

Relational Aggression and Team Cohesion Among  
Female Adolescent Athletic Teams

by

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*ABSTRACT*

Research shows that 61% of adolescents reported at least one experience of relational aggression within the last month, and many experienced repeated instances (Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006). Due to added stressors from their sport and team dynamics, female adolescent athletes may be at greater risk for such experiences than non-athletes. Increasing awareness among school-based professionals and developing strategies to help these students deal with relational aggression may be helpful in reducing the prevalence of this problem. Studies have shown that school-based programs targeting relational aggression have been successful in fostering a positive school climate and healthy connections (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland, 2002). School-based professionals, especially school counselors, are in an excellent position to help establish an effective system with which to deal with these behaviors in all groups, including athletic teams. This research paper reviews the existing literature on relational

aggression, gender, and adjustment implications. In addition, this review examines how relational aggression may affect female adolescent athletes. A critical analysis of the relevant literature is discussed, including recommendations for school-based professionals who seek to decrease relational aggression among all youth.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

In the wake of increasing violence on our nation's campuses, it seems natural to want to address the obvious, immediately dangerous behaviors with zero tolerance policies, crisis plans and safe contact procedures. The presence of weaponry and dangerous threats against school communities demand immediate attention. However, students may also be exposed to the damaging effects of other types of threatening behaviors that are found beyond the headlines, and these should also receive attention. This other threat, often termed as "girl bullying," may receive less daily media coverage but it can be just as menacing to our youth.

Until recently, hearing the word "bully" might have elicited thoughts of fistfights on the playground after school, faces punctuated by black eyes and fat lips, or a few menacing kids controlling others through sheer size and brutality. However, victimization occurs in multiple ways including less blatant, but just as hurtful, forms of bullying behavior, relational aggression.

Most often associated with females, the purpose of relational aggression is to prevent or disrupt relationship goals of others, and its behaviors include, but are not limited to: withholding friendship, ignoring others, spreading rumors, gossiping, and eliciting peer rejection of another child (Crick, 1995; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Recently, pop culture and films such as *Mean Girls* have tried to cast a lightheartedly humorous spotlight on this important cultural issue. In reality, however, relational aggression can be incredibly destructive and hurtful for its victims (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Roland, 2002).

Unfortunately, although relational aggression and its associated behaviors are sometimes obvious to bystanders, they are often undetected because they can also be delivered in a covert, silent, or hidden manner, such as a group of girls simply decide to snub another on the bus for no apparent reason (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Besides the girls and their victim, perhaps no one else would even notice this happening. The very transparent nature of this type of aggression makes it so hard to detect that, unless made aware, it may go unnoticed by adults such as parents, teachers, and coaches. There appear to be certain times and situations when adults may be privy to such peer interactions. For example, it is known that in early childhood in particular, relational aggressive behaviors are more overt in nature (Ostrov & Crick, 2007). For example, a teacher may overhear his student exclaiming, "I'm not playing with you anymore" but may miss the group of students rolling their eyes. Thus, teachers are more likely to see and hear overt displays of aggression among students. There is also some evidence that during elementary school, "indirect" aggression (which can include relational aggression) occurs more often in the classroom than on the playground (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). In this environment, teachers are available to see such behaviors. Research suggests, that as children move into middle and high school, not only does relational aggression become more covert, but children spend less time in teachers' presence, therefore making it difficult to detect (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Furthermore, teachers are less likely to identify social exclusion as "bullying" as very serious or needing intervention than more overt types of aggression (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000). Therefore, it may be true that relational aggressive behaviors are more covert and less likely to be noticed or others

may not deem them dangerous enough to intervene, especially as children get older and move into middle school, high school, and college.

Whatever the cause may be for relational aggressive behavior going unnoticed or underreported, being relationally victimized can cause social-emotional adjustment difficulties that manifest in the forms of drug abuse, failing grades, or possibly physical aggression (Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006). While it seems easy to assume that the targets of relational aggression stand to suffer the most in this situation, research shows that the perpetrators are also at certain risks based on their behavior (Sullivan et al., 2006).

According to their study of eighth grade urban students and implications of relational victimization and aggression, Sullivan and colleagues (Sullivan et al., 2006) found that 61% of adolescents reported experiencing at least one act of relational victimization in the past 30 days, with 38% of these being repeat offenses. Clearly, relational aggression is pervasive in the lives of these teens. In addition, significant correlations were found between the teens' experiences of relational victimization and drug use, including heavy cigarette and alcohol use. It was found that victimization was also strongly related to subsequent physical aggression. This research presents only a handful of possible outcomes associated with experiencing relational aggression during adolescence; however, it is possible that the effects of this victimization could follow these girls into the future as they become young women (Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002).

Relational aggression does not occur in a vacuum and it is important to consider other factors that contribute to the rollercoaster of female adolescent life. For some, participation in athletics may be one factor that may affect how young women experience

relational aggression. As a member on a sports team, teenagers have the opportunity to gain acceptance by peers, a primary motivator and social need for adolescents (Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh, & McElhaney, 2005). Studies that examine the factors behind youth participation in sports have repeatedly found that the opportunity to develop friendships and affiliations is among the most frequently cited motives for participation in athletics (Weiss & Smith, 1999). This desire to seek social benefits in athletics is strong and substantial in the memories of the athletes. For example, in one study, Butcher, Linder, Koenraad, and Johns (2002) had 10<sup>th</sup> grade students who had previously participated in sports complete a retrospective questionnaire pertaining to reasons for original participation. The three major motives found for participation in athletics were: the desire to develop and demonstrate physical ability, gaining social acceptance and support from peers and parents, and having fun and experiencing enjoyment.

