

## Relational Aggression among Adolescent Girls

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### Abstract

*In recent years, the statistic data from Local commissions for prevention of juvenile delinquency that functionate within municipalities in Bulgaria have reported high rates of aggressive acts among adolescent girls. At the same time, they are significantly different from the aggressive manifestationsoftheir male peers. They discern in frequency, expansiveness, mode of manifestation, and involve different objects.The relational aggression is one of the main factors for female aggressive acts in adolescence – a concept first introduced by Nicki R. Crick in 1995 as indirect, social form of aggression among adolescent groups in schools.*

**Key terms:** bullying, hostility, indirect aggression, relational aggression

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### 1. Introduction

Numerous research studies of delinquency among girls and women indicate a stable tendency of prevalence of antisocial manifestations of 13,7 % from all crimes (Beshkov, 1998; Belova, 2004). The data from annual reports of Local commissions for prevention of juvenile delinquency at different municipalities in Bulgaria displays sustainable growth of crimes of girls especially in adolescence. In addition to escapes from home and prostitution, bullying and hooliganism also are increasing. The educators and psychologists in schools encounter discipline problems with students who are highly aggressive and difficult to control. They have slight effect fromcorrective and psychological interventions (Pehlivanova, 2009). The studies conducted by Central commission for prevention of juvenile delinquency in 2009, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Children Pedagogical Office in 2012revealed that aggression among girls became flatten to aggressive acts of boys as rates and types. These studies indicate that girls use not only indirect or verbal types of aggression but also physical and direct aggression.There is steady tendency of increasing aggression worldwide that have led to a policy of examining the specificity, intensity and process of girls' aggression, as well as the factors, scope and focus of its process. Therefore, studies of aggressive behavior in children and adolescents in recent years have focused on the evaluation and measurement of specific types of aggression to reveal the heterogeneous nature of this phenomenon (Little at al., 2003; Dodge et al., 2006; Tackett &Ostrov, 2010). For example, in the United States, there are federal and state policies for reducing of aggression and victimization in schools. They are oriented to aggressive behavior among girls since preschool age (Nishioka, Coe, Burke, Hanita, & Sprague, 2011). Some authors(Horton, 2010; Nishioka, Coe, Burke, Hanita, & Sprague, 2011; Paris, 2006; Prinstein, Boergers, &Vernberg, 2001; Tackett &Ostrov, 2010) createddiagnostic toolkits that test direct and indirect forms of aggression in various age and gender samples.

The specialists point out the relational aggression as one of the main factors for high rates of delinquency between girls (Crick, 1996). It belongs to the social indirect types of aggression that can be both active and passive and its victims usually are peers. The goal of this agression is to harm the victim bysocially isolation and / or public insult. It last longer, because this form of aggression is covert and victims rarely complain to adults. This causes tremendous psychological damage and disturbs the social and psychological climate in the classroom or peer groups. Various questionnaires assessingrelational aggression in the school systemscheck the rates of bullying, hostility, social rejection, and victimization of students. The classroom is a place where peer relationships are developing and establishing. Therefore, relational aggression is spreadingprimarily in the schools. Interpersonal interactions in the classroom, as well as its social and psychological climate, are important for the manner and intensity of relational aggression. Thus, schools have become a "laboratory" for the study of this type of aggression, leading to successful school policies for the diagnostics, prevention and intervention of indirect aggression among students over the years (Merell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006).

This information from classrooms should direct the attention of specialists toward characteristics and nature of the personality of the children and adolescents and influence of gender on the types of aggression, as well as the objects and subjects involved in it, in order to undertake adequate preventive and interventional policies to overcome aggression among girls. This article attempts to shed light on the "feminine side" of aggression and to respond to increased need for prevention and intervention of girls' aggressive acts by revealing one of the possibilities for aggression - the relational, indirect forms of school and peer violence.

## **2. Definition of relational aggression**

A pioneer in examination of relational aggression is Nicky Crick – a lecturer at University of Minnesota, USA, who has used first this term in 1995 as a specific indirect form of aggression that is more common for girls and women. Crick claims that its initial manifestations occur in preschool age and it stabilizes in adolescence as specific for women social aggression. Relational aggression involves a process that uses established relationships to inflict psychological harm to victim. This process includes an *aggressor (bully)* and a *victim (target)*, as well as *cooperators* – one girl or a group of girls following the aggressor's tactics. It is used usually by the girl-aggressor to achieve higher status in the peer group, using manipulation or control. The victim often has low self-esteem, she or he lacks assertive skills and accepts bullying thinking that he/she deserves the punishment (Paris, 2006). Girls that are cooperators usually are afraid from the aggressor or have low self-esteem. They prefer to stand to the "side of the stronger" and engage in practices such as gossips, public humiliation, scoffs or scattering the friends of victim in order to avoid harms from the aggressor (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). This type of aggression includes a set of practices such as threats or rejection, gossips and social exclusion from the group, public humiliation, even use of social networks to compromise the victim (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

