success. Due to the covert nature of relational aggression, naturalistic observation of this type of behavior is difficult to document. The structured observation methodology is limited as well because it only mimics real life scenarios (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006).

The research on identifying relational aggression has provided some startling figures as to the prevalence of this form of aggression. According to Henington, Hughes, Cavell & Thompson’s 1998 study (as cited in Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006) traditional anti-bullying programs tend to address only physical aggression which then targets 93% of aggressive boys but only 40% of aggressive girls. Also, according to Crick and Nelson (2002) using physical aggression as the only criteria for aggression 71.4% of female victims would not be identified, whereas only 21.1% of male victims would not be identified. Since research suggests that approximately 75% of adolescents in the United States have experienced some form of bullying (either physical or relational) at school, this lack of identification serves girls especially poorly (Raskuaskas & Stoltz, 2004).

The research conducted to identify relational aggression has given a great deal of insight into the number of aggressors and victims. Unfortunately the measures used in this body of research are available for research purposes only and not available to educators to administer to students. This limits an educator’s ability to identify and develop intervention strategies (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2002).
The research thus far suggests that relational aggression appears to be a prevalent problem among children and adolescents. This raises several important questions, such as: What are the predictive and contributing factors to the use of relational aggression? What are the impacts of relational aggression on victims and aggressors? And, what can be done to identify and intervene within the school setting?

At this time the majority of research suggests that possible predictive and/or contributing factors to relational aggression include gender, popularity, and parental influences. Gender is strongly associated with relational aggression (Bowie, 2007). Girls appear to utilize this form of aggression by as young as early childhood (Conway, 2005). Popularity can also impact the use of relational aggression. Perceived popularity is positively associated with the use of relational aggression (Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006). Finally parental influences such as parental control and negative family environments can be associated with an increase the use of relational aggression among children and adolescents (Park, Essex, Zahn-Waxler, Armstrong, Klien & Goldsmith, 2005).

The impact of relational aggression is also a concern. Relational aggression can have a negative effect on the psycho-social development of the victim and the aggressor. Interestingly, whether victim or aggressor the effects of relational aggression can be similar. Those who are victimized and those who victimize through the use of relational aggression can suffer from increased depression, loneliness, and anxiety (Crick, Casas & Mosher, 1997). Finally relational aggression can affect the safety perceptions a student has about his or her school. Schools with high levels of relational aggression appear less safe to its students, and can increase the number of weapons brought into school (Goldstein, Young & Boyd, 2008).
Research is not only new in the area of relational aggression, but it is also virtually absent in relation to the role of the licensed school counselor in addressing this form of aggression (Jacobson & Baumen, 2007). The licensed school counselor can be an integral part in the identification and intervention of relational aggression. The role of the licensed school counselor is to contribute to the academic success of all students in his or her academic, career and social development (American School Counselor Association, 2005). Therefore an understanding of the research on possible contributing factors to and the impacts of relational aggression is imperative for educators especially the licensed school counselor.

Relational aggression falls under the personal/social domain of the American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) National Model (2005). One of the roles of the licensed school counselor within this area of development is to contribute to the academic and career success of students through assisting in the development of effective interpersonal skills, as well as to increase the understanding of respect for self and others (Stone & Dahir, 2004). Within this domain, the licensed school counselor has many tools at his or her disposal to assist students with acquiring the above skills. A comprehensive school counseling program addresses the academic, career, and personal/social needs of all students at a developmentally appropriate level through guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support (ASCA, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Relational aggression has been identified as a concern among school-age and adolescent children as well as educators. There is evidence that this form of aggression is on the rise (Raskauskas & Stotlz, 2004). There is evidence that children who are involved in relational aggression can suffer harmful effects. Though the construct of relational aggression is not
completely understood, there is a growing body of research that is attempting to identify factors that contribute to the use of relational aggression as well as the harm this form of aggression can cause. Therefore, this literature review will explore the possible contributing factors to relational aggression, the impact this form of aggression has on victims and aggressors, as well as implications for the comprehensive school counseling program. It is hoped that the information provided in this review will help licensed school counselors and other school professionals identify, develop interventions for, and decrease this form of aggression in schools.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this review is to explore the issue of relational aggression, its contributing factors, its impact on those who are involved in this type of aggression, and the role a licensed school counselor can play in the identification and intervention of this type of aggression. This review of literature will focus on the research of school-age and adolescent children in schools.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this literature review include:

1. What contributes to children and adolescents participating in relationally aggressive behavior?
2. What are the impacts of relationally aggressive behavior on victims and aggressors?
3. What are the implications for a comprehensive school counseling program?

Definitions of Terms

A list of frequently used terms throughout the literature review that need to be explicitly understood in order to fully comprehend the research is included.