The desire for social acceptance these athletes attribute to their original willingness to participate in athletics may actually cause stress on their other relationships (e.g. with other students, their families, their workplace), resulting in an environment where relational aggression may thrive. With so much time and devotion wrapped up in being teammate, such as spending hours at practice after school and weekends dedicated to playing in tournaments, an athlete may struggle to maintain relationships in other areas of her life. According to psychologist Gaby Bussmann, athletes are confronted with stresses and strain within (e.g. anxieties about performing well) as well as outside of (e.g. trying to maintain connections with friends and keeping up on school work) their sport, such that they may feel burdened and experience social-emotional difficulties caused by these multiple pressures (Bussmann, 1997). These added stressors could greatly affect the

amount of relational aggression a female adolescent athlete experiences in that type of environment. Indeed, Bussmann argues that social, academic, and sports-related pressures interact in a way that stressful events in one domain of an adolescent's life, such as feeling rejected by or disconnected from peers, affect other domains of their lives (e.g., academics and athletic performance), making unfavorable social conditions worse. It is possible then, that adolescents who experience many social stressors outside of their sport team, may also experience similar stresses when on the court or playing field.

For athletes who are members of a sports team, the many hours logged practicing, playing, and traveling for sporting events often gives them the opportunity to become close companions, if not friends. However, on athletic teams, conditions also exist for teammates to make enemies in addition to forging friendships. Longitudinal research has shown the presence of relational victimization and aggression increases across relationships that include dislike (Murray-Close & Crick, 2006). The possibility for both these sentiments seems to exist in the arena of athletic competition among teammates who become friends, enemies, or both. Rachel Simmons, author of *Odd Girl Out* (2002), posited the following in regards to athletic participation:

Giving girls a chance at success means giving them full, equal access to the tools of the game: to the acts of competition and desire required to excel and to the knowledge that relationships can survive them. When competition and desire cannot be enacted in healthy ways and when girls are expected to give priority to care and relationship, resentment, confusion, and retribution follow shortly behind. (p. 126)

It seems important therefore, to create conditions where participating in sports contributes to one's psychosocial and physical development in healthy ways. In several studies a positive school climate, specifically one with an emphasis on high academic achievement and positive aspirations, has a preventative effect on bullying and deviant behavior into adulthood (Kasen, Cohen, & Brook, 1998; Ma, 2002). Therefore, schools that have a successful athletic and academic record may protect student athletes from experiencing aggression and other destructive behaviors. However, in many school communities, athletes, particularly successful ones, become viewed as major representatives of their school and a source of pride for the entire community. As such, student athletes may be aware of this and strive to live up to and maintain the high expectations. Therefore, something that offers the opportunity for social acceptance and prosocial bonding may actually become a context that puts the female athlete at a higher risk for relational aggression. In addition to school-wide factors that increase or reduce the risk of relational aggression, there are elements within individual teams that are likely to contribute to the expression of relationally aggressive behaviors. For instance, an athletic team is no different than other groups of individuals that maintain their relationships and depend on others to retain membership, be loyal to the group, and make beneficial group decisions. This is known as team cohesiveness, and is considered by many to determine the success or failure of teams (Widmeyer, 1994; Ziobro & Dziaasko, 1975). Research shows evidence that higher levels of team cohesiveness predict better individual performance (Chow, Hepler, & Feltz, 2007). Higher levels of relational aggression are likely to affect team cohesiveness and in turn, team performance.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Bullies and victims of relational aggression are at a substantially greater risk for having adjustment difficulties including using drugs and alcohol, experiencing physical aggression, and failing grades (Prinstein et al., 2001; Sullivan et al., 2006). While participation on an athletic team can offer an adolescent a wonderful social opportunity it also has the propensity to cause maladjustment and social problems (Storch, Werner, & Storch, 2003). Despite the apparent relation between athletic participation, social acceptance, and the subsequent environment for relational aggression, little research exists examining the links in this area. It is important, therefore, to investigate the links between athletic participation and relational aggression in order for school-based professionals to gain a better understanding of the dynamics that relation to this so that they can increase awareness, develop strategies that help students cope with relational aggression, and take steps to prevent or reduce the occurrence of relational aggression and promote social acceptance for all students.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this review is to examine whether relational aggression occurs among female athletes during adolescence. It will also explore the dynamics of group cohesion salient during the adolescent period that may influence and be influenced by relationally aggressive behaviors. Understanding these links will help shed light on the ways in which school-based professionals can ensure that student's participation in athletics contributes to their social and physical development in positive, as opposed to harmful ways.

#### *Research Objectives*

This review focuses on four main objectives. They are:

- 1) Examine the associations between relational aggression, gender, and adjustment.
- 2) Examine the extent to which relational aggression occurs among adolescent female athletes.
- 3) Explore the relation between relational aggression and team cohesion.
- 4) Explore information available to school personnel to increase understanding of relational aggression among groups of students to begin to address their needs.

### *Definition of Terms*

In this paper, relational aggression, individual cohesiveness, and team cohesiveness will be defined and used as follows:

*Relational aggression*: behavior that is intended to purposely prevent or disrupt relationships among individuals, and include but are not limited to: withholding friendship, ignoring others, spreading rumors, gossiping, and eliciting peer rejection of another child (Crick, 1995).

