

EXAMINING COPING STRATEGIES OF YOUNG GIRLS VICTIMIZED BY
RELATIONAL AGGRESSION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the coping strategies developed by young girls victimized by the phenomenon of relational aggression. This study examined the experiences and coping strategies developed by kindergarten, first, and second grade girls who attend a rural Georgia primary school. The co-researchers were selected from a pool of 294 female students who were identified by teachers as having experienced relational aggression. I used semi-structured interviews with co-researchers, document analysis, and art activities to gather data. I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data conforming to Moustakas' (1994) transcendental model. Roth and Cohen's (1986) theory on stress and coping, including approach and avoidance strategies, was the theoretical framework used when examining data and uncovering themes. A total of 22 female students were identified as having experienced relational aggression victimization. The study revealed approach coping strategies, avoidance coping strategies, and strategies deemed successful by the co-researchers as they dealt with victimization. Suggestions for future research studies are also included.

Descriptors: relational aggression, girls, primary school, coping strategies

Dedication

This accomplishment would not have been possible without the desire placed in my heart by the Lord. I am so blessed to have been given the desire and perseverance to accomplish such a difficult, yet rewarding, task. When my motivation waned, prayer revealed to me that Jesus was constantly by my side.

My grandfather and my father always wanted me to become a doctor. I promised them that I would one day become the doctor that they believed me to be. Although my heart was grounded in the field of education, I have finally become a doctor as I promised my papa and my daddy.

I began this journey just before my husband and I were married. To say that he has endured it all with me is an understatement. He has been my backbone when I felt that I could not stand. He has been my encouragement when I did not know if I could go on. He has always known exactly what to say to help get me into gear to press on toward the goal. Thank you for giving up precious time with me so that I could pursue this goal. Thank you for sticking by my side through it all. I love you beyond measure!

To my unborn children: I did this now so that your daddy and I could be a part of every precious moment of your being. The next title that I hope to gain in life is being called Mommy!

To extended family and my friends: thank you for continuing to ask about this process and for the support you gave me. The simplest gestures have helped me more than you know. To my sister: I hope I can repay you someday! I appreciate you all!

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List of Abbreviations

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Friend to Friend (F2F)

Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GAPSC)

In School Suspension (ISS)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Students with a Purpose (SWAP)

Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it Out, Seek Help (WITS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Upon visiting any primary school, one might notice cheerful laughter, numerous hugs from young boys and girls, and quality teaching and learning occurring. At first glance, the children may seem happy and enjoying life. Pain is silent as is the source of pain for many young girls and boys who experience relational aggression. In this study, I define relational aggression as intentional behavior that damages friendships or restricts involvement in a social group (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton, & Young, 2010).

Relational aggression is found in children as young as two years old (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Crick, Ostrov, Appleyard, Jansen, & Casas, 2004; Maniago, 2010). Although relational aggression is present in boys and girls in kindergarten, first, and second grade, this study will only focus on girls (Maniago, 2010; Ledbeater, 2010). Girls use relational aggression more often than physical aggression and report being hurt more by the effects of relational aggression (Maniago, 2010). When relational aggression victimization takes place, girls are not focusing on academics, but on the problems they face with their friends (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Hadley, 2004; Knudsen, 2003; Merrell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006; Ostrov, Ries, Stauffacher, Godleski, & Mullins, 2008). Because relational aggression is covert in nature, it often goes unnoticed as a serious problem (Ophelia, 2006; Young et al., 2010).

The Ophelia Project (2006) reported that 160,000 children miss school each day because of the fear of emotional torment by classmates. According to Knudsen (2003), some children can experience bullying every three to six minutes from the beginning of kindergarten through first grade. Children who are tormented endure emotional stress and

suffer academically and socially (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006; Ophelia, 2006; Ostrov, Crick, & Stauffacher, 2006; Young et al., 2010). When children suffer such emotional stress it leaves a heavy burden for parents, as well as schools, to meet the emotional and intellectual needs of all students. If interventions for aggression do not occur before the age of eight, a child is likely to develop delinquent behavior and require more intensive programs later (Carney, 2008; Gomes, 2011; Leff & Crick, 2010; Ostrov et al., 2006; Ostrov et al., 2008). Relational aggression has also been linked to more serious problems including increased suicide risk, increased depressive symptoms, unhealthy eating patterns, externalizing behavior, and substance abuse (Conway, 2005; Coyne et al., 2006; Hadley, 2004; Leff & Crick, 2010 Ostrov et al., 2006).

Background

Bullying has been in existence since the beginning of time; however, it has been a significantly growing concern for educators, researchers, and parents since Olweus (1978) published *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys* (as cited in Maniago, 2010). Traditionally the focus on bullying targets overt acts of aggression such as punching, kicking, and name calling (Maniago, 2010). In the mid-1990s a new form of aggression was recognized; Crick and colleagues (1995) introduced and defined the term relational aggression. Resulting research on relational aggression has shown the short-term and long-term detrimental effects of relational aggression such as poor self-esteem, loneliness, frustration, depression, or suicidal ideation (Coyne et al., 2006; Leff & Crick, 2010; Ophelia, 2006; Ostrov et al., 2006; Young et al., 2010)

In the past decade, the message has been that relational aggression is only a female issue (Maniago, 2010). With the publication of *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002)

and the movie *Mean Girls* (Messick, Michaels, Fey, & Waters, 2004), it is easy for the public to associate relational aggression as a female only issue. However, recent research proved that relational aggression is prevalent in boys and girls (Maniago, 2010; Ledbeater, 2010). Girls are especially sensitive to the effects of relational aggression due to their strong desire for connectedness (Anthony & Lindert, 2010). This research only focuses on girls because girls tend to use relational aggression more often than physical aggression as children (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Maniago, 2010; Ostrov et al., 2009).

Researchers previously viewed relational aggression as a normal phase of growing up; however current research has shown that relational aggression can be just as harmful as physical aggression (Young et al., 2010). Now researchers recognize relational aggression as a serious form of violence because of its devastating effects (Gomes, Davis, Baker, & Servonsky, 2009). Leff and Crick (2010) stated that problems range from academic and behavioral issues to adjustment issues later in life. Girls who experience relational aggression victimization must learn positive coping strategies from parents and educators to prevent the use of ineffective coping strategies (Gomes, 2011). Ineffective coping strategies lead to more long-term problems such as depression, anxiety, drug abuse, delinquent behaviors, and to suicides among girls (Gomes, 2011).

The review of literature specifically highlights that the justification for this study lies in the most recent cases of suicide by young girls who site relational aggression as the cause (Inbar, 2009). The cases of Ashlynn Conner, Hope Witsel, Jesse Logan, Megan Mier, and Phoebe Prince are only a few sad examples of girls tormented by other females until they were no longer able to face the aggressors. All five of the girls committed suicide after incessant bullying occurred and the schools were not willing or able to help.

Ashlynn Conner was a mere 10 years old; Hope Witsel and Megan Mier were only 13 years old. Jesse Logan was 18 years old when she died and Phoebe Prince was 15 years old (Cumming & Howie, 2009; Goldman, 2010). If relational aggression is addressed early and children are given coping skills to deal with their anger, then they may be less likely to commit such hurtful acts among each other (Carney, 2008; Ostrov et al., 2006; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). Furthermore, if schools are more able to support students victimized by relational aggression, then girls may find resolve before turning to suicide.

Roth and Cohen's (1986) theory on stress and coping, including approach and avoidance strategies, is used often in children's research, and was used in this research. Maniago (2010) stated, "These two basic modes of coping with stress have to do with behavioral, cognitive, or emotional activities that are oriented either toward (i.e., approach) or away from (i.e., avoidance) the stressor." (p. 3). An approach strategy, viewed as an effort to change the stressful situation and allow the appropriate actions, may include seeking more information (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Avoidance strategies include expressing emotions or escape, and seem to be an attempt at managing painful emotions. Avoidance strategies may be useful if they reduce stress and control anxiety (Roth & Cohen, 1986).

The ways children cope can include successful and unsuccessful attempts at managing a stressor (Maniago, 2010). Beebout-Bladholm (2010) suggested, "Students who develop coping strategies are more likely to deal with their feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety (p. 68).

Situation to Self

I am presently a professional school counselor at the rural Georgia primary school under study. As a school counselor, I witness relational aggression issues first hand every school year. I often have teachers asking what they should do to help students experiencing relational aggression. I also receive phone calls from parents of aggressors and victims asking how they can help their children. I see the results of the pain caused by relational aggression, and I want to raise awareness of this issue. I want to help students develop appropriate coping strategies for dealing with relational aggression, and to help parents and teachers understand their role in dealing with the issue. As a professional school counselor in a primary school, I have a unique opportunity to help victims of relational aggression before it is too late.

My personal experience in elementary, middle, and high school grounded the foundation for my interest in this topic. I vividly remember the dread I felt when walking into the school building on the weeks that my “friends” were not speaking to me. I remember the song my “friends” made up about me and sang as loudly as possible when I walked into the classroom. I distinctly remember the pain I felt after hearing the unfounded rumors spread about me. I have many stories of how girls hurt me through relational aggression from elementary school on through high school. I felt that I had no one to talk to about my problems with relational aggression. I was too embarrassed to speak to my mom. I was afraid she was too busy and would not understand, and my sister was away at college. I had no one to confide in or ask for help. The literature just began recognizing this type of aggression during my junior and senior years of high school (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

The rumors from high school even followed me into adulthood. The first boy I dated after college heard one of the high school rumors and believed it completely. Nothing I could say to him would make him believe that the rumor was not true. It eventually led to our demise. From that moment forward, I began to work on healing from the pain relational aggression caused. I started a journal to self-reflect on my insecurities caused by the issues I faced growing up. I realized that I too was aggressive to other girls during the times the mean clique accepted me. However, this was the only way to be accepted. I have made apologies to some girls because of the acts in which I engaged. I even confronted one of the girls who participated in the mean acts directed at me, and we are now dear friends. This process of self-reflection has helped me to heal over time.

As a professional school counselor who is a relational aggression survivor, I have a duty to advocate for the young children who are victims of relational aggression. Krating (2008) noted that girls report relational aggression more often as young children. Positive coping mechanisms help children overcome the negative effects of relational aggression, and early intervention increases their chances of improvement (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010; Gomes, 2011; Ostrov et al., 2009). I wanted the children I work with to become survivors of relational aggression victimization instead of just another statistic of the detrimental effects. By capturing the voices of victimized students, I gained insight into their experience and learn more about how they are learning to cope (Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2011). I achieved a clearer view of their world by allowing the children's voices to be heard (Holliday, Harrison & McLeod, 2009). This knowledge will lead to a positive change for young victims of relational aggression.

Problem Statement

According to Anthony and Lindert (2010), children exist in a world where best friends may become enemies overnight. It is a world where no one explains why friends ignore each other, and a world where children trade secrets like candy. Although most cruel acts among very young children are unintentional, their actions stem from the desire to be a part of the popular crowd (Anthony & Lindert, 2010). The problem in relational aggression is that the aggressor harms the target individual through manipulating relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; O'Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010).

Relationally aggressive behaviors include, but are not limited to, spreading gossip, excluding, and social alienation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; O'Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). In the past, these behaviors were passed off as normal behaviors for children and have, in turn, been attributed to just a phase of growing up (Young, Boye, & Nelson, 2006; Young et al., 2010). Although there is awareness of relational aggression now, it continues to be very difficult to observe because of the covert nature of the problem (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010; Young et al., 2010). If these behaviors are ignored and girls are not instructed on what to do when faced with relational aggression, then they may develop coping strategies that are unhealthy, leading to emotional harm as they grow older (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010; Maniago, 2010).

The ways children learn to cope are extremely important with respect to how relational aggression victimization impacts the children (Maniago, 2010). Coping strategies may be positive or negative and can continue as a pattern into adulthood (Gomes, 2011). Coping strategies developed by students may be approach patterns in which they make direct attempts to alter the situation, or avoidance strategies in which

students manage their emotional reactions (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Some unhealthy coping strategies include remaining silent, but worrying to the point of becoming physically ill (Krating, 2008; Ostrov et al., 2006). Other coping strategies include seeking escape from the torment by refusing to go to school (O'Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). Girls may also become relationally aggressive toward others when not given specific coping strategies (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005; Mishna et al., 2011). If the problem is not addressed, chronic victimization impacts coping abilities, which leads to a depletion of coping resources (Gomes, 2011). Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, and Connolly (2007) explained that repeated victimization impedes a child's social and emotional development. Victimization can lead to serious problems such as depression, low self-esteem, alcohol and drug use, and suicide (Coyne et al., 2006; Goldbaum et al., 2007).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to discover coping strategies developed by young girls victimized by relational aggression in a rural Georgia primary school. In this study, I define relational aggression as intentional behavior that damages friendships or involvement in a social group (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young et al., 2010). The research tapped into the unique experiences young girls face as victims of relational aggression, and it revealed young girls' repertoire of both positive and negative coping strategies.

Significance of the Study

Mishna and colleagues (2011) explained that researchers should conduct qualitative research in order to gain a better understanding of subtle types of bullying like relational aggression. Holliday and colleagues (2009) stated, "despite how well an adult

knows a child and can voice their perspective, the child's *own* perspective provides important information about what they are thinking or feeling and what they actually want to say.” (p. 245). When researchers do not include young children in research, the view of their world is distorted (Holliday et al., 2009). Beebout-Bladholm (2010) specifically called for more qualitative studies to gain insight from students. Although bullying among friends is prevalent, Mishna et al. (2011) reported that the topic is understudied. Additionally, Beebout-Bladholm (2010) called for more qualitative research concerning relational aggression and girls.

Researchers have called for more studies that look into peer victimization with young children (Ostrov, 2007). Maniago (2010) suggested that future research explore the different ways children cope with victimization with respect to age. Gomes (2011) explained that adults must determine why some girls learn to cope well with relational aggression while others do not. “Research is needed to tap into the different responses so that the girls who are at risk can be taught strategies to build their support structure once faced with this experience.” (Gomes, 2011, p. 5) In response to this gap in literature, I will seek to discover the coping strategies developed by young girls victimized by relational aggression. Through this study, educators will gain insight into the lives of young girls victimized by relational aggression. Educators and parents must teach children how to cope with relational aggression instead of enlisting adults to charge in and take control of every situation (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010). Educators and parents may use knowledge gained from this research to teach girls positive coping strategies and build a strong support structure for children so that they too will become survivors (Gomes, 2011).

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to discover coping strategies developed by young girls victimized by relational aggression in a rural Georgia primary school. The following questions served as a guide for this study:

1. What approach coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use?

Approach coping strategies are those in which the child actively explores a solution to the problem by seeking information, demonstrating concern, and making plans to solve the problem (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Children who use approach strategies take action to solve the problem rather than simply avoiding the problem.

2. What avoidance coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use?

Avoidance coping strategies are the opposite of approach strategies in that the child avoids the stressor. Avoidance strategies are those that are oriented away from the problem in an effort to get away from the problem (Roth & Cohen, 1986).

3. Which coping strategies produce a feeling of success among the girls in a rural primary school?

Avoidance and approach strategies are completely different in that one is oriented toward a stressor and the other is moving away from the stressor (Roth & Cohen, 1986). In this study I determined which strategy is reported to be most successful for kindergarten, first, and second grade students.

Holliday and colleagues (2009) explained, “Without including young children in research, our understanding of their lives is fragmented, but by working in collaboration

with them, we can seek to achieve a clearer view of their world and enable their voices to be heard.” (p. 247). I captured the voice of children who were being victimized by relational aggression so that educators can discover what coping strategies are developed by young children, as well as which coping strategies produce a positive result for students. Mishna and colleagues (2011) stated that qualitative research can provide insight into the more covert forms of bullying, such as relational aggression, and can offer awareness into the components that influence how children understand and respond to relational aggression.

Research Plan

This qualitative phenomenological study examined coping strategies developed by young victimized girls of relational aggression in a rural Georgia primary school. Holliday and colleagues (2009) explained that using young children as co-researchers is very important in early childhood research. Relational aggression affects children in preschool all the way through adulthood (O’Rourke, 2008). Since young girls face relational aggression victimization, this study appropriately captured the voices of young girls and provides insight into such a covert form of bullying behavior (Mishna et al., 2011).

Delimitations

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), delimitations define the boundaries of a study. I completed the research in a rural Georgia primary school in order to examine the lived experiences of young girls victimized by relational aggression. I chose the sample from a pool of 294 girls in the rural Georgia primary school (PowerSchool, 2011). I examined the experiences of kindergarten, first, and second grade girls in this setting

because during early childhood relational aggression is usually seen more often in the female population; therefore, findings of this study may not be transferrable to male populations (Ostrov et al., 2009; Ostrov et al., 2008).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This transcendental phenomenological study discovered coping strategies developed by young girls victimized by relational aggression in a rural Georgia primary school. This literature review highlights the phenomenon of relational aggression, the impact of relational aggression, victims, aggressors, current laws, and programs that target relational aggression are reviewed. I review theories related to relational aggression as well as theories of coping with relational aggression. There is a special emphasis on relational aggression among young children throughout this chapter.

Theoretical Framework

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained that a theoretical base used as a guide to the collection and analysis of data results in high quality research. First, I discuss the social learning theory of aggression in order to discover how relational aggression develops in young children. Then, I will explain Roth and Cohen's (1986) theory on stress and coping in order to determine if avoidance or approach coping strategies are present in young children. By creating a strong foundation for how children learn aggressive behaviors and how victims cope with the aggressive models, I have a relevant guide for collecting and analyzing the data from the research.

Learning Theory

The social learning theory of aggression may best describe how relational aggression develops in young children (Ostrov et al., 2006). Crain (2000) explained that the socialization of aggression might partially be a matter of operant conditioning. Children receive some type of reward by the behaviors they exhibit (Snethen & Van Puymbroeck, 2008). They watch aggressive models, such as siblings, and learn when the

behaviors are reinforced (Ostrov et al., 2006). Then they imitate those aggressive models. Early childhood is the developmental period when sibling relationships are most important and influential.

Bandura conducted the Bobo doll experiments in 1961 to prove his point about social learning with aggression (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). He asked children ranging from three to almost six years to participate in the study. The control group did not see any adult models at all. The second group watched an adult model engaging in aggressive behavior with the doll; half of the children watched a female aggressive model and the other half a male. The researchers exposed the third group to a passive adult. After viewing the models, they took the children into a room with a Bobo doll. The children who witnessed the aggressive model were more likely to imitate the aggressive model. Those exposed to a passive model or no model at all showed very little aggressive behavior. Bandura et al. (1961) noted that girls were less likely to be physically aggressive but were equally as likely as boys to be verbally aggressive.

The social learning theory explained that socialization might also teach children how to behave in gender-appropriate ways (Crain, 2000). Children learn by watching both genders but generally only interact in gender appropriate ways because that is what they are reinforced to do. Society teaches girls not to express anger openly and to smile when angry, which causes anger to intensify (O'Rourke, 2008). Girls are socialized to be nurturing and sweet, which forces them to express their aggression in devious ways (Crothers et al., 2005). Girls may perceive that speaking their feelings openly may result in hurting someone else, so they avoid this confrontation all together (Bem, 1981). They learn that open conflict reflects that they have done something wrong which puts their

identity at risk (Crothers et al, 2005; Frenzen, 2004). Children learn societal perspectives about gender early and incorporate these views into their behavior (Bem, 1981; Crothers, et al., 2005; O'Rourke, 2008). Ostrov and colleagues (2009) explain, "Arguably the earlier we intervene for aggression, the greater the probability of children improving" (p.15).

Cognitive Theory

Jean Piaget's (1950) cognitive theory offers a method for understanding a child's development of thinking. Piaget's theory presents four stages of development, with each stage differing in terms of how one perceives and interprets information (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000). The stages of cognitive development include the sensory-motor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages.

The sensory-motor stage begins at birth and generally develops through two years old (Piaget, 1950). In this stage, learning is linked to sensory input and the developing motor abilities of the child. The young child develops and organizes a sense of how the world works through imitation and play. A child in the sensory-motor stage is egocentric, meaning that the child is not able to see the viewpoint of others. Piaget broke the sensory-motor stage down into six smaller stages, with the sixth stages serving as the end to the sensory-motor stage and a transition into the preoperational stage of development (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000).

The preoperational stage is evident around ages two through seven. This stage begins around the time a child learns to talk and use language (Piaget, 1950). In this stage, the child develops the ability to think symbolically through language, deferred imitation, games and art (Piaget, 1950). The child increases play and imagination in the

preoperational stage. Children in the preoperational stage continue to lack the ability to see the viewpoint of others.

The concrete operational stage is evident around the ages of seven to 11. In this stage, thoughts are tied to concrete experiences and the child focuses on the here and now (Piaget, 1950). Children in this stage use appropriate logic, although they can only associate logic to physical objects. At the concrete operational stage, children apply rules, to investigate relationships, and share ideas verbally. Most children in primary school are concrete operational thinkers.

The final formal operational stage takes place at age 11 and up. In this stage, individuals reason logically, analyze, and search for solutions among an array of possibilities (Piaget, 1950). Individuals have the ability to think about consequences of their actions and solve problems using trial and error (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000).

Piaget's (1950) stages of cognitive development help educators understand how children learn and think at different ages. The four phases of development offer a description of how individuals perceive and interpret information at the different phases. I gathered and analyzed data according to the developmental capabilities of children based on the Piagetian perspective.

Coping Theory

A theory on coping that has generated research with children is Roth and Cohen's (1986) approach and avoidance models of coping. These two models relate to behavioral, cognitive, or emotional actions that move them toward or away from a stressor (Maniago, 2010). Approach strategies are oriented toward a stressor and represent actions by the child to actively seek out information, demonstrate concern, and make plans for solving

the problem (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Avoidance strategies are actions that are oriented away from a stressor in an effort to avoid the stress (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Although adult literature has demonstrated that avoidance strategies are associated with poor social functioning, avoidance strategies may be useful if they reduce stress and control anxiety (Fields & Prinz, 1997; Roth & Cohen, 1986). How children learn to cope with stress can be extremely important in how it impacts them in their current and future adjustment (Maniago, 2010). Coping strategies are vital in helping children deal with the emotional impact of victimization (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010). Gomes (2011) found the following:

Because coping skills are a learned response and continue as a pattern into adulthood, it is crucial that adolescent girls faced with this victimization experience learn positive ways of coping to prevent the use of ineffective coping skills such as retaliation. (p. 4)

Relational Aggression

Crothers and colleagues (2005) explained, “Relational aggression (including socially and direct relationally aggressive behavior) can encompass a range of emotionally hurtful behaviors” (p. 349). With the problem of relational aggression, the aggressor hurts the target individual by manipulating relationships (Gomes, 2011; Ledbeater, 2010; Leff & Crick, 2010; O’Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). Aggressive behaviors classified as relational aggression includes gossiping, social exclusion, talking about someone, and stealing friends (Crothers et al., 2005; Gomes, 2011; Ledbeater, 2010; Leff & Crick, 2010; O’Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). Crothers et al. (2005) also stated:

Direct relationally aggressive behaviors, defined as the use of confrontational

strategies to achieve interpersonal damage, include not talking to or hanging around with someone, deliberately ignoring someone, threatening to withdraw emotional support or friendship, and excluding someone from a group by informing her that she is not welcome. (p. 349)

Young and colleagues (2010) warned that relational aggression can cause as much or more destruction as physical aggression and should be targeted in bullying prevention and intervention. Relational aggression is often overlooked in the educational setting because it is more difficult to identify and admonish (Young et al., 2010).

