RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AMONG YOUNG GIRLS: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT ON VICTIMS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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Abstract

This study examines the impacts upon victims and families of adolescent female relational aggression. Many adolescent girls endure female relational aggression on a daily basis in their school, community, and home settings. Research shows numerous short-term and long-term mental health impacts to the victims. Currently there is little research on the impact of those supporting female adolescents victimized by relational aggression, namely, the victim’s family. From the small amount of research discovered, certain themes emerge. Families feel powerless, become angry, agitated, and anxious, and struggle with the feeling that they failed their child. Some families feel alone and isolated, while others feel such devastation that they resort to relocating their entire family for a fresh start. Furthermore, research also reveals discrepancies in the focus of intervention and prevention programs. The purpose of this project was to discover the impacts of adolescent female aggression on the victims and their families and to narrow down interventions and prevention programs for victims and aggressors of relational aggression. In doing so, this report aims to provide programs to assist school personnel and those involved in mental health professions.

Keywords: relational aggression, impacts
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Introduction

Relational aggression amongst female youth negatively affects the victims resulting in short-term and long-term problems. The purpose of this research project was to determine the impact of relational aggression on young female victims and their parents. The process of this study was to first conduct interviews with a victim of female adolescent relational aggression and then with the victim’s parent, to develop a comprehensive understanding of female peer victimization, and to assist in addressing the knowledge gap on how families are impacted. In addition, the female victim was asked to use a creative output such as photo journaling, storytelling, and poetry, to depict her personal experience with relational aggression. The overall purpose was to educate the readers on the resounding impact of female peer victimization on victims and their parents. The final step was to interview a female youth and her parent to develop pedagogy that will inform policy and programs related to the themes of relational aggression.

The subsequent pages comprise a literature review demonstrating the short-term and long-term impacts of female youth relational aggression on the victims and their families. This includes information on what relational aggression consists of, a gender and development perspective of female relational aggression, and cyber-bullying as a form of relational aggression. It then proceeds to discuss possible interventions and prevention avenues for female adolescent relational aggression.
Relational Aggression Among Young Girls

Literature Review

What is Relational Aggression?

Relational aggression is often defined as the intent to do damage to another by exploiting one’s relationship (Putallaz et al., 2007). Relational aggression is unique in that it occurs mainly amongst female adolescents. The aggressor accomplishes this by the use of indirect or covert acts that focus mainly on social manipulation. Examples include the use of derisive verbal remarks, gossiping, ignoring, mean facial expressions, spreading of lies or rumors, manipulation, negative body language, exclusion from social interactions, ostracizing by peer’s in-group, and cyber-bullying (Young, Boye, & Nelson, 2006). The goal of the aggressor is to destroy the victim’s social status and her self-esteem. Relational aggression is a difficult type of bullying to identify because it is an indirect form of aggression. It is not as overt as physical aggression, making it difficult to detect. Simmons (2002) demonstrates this when he states:

Identifying relational aggression in school environments is not a straightforward process because relational aggression may not be observed by adults or identified as aggression by both adults and students. Students who instigate relational aggression can easily say, “I didn’t do anything. Is it a crime to not talk to someone?” (p. 299)

Young adolescents are more reluctant to bring this type of aggression forward with an adult as relational aggression is seen more as the type of aggression to just ignore (Goldstein, Young & Boyd, 2007). Relational aggression is as damaging if not more so than physical aggression. According to Young, Boye, and Nelson’s study (2006), “evidence is accumulating to suggest that relational aggression may create just as much, if not more, damage than physical aggression, but in a subtle and less visible way” (p. 297). Young et al., (2006) discuss how
relational aggression calls for sophisticated social skills. Making sense of the young girl’s intentions or social function with behavior would take in-depth analysis.

Many young girls involved in relational aggression have high social status and are viewed as popular. Adolescents observe adverse behaviors correlating with social prominence or popularity. In turn, young girls see aggression as an avenue to build a dominant role within a peer group. A strategic plan develops, dictated by a female adolescent’s behavior in securing a dominant position within her own peer group (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck’s study (2010) states that, “When used as a tactic to achieve dominance, aggression plays a role in peer-group hierarchy formation during the transition from primary school to secondary school” (p. 177).

**Relational-Cultural Theory and Female Relational Aggression:**

Relational-cultural theory is a continually changing feminist model of human development focusing on growth-fostering relationships as the path to strengthening the skills of group members. Female youth face a difficult journey with development in the areas of individual identity, feeling connected, and having a secure sense of belonging with a peer group. Youth require skills in order to negotiate the narrow paths of relational aggression and to connect and have relational competence (Tucker, Smith-Adcock, & Trepal, 2011). The female youth involved in a relational-cultural group create connections by exploring the avenues of marginalization and inhibition, thereby allowing development of their own relationship proficiency.