*Individual cohesiveness*: Includes an individual's desire to remain in and be loyal to a group, attitudes about other member's attachment to the group, and decisions to weaken, strengthen, or maintain membership of a group (Friedkin, 2004).

*Team cohesiveness*: A dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its goals and objectives that may play a critical role in the success or failure of teams (Carron, 1982; Widmeyer, 1994; Ziobro & Dziaasko, 1975).

### *Assumptions of Research*

The assumption of this review is that there will be adequate quality research in the areas of relational aggression and how it relates to female adolescent athletic participation and possible interactions with team cohesion available to the researcher to conduct a thorough literature review. Furthermore, it is assumed that social acceptance is a salient developmental task in adolescence which can be fostered or threatened through the participation in team sports and relational aggression.

#### *Limitations of Research*

There are several limitations of this study. First, there is a paucity of research available that discusses the role relational aggression takes in specific groups such as athletic teams. Therefore, there are few guidelines that would help school personnel address these groups in particular.

Second, there is little information regarding the influence of relational aggression on overall team cohesion and how this, in turn, may affect the individual. More research on effective preventative and supportive programs for these groups would be beneficial for school-based professionals.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

For many years, people mainly considered physical and destructive behaviors acted out by boys when thinking about bullying, especially among school-aged children. This is probably because these behaviors stand out more prominently in the mind (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000) and are reportedly carried out frequently by young males (Burton, Hafetz, & Henninger, 2007). While gender differences in physically aggressive behaviors are uncommon in infant and toddler stages, by age four, boys engage in more destructive and physically aggressive behaviors than girls (Keenan & Shaw, 1997). For boys, this pattern tends to continue throughout the elementary school years. Further, boys are more likely than girls to be diagnosed as having a conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder (Hinshaw & Anderson, 1996). Thus, for many years, it was believed that aggression was a problem only among boys (Crick, 1995).

Over the past 12 years, researchers have come to realize that girls also experience aggression, but girls tend to aggress differently than boys, exhibiting relational forms of aggression as opposed to physical aggression. For example, boys would use more overt, noticeable behaviors to aggress whereas girls' whispering, gossiping, and silence would go unnoticed by most people. Several studies have examined relational aggression and have found these gender differences as well as a host of associated negative outcomes in children as early as preschool age (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1997; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997) and into adulthood (Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002). Based on its definition (Crick, 1995), relational aggression exists between those who may share proximity and social opportunity to aggress in this way. Longitudinal research has shown that relational aggression and victimization can occur in different kinds of relationships, including peer

relationships, friendships and mutual antipathies (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Murray-Close & Crick, 2006).

The discrepancies in the ways girls and boys aggress only seem to grow as they mature (Archer & Coyne, 2005), and among girls, the rates of relational aggression appear to increase as they get older. For example, research has shown that eight-year-old girls are more likely to show deviant behavior and relational aggression than their younger five-year-old counterparts (Hipwell et al., 2002). This increase in the discrepancy between boys' and girls' use of aggression and girls' increase in relational aggression coincides with the transition to adolescence, a time when children navigate many social opportunities and stressors, such as participating in more extra-curricular activities, such as athletics. Given the interaction between social stressors outside of sports with the stressors associated with participation in athletics (Bussman, 1997; Butcher et al., 2002) it is possible that female athletes could be at higher risk for relational aggression. It is necessary to examine how relational aggression might be related to participation in athletics because there is a paucity in current research addressing the relationship between these factors.

This chapter explores the fundamental elements of relational aggression and how it may affect female student athletes. It is divided into four sections. A review of the relational aggression, gender differences, and adjustment will be provided in the first section. The second section will examine the extent to which relational aggression occurs among female adolescent athletes. The influence of relational aggression on team cohesion is explored in the third section. The fourth section includes a discussion on the

information available to school personnel to address issues experienced with relational aggression.

### *Relational Aggression, Gender, and Adjustment*

In order to understand the implications of relational aggression and any connections between it and athletic participation, one must first gain knowledge regarding the definition and characteristics of relational aggression. As a leading researcher among the first to conceptualize relational aggression, Crick (1995) defined it as behaviors which could include, “withholding friendship, ignoring others, spreading rumors, gossiping, and eliciting peer rejection of another child” (p. 711). While this list is certainly not exhaustive of all behaviors, it helps focus the attention away from traditional concept of aggression (i.e. physical) and onto the variety of ways people could aggress relationally.

In her study, Crick (1995) posited children use aggressive behaviors that are most effective in harming the social goals of their peers. For boys, this means using physical aggression to harm other boys. Using the means of physical aggression these boys may be meeting their need for recreational contact in maintaining relationships. For girls, on the other hand, this often means using underhanded, relational forms of aggression to frustrate or stop the social goals of other girls. Consistent with this view, Crick (1995) found a distinct difference in the way boys and girls use aggression. In contrast to boys, girls use the actual relationship with peers as the medium used to control and harm others.

Much research has been conducted on gender differences in aggression and there is evidence to suggest that boys and girls begin to aggress in observably different ways

(e.g., physically versus relationally) shortly after toddlerhood (Keenan & Shaw, 1997; Ostrov & Crick, 2007). However, in order to further define and assess relational aggression, it is beneficial to consider the nature of how girls tend to aggress at subsequent developmental stages.