Relational Aggression is the purposeful use of the peer relationship to cause harm to another (Crick & Gropeter, 1995).
Social Aggression is the purposeful damaging of another’s self-esteem and/or social status (Gommes, 2007).

Indirect Aggression is the type of aggression where the aggressor and the intent of the aggressions remains unidentified to avoid consequences and is conducted in a circuitous manner (Gommes, 2007).

Bullying is the use of any act of aggression by an individual or group repeated over time on an individual perceived as weaker (Vaillancourt et al., 2008).

Perceived Popularity is the identification of peers who are well-known, in social groups with peers who are well-known, attractive, athletic and/or affluent (Rose, Swanson & Waller, 2004).

Social Preference is the identification by peers as being well-liked by other peers (Andreou, 2006).

Status is the extent to which an individual or group is dominant in the larger peer context (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007).

Social Intelligence is considered having social skills and competence in analyzing one’s own and others social behavior, recognizing motives and being able to exhibit behaviors that will achieve one’s own social goals (Andreou, 2006).

Social Emotional Learning is the process by which knowledge, attitudes and skills are acquired to recognize and manage emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations in a constructive manner (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2005).
Chapter II: Literature Review

Factors Contributing to Relational Aggression and its Effects

Relational aggression can have long-term negative effects on a child’s social, emotional and academic development and success. Due to the prevalence of aggression, including relational aggression, researchers have begun to explore possible factors that contribute to the use of this form of aggression. Particular attention will be paid to the connection between the use of relational aggression and factors such as gender, parental influences and popularity.

Gender

Boys vs. girls. Historically there appears to be a widely held belief that boys are more aggressive than girls. In fact until recently research on aggression did not take into account different forms of aggression or gender differences. Although boys are still more physically aggressive and commit more violent acts than girls, increased attention is being given to female aggression (Letendre, 2007).

Past research not only focused on overt forms of aggression such as physical fights and verbal threats, but identified it as the most common form of aggression among boys. To understand female aggression more fully, Crick and Gropeter (1995) developed a measure to identify relational aggression in children and adolescents. They also wanted to be able to identify it as a separate more gender specific form of aggression.

Because of the covert nature of relational aggression and the past success of peer nomination to identify aggressive children, a peer nomination scale was developed to assist in the identification of relationally aggressive children (Crick & Gropeter, 1995). Third through sixth grade students in a medium sized Midwestern town received a peer nomination instrument to identify aggressive students. Results from this research indicate that girls and boys were
equally identified as aggressive, and both genders will utilize both forms of aggression. Boys exhibited more overt aggression and girls exhibited more relational aggression. Research also indicated that relational aggression is an independent form of aggression and is viewed as such by both genders (Crick & Gropeter, 1995).

After finding that both boys and girls view relational aggression as aggressive, Crick, Bigbee and Howes (1996) further explored the gender difference in aggression. They investigated the differences in how boys and girls identify aggressive acts in same gender and opposite gender groups. The researchers asked third through sixth grade students in a different medium sized Midwestern town open-ended question about angry and harmful behaviors. Both genders significantly identified physical aggression as normative behavior for boys when angry and intending harm. Girls significantly identified relational aggression as normative behavior for girls when angry and intending harm at all ages, and boys identified relational aggression as normative behavior for girls once they reached the older grades.

Researchers have found that students as early as pre-school were rated by teachers and peers more likely to use one form of aggression over another based on gender (Maccoby, 1998, Maccoby 2002 and Ruble and Martin 1998 as cited in Giles and Heyman 2005). Giles and Heyman wanted to determine whether social information and beliefs about gender would influence the type of aggression children report as normative. Children from two culturally diverse, low-income urban areas of a large western city were presented with characters in a story in which they knew the gender, and then were asked about behaviors that might be exhibited by those characters when they were acting mean. Conversely the children were also asked the gender of a character based on behaviors exhibited in a story when the character was acting mean. The results from Giles and Heyman (2005) again find that young children view relational
aggression as a primary behavior for girls and physical aggression as a primary behavior for boys when angry and intending harm.

The studies conducted indicate several findings. Importantly it has been found that girls are equally aggressive as boys. Relational aggression is an independent from of aggression, but not the sole province of girls. Finally children as young as pre-school identify girls as predominately relationally aggressive and boys physically aggressive (Crick & Gropeter 1995, Crick, Bigbee & Howes 1996 and Giles & Heyman, 2005). These findings then beg to answer, Why based on gender is this so? Is it socialization? Is it differences in relationship goals?

_Socialization and relationship goals._ From early on gender is differentiated for young children by their clothes, toys, games and behavioral expectations. These differentiations may play an important part in the examination of gender and aggression (Giles & Heyman, 2005). Letendre (2007) asserts that socialization, especially in the realm of behavioral expectations and relationships, contributes to the use of female relational aggression.

