



Kids Helping Kids

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# Introduction

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**Kids Helping Kids culminates in an awareness building campaign developed by students.**

In schools today, aggression among peers has become the norm. Not surprisingly, lessons that teach friendship building are a rarity in most curricula. When aggression occurs, it not only impacts children's social and emotional well-being; it also makes it difficult for children to focus on academic learning.

As adults who work with children, we can appreciate the importance of nurturing, caring friendships that act as excellent support systems in our lives. We therefore understand how important friendships are in the lives of the children we teach.

Elementary school is a crucial time in a child's life, and it is imperative that students learn normative beliefs that foster cooperation, respect and effective conflict resolution. The great need for this kind of education is a key motivating factor of The Ophelia Project<sup>®</sup>, and the force behind the creation of this curriculum, which promotes awareness of peer aggression among parents, educators, administrators and most importantly, children.

This curriculum targets elementary grades four and/or five. The focus is to:

- Define peer aggression with a special emphasis on relational aggression
- Help students share personal experiences, when appropriate
- Identify the three major roles in peer aggression: aggressor, target and bystander or kid in the middle
- Create a safe social climate by teaching children pro-social behaviors

The goal in implementing this curriculum is that students will be empowered to begin to deal with aggression and feel that their classroom is a socially and emotionally safe environment in which to learn.

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## **What is relational aggression?**

Aggression and victimization among children and adolescents is considered to be one of the most serious problems plaguing youth today. Although estimates vary, most studies indicate that approximately 10% to 15% of children are severely bullied by peers; many more children experience victimization at a lower, but nonetheless painful, level of severity.

Relational aggression is behavior that is intended to hurt someone by harming his or her relationships with others. This kind of behavior is often covert and subtler than physical bullying, and requires careful observation by both students and teachers. The way in which students use their relationships to hurt one another through aggression may include all or some of the following behaviors:

- Exclusion
- Building alliances
- Teasing and put-downs
- Spreading rumors and gossip
- Covert physical aggression
- Cyberbullying

*Overt aggression is defined as physical bullying or other harassment that can be easily seen by others. The bully physically or verbally attacks a classmate who may or may not be part of his/her social circle. Overt aggression is often easier for others to identify and includes:*

- Any form of physical aggression, including threats
- Name calling based on race, religion, gender or sexual orientation
- Verbal abuse including put-downs and sexual harassment
- Taunting

Peer aggression can happen in different ways—it can be either overt, covert or a combination of the two.

**Until recently, it was widely accepted that boys were more aggressive than girls and that boys were more likely than girls to be victims of**

**aggression.** As a consequence of this, the majority of intervention efforts in schools have been targeted at modifying boys' aggressive behaviors.

However, researchers have recently shown that girls engage in just as much aggression as boys. Importantly, the expression of aggression among girls is different from that of boys. Both boys and girls use verbal aggression, such as verbal insults, but the nature and content of verbal assaults are likely to differ for boys and girls. Whereas boys are more likely to engage in physical forms of aggression, girls are more likely to use more covert forms of behavior that harms others by damaging or manipulating their social relationships through relational aggression (*Crick & Grotpeter, 1995*).

All forms of peer aggression are hurtful and harmful. Too often peer aggression is written off as “boys will be boys” or “that’s how girls act.” Research shows, however, that peer aggression has a negative impact on self-esteem, one’s ability to form and create friendships and one’s sense of belonging. All of these, in turn, have a significant impact on a student’s academic life.

### **How can this curriculum help you address relational aggression?**

Research has shown that children begin to use relational aggression during the preschool years, and even at this young age, girls appear to engage in relational aggression more frequently than boys. Moreover, relational aggression is as powerful and frequent a social behavior as physical aggression through the middle school years. That is, some children consistently use relational aggression in their social interactions, despite changes in classroom environments from year to year.

In order to address aggression’s complex and deep-rooted influence over middle school students, it is critical for parents, teachers and the students themselves to be proactive. Rather than reacting to incidents of peer aggression after they occur, students and teachers can work to create a school culture that values cooperation, true appreciation of diversity, tolerance and friendship.

Many schools today know that peer aggression is a serious problem, but only a few have the vision, resolve, leadership and support to work towards systemic change. Schools know how to promote the beliefs, norms and behaviors needed for students to learn academically. The same kind of skills and focus can be applied to changing social climate in classrooms ... within every school where peer aggression is a problem there is a set of social norms that allows aggression to take place. Once we recognize what is actually happening, we can begin the long-term process of changing children’s normative beliefs and social behaviors.

When addressing relational aggression, it is equally important to understand that our relationships occur in a context ... in a culture. Schools create their own culture in the ways that they address social cliques and competition, and the ways students and teachers are expected to interact. The goal is to promote safe social and emotional climates that foster pro-social behaviors and minimize destructive, aggressive behavior. A culture can always change, but such a shift takes time, patience, persistence and a shared vision among both students and teachers.

Relational aggression is prevalent and powerful. Without sustained prevention/intervention efforts, this learned behavior will NOT “go away” on its own. Prevention remains the most effective intervention program. Children and adolescents need to be taught how to establish and maintain healthy relationships and peer interactions. What children learn and tolerate during these early years becomes their “training ground” for future adult relationships.

### **Introducing the Curriculum to Parents**

To change the culture of a school and introduce new norms, parents need to be involved and informed. A letter of introduction to parents is included at the end of the unit. Schools may decide to hold parent meetings or discuss groups before, during or after the curriculum is presented in class.