Research suggests the difference apparent in early childhood between male and female aggression is present in adolescence as well. This difference is reflected in the findings of a study of adolescents in grades 9 to 12 which examined associations among overt (e.g. hitting, pushing, or threatening to beat up a peer) and relational aggression (Prinstein et al., 2001). Male adolescents reported significantly higher levels of overt aggression and overt victimization than their female counterparts, whereas female adolescents reported using relational aggression significantly more often than over forms of aggression.

In another study focused on violence and relational aggression, researchers analyzed data from 1,929 youth in grades seven and nine and found that over half of those reporting relationally aggressive behavior were female students (Herrenkohl et al., 2007). They also found the participants in the violent offender groups were primarily male youth. Although the female adolescents in this study did exhibit some overt aggression and male did exhibit some relational aggression, the patterns of findings clearly showed that relational aggression tends to occur more often in females.

Gender differences may also be apparent among physical and relational victimization, although the nature of the findings is complex. In a study of 4<sup>th</sup> graders, researchers found that peer and teacher reports of victimization indicated that females were more relationally victimized than physically victimized. However, when directly

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asked, females reported experiencing both types of victimization at equal rates. In essence, they were more likely to view themselves as overall “victims” of aggression than a victim of one type over another (Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005). Despite the fact that both peers and teachers viewed females as more relationally victimized, they themselves were less likely to report seeing it that way. Due these inconsistencies in awareness reported by the victims themselves, relational aggression poses serious risks for those involved in that they may be unaware of or unwilling to identify the true nature of the problem they are experiencing. This would present a problem for those who are seeking to support the victims.

Research into how and why girls use relational aggression more than physical aggression offers additional information to put these behaviors into context. In a recent study, Andreou (2006) examined social preference, perceived popularity, and social intelligence in over 400 fourth- through sixth-grade school children using peer-estimation techniques. For females, both overt and relational aggression was negatively associated with social preference. This means that females were less likely to report approving of a peer who engaged in overt and relational aggression. Despite this, females who were relationally aggressive were perceived as being popular by their peers. In other words, even though females reported they would not approve of a relationally aggressive peer, that is, like them, they nevertheless reported anticipating a higher popularity level and social status if they engaged in those same behaviors.

Those involved in athletics, especially those who are successful in doing so, can probably also expect to receive an elevated level of peer status compared to nonathletes. Elevated peer status, a social reinforcement, was evidenced in a study which found that

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students viewed socially powerful bullies as those possessing a high competency or asset such as being a good athlete (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). In their study examining peer-perceived associations among levels of popularity and peer aggression, Prinstein and Cillessen (2003) found that aggressive behavior is associated with high levels of peer popularity, but not always with peer acceptance. Furthermore, the results showed that the forms of aggression most likely to affect the peer status hierarchy (i.e. relational and reputational aggression) were related to those students with the popular reputations.

Youth who engage in what have been defined as relationally aggressive acts may experience a host of adjustment difficulties. Compared to non-aggressive and non-victimized students, bullies and victims are at a substantially greater risk for having internalizing and externalizing difficulties. Unfortunately, the effects of relational aggression are sometimes more pervasive in the youths' lives than one may conclude at first glance.

In a study of over two thousand 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, bullies and victims had significantly higher mean scores on both depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts than their non-aggressive and non-victimized peers (Roland, 2002). When contrast against each other, bullies had higher mean scores for suicidal thoughts than victims, whereas victims have significantly higher mean scores on depressive thoughts than bullies. Compared to all the pupils studied, females had significantly higher mean scores than males on both depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts (Roland, 2002). The findings of another study support the notion that being a victim of relational aggression was a consistent contributor to the prediction of loneliness and low self-esteem (Prinstein et al.,

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2001). These findings show that adolescents who are both relational aggressors and victims are at substantial risk for internalizing difficulties.

The research also suggests that the risks associated with relational aggression and victimization go beyond internalizing difficulties, and can also be related to more overt, or externalizing problems. Prinstein (2001) found associations between females who relationally aggress against their peers and externalizing behaviors (Prinstein et al., 2001). Compared to non-aggressive and non-victimized students, bullies and victims are a substantially greater risk for having adjustment difficulties. For example, significant correlations were found between relational victimization and drug use for cigarette, alcohol, and advanced alcohol use. Being relationally victimized also contributed more to subsequent physical aggression, failing grades, and drug use for females than males (Sullivan et al., 2006).

This research confirms that relational aggression is damaging and destructive for both the aggressors and their victims. Although some evidence has shown that females who use gender normative forms of aggression, that is relational aggression, are less likely to be maladjusted than girls who use gender nonnormative forms of aggression (i.e., physical) (Crick, 1997), the negative implications of relational aggression for so many individuals clearly override any benefits (Sullivan et al., 2006). In addition, findings from Andreou (2006) suggest that what may appear to be “benefits” or protective features of being relationally aggressive, such as being perceived by peers as popular, may come at the cost of not being liked by one’s peers. Furthermore, as noted by the above studies, both aggressors and victims are at risk for depressive symptoms,

suicidal thoughts, physical aggression, drug and alcohol use, and other delinquent behaviors.

It is beneficial to consider the developmental nature of aggression amongst girls and how girls might use aggression differently during various developmental stages. Thus, for the purposes of this study, where possible, specific attention will be paid to the dynamics that relate to girls' and young women's use of aggression, particularly relational forms.