Girls learn from their modeling caretakers to be focused on and to develop relationships with others that are based on mutual caring and responsibility. Boys are expected to remain autonomous (Letendre, 2007). This more traditional female role of connectedness may cause feelings of anxiety when faced with conflict because expressions of anger be it verbal or physical, may result in harming another (Crothers, Field & Kolbert, 2005).

Through early gender differentiation and socialization, girls have been limited in their ability to express anger and deal with conflict. Based on this assumption, Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005) studied the dynamics of conflict in adolescent friendships. The researchers asked how being female influenced the manner in which conflict is resolved. They found that girls who identified with more traditional feminine roles perceived themselves as utilizing relational
aggression more than females who identified with non-traditional feminine roles. Participants again identified females as more relationally aggressive than boys. Therefore it could be said that socialization, gender roles and relationship goals contribute to the recognition and utilization of relational aggression.

**Parental Influences**

To more fully understand aggression researchers also studied the connection of aggression to parental influences. According to Sandstrom (2007) a logical place to look at the development of aggression is to examine the parenting. Factors such as parenting styles and maternal/paternal psychological control will be examined.

*Psychological control.* Researchers reported that psychological control is significantly related to externalizing behaviors such as aggression (Barber, 1996; Barber et al., 2005; Buehler et al., 2006; Conger et al., 1997; Petite et al, 2001 as cited in Albrecht, Galambos and Jansson 2007). Further studies found that psychological control can evoke anger in children leading to aggression against peers (Casas et al., 2006), and Mills & Rubin, 1998 as cited in Albrecht, Galambos & Jansson 2007).

To better understand parental psychological control and the connection to aggression Albrecht, Galambos and Jansson (2007) defined psychological control as, “the invalidation of feelings, constraining verbal expressions, verbal attacks and withdrawal of love”. They studied whether high levels of perceived parental control would lead to higher levels of externalizing aggressive behavior. Their two year longitudinal study utilizing adolescents ages 12 to 19 as well as both mothers and fathers. The study took into account the bi-directionality of the parent/child relationship and examined both parent effects and child effects.
The results indicate that when both parents perceived increases in psychological control between time one and time two of the longitudinal study, there were related increases in physical and relational aggression. The results also indicated that when the child perceives an increase in parental psychological control in both parents, physical aggression increases between time one and time two. There was only a perceived increase in maternal psychological control in response to relational aggression.

The results show that there is a directional relationship between aggression and parental psychological control. Whether the parent sees themselves as psychologically controlling or the child sees the parent in that manner there is an increase in aggression. The responses perceived based on gender differs for mothers and fathers in regards to relational aggression. This may be the result of how relational aggression is viewed and utilized based on gender.

*Parenting styles.* The influence of authoritative, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles and overt physical aggression has been examined time and again. There is an association between physically aggressive behavior towards peers and an authoritarian parenting style (Sandstrom, 2007). There is also an association between behavioral problems, non-compliance and a permissive parenting style (Sandstrom, 2007). Less is known about how parenting styles affect the utilization of relation aggression. Sandstrom (2007) predicted that the children of mothers who use high levels of authoritarian discipline would engage in higher levels of overt aggression, and that the children of mothers who use high levels of permissive parenting would engage in higher levels of relational aggression.

Peer nomination questionnaires were given by Sandstrom (2007) to a group of fourth grade students to identify those children who are seen by their peers as relationally aggressive. Mothers of those students were then given a parenting style questionnaire. The results from this
study found a strong association between authoritarian parenting in both overt and relational aggression, thus replicating previous findings. Further when gender is taken into account it was found that there is an increase in overt aggression in boys and relational aggression in girls with an authoritarian parenting style. When mothers used a permissive parenting style there was an increase in both overt and relational aggression in girls but not for boys (Sandstrom, 2007). Though this study did not take into account the effects of a father’s parenting style or the authoritative parent it does provide another insight into the utilization of aggression.

**Popularity**

The internal and external factors that contribute to a child/adolescent being liked, having status or popularity among peers has a relationship with the use of aggression, especially relational aggression (Rose, Swenson & Waller, 2004; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007; Andreou, 2006). The term popularity conjures the image of a well-liked, friendly, attractive, smart, well dressed youth. This youth is considered socially preferred. A child or adolescent with the above characteristics but who also uses aggressive behaviors is generally perceived as popular or as having status by others, but is not well-liked. The effects of perceived popularity, status and social intelligence on the use of relational aggression are explored.