Aggressors

Relational aggression is common in early childhood, and it has been identified in girls as young as two years old (Hadley, 2004; Ledbeater, 2010; Maniago, 2010; Ostrov et al., 2008; Vail, 2002). Young children may use aggressive behaviors in order to get what they want and not as a way to hurt other children (Anthony & Lindert, 2010). In fact, young children may not even realize the other person's point of view, and are driven more by their own wants than by the feelings of others (Anthony & Lindert, 2010).

Relationally aggressive behaviors among young children tend to be focused on immediate social exchange (Crick et al., 2004). By the third grade, children should be able to empathize with others but still may not realize the harm they are inflicting on others. Anger or frustration pushes a child to react to other children in an aggressive way. Jealousy is also a motivator for aggressive actions (Anthony & Lindert, 2010). In elementary school, many problems with relational aggression stem from generally good children who are trying to fit in. As a child's social intelligence emerges, they begin to use relational aggression to get what they want (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Ostrov et al.,

2008). Although relational aggression is present in young boys and girls, girls tend to use relational aggression more than physical aggression and are hurt more by the effects (Leadbeater, 2010; Maniago, 2010; O'Rourke, 2008).

Putallaz, Kupersmidt, Coie, McKnight, and Grimes (2004) stated, "The relational aggressor is likened to a 'skilled politician, methodically building a coalition of other girls willing to throw their support behind her'" (p. 112). Harderer (2009) described, "Perpetrators of relational aggression generally use manipulation and exclusion techniques to not only manage their anger but to get what they want and to achieve high social status" (p. 13). Aggression may serve as a way to manage anger for some females (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Conway, 2005; Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). The relational aggression may also be an outlet for strong emotions experienced during stressful situations (Harderer, 2009). Most aggressors may think that they are not causing any real harm to the victims.

Aggression becomes much more sophisticated in adolescence and adulthood (O'Rourke, 2008). Their peers often see relationally aggressive females as popular (Simmons, 2002; Vail, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). Adolescent girls are caught in the middle of a stereotypical role that does not fit. They struggle to maintain a certain reputation, such as acting smart and stupid at the same time. Research has shown that popular girls exhibit prosocial as well as antisocial behaviors (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). Popularity tends to be associated with the quantity of a girl's friends instead of the quality of the friendships. The sad fact is that without addressing these behaviors and consequences, the girls will continue to be relationally aggressive (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Harderer, 2009; Vail, 2002; Xie et al., 2002).

Victims

Almost anyone can be a victim of relational aggression. Victimization often happens among close friendships (Anthony & Lindert, 2010). Young victims may have trouble because they cannot clearly articulate what is happening. It is also difficult, particularly when being victimized within close friendships, because adults may pass off the behaviors and ignore the situation (O'Rourke, 2008). Unfortunately, young victims are hesitant to tell adults about these problems because of fear of retaliation and because adults often do not know how to help (Anthony & Lindert, 2010).

Victims of relational aggression are often vulnerable targets (Hadley, 2003; Vail, 2002; Zins, Elias, & Maher, 2007). Children who are already socially isolated may become targets of this type of aggression. Additionally, students who are new to a school and have not yet established social networks may become targets of relational aggression (Zins et al., 2007). Often, the children are simply non-assertive children who lack the skills to stand up for themselves. The children targeted are sometimes seen as unpopular by the aggressors. Harderer (2009) found, "They viewed unpopular children as 'misfits' who do not understand the proper way to behave in social situations involving interactions with peers" (p. 16). Victims in late elementary and early middle school become particularly vulnerable because they are more interpersonally sensitive during this period of time (Anthony & Lindert, 2010). Anthony and Lindert (2010) explained, "Peer rejection in this age group can result in painful existential loneliness, or even in depression and suicidal thoughts, Internet abuse, gang membership, and retaliatory aggression" (p. 589).

Population

In the past, researchers have paid little attention to young children and relational aggression (Crick et. al., 2004; Ostrov, 2007). Crick and colleagues (2004) discovered, “Studies of relational aggression during the preschool years have found that these behaviors are quite common in young children’s interactions” (p. 73). In early childhood, relational aggression tends to be more direct, and has been identified in girls as young as two years old (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Crick et. al., 2004; Knudsen, 2003; Maniago, 2010; Ostrov et al., 2008). Although we find relational aggression in boys and girls in kindergarten, first, and second grade, this study will only focus on girls (Maniago, 2010; Ledbeater, 2010).

Girls use relational aggression more often than physical aggression and report being hurt more by the effects of relational aggression (Maniago, 2010; O’Rourke, 2008). Physical aggression is at its peak among boys between the ages of three and seven (Maccoby, 2004). As boys progress in impulse control and as social intelligence evolves, usually by late elementary school, they begin to use relational aggression more often. They then view relational aggression as more hurtful than they do at young ages (Hadley, 2004; Merrell et al., 2006). Therefore, the focus of this investigation is on relational aggression among young girls.

One of the most important relationships that girls will develop over their lifetime is friendship (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Crothers et al., 2005; Davis & Davis, 2005). A woman bases her sense of self-worth and morality on connectedness and interdependence with others (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Gilligan, 2003). Pipher (2002) explained that the process of establishing and maintaining friendships with other girls is a vital aspect of

psychosocial development. Additionally, as girls reach adolescence these relationships become increasingly important and potentially have the ability to affect women's identity, adjustment and sense of well-being (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Crothers et al., 2005; Hadley, 2004). Although the desire for friendship is very prevalent within the feminine psyche, women are not always good at being friends. Adults rarely teach girls how to deal with anger, jealousy, or conflict; therefore they lack specific social skills to produce friendly behavior (Crothers et al., 2005; Frenzen, 2004; Vail, 2002).

Research suggests that girls are just as likely as boys to be aggressive in their friendships; however, they use their social intelligence as a weapon in conflict (Crothers et al., 2005). Since girls tend to be more emotionally intimate in their friendships than boys, they are able to use the feminine strong desire for connectedness as leverage against each other (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Talbot, 2002; Vail, 2002). However, according to Crick, Casas and Nelson (2002), relational aggressive behavior can deprive girls of their innate need for friendship and connectedness, which is important to their emotional health.

Why do girls use relational aggression? Historically, adults see girls as passive and teach them not to act out in aggressive ways (Crothers et al., 2005; Hadley, 2003; Hadley, 2004; O'Rourke, 2008; Vail, 2002). Previously, research has long addressed the gender differences in toys, games, clothing, and social interaction among children. According to Bem (1981), children rapidly learn to understand societal perspectives about gender and incorporate these views into their behavior. Children develop gender schemas for femininity and girls match this schema to their preferences, attitudes, behaviors, and personal attributes. Included in this feminine schema are things like

restricting emotional expression of anger and maintaining harmonious relationships with others (Bem, 1981; Crothers et al., 2005). Restricting emotions about anger and being concerned about the potentially negative impact of physical aggression toward others, can be extremely limiting for girls (Crothers et al., 2005; Hadley, 2003; Wiseman, 2002). Thus, because “directness and overt confrontation are not consistent with a feminine gender identity, girls adhering to such standards are forced to use more manipulative and covert means of expressing anger, resolving conflict, and establishing dominance” (Crothers et al., 2005, p. 349).

Effects

Relational aggression can be a very serious problem in schools (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Gomes, 2011; Hadley, 2003; Simmons, 2002; Talbot, 2002; Vail, 2002). Relational aggression can start as early as pre-school and continue into adulthood (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Crick et. al., 2004; Knudsen, 2003; Maniago, 2010; Ostrov et al., 2008). When students are bullied, they often do not confide in adults but seek escape by not coming to school (DeRosier, 2007; Leff & Crick, 2010; Vail, 2002). This behavior impinges upon the school climate by affecting the school culture, grades, and the child’s sense of self-worth (Frenzen, 2004; Vail, 2002). Students have reported that relational aggression is more upsetting than physical aggression (Ophelia, 2006). If left alone, relational aggression can lead to issues that are more serious.

Short-Term Effects

When relational aggression happens within the classroom environment, if the teacher happens to notice the behaviors, the culture of learning is interrupted because the teacher is obligated to stop teaching in order to deal with the situation (Frenzen, 2004;

Vail, 2002). Parents often call school administrators when their daughter repeatedly asks to stay home from school because she is worried about the emotional torment she may face (Frenzen, 2004). Girls even experience somatic symptoms because of the worry created by the ridicule of other students (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Krating, 2008; Ostrov et al., 2006; Vail, 2002; Young et al., 2010). Parents end up seeking medical attention for their daughters who are experiencing relational aggression. When a child is so concerned about why her friends are treating her badly, how can she concentrate on her academic assignments?

Long-Term Effects

Relational aggression can potentially have more long-term effects as well (Conway, 2005; Coyne et al., 2006; Hadley, 2004; Ostrov et al., 2006). Staying in relationships with girls who bully can train girls to accept abuse as a normal part of friendship (Davis & Davis, 2005; Leff & Crick, 2010). Vail (2002) explained that women as old as 70 can remember the names of girls who humiliated them in school. Adjusting and coping with these challenges can be a difficult struggle for children, and some do not manage the task successfully (Conway, 2005; Coyne et al., 2006; Hadley, 2004; Ostrov et al., 2006). Children who are frequent targets of relational aggression can develop serious social-psychological adjustment problems (Conway, 2005; Coyne et al., 2006; Hadley, 2004; Ostrov et al., 2006; Young et al., 2010).

Relational aggression is associated with increased depression, lower grade point average, increased suicidal thoughts, increased promiscuity, increased anxiety, more anger and sadness, eating disorders, loneliness and many other related negative emotional problems (Leff & Crick, 2010; Krating, 2008; Ophelia, 2006; Young et al., 2010).

Relational aggression does not stop in adolescence. Studies show that these behaviors continue into adulthood if not changed (Vail, 2002). Being subject to this type of behavior can ultimately set girls up to stay in abusive relationships with men (Leff & Crick, 2010; Krating, 2008; Simmons, 2002; Vail, 2002; Wiseman, 2002).

Most Recent Effects

In 2006, Megan Meir, a 13-year-old, committed suicide after cyber bullying occurred by a former friend and the former friend's mother (Inbar, 2008). The former friend and her mother were neighbors of Megan. The plan was to create a MySpace account for a fictitious boy, have him flirt with Megan, then dump her suddenly (Pokin, 2007). "The boy" sent many troubling messages to Megan as if he had been talking to her friends. Megan, who had a history of emotional problems, committed suicide by hanging herself in her home after the boy told her "the world would be a better place without you" (Inbar, 2008). The 49-year-old mother stated that they created the character to find out what Megan had been saying about her daughter (Inbar, 2008).

In 2008, Jesse Logan, an 18-year-old girl, committed suicide after incessant bullying by female peers (Celizic, 2009). She had sent nude photos of herself to her boyfriend. However, when they broke up he sent the pictures to other girls. Jesse began receiving harassing phone calls and threats at school. Girls threw things at her, called her names, and harassed her terribly at school. School officials were not willing to help so Jesse began skipping classes. After trying different means of handling the torture, Jesse finally committed suicide. She also hanged herself in her bedroom (Celizic, 2009).

In 2009, a 13-year-old girl, Hope Witsel, committed suicide after constant bullying by classmates (Inbar, 2009). The bullying began after she sent a topless picture

of herself to a boy she liked. Another person saw the picture and began circulating the photograph around school. The picture even reached the local high school. Soon, Hope began experiencing horrific bullying and taunting at school. Her friends report that girls would surround Hope and yell “whore” and “slut” as she walked through the hallway. The school was no help; in fact, the school caught wind of the photo and punished Hope (Cumming & Howie, 2009). She was suspended from school for the first week of the next school year and was no longer able to serve as a student advisor to the Future Farmers of America (FFA), a role in which she excelled (Inbar, 2009). When she returned to school, Hope sought help from the school counselors. The counselors noticed self-inflicted cuts on Hope’s legs and decided to do a “no-harm contract.” However, they never informed Hope’s parents of the danger. Soon after, Hope hanged herself in her room with a scarf. Her mother found her body (Inbar, 2009).

In 2010, a 15-year-old girl named Phoebe Prince hanged herself after over three months of torment by girls from her high school (Goldman, 2010). After briefly dating an older football player, Phoebe became the target of older girls who resented her (Cullen, 2010). The girls would follow Phoebe around school calling her horrendous names, stalking her, intimidating her, and even throwing objects at her (Goldman, 2010). Phoebe walked into her home on January 14, 2010 and hanged herself. Her 12-year-old sister found her body (Cullen, 2010). After the tragedy, the girls were heard bragging and even went on Facebook and mocked her death (Cullen, 2010). Authorities charged nine students with various crimes related to Phoebe’s death (Goldman, 2010).

In November of 2011, a 10-year-old girl named Ashlynn Conner hanged herself by a scarf in the closet of her bedroom after experiencing teasing and taunting by

classmates (Grimm & Schlikerman, 2011; Pinto, 2011). Ashlynn lived in a very small community and attended an elementary school with 23 total students in the fifth grade (Grimm & Schlikerman, 2011). Relatives reported that Ashlynn became a target years ago when she received a short haircut. The other girls made fun of her and told her she looked like a boy. Shortly before committing suicide, Ashlynn told her family that three girls had been calling her fat, ugly, and slut. Ashlynn asked her mother the meaning of the word slut because she did not know what it meant. One day before the suicide, Ashlynn asked her mother to be homeschooled. Her mother told her no but assured her that they would speak with the principal the following Monday (Grimm & Schlikerman, 2011; Pinto, 2011). Characterized as a sensitive child, the torment became too much for Ashlynn Conner and she chose to end her life at the age of 10 years old.

Victimization by peers has only recently been an area of interest due to the school shootings and violence that has received much media attention (Crick et al., 2002). Crick and colleagues (2002) explained that, “even in the cases that ended in serious physical injuries and death to the victims, perpetrators often cited relational slights as significant motivating factors in their physically aggressive acts” (p.100). Recent statistics show that girl violence and aggression is increasing, accounting for 29% of all juvenile arrests (Leach, 2004). If educators address aggressive behavior in the elementary years and children are given skills to deal with their anger, then they may be less likely to commit this misconduct (Carney, 2008; Ostrov et al., 2006; Xie et al., 2002).

Interventions

Adult Intervention

Adults play a critical role in preventing and controlling the effects of relational aggression (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010). Young children still look to adults for help, so this is a very important time for interventions to occur (Mishna et al., 2011). Ostrov et al. (2009) explained that the earlier the interventions occur, the greater the chance for improvement. Educators and parents must address this problem as early as preschool (O'Rourke, 2008). Morine (2009) stated that adults should teach conflict resolution skills to help children manage relationships. Anthony and Lindert (2010) explained that observing, connecting, guiding, and supporting children experiencing relational aggression may be useful for adults who are helping children navigate relational aggression. Additionally, educators should empower bystanders to intervene when they witness bullying behaviors. Children must know that it is important for them to help when their peers are being bullied (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). When students stick together and alert adults about the problem or help the victimized child take appropriate action it can bring about global change within a school system.

What is the government doing about relational aggression? In 1998, the United States Department of Education set forth an initiative to take action on school violence. Legislation was passed to provide funding through the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative. Legislators have put state laws in place in 45 states since 1998 to combat bullying (High, 2010). Only some of those laws address areas of relational aggression. There are numerous research-based programs developed to target physical aggression. Some of those programs may not be suitable for relational aggression (Ostrov 2009).

School-wide programs are available for children in elementary through high school. There are a limited number of programs that target children ages five and younger, and only a few programs that target primary and elementary aged students. If a school has money in the budget to purchase a program, there are some viable options such as the Friend to Friend program (F2F); Second Step, Violence Prevention; and Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it Out, Seek Help (WITS) programs. However, awareness and education for students, faculty, and staff can also be very effective (Ostrov et al., 2008.)

State Laws

Georgia was the first state, out of 45, to develop a bullying law. Originally developed in 1999, Georgia updated the law in 2010. The Bully Police website gave the new and improved law a grade of A++, increased from the original grade of B (High, 2010). Brenda High (2010) explained that in order to make the perfect grade states need specific points outlined in the bullying law. First, states must use the word “bullying” in the explanation of the law. Secondly, it must clearly be a bullying law with definitions of the word bullying outlined in the law as well as a clause for cyberbullying. A good law should mandate anti bullying programs with a specific date in which the program should be implemented. High (2010) suggested that there be protection against lawsuits for the school staff dealing with each bullying situation. The law must mandate counseling for victims who suffer due to episodes of bullying. Finally, there must be consequences for schools that do not comply. Georgia is compliant on all of these points with the 2010 update, according to Brenda High (2010).

The Georgia Bullying Law, O.C.G.A. 20-2-751.4 (2010), defines bullying as the following:

As used in this Code section, the term ‘bullying’ means an act which occurs on school property, on school vehicles, at designated school bus stops, or at school related functions or activities, or by use of data or software that is accessed through a computer, computer system, computer network, or other electronic technology of a local school system, that is: (1) Any willful attempt or threat to inflict injury on another person, when accompanied by an apparent present ability to do so; or (2) Any intentional display of force such as would give the victim reason to fear or expect immediate bodily harm; or (3) Any intentional written, verbal, or physical act, which a reasonable person would perceive as being intended to threaten, harass, or intimidate, that: (A) Causes another person substantial physical harm within the meaning of Code Section 16-5-23.1 or visible bodily harm as such term is defined in Code Section 16-5-23.1; (B) Has the effect of substantially interfering with a student’s education; (C) Is so severe, persistent, or pervasive that it creates an intimidating or threatening educational environment; or (D) Has the effect of substantially disrupting the orderly operation of the school.”

The law goes on to outline exactly how local boards of education should develop a bullying policy. For example, it describes everything from how schools should protect victims to the fact that schools should assign students in grade six through twelve to alternative school after the third offense. Schools must notify parents in writing about the bullying policy at the beginning of each school year. The law instructs local boards to comply with this law by August 1, 2011 in order to continue receiving state funds.

The Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GAPSC) has included a clause pertaining to bullying in the most recent Code of Ethics for Educators. Standard 2:4 states that unethical conduct now includes, “engaging in or permitting harassment of or misconduct toward a student that would be a violation of state or federal law” (GAPSC, 2009). In essence, the GAPSC could seek disciplinary action if the educator is in violation of this code. An educator could even lose his or her certificate and no longer be able to work in the field of education (GAPSC, 2009).

Anti-Bullying Programs

The “Friend to Friend” (F2F) Program is a research-based program that implements interventions with small groups of girls, in middle childhood, who are a victim or aggressor in relational aggression (Ostrov et al., 2009). The F2F program attempts to improve participants’ ability to interact and negotiate conflicts more successfully (Leff et al., 2007). The program consists of 20 group sessions that meet twice each week for 30-45 minutes. After session 10, the group leader collaborates with the participants to do eight classroom sessions with the larger population of students. Ostrov and colleagues (2009) reported, “Initial research suggests this program is highly acceptable to teachers and children and is effective at reducing relationally aggressive girls” (p. 17).

The “Second Step, Violence Prevention Program” also attempts to promote social skills and problem solving skills (Committee for Children, 2009; Ostrov et al., 2009). This program targets students from preschool through the eighth grade. The Second Step, Violence Prevention Program integrates the lessons with the academic curriculum and works on changing attitudes toward physical and relational aggression (Committee

for Children, 2009; Ostrov et al., 2009). This program uses a variety of methods to appeal to and reach students. For young children, the program is extremely child friendly, using puppets and songs for optimal enjoyment.

The “Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it Out, Seek Help” (WITS) Program is created specifically for relational bullying in schools (Ostrov et al., 2009). This is an inexpensive elementary program that collaborates between police officers, university student athletes, and school staff (Woods, Coyle, Hoglund, & Leadbeater, 2007). Training is provided for all members involved. The idea of the WITS program is to speak uniformly about relational aggression to promote conflict resolution strategies (Ostrov et al., 2009; Woods et al., 2007). This program is literacy-focused so that teachers can implement the information with the general curriculum (Woods et al., 2007). Literacy is used to stimulate learning about appropriate interactions with peers. Police officers visit classrooms periodically to reinforce the program (Woods et al., 2007). Athletic groups adopt specific classrooms to provide further assistance with the WITS program. Researchers have reported favorable results for reducing victimization in high poverty schools with the use of this program (Ostrov et al., 2009).

Other Programs

Counselors often use school-wide guidance lessons to support student needs (Mathias, 1992). Originally designed by Dawn Harris, some schools use the DeBug System to support problem-solving skills among students (as cited in Mathias, 1992). The DeBug System is used to help students solve minor problems that are created when other students are “bugging” them (Mathias, 1992). During classroom guidance lessons, the counselor teaches a series of steps that helps students learn to be assertive and promotes

self-management (Oppenhuizen, 2001). Students are able to role-play and practice the steps during the lesson. The program defines the child's role and the adult's role in simple steps that even kindergarten students can understand (Mathias, 1992). Teachers and counselors teach the students the following steps to follow if someone is bothering them:

Ignore. If that doesn't work . . .

Move Away. If that doesn't work . . .

Talk Friendly. If that doesn't work . . .

Talk Firmly. If that doesn't work . . .

Get adult help.

The adult response is to ask the following:

Have you tried the DeBug System?

What step are you on?

Come back when you get to step 5. (Oppenhuizen, 2001).

The counselor enlists help from students and all adults who surround the students to support this system. Counselors may send letters to parents so that they are involved as well. DeBug is not recognized as a bullying program because it is targeted for situations in which both students are equally powerful. In a bullying situation, one student is usually in a position of power over the other.