Although relational aggression begins to emerge in preschool, it appears to continue into late adolescence and early adulthood. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that unlike physical aggression, which tends to decrease as children get older, relational aggression may actually increase as youth move from early and middle childhood to early and late adolescence. In a recent study, Sullivan, et al. (2006) compared associations between physical and relational aggression and externalizing behaviors among a sample of 276 eighth graders in an urban middle school. They found that 61% of adolescents reported experiencing at least one act of relational victimization in the past 30 days, with 38% of these being repeat offenses. In addition, research has shown that instances of relational aggression seem to increase beginning near the transition from middle school into grade 12 (Cillessen & Borch, 2006). These findings suggest an increase in relational aggression as children move into late adolescence.

In a study examining the characteristics of girls with delinquent and antisocial behavior, Hipwell et al. (2002) collected data on 2,451 girls between five and eight years of age in the Pittsburgh, PA area. Reports were collected from the girls, their teachers, and their parents. Overall, parents of the older girls reported more problematic behaviors.

Not surprisingly, teachers reported more disruptive behaviors than parents. This may be because they spend more time with the girls as they interact with each other. Perhaps most importantly, by their own reports, older girls were more likely to show oppositional and defiant behavior and relational aggression than the younger girls. By parent and teacher reports, the younger girls demonstrated fewer problematic behaviors and less relational aggression. This study shows that changes in girls' development may correspond with new and different behaviors than previously experienced as indicated by girls' reports, as well as reported by those close to them.

These studies seem to indicate that participating in relational aggression for girls is developmentally preferable to participating in overt aggression. What might explain these developmental trends? If one were to consult much of pop culture, it would appear the message is that female adolescents who are relationally aggressive have a higher social status than those who do not actively engage in this behavior. Perhaps girls are portrayed this way because, according to some research, aggressing relationally is a more favorable alternative to aggressing overtly. In a study linking gender normative versus nonnormative forms of aggression and social-psychological adjustment, Crick (1997) found that children who engaged in gender nonnormative forms of aggression were significantly more maladjusted than children who engaged in gender normative forms of aggression. In other words, females who engaged in overtly aggressive behaviors were more likely to be maladjusted than the females who engaged in relational aggression. These results may give credence to the message conveyed in pop culture, such as *Mean Girls*, that catty strategies and manipulations can be used to get ahead socially. However, as aforementioned, individuals who use such behaviors may pay a price. Indeed, evidence

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suggests that although relational aggression is associated with higher levels of perceived popularity amongst young females, it appears to prevent the establishment of mutually rewarding relationships (Andreou, 2006; Grotzinger & Crick, 1996).

As children develop from middle childhood to adolescence, being socially savvy has been found to be associated with positive effects such as ego development, secure attachment, and establishing and maintaining close relationships with friends and parents (Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh, & McElhaney, 2005). In one study (Allen et al., 2005), popular adolescents were also more likely to increase peer-approved activities (e.g., minor drug use and delinquency) and less likely to continue behaviors not approved by peers (e.g., hostile behaviors with peers). The different types and levels of both positive and negative behaviors appear to rely heavily on the attitudes, beliefs, and support of the peers.

This phenomenon is not solely associated with female elementary school-aged students. In their study on aggression in adolescent girls' friendships, Crothers, Field, and Kolbert (2005) found that adolescent girls, around 15 years of age, expected other girls to use "indirect" styles of managing conflicts more often than male peers (p. 353). That is, the girls expected their fellow girls to spread rumors and seek alliances more readily than the males who might choose to directly confront another student.

Relational aggression is not the only factor that contributes to children's social-emotional development. Part-time jobs, family obligations, volunteer work, and extracurricular activities are just a few elements that may contribute to the, oftentimes hectic, lifestyle. To fully understand the role relational aggression plays in adolescents' lives, as well as the consequences it brings, it is important to consider how these other

factors may contribute and relate to adolescents' use reliance on relational aggression and social-emotional development. In their recent study, Herronkohl et al. (2007) found that youth who engaged in relational aggression had more risk factors in their lives than their nonoffending counterparts. These risk factors existed across several areas of the youths' lives including family, school, peer, and community areas. The greatest risk factors for experiencing relational aggressive behavior were related to peer influences (e.g., relationships with aggressive peers, group membership), characteristics of the youth (e.g., power seeking, manipulative), and a background of maladaptive familial approaches to conflict resolution. Therefore, it is important to consider other areas of adolescents' lives, such as connections and responsibilities to family, school, and community in order to understand their experience of relational aggression.

#### *Relational Aggression and Athletics*

As a member of an athletic team, the athlete has the opportunity to develop a sense of peer acceptance, a primary social need for adolescents (Allen et al., 2005). Studies that examine the factors behind youth (children and adolescent) participation in sports have regularly found that the opportunity to develop friendships and affiliative bonds is among the most frequently cited motives (Weiss & Smith, 1999). The athletes seem to recognize their strong desire for social benefits when participating in athletics. In their study, Butcher et al. (2002) asked 10<sup>th</sup> grade students who had previously participated in sports to complete a retrospective questionnaire pertaining to the reasons for their participation. The three major motives found for participation in athletics were: the desire to develop and demonstrate physical ability, gaining social acceptance and support from peers and parents, and fun and enjoyment. The results of

these studies suggest that expectations for social affiliations are a major factor in seeking out athletic participation.