*Perceived popularity.* It is suggested that some children/adolescents are not well liked by their peers, yet they are considered popular by those same peers. It is also suggested that these youth perceived as popular may use aggressive behaviors especially relational aggression to maintain his/her popularity. Research has in fact indicated that children/adolescents use aggressive acts to manipulate their social worlds to their advantage to maintain/and or increase their popularity (Rose, Swenson & Waller, 2004). Often children/adolescents can aggress without consequence especially as they age and they become more skilled at using relational
aggression. Interestingly children/adolescents who use relational aggression are more attractive
to their peers (Rose, Swenson & Waller, 2004).

In their longitudinal study Rose, Swenson and Waller (2004) explored the connection
between relational aggression and perceived popularity. Once popularity is achieved it becomes
important to maintain it. The use of relational aggression can be a tool in which to gain an
advantage over peers who may challenge or threaten said popularity. Its use may even be seen as
justified. Peer nomination questionnaires administered to youths in grades three, five, seven and
nine in a mid-size lower-middle class community identified both peers who exhibited relationally
aggressive behaviors, and peers considered to be popular (Rose, Swenson & Waller 2004).
Controlling for statistical overlap between overt and relational aggression the researchers found
that a significant relationship between youths perceived as popular and the use of relational
aggression existed. The perceived popularity of the aggressive youth increased over time if the
aggressive acts were considered gender normative (i.e. physically aggressive boys). Girls
exhibiting overt aggression were not considered popular. The popularity of boys declined over
time if there was a continued use of overt aggression as well (Rose, Swenson & Waller, 2004).

This research shows the relationship between perceived popularity and relational
aggression. The longitudinal nature of the study provides insight into the necessity of early
intervention/prevention programs due to the direct relationship between popularity and the
increase of relational aggression over time.

Status. Humans have a fundamental need to belong to their social world (Adler, 1956).
The individual’s need to belong to the larger social world causes the formation of friendships and
larger peer groups, which in turn impacts the socialization and the behaviors of its individual
members. Children and adolescents can be active members in conforming to group norms as
well as passive recipients of group influences through peer pressure, manipulation and
reinforcement (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007).

As children age into adolescence, the majority of their time is spent socializing in a group
context. The group becomes all important to its individual members; as such a group has
tremendous influence over its members. Examining group influence on aggression is essential.

Ellis and Zarbatany (2007) examine group status as a moderator for aggression. Group
status is the extent to which a group is dominant within the larger context. Just as an individual
can use aggression to maintain his/her status, a group will use aggression to maintain its status as
well. Ellis and Zarbatany (2007) hypothesized that well-known central groups (i.e. perceived
popular groups) rely on a combination of pro-social behavior and relational aggression with an
increase in aggression to maintain the group status over time. Whereas groups of well-liked
children/adolescents or socially preferred groups utilize pro-social behaviors to maintain status,
the researchers also hypothesized that central groups would socialize more aggressive behavior
than pro-social behaviors even though both types are used by central groups to maintain status.

In their three part study Ellis and Zarbatany (2007) administered a social cognitive map
technique to identify social groups with fifth through eighth grade students in a medium sized
city. The researchers also administered a peer nomination scale to identify those social groups
that were central or socially preferred, and to identify which groups exhibited aggressive and/or
pro-social behaviors. The results show that highly central groups used more relational
aggression than socially preferred groups. Not only did highly central groups use more relational
aggression, they socialized members of the group to use more relational aggression and other
negative behaviors than pro-social behaviors even though central groups utilize both types of
behaviors. Again, socially preferred groups used more pro-social behavior and socialized their members to use more pro-social behaviors.

Ellis and Zarbatany (2007) took an individual phenomenon and applied it to the group setting. They found that just as when individuals strive to maintain their popularity, so too will groups. Also, just as in situations when individuals will use negative behaviors such as relational aggression, groups do too. Members of these groups may not be as well-liked but they enjoy a higher status and have more of an impact on the greater social context.

*Social Intelligence.* Popularity and status may play a role in use of relational aggression but Andreou (2006) argues that a certain level of social intelligence is needed to facilitate the use of relational aggression. Social intelligence is considered having social skills and competence in analyzing one’s own and others’ social behavior, recognizing motives and being able to exhibit behaviors that will achieve one’s own social goals (Andreou, 2006). Andreou (2006) hypothesized that the use of relational aggression but not overt aggression can be predicted by cognitive aspects.

Andreou (2006) administered a peer nomination form to fourth through sixth grade students at a large inner-city school to measure levels of social intelligence and the use of relational aggression. Social intelligence was measured by items such as being able to understand others feelings, intention through body language, choices, desires and being able to easily fit into social situations and conversation, as well as not being easily surprised by one’s own or others’ behaviors. The results indicate a significant correlation between social intelligence and relational aggression and almost a zero correlation between social intelligence and overt aggression. The very nature of relational aggression as a covert action highlights the sophistication of relationally aggressive acts and an understanding of what will hurt the intended
target most. It is reasonable to assume that most individuals who effectively utilize relational aggression have a higher level of social intelligence.