Teacher Interventions

Many researchers report that teachers view relational aggression as less serious than physical aggression and are less sympathetic to victims (Davis & Davis, 2005; Simmons, 2002; Vail, 2002). Ophelia (2006) encouraged everyone who works with

children to take a stand against this serious problem. Swearer (2008) explained, “Teachers are vital for creating a positive climate in classrooms and schools” (p. 614). Young and colleagues (2010) explained that adults must always be approachable, alert, and helpful toward students. Although researchers have not extensively studied the teacher-student relationship, the climate in a classroom can welcome relationally aggressive behaviors or it can deter the behaviors. Swearer (2008) determined, “Healthy teacher and student relationships are critical for reducing bullying and relational aggression” (p. 614). Stan and Julia Davis (2005) explained that teachers must give consequences for subtle forms of bullying in classroom situations. The Davis’ (2005) also explained that teachers must help students disconnect from abusive friendships and help bystanders refuse to be used by aggressors. Teachers may encourage journaling at a young age to help improve the emotional and physical health of students (Davis & Davis, 2005).

School Counselor Interventions

As girls grow they are in the process of forming their view of the world and creating schemas about their environment. Cognitive-behavioral treatments provide educational experiences and counselor-coached reconceptualizations of problems to build a new “coping” template (Kendall, 1993). Specifically, the treatment goal is for the girls to develop a new cognitive structure, or a modified existing structure, through which they can look at aggression (Crothers et al., 2005). Counseling helps in reducing the support for dysfunctional schemata and in constructing a new schema through which the girls can identify and solve problems. The professional school counselor may guide both the girl’s recognitions about prior behavior and their expectations for future behavior. Therefore,

the girls can acquire a cognitive structure for future events that includes the adaptive skills and appropriate cognition associated with adaptive functioning (Kendall, 1993).

There are several techniques that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) utilizes that could be beneficial for girls with aggressive behaviors (Crothers et al., 2005). For instance, through modeling, the counselor or teacher overtly verbalizes his or her appraisal of the situation, various solutions to the situation, and possible consequences of the different solutions. Additionally, role plays provide the aggressive girls not only with a chance to practice interpersonal social skills, but also with the opportunity to increase skills in perspective taking (Kendall, 1993). By using role-play the girls may be able to better see another's perspective and may increase their empathy for another person, therefore reducing aggressive behavior. Counselors may use behavior modification to replace a habitual, unwanted behavior with a more desirable one. This is achieved by identifying eliciting cues, specifying new behavior, then rewarding progress toward a goal without waiting to achieve it fully. Social problem-solving training is a core element in most cognitive-behavioral interventions and involves assisting girls in thinking of a wider array of possible solutions to perceived social provocations, with particular emphasis on verbal assertion, bargaining and compromise solutions, and competent performance of selected solutions (Kendall, 1993).

Summary

Relational aggression includes behaviors that intentionally harm others through the manipulation or threat of harm to peer relationships (Cairns & Cairns, 2002; Crick et al., 2002; Hadley, 2003; Sveinsson & Morris, 2007; Vail, 2002; Xie et al., 2002). There are higher rates of relational aggression among girls in early childhood (Hadley, 2004;

Ostrov et al., 2008; Vail, 2002. Repeated victimization can be detrimental to a child's social and emotional development (Goldbaum et al., 2007). It has even led to suicides among some young teenaged girls. Interventions must be implemented in order to move away from a culture that ignores the problems and move toward building an empathetic environment that helps young females have the greatest opportunity for culture change and healthy relationship development (Carney, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006; Ostrov et al., 2006; Xie et al, 2002). Practical approaches by teachers, administrators, and professional school counselors can create drastic improvements in targeted individuals. The earlier these interventions occur, the greater the chances are for improvement (Carney, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006; Ostrov et al., 2006; Ostrov et al., 2009; Xie et al., 2002). Researchers specifically called for further research that targets victims' responses in early childhood (Ostrov, 2007; Willer & Cupach, 2008). Willer and Cupach (2008) explain, "Apart from aggression, responses might include apologies or relational distancing. Such behavioral responses may affect the degree to which victims are negatively affected by mean acts and may provide girls with tools for coping with mean acts" (p. 427).

There seems to be a considerable gap in the literature involving the topic of relational aggression among young students. Researchers have called for more studies involving peer victimization with young children, specifically looking at the different ways children cope with victimization (Maniago, 2010; Ostrov, 2007). Gomes (2011) explained that adults must attempt to discover why some girls learn to cope well with relational aggression while others do not. In response to this gap in literature, I seek to discover the coping strategies developed by young girls victimized by relational

aggression. Adults must teach children to cope with relational aggression instead of charging in and taking control of every situation (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010).

Researchers have specifically called for qualitative research to be conducted in order to gain a better understanding of subtle types of bullying like relational aggression (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010; Mishna et al., 2011). Researching this issue from the child's perspective provides vital information about their thoughts, feelings, and what they want the world to know about their victimization (Holliday et al., 2009). Although relational aggression among friends is prevalent, the topic is understudied (Mishna et al., 2011). More qualitative research is needed concerning relational aggression and girls. (Beebout-Bladholm, 2010).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this transcendental qualitative phenomenological study was to discover coping strategies developed by young girls victimized by relational aggression in a rural Georgia primary school. In this study, I defined relational aggression as intentional behavior that damages friendships or involvement in a social group (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young, et al., 2010). When I received IRB approval, I selected co-researchers from a pool of 294 female students in kindergarten, first and second grade whose teachers identified as having experienced relational aggression. I used semi-structured interviews with co-researchers, document analysis, and art activities to gather data. I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data conforming to Moustakas' (1994) transcendental model.

Research Design

According to Creswell (2007), researchers use qualitative research when exploring a problem within a population in order to discover variables that may be measured or to hear censored voices. Creswell (2007) states, "Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems." (p. 37). I conducted the research in the natural setting in which co-researchers experience the problem under study. The researchers are the instrument for data collection through examining, observing and interviewing co-researchers. Qualitative researchers gather data through multiple sources, organize the data, and look for themes that emerge. This study was an effort to find meaning from the co-researchers'

experience through an interview process, reviewing documents, and the subjective interpretation of the interview transcripts.

I used Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach in this research. Moustakas (1994) explained,

Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience. (p. 41).

This study looked at young female students who were involved in relational aggression problems within the school, and focused on the process they used to deal with the aggressive girls. The transcendental approach was the best fit because it provided a concrete framework to follow as well as appropriate methodology for understanding the experience of the co-researchers without influence from my own experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) suggested using the term co-researchers for the participants because in transcendental phenomenology, the participants collaborate with the researcher to become the creator of knowledge. The model served as a guide to asking questions, recording answers, and analyzing data collected in the research.

Research Questions

The focus of this research was to gain a clear view of the perceptions young children had toward coping with relational aggression. I captured the voice of young victimized students to discover the coping strategies they use as well as the coping strategies that made the girls feel successful. The following questions served as a guide

for this study:

Research Question 1: What approach coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use?

Research Question 2: What avoidance coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use?

Research Question 3: Which coping strategies produce a feeling of success among the girls in a rural primary school?

Co-Researchers

This study identified kindergarten, first, and second grade female students who were victims of relational aggression. I selected co-researchers by purposeful sampling from a pool of 294 kindergarten, first, and second grade girls in a rural primary school in northeast Georgia. Of the 294 girls, 98 students were in kindergarten, 106 were in first grade, and 90 students were in second grade. The population was 87% Caucasian, 6% Multiracial, 3% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 2% African American students (PowerSchool, 2011). I initially selected co-researchers in this study through purposeful sampling that insured all co-researchers were involved in the phenomenon of relational aggression. A checklist was adapted from the girlshealth.gov parent factsheet for teachers to use in identifying victims of relational aggression (see Appendix B). Thirty-two teachers participated in identifying students victimized by relational aggression.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health (2007), even one of the warning signs listed on the checklist could mean that a child has experienced relational aggression victimization. Therefore, if a teacher checked one item on the checklist, a child received a parental permission form to

participate in the study. I obtained parental consent before I met with any of the students identified (see Appendix C). Once I obtained parental consent, I informed the students of the research and I obtained assent before the study began (see Appendix D). All of the girls who were identified by at least one check on the teacher checklist had parental permission and had given assent participated in an initial interview to determine if she has experienced relational aggression victimization.

The two professionals in the field of counseling and I analyzed answers to the interview questions to determine if the girls had, in fact, experienced relational aggression victimization. The first professional (Professional 1) was a school counselor with 20 years of experience in professional school counseling and five years of teaching experience. She had a master's degree in professional school counseling and an education specialist degree in leadership. Most of her career has been in the area of early childhood counseling. The second professional (Professional 2) was a school counselor with 23 years of experience in early childhood counseling. She also had six years of teaching experience. This professional had a master's degree in professional school counseling.

Those who have experienced relational aggression participated in subsequent interviews, document analysis, and art activities until I obtained data saturation. Dukes (1984) recommended studying between three and 10 co-researchers in phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) described phenomenological studies that researched between 12 and 15 co-researchers. Creswell (2007) has seen a much greater range of co-researchers in phenomenological studies. In this study, I studied all of the victimized girls. Twenty-two girls were determined to have experienced victimization and received follow-up interviews, participated in art activities, and had documents analyzed. The documents

include any writing that was completed in class that has to do with friendships. I provided pseudonyms to each co-researcher in order to protect the identity of the students. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the co-researchers chosen for this study.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Co-Researchers

Name	Grade	Age	Ethnicity
Sue	K	6	Caucasian
Katie	K	6	Caucasian
Grace	K	6	Caucasian
Lindsey	K	5	Caucasian
Sunny	K	6	Caucasian
May	1	7	Caucasian
Chloe	1	8	Caucasian
Izzy	1	7	Caucasian
Kay	1	7	Caucasian
Macy	1	7	Multiracial
Sarah	1	7	Caucasian
Mandy	2	7	Caucasian
Mallory	2	8	Caucasian
Andy	2	8	Caucasian
Taylor	2	8	Caucasian
Marie	2	8	Caucasian
Brittany	2	8	Caucasian
Tara	2	8	Caucasian
Ally	2	8	Caucasian
Rosie	2	7	Caucasian
Amanda	2	8	Caucasian
Tenley	2	7	Caucasian

I developed a research guidance group in order to prevent students from identifying the victimized girls and in order to help each girl feel as if she were included (F. Garzon, personal communication, March 10, 2010). Ninety-two percent of the population of girls in kindergarten, first, and second grade participated in the research guidance group. The research guidance group was simply a classroom guidance session in which I invited all female students in kindergarten, first, and second grade. I obtained parental consent for the girls to participate in the study (see Appendix C). I informed the girls of their duty in the research, and I obtained assent before the study began. All of the girls who returned a permission slip and gave assent viewed the twelve webisodes from the Stop Bullying Now website (2010). Following the video, the counselor held a brief question and answer session using the discussion guide accompanying the webisodes (see Appendix E). The instructional lead teacher of the school as suggested by IRB (F. Garzon, personal communication, March 10, 2010) observed the process. I chose the instructional lead teacher because she was someone the children often see in their classroom and they are familiar with this person. The children were comfortable with her presence in the research guidance group and interview sessions. Because the children were minors, I asked the instructional lead teacher to be present in order to verify the process was followed as written.

Site

District Profile

The county under study was located in the Piedmont Region of North Georgia bordering the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The school system strives to implement a challenging academic curriculum that prepares students for their future. The

faculty and staff provide a caring, nurturing, challenging, and supportive environment. The size of the system allows for early intervention on the behalf of students who may need more individualized instruction. The enormous growth in student population brings many challenges and opportunities, but school system is committed to leading the state in student achievement.

The total system enrollment for the school year 2011-2012 in kindergarten through twelfth grade was 2,915 (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). The smaller student population makes the system unique among other school systems in the region. Student enrollment in the system has steadily increased since 1995 with the last 10 years averaging 60 students per year. In 2011-2012, there were 175 students in the county who were home-schooled and 25 students who attended private schools.

An increasing number of students are now applying and qualifying for free or reduced meals. The four schools in the system serve breakfast and lunch daily, with an average breakfast participation rate in May 2010 of 41%, and an average lunch participation rate of 87%. In the 2011-2012 school year, of the 2,915 students, 57% qualified for free or reduced lunch. These socioeconomic statistics explain the fact that the primary school, elementary school, and middle school are identified as Title I school-wide programs and though the high school qualifies as a Title I school-wide school, it does not operate as one. The primary school serves kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. The elementary school serves third through fifth grades, the middle school serves sixth through eighth grades, and the high school serves ninth through twelfth grades.

School Profile

The study took place in a Title 1 primary school located in a rural area of

northeast Georgia. I chose this site because it was a small rural setting that does not have a formal bullying program in place. I was the professional school counselor in this school and had access to students and faculty members within the school. The school had a strong feeling of community, where everyone knows everyone. Overall, throughout the school system students experienced a great deal of relational aggression, possibly because it is such a small rural area. There were no anti-bullying programs implemented in this school at the time of the research. I, as the professional school counselor, have implemented the DeBug System as a way to help children deal with minor conflicts (Oppenhuizen, 2001).

The school building was constructed in the early nineties. The building was renovated in 2007, adding nine brand new classrooms. There are approximately 46 classrooms within the building and an extra 10 classrooms in an adjacent building. Currently, there are 11 operating kindergarten classrooms, 11 first grade classrooms and 11 second grade classrooms within the school that houses kindergarten through second grade. The other classrooms in the building contain kindergarten, special education, early intervention, and connections classes.

The school is the only primary school in the system and contains approximately 58% economically disadvantaged students. The student to teacher ratio is approximately one teacher per every 18 students. The student population is 88% Caucasian, 6% Hispanic, 2% African American, 2% multiracial, and 1% Asian. There were approximately 216 girls enrolled in first and second grade at the school for the duration of one school year (PowerSchool, 2011). The female student population is 87% Caucasian, 6% multiracial, 3% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 2% African American students

(PowerSchool, 2011).

There is only one resource room for all special education students, so every child spends a great deal of time each day in the general education setting. This school has “connections” teachers that include one music teacher, one art teacher, one physical education teacher, and one computer paraprofessional. The connections teachers work with all students in grades kindergarten through second grade on one or two days per week. This school has one principal, one assistant principal, one instructional lead teacher, one full-time professional school counselor, 20 paraprofessionals, two secretaries, one attendance clerk, two speech therapists, one shared occupational therapist, one English language learner teacher, and four early intervention teachers. There are a total of 48 classroom teachers across grade levels and special areas.

The school offers an after school and summer school support program called Students with a Purpose (SWAP). The program provides academic enrichment after school hours for students who need extra support academically (S. Taylor, personal communication, April 3, 2011). The 21st Century grant funds the program (S. Taylor, personal communication, April 3, 2011).

Researcher’s Role

Since I am a professional school counselor who often deals with relational aggression issues and because of personal experience with relational aggression throughout my life, I have personal interest in this topic. The pain experienced in my own life and seeing pain in the eyes of other children dealing with this issue attracted me to discover how children can best cope with relational aggression victimization. Hence, there was a tendency for me to influence the data by imposing my own thoughts, feelings,

and experiences. Because I was interested in hearing the voice of the child, and not my own, procedures were in place to bracket my experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

I used several procedures to ensure that my experiences not influence the data in this research. First, I clearly described my personal experiences with the phenomenon at the beginning of the study in order to set aside my own experiences and focus solely on the co-researchers in the study (Creswell, 2007). I also implemented member checks in which I informally checked with each member at the conclusion of the interview to ensure the accuracy of my interpretation (Creswell, 2007). Most importantly, I utilized the Epoche process as a guide to interviewing and analyzing the data (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) explained, “In the Epoche, we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things.” (p. 85). Moustakas (1994) also explained that the Epoche allows us to see the phenomenon as if for the first time. It gives us a fresh new beginning that is unobstructed by experiences of the past (Moustakas, 1994). Because of my strong desire for the results to be accurate and unbiased, nothing was predetermined and I focused solely on the co-researchers’ experiences. I worked to present the data as truly experienced by the individual co-researchers. The co-researchers became the experts and I became the tool by which they communicate their experiences.

Procedures

I used a transcendental phenomenological approach in order to capture the voice of the young girls victimized by relational aggression because the child’s perspective is the focus of this research. The school system granted permission to conduct the study before Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. I also obtained approval from the school principal to conduct the study at this particular school. I maintained

communication with the IRB committee through the first IRB approval and one year extension granted (see Appendix A). However, I decided to begin the study with fresh data and re-applied for IRB approval with a new application. The IRB suggested using a placebo group in order to protect the young victimized girls (F. Garzon, personal communication, March 10, 2010). I used the term research guidance group because it is more like a classroom guidance session that is in place solely to protect the victimized girls by making all girls believe they are a part of the research. The group included all girls in kindergarten, first, and second grade in the school, who had parental permission, in order to help the girls feel that they were all able to participate in the research (see Appendix C). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained that IRBs, “review proposals, checking that the proposed research insures proper informed consent and safety for the participants” (p. 48).

After gaining approval from IRB and the school, data collection began. I collected data throughout one nine-week period. I used purposeful sampling to select co-researchers for this study, giving 32 teachers a checklist for every female student in their classroom (see Appendix B). If a teacher placed one checkmark on a checklist, I gave that student a parental permission form to participate in the study. Once teachers identified victimized students, I sent parental permission consent forms home with the identified students, and I sent another consent form to the research guidance group participants (see Appendix C and H). I sent the consent forms in a sealed envelope through the students’ daily agenda.

Once I obtained parental permission, I met with each of the students individually to obtain participant child/minor assent (see Appendix D). I assured co-researchers that

participation in the study was strictly voluntary and that they may stop participation at any time. If they chose to stop participation, I would destroy their data and the information would not be part of the findings in the study. I notified co-researchers and parents that the only documents with identifying information on them were the teacher checklist, parental consent, and student assent. I keep these documents in a separate locked file from the other data collected during and after the study. I will maintain all forms in a locked file for three years after the conclusion of the study before I destroy them. The English Language Learner (ELL) teacher at the school under study translated any forms that required translation into another language for parents.

I gathered data collection with the co-researchers through several interviews (see Appendix F and G), document analysis, and drawings. I used Roth and Cohen's (1986) theory of approach and avoidance strategies for coping when analyzing the data from this research. These two types of strategies for coping with stress have to do with activities that are directed either toward (i.e., approach) or away from (i.e., avoidance) the stressor (Maniago, 2010). An approach strategy is viewed as an effort to change the stressful situation and allow the appropriate actions (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Avoidance strategies seem to be an attempt at managing painful emotions. I used Moustaka's (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach in order to capture the voice of the students without influence from my experiences. Data collection procedures will be explained in detail later in this chapter.

Teacher Checklist

I obtained a list of female students in each class (PowerSchool, 2011). Each kindergarten, first, and second grade teacher was given a checklist (Appendix B) for

every female student enrolled in their classroom. I developed the checklist questions through the review of literature and by reviewing the parent factsheet from the girlshealth.gov (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Women's Health, 2007) website. Because I developed the checklist questions through the review of literature, it maintains face validity. I chose eight checklist items because eight is enough to cover the realm of factors that can help identify if a girl is experiencing relational aggression (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health, 2007). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health (2007) reports that even one warning sign may indicate that a child is experiencing relational aggression, therefore one checked item indicated that an initial interview may be conducted with the subject to determine if relational aggression victimization is actually present.

I also relied on other professionals in the field of counseling to review the checklist items for content validity. These are the same two professionals who assisted in analyzing the interview questions and answers. I met with each professional individually to discuss the items on the checklist.

I wrote the teacher checklist in a very clear and concise manner in which teachers were able to determine if they have or have not noticed the behaviors. I based the teacher checklist items on behaviors found throughout the literature review that indicated relational aggression victimization. In fact, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health (2007) has used many of the items in a parent factsheet to help parents identify when their daughters have experienced relational aggression victimization. Table 2 shows the teacher checklist items.

Table 2

Teacher Checklist Items

Teacher Checklist

Teacher Checklist

Teacher Name: _____

First Name of Student: _____

Please place a check beside each statement that you agree with. This incident could have occurred at any time during this school year.

- The student is not completely focused on academic assignments or seems emotionally distracted in class.
- The student has complained of or you have witnessed social problems with other girls during less structured times.
- You have noticed other girls excluding this student.
- You have noticed the student being overly emotional (i.e., cries easily or has mood swings).
- The student has claimed to be ill at school or you have noticed that the student wants to go home more often.
- You have noticed the student displaying “victim” body language such as hanging her head, hunching her shoulders, or just wanting to be alone.
- The student has expressed feelings of frustration with other students.
- You have noticed the student playing with different groups of friends periodically throughout the school year.

Checklist item one indicated that the focus of the child is not on academic assignments and may be emotionally distracted in class. If relational aggression victimization is taking place, it is difficult for girls to focus on academics and they are instead focusing on the problems they face with their friends (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995;

Hadley, 2004; Knudsen, 2003; Merrell et al., 2006; Ostrov et al., 2008). Teachers may notice a considerable change in the child's participation in the classroom environment.

Checklist items two and three identified social problems with other girls and, more specifically, other girls excluding the victimized child. I defined relational aggression as intentional behavior that damages friendships or involvement in a social group (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young et al., 2010). Relationally aggressive behaviors include spreading gossip, excluding, and social alienation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; O'Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). Therefore, these two checklist items were directly related to relational aggression victimization.

Checklist items four through eight included behaviors exhibited by the victimized child that helps adults identify that relational aggression victimization is present.

Checklist item four identified girls who were overly emotional. Emotional stress is readily apparent in girls victimized by relational aggression (Coyne et al., 2006; Ophelia, 2006; Ostrov et al., 2006; Young et al., 2010). Checklist item five indicated that girls exhibit somatic symptoms or want to go home from school often. Children miss school every day because of fear of emotional torment and girls experience physical symptoms because of the worry created by relational aggression victimization (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Krating, 2008; Ophelia, 2006; Ostrov et al., 2006; Vail, 2002; Young et al., 2010).

Checklist items six and seven described the body language and emotional frustration displayed by victimized children. Researchers have indicated that depressive symptoms are evident in children who are victimized by relational aggression (Conway, 2005; Coyne et al., 2006; Goldbaum et al., 2007; Hadley, 2004; Leff & Crick, 2010; Ostrov et al., 2006). Additionally, because adults teach girls not to express anger openly, it causes

frustration to intensify (O'Rourke, 2008). Checklist item eight indicated that the child was playing with different groups of friends. This behavior is evident when students push the victimized child out of their regular friendship group and they are forced to find different groups of children in which to play (Crothers et al., 2005; Gomes, 2011; Ledbeater, 2010; Leff & Crick, 2010; O'Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010).