Key concepts of relational-cultural theory are: connections and disconnections, identifying non-mutual relationships, feeling empowered by the group experience, honoring emotions and authenticity, fostering empathy, and promoting growth-fostering relationships.
The goal is to increase relational competence and to improve the friendship dynamics with the participating group. The conclusive goal of this process is to disassemble lateral marginalization by cultivating each group member’s connected empathy and aspiration for development (Cannon, Hammer, Reicherzer, & Gilliam, 2012). The intervention is sound if given adequate time and resources, and follow-up is ensured.

**Gender and Development Perspective of Female Relational Aggression:**

Remilllard and Lamb (2005) discuss the expansion of adolescent female relational aggression, especially as the adolescents’ age advances. Relational aggression occurs often and on a daily basis, which has many researchers querying whether it is part of the normative development for pre-adolescent and adolescent girls. As girls begin to develop their social skills in early adolescence, relational aggression often functions as a means of sorting out issues of identity and social norms. Relational aggression paradoxically assists in creating a sense of belonging with peers and helps to preserve the integrity of the peer group (Remilllard & Lamb, 2005).

Remilllard and Lamb (2005) state that in order to garner status on the social hierarchy, girls will resort to acts of relational aggression. These particular authors state that relational aggression is closely related to young girls placing an immense focus on their friendships and commonly shared characteristics. There is an association between relational victimization and mental health, and other problems are sometimes found to exist most strongly or only among girls (Zimmer-Gembeck, Pronk, Goodwin, Mastro & Crick, 2012). Ojanen, Findley, and Fuller (2012) argue that for many decades young girls have been socialized to not use physical aggression when they are upset and that it is more acceptable for the young boys to be aggressive.
Simmons (2002) also argues that relational aggression is a stage that all children will go through and this perspective is known as, “Boys will be boys and girls will be girls” (Ojanen, Findley, & Fuller, 2012, p. 298). Simmons (2002) argues this when he discusses the following:

Furthermore, this type of hostility has often not been recognized for what it is: hurtful, inappropriate aggression that warrants a targeted response and intervention from adults. Rather, it has been seen as a rite of passage, a part of growing up, and a way of learning social games. (p. 299)

This is not actually the case, but is in fact an antiquated belief that does not consider the impact that relational aggression has on a girl’s mental health. I think this begs the questions: When do we see relational aggression as not normal and strength building? When is relational aggression considered detrimental and abusive?

With a more comprehensive study of relational aggression, thinking of relational aggression as a normal stage in development will hopefully become a thing of the past. Young et al. (2006) discuss how development timelines play into relational aggression. For example, as language skills develop, so too will the intensity of relational aggression increase. Cognitive and social skill development occurs later in the development timeline, which is when more mature relationally aggressive acts occur. As children establish an understanding of gender norms regarding physical and relational aggression, they will embrace gender-congruent forms of physical and relational aggression appropriate to their development levels (Young et al., 2006).

Another avenue of relational aggression is the passive piece, which is commonly called cyber-bullying and has also been referred to as “online social cruelty.” Victimization crosses the line from the school to the home with this tactic of relational aggression. The victim of female relational aggression cannot escape from the abuse targeted in her direction. It is a form of
indirect bullying that allows individuals to be hidden behind a computer screen. In a study by Jackson, Cassidy, and Brown (2009), their analysis demonstrated that more girls than boys admit to engaging in cyber-bullying actions towards peers. Modern technology allows individuals or groups to viciously attack another individual indirectly, and it is particularly easy to do because of its anonymity. Text messaging and social media websites like Facebook, Ask FM, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat to name only a few provide a rampant and fertile ground for the practice of relational aggression. Many female cyber-bullies utilize social media to sabotage another female peer’s reputation, leaving the victim isolated from her peer group and struggling to focus on things such as school assignments (Javier, Dillon, DaBreo, & Mucci, 2013). Relational aggression is increasingly becoming more complicated. By utilizing text messaging and social networking sites, an aggressor can victimize someone at any time throughout the day or night, which leaves the victim with no escape.

Relational-cultural theory as a continually changing feminist model of human development promotes the growth-fostering of relationship, which includes a positive communication style. This theory would assist in eliminating the marginalization of the victims of relational aggression by benefiting the group of girls with channels of inclusive and positive conversation (Tucker et al., 2011).