**Effects of Relational Aggression**

The psycho-social effects of being victimized by peers are well documented. Children who are victimized by peers have higher incidences of depression, loneliness, suicidal ideation and anxiety, as well as higher levels of impulsive behavior (Dempsey, Fireman & Wang, 2005). Further peer-victimized children/adolescents are more rejected by, less popular and have less positive peer interactions than non-victimized peers (Dempsey, Fireman & Wang, 2005).

*Victim effects.* Children report that the onset of negative symptoms of aggression (i.e. depression, anxiety etc.) coincide with the onset of victimization. To more fully understand the impacts of aggression, Dempsey, Fireman and Wang (2005) explored factors that contribute to children becoming victimized, staying victimized, transitioning out of victimization and victim/aggressors. Using Crick and Gropeter’s (1995) peer nomination scale with third, fourth and fifth grade students in a medium sized, urban southwest city the authors were able identify and place students in the above categories. In analyzing the data the researchers found that there were not gender differences in the rate of victimization only gender differences in the type of aggression used on the victims. Meaning more girls are victimized with relational aggression than boys.

Dempsey, Fireman and Wang (2005) consistently found that the more impulsive and/or aggressive a child is the more likely they are to be victimized. The inability to exhibit pro-social behavior led children to be more vulnerable to victimization. Children tend to continue to be victimized due to these same behaviors. The researchers also found that if a victim fights back there is a continuation of victimization. There is a decrease in the amount of victimization if
more positive peer interactions and/or pro-social behaviors occur. Having a friend to assist with situations of victimization also decreased the likelihood of continued victimization.

Though there are obvious negative consequences to relational aggression some research indicates that girls may use coping skills to address relational aggression to maintain friendships. Past research has shown that girls use wishful thinking, social support and tension reduction activities as coping strategies (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). The authors further examined coping strategies used by adolescent girls specifically when confronted with relational aggression. Of particular interest in this study is whether and under what circumstances acts of relational aggression are dealt with in a way that preserves the friendship.

Utilizing the Revised Ways of Coping questionnaire and a series of questions regarding a relationally aggressive incident with a friend the researchers surveyed sixth through twelfth graders at a large urban junior school and senior high school they found that every girl participating in the study could identify an incident with a friend that included a form of relational aggression. The effect of the incident on the friendship varied based on coping skills used by the victim, the level of closeness with the aggressor and the amount of anger experienced by the victim.

They found that the closer the friend, the more hurt or angry the victim felt by the incident. Girls with higher levels of hurt feelings tended to utilize coping mechanisms such as wishful thinking, self-blame and isolation (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Interestingly these same girls reported feeling closer to their aggressor friend after the incident. Girls with higher levels of anger towards their aggressor friend were less likely to utilize identifiable coping mechanisms and were less likely to attempt to maintain the friendship after the incident. Finally, whether hurt
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or angry, girls utilizing social support to cope with a relationally aggressive incident with a friend were the most likely to maintain the friendship.

*Aggressor effects.* Aggression not only negatively impacts the victim but the aggressor as well. Numerous studies have been conducted on the effects of overt aggression and social-psychological maladjustment on children (Crick & Gropeter, 1995). Until recently there are limited studies on the effects of relational aggression. Crick and Gropeter (1995) explored specifically whether relational aggression is related to social-psychological maladjustment and Crick (1996) explored the role of relational aggression as a predictor for future social adjustment.

Crick and Gropeter (1995) hypothesized that the use of relational aggression would have the same negative impacts on social-psychological adjustment as overt aggression. The researchers administered several measures to third through sixth grade students in a moderate size mid-western city, including a peer nomination scale to identify relationally aggressive peers and administered measures to assess social-psychological adjustment. The researchers found that using relational aggression has the same negative impacts as being a victim of relational aggression, including higher levels of depression, loneliness and social isolation. This applies to both rejected and controversial students (highly liked by some and highly disliked by others).

Crick’s and Gropeter’s (1995) findings that there are concurrent social-psychological difficulties with the use of relational aggression led Crick (1996) to hypothesize and explore whether these difficulties were stable over time. Conducting a longitudinal study utilizing peer nomination scales and teacher assessments with third through sixth grade students in a medium sized mid-western city over the course of a school year the researcher found that relational aggression and its social-psychological impacts are stable over time and may even increase. The
study found that relationally aggressive children become more rejected over time increasing, the likelihood of continued social-psychological maladjustment.

**Child/adolescent views.** Not only is the knowledge of factors that contribute to the use of relational aggression and its effects is important, but knowing how children and adolescents themselves view relational aggression is important as well. Are adults and children discussing the same thing? Definitions of bullying and personal perceptions of aggression may affect the use and the consequences of aggression to a greater degree.