While athletes cited the social benefits as a major proponent for participation in athletics, athletic participation can also contribute to added stress and more conflict in their lives. According to psychologist Gaby Bussmann, athletes are confronted with stresses and strain within their sport and outside of their sport, “so that they automatically face multiple pressures leading to considerable problems and conflicts” (Bussmann, 1997, ¶ 2). For example, a student athlete may deal with demands from her teammates and coaches in addition to the academic and personal pressures inherent in high school. The combination of these stressors can make coping with problems in any one area difficult. The interactions among stressors in and outside of the athletic team could contribute to the amount of relational aggression a female student athlete experiences, be it on or off the field.

Emerging research suggests that relational aggression may be associated with maladjustment among athletes. A peer nomination instrument and selected subscales of a personality assessment were given to 105 college-level athletes (Storch, Werner, & Storch, 2003). Results revealed that relational aggression was positively correlated with teammate rejection for males and females. This means that those who were perceived as being relationally aggressive were more likely to experience rejection by teammates. Among female athletes only, competition in sports was associated with higher alcohol consumption and lower levels of prosocial behavior. This is significant evidence of not only the maladjustment that can occur among female student athletes, but, in the face of

the previously discussed research, also sheds remarkable insight into how seriously relational aggression can affect athletics on and off the field.

The evidence discussed thus far suggests that when athletes have problems in non-sports related areas, such as difficulties with peers, they may be less likely to cope with frustrations and stressors within the team context. This in turn, may negatively affect not only their performance on the team, but also their social and academic adjustment, as demonstrated by the fact that female athletes who are perceived as being relationally aggressive are more rejected by their teammates and engage in more risky behaviors. Thus, in order to support adolescent athletes' social, emotional, and academic health, it is important to understand the factors associated with such links.

For many athletes, the opportunity to foster pride and confidence in their home team community is a high priority, and perhaps may serve as another motivator for participating on sports teams. The positive emotions associated with active participation, such as knowing that one is making a contribution to school pride, have been described by researchers as school attachment effects (Hill & Werner, 2006). With athletics, these effects may be supported by affiliative orientation, or the affinity of wanting to be near others to create and tend to relationships. In a study examining youth in grades 3-12, researchers found that students with high affiliative orientation, or a desire to be near others, were more likely to take into account the relational goals across different situations and were less likely to use aggressive strategies to achieve their goals (Hill & Werner, 2006). Students who had a positive connection with their schools were also likely to form and keep positive relationships with their peers than aggressive students. In other words, for female adolescent athletes, their participation in sports and team

membership may serve as a protective factor against aggression because of their connections to the school and their teammates.

This means that there is social reinforcement within certain social contexts which further supports participation in athletics. This social reinforcement is evidenced by a study of middle and high school students using peer nominations that found students viewed socially powerful bullies as those possessing a high competency or asset such as being a good athlete (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). In essence, the adolescent female athlete stands to make more connections with others that increases popularity and provides her with some protection from being relationally victimized. However, this popularity, which is associated with higher levels of relational aggression, the popular athlete may be at a heightened risk for experiencing rejection and social maladjustment. It is important to examine whether these types of aggression exist in the athletic environment since student athletes are part of a subgroup that has the propensity to be labeled as high status.

#### *Relational Aggression and Team Cohesion*

Regardless of how athletes are viewed by their non-athlete peers or whether they are comfortable with their own level of social acceptance, female student athletes have the opportunity to feel connected to others as a member of a sports team. Indeed, one major dynamic found on a sports team is a mechanism known as team cohesion. The relative amount of team cohesion present on a given team may affect how relational aggression is experienced by the players.

Embedded in the complexities that exist on an athletic team is the idea of cohesiveness, or a dynamic which may influence whether a team experiences a win or

loss (Widmeyer, 1994; Ziobro & Dziaasko, 1975). For an individual this may mean the level of loyalty and attitude she feels towards her teammates based on her interactions with them (Friedkin, 2004). In many cases, group cohesion may be based upon whether or not the group experiences success as a team.

Relational aggression research has indicated that in regards to student athletes, those who are perceived as highly aggressive are then met with higher levels of peer rejection (Storch, Werner, & Storch, 2003). One could argue that those relational aggressors, by their behaviors, are acting against the team's desire to achieve and maintain group cohesiveness. Fostering teammate rivalry, encouraging the break-up of friendships, and developing covert alliances are only a few examples of the tactics in which a relational aggressor may employ to disrupt her team's cohesiveness.

Studies examining the effects of team cohesiveness have found that levels of cohesion significantly predicted individual player's performance (Chow et al., 2007). That is, higher levels of team cohesiveness were found among individual players who were performing well. Individual players' performance oftentimes predicts overall team performance. Thus, it follows that overall team cohesiveness may play an important role in determining a team's performance record.

Given one of the stressors faced by athletes is to perform well individually and as a team, it is not surprising that relationally aggressive individuals would be more rejected by their teammates. That is, relational aggression includes behaviors that threaten team cohesiveness, and thus team performance. Therefore, teammates, in their attempt to deal with stress of winning and performing well, may actively reject those that pose an additional threat to these needs.

