2005 First Place Informative Research Paper

Exclusion, Gossip and Rumors:
How Teachers and Schools Can Reduce Alternate Aggression

“I won’t be your friend unless you play what I want to play.”

“She’s so annoying. When she comes over, everyone ignore her.”

“Did you hear? She’s been making out with guys behind the bleachers after school.”

Girls of all ages hear and say things like this every day of their lives. These attitudes are present in every classroom and on every playground. Until recently, gossip, exclusion, and manipulation among girls were considered a normal part of their growing up. But recent studies have given these behaviors a new name. Rachel Simmons, who received a degree in women’s studies from Vassar College and studied female aggression at Oxford University, termed this manipulative conduct “alternate aggression” (2002, p. 21). Contrary to popular belief, alternate aggression is socially and emotionally damaging to all involved, and needs to be addressed and stopped in schools.

What is Alternate Aggression?

Alternate aggression is manipulative behavior that allows an individual to express anger and force others to follow orders while maintaining a kind and happy image. According to Marion Underwood, who earned her doctorate in child clinical psychology from Duke University and now works as an Associate Professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Dallas, alternate aggression takes three basic forms: social, relational and indirect (2003, p. 15). Social aggression “is intended to damage self-esteem or social status within a group” (Simmons, 2002, p. 21). Examples include spreading rumors, excluding and teasing. Relational aggression uses friendship as a weapon. A girl will threaten to end a friendship if her wishes are not carried out (Underwood, 2003, p. 22). Indirect aggression is essentially social aggression, except that the victim does not know who is
hurting her because she is never confronted. This is generally done by spreading a rumor. A girl’s social standing is ruined, and she does not know why (Simmons, 2002, p. 21). These forms of aggression can overlap, but all have the same purpose. They allow girls to manipulate and hurt other girls without adults noticing that anything is happening.

Why Alternate Aggression?

Why do girls use alternate aggression? Because society gives them no other outlet for their anger. Girls are expected to be sweet, nurturing and non-aggressive. It is assumed that they will avoid conflict and let things roll over them without getting angry. Journalist Peggy Orenstein describes the perfect girl as “nice before she is anything else—before she is vigorous, bright, even before she is honest” (1994, cited by Simmons, 2002, p. 17). To fit this mold, girls cannot show anger even when they feel it. She must be nice, even if she doesn’t feel nice. “Aggression undermines who girls have been raised to become” (Simmons, 2002, p. 18). When girls do get angry and confront someone, they are criticized. Lynn Brown, a graduate from Harvard’s School of Education, and Associate Professor of Woman’s Studies and Human Development at Colby College, described it well by saying, “Their same expressions of strong feelings [are] labeled differently— boys are called assertive and competitive, girls bossy and confrontational” (2003, p. 37). But girls do get angry; they are human beings and have human emotions. To avoid censure, girls use non-physical, or alternate, forms of aggression, which are difficult to detect. Because teachers do not see these displays of aggression, they assume that girls are not aggressive. This is not true. Teachers need to educate themselves on alternate forms of aggression, so they can recognize them and intervene.

Why Alternate Aggression Has Not Been Treated

Alternate aggression was largely ignored, up until a few years ago. Brown attended a conference on bullying in 2001 that did not address alternate aggression at all (2003, p. 13). Most of the books and studies done on alternate aggression were published within the last four years. This ignorance about alternate aggression is largely because many researchers think that aggression is a male problem. They believe that aggression can only be exhibited by physical bullying (Macklem, 2003, p. 2). Physical aggression is much more obvious than alternate aggression, and therefore researchers put more effort into fixing this problem. Because
males tend to be physical aggressors, they have received the attention (Brown, 2003, p. 13). Even though boys are reprimanded for bullying each other, it is expected that boys will beat each other up; doing so shows manliness and self-reliance. Society allows them an outlet for their anger, while it has driven female aggression underground.

Unlike bullying, alternate aggression is designed to be difficult to see. Girls take advantage of gender stereotyping: they know teachers do not expect aggression from them. Simmons’ interviews with middle school girls display how easy it is for alternate aggression to go unnoticed. One girl says, “If girls are whispering, the teacher thinks it’s going to be all right because they’re not hitting people. Teachers think they’re not hurting you…but they are” (Simmons, 2002, p. 25). Girls know that they will not be punished for non-physical aggression, because there is no proof that anyone was hurt. They also know how to act around adults. If they display the good girl image, adults will not believe that they are capable of being cruel. Another girl that Simmons interviewed said, “some girls act real good around the teachers, and then when they do something bad, the teachers don’t believe it because they never seen them do it” (2002, p. 24). This should not happen. Every complaint should be taken seriously, and investigated. Alternate aggression is designed to be hard to detect, so teachers should not be surprised that they have not seen it, and realize that just because they did not notice it, that does not mean it did not happen.