Vailancourt, et al. (2008) explored whether themes in the definition of bullying and aggression is the same for adults and children. The researchers found that children providing their own definition of bullying rarely contained the same themes of intentionality, repetition and imbalance of power as is widely recognized by adults and the research community. Nearly all children in this study concurred with the definition of the negative behaviors that are associated with bullying. Overt aggression and bullying were reported more during the elementary years and by boys, while relational aggression was reported more during the middle years and by girls. Children in this study also reported less aggression when provided the definitions of bullying and aggression. How social information is processed, beliefs about aggression and the intent attributed to acts aggressive may all affect how children and adolescents view the use and acceptability of relational aggression.

Crick and Werner (1998) hypothesized that how social information is processed is related to the use of relational aggression. The researchers believed that children exhibited relationally aggressive behavior would exhibit biases when interpreting social information, meaning the child would be more likely to think social acts as aggressive even if it is neutral. Further the
researchers believed the response to a social act would be related to the particular type of aggression the child exhibited.

To explore these hypotheses the authors used peer nomination to identify relationally aggressive students, they administered a series of hypothetical situations to assess patterns of social information processing to third through sixth grade students in several moderate sized Midwestern cities. They found that children identified as relationally aggressive viewed neutral social situations as relationally aggressive (Crick & Werner, 1998). This result was not as significant as those girls who viewed neutral situations as overtly aggressive and displayed non-normative aggression (overt aggression), suggesting that relational aggression may be considered a more “normal” response to conflict by girls.

Werner and Nixon (2005) explored whether normative beliefs and social knowledge influenced the use and acceptability of relational aggression. In past studies on overt aggression children who believe aggression is an acceptable response are more aggressive than children who believe it is an unacceptable response (Werner and Nixon). In this study the researchers administered an instrument designed to measure normative beliefs about aggression with specific items about relational aggression. The researchers also administered a self-report measure about the study participants’ own use of overt and relational aggression to seventh and eighth grade girls in a suburban northeastern town.

The findings of the above study confirm the hypothesis that beliefs about specific forms of aggression are associated with the use of those specific forms of aggression. Students who endorsed relational aggression more highly reported the use of relational aggression. This study was then expanded and replicated with a larger sample to include both adolescent boys and girls,
and overt and relational aggression. In general girls endorsed and used relational aggression more while boys endorsed and used overt aggression (Werner & Nixon, 2005).

The effect of relational aggression is similar to both the victim and the aggressor. The negative impacts of greater peer rejection, loneliness, depression and poor social relationships can be stable over time for both groups. How a child/adolescent defines aggression, perceives his/her social word and processes that information, as well as knowledge of his/her beliefs regarding aggression can have an impact on the use and effects of relational aggression. This knowledge is useful in determining appropriate interventions within the school setting to address the issue of relational aggression.

*Summary of Current Literature*

Growing evidence suggests that relational aggression is in fact an independent form of aggression that is considered gender normative to females. Children and adolescents are greatly affected by this form of aggression in many negative ways. The current literature suggests that there are many possible factors that contribute to this form of aggression, from socialization and parenting, to the desire to maintain popularity and status. Not only do outside factors contribute to the use of aggression but the individuals own perceptions and beliefs in regards to aggression come into play when utilizing aggressive behavior.
Chapter III: Implications for a Comprehensive School Counseling Program

Comprehensive Program

Limited research exists about addressing relational aggression in the school setting. It is disappointing that in the literature that is present, relational aggression is still a misunderstood, under reported and often not specifically addressed within the school setting. While nearly all principals report relational aggression as a problem, only one-half formally address relational aggression in an anti-bullying program (Smith, 2007). Teachers view physical and verbal aggression as more severe and warranting more consequences than relational aggression (Yoon, Barton, Taiarol, 2005). How do school counselors respond? The knowledge and responsiveness of the school counselor regarding relational aggression and the utilization of a comprehensive school counseling program will be discussed.

*Education.* School counselors working with the entire school population in a preventative and responsive role have knowledge of the school culture and the skill set to implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of programming used to address relational aggression. Even though school counselors are in a prime position to address relational aggression, they often do not view this form of aggression as serious as overt aggression (Jacobsen & Baumen, 2007). The same authors hypothesized that school counselors respond differently to different types of aggression based on education, specifically anti-bullying education. The researchers found that school counselors without specific anti-bullying training rate physical and verbal aggression as more serious and in need of stronger consequences than relational aggression. School counselors without anti-bullying training also expressed more empathy for victims of physical and verbal aggression than victims of relational aggression (Jacobsen & Baumen, 2007).
The above findings are quite disturbing given the equally damaging nature of relational aggression. There is a great need to educate and develop effective interventions in the schools themselves (Yoon, Barton & Taiarol, 2005). A greater awareness of relational aggression would move educators away from the belief that this form of aggression as “a phase” or a “normal part of growing up.” Though anti-bullying programs are popular in elementary and middle schools there is little empirical evidence that these programs alone are effective in addressing relational aggression (Yoon, Barton, & Taiarol, 2005).