Therefore, it is important for schools to put systems in place that help athletes, especially adolescent athletes, cope with the multitude of stressors they face. Based on the reviewed research, it may be that female athletes are more likely to use relational aggression as one way to maintain the popularity and school connections that come along with being an athlete (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). However, given that costs associated with being relationally aggressive (Prinstein et al., 2001; Roland, 2002), in their attempt to maintain these things, they may actually create more stress (e.g., poor performance) and isolation (e.g., peer rejection), which in turn may lead them to engage in risky behaviors (e.g., cigarette, drug and alcohol use) as a result (Sullivan et al., 2006).

#### *Guidelines for School-based Professionals*

Since there is limited information available that addresses relational aggression and how it affects female adolescent athletes and team cohesion, there are no specific guidelines for coaches, counselors, parents, teachers, administrators or other school personnel to follow. It is imperative that both students and school-based professionals develop an increased awareness of relational aggression and the stressors female adolescent athletes may face. In addition, efforts should be made through school-wide programs to help female adolescent athletes and all students effectively manage peer conflict and stress so that they do not engage in relational aggression and risk peer rejection. Finally, schools should strive to increase a positive school climate and foster connections within their schools that does not inadvertently add more stress to athletes.

Developing awareness begins with identifying and defining the problem for school-based professionals and students. The next step should be a push towards

empowering those that are affected and supporting them by giving them tools to stand up against relational aggression. With definition and empowerment, a school may begin to see a decrease in the incidence and negative affects from relationally aggressive behavior.

Developing school-based intervention programs is an important way to begin to increase awareness about relational aggression and directly confronts the issues associated with it. One promising intervention curriculum that addresses relational aggression at the elementary through middle school level is known as Second Step (Committee for Children, 2007). The curriculum focuses on changing attitudes about aggression, empathy, impulse control, anger management, and problem solving through classroom lessons. Research supports that implementing this curriculum at the middle school level resulted in increased social skills knowledge, prosocial behaviors, and school bonding while decreasing relational aggression (McMahon & Washburn, 2003). In another study, it was found that middle school students were also less likely to view relational, verbal, and physical aggression acceptable and were more confident employing prosocial, problem-solving strategies after completing the Second Step lessons (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland, 2002). This evidence supports the desired effects of a positive school climate and fostering connections. Successes such as these gained from early intervention at the late elementary and middle school levels could carry over into adolescence.

With school administrators, counselors, teachers, parent groups, coaches, and other personnel supporting efforts to dissuade relational aggression, female adolescent athletes will receive a clear message that this type of behavior will not be tolerated. School behavior policies could be rewritten to include this type of aggression. For

adolescent athletic teams, this policy could be written into existing codes of conduct that already address other types of violations with appropriate consequences. School-based professionals, parents, and coaches could encourage female adolescent athletes to be involved with many social groups made up of a variety of people, both fellow adolescents and conscientious adults, which will increase the chance that they will be exposed to an outlet with positive, supportive contacts. For those female adolescent members of an athletic team, this means giving them another group to identify with instead of helping to solely enforce the “student athlete” label.

These actions will force school personnel to examine the climate of the school environment in which these students are members. In most instances, it will be the role of the school counselor to educate fellow staff and parents on this type of bullying and the effects it has on students. Components of successful bullying prevention programs indicate that understanding of the spectrum of bullying behaviors (i.e., both physical and relational aggression) and the negative effects in conjunction with an assessment of the local school environment is a successful way to curb this activity (Greene, 2003). In addition, creating a system of acknowledging, reporting, and responding to bullying behavior specific to their school may increase student cooperation. When school personnel at every level are on board with these recommendations designed to discourage relational aggression, this will establish an effective system with which to deal with these behaviors in all groups, including athletic teams.

### Chapter III: Summary, Critical Analysis, and Recommendations

This chapter includes a summary of main points from chapter two as well as a critical analysis of the literature. It will conclude with recommendations for school counselors, coaches, parents, and others who have key roles in students' lives to use to help decrease relational aggression in female adolescent athletic teams and other similar groups.

#### *Summary of Main Findings*

The purpose of this review was to explore and examine several objectives relating to relational aggression and its influence on adolescents and athletics. Specifically, this literature review looked at the following: the associations between relational aggression, gender, and adjustment; the extent to which relational aggression occurs among female athletes; the relationship between relational aggression and team cohesion; and information available to school personnel to increase understanding of relational aggression to address students' needs.

The definition of bullying among school-aged children has evolved to include relationally aggressive behaviors such as purposeful prevention and disruption of relationships through withholding friendship, ignoring others, spreading rumors, gossiping, eliciting peer rejection of another child, and other tactics (Crick, 1995). The description of relational aggression diverges from the conventional, more physically-based definition of bullying but the topic has been emerging among child development researchers and others with similar interest in youth behavior. There is a gender disparity between girls and boys in regards to aggression. In particular, girls begin to aggress differently than boys (e.g. relationally versus physically) shortly after toddlerhood

(Keenan & Shaw, 1997; Ostrov & Crick, 2007). Evidence exists that these differences continue through middle school and into late adolescence (Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Prinstein, et al., 2001). Findings from research indicate that the presence of relational aggression among adolescents at school is considerable, with 61% reporting at least one act in the last 30 days, with 38% being repeat offenses (Sullivan et al., 2006). Such experiences come at a cost. Relational aggressors and victims face a multitude of adjustment difficulties manifesting in both internal and external ways. Children and adolescents who are relationally aggressive and victimized experience higher levels of depression, suicidal ideation, loneliness, drug use, and physical aggression, lower levels self-esteem, and are more likely to receive failing grades than non-relationally aggressive or victimized peers (Prinstein et al., 2001; Roland, 2002; Sullivan et al., 2006). Clearly, youth who experience relational aggression are presented with many potential obstacles to overcome.