The psychological and physiological impact on young females is detrimental due to the fact that adults are often either unaware of what is happening or do not know how they can help. Other adults may believe that this type of aggression is not a problem for today’s youth, thus they do not offer to help. Youth are extremely advanced in their ability to maneuver through technology, often leaving many adults struggling to understand how to intervene. This creates many challenges in regard to intervention (Chisholm, 2013).
Impact of Female Adolescent Relational Aggression on Victims:

Cyber-bullying has been proven to have harmful effects on female youth especially in the areas of psychological and physical difficulties. Victims are subject to feelings of depression, anxiety, and fear. Anger, tension, loneliness, and difficulty communicating with others are areas of impact for victims of relational aggression (Ismaili, 2014). Many victims experience shame over the situation. Others deal with the abuse by feeling bitter and destructive, often reaching out to bully others as a way to demonstrate their own assertiveness. Schools may notice a drop in attendance and failing academics where prior to the act of relational aggression, the student's attendance and academics could have been top of the class (Ismaili, 2014). Gomes (2011) describes the impacts of relational aggression when she states:

For girls, this is crucially important because it impacts social connections that are a vital aspect of growth and development, and self-identity formation. Moreover, the maladaptive responses of depression, social anxiety, social phobia, borderline personality disorder, psychosocial maladjustment and decreased life satisfaction have all been associated with the relational aggression victimization experience. (p. 1)

Relational aggression manifests in the physical arena as well. Many victims, due to nervousness and anxiety, will suffer from a lack of appetite and develop somatic difficulties, causing stomachaches or headaches. The ability to concentrate is lowered due to nervousness and anxiety. Many victims of relational aggression deal with nightmares and sleep becomes a new difficulty, further compounding the situation (Ismaili, 2014).

A vicious cycle develops. As a victim struggles with the physical manifestations of relational aggression, many victims will also begin to struggle with social anxiety. The victim believes others are watching them and that they are being judged, whether this is happening or
not. While in this constant state of high anxiety, characteristics that mimic paranoia often set in. The victim also worries about the next event of relational aggression, resulting in the victim always being on the alert, dealing with anxiety and fear. Some victims will remove themselves from activities and outings, including school, extra-curricular activities, and activities with other friends, due to their escalating social anxiety (Ismaili, 2014). This dynamic leads the victim to isolation and loneliness. It is as if they no longer need the aggressor because they independently stop initiating relationships or friendships (Ismaili, 2014).

**Familial Relationships and Relational Aggression:**

Another difficult component of relational aggression is its impact on family relationships. Many of the victim’s negative feelings are transferred to family members, making it difficult to engage in positive family relationships. Family members are often left completely in the dark in understanding the difficulties their child is experiencing since acts of relational aggression often occur in the school environment or away from adult supervision. The unfortunate result of this situation is that family relationships are damaged or severed due to the transference of behavior by their young daughter who is being bullied. Many parents react to their child’s behavior in a negative, conflictual, or punitive manner, which adds to an already difficult situation for the victim. These negative communication patterns create additional isolation for the victim, who many now be disillusioned into believing that there is neither support or allies at school or at home (Ismaili, 2014).

**Common Reactions to Relational Aggression:**

When in a state of trauma, victims often cope by automatically going to the fright, flight, or fight phase. Girls need to increase their feelings of closeness to people and need to bond. Instead, during this time they tend to go into a “fright” stage, shutting others out and shutting out
their potential support in order not to be hurt again. They often retreat into isolation or to the “flight” phase. Some victims may even try to assert themselves in the hierarchical standing within the group, resulting in them taking on the role of aggressor by demonstrating the “fight” mode. This can encourage a ripple effect on others, exacerbating the situation (Perry, 2003).

Many young adolescents experience risk in making attachments, especially with a friend group that they want to belong to. All social structures have a hierarchy of status. Victims can be at risk for exclusion, not fitting into a high enough status, or being treated in an emotionally and verbally adverse manner (Adamshick, 2010).

Female relational aggression has also been associated with a heightened fear of negative evaluation and an avoidance of social situations, especially if they are new to this form of aggression (Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004). Girls internalize negative behavior towards themselves and this produces anxiety. This anxiety can be a learned response from ongoing direct and indirect relational aggression. Avoidance of social situations and continued negative relational aggression can restrict a victim’s chance of participating in positive peer relationships, which in turn affects the youth’s development of social skills and self-esteem. The result is exalted levels of loneliness. Without interventions, the victims of female relational aggression are at risk for severe adjustment complications (Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004).