Other professionals in the field of counseling established content validity for the checklist items through the review. Professional school counselors with a combined total of 43 years of experience reviewed the checklist items for content validity. I have established face validity by relating the questions to information obtained in the review of literature. I accepted suggested changes from my dissertation committee as they determined necessary and considered suggestions from the other professionals in the field of counseling. The initial approval by IRB and data collection served as a pilot test for this study to ensure that the checklist items uncover what they are intended to discover.

Preliminary Interviews

I used purposeful sampling to identify kindergarten, first, and second grade girls victimized by relational aggression. The teachers completed a checklist of items, adapted from the parent factsheet of girlshealth.gov (2007), to identify victimized girls. With a list of eight items, any checked items qualified students as possibly being victimized by relational aggression in this research. According to the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's' Health (2007) website, even one checked item can indicate a problem. I obtained parental permission to conduct research with the individuals from the checklist. I interviewed each of the identified girls in the counseling office at the primary school, with the instructional lead teacher observing. Because the

children were minors, I asked the instructional lead teacher to be present in order to verify that I followed the process as written. I chose the instructional lead teacher because the students were very familiar with her. She is in the students' classrooms on a daily basis. The children were comfortable with her presence in the research guidance group and interview sessions.

To draw out the personal story of each participant's experience with relational aggression, I developed a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D). I developed questions through the review of literature. Some questions were adapted from the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health (2007) bullying quiz by changing some of the vocabulary to a more age appropriate term. The questions were aimed at capturing the respondent's individual situation and her reactions to victimization. The interview consisted of open-ended questions but encouraged a degree of flexibility according to the different stories presented. I obtained face validity for the interview questions through the review of literature. I established content validity by having other professionals in the field of counseling review the questions.

Table 3

Initial Interview Guide

Initial Interview Questions

Purpose Statement: The purpose of these questions is to explore if the girls have actually experienced relational aggression victimization.

Student Name: _____

Date: _____

1. Tell me about a time that a girl made faces or bad hand signs to you?
 2. Tell me about a time at school when someone said mean things about you.
 3. Tell me about a time at school when someone teased you.
 4. When was the last time someone whispered in front of you? How did it make you feel?
 5. Have you ever been left out of games or activities at school? Tell me about that.
 6. Has anyone ever made fun of you at school? Tell me more about that.
 7. Have other girls stole or taken away your friends?
 8. Tell me about a time when other girls ignored you on purpose.
 9. Tell me about a time when a group of girls left you out and would not let you be part of their group.
 10. Has anyone ever threatened to hurt you at school? Tell me more about that.
-

I used questions one through 10 to identify specific types of relational aggression that is common among young students. In the initial interview, I wanted to be sure each student had, in fact, experienced relational aggression. Questions one through six were indicated as a sign that girls are experiencing relational aggression (U. S. Department of

Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health, 2007). Questions seven through nine were indicated as relationally aggressive behaviors as well (Crick et al., 2002; Crothers et al., 2005; Hadley, 2003; Simmons, 2002; Vail, 2002; Xie et al., 2002). Question 10 was included because in early childhood, relationally aggressive behaviors may be more direct and could come in the form of a threat (Crick et al., 2004). By triggering memories of specific events in which the students have experienced relational aggression, I hoped to be able to jog the girls' memory so that they could give me more details about what happened, what coping strategy they used, and how they developed the plan of action.

I have obtained content validity by having the two professionals in the field (Professionals 1 & 2) review the interview questions prior to implementation. The initial approval by IRB and data collection has served as a pilot test for this study to ensure that the initial interview questions gather appropriate data. I secured permission to record the interviews, and I coded all tapes with a pseudonym but without any personal details. After I completed the initial interviews, the two professionals in the field of counseling and I analyzed the responses to the questions to determine if the co-researchers had, in fact, experienced relational aggression. If indicated that they had experienced relational aggression, and then I asked them to participate in subsequent interviews until data saturation, participate in art activities, and I analyzed documents related to the phenomenon. I reached data saturation when the subject no longer revealed new information, but repeated information previously obtained in the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I estimated that between 15 and 25 girls will have experienced relational

aggression victimization and participate in further research data collection. However, I studied a total of 26 girls.

Follow Up Interviews

Interviews are a typical method of data collection in phenomenological studies.

Moustakas (1994) explained:

Although the primary researcher may in advance develop a series of questions aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person's experience of the phenomenon, these are varied, altered, or not used at all when the co-researcher shares the full story of his or her experience of the bracketed question. (p. 114)

When a child responded to a question and I wanted to learn more about the specific situation, I asked for more information. I based follow up interview questions (Appendix E) around the initial interview questions, only asking the girls to elaborate more on how they responded and the process by which they developed the plan of action. I hoped to discover detailed information of personal experiences with relational aggression.

Questions focused on capturing the respondent's voice about her individual situation and her coping strategies for relational aggression victimization. Follow up interviews continued until data saturation, meaning that co-researchers were not sharing new information (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007).

Table 4

Follow Up Interview Guide

Follow Up Interview Questions

Purpose Statement: The purpose of these questions is to explore the child's coping strategies for relational aggression victimization. I will use this information to look for common themes that emerge among different girls.

Student Name: _____

Date: _____

We talked earlier about times that other girls were mean to you. Today I would like to find out more information about how you dealt with these situations.

1. When the person made faces or bad hand signs to you, how did you react? Did the faces/signs stop? What do you think would have helped more?
 2. When someone said mean things about you, how did you react? Do you feel that this helped the situation? How did you decide what to do? Did it happen again?
 3. When someone teased you, what did you do? How did you decide what to do? Did this stop the teasing? Do you think something else would have helped more?
 4. When someone whispered in front of you, how did you react? Did anything change? How did you decide what to do?
 5. When you were left out of games or activities at school, how did you feel? What did you do? How did you decide what to do? Do you feel that this helped the situation?
 6. When someone made fun of you at school, what did you do to respond? How did you decide what to do? Did this make you feel better? Did it stop the teasing?
 7. When other girls stole your friends, what did you do? How did you decide what to do? Did you get your friend back? Did you feel better about the situation?
-

-
8. When other girls ignored you on purpose, what did you do? How did you decide what to do? Did they stop ignoring you? Did you feel better about the situation?
 9. When a group of girls would not let you be part of their group, what did you decide to do? How did you decide what to do? Did this help?
 10. What did you do when someone threatened to hurt you at school? How did you decide what to do? Did this work for you?
 11. Is there anything else that helped when others were being mean to you?
-

I used questions one through 10 to help students elaborate on the specific types of relational aggression that are common among young students (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health, 2007). In the final interview, I already determined that the child has experienced relational aggression and I wanted to identify exactly what types they have experienced. Questions one through six were a sign that girls were experiencing relational aggression, and I asked the students to elaborate on those signs (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health, 2007). Questions seven through nine identified relationally aggressive behaviors, and I attempted to get the girls to elaborate on those experiences (Crick et al., 2002; Crothers et al., 2005; Hadley, 2003; Simmons, 2002; Vail, 2002; Xie et al., 2002). Question 10 was included because in early childhood, relationally aggressive behaviors may be more direct and could come in the form of a threat and I wanted to make sure they were protected (Crick et al., 2004). Question 11 was included so that the girls would give me any final thoughts on anything else that happened regarding relational aggression. I developed the final interview questions so that the girls may elaborate on

details about what happened, what coping strategy they used, and how they developed the plan of action.

I obtained content validity by having the two professionals in the field (Professionals 1 & 2) review the interview questions prior to implementation. The initial approval by IRB and data collection has served as a pilot test for this study to ensure that the final interview questions gather appropriate data. I obtained permission to record the interviews, and I coded all tapes with a pseudonym but without any personal details. Girls participated in subsequent interviews until data saturation was achieved. I reached data saturation when the subject no longer revealed new information, but repeated information previously obtained in the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I estimated that between 15 and 25 girls will have experienced relational aggression victimization and participate in further research data collection.

The interviews took place in the counseling office with the instructional lead teacher present, and consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged flexibility based on what the child was willing to communicate. Face validity was obtained for the interview questions through the in depth review of literature. I secured content validity by having other professionals in the field (Professionals 1 & 2) thoroughly review the interview questions prior to implementation. Parents granted permission to record the interviews, and all students were coded with a pseudonym but without any personal details.

Art Activities

Art activities are easy and appealing to children (Emerson, 2008). The use of art activities when working with children offers much richer data than standard verbal

interaction (Emerson, 2008). Because I needed to understand the child's perceptions in this study, I needed to use a more natural method of inquiry for young children (Walker, 2007). Waller (2006) explained that art activities serve as an excellent method of communication between adults and children. Examining drawings, with verbal input from the child, can provide vital insight into students' concerns in the educational environment (Walker, 2007). The non-threatening nature of drawing assists the child in communicating their thoughts and feelings (Emerson, 2008). During the interview process, I used two art assignments in this research: 1) Draw a situation at school that you want to change and 2) Draw the perfect day at school (Leggett, 2009).

Children are more comfortable drawing a situation that they would like to change instead of discussing a situation they would like to change (Leggett, 2009). Near the beginning of the interview process, I asked the child to draw a situation at school that they would like to change, and then I allowed the child all the time she needed to complete the drawing. After she had finished drawing, I asked the child to describe the drawing, making notes about her comments (Legett, 2009). I audiotaped this activity.

Near the end of the interview process, I asked the child to draw her perfect day at school (Legett, 2009). I explained that we would pretend that during the night a miracle occurred and the problems she has had with other girls just disappeared. I then asked the child to draw the first thing she would notice when she walked into school that lets her know the miracle has occurred (Legett, 2009). Although this activity was a bit more difficult for children, it provided valuable information about how their coping strategies worked.

Document Analysis

I obtained consent and assent in order to review documents associated with each participant for the duration of a nine week period. I analyzed any letters passed during class and confiscated by teachers. I also analyzed behavior records kept by the teacher and assistant principal in order to search for proof of action by the adults within the school. I analyzed any applicable journal entries within the classroom setting as needed. The teachers used friendships as a writing topic at least twice throughout the school year (T. Sims, personal communication, August 8, 2011). The teachers also noted that during free choice writing, the students often choose to write about friendships (T. Sims, personal communication, August 8, 2011). For example, if the teacher asked the students to write about what makes a good friend and a victimized child wrote about a bad experience with a friend, I analyzed the document. Document analysis provided additional information to back up details given within the interview sessions.

Data Analysis Procedures

I followed Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenology model because it allowed the child's voice to be heard without preconceived notions due to my experience with the phenomenon. The data analysis began with transcription of the data and followed by Moustakas (1994) Epoche and phenomenological reduction. I used memoing in order to gain a clear understanding of the child's voice. I used feedback from other professionals in the field of counseling in order to have credible data. I used member checking in order to ensure that I captured the child's thoughts. By including quotations from the interviews, I used rich data (Creswell, 2007). I captured the voice of the children concerning how they cope with relational aggression victimization.

Transcription

I recorded all interviews and art activities on a digital voice recorder. The digital recorder was under lock and key at all times when not in use. I transcribed all information by using the headphones to listen to the dialogue, and I typed the information verbatim. The typed transcripts are kept on a USB flash drive and assigned a pseudonym so that the co-researchers cannot be identified. I keep the USB flash drive in a locked cabinet when not in use. I will maintain the information for three years following the conclusion of the research.

Memoing

I reviewed the transcriptions many times, immersing myself in the details of the data. This allowed me to grasp the data as a whole before breaking it into manageable parts. As I read the transcripts, memos were written in the margins. The memos were short phrases, ideas, or thoughts that occur to me. Self-reflective memoing helped document personal thoughts and reactions to the data and aided in the Epoche process (Creswell, 2007). A sample memo is found in Appendix J.

Epoche

At the beginning of this research, I included a description of my experiences with relational aggression in order to aid in the Epoche process. After completing the transcriptions, I began Moustaka's (1994) data analysis process by setting aside my own experiences and preparing myself to see the phenomenon as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994). This was a continuous and difficult process throughout the data analysis portion of research. I worked to focus only on the information communicated by the co-researchers so that I could achieve a clearer view of their world.

Phenomenological Reduction

Moustakas (1994) coding process is multifaceted and includes several steps. First, I completed horizontalization, which is highlighting significant statements by the participant. A sample of horizontalization is found in Appendix K. Next, I clustered the meanings by arranging similar statements into emerging themes. I then developed textural descriptions to describe what the co-researchers experienced. I used the textural descriptions to write structural descriptions that expressed how the co-researchers experienced relational aggression victimization. Finally, from the textural and structural descriptions, I wrote a composite description that exposed the essence of what the child wanted to communicate through the research (Moustakas, 1994).

I analyzed the art activities in much the same way as the interviews because I used them as a more natural tool to gather richer data in the interview process. After the art activities, I asked the child to describe the drawing while I made notes and asked clarification questions about the drawing. I highlighted significant statements and combined them with the emerging themes discovered during the interview process. I developed the information gathered during the art activities into textural descriptions to describe the experiences of the co-researchers. From the textural descriptions I developed structural descriptions to better understand how each co-researcher experienced the victimization. From both the textural and structural descriptions I wrote a composite description that exposed the essence of what the child wanted to communicate in the art activity. Several of the composite descriptions are discussed in chapter four.

I reviewed the documents to serve as a supplement to the data gathered during the interviews and art activities. Any information gathered through documents was associated with the particular student, and I used the data as a way to verify the information gathered during the interviews and art activities.

Once all of the data was collected from interviews, art activities, and document analysis, the data was organized into meaningful clusters. A sample of this organization is included in Appendix L. I used the research questions as a framework for guiding me to discover themes from the interviews and art activities. The information gathered from the document analysis was then organized, categorized, and woven into the themes that emerged from the interviews and art activities. Information revealed in the documents supplemented each theme. The textural description, developed from the themes provided content and illustration, and then I developed the structural description to explain how each co-researcher experienced victimization. Next, I analyzed the information to gain a true meaning of the experiences of the co-researchers, looking at the deeper meanings for the individuals. Analyzing the three data collection tools in this manner revealed the essence of the phenomenon.

Feedback

After I coded the data, two other professionals in the field of counseling reviewed the data for credibility. These two professionals are the same ones who reviewed the checklist and interview questions used in this study. The first professional was a school counselor with 20 years of experience in professional school counseling and five years of teaching experience. The professional school counselor has a master's degree in professional school counseling and an education specialist degree in leadership. Most of

her career has been in the area of early childhood counseling. The second professional was a school counselor with 23 years of experience in early childhood counseling. She also has six years of teaching experience. This professional has a master's degree in professional school counseling. Both professionals verified that I coded appropriate themes within the data by reviewing the data and noting themes that they determined emergent in the data. I kept the student names confidential from the two professionals.

Rich Data

Rich data are data that is detailed enough to provide a complete picture of what the participant is experiencing (Creswell, 2007). The art activities facilitated communication between adults and children, and therefore provided much richer information than standard verbal interaction (Emerson, 2008). I provided detailed information and thick descriptions about what was dictated in the interactions with co-researchers, documents, and art activities.

Triangulation

In order to have credible and reliable results from the analysis of data, a researcher must use multiple methods of analysis. In this research, I used multiple methods of data collection, including interviews, document analysis, and art activities. I also used multiple techniques within data analysis, such as transcription, phenomenological reduction, rich data, and feedback to ensure that the research findings accurately reflected the co-researchers' voice. I checked and balanced the process by the multiple methods of analysis and by the review of other professionals in the field. I used triangulation to increase the credibility of the study.

Trustworthiness

In order to have credible and reliable results from the analysis of data, a researcher must use multiple methods of analysis. In this research, I used multiple methods of data collection, including interviews, document analysis, and art activities. I also used multiple methods of data analysis, such as transcription, thematic analysis (i.e. coding), rich data, and feedback to ensure that the research findings accurately reflected the co-researchers' voice. I checked and balanced the process by the multiple methods of analysis and by the review of other professionals in the field. I used triangulation to increase the credibility of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed the terms credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative studies.

Credibility

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) explain, "Criteria for evaluating qualitative research differ from those used in quantitative research, in that the focus is on how well the researcher has provided evidence that her or his descriptions and analysis represent the reality of the situations and persons studied" (p. 77). Credibility "refers to whether the co-researchers' perceptions match up with the researcher's portrayal of them" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 77). Closely related to validity in quantitative research, memoing, peer debriefing, and triangulation satisfied credibility in this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Memoing includes reviewing the transcriptions numerous times so that I immerse myself in the details of the data. Memoing allowed me to grasp exactly what the child was attempting to communicate. As I read the transcripts I wrote short phrases, ideas, and

thoughts in the margins. Memoing helped document personal thoughts and reactions to the data so that we only hear the child's voice through the research (Creswell, 2007).

Credibility also refers to peer debriefing, in which I will ask two other professionals in the field to look over the data and note their own themes that emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After I coded the data, two other professionals in the field of counseling reviewed the data for credibility. Both professionals verified that I coded appropriate themes within the data by reviewing the data and noting themes that they determined emergent in the data. I kept student names confidential from the two professionals.

Triangulation, in which multiple methods of data collection and data analysis are used, also adds credibility (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). In this research, I used multiple methods of data collection, including interviews, document analysis, and art activities. I also used multiple methods of data analysis, such as transcription, phenomenological reduction, rich data, and feedback to ensure that the research findings accurately reflected the co-researchers' voice. I checked and balanced the process by the multiple methods of analysis and by the review of other professionals in the field.

Dependability

“Dependability refers to whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data.” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 78). Dependability is closely related to reliability in qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I achieved dependability in this study through a very thorough description of how I collected and analyzed the data, providing an audit trail (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). I also achieved dependability in the study by asking Professionals 1 and 2 to code some of the interviews

in order to be sure they see the same themes as I saw. This process established inter-rater reliability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Transferability

Transferability is associated with how well the study will fit into other contexts as determined by the reader (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). I achieved transferability by creating thick, rich descriptions of the lived experiences of the co-researchers. I included much detail so that others can decide if similar procedures will work in their own settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Confirmability

Finally, confirmability is closely related to objectivity in qualitative studies. I achieved confirmability through triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Again, in this research, I used several methods of data collection, including interviews, document analysis, and art activities. I also used several methods of data analysis, such as transcription, phenomenological reduction (i.e., coding), rich data, and feedback to ensure that the research findings accurately reflected the co-researchers' voice. The process was checked and balanced by the multiple methods of analysis and was reviewed by other professionals (i.e., Professional 1 & 2) in the field.

Ethical Issues

As a researcher, it is important to model appropriate ethical practices when conducting research. Kouzes and Posner (2007) explain, "Modeling the way is about earning the right and respect to lead through direct involvement and action. People follow first the person, then the plan." (p. 16). Self-reflection was extremely important as I completed this study and reported the findings. I was constantly aware of my personal

worldview while delving into the responses from the individuals. It is important to refrain from projecting one's own worldview and beliefs onto the respondents.

One of the most important ethical aspects to research is that of confidentiality. Researchers should not share specific confidential information about the child or faculty member involved in the research. The information reported does not include specific information about those involved in the research. All data gathered will remain in a locked file cabinet for three years after the conclusion of the study. I did not share specific confidential information about the child or faculty member involved in the research. The students completed a confidentiality statement in which the parents also signed (see Appendix I). The individual sessions were audio taped and I made notes to review later. I will destroy the audio tape after three years. The child's name was not associated with the data gathered, but I assigned a pseudonym to each interviewee. The only form that had the child's name is the permission form and the teacher checklist, and all are in a locked file cabinet. The information reported does not include specific information about those involved in the research. This data will be maintained under lock and key for three years following the research. I explained this information to the students and faculty and documented so that no misunderstandings occur. I also discussed the role of confidentiality with the parents of the minors.

Conclusion

This study, which investigated the coping strategies of young girls victimized by relational aggression, used a phenomenological method of inquiry in order to capture the voice of the victimized children. I targeted individual students who had a powerful voice through purposeful sampling and interviews. I sought to determine what the co-

researchers experienced as a victimized child as well as how they experienced the phenomenon of relational aggression. I was then able to develop the composite description of the significance of the phenomenon of relational aggression. The intent of the study was to discover approach and avoidance coping strategies used by young girls victimized by relational aggression. I also hoped to determine which strategies produced a feeling of success among victimized girls. I chose the qualitative methods in this study in order to achieve credible and dependable research conclusions.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the coping strategies developed by young girls victimized by the phenomenon of relational aggression. The following research questions served as a guide for this study:

1. What approach coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use?
2. What avoidance coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use?
3. Which coping strategies produce a feeling of success among the girls in a rural primary school?

Through this research, I discovered what the co-researchers experienced and how they felt as they were experiencing relational aggression. Twenty-two students in kindergarten, first, and second grade were found to have experienced relational aggression victimization. Five kindergarten students, six first grade students, and 11 second grade students participated as co-researchers in subsequent interviews, document analysis, and art activities. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved. I developed a research guidance group in order to prevent students from identifying the victimized girls and in order to help each girl feel as if she were included in the study. Ninety-two percent of the 294 girls in the school participated in the research guidance group. I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data conforming to Moustakas' (1994) transcendental model.

This chapter begins with an overview of the co-researchers in this study. To protect student identities, I used pseudonyms to represent each student instead of their

actual names (see Table 1 on p. 54). Following the introduction, co-researchers' responses are categorized according to the type of victimization experienced. Because I used Roth and Cohen's (1986) approach and avoidance models of coping, the coping strategies used by each co-researcher are broken down by type of coping strategy used. I addressed research question number one through the identification of approach coping strategies from the co-researchers' responses. The section focusing on research question two presents information on avoidance coping strategies the co-researchers used. I addressed research question three in the final section as the co-researchers' descriptions of successful coping strategies.

Portraits of the Co-Researchers

This section presents the stories of the 22 co-researchers' broken down by type of victimization experienced. All students attend the same rural primary school. Of the 22 co-researchers chosen, one is African American, two are multiracial, and 19 are Caucasian females; five being kindergarten girls, six being first grade girls, and 11 being second grade girls. Two of the students were retained in a grade, and two of the students have a disability that limits their ability to learn at the same rate as their peers.