## **2. Differences between direct and indirect forms of aggression**

In order to reveal the nature of indirect relational aggression, it is necessary to describe how it interacts with direct forms of aggression. Indirect relational aggression and direct active aggression are often displayed as opposite types in numerous studies that examine the trajectory of aggressive acts in teenage samples. These studies detect the tendency that overt aggression increases significantly in the school environment, if there is conflicts due to relational aggression (Vossekul, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). The authors have indicated the following factors of relational aggression: gender (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2006; Ostrov, 2006); family (Nelson et al., 2006; Stauffacher & DeHart, 2006; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997); peer reference groups (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick, 1996; Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005; Werner & Crick, 2004); community related factors (Aisenberg & Herenkohl, 2008; Hawkins et al., 1998; Herrenkohl et al., 2000). They influence the process, consequences and effects of relational aggression in adolescence. In Bulgaria conflicts usually escalate gradually. The subjects in the conflict mostly know each other; they are teasing together, using gossips or humiliation on social networks. The attacker is stalking the victim in Facebook or spreads slanders about him or her. As a result, teens arrange a meeting that leads to beating (alone or in conjunction with other peers). The subjects involved in the conflict vary in their social, family and educational background. This means that referent peers groups are crucial for manifestation of relational aggression.

To what extent does relationship aggression involve active and/or passive forms? According to Paris and Archer (Archer, 2001; Paris, 2006) practices that aim to destroy reputation of victim, can be both active and passive. For example, mockery, verbal attacks and visible disregard to victim are active forms, while gossips, intrigues and social rejection are passive. This fact makes relational aggression even more difficult to identify and influence (Merell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006; Underwood, Galen, & Paqueter, 2001). It involves reactive and instrumental forms of aggression too: a violent speaking behind the back of someone is different from spreading gossips and humiliation in front of a group in order to achieve higher status in group (Woung, Boye & Nelson, 2006).

## **3. Results of victimization in relational aggression.**

Victims of relational aggression typically experience very high levels of psychological distress that leads to various behavioral and emotional problems such as depression, feelings of loneliness or externalized behavior (Boivin, Hymel & Bukowski, 1995; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro & Bukowski, 1999; Olweus, 1992; Vernberg, 1990). Number of studies suggest that the victimized child or adolescent may perceive and accept the negative pressure from peers as a real assessment of his or her personality. The victim usually is depressed, socially isolated and with low self-esteem. He or she may develop pejorative attitudes toward the group that leads to problems with self-control, display of anger and sometimes impulsive or oppositional behavior to peers (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick, Grotpeter & Rockhill, 1999). Some studies claim that symptoms of anxiety and depression as well as feelings of social exclusion occurring in the school years may continue after relational aggression has ceased (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1998).

Bulgarian Local commissions have reported numerous cases of public humiliation of girls or boys through social networks or among their friends. This humiliation is often sexual or the child is accused of doing things that embarrass him or her. The results of such acts are depressive moods, disinclination to attend to classes or visit certain public places, fears that the bullying will continue in the future. Victims sometimes start to use techniques from the set of relational aggression by spreading rumors or complaining on social networks. That is why, the early diagnostics and psychological interventions in the peer groups are very important for psychological wellbeing of children or adolescents and positive climate in schools.

#### **4. Gender characteristics.**

Gender differences are central issue in discussing of relational aggression. Early studies claimed that direct physical forms of aggression are not typical for female samples, regardless of age (Bjorkqvist, 2001; Crick, 1996). Victims of indirect social aggression are not only peers - girls and boys, but also in the family members, especially if family functioning is impaired and such behavior patterns are created within it. Compared to other types of aggression, it is much "quieter" and difficult to detect. The aggressor harm the victim by spreading rumors and gossips, teasing, creating "lobby groups", which stereotypically associate with the behavior of girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). In the cases of community educators working at Local commissions, mothers often use relational aggression against the father or his family, forming a coalition with their children. This has a detrimental effect on family cohesion and it is in the roots of family conflicts. Thus, children often adopt relational aggression within their families, and then establish it among peers as a form of manipulation and influence on victims and the group.

