

### **Fact Sheet 20: FEMALE RELATIONAL AGGRESSION**

The vulnerability of girls to relational aggression stems from the importance they place on their friends and other social relationships. Understanding relational aggression is particularly important in understanding the difficulties experienced by girls.

#### **What is relational aggression?**

Relational aggression is described as “behaviours that harm others through damage (or threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship or group inclusion” (Crick and Grotpeter 1995). There are two types of relational aggression: pro-active, in which the behaviours are a means to achieving a goal, and reactive, where the behaviours are a response to provocation with the intent to retaliate. Relational aggression can take many forms and includes exclusion, ignoring, malicious gossip, spreading rumours, manipulative affection, taunts, insults, intimidation, alliance building and cyberbullying. Motivation for relational aggression can be as varied as the methods and includes fear, power, control, popularity and security.

#### **Who is affected?**

Until the 1990s research into bullying was limited and it was widely assumed that girls were less prone to this than boys, in that they did not generally engage in bullying and domination of their peers. This assumption was wrong, as when researchers focused on adolescent girls they found a form of aggression that was far more sophisticated, covert and possibly more harmful than the physical oppression of the traditional male bully. Instead of targeting a victim’s physical inferiority or isolation, relational aggression attacks victims through what girls value most – their friendships and social acceptance. This form of bullying has proven to be at least as common amongst preadolescent and adolescent girls as physical bullying is amongst boys. The female preference for relational aggression is that it does a very effective job of aggression’s purpose, inflicting pain in intensity and in kind to that of physical injury. Some boys may also engage in relational aggression, but often at a less sophisticated and destructive level.

#### **What are the effects?**

Children who use high levels of relational aggression are likely to display serious adjustment and relationship problems that are long lasting and worsen over time, and both aggressors and victims are at risk of harm. Aggressors can suffer from depression, loneliness, school avoidance, peer rejection, anxiety, substance misuse, self-harm and eating disorders. Victims can suffer from peer rejection, school avoidance, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance misuse, and violence towards self and others.

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