Once the school counselor has received education and training on relational aggression incorporating that knowledge into a comprehensive school counseling program is essential. Though comprehensive school counseling programs vary, those based on the American School Counselor Association’s National Model will contain the basic structures of Foundation, Delivery System, Management and Accountability (American School Counselor Association, 2005). The logical place to address the needs of students in regards to relational aggression is the Delivery System and the Foundation of the comprehensive school counseling program. Research on interventions to incorporate into the delivery system (system support, guidance curriculum, and responsive services) and the foundation (beliefs, philosophy, and mission statement) of the comprehensive school counseling program will be discussed.

**Delivery System**

*System Support.* Due to the covert nature of relational aggression it is at times difficult for trained professionals to identify. Education for school staff, students, and parents becomes vital in addressing the more minor and isolated incidences of relational aggression to prevent it from becoming more widespread (Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006). Because relational aggression is stable and generally increases in intensity over time, it is unlikely that it will
resolve without intervention (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006) expanding education beyond school staff will produce a more meaningful impact and will lessen the inadvertent sanctioning of relational aggression through lack of knowledge (Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006). Yoon, Barton and Taiariol (2004) suggest that when armed with knowledge school professionals and parents can investigate whether victimization due to relational aggression is a possible cause for school and psycho-social difficulties among students.

Guidance curriculum. In the current literature there is not widespread agreement about whether curriculums specifically focusing on anti-bullying are effective for long-term change in regards to aggression, though there is agreement that short-term positive results are often seen (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004). In addition to anti-bullying programs there is growing evidence that social and emotional learning is more effective for long term behavioral change (Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006). Social and emotional learning is defined as “the process of acquiring skills to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively” (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2005). Guidance curriculums such as Second Step (Committee for Children, 2008) and Steps to Respect (Committee for Children, 2008) provide weekly lessons for students in kindergarten through eighth grade to teach and reinforce social and emotional learning. Addressing relational aggression through the guidance curriculum enables the school counselor to impact all students.

Responsive services. Individual and small group counseling can be an effective means in assisting individual students dealing with relational aggression. Children and adolescents who are the victims of relational aggression are often isolated. Developing groups that focus on conflict resolution, positive interpersonal interactions and that provide high levels of social
support can buffer victims from the effects of relational aggression (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004).

Aggressive children and adolescents also suffer negative psycho-social consequences of relational aggression. Focusing solely on aggressive behaviors when developing responsive services for children who utilize aggressive behavior may not be as effective, as there tends to be little motivation to change behaviors deemed as successful (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). Instead providing a safe opportunity to explore positive social behavior and healthy emotional expression to reduce aggressive behavior may be more effective (Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006).

Foundation

School culture. The foundation of any comprehensive school counseling program is the starting point which defines what “every student will know and be able to do” (American School Counselor Association, 2005). Within that foundation the environment in which each student achieves the above is important. School culture can impact students’ psycho-social and academic functioning (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004). Creating beliefs, philosophies and mission statements that provide for a safe, tolerant, respectful, and inclusive environment can lead to less bullying, fewer behavioral referrals and more appropriate social interactions (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). Positive school affiliation and high attachment to school is associated with positive social, emotional and academic success (Hill & Werner, 2006).

Without a positive school culture which supports all students, staff and parents relational aggression and other forms of aggression and bullying can undermine the very foundation of a comprehensive school counseling program. Though the delivery system is important in reaching all students in regards to relational aggression, the literature in this area overwhelmingly agrees
that a positive school culture has the greatest impact on the occurrence of relational aggression (Hill & Werner, 2006; Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006; Yoon Barton & Taiariol, 2004; Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006).

**Conclusion.** Relational aggression can have a negative impact on those involved within a school. A school counselor by the very nature of his/her position is in prime position to address the needs of a school in regards to relational aggression. By gaining the appropriate knowledge and skills, implementing the appropriate services, and tracking the effectiveness of said services the school counselor can prove themselves invaluable in addressing relational aggression.
Chapter IV: Summary, Critical Analysis and Recommendations

Summary of the Literature Review

The literature shows that relational aggression is a prevalent problem among children and adolescents. There are many possible factors that contribute to the use of relational aggression. When relational aggression is taken into account girls are found to be equally as aggressive as boys (Crick & Nelson, 1992). Though it is not the sole province of girls, relational aggression appears to be gender normative for girls. This is possibly due to differences in gender socialization and relationship goals between boys and girls (Ledtendre, 2007).