#### **5. Age characteristics.**

Relational aggression has been studied predominantly in adolescence due to the establishment of inter-gender groups from peers in this period in which teenagers develop their self-esteem and compare and construct characteristics of their self-concept (Tackett & Ostrov, 2010). The increasing time that adolescents spend in the peer groups leads to a potentially higher risk of relationship aggression (Parker, Rubin, Price & DeRoser, 1995). Informal groups also are crucial for personality development in this age, as adolescents already are more precise and aware in choosing of their friends than middle childhood (Brown, 1989). Thus, relational aggression is more directed to the peers involving group exclusion, isolation or ridicules (Tackett & Ostrov, 2010). At the same time, relational aggression is often viewed by adolescents as a "safer" form of aggression than physical aggression, as it is more hidden and there is not visible harm on the victim, and in this way is less commonly detected by teachers and parents (Tackett & Ostrov, 2010). Development of the abstract-logical thinking and self-reflection enable adolescents to plan their actions, understand sarcasm and insinuations, which cause high psychological distress (Creusere, 1999; Winner, 1998). Self-disclosure and low level of trust in adolescent groups may lead to the use of personal information against victims (Parker et al., 1995).

#### **5. Predictors for display of relational aggression**

**5.1. Gender.** A number of studies indicates that active aggression in most cases is observed in boys, whereas girls exhibit behavior that is connected to relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005; Werner & Crick, 2004; Crick & Ladd, 1993). These gender differences can be noticed from early childhood and became more intensive during adolescence (Crick, Ostrov & Werner, 2006; Giles & Heymen, 2005; Ostrov, 2006). They are anchoring during teenage and adulthood by gender roles (Conway, 2005; Crick & Ladd, 1993; Crick, 1996; Herrenkohl et al., 2007).

**5.2. Family background.** Another source of relational and direct aggression among adolescents is family functioning. The models observed from parents and siblings are extremely important for the development of relational aggression between peers during adolescence (Maxwell & Maxwell, 2003; Solomon, Bradshaw, Wright & Cheng, 2008). Casas and colleagues (Casas et al., 2006) have assessed the influence of parenting styles onto development of relational and physical aggression in preschool age. The authors find out that the authoritarian and liberal parenting style is more often associated with indirect forms of aggression. Another study in the USA targeting samples from Latin American and European ethnic background (Brown, Arnold, Dobbs & Doctoroff, 2007) have compared different behavioral characteristics with types of aggression. The researchers have proved the correlation between reactivity (in strict authoritarian style), negligence (liberal style) and negative effect as outburst and aggression, on the one hand, and relational aggression, from the other. The results proved that positive parental affect decreases this type of aggression, and negative increases it.

The interactions and modeling that occur in sibling relationships may also influence relational aggression. Updegraff and colleagues (Updegraff, Thayer, Whiteman, Denning & McHale, 2005) find a connection between relational aggression in adolescent sibling groups based on the quality of the parent-sibling relationships.

**Table 1: Predictors of relational aggression**

Gender	Family	Peers	Community
-it is observed mostly in girls among adolescence; - it maintains by gender roles.	-family functioning, parenting styles and role models of parents and other family members are significant; -it is noted more often in authoritarian or permissive parenting style; - it is imitated as role model from parents or older siblings.	-the socio-psychological climate in the classroom and previously established practices of relational aggression influence the formation of this type of aggression; - inclusion in antisocial peer groups is also influential; -the aggressor desires popularity and higher social status that is the major source of relational aggression.	- children and teenagers from poor and criminogenic areas are more susceptible to aggression; - children and adolescents are exposed to bad models from neighborhood; - RA is often connected to lack of community identity.

**4.3. Relationships with peers.** Studies find out that peer interactions are significant determinants of relational aggression (Gorman-Smith, Henry & Tolan, 2004). The inclusion in antisocial peer groups is one of the most important factors for development of aggression and deviant behavior (Herenkohl, Kosterman, Hawkins, Catalano & Smith, 2001). The involvement of friends in aggressive and bullying activities is often associated with manifestations of the bully and the provocateur-victim (Moutapa, Valente, Gallagher, Rohrbach & Unger, 2004). Neal (2009) points out that relational aggression depends on the context of peer relationships. His study reveals that social status and / or popularity correlate positively with relational aggression (Rose, Swenson & Waller, 2004).

**Community.** Children and adolescents who are living in utmost, poor or criminogenic districts tend to have higher risk for violence (Aisenberg & Herenkohl, 2008; Hawkins et al., 1998). Indirect and direct aggression as well as all forms of aggression, develop in violent environment. Additional community factors that may lead to aggression are role models from the neighborhood and lack of attachment to community identity (Aisenberg & Herenkohl, 2008; Herenkohl et al., 2000), as well as an exposure on scenes of violence on media and television (Coyne, Archer & Eslea, 2006).

### 6. Methods of prevention and intervention

Psychological and pedagogical activities against relational aggression need to be oriented toward prevention and intervention.