I explored the lives of the co-researchers through a semi-structured interview format summarized by guiding questions. The interviews took place in the counseling office with the instructional lead teacher present. The counseling office of the school is located adjacent to the administrative offices. Although it is close to the administrative offices, which can be intimidating, it is a very inviting atmosphere for children. The office is a small space filled with fun items for children such as puppets, books, games, and toys. The children sat on a comfortable beanbag chair on the floor with me in an

identical chair beside them. The instructional lead teacher sat in a chair behind the large desk, out of sight of the children. As the school counselor I am a very familiar face for the children in kindergarten, first, and second grade as I teach them for one hour per day biweekly. I developed the snapshots of the co-researchers based on what I observed in the interview. I took every measure possible to produce an accurate representation of the co-researchers' responses. Transcripts were listened to and transcribed repeatedly in order to be completely accurate. After I coded the data, two other professionals in the field of counseling reviewed the data for credibility. Rich data was achieved by including quotes from the co-researchers in their description of what happened to them.

Making Mean Faces

Making faces and/or bad gestures with your hands at someone is characterized as a type of aggression when used over and over again in order to hurt someone (Girlshealth.gov, 2007). A total of 14 co-researchers experienced girls making mean faces as a type of victimization. Of the 14 co-researchers, three were in kindergarten, three were in first grade, and eight were in second grade. All 14 students were interviewed until data saturation was met. They were all asked to complete art activities and submit documents to be analyzed, although all students did not write or draw about this specific type of victimization. When asked to draw a picture of something she would like to change one student, Izzy, drew a picture of a girl sticking her tongue out on the playground. In the conversation that followed, Izzy communicated her frustration with girls when they stick their tongue out at her. She explained that she would like for girls to always be nice to each other. Data obtained in numerous interviews are organized below according to the three research questions.

Approach strategies. Lindsey, Sunny, May, Chloe, Izzy, Mallory, and Amanda all chose to tell a teacher or a parent when they experienced girls making mean faces at them. Lindsey stated, “I try to tell them to stop, but they don’t listen!” She then declared, “So I just tell the teacher!” Sunny explained, “They stick their tongue out when they don’t get their way.” Sunny disclosed that she always tells the teacher and it helps because the kids get into trouble when she tells. May explained that girls sometimes make mean faces at her when they are mad. May added a threat to tell the teacher before she actually chose to tell. She stated, “They usually stop when I say I’ll tell the teacher because they know I’ll do it!” However when she tried to tell the teacher, the girls just denied that they did anything wrong. Chloe explained, “Girls make mean faces at me for no reason. They just decide they are mad at me and treat me that way.” Unfortunately Chloe exclaimed, “The teacher didn’t do anything! It didn’t help at all.” When Izzy told the teacher she disclosed, “My teacher just said for me to go play and don’t talk to her.” Mallory chose to tell the teacher as a last resort and reported positive results. Amanda, on the other hand, chose to talk to her mother about the problem. Amanda explained that her mother tends to minimize the situation and said that it happened to her when she was a girl. Only Lindsey, Sunny, and Mallory reported positive results from telling a teacher about the problem. All of the students disclosed a longing for support from the adults that they sought help from.

Lindsey, Mandy, Mallory, and Andy all chose to confront the aggressors. Lindsey stated, “I try to tell them to stop, but they don’t listen!” Mandy stated, “We could be just sitting in class and when the teacher is not looking she will look at me and roll her eyes or stick her tongue out.” I asked Mandy what her response would be when this happened.

She said, "I just asked them are we gonna be friends, and are you not going to make mean faces at me anymore. She eventually said yeah and we were friends again." Mandy stated that she was just tired of the faces and wanted the girl to stop. Mallory admitted to asking the girls to stop very nicely, "I said, 'Will you please stop'" She admitted that it did not work so she tried to tell them more assertively. Mallory stated, "I told them that I wanted them to stop right now!" Unfortunately, the more assertive attempt did not work either. Andy stated that girls make mean faces at her because they enjoy being mean to her. When asked what coping strategy she used Andy stated, "Ummm, I just told them that was not nice and it hurt my feelings." I asked how this worked for her and she said the girls do not really mind that it hurts her feelings. They continue to make faces at her and ignore her statements. Overall, this strategy did not help Andy. Only Mandy reported positive results after attempting to confront her aggressors.

Avoidance strategies. Avoidance strategies are those that move the person away from the stressor so that they may avoid the stress. Izzy and Kay both chose to play with other girls as an avoidance strategy in dealing with girls who make mean faces at them. Izzy stated, "I played with other kids because my teacher told me to do that." Izzy did not feel that this strategy was very helpful in dealing with relational aggression victimization. Although Kay tried another avoidance strategy as well, she felt that playing with other girls was the most helpful in dealing with this type of aggression.

Kay, Mallory, Taylor, Brittany, Rose, Amanda, and Tenley all chose to ignore their aggressors when they made mean faces. Kay stated, "First, I ignored her but it didn't work that good." Mallory also reported poor results from ignoring the aggressor. Taylor stated, "It's just their problem; it's not mine." She chose to ignore the girls when they

made the mean faces at her because she knew she had done nothing wrong. Brittany exclaimed, "I just walked away." She admitted that it did not keep the girls from making faces at her again but seemed to help for the moment. Rose chose to ignore the girl and walking away from her when they arrived at daycare. She stated that she wanted to do the same thing back to the girl but explained, "I knew it wasn't right to do it back." Rose disclosed that she felt better when she was able to get away from the girl and forget what happened. Amanda attempted to ignore the girls, acknowledging that although her feelings were hurt she did not let the girls know how she felt. Unfortunately, she reported that the coping strategy was not very helpful. Tenley used the same coping strategy for this problem each time. She chose to ignore the girls for a while. She stated, "They eventually go back to being friends with me again." Although Tenley felt that this strategy was helpful, she admitted that she was hurt by this act of aggression each time it occurred.

Saying Mean Things

When children say mean things about each other in an attempt to damage relationships, it is known as relational aggression (Ophelia, 2006). A total of 20 co-researchers admitted to girls saying mean things to them or about them as a type of victimization. Of the 20 co-researchers, four were in kindergarten, five were in first grade, and eleven were in second grade. All 20 students were interviewed until data saturation was met. However, five of the co-researchers only admitted to this type of victimization only through the documents analyzed and/or the art activities. In the documents and pictures, they did not discuss coping strategies, only the fact that they have experienced girls who say mean things to them or about them. Izzy's parents and

teachers approached me about a note that was found in class and written by Izzy. It said simply, "I hate myself." The teachers noted that this note was found after Izzy had experienced problems with her aggressors in class, including a claim that they were saying mean things to her. Izzy never admitted that girls said mean things to her during the interviews. I later tried to speak to Izzy about this incident, but she was not willing to disclose any further information.

Approach strategies. Of the fifteen co-researchers who discussed coping strategies in the interviews, fourteen co-researchers attempted approach strategies. Seven co-researchers tried telling an adult about the victimization. Katie declared, "Two girls in my class get together and call me mean names." She chose to tell the teacher, and she felt that the strategy was helpful. Grace recalled that girls often boss her around and are very rude when doing so. Grace chose only to tell the teacher when girls were bossing her around and saying mean things. She stated that her teacher always reprimanded the girls and it made her feel better. Lindsey's source of victimization came from an older cousin. She disclosed that she told her mom and dad and they talked to the cousin and the cousin's parents about the problem. Lindsey explained that the cousin usually got punished, which made her feel better. Taylor explained that girls often call her fat and big. She disclosed that she did not let them know she was upset but talked to her mom about it later. Taylor felt that her mother was helpful. Marie told her teacher and admitted, "The teacher told the girls they did not need to say mean things and if they did, then they would go to the principal." Marie felt better, but later admitted that she did not like to get her friends into trouble. Ally stated, "Those girls call me fat! I try to tell the teacher, but my teacher don't really help that much." Ally has also tried talking to her

mother when girls are mean to her. She felt that her mother has helped most. She admitted, “My mom makes me feel so much better because she does stuff with me that she normally doesn’t do.” When Rose tried to talk to her teacher about the victimization, her teacher gave her advice. One teacher told her she should put up her hand and say, “Talk to the hand!” All seven co-researchers reported positive results from talking to adults about this type of relational aggression victimization.

Six co-researchers tried to confront their aggressors. Sunny explained, “When those girls are bossy I get very mad. I say, ‘What’s your deal!’” Unfortunately, Sunny reported that the strategy was not very helpful. Mandy explained that she recently wore one of her favorite shirts to school that had one of her favorite cartoon characters on the shirt, but this girl in her class said it was not cute. Mandy disclosed, “I said that is not very nice. Please don’t say things like that to me.” Mandy stated that it made her feel better, but the girl “always” says mean things to other people too. Tara explained that her older sister often calls her stupid because she does not understand some of the homework she brings home from school. She disclosed, “I get so mad at her and tell her not to be mean, but she just keeps on.” Rose attempted the strategy given to her by her teacher in which she put up her hand and said, “Talk to the hand!” Rose disclosed that she felt that the strategy was helpful.

May, who is a first grader, explained that girls say mean things about the way she looks because she does not have any front teeth. She stated that she tried confronting them about the problem. She explained, “I told them that losing teeth comes naturally and I am no different than anyone else. It didn’t help though. They were still saying mean things.” She later explained that girls tell her she is a bad person and that they do not like

her. She explained that she becomes argumentative with them and tries to force them to realize that she is a good person. She stated, "It didn't help. They just got really mad at me."

Andy, a second grade girl, explained that girls said something really softly so she could not hear exactly what they said. So, Andy asked them, "What did you say? They don't tell me though." She disclosed that the fact that they said something mean and then would not admit what they said made her very mad and sad. Andy explained, "They don't even care! They just look at me and watch me cry!"

Four of the six co-researchers who tried confrontation reported that it was not a helpful coping strategy. Mandy and Rose both reported positive results. However, Mandy understood that her aggressor was mean to most girls in her class and felt a sense of accomplishment from standing up to the aggressor. Rose seemed to feel a sense of power over her aggressor when she put her hand in the aggressors face. Rose's coping strategy could be viewed as an aggressive strategy or even retaliation.

Brittany actually chose retaliation as a coping strategy for dealing with her aggressive sister. She hesitantly admitted, "I react and do the same thing back to them." She confessed that sometimes that strategy helped and sometimes it did not. She revealed that that her sister realized how it felt when she retaliated, but it continued to happen. Ally tried a different strategy by talking to another friend about the problem. She tried talking to the friend who told her about the mean things the girls had said. She felt that her friend was very helpful in making her feel better.

The approach coping strategies to deal with girls who say mean things to the victims or about the victims included telling an adult, confronting the aggressor,

retaliating, and talking to a friend. Confronting the aggressor was the least successful of all strategies attempted according to the co-researchers. Talking to an adult or a friend who is supportive tends to be the most successful approach coping strategy in dealing with this type of aggression.

Avoidance strategies. Only five co-researchers attempted to use avoidance strategies when dealing with girls who said mean things to them or about them. Most simply ignored the aggressors and walked away from them with no reaction at all. Chloe explained, “I try to just walk away from them.” This seems to help her because she does not have to be around the girls. Sarah explained, “This girl in my class was telling everyone that I was mean! She told girls that I said rude things about them and I didn’t!” Sarah chose to walk away and pointed out that if she had argued with the girl, it would have looked like she was guilty. By walking away and acting like it did not bother her, she was able to “prove” that the girl was telling lies about her. Sarah exuded maturity as she justified her actions. When girls called Taylor “fat” or “big” she disclosed that she did not let them know she was upset. “I just walk away.” Taylor said. Rose also chose to get away from the aggressors. Katie, on the other hand, chose to get away from her aggressors and play with other children. All five co-researchers reported successful results from using an avoidance strategy when girls are saying mean things to them or about them.

Teasing

When children tease each other by irritating or provoking in an attempt to damage relationships, it is known as relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; O’Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). For example, some aggressors began by telling others that the

co-researcher liked a certain boy. A total of eight co-researchers admitted to girls teasing them as a type of victimization. Of the eight co-researchers, four were in kindergarten, one was in first grade, and three were in second grade. All eight co-researchers were interviewed until data saturation was met. None of the co-researchers chose to write or draw about this type of victimization.

Approach strategies. Six of the eight co-researchers who experienced teasing tried some type of approach coping strategy. Three co-researchers chose to talk to an adult, one chose to confront the aggressor, one chose to retaliate, and one chose to laugh with the aggressors. Grace explained that her twin sister usually teases her, and she chose to tell her mom. Grace explained that the teasing made her, “crazy mad” and her mom helped by asking her sister to stop. Lindsey’s older cousin teased her often. Lindsey said, “She teases me because she doesn’t like me. I told my mom and dad.” They spoke to the cousin and her parents about the problem, which helped because the cousin was punished. Mandy explained, “A girl on the bus was telling all of the kids that I had a crush on a boy that’s on our bus!” Mandy described the situation with a scowl on her face. She reported that the boy was “gross” and she did not like him. Mandy told the bus driver right away and the bus driver reprimanded the girl by yelling at her to get in her seat and act nice.

Sunny described how she became, “super mad” when a girl in class teased her. Sunny explained, “I say, ‘Don’t tease me!’” She declared that this made her feel better because she got her feelings out. Brittany stated, “Well sometimes these girls are teasing me with my favorite things, and sometimes they are doing something in front of me that makes me uncomfortable.” She explained that with either of these situations, “I have tried

to do the same thing back to them, but it didn't help that much." Amanda tried a much different approach to teasing. She remembered falling down at recess and the girls teasing her and laughing. She admitted that she was extremely embarrassed and did not know what she should do, so she decided to laugh at herself. Although laughing at herself did not make her feel better on the inside, she was able to get through the embarrassing moment.

All of the co-researchers who sought adult help reported successful results. Sunny felt that when she confronted the aggressor it was helpful because she was able to get her feelings out. Brittany did not experience success from teasing her aggressors back, although she did not experience remorse for treating the girls the way they had treated her. Amanda was able to get through her embarrassing moment, but continued to feel bad on the inside. Several of the co-researchers talked about needing someone to support them after having experienced such embarrassing moments.

Avoidance strategies. Only three co-researchers attempted an avoidance strategy when they experienced teasing. All three co-researchers chose to ignore their aggressor. Katie stated that the girls in class tease her about boys or about what she is wearing. Katie stated that she usually just ignores them and it helps, however, she also admitted that she feels really bad after they tease her. Kay explained that this problem has occurred on the playground a few times. She said they would tease her about, "going out with gross boys!" Very confidently Kay explained, "I just ignore them and turn around and walk away!" Kay was adamant that ignoring and walking away from the teasers was helpful to her. Brittany explained that when girls tease her, "I guess I sort of try to ignore them first." She determined that sometimes ignoring them helped, but they have teased her

again. Overall, the co-researchers reported positive results from the avoidance strategy, but they admitted to feeling emotional about having experienced teasing.

Whispering

Whispering to other girls in the presence of our co-researchers is another way that girls hurt each other and is considered a form of relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; O'Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). Most of the time, the co-researchers were certain that the girls were talking about them. Even if they were not, it is very disrespectful for two children to whisper in front of another without including the third child. A total of 21 co-researchers admitted to girls whispering in front them as a type of victimization, with only Sue not having experienced this form of victimization. Of the 21 co-researchers, four were in kindergarten, six were in first grade, and 11 were in second grade. All 21 co-researchers were interviewed until data saturation was met. All of the co-researchers were asked to submit documents for analysis and were asked to complete art activities. Three co-researchers chose to draw pictures associated with girls whispering about them.

When asked to draw something at school that she would like to change, Katie drew a picture of two girls on a swing with herself watching (see Figure 1). Katie explained that the girls were on the swings talking about her. She stated that she wished girls would not talk about her. When asked to draw a picture of something at school that she would like to change, Chloe drew a picture of two girls whispering and a girl off to the side with a shocked expression (see Figure 2). In the conversation bubble, one girl said to the other, "She is willy wierd." The picture of the child being victimized bears a striking resemblance to Chloe. Chloe described her picture as a girl in class sassing her.

She talked about how she wished people would quit talking about others and just be sweet. She longs for school friendships without relational aggression victimization. I asked Ally to draw a picture of something at school that she would like to change. Ally illustrated a picture of two girls whispering. She also drew herself all alone and looking very sad (see Figure 3). I asked Ally to explain the picture. She stated, “This is what it looks like when girls whisper about me. I know they are talking about how fat I am. I just want them to stop being mean.”



Figure 1. Katie's Drawing. This drawing shows two girls whispering about Katie on the playground.



Figure 2. Chloe's Drawing. This drawing shows two girls whispering about Chloe and stating, "She is willy wierd."

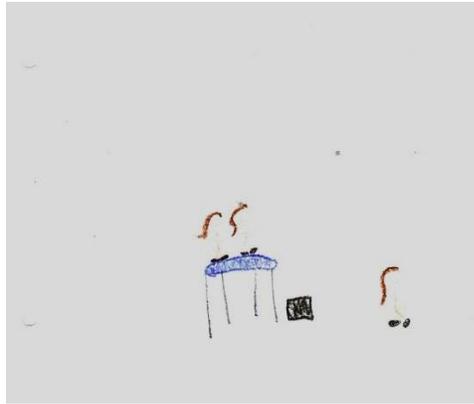


Figure 3. Ally's Drawing. This drawing shows two girls whispering about Ally as she walks off being very sad.

Approach strategies. Nineteen of the 21 co-researchers who experienced whispering tried an approach coping strategy, with some co-researchers attempting more than one approach strategy. The approach coping strategies attempted included telling an adult, confronting the aggressor, retaliating, and talking to other friends. Most co-researchers reported successful results from the use of approach coping strategies.

Several co-researchers chose to tell an adult about girls who whisper in front of them. Grace disclosed, "When me and my sister have a friend over to our house to play, she does this to me." Grace talked to her mom, and her mother talked to Grace to help her handle the problem on her own by talking to the aggressor and letting her know it makes her feel bad. Lindsey explained, "When they whispered, I telled the teacher and she said, 'Stop or you won't go outside anymore.'" Lindsey declared that this strategy was very helpful because the girls stopped whispering. Izzy, who seemed to be particularly affected by this type of victimization, concluded, "When I tell my teachers, they just tell me to go sit down." Sarah confessed, "These two girls were whispering and I thought they were talking about me because they made a face." She revealed that she told her teacher because she is always helpful when dealing with friendship issues. Her teacher

confronted the girls. Sarah disclosed, “They said they were not talking about me. They told the teacher they were talking about dogs and cats. They tell lies! They were really talking about me because they were looking at me.” Andy decided to go tell the teacher after two girls were whispering in front of her. With a scowl on her face, Andy explained, “She just says, ‘I can’t make them be your friend.’” After the teacher did not help her, Andy decided to go home and talk to her mother about the issue. She stated, “I tried telling my mommy, and now it’s better.” When girls whisper in front of Amanda, she told the teacher who was not helpful at all. Amanda explained that the teacher talked to all of the girls at once. The aggressive girls changed their story because they were afraid of getting in trouble. She stated, “They just tell the teacher what she wants to hear.” Co-researchers who reported successful results with telling an adult described a sense of validation from the adult. Even if the adult did not actively talk to the aggressors, they made the victim feel supported. Those who reported unsuccessful results described adults who did not want to help at all and who made the victim feel as if they were not being truthful. Most co-researchers described adults who were very supportive and helpful.

Seven co-researchers tried to confront their aggressors. Katie and May both chose to ask their aggressors what they were talking about. May stated, “I usually ask them what they are talking about. They don’t tell me. They just say I’m weird and turn away.” Macy disclosed, “I knew those girls were whispering about me because they were looking at me when they were talking.” She said that she told the girls, “You better stop whispering about me! It made them stop too!” Mandy explained that when she got the bad feeling in her tummy she knew it was time to do something. She confronted the girls who were whispering about her. When asked if it helped, Mandy chuckled and said,

“Well, kind of.” The girls reportedly came up with something to tell Mandy that they were talking about. Mandy did not believe them, but she did feel better because they stopped looking at her and whispering. Rose became so frustrated with her aggressors that she yelled at them. Rose, in turn, got into trouble for yelling. Both Chloe and Tenley attempted to ask the aggressors what they were talking about, but the aggressors did not acknowledge their question. Only Mandy and Macy reported successful results from confronting their aggressors.

Sunny and Tenley both tried to retaliate against their aggressors. Sunny stated, “When they do that to me I just whisper about them to someone else.” She feels that this strategy helps because the girls see how it feels. The social learning theory of aggression is relevant in Sunny’s behavior and in the strategy she has chosen. After attempting several other strategies, Tenley retaliated by whispering about the girls to someone else. She claimed that she felt much better because, “They know how I feel.” She later reflected on her actions. She stated, “I went by myself and thought about what happened. I told myself that they were very mean and deserved what I did.” Both girls reported successful results because the aggressors were able to see how it feels. However, it is never recommended for victims to retaliate against their aggressor (Girlshealth.gov, 2009).

Brittany and Ally both chose to talk to other girls to figure out if there was ever anything to be concerned about. Brittany confessed that she will ask other girls what they were whispering about because, “I want to know if there is really a problem.” She disclosed, “Sometimes they tell me and sometimes they won’t.” I asked Brittany if the whispering still occurs. She admitted that it does, so overall this strategy has not helped

combat the problem with whispering. Ally disclosed, “My good friend would follow me to help me feel better. Sometimes she even listens in to what they are saying and she will tell me.” She feels that her friend is being helpful by telling her what they said and supporting her when she is sad. Brittany did not find this strategy helpful, but Ally did. Ally found the strategy helpful because her friend supported her and helped her cheer up.

Overall, the co-researchers reported the most successful results when they were supported by an adult or a friend. Although the co-researchers who retaliated found their strategy successful, it is not a coping strategy that is recommended to alleviate relational aggression victimization.

Avoidance strategies. Several co-researchers attempted an avoidance strategy. The two avoidance strategies used were to ignore the aggressors and to play with other children. Katie stated, “I usually just ignore them and play with other kids when they whisper about me.” She declared that the strategy was helpful. When describing the eight year old girl who usually leads the whispering May said, “She’s all popular! Lots of people like her, but not me!” May chose to ignore her aggressor but did not feel that the strategy was helpful. Chloe always chose to ignore the whispering explaining, “It helps me because I just pretend it isn’t happening.” Taylor stated, “I just ignore them because they might not be talking about me. They might be talking about someone else.” Ally was deeply troubled by this type of aggression. She has tried running away from the girls and would often end up crying because of the whispering. When Rose tried to ignore her aggressors and walk away she stated, “They just followed me whispering!” Both Kay and Marie try to ignore their aggressors each time. It seems to help for the moment, but the same type of aggression occurs again. Both girls have better friends, but desire to be

friends with the aggressive girls. Amanda found other kids to play with, who made her feel better on the inside. Amanda disclosed, "Time helps most." After time goes by, the girls always decide to be Amanda's friend again. Most of the co-researchers found an avoidance strategy helpful because it helped them get away from the stressful situation and did not have to think about it. Those who did not experience success dealt with aggressors who were very persistent with the hurtful actions.