Gender is not the only factor that can lead to the use of relational aggression. The literature has indicated parental relationships influence the use of relational aggression. Just as the level of parental control and parenting styles can increase the likelihood of physical aggression; it can also increase the use of relational aggression (Sandstrom, 2007). Finally popularity is another factor that can contribute to the use of relational aggression. Rose, Swanson and Waller (2004) indicate that children rated as popular but not liked by their peers use relational aggression more than children who are socially preferred (popular and/or well-liked). Due to the covert nature of relational aggression, children and adolescents are often free to aggress without fear of consequence. There is often little motivation to change behavior as relational aggression assists in maintaining popularity and status (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007).

The role of a school counselor and the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program can assist school professionals, students and parents in dealing with relational aggression in the school setting. Unfortunately little research has been done in this area. The literature suggests that school counselors do not always recognize relational aggression or always rate it as serious as physical aggression, indicating a need for further
Relational Aggression

education about relational aggression. Literature also suggests that the single most effective means of addressing relational aggression within the school setting is by creating a positive school culture (Merrell Buchannan & Tran, 2006). The more knowledgeable a school counselor is about relational aggression the better able he or she will provide education, support and interventions within a school.

Critical Analysis of the Literature Review

The research in the area of relational aggression is relatively new. At this time the research is defining relational aggression as a separate from of aggression, and exploring factors that lead to its use. The findings from this literature review provide an initial understanding of the factors that contribute to relational aggression. These findings are neither conclusive nor complete, so they should be examined with that understanding. Research has shown that the effects of relational aggression on both victims and aggressors are as damaging as that of physical aggression. Research in the area of the role of the school counselor is almost non-existent. Only knowledge of the role that the school counselor plays in addressing the academic, career and social development of all students leads to the logical conclusion that he or she is equipped to successfully address relational aggression within the school setting.

It appears in order to help children and adolescents deal with relational aggression the school counselor must educate themselves, students, school personnel and parents about relational aggression and its damaging effects. Though the research indicates anti-bullying programs alone are not effective in addressing relational aggression, implementing such programs under the broader context of social emotional learning has been shown to be effective (Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006). Finally it is imperative the school counselor works with all
stakeholders within a school to create a safe, respectful and caring environment with zero
tolerance to all forms of aggression and bullying.

**Recommendations from the Analysis**

After analyzing the results of the current research on relational aggression in an attempt
to answer the question of what contributes to participation in relationally aggressive behavior, it
is recommended that further research be conducted to increase understanding of the factors that
contribute to the utilization of this form of aggression. It still is not fully understood why some
children and adolescents utilize this form of aggression. The current research on gender, parental
influences and relational aggression leads to questions such as 1) Why do girls use this form of
aggression more often than boys? 2) How important is socialization and gender roles in the use
of relational aggression? 3) How large of a part do parental relationships and parenting styles
play in the utilization of this form of aggression? 4) What skills do parents need to decrease the
use of relational aggression? And 5) When boys utilize this form of aggression does it look
different than when girls are using relational aggression? Understanding these questions would
allow for the creation of more effective interventions and early on such as early childhood family
education programs.

Gender and parenting are not the only aspects of relational aggression that needs further
exploration. Children and adolescents use this form of aggression to maintain popularity and
status within their social groups. It is also important to know what interventions are effective for
school professionals in addressing relational aggression. To answer the above questions
researchers need to further explore what skills aggressors have that allow them to control and
manipulate others while maintaining peer relationships, as well as knowing what qualities are
typical of their peer relationships.
This literature review provides evidence of the damaging psycho-social impact of relational aggression on both victims and aggressors. Due to the damaging impact it is imperative that further research be done on developing early identification methods and of victims and aggressors. With schools being the main social outlet for children and adolescents, school professionals are in a position to identify relational aggression. Yet, further information is needed by school professionals about warning signs that may lead to identification of aggressors and victim because often times a student using relational aggression is a likeable, friendly kid people do not suspect as being aggressive.

Though there is research that provides insight to factors that contribute to relational aggression, the implications for a comprehensive school counseling program when addressing this form of aggression in the school setting has yet to be studied thoroughly. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be conducted in this area as well. Though limited research has indicated a positive school culture that promotes tolerance, respect, safety and inclusivity is at this time the single most important factor in addressing relational aggression, it will continue to be an issue, since this one factor cannot eliminate all aggression.

Because of lack of understanding of this relatively new form of aggression by many school counselors, further education is needed. Further research is needed to identify what role the school counselor has in developing effective curriculums and appropriate interventions for victims and aggressors of relational aggression. School counselors knowledgeable in this form of aggression can and should continue to educate school professionals, students and parents as well as stay abreast of current literature to assist in developing effective programming to promote a safe aggression free school.
References