*Prevention of relational aggression* is more crucial for its reduction and need to be implemented in the classroom or referent groups of peers. It should include diagnostics and group forms of work with adolescents. The diagnostic procedure for screening relational aggression typically involves many informants. Interviews and questionnaires with teachers and peers (friends and classmates) are the most used methods – the information they receive is considered to be the most reliable as the relational aggression affects group relationships and interactions in the collectives at school or referent groups (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Self-assessment forms from parents and adolescents are less objective (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Tackett et al., 2009). At the same time, recent studies proved good test-re-test and internal reliability, as well as the validity of the results of questionnaires examining relational aggression with parents and adolescents in a number of countries such as the UK (Keenan et al., 2008), Canada (Leadbeater et al., 2006), Germany (Little et al., 2003) and the United States (Fite et al., 2008). Better picture can be obtained by interviews and questionnaires with parents that show the impact of systemic environmental factors for manifestation of relational aggression involving family functioning and the influence of the neighborhood and community on the performance of this type of aggression (Tackett & Ostrov, 2010).

**Table 2: List with the most commonly used questionnaires for relational aggression**

Instrument	Authors	Scales and items	Sample	Informants
Peer Nomination Instrument	Crick & Grotpeter (1995)	Relational aggression, direct aggression and social rejection	Students in 4 <sup>th</sup> to 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	Assessment scale for peers
Children's Social Behavior Scale	Crick (1996)	Relational aggression, direct aggression and prosocial behavior	Students in 3 <sup>rd</sup> to 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	Assessment scales for peers and teachers
Preschool Behavior Scale	Crick, Casas & Mosher (1997)	Relational aggression, direct aggression, prosocial behavior and depressive affect	Children in preschool age	Assessment scale for teachers
Direct and Indirect Aggression Scale	Bjorkjuist, Lagerpetts & Osterman (1992)	Direct and indirect aggression	8-, 11- and 15-years old students	Self-assessment scale
Diverse Adolescent Relational Aggression Scale	Horton (2010)	Mockery, relationships with adults, rumors, skills for recognition of relational aggression, gender differences, passive hearing of rumors, stalking and popularity	14-20 - years old students	Self-assessment scale

In assessment of relational aggression, the specialists may use methods as observation, sociometric questionnaires, case studies and questionnaires testing anxious-depressive symptoms. These methods will help them to evaluate the process of this form of aggression, the level of social exclusion and its effects. The aim of the diagnostic procedure is gaining of full picture of the group effect to victim, as well as the possible emotional and behavioral effects of the isolation caused from relational aggression. Preventive forms of work need to be targeted to whole group of peers because relational aggression covers all its members. To reduce conflicts and usage of behind-the-scenes aggressive tactics specialists need to conduct group discussions and interactive sessions. Their thematic need to be oriented to reduction of all kinds of aggression and to reveals the necessity of clear and openly discussions of problems in the group, as well as creating of moral codex of the class, maintaining relationships of tolerance and mutual respect, the risks in the social networks, etc.

*Intervention* in the environment where conflicts are already result of relational aggression involves the extended and gradual elimination of the factors and the consequences of RA. The intervention includes a variety of psychological and socio-pedagogical techniques oriented to the aggressor, the victim, and the entire group. The specialist's first task is to evaluate the factors and manner of harming by conducting of questionnaires and interviews with peers and educators. In this way, the specialist will be able to assess both the individuals involved in the relational aggression and its intensity. Psychological activities with the bully involves a case study that evaluates the factors and trend of his or her personality to use direct or indirect forms of aggression. To reduce indirect aggressive behavior psychologists need to support the enhancing of emotional intelligence and self-esteem and to manage the impulsive behavior by using cognitive-behavioral, rational-emotional and systemic approaches of psychotherapy. The specialists need to work with victims of relational aggression to decrease the harm and prevent future conflicts and to increase the self-esteem and assertive skills. Techniques used in the peer groups are the same as those described for the prevention of relational aggression.

## 6. Conclusion

The prevention policies at schools and social institutions for reducing aggression among girls need to be oriented toward several directions: identification and early diagnostics by usage of rich methodological set of tools; more detailed research and validation of questionnaires measuring this type of aggression since middle childhood; development of mechanism for the prevention and intervention of indirect forms of aggression among adolescents. Knowing the specific nature of the gender characteristics of aggression would facilitate specialist not only in the school setting, but also in their preventive and correctional work. Relational aggression is a phenomenon that should take its place in the handbooks of public educators, teachers and school psychologists, so as to improve the social and psychological climate in the classroom and to prevent future conflicts and aggressive acts among students.

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