Left Out of Games

Leaving someone out of group activities on purpose is a hurtful form of relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; O'Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). Most of the co-researchers who were hurt by being left out of games reported that it happened on the playground. At the school under study, the teachers usually huddle in a designated area, which is a row of chairs lined up around the outside edge of the playground, as the children play on the playground equipment. The playground is a rather large, approximately half of a football field, so it is difficult for the teachers to see or hear everything that occurs because of their position. Sixteen co-researchers reported being left out of games as a form of victimization. All co-researchers were interviewed until data saturation occurred. All students were asked to submit documents for analysis or to participate in art activities. Many of those victimized by this type of aggression either wrote or drew about the problem.

Approach strategies. Approach coping strategies are viewed as a way to change the stressful situation (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Most co-researchers who used an approach strategy chose to tell an adult about the problem. One child threatened her aggressor and

another retaliated. Most co-researchers who chose to use an approach strategy for being left out of games reported successful results.

Sue explained that she and some friends were on the playground playing the Barbie and Mermaid Tails 2 game. As the game began, a girl told Sue that she could not play anymore because she was not running fast. Sue chose to tell the teacher about being left out of the game, and the teacher spoke to the girls and asked them to let Sue play. Grace disclosed, "It makes me feel so bad when they leave me out!" She usually tells her mom about what happened at school, and her mother directs her to find someone else to play with when this occurs. When Lindsey told her teacher about being left out, her teacher would walk to the playground to reprimand the students. Lindsey did not recall being able to play with the students even after the teacher's redirection. Although Lindsey admits to feeling a sense of accomplishment after telling her teacher, the strategy did not help the situation. Tara's issues occurred at the afterschool program. She explained, "The teachers just tell me to stop being a tattler." However, the SWAP teachers disclosed that they realize three girls have had serious problems to the point that the teachers limit their time together, and they do not let all three girls play together at the same time. Therefore, even though Tara felt that the teachers did not help, they were attempting to prevent future problems from occurring. Ally told a story about a baby game that is often played at recess. Each girl apparently has a part in the game by playing the mother, the baby sitter, or the baby. Ally stated, "They said I wasn't good enough and kicked me out of the game." Ally was very distraught after this happened the first time and explained that she went home and talked to her mother about the problem. Her mother directed her to just ignore them and not to let it bother her. Only Tara reported

negative results from telling an adult although the adults felt that they were actually helping the problem. Perhaps Tara would have felt more successful if she had been supported by the teachers.

Mandy explained that she and some friends were on the playground playing a game called, "Girls' Touch". This is reportedly a game in which girls are on one team and boys are on another. The girls chase the boys and try to tag them. If tagged, the boy is on the girl team until he tags another boy. During this game, a girl told her that she could not play anymore because she was not running fast. Mandy explained that she had flip flops on that day and was not able to run like she normally runs. The girls told her to go play on the swings. In this occurrence, Mandy chose to threaten the girl with not being her friend. She explained that she said, "If you do not let me play, I will not be your friend anymore." Mandy reported successful results from using this strategy. Mallory recalled a time that a group of girls did not want to play the game she chose for them to play. She told them, "Hey! If ya'll don't want to be part of my game, then I'm not going to be a part of your game anymore!" She explained that they are supposed to take turns choosing games; each girl in the group gets to choose a game and it was Mallory's turn to choose. Mallory stated that it is not fair when they do not want to play her games. She assured me that her method of coping with this situation was effective and solved her problem. Although both Mandy and Mallory reported successful results, their strategies are not suggested because they could cause a cycle of aggressive behaviors among the children.

Avoidance strategies. All co-researchers who used an avoidance strategy chose to play with other friends to cope with the victimization. Katie recalled a time that a

group of girls did not want to her to play fairies with them. She stated that she just found someone else to play with. Katie admitted that she still felt really bad but felt better to have someone else in which to play. It appeared that this problem greatly affected Izzy as well because she resorted to her shy behavior with this question. She bowed her head and displayed a pouty face while shaking her head that yes, this has in fact happened often. Izzy chose to, “play with someone else.” I asked if this was helpful, and Izzy shyly shook her head yes. Taylor disclosed, “It’s aggravating . . . cause like . . . if they don’t like me to play then I have to play another game.” She stated that she never shows emotion although she is hurt deeply on the inside. She usually finds someone else to play with when this occurs.

Marie explained that the group of friends who are sometimes not nice once planned to go to a local family fun center together. The family fun center has both indoor and outdoor games for children. Marie explained that it really hurt her feelings when they did not invite her to go. I asked if the girls knew Marie was sad. She told me that they did know because she acted very sad around them. They even asked her several times what was wrong. She stated that those girls just think they are better than her sometimes. She remembers choosing to play with her true friends more that day.

Brittany described how a teacher’s child, who is in the second grade and is supposed to be her friend, would ask her younger sister to come and play in her mother’s room. Brittany stated that she made it clear that she was inviting her sister only. Brittany disclosed, “It sort of made me feel like I wasn’t part of the world.” She admitted that it was a very uncomfortable feeling. Brittany communicated that she believed that the girls

knew she was very hurt but did not care. She chose to play with other kids that day, but continued to feel bad about the incident.

All of the co-researchers reported successful results from playing with other children, although some still felt very emotional about the victimization. The co-researchers felt the need to feel like they belonged in a game, and were very hurt by the rejection of the aggressors. Some even said that they needed someone to help them feel better when left out of games. The avoidance strategy helped the problem for the moment, but did not help with their emotional state.

Making Fun

Making fun of someone for being “different” is a damaging form of relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; O’Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). Only six co-researchers reported that girls had made fun of them. Four co-researchers chose approach strategies and two co-researchers chose avoidance strategies. All co-researchers were interviewed until data saturation occurred, were asked to submit documents for analysis, and were asked to participate in art activities. None of the co-researchers chose to write or draw about this form of victimization.

Approach strategies. Four co-researchers chose to use an approach coping strategy. Two chose to tell an adult, one chose to confront the aggressor, and one chose to retaliate. Lindsey and Mallory both decided to tell an adult. Mallory told about a time that girls were looking at her and laughing. She was not completely sure why the girls were laughing, but felt sure they were making fun of her outfit. Mallory explained that her feelings were being hurt and felt that it was alright to get help from the teacher right away. Mallory stated, “The teacher told them to quit doing that and if they do it again

then they'll have to go to the principal and be in ISS." ISS is a term used for In School Suspension. This is a form of time out in which the student is secluded from the general population of students for a day or two at a time. They just sit at a cubby and do work for the entire day. When asked if she thought the strategy was effective, Mallory explained, "It worked good." When girls made fun of Grace she told them, "Back off! It's not funny!" She stated that it made her so mad because they were laughing at her. She explained that by confronting the girls herself, she felt that the girls realized they had done wrong. Sunny explained, "I just make fun of them!" She disclosed that by addressing the problem in this manner, she felt that the girls would see how it felt. Sunny felt much better after using this strategy, although she admits that the problem has reoccurred. Although all of the co-researchers felt that their coping strategy was successful, telling an adult may have been the most successful because it would not create more problems for the victims.

Avoidance strategies. Both Taylor and Izzy chose to use avoidance coping strategies when aggressors made fun of them. Taylor described how girls make fun of her. She stated that she is often teased because of her weight and height. She is taller than any of the boys in class and almost as tall as the teacher. She explained that when they tease her it really hurts her feelings, but she does not show any emotions. I asked what she does when they make fun of her. Taylor stated, "I just said to myself it's your problem, it's not mine. Then I just walked away." Again, Taylor explained that this is the motto her mother teaches to help deal with mean girls. She explained that this method of dealing with the problem made her feel better. Izzy was extremely shy about talking about this type of aggression. She was unable to give details about how girls make fun of

her, but simply stated that she does, “Nothing!” in response. Taylor felt that this strategy was extremely helpful when dealing with this type of aggression, and Izzy felt that it was not helpful.

Stealing Friends

Telling others not to play with a certain classmate is a form of relational aggression (Ophelia, 2006). A total of 11 co-researchers experienced this type of hurtful victimization. All co-researchers were interviewed until data saturation was met, with most choosing to use more than one coping strategy for this type of victimization. All co-researchers were asked to submit documents for analysis and to complete art activities, although most did not choose to write or draw about this form of victimization. One student did choose to draw a picture of an aggressor who stole her friend. When asked to draw a picture of something that she would like to change with her friendships, Marie drew a picture of two girls together and one off to herself (see Figure 4). The child who was alone appeared to be very sad about what was going on with the other two girls. I asked Marie to explain. She stated, “This girl took my friend and told her she shouldn’t be friends with me anymore. After that, she wouldn’t be friends with me anymore. I think kids should be friends with everyone.” The drawing was a disclosure of pain that Marie had experienced in the past.



Figure 4. Marie's Drawing. This drawing shows the aggressor who stole Marie's friend. Marie is on the right side feeling very sad.

Approach strategies. The co-researchers who used an approach strategy chose to tell an adult, confront the aggressor, or retaliate. May admitted that she cried about this type of victimization often, but that never helped. She stated, "I don't cry anymore. I tell them that I will tell the teacher what they are doing. My teacher always helps me." She admitted that threatening to tell the teacher helps and that telling the teacher helps. Chloe seemed to be a bit sensitive over her friends, feeling left out when her friends simply chose to play with a different group for the day. She said she always got really mad when this happened. She usually went to a spot alone and threw rocks at the fence. I asked if she had ever gotten in trouble for throwing the rocks. She assured me that she did not because she never threw rocks at kids, only at the fence. She also explained that she tried talking to the teacher about the problem. However, her teacher was unable to help her resolve this problem. Both Grace and Lindsey told their teacher when someone stole their friends, however their teacher was unable to help them. They both admitted that they felt better because they were able to tell someone about the problem. Sunny took a very different approach. She stated, "I take their friends away so they know how it feels." Sunny felt that this was a very helpful strategy in dealing with relational aggression. Tenley explained that girls, "decide to become friends with my friends. Then they play together and will not let me play." Tenley has tried to confront the girls, but the strategy

did not change the situation. She disclosed that they became friends again after a few days not because of a coping strategy used by Tenley, but because they simply decided to be friends again.

There is very little that a teacher can do to help this situation except for supporting the victim. The co-researchers who chose to tell the teacher do not remember any specific actions taken by the teacher, only that they felt supported. Tenley felt that giving the situation time is the most successful strategy. Although Sunny felt that her strategy of retaliation was helpful, it is never a good idea to combat relational aggression with aggression.

Avoidance strategies. The co-researchers chose to use two types of avoidance strategies, playing with other friends and ignoring the aggressor. Katie stated that girls start playing with her friends and those friends no longer want to play with Katie. Over the course of the interviews, Katie communicated that this caused her the greatest pain. She chose to play with other girls, which seemed to help. Kay nonchalantly expressed that sometimes her two best friends become better friends and they do not include her anymore. This is one of the only times that I saw a bit of hurt in Kay's eyes as she explained the situation. She disclosed that this made her very sad. In fact, she admitted to crying often when this occurs. Kay described how she found other friends to play with, but she still missed her old friend. Macy narrowed her eyes with anger as she expressed how other girls in the class take her two best friends away. She disclosed that this made her very angry because, "They were my friends first!" Macy chose to play with someone else each time this occurred, which helped. Sarah explained that in her class all of the girls are left out at some point. She stated, "Everyone just steals everyone else's friends

all the time.” Sarah revealed that she always got very sad. She stated, “All I could do is find other kids to play with.” Tenley chose to ignore the aggressors, but disclosed that only time helped the situation. Overall, having other friends to play with seems to give the co-researchers a sense of hope. Although most were very emotional about this type of victimization, they felt relieved to have another friend to be around.

Ignoring

Giving someone the “silent treatment” is a painful way that girls hurt each other by what is known as relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; O’Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). A total of 17 co-researchers experienced girls who ignore them on purpose; with three co-researchers being in kindergarten, three in first grade, and 11 in second grade. All co-researchers were interviewed until data saturation was met. They were all asked to submit documents for analysis and to complete art activities, although none of the co-researchers chose to write or draw about this type of victimization.

Approach strategies. Approach strategies are oriented toward a stressor and represent actions by the child to actively seek out information, demonstrate concern, and make plans for solving the problem (Roth & Cohen, 1986). The types of avoidance strategies chosen by the co-researchers included talking to an adult, talking to other friends about the problem, confronting the aggressor, and retaliating. Eleven co-researchers attempted one of the above coping strategies to try to alleviate the stress of relational aggression victimization.

Most co-researchers who tried to talk to an adult about the problem found that it was a helpful strategy. Lindsey declared, “I just tell the teacher and she gets on to them.” Sunny seemed to feel aggravated when discussing the problem of being ignored. She

stated that she has tried to tell the teacher and felt that telling the teacher was helpful because she redirected the children. After trying many other strategies, Mandy finally decided to tell the bus driver about a girl on the bus that was ignoring her. Mandy confessed that her goal at this point was to get the girl in trouble because she did not feel that anything would make her start talking again. The strategy did work in that the child was reprimanded by the bus driver. Tenley explained that when girls ignored her, she became very frustrated. She tried asking her parents for help, and they told her to, “get them back by doing what they did.” Tenley felt that the advice given to her by her parents was helpful.

Two students reported unsuccessful results from talking to an adult. As Andy recalled this story, she would scrunch her eyes and frown. She explained that girls just decide to start ignoring her and they will not look at her, talk to her, or include her in any activities. She stated that there was no real reason for the girls to be mad at her; they got together and decided to be mad at her. Among other strategies used by Andy, she stated that she tried to tell on them, but the teacher says the same thing she always says. Andy said, “The teacher always says that she cannot make them be friends with me.” Amanda also tried talking to her teacher about girls who were ignoring her. Amanda reported that her teacher said, “I am not going to deal with this girl drama today!” These two co-researchers expressed extreme frustration by the lack of concern by their teachers. They simply wanted someone to listen to them and make them feel better, even if there was nothing that could actually be done.

Some co-researchers decided to talk to other friends about the problem and found the strategy to be very successful. Andy, who was frustrated by other strategies she had

attempted, stated, "Sally always tries to help me when my friends are being mean to me. She says, 'Why are yall being mean to her because she didn't do anything to you!'" Andy disclosed that this always makes her feel better. She described Sally, "She's a happy friend." When asked to define happy friend, Andy explained, "She always likes us to have fun with her, and she always likes us to be happy." Andy stated that the happy friend does not do the things to her that the other friends do. She is always good to Andy. Brittany stated, "My neighbor helps me sometimes because I'll do something and she knows right from wrong because she is in third grade. I'll say, 'Was that the right decision or the wrong decision?'" The third grade neighbor helped Brittany figure out whether her strategies were the right ones or the wrong ones. After trying several other strategies, Amanda decided to talk to another friend. The friend helped her to feel much better.

Ally acknowledged that a particular friend in her class ignores her often. Ally stated, "She ignores me and I don't know why she acts like I'm invisible!" Ally explained that she usually asks her other friends what to do. Those friends go and talk to the other friend for Ally. She explained, "They ask her what's wrong. I think she just gets mad at me for liking the same boy as she does." According to Ally, she gets most frustrated with this particular friend and sometimes takes out her frustrations about other things on this friend. She could not voice any particular reason she takes out her frustrations on this particular friend. However, it may be noted that the friend could be using ignoring as a strategy to help her alleviate problems with Ally. In Ally's case, the friends seem to be trying to help Ally and the accused aggressor work out their problems.

Confronting the aggressor was another popular approach strategy for the co-researchers. After being ignored by a student on the bus, Mandy got on the bus and tried to talk to the girl, but she would not talk back. Mandy explained that it made her really angry because she wanted to tell her something important. Mallory attempted two of the steps to the DeBug system, including talking friendly and talking firmly. She determined that the two strategies were successful. Marie acknowledged that ignoring occurs often within her preferred friendship group. She revealed that she would come to school one morning and they would be ignoring her for no reason. The most recent occurrence was one week prior to the interview. Marie explained that she got very upset and tapped the girls on the arm. This made her feel even worse because the girls still ignored her. She had no idea of what else to try when girls ignore her. Tara explained, "She sticks her fingers in her ears. I ask her if she wants to be my friend, but she just keeps her fingers in her ears." Like Tara, most of the co-researchers reported unsuccessful results from confronting the aggressor. Only Mallory determined that confronting her aggressors was a successful strategy.

Finally, two co-researchers attempted retaliation as one of their coping strategies. Brittany explained, "I try to do the same thing to them." I asked how this worked for Brittany. She admitted, "Uh, I guess fine. Sometimes they'll forget they are ignoring me and say something. I'll pretend like I didn't hear it." I asked if she felt better after retaliating. She disclosed, "Sort of because I think now she gets to feel like what I felt like." Based on advice given by her parents, Tenley tried ignoring the girls so that they could see how it felt. Tenley claims that this strategy was helpful. She believed that the girls realized how it felt and decided to be nice again.

Overall, talking to an adult or a friend who is supportive seemed to be the most successful approach coping strategy. Although the co-researchers who attempted retaliation felt that the strategies were successful, it is not recommended for girls to retaliate against their aggressors (Gomes, 2011). As noted by Gomes (2011), “it is crucial that adolescent girls faced with this victimization experience learn positive ways of coping to prevent the use of ineffective coping skills such as retaliation.” (p. 4).

Avoidance strategies. Avoidance strategies are actions that are oriented away from a stressor in an effort to avoid the stress, and although adult literature has demonstrated that avoidance strategies are associated with poor social functioning, avoidance strategies may be useful if they reduce stress and control anxiety (Fields & Prinz, 1997; Roth & Cohen, 1986). The two avoidance strategies chosen by co-researchers included ignoring the aggressors and playing with other children.

Izzy originally insisted that she did nothing when girls ignored her. In later interviews, she stated that she chose to play with someone else. I asked if this helped, and Izzy shook her head to indicate that it was not helpful. Izzy appeared to be extremely affected by this type of relational aggression. Grace, Sunny, Kay, and Macy all chose to ignore the aggressors and felt that the strategy was helpful in alleviating the stress of the situation. Mallory, who always seemed to choose a step of the DeBug system, chose to ignore the aggressors and walk away. She also felt that the strategy was successful. Taylor explained, “When they don’t answer, I just do what I’m supposed to do.” She stated that she tries not to worry about what they are doing and why they are ignoring her. When asked if this strategy makes her feel better she stated, “Yes, because they might get in trouble by the teacher and stuff.” Rose disclosed, “Usually the older girls ignore me.”

When the girls ignored Rose, she always chose to ignore the situation and walk away. She explained that walking away helps take her mind off of the problem, and she begins to feel better. When Amanda tried ignoring her aggressors she stated, “Once it went on for a whole week!” Ignoring the situation did not make Amanda feel better. Overall, most co-researchers felt that ignoring and getting away from the situation was a successful strategy.

Left Out of Friendship Group

Leaving someone out of a friendship group on purpose is a destructive form of relational aggression in which the child feels as if she is all alone (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; O’Rourke, 2008; Young et al., 2010). A total of nine co-researchers experienced this form of victimization, including three kindergarten students, two first grade students, and four second grade students. All of the co-researchers who experienced girls who left them out of a friendship group only attempted one type of coping strategy. Four co-researchers tried an approach strategy and five tried an avoidance strategy, with the results being very similar for each type of strategy.

Approach strategies. The co-researchers who used an approach strategy chose to talk to an adult, with only one child choosing to retaliate against her aggressor. According to the teacher, Lindsey is never part of anyone’s group, but Lindsey explained that girls leave her out of their group when they are on the playground. She stated, “I tell the teacher that they won’t let me hang out with them.” Lindsey felt much better after letting the teacher know even though the problem occurs again. Mandy revealed that her older cousin and neighbor were hanging out and she wanted to be included, but they just kept walking off and doing their own thing. Mandy described feeling mad and sad at the same

time because she wanted them to include her but could not think of a way to make it happen. She stated that her uncle, her cousin's father, was really nice so she decided to go tell him. She felt confident that he would make her cousin include her, and he came through for her. Her uncle directed the cousin to include Mandy. Even though the girls were not at all happy about being directed to include her in their group, they allowed her to follow along. Mallory again chose to use steps to the DeBug system, but felt that getting adult help was the most successful strategy. All three co-researchers experienced success from getting adult help.

The girls Marie prefers to hang out with tend to leave her out at times. She stated that she chose to leave them out when they want to hang out with her. Marie admitted that she did not think it bothered the girls because they continue to leave her out of their group. I asked Marie how she felt when she retaliated against the preferred group of friends. She acknowledged that she gained no joy from being mean to them even though they were mean to her first. In fact, she felt very badly after attempting to leave the girls out of something she was doing. Marie did not feel that retaliation was a successful strategy.

Avoidance strategies. Grace, Sunny, Macy, and Taylor chose to play with other children as their avoidance strategy and Izzy chose to do nothing and be upset. Grace explained, "I just find my own group to play with." Although she continued to feel sad and mad, it made her feel better to be a part of some group. Sunny stated that she gets mad and, "I find another group to play with." Although she continued to be mad, it made her feel better to be a part of some group. Macy furrowed her brow as she discussed how she was left out of groups. She talked of how rude the other children were to her when

they would not let her play. I asked what she chose to do and she explained that there are other classes on the playground, so she would always find kids in other classes or groups of boys to play with. Although Macy was obviously angry about this problem, she assured me that her strategy was helpful. Taylor stated, “Umm, I just get another group to play with.” When asked if she felt better when she found another group, she explained, “Way better!” She stated that she was always able to find someone to play with, even if it included boys. All four girls determined that finding other children to play with was helpful because they felt like they were not alone. Whenever I asked Izzy about being left out of a friendship group, she explained that she became very sad, but did nothing. I asked if her friends knew she was sad, and she answered yes. I asked if this strategy was helpful, and she would always look sad while shaking her head no.

Overall, co-researchers who used the approach strategy of telling an adult and were supported felt that the strategy was helpful when dealing with being left out of a friendship group. Co-researchers who used the avoidance strategy of playing with other children felt that it was successful because they felt like they were part of a group. Again, the co-researchers have shown that support and validation are the key in helping them feel successful.