Alternative aggression is ignored because many people do not think that it is harmful. As Brown discusses, “there [is] a prevailing view that complaining and bickering, deceit, and backstabbing are normal aspects of growing up female and thus not worthy of serious scholarly attention” (2003, p. 14). Because there is not physical injury, many adults assume that nothing seriously damaging is happening. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Damaging Effects of Alternate Aggression

Alternate aggression is socially and emotionally damaging to both the victim and the perpetrator. Victims lose self-confidence and may become lonely and depressed when they are teased or excluded (Underwood, 2002, p. 210). Simmons’ book is full of first-hand accounts of victims of alternate aggression. Vanessa’s story in particular shows how much confidence girls can lose. Vanessa was bullied by a group of
girls led by her former best friend. They got all the girls in the grade to call her fat and ugly and to exclude her from everything. They wrote songs talking about how ugly she was and then told her it was just a joke. They pretended to be friends with her and then turned on her again. By seventh grade her life was a mess:

She began wearing a black trench coat. Inside the pocket she kept a bottle of pills stolen from her grandfather’s medicine cabinet… At night she would stare at them, imagining her funeral… In school, her grades nose-dived from A’s and B’s to straight D’s. She started hanging out with kids who smoked pot, and she began smoking cigarettes (2002, p. 53).

Vanessa, and many other girls like her, never regain their self-esteem. This lack of self-confidence keeps them from having meaningful relationships. Years after her experience with bullying, Vanessa says that she has mostly guy friends because she does not trust women (Simmons, 2002, p. 55). But her relationships with men are not functional either. She tells them personal information, even if she does not know them well. She still feels unattractive after all the teasing about her looks, so she sleeps with men early on in relationships to feel better about herself. Even after all these years, she does not consider herself “girlfriend material” because of how undesirable those girls made her feel (Simmons, 2002, p. 56).

Alternate aggression not only hurts the victims of it, but the perpetrators as well. Girls who use alternate forms of aggression are rejected by peers, becoming socially isolated. They can also suffer from depression and loneliness (Underwood, 2002, p. 210). These girls lose the ability to have meaningful relationships. They may be popular, but they are disliked (Geiger, Zimmer-Gembeck, Crick, 2004, p. 33). According to Rosalind Wiseman, co-founder and president of the Empower Program for girls, alternate aggressors do not have real friends, because they are too busy trying to keep everyone under their control by keeping up an image of perfection (2002, p. 27). They manipulate and control, instead of forming meaningful relationships. Alternate aggressors also have low self-esteem, because they feel like no one really likes them (Wiseman, 2002, p. 27). This need to control people is itself a display of low self-confidence. They need to have people around them, complimenting them and following instructions, or they feel unloved. This lack of self-esteem carries over into adult life.
What Can Teachers Do About Alternate Aggression?

When children are four or five they start school and will spend the majority of the next twelve years there. School is where they learn to interact with other people and where they find the things they are good at and like to do. Teachers have a responsibility to make the classroom as safe a place as possible. This includes eliminating, or at least reducing, alternate aggression. In order to do this, teachers need to know how to recognize alternate aggression. According to Simmons, popular girls are the most likely to use alternate forms of aggression. They are like “skilled politician[s]… methodically build[ing] a coalition of girls willing to throw their support behind [them]” (2002, p. 80). Popular girls like to be surrounded by people who will follow orders. They will use alternate aggression to keep their control over people around them, especially when they feel that their control is being threatened.

Teachers should also be aware that almost any girl can be a victim of alternate aggression. All she has to do is threaten a popular girl’s power in some way. She may dress or act differently then the popular group. She may be a member of the group who has challenged the popular girl’s opinion of what is acceptable (Wiseman, 2002, p. 34-35). Or she may be an old friend that is not cool enough anymore (Simmons, 2002, p. 49-50). Girls have endless reasons for bullying. But most victims react to this bullying in similar ways. They become withdrawn. They may try to change who they are to fit in (Simmons, 2002, p. 65). Their grades may drop (Wiseman, 2002, p. 36). Any major change in personality could be a clue that a girl is being bullied. Teachers should be aware of these signs in their students, and try to determine what caused them.

After learning what alternate aggression is, teachers need to stop it in the classroom. One simple way to do so is to teach children about alternate aggression and how harmful it can be. Studies have shown that children start using alternate aggression as early as pre-school. These lessons need to start in preschool (Underwood, 2003, p. 221). Teachers need to say straight out that exclusion and teasing are unacceptable. Then they need to stand by their rules.

