

Hitting You Where It Counts

For many girls, the most important things are their friendships and sense of belonging. So it makes sense that when girls attack other girls, that's where they strike, using weapons like exclusion, gossip and lies.

A group of girls starts saying nasty things about a classmate who has just started dating one of their ex-boyfriends. A girl gets dumped by a friend who's moved into a more popular crowd. A popular girl subtly makes a friend feel inferior by criticizing her outfit, the boy she likes, or what she did or said in a particular situation. A group of girls makes another girl feel left out by not inviting her to a party, or not making room for her at the lunch table.

Psychologists call this social or relational aggression. It's the dominant form of aggression among girls (although guys do engage in social aggression as well). Compared to physical bullying, which is more typical of guys, social aggression is far more subtle and sophisticated—and any girl who has experienced it knows it can be extremely painful. It may also be more widespread than physical bullying, because it can't succeed without the participation of many girls.

More About Social Aggression

www.intheknowzone.com/socialaggr



There are a number of labels for the typically popular, high social-status girls who dominate this sort of aggression—Queen Bees, Really Mean Girls (RMGs), Alpha Females. But when they are using their social power and influence to hurt other girls, they're really being bullies—cruel, unfeeling and manipulative. And it's hard for adults to even detect, much less stop, their behavior.

As awareness of this problem has grown, however, more and more adults—teachers, school counselors, mentors and parents—are encouraging girls to take responsibility for how they treat each other. No one should need to make someone else feel bad in order to feel good about herself, or secure her place on the social ladder. Lifting other girls up, instead of tearing them down, will make for fewer “mean girls” and more vibrant young women.

gossip



For More Information

Go to www.intheknowzone.com for more information about social aggression, with citations and links. Test your understanding with a quick quiz.



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Social Aggression

words can hurt



Wounds You Can't See

While guys who beat each other up might get a black eye, girls' emotional and psychological attacks leave no visible wounds. This may be part of the reason that aggressive girls drew little adult attention until recently. People assumed that girls were considerate and passive.

When psychologists began studying the subject, they discovered that girls are about as aggressive as boys. Their social order is based on relationships rather than physical superiority.

Social aggression often happens within cliques—changeable groups of girls who usually orbit a popular Queen Bee. This is particularly true in middle school and junior high, where cliques dominate girl society. However, social aggression can also happen between just two people—one best friend gets mad and stops calling the other one, for example.

While bullying is often dismissed as boys being boys, social aggression might seem like a case of girls being girls—a painful but unavoidable part of growing up. But social aggression and the hurt it causes are serious issues.

In Canada recently, three girls were tried and two were convicted on charges growing out of the suicide of a 14-year-old classmate. In Britain, where statistics on the subject are tracked, an average of 16 students a year kill themselves because of physical or social bullying.



E-mail Can Be E-vil

The Internet, e-mail, instant messaging, and blogging have become powerful tools for social aggressors. Now a lie or piece of gossip that would have been whispered in a school hallway can be instantly forwarded to the entire student body—and frequently is. A girl sitting at a computer in her room can trash another girl's reputation with a single e-mail or IM. When caught, the offenders claim it was "just a joke."

However, modern communication technology may be the social aggressor's undoing. It creates an electronic paper trail that can be traced back to the girl who perpetrated the attack. Proof that the attack occurred can motivate efforts to punish the offenders.

With friends like these . . .

Girls' friendships tend to be more intimate than those of guys. Girls typically tell their best friends their deepest secrets. Which might be harmless, if their friendships never changed. Former friends often have a lot of information to turn into malicious gossip after they've parted ways.

Maintaining relationships is so important to girls that particularly clever aggressors often convince a victim that they're still friends, even after spreading vicious rumors about her.



manipulative

You're targeted. What do you do?

Don't lash out at your attacker. Getting a reaction from you is what she wants.

If you choose to confront a girl who has attacked you, find a time and place when you'll have some privacy. Be specific about what happened and how it made you feel, and ask her to stop the attack. Stay calm. Say that although you may resent what happened, you're willing to treat her civilly and with respect. Ask her to do the same.

Recruit reliable friends. The attack will end when the attacker runs out of people who will spread the gossip or lie. Get friends you trust to spread the truth about the claims and refute the attacker's story.

Involve an adult. A big problem when you're under attack is keeping things in perspective. The counsel of a caring and understanding adult can do wonders for your morale and self-confidence. You may feel reluctant to go to an adult for help, but you'll probably be glad you did.

Set a good example. Don't gossip or spread rumors. If you have an issue with a friend, talk about it calmly and openly with her, rather than going behind her back. Your behavior will encourage others to do the same.

true friends



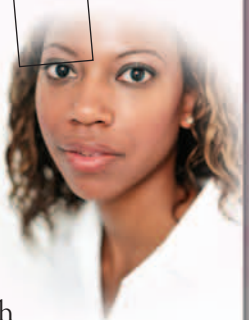
A friend is targeted. How do you help?

Don't participate in the gossip. Even if you want to win favor with the gossiper, refuse to take part.

Deny the lie. If you know the story is untrue, say so every time you hear it. Everyone you convince becomes another source of friction to slow and stop the rumor.

Let the victim know you're on her side. But don't expect her to necessarily believe you, or to openly share her feelings.

If there's documented proof, take it to adult authorities. An e-mailed death threat or an IM that trashes a reputation is not a minor attack. And the attacker's claim that it was "just a joke" is a lie. Emotional and psychological suffering isn't funny.



More About How to Help

www.intheknowzone.com/socialaggr/help