Research Questions

Research Question One

Research question one was, “What approach coping strategies do girls use?” This section describes the approach coping strategies chosen by the co-researchers. Approach strategies are oriented toward a stressor and represent actions by the child to actively seek out information, demonstrate concern, and make plans for solving the

problem (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Female students who were in kindergarten, first, or second grade and were identified as having experienced relational aggression participated in this study as co-researchers. All 22 co-researchers attempted to use approach coping strategies. Overall, more approach strategies were chosen than avoidance, possibly because there were more options for coping strategies among those classified as approach. Some girls chose to use approach coping strategies more often than avoidance. Those girls who chose approach coping strategies more often were either extremely frustrated, had a good support system, or had better self-esteem. Among the approach strategies chosen the girls told an adult, confronted the aggressor, retaliated, or asked other kids for help.

Telling an adult. The most popular approach strategy for the girls in kindergarten, first, and second grade tended to be telling an adult. Telling an adult is the last and final step to the DeBug system and is not to be used until all other steps have been attempted. Most girls chose to tell their teacher about the problems with other girls. Those who reported that the strategy was helpful had teachers who validated their feelings and either supported the student's efforts in alleviating relational aggression or they intervened. Sara declared that she told her teacher because her teacher is always helpful, and Sara has explained this means that the teacher believes Sara, confronts the aggressors, and has conversations with the aggressors about how to treat others. Those who reported that the strategy was not helpful had teachers who chose not to get involved in relational aggression issues. For example, Amanda reported that her teacher said, "I am not going to deal with this girl drama today!" Yet others were torn between telling the teacher so that they could receive help and the guilt of getting the girls in trouble. Marie

admitted that she was glad the teacher tried to help her by telling the aggressors that they should not say mean things and threatening to send them to the principal's office, but she did not feel better because she did not want the girls to get into trouble.

Confrontation. Some of the girls chose to confront the aggressor. Threats were one strategy chosen to confront the aggressors. May and Chloe chose to threaten to tell the teacher when girls were being relationally aggressive. They reported that the strategy helped only sometimes, possibly due to overuse of this particular strategy. Mandy, on the other hand, threatened to withdraw her friendship, which could be considered a relationally aggressive behavior. Some students chose to talk to the aggressors, which is included in two steps to the DeBug System; talk friendly or talk firmly. Girls such as Grace, Rose, and Sunny took this to the next level and yelled, "Back off!" or "What's your deal?" Other girls like Andy attempted to reason with the aggressors by explaining that their actions were not very nice. Rose chose a strategy suggested by her teacher in which she holds a hand in the aggressor's face and states, "Talk to the hand!" Overall, confronting the aggressors had very mixed reviews on effectiveness.

Retaliation. Retaliation was another coping strategy chosen by some of the girls who experienced relational aggression victimization. The girls felt that by retaliating they were able to show the aggressors how it felt for someone to hurt them. Sunny especially found solace in retaliation, admitting that every time she retaliated it helped the situation. She acknowledged that she had ignored girls, whispered about girls, made fun of girls, and took the friends of other girls simply to retaliate against her aggressors. Mallory and Marie both retaliated by leaving the aggressors out of games. Mallory felt that the strategy was helpful while Marie did not find it helpful. Brittany chose to ignore girls and

tease them in retaliation, and she felt that the strategies were helpful. Tenley decided to whisper about her aggressors and to ignore them in retaliation and admitted that both were helpful. Although retaliation can be considered relational aggression in and of itself, most of the girls found the strategy helpful because of how it made them feel inside. Co-researchers who tried the strategy discussed feeling a sense of power over their aggressors. This was a helpful strategy to the young girls even though it is not a strategy educators should recommend because of the long-term effects on other girls.

Seeking peer help. One successful approach strategy discussed was seeking help from other girls. Co-researchers who chose to talk to their friends in an effort to alleviate their problems with relational aggression reported positive results. Andy called her friend the “happy friend.” Not only was her friend someone that she could talk to when she was feeling sad, but her “happy friend” stood up for Andy when the aggressors were being hurtful. Andy felt validated and as if she belonged to someone. Brittany chose seeking advice from her third grade neighbor over the advice of her mother. She disclosed that her neighbor is in the third grade and knows right from wrong. Brittany would tell her friend what happened and get her opinion on whether or not it was the right thing. Brittany felt that her friend understood her feelings and believed what was happening to her. Ally disclosed that her good friend would follow her and make her feel better when others were mean. She explained that when girls were whispering about her, the friend would listen in and tell her what they said later. Amanda also felt that talking to her friend about relational aggression was very helpful. All girls reported that confiding in a friend was a helpful strategy.

All 22 co-researchers from this study attempted at least one approach strategy, while two co-researchers attempted only approach strategies. There were several approach strategies that were deemed helpful by the co-researchers and could be used as viable options for other girls.

Research Question Two

Research question two was, “What avoidance coping strategies do girls use?” This section of the findings describes the avoidance coping strategies chosen by the co-researchers. Most of the 22 co-researchers attempted to use approach coping strategies, with only two co-researchers choosing only approach strategies. Avoidance strategies include expressing emotions or escape, and seem to be an attempt at managing painful emotions. Avoidance strategies could be useful if they reduce stress and control anxiety for children (Roth & Cohen, 1986). All of the girls who chose to use avoidance strategies also chose to use approach strategies. Among the avoidance strategies chosen the co-researchers ignored the aggressors, walked away, showed emotions, gave it time, and played with other kids.

Ignoring/walking away. Co-researchers often attempted to ignore aggressors or walk away from them because both are steps of the DeBug System implemented at the school under study. The DeBug System was originally designed to help students solve minor problems that are created when other students are “bugging” them (Mathias, 1992). The program was designed to help students learn to be assertive and promote self-management of problems (Oppenhuizen, 2001). The DeBug System is the only program available at the primary school in which the students participate. It is not recognized as a bullying prevention program at this time. The co-researchers expressed satisfaction in

having concrete steps to take that help them first attempt to handle the problem alone, however these first two steps of the DeBug System had mixed reviews on effectiveness. Sarah pointed out that she walked away because if she had argued with her aggressor, then it would have looked like she was guilty. By walking away and acting like it did not bother her, she was able to “prove” that the girl was telling lies about her. Rose disclosed that she felt better when she was able to ignore, get away from the aggressor, and forget what happened. Other co-researchers were not able to avoid their aggressors as easily and reported less effective results.

Emotional. Some co-researchers became emotional as a result of relational aggression victimization. Showing emotions can be a way of managing painful situations (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Although showing emotions can be helpful if it reduces stress, all co-researchers reported that this strategy was not helpful at all. Andy reported, “They don’t even care! They just look at me and watch me cry!” Izzy became so emotionally distraught that she wrote a note that stated, “I hate myself!” (see Figure 5). The co-researchers in this study who chose avoidance strategies preferred them because it helped take their mind off of the situation. Rose explained that showing emotions meant that she was thinking about the problem, and she would rather focus on happy thoughts.

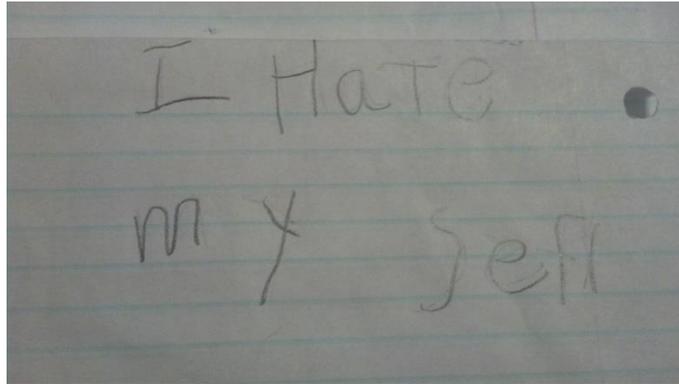


Figure 5. Izzy's Note. This is a note found by Izzy's teacher after a particularly tough day with her aggressors.

Time. Amanda explained that time was a helpful avoidance coping strategy. She stated, "Time helps most." Out of the eight strategies Amanda attempted, she found that time was the most helpful for her. She disclosed that by simply doing nothing and giving her aggressors time, everything works itself out, and the aggressors choose to be her friend again.

Playing with others. Several of the research subjects described a sense of security from playing with other students. Marie explained that when she was left out, she knew she could play with her "true friends." Although she longed to play with the girls who were leaving her out, she realized that she would have friends to play with each day. She explained, "When they left me out of their group I played with my true friends. I felt better but I still wanted to play with them." Andy described her "happy friend." The happy friend stood up for Andy when other girls in the classroom were being mean. She described this particular friend as a happy friend "because she always likes us to have fun with her and she always likes us to be happy." Andy disclosed, "She always tries to help me when my friends are being mean to me. She says, 'Why are yall being mean to her

because she didn't do anything to you!" Andy explains that she feels better when someone stands up for her.

Research Question Three

Research question three was, "Which coping strategies produce a feeling of success?" When determining which coping strategies produced a feeling of success, three common themes emerged from the data. Table 5 shows the three themes that emerged from the data (see Appendix M). All students found coping strategies that resulted in feelings of success, but all successful coping strategies fell within one of the above themes.

Table 5

Themes that Emerged from the Data

Number	Theme
Theme 1	Co-researchers found approach strategies helpful more often than avoidance coping strategies.
Theme 2	Feelings of success depended on their goal for choosing the coping strategy.
Theme 3	Co-researchers felt success through any strategy that offered support and validation to the victim.

When analyzing the data, 19 out of 22 co-researchers revealed at least one approach coping strategy that produced a feeling of success, as opposed to 15 out of 22 co-researchers who found at least one helpful avoidance coping strategy. Lindsey and Mandy were the only girls who only chose approach coping strategies, both feeling successful from all of the attempted strategies. Most girls who experienced success with approach coping strategies expressed their desire to do something about the problem of relational aggression victimization.

Another common theme that emerged from the data was that some feelings of success depended largely on their goal for choosing the coping strategy. For example, Lindsey wanted immediate relief from the victimization with little thought about the future. She chose only approach strategies that sometimes resulted in actions that could cause more problems later. Rose, on the other hand, often simply wanted to get away from the problem and to forget about it for a while. Therefore, she chose avoidance strategies and decided that they were successful. Although some co-researchers were

using trial and error, others began to choose coping strategies based on their goal for the outcome.

The final theme that emerged from the data was that students felt a feeling of success from any strategy that resulted in support and a feeling of validation. When the co-researchers chose to tell an adult about victimization, they only felt it was a successful strategy if the adult believed them and supported them or validated how they were feeling. In fact, sometimes the adult only needed to hug them and show empathy for what they were going through in order to experience success. Many students found that talking to their peers produced a feeling of success when those peers supported the co-researchers. Playing with others produced an overwhelming report of success because the co-researchers felt as if they were a part of someone's group. By simply playing with the co-researchers, students showed support and made them feel successful.

Conclusion

The co-researchers in this study did an excellent job of communicating what they experienced as victims of relational aggression. In kindergarten, first, and second grade children are already manipulating relationships in order to gain something for themselves. The co-researchers in this study experienced girls who made mean faces at them and said mean things about them to other students. They listened to their peers teasing them about which boy they liked, whether or not it was true. The co-researchers in this study saw their "friends" whispering to each other as they stared and giggled, making it obvious who they were whispering about. The young co-researchers in this study were left out of games on purpose and listened to other children making fun of them about what they were wearing or how they were performing on a game. The young girls experienced the

loss of friendship as their old friends found new ones they liked better. They wondered why their buddies began ignoring them without explanation. The co-researchers experienced being excluded from a friendship group in which they were previously part of. The twenty-two co-researchers in this study experienced a plethora of different forms of relational aggression. When relational aggression victimization takes place, girls are focusing on the problems they face with their friends and not on academic success (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Hadley, 2004; Knudsen, 2003; Merrell et al., 2006; Ostrov et al., 2008).

Because of their strong desire for connectedness, girls are especially sensitive to the effects of relational aggression (Anthony & Lindert, 2010). The co-researchers in this study were open to sharing their emotions about experiencing the phenomenon of relational aggression. Several students explained very strong emotions about their experiences. Some co-researchers were extremely sad and often cried about their problems with other girls. Others expressed frustration about dealing with the same problems time after time with no solution in sight. Still others were down right angry about their problems with other girls, while a select few girls experienced all of these emotions. Some co-researchers had friends, parents, or teachers who were very supportive and helped them tremendously each time a new problem occurred by listening, giving a hug, or confronting the aggressors. Others expressed loneliness either because they refused to talk to others about their problems or because they did not have support from a parent or teacher. A primary school student who experiences relational aggression is always on edge because she never knows when the next problem will occur.

She may have a week of peace, but in the back of her mind she knows that more problems are on the way.

This chapter introduced the 22 exceptional young girls who chose to courageously reveal their experiences with relational aggression. Analysis of the data revealed approach coping strategies, avoidance coping strategies, and themes that revealed coping strategies that produced a feeling of success among kindergarten, first, and second grade girls who experienced relational aggression victimization. The final chapter reveals conclusions, implications, and direction for future research based on the findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the coping strategies developed by young girls victimized by the phenomenon of relational aggression. The study was an investigation of the unique life experiences of 22 co-researchers who experienced several different types of relational aggression without a school-wide bullying program in place. One cannot infer that other victimized students would react as these co-researchers did; each child's worldview is unique. Understanding how these girls responded to relational aggression and the effectiveness of the coping strategy will serve as a useful guide to help educators identify common behaviors of victimized children and implement programs that teach effective coping strategies.

The previous chapter provided an analysis of the responses of each participant. This final chapter discusses each research question in detail along with the implications. The following research questions were addressed throughout this entire study: What approach coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use? What avoidance coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use? Which coping strategies produce a feeling of success among the girls in a rural primary school?

What approach coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use? Co-researchers chose to tell an adult, confront the aggressor, retaliate, and asked other kids for advice. When co-researchers told adults who chose to validate and support the victim, they found this strategy very helpful. When they confronted the aggressors or retaliated, there were mixed reviews as to the success of the strategy. All co-researchers felt that asking other kids for advice was a successful strategy.

What avoidance coping strategies do young girls in a rural primary school use? Co-researchers chose to ignore, walk away, show emotions, give it time, and play with others. When they chose to ignore the aggressors or walk away, reviews were mixed as to the success of the strategy. When students chose to show emotions, all co-researchers felt that the strategy was unsuccessful. The co-researchers who attempted to give it time or play with others all found the strategies successful in dealing with relational aggression victimization.

Which coping strategies produce a feeling of success among the girls in a rural primary school? Three common themes emerged from the data about successful coping strategies. Approach coping strategies were helpful more often than avoidance coping strategies. Feelings of success depended largely on their goal for choosing the coping strategy. Co-researchers felt successful by using any strategy that offered a sense of support and validation.

From the three themes that emerged from the data analysis, several factors emerged that guide educators' plan of action to combat relational aggression victimization. First, because some successes depended on student goals, programs should be implemented that provide a variety of coping strategies for students to choose from. Secondly, all adults should receive training on how to respond to claims of relational aggression victimization. Finally, students should be trained to know how to respond as a bystander and how to support students who experience relational aggression victimization. From these factors, implications for educators are derived and recommendations for future research are determined.

Implications for Educators

Relational aggression is present in kindergarten, first, and second grade and it is negatively affecting children. Ostrov and colleagues (2009) explain that interventions must occur at an early age in order to promote global change. Educators must implement interventions in order to move away from a culture that ignores the problems and move toward building an empathetic environment that helps young females have the greatest opportunity for change and healthy relationship development (Carney, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006; Ostrov et al., 2006; Xie et al., 2002). If the problems are ignored, students may socially learn from their aggressive models and become more and more aggressive toward other students (Ostrov et al., 2006). The victims may soon become the aggressors and the problem will spiral out of control.

There was evidence in this research that victims were attempting to become aggressors. Mandy reported that telling the girls she would not be their friend yielded positive results. The girls began to let her play. Mallory chose to leave the girls out as retaliation and reported that it seemed to help the situation. Sunny chose to ignore and tease the aggressors in retaliation and reports that now they know how it feels to be ignored. This relates to the social learning theory of aggression in which kids receive some type of reward by the behaviors they exhibit (Snethen & Van Puymbroeck, 2008). Children watch aggressive models and learn when the behaviors are reinforced (Ostrov et al., 2006). They then imitate those aggressive models, and this can cause serious problems for students through the years.

Everyone who works with children must take a stand against relational aggression (Ophelia, 2006). The classroom climate can welcome the conditions for relationally

aggressive behaviors or it can deter conditions (Swearer, 2008). Overall, educators should notice the emotional state, facial expressions, and routine behaviors of the students who are in their care. As Swearer (2008) points out, teachers should develop healthy relationships with students so that they can identify when social behaviors become abnormal. When their social behaviors become abnormal, it is a good sign that there is a problem. When students are crying for no apparent reason or when students become aggravated or angry, teachers should take notice and begin to ask questions. Taking notice of behaviors that may be a result of relational aggression is the first step in helping the students.

Training for Adults

In the co-researchers' responses, I found that there are two common mistakes made by adults when children tell about the phenomenon of relational aggression. Adults either do nothing or do too much. When adults do not intervene, the child feels as if she is not supported and that her feelings are not important. On the other hand, some adults try to do too much for the student, and their actions seem to make things worse for the victimized child.

When approached by a student about relational aggression, it is necessary for adults to first acknowledge the problem. Some of the co-researchers reported that teachers seemed frustrated from simply hearing about the problem victims were facing. The co-researchers reported the need for teachers to listen to the problem and believe that there is an actual problem. Passing it off as just, "Girl drama" is very painful for victims as they begin to feel that they are completely alone in dealing with relational aggression. For example, some co-researchers reported that their teachers sat down with them and

listened to the entire story. The teachers would say, “I understand,” or “That is a difficult situation,” which made students feel like their problem was acknowledged.

Additionally, the co-researchers expressed the need for adults to validate their feelings. Co-researchers reported positive results from telling teachers who would accept their feelings about the victimization without passing judgment. Some teachers would show compassion to the victims by giving them a hug, a smile, or simply a pat on the back. Some parents and teachers would share personal stories with the victims, which helped them feel like they were not the only one who has had to deal with victimization.

Teachers, school staff, and parents should support students by giving them positive coping strategies to try, such as journaling, finding others to play with, or confronting the aggressor by talking friendly or talking firmly, which may improve the emotional health of students (Davis & Davis, 2005). This gives the child power over the circumstance and helps children develop coping strategies. It can be beneficial for teachers, other school staff, and parents to help students disconnect from abusive friendships, by providing opportunities for the victims to meet new children (Davis & Davis, 2005). Implementing a bullying program that addresses relational aggression may help educators develop a collection of coping strategies to suggest to victimized students.

As a final resort, adults should develop consequences for subtle forms of bullying in the classroom situation (Davis & Davis, 2005). Co-researchers in this study found it helpful when teachers spoke to the aggressors, sent notes home to parents, and administered a reprimand such as sitting at recess. It is recommended for educators to have a program in place that guides the teacher response to relational aggression. Bus

drivers, paraprofessionals, and parents should also be trained in responding to relational aggression.

Training for Students

Many of the co-researchers described a sense of security from playing with other students. Andy described her “happy friend.” The happy friend stood up for the participant when other girls in the classroom were being mean. She described this particular friend as a happy friend “because she always likes us to have fun with her and she always likes us to be happy.” Andy disclosed, “She always tries to help me when my friends are being mean to me. She says, ‘Why are yall being mean to her because she didn’t do anything to you!’” Andy explains that she feels better when someone stands up for her. Taylor reported that she often walked away and found other students in which to play, and this made her feel better. Marie explained that when she was left out, she knew she could play with her “true friends.” Although she longed to play with the girls who were leaving her out, she realized that she would have friends to play with each day. She explained, “When they left me out of their group I played with my true friends. I felt better but I still wanted to play with them.” Although it was not openly discussed as a coping strategy for Marie, she often mentioned the fact that she chose to play with other groups of students.

Friendships are one of the most important relationships that girls will develop over their lifetime (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Crothers et al., 2005; Davis & Davis, 2005). The female bases her sense of self-worth and morality on connectedness and interdependence with others (Anthony & Lindert, 2010; Gilligan, 2003). The process of establishing and maintaining friendships with other girls is a vital aspect of psychosocial

development (Pipher, 2002). When students stick together, the victim feels supported and like they are part of a friendship group.

Students should be trained in order to be good bystanders and to be positive supports for victimized peers. Adults should empower the students within their classroom, bystanders, to intervene when they witness bullying behaviors. Simply playing with the alienated child may be enough to support the victims. Bystanders may also be able to speak firmly to the aggressors in support of the victimized child. Additionally, bystanders may be the ones who have to seek adult help for a victimized peer. Children must know that it is important for them to help by supporting the victim, sticking up for the victim, or seeking adult help when their peers are being bullied (Swearer et al., 2008).

Programs

Some co-researchers in this study expressed frustration over lack of knowledge about what to do when victimized. Other students sought advice from those around them to figure out what to do. Some of the advice received included retaliation, which only makes the problem of relational aggression grow larger. Because some successes depend on the goals of the students and educators want students to choose appropriate coping strategies related to those goals, programs must be implemented that provide students with a variety of coping skills. Several interventions were listed in the literature review of this research. According to the co-researchers' responses, I list pros and cons of each program.

Cognitive behavioral therapy has been mentioned as a viable option for intervening with relational aggression (Crothers et al., 2005). The DeBug system,

although it was not developed to specifically target relational aggression, uses role plays and modeling to help change the child's thought process and behavior (Mathias, 1992). The role plays are suggested for use with all students and will provide all students with a chance to practice interpersonal social skills and the opportunity to increase skills in perspective taking (Kendall, 1993). By using role play the students will be able to better see another's perspective and may increase their empathy for another person, therefore reducing aggressive behavior.

The DeBug System is part of some school wide guidance programs and only requires that the counselor gain knowledge about how to teach the program. The DeBug System is a free program, after the initial purchase of an article describing the program, that is used to help students solve minor problems that are created with other students are "bugging" them (Mathias, 1992). During three classroom guidance lessons, the counselor teaches a series of steps that helps students learn to be assertive and promotes self-management (Oppenhuizen, 2001). Role play and modeling are used to help students practice the steps during the lesson. The child's role and the adult's role are defined in simple steps that even kindergarten students can understand (Mathias, 1992). The counselor enlists help from students and all adults, including parents, who surround the students to support this program. This program seems to fit most of the criteria defined by the co-researchers. It is recommended that more training be provided for teachers, and it would be helpful to provide direction for bystanders. The program should also define relational aggression and bullying. The co-researchers in this study were able to take the concepts they learned from the DeBug system, which is a conflict resolution program, and apply them to situations with relational aggression. One disadvantage of this program

is that it promotes using the steps in order. Some of the co-researchers reported unsuccessful results from using the first two steps and gave up on trying the remaining steps. Additional resources for adults and bystanders would make this program much more helpful.