Many girls will not report bullying because they do not think anyone will believe them. But if teachers speak out against alternate aggression, they make themselves more accessible to students who are being bullied. “If children [know] that adults view social aggression as hurtful and wrong, they might be more willing to seek
their help and in so doing, might help teachers become even more aware of social aggression in their…
classrooms” (Underwood, 2002, p. 222). If students know that teachers will help them, they will ask for help,
instead of feeling “desperately alone even though a teacher is just steps away” (Simmons, 2002, p. 25).

In addition to teaching the negative affects of alternate aggression, teachers need to fight the gender
stereotypes that cause alternate aggression. They need to teach girls that it is all right for them to be angry and
to tell others about their feelings. Girls need to learn how to confront each other and work out their problems
face to face. Underwood calls this assertiveness training, and describes it by saying:

Girls could be taught to express their needs and desires more directly and to accept that conflict is a
natural part of relationships. Moreover, girls could be taught to express their negative feelings calmly
and in the least threatening manner possible, and could practice these skills in role-plays with friends or
in groups (2003, p. 223).

If girls can work things out by talking, they will not have to resort to teasing, gossiping and excluding.

Teachers can also design their lesson plans to encourage cooperation and unity. “Cooperative learning
programs have long been recognized as a means for helping students achieve academically and for creating a
more positive social climate” (Underwood, 2002, p. 217). Instead of making students compete against each
other, teachers should have them work together to solve a problem. For example, instead of dividing students
into teams and having them compete, teachers can divide them up and have them work on different projects.
This way they learn to work with others without feeling that they have to beat other students. Teaching students
to work together will reduce alternate aggression.

The Part the Administration Plays

Teachers cannot stop alternate aggression on their own. They need the school administration to back
them up. Most schools, if not all, have some sort of policy on bullying and violence. But since alternate
aggression is a relatively new idea, few schools include it in their policies. Administrators as well as teachers
need to understand the seriousness of alternate aggression and make specific policies that punish alternate
aggression.
These policies need to go beyond general statements so as to provide guidelines at several levels: (1) delineating what behavior is acceptable at school; (2) specifying strategies that... should [be implemented] when bullying is suspected; and (3) setting up focused programs that target individual bullies and victims (Sharp & Thompson, 1994, cited by Underwood, 2002, p. 217).

Rules about aggression cannot be vague. If they are, students can use the lack of information as an excuse to break the rules. While enforcing anti-bullying policies, schools also need to create programs that teach girls how to handle conflict in a healthy way, and give them the confidence to do so. School-wide programs that teach girls how to constructively deal with conflict can be as effective as teaching it in the classroom.

Girls want more than anything to belong to a group. They want to fit in with people and feel accepted. Often, however, there are too few ways to do this in schools. There is no class or club that interests them. Because they cannot find people with their same interests, they do not feel accepted anywhere, so they use social aggression to keep people close to them and to feel accepted. But “if girls were able to engage in a broader range of activities...there might be more diverse opportunities for girls to feel accepted within at least one group” (Underwood, 2002, p. 224).

Not all girls are directly involved in alternate aggression. That is, not every girl is a perpetrator or victim. But nearly all of them observe it happening. Another way to prevent alternate aggression is to teach girls to stand up and stop it. It is harder to bully someone who is being defended by another person. There are generally other girls around when someone is being bullied. They can stop it when there are no adults present (Underwood, 2002, p. 226). The victim does not have to be present to be defended. Girls can also stop gossip. Teachers should teach students to ignore gossip and not to pass it on. If no one listens to rumors, they cannot spread. Schools and teachers should support and encourage this kind of behavior.

**What if They Will Not Listen?**

Even if all the above techniques are put into practice, there will still be girls who use alternate forms of aggression. Some girls “may not wish to change because they perceive no problems with their peer relations and may not even be aware of the impact of their social aggression” (Underwood, 2002, p. 228.) There will always be some girls who will not listen, not matter what is said to them. In these cases, teachers need to reprimand the
student and neutralize her control over other girls. This can be difficult, because bullying can get worse when girls are punished for it. The perpetrator will now use teasing as revenge for telling as well as for control. Sometimes the only solution is to separate a victim from the aggressor (Simmons, 2002, p. 60). No one can force another person to change his or her behavior. So when a girl refuses to change, it is up to the victim to stand up for herself. This is why it is so important for schools and teachers to build girls self-confidence. Ultimately, she must decide that she does not believe what is being said about her. If she continues to believe what the bullies say, stopping the bullying will not be enough. Her confidence will still be gone.

**Conclusion**

Alternate aggression is difficult to recognize. “Two girls playing quietly together in the corner might be two girls playing quietly in the corner—or they might be one girl slowly wearing down the other” (Simmons, 2002, p. 44). But alternate aggression has lasting negative effects on all involved. Schools and teachers have the ability to restrict these behaviors by boosting girls’ self-esteem, teaching them to stand up for themselves and others, and showing them better ways to handle conflict.
References