Members of an athletic team receive social affiliations and may incur added stress from relations with teammates, coaches, and parents in addition to everyday pressures with academics and personal situations (Bussman, 1997; Butcher et al., 2002). For athletes, research shows the impact of relational aggression has the ability to reach them both on the playing field and off. Among female collegiate (late-adolescence) athletes, relational aggression was positively correlated with peer (teammate) rejection, higher alcohol consumption, and lower levels of prosocial behavior (Storch, Werner, & Storch, 2003). Depending on factors such as the level of social reinforcement on athletic teams, high levels of team affiliation and school attachment may offset these risks and encourage solid team cohesion. Since research shows team cohesion significantly

predicts individual player's performance, there may be a link between relational aggression on a team, that team's level of cohesion, and the team's subsequent performance (Chow et al., 2007).

School personnel who are associated with adolescent athletics have the opportunity to identify relational aggression levels in their school, educate individuals and groups of youth who may be at risk, and promote a positive climate that discourages relational aggression. Existing programs suggest providing a variety of opportunities and people for the youth to engage with, educating school-based professionals on how to respond to relationally aggressive behaviors so they can intervene immediately, and increasing everyone's awareness of the risks and influence of relational aggression (Greene, 2003). In summary, these strategies have demonstrated some level of success at creating a better climate for youth.

### *Critical Analysis*

Although attention to issues and factors associated with relational aggression has been increasing, research has not yet addressed interacting dynamics occurring in specific groups. Such research may lend valuable insight towards deepening the understanding of these behaviors and improving efforts to eliminate it from the adolescent experience. Much research has been dedicated to defining relational aggression, identifying its prevalence among specific ages and genders, and studying it on a developmental platform, and warning of its negative effects. While many of the studies used a variety of assessment methods (e.g. self-report, teacher perceptions) to gauge aspects of relational aggression at the individual level, it makes it hard to speculate about relational aggression's influence on specific groups, in this case, athletic teams.

Relatively speaking, research on relational aggression is fairly new to the childhood development and education field. However, the enormity and severity of the effects of relational aggression found so far resoundingly speak for the need for more development in many aspects, including the group dynamic. If more studies targeted relational aggression and group dynamics it would benefit the leaders and members of such groups as athletic teams. Since these groups serve as a microcosm of the overall community, any insights drawn from this research could be transferred to the understanding of the greater population.

### *Recommendations*

Regardless of their position, all school personnel and other members of the school community have a responsibility to address the aspects of harmful behaviors that face students. This should include identifying relationally aggressive behaviors, creating a message that it will not be tolerated, providing support when necessary, and promoting school-wide efforts to decrease hurtful behaviors.

*School counselors.* In particular, school counselors are in a unique position to obtain and distribute knowledge about relational aggression and how it is affecting the students at their school. Although a formal assessment would be beneficial, more than likely the counselor has a grasp on the impact relational aggression is having at the school. Unlike with other adults who may give a grade, promote members of a team or group, or pass discipline, with a counselor, students can express their thoughts and feelings in a wholly nonjudgmental setting. In turn, the school counselor should share the underlying conditions most often associated with relational aggression (e.g. unhealthy

athletic competitiveness, overemphasis on social status, student body hierarchy) with other school professionals who influence these sectors of the school population.

*Coaches.* Coaches, teachers, and other student group leaders have the most contact with these groups and can best address relational aggression if they notice it happening. Leaders should be familiar with the signs and effects of relational aggression on adolescents in order to properly identify its existence. Adults should resist the urge to ignore these behaviors or invalidate them by assuming the age-old “Boys will be boys; girls will be girls” bullying attitude. Doing so could perpetuate this behavior and is a disservice to the youth. Instead, they should make it clear that any member of the group is welcome to share their thoughts, concerns, or questions about relational aggression. All groups will have emergent leaders and play-makers, but it is crucial to primarily emphasize cooperation, teamwork, and support before stressing wins and other forms of group success.

*School-wide action.* As with other violations, such as underage drug and alcohol use, physical fighting, academic progress, instances of relational aggression should be considered serious enough to result in individual and team penalties for those involved. While instances of relational aggression will likely be more difficult to prove, increased understanding and awareness by those involved should make these occurrences stand out. Adopting a policy against relational aggression coupled with direct interventions with a serious intent to carry it out will discourage students from taking part in relationally aggressive behaviors and may give confidence to the victims to speak out. Perhaps most of all, adults working with youth should model appropriate behaviors in their

relationships with each other while offering support and resources for students who may be experiencing relational aggression.

### *Conclusion*

To date, much research has been devoted to furthering the understanding the devastating consequences of relational aggression on children's emotional and social adjustment. The negative effects associated with relational aggression have been found in most developmental periods, including from toddlerhood to late adolescence. School personnel who are responsible for the healthy development of these youth are under particular pressure to provide a supportive learning experience with lessons to be learned both in and out of the classroom. Any advancement in the ways to identify and prevent relational aggression in the lives of these young people will benefit everyone. Future research should focus particularly on how relational aggression affects groups, such as athletic teams, which will generate insight on how to confront it on a variety of levels. More research will provide more comprehensive ideas on how to effectively deal with these incidents.

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