The “Friend to Friend” (F2F) Program is a research-based program that implements interventions with small groups of girls, in middle childhood, who are identified as being a victim or aggressor in relational aggression (Ostrov et al., 2008). With this program, teachers would need to be able to effectively identify children who were the aggressors and victims, which would require teacher training. According to the co-researchers in this study, some educators do not identify the signs. Also, the phenomenon of relational aggression should be addressed even earlier than middle childhood. The program consists of twenty group sessions that meet twice each week for 30-45 minutes. After session ten, the group leader collaborates with the participants to do eight classroom sessions with other students. This program utilizes the counselor as the group leader, which takes the teacher out of the dialogue until the classroom session. The F2F program is reported to be effective, however after reviewing the co-researchers’ statements, it should offer concrete steps for all students and provide more clear direction for teachers.

The “Second Step, Violence Prevention Program” attempts to promote social skills and problem solving skills in students from preschool through the eighth grade (Committee for Children, 2009; Ostrov et al., 2008). This program integrates the lessons with the academic curriculum and works on changing attitudes toward physical and relational aggression (Committee for Children, 2009; Ostrov et al., 2008). For young

children, the program is extremely child friendly, using puppets and songs for optimal enjoyment. This program seems to meet most of the criteria the co-researchers' suggested and is effective at preventative measures. However, it should provide more direction for the teacher response when relational aggression actually occurs within the classroom. This program only focuses on training the teachers to teach the curriculum and does very little to guide teachers on how to help students. According to the co-researchers, teachers should validate the victim's feelings, support them in their efforts to cope with the aggression, and intervene when the victim feels it is necessary. By adding a component to this program that trains teachers in helping victims, this would be an extremely valuable option for educators.

The "Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it Out, Seek Help" (WITS) Program is created specifically for relational bullying in schools (Ostrov et al., 2008). This is an inexpensive elementary program that collaborates between police officers, university student athletes, and school staff and training is provided for all members (Woods et al., 2007). The WITS program helps everyone speak uniformly about relational aggression to promote conflict resolution strategies (Ostrov et al., 2008; Woods et al., 2007). Because it is literacy-focused teachers are able to use the information with the general curriculum (Woods et al., 2007). This is an exceptional program that meets all of the criteria the co-researchers suggested. The only issue may be soliciting help from the community agencies during this time of financial turmoil. For example, many of our local sheriff's departments are still furloughing employees and working with a minimal staff. It could be difficult to provide the extra man power to work with the schools. If schools have the community resources available, this is an excellent option.

Limitations

Limitations divulge conditions that may limit the study, but are not controllable by the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This is a qualitative study with a sample size of primary school-aged girls, ranging from five to eight years old. Working with such young children can be difficult because they have a hard time articulating their true thoughts and feelings, especially to someone who is not familiar to them. This study does not address boys, although it is noted that boys also suffer from relational aggression victimization. It is difficult to transfer the findings of this study to a larger population of students because the research takes place in a rural elementary school with a high Caucasian population. The study should be replicated in many different settings, such as those with a higher multicultural population and those with a different socioeconomic make up, in order to establish transferability to a large population of students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Multiple replications of this study in different demographics is recommended to address whether coping strategies would be similar. Including a more diverse population of students and a more diverse group of co-researchers would be helpful. Additionally helpful would be a duplication of this study to include the male population of students. Although research shows that girls are more relationally aggressive in early childhood, the co-researchers mention boys within their interviews (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Hadley, 2004; Knudsen, 2003; Merrell et al., 2006; Ostrov et al., 2008).

Further research into the effectiveness of the DeBug System, Friend to Friend Program, Second Step Program, and the WITS Program in early childhood is highly recommended. The DeBug System was the only systematic direction being given to the

co-researchers in this study. Because the students in this study were able to use what they learned from the DeBug System, and apply that knowledge in different situations, it is likely that anti-bullying programs may be beneficial to young children. Because the DeBug System has very little research to back up its usefulness, quantitative research investigating the success of the DeBug System would be beneficial to the educational community.

Conclusion

The message of this research is clear; educators must not stand idly by and allow relational aggression to run rampant in schools. When girls are not taught coping strategies, they will develop their own, which may result in unhealthy choices that could lead to other problems later. Interventions have to be in place in early childhood in order to improve coping skills of students and prevent the negative effects of relational aggression (Ostrov et al., 2008). The key is that relational aggression should not be ignored; by middle school the problem is often too far out of control and serious emotional effects have occurred. Educators and parents must all remember Hope Witsel, who at thirteen years old felt there was no other way out (Inbar, 2009). Educators and parents should remember Jesse Logan, who committed suicide at eighteen years old because she could not take any more torment from her classmates (Celizic, 2009). Educators and parents should remember Megan Meir, who at thirteen years old committed suicide after being told the world would be a better place without her (Inbar, 2009). Educators should most recently remember Phoebe Prince, a fifteen year old who endured such incessant bullying at school that she could no longer endure the pain. Nine

of her tormentors were charged in her death (Goldman, 2010). Educators cannot overlook this problem any longer.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Documentation

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The Graduate School at Liberty University

April 3, 2012

IRB Approval 1289.040312: Examining Coping Strategies of Young Girls Victimized by Relational Aggression: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Dana,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
IRB Chair, Associate Professor
Center for Counseling & Family Studies

(434) 592-5054

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APPENDIX B: Teacher Checklist

Teacher Checklist

Teacher Name: _____

First Name of Student: _____

Please place a check beside each statement that you agree with. This incident could have occurred at any time during this school year.

-
- The student is not completely focused on academic assignments or seems emotionally distracted in class.
 - The student has complained of or you have witnessed social problems with other girls during less structured times.
 - You have noticed other girls excluding this student.
 - You have noticed the student being overly emotional (i.e., cries easily or has mood swings)
 - The student has claimed to be ill at school or you have noticed that the student wants to go home more often.
 - You have noticed the student displaying “victim” body language such as hanging her head, hunching her shoulders, or just wanting to be alone.
 - The student has expressed feelings of frustration with other students.
 - You have noticed the student playing with different groups of friends periodically throughout the school year.
-

This information will only be used to identify students who may have experienced some form of relational aggression during this school year. Further exploration will be required to positively determine whether the student will be able to participate in the research project. Thank you for your time in completing the checklist.

Sincerely,
Dana Boling Simmons, NCC

APPENDIX C: Parental Permission

Dear Parents,

My name is Dana Boling Simmons and I am your child's counselor. I am also a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Program at Liberty University conducting a dissertation study. This study is about bullying among girls, often referred to as relational aggression. Relational aggression often involves spreading rumors, gossiping, causing problems between friends, etc. I will be asking questions to find out how your child deals with some of these issues so that educators can understand how to help.

A basic explanation of the research is given below. Please read this explanation and contact me if you have any questions.

Explanation: This study will not impact your child's instructional time. It will take place during lunch or social science classes. I will interview your child individually to discuss these friendship issues and aspects of coping that your child uses. During the interviews, your child will be asked to complete and describe a drawing. The sessions will be audio taped and notes will be made to review later. If your daughter writes about friendship experiences during class, I would like to look at a copy of the writing as well. Any applicable behavior records may also be reviewed. After the study is over, I will write a report that will not include your daughter's name or any other identifying information. This report will be submitted to Liberty University where faculty members and doctoral students may view the report.

Benefits: The results of the study will help school professionals gain knowledge about how we can help girls effectively deal with relational aggression.

Risks: The risks associated with this study are minimal. We will talk about friendship experiences but the study looks at aspects of how girls deal with relational aggression.

Confidentiality: Your child's name will not be associated with the data gathered. The only form that will have your name or your child's name is the permission form and a checklist completed by teachers, which will be locked in a file cabinet.

Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to stop participating in this study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study before it is over, your child's data will be destroyed and will not be included in the results.

If you decide to allow your child to participate in the project, please sign at the bottom of this page.

Child's Name

Date

Parent's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

APPENDIX D: Child/Minor Assent

I, _____, understand that my parents (mom and dad) have given permission (said it's okay) for me to take part in a project about what I do if girls are not nice to me. I am taking part because I want to. I have been told that I can stop at any time I want to and nothing will happen to me if I want to stop.

Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

APPENDIX E: Sample Webisode Discussion Guide

Questions for Stop Bullying Now! Webisodes

Bracketed text indicates the narrator's answers to each response.

Episode #1 [Narrator: Mr. Bittner]

Question #1: Why do you think K.B. didn't want to go to school?

A) It was her very first day at a new school and she probably was scared because she didn't know anybody.

[You're probably right! Have you ever been the "new kid" at school or on a team? Do you remember

feeling "butterflies" in your stomach? Did someone make you feel less scared? Is there someone at school

who you could help out? Are there any other good answers?]

B) She had to wear clothes that weren't very cool and she was afraid of what the other students might think

of her. [Yup. Have you ever worried about kids making fun of clothing that you wear? Are there any other

good answers?]

C) She hated science and wasn't looking forward to science class. [No way! K.B. LOVED my Science Camp

over the summer and she seemed really excited when she saw me again.]

Question #2: Why didn't K.B. just refuse to wear the new clothes that her mother bought for her?

A) Maybe she decided that the clothes weren't so bad after all. [I kind of doubt it.]

B) She thought that would hurt her mom's feelings. [I agree. Her mom bought the clothes as a special

surprise for K.B. and might have felt bad if K.B. refused the gift. Are there any other good answers?]

C) K.B. probably didn't have any better clothes. [Probably. It sounds as if K.B.'s mom bought her a whole

closet of clothes that weren't very stylish. Have you ever had kids make fun of your clothes or the way

you looked? Why did they do that? How did it make you feel? Are there any other good answers to this

question?]

Question #3: Why did I call K.B. "Fluffernutter"?

A) I was making fun of her name. [Of course not! I would never make fun of a student. Try again.]

B) I made a mistake in trying to pronounce her name. [Yup. K.B.'s last name—"Floofinatta"—is pretty hard to

pronounce. I goofed. Sorry, K.B.!]

C) I mixed her up with another student whose last name was "Fluffernutter." [In all my years of teaching I've

never met a student with the last name "Fluffernutter." Try again.]

Question #4: Why do you think Cassandra called K.B. a “freak”?

A) K.B. bumped into her. [Maybe. That’s a pretty poor reason to call someone a name, isn’t it? Are there

any other good answers?]

B) Cassandra was just kidding. [I don’t think so. It didn’t sound like friendly teasing to me. Try again.]

C) She was making fun of K.B.’s clothes. [I agree. That was pretty mean, wasn’t it? How would you have felt

if you were K.B.? Have you heard anyone call another person a mean name? What could you do to stop it?]

Question #5: I was angry when Cassandra called K.B. a “freak”. The door closed before you could see what happened next, however. What do you think I did about Cassandra’s mean comment and the class’ reaction?

A) Nothing. [Absolutely not. Teachers want to put a stop to school bullying, too! Try another answer.]

B) I talked with Cassandra after class about her mean comment. [I certainly did! I also told Cassandra that

I’d be watching to make sure she didn’t pick on K.B. again. Are there any other good answers?]

C) I told the class to stop laughing. [Yes, I did. I told them that there was nothing funny about that and to cut

it out. Are there any other good answers?]

Question #6: How do you think K.B. could have handled Cassandra’s rude comments?

A) Talked back to Cassandra in her same, rude tone. [Not a very good idea. First, trading one mean

comment for another doesn’t solve anything. Second, she could get in trouble if she said something

mean in front of an adult at school. Third, it probably would just make things worse with Cassandra.]

B) Talked with her mom, me, or another adult at school. [K.B. could have talked to me or her mom. Both of

us would want to listen and help.]

C) Nothing—It’s best to keep quiet. [I don’t think this will work very well. If K.B. doesn’t talk with anyone

about it, she’ll probably keep feeling bad, and Cassandra will probably keep bullying her. Are there any

other good answers?]

Episode #2 [Narrator: Raven]

Question #1: What is Milton Weems’ big dream?

A) To be part of Brick’s gang. [I doubt it. I wouldn’t want to hang out with Brick, would you?]

B) To be a tuba rock star! [Right. And he’ll probably be the first one!]

C) Not to be picked on by Brick and his friends anymore. [I'm sure he wants them to quit bullying him, wouldn't you? Are there any other good answers?]

Question #2: How did Señorita Ortega react when Milton said he'd been picked on by some guys in school?

A) She was upset and said she'd look into it. [Right. What else did she tell him?]

B) She told him he just had to stick up for himself. [No way! That wouldn't be very helpful, would it? Try again.]

C) She told him that nobody deserves to be bullied. [Right. And Señorita Ortega is absolutely correct.]

Question #3: How many different ways was Milton bullied today at school?

A) One. He was shoved by Brick and his friends. [Is that all? Look again.]

B) Two. He was shoved by Brick and his friends and hit with mud. [Any other ways?]

C) At least three. He was shoved, hit with mud, AND teased. [Right. And that was just today! What are some other ways that kids bully each other?]

Question #4: If Milton tries to keep ignoring Brick, do you think the bullying will stop?

A) Probably. [Maybe...but I doubt it. It looks like Milton has been bullied a long time by Brick and his friends, so I think it's going to take something more to stop it.]

B) Probably not. [Right. Sometimes trying to ignore a bully will work, but usually the bullying just continues.

In Milton's case, it looks like the bullying has been going on a long time. He did the right thing in talking to Señorita Ortega.]

Question #5: What do you think Señorita Ortega should do to help Milton?

A) She should talk with Milton's parents about the bullying. [This is probably a good idea. How do you think Milton would feel about that? What else might she do?]

B) She should keep encouraging Milton with his tuba playing, since that makes him happy. [I agree. Milton seems to really like hanging out with Señorita Ortega. What else should she do?]

C) She should talk with the principal or other teachers at school and make sure that an adult talks with Brick

and his buddies about their bullying Milton. [Yes. Often, this is the best way to stop bullying. How do you

think Milton would feel about this? How could Señorita Ortega do this without making it worse for Milton?

What else should Señorita Ortega do?]

APPENDIX F: Initial Interview Guide

Initial Interview Questions

Purpose Statement: The purpose of these questions is to explore if the girls have actually experienced relational aggression victimization.

Student Name: _____

Date: _____

1. Tell me about a time that a girl made faces or bad hand signs to you?
2. Tell me about a time at school when someone said mean things about you.
3. Tell me about a time at school when someone teased you.
4. When was the last time someone whispered in front of you? How did it make you feel?
5. Have you ever been left out of games or activities at school? Tell me about that.
6. Has anyone ever made fun of you at school? Tell me more about that.
7. Have other girls stole or taken away your friends?
8. Tell me about a time when other girls ignored you on purpose.
9. Tell me about a time when a group of girls left you out and would not let you be part of their group.
10. Has anyone ever threatened to hurt you at school? Tell me more about that.

APPENDIX G: Follow-Up Interview Guide

Purpose Statement: The purpose of these questions is to explore the child's coping strategies for relational aggression victimization. I will use this information to look for common themes that emerge among different girls.

Student Name: _____

Date: _____

We talked earlier about times that other girls were mean to you. Today I would like to find out more information about how you dealt with these situations.

1. When the person made faces or bad hand signs to you, how did you react? Did the faces/signs stop? What do you think would have helped more?
2. When someone said mean things about you, how did you react? Do you feel that this helped the situation? How did you decide what to do? Did it happen again?
3. When someone teased you, what did you do? How did you decide what to do? Did this stop the teasing? Do you think something else would have helped more?
4. When someone whispered in front of you, how did you react? Did anything change? How did you decide what to do?
5. When you were left out of games or activities at school, how did you feel? What did you do? How did you decide what to do? Do you feel that this helped the situation?
6. When someone made fun of you at school, what did you do to respond? How did you decide what to do? Did this make you feel better? Did it stop the teasing?
7. When other girls stole your friends, what did you do? How did you decide what to do? Did you get your friend back? Did you feel better about the situation?
8. When other girls ignored you on purpose, what did you do? How did you decide what to do? Did they stop ignoring you? Did you feel better about the situation?
9. When a group of girls would not let you be part of their group, what did you decide to do? How did you decide what to do? Did this help?
10. What did you do when someone threatened to hurt you at school? How did you decide what to do? Did this work for you?
11. Is there anything else that helped when others were being mean to you?

APPENDIX H: Research Guidance Group Permission

Dear Parents,

My name is Dana Boling Simmons and I am your child's counselor. I am also a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Program at Liberty University conducting a dissertation study. This study is about bullying among girls, often referred to as relational aggression. Relational aggression often involves spreading rumors, gossiping, causing problems between friends, etc. I would like to include your child in a group to show videos about bullying and bullying prevention. After the videos, the group will complete the post-webisode discussions found at the following web address http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/PDFs/SBN_Activities_Guide.pdf

A basic explanation of the research is given below. Please read this explanation and contact me if you have any questions.

Explanation: This study will not impact your child's instructional time. It will take place during lunch or social science classes. I will include your child in a group to view bullying webisodes from the Stop Bullying Now campaign. These videos may be reviewed by you at the following website

<http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/kids/webisodes/default.aspx>

Benefits: The results of the study will help school professionals gain knowledge about how we can help girls effectively deal with relational aggression.

Risks: The risks associated with this study are minimal. After the videos, the group will complete the post-webisode discussions found at the following web address

http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/PDFs/SBN_Activities_Guide.pdf

Confidentiality: Your child's name will not be associated with the data gathered. The only form that will have your name or your child's name is the permission form, which will be locked in a file cabinet.

Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to stop participating in this study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study before it is over, any data collected will be destroyed.

If you decide to allow your child to participate in the project, please sign at the bottom of this page.

Child's Name

Date

Parent's Signature

Date

APPENDIX I: Confidentiality Statement

Confidentiality: Everything that we talk about in this group will stay between us unless you tell me that someone is going to or has hurt you, you are going to hurt someone else, or you are going to hurt yourself. If you reveal something like this to me, I will have to tell someone to help keep you safe.

I, _____, agree to keep what is said in our group confidential. If I think I need to share the information that is discussed in my group, then I will share it with a parent or another adult.

Student Signature _____

Parent Signature _____

Counselor Signature _____

APPENDIX J: Sample Memoing

May 11, 2012

Continued reflections on the co-researchers:

Today, Izzy's teachers and parents approached me about a note that was found written by Izzy. It said simply, "I hate myself." They were all very concerned about Izzy and rightly so. This note was found after another situation with her aggressors/friends.

I decided to look over the interview transcripts, drawings, and documents that had been gathered with Izzy over the past few weeks. I sensed a great deal of frustration felt by this co-researcher. She had tried several strategies to cope with relational aggression victimization, but few of them worked for her. The one thing that seemed to work well for her was finding other children to play with. Unfortunately, she continued to want to play with the friends who were aggressive toward her. I have decided that I should conduct another interview with Izzy regarding the note to see if she is able to voice her feelings about the situation.

This situation reminds me of frustrations that I felt as a child who was dealing with relational aggression victimization. Although I never wrote any notes to this degree, I did feel the frustrations that Izzy feels and I often felt the same way toward my aggressors. Even though they treated me badly, I still wanted to be friends with them. The difference between Izzy and I are that I kept everything inside. She is able to get her feelings out by writing and talking to those close to her.

APPENDIX K: Sample Horizontalization

This example of horizontalization is taken from one of my interviews with Brittany. This interview excerpt illustrates the recognition that every statement has equal value. The following horizontal statements are taken from the third interview with Brittany in which she recounts her experiences with aggressors who said very mean things about her. As the interview evolved, Brittany paints a very clear picture of how she felt and that she needed someone to support her through that difficult time.

R: When we talked before you told me that someone has said mean things to you or about you?

B: Um hmm

R: Can you tell me more about what happened?

B: I guess I got sort of mad and ...

R: So, when that happens you just get mad. Do you do anything else?

B: Yeah.

R: What do you do?

B: Umm, I don't remember.

R: You don't remember? Ok. Anything you do is ok. I'm just trying to figure out the best thing to do.

B: I react and do the same thing back to them?

R: Oh, you do the same thing back? How does that work out for you?

B: Uh, sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not.

R: Do you think she realizes how it feels when you do it back to her?

B: Yes.

R: Did she do it anymore?

B: Yeah.

R: She still does it. Ok. Do you think they knew you were mad?

B: Yeah

R: How did they know?

B: My sister does it so she can pretty much tell by my face and I say something.

B: Yeah

R: Can you tell me more about how it made you feel when they were saying mean things about you?

B: It sort of made me feel like I wasn't a part of the world.

R: Like you were not part of the world?

B: Yeah.

R: It sounds like you were hurt.

B: I felt uncomfortable and like no one was on my side.

R: Do you think they could have known how you were feeling?

B: Um hmm. I guess.

R: What could have made you feel better at that point?

B: I just wanted to know that someone was there to support me.

APPENDIX L: Sample Clustering

Grace Coping Strategies

Types of Relational Aggression	Reaction	Avoidance or Approach Strategy	Effect
Said mean things	Tell the teacher	Approach strategy	It helped, but problem happened again.
Teased her	Showed emotion, Talked to mom	Approach	It helped, but problem happened again.
Whispered in front of her	Told teacher and mom; they gave advice	Approach	It helped, but problem happened again.
Left out of activities	Showed emotion, Talked to mom	Approach	It helped her know what to do.
	Found someone else to play with	Avoidance	It helped, but problem happened again.
Made fun of her	Showed emotion, “Back off! It’s not funny!”	Approach	It helped, but problem happened again.
Stole her friends	Showed emotion, Told teacher	Approach	It helped, but problem happened again.
Ignored on purpose	Showed emotion, Ignored them	Avoidance	It helped, but problem happened again.
Left out of friendship group	Showed emotion, Found someone else to play with	Avoidance	It helped, but problem happened again.

APPENDIX M: Table of Themes

Themes that Emerged from the Data

Number	Theme
Theme 1	Co-researchers found approach strategies helpful more often than avoidance coping strategies.
Theme 2	Feelings of success depended on their goal for choosing the coping strategy.
Theme 3	Co-researchers felt success through any strategy that offered support and validation to the victim.