In a study by Borowsky, Taliaferro, and McMorris (2012), it was found that within the United States the health care settings did not actively prevent or lessen thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts for victims of bullying behaviors. This study discussed the need for dynamic inter-agency support in prevention of bullying behaviors. Schools, health agencies, and mental health agency involvement is critical. Victims display suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, self-
injury, depression, mental health difficulties, running away from home, substance abuse, and negative self-perception of their weight status (Borowsky et al., 2012).

Research studies have shown that female relational aggression causes mental health difficulties. In a study performed by Johnson, Barrett, Horricks, Akintan, and Van Blyderveen (2014), they found that teens with psychiatric diagnoses have an increased risk of high-risk sexual behavior. These researchers found data in their study that showed young adolescents with mental illness were also apt to engage in riskier sexual behaviors. This study did not focus upon female relational aggression. However, researching how female relational aggression is associated with mental health diagnoses would be a reasonable avenue for further research. Overall, one could conclude that mental health difficulties caused by relational aggression could lead to risky sexual behavior (Johnson et al., 2014).

In a study by Gomes (2007), relational aggression was discussed as a category of aggression that can have damaging effects on the victim’s social and psychological development. Gomes (2007) states, “The experience of being a victim of relational aggression can be traumatic and have lasting damage to the victim’s image of self” (p. 511). Due to the trauma of relational aggression, many victims become angry and seek revenge on their aggressor. Gomes (2007) found the behaviors displayed by victims of relational aggression were self-destructive when dealing with friends or situations. During this time in an adolescent’s development, a sense of normalcy, or fitting in, is intense. They rely heavily on peer approval, going to great lengths to achieve status within their peer group. Hence, the negative impact of relational aggression can damage a youth at this developmental stage, when they are seeking connection and belonging, often by any means (Gomes, 2007).
Matos (2009) discusses how young female adolescents require a sense of belonging and how relationships with peers are important areas for self-worth and purpose. When relationships are not secure or troubled, a disconnection is felt. Insecure relationships can cause psychosocial disconnection, which can lead to self-esteem difficulties and possible depression (Matos, 2009).

Relational trauma is defined as when two or more individuals are interacting in a relationship and a traumatic event takes place within that relationship. It is during the traumatic event that a sense of loss or loss of safety occurs, or when there is a loss of connection with someone, where it once existed.

Past research correlates the effects of traumatic situations in relationships with self-injurious behavior (Connors, 1996). This is manifested by cutting, drinking, overeating, substance abuse, smoking, and head banging, as well as other avenues of self-injurious behavior (Matos, 2009). Self-injurious behavior is defined as any socially unaccepted forms of behavior that cause conscious and explicit injury to his/her own body (Matos, 2009).

**Impact of Female Adolescent Relational Aggression on Victims’ Families:**

Little research has been conducted on the impact of female youth’s relational aggression and the victims’ families. Owens, Slee, and Shute (2000) discuss how a victim’s parents were devastated by the fact that their own child fell prey to acts of female relational aggression. The parents also felt they received a lack of support from the community. The system’s inability to help in turn devastated them even further, at times to the point of uprooting their family and relocating to a new community for a fresh start (Owens et al., 2000).

Information from a website, “About Health,” discusses how many victims’ parents develop physical symptoms such as feeling physically ill when told their child is being bullied (Gordon, 2014). The parents develop feelings of powerlessness due to their inability to change
the situation for their child. Stress from this situation can cause some parents to struggle with ulcers, stomach difficulties, and chronic headaches. Many family members struggle with what avenue of support to pursue and worry about how the situation will progress. There are parents that become obsessive over the situation because it consumes their thoughts. A parent can become over-protective, thus compounding issues. Some parents feel they have failed their child and question their role as a parent. They believe that they have made poor choices in keeping their child safe. Other parents described the situation as lonely and isolating because of little support from community members. Some community members questioned the victim’s role in the situation and her role in escalating the bullying (Gordon, 2014).

Pappas (2011) discusses the impact on parents of the bullying victims. One parent spoke about how she felt on edge the entire time when dealing with a cyber-bullying situation. She went on to speak about feeling powerless due to her inability to keep her own child safe. Pappas goes on to discuss how many parents feel angry, frustrated, and helpless when their child is a victim of bullying. Some parents talk about how relationships with other parents are broken due to other parents avoiding any involvement. As a result, the bullying situation places pressure on the entire family (Pappas, 2011).

Johnson (2012) discusses how parents of bullied children also feel like victims. These parents shared feelings of helplessness and hopelessness with ongoing relational aggression due to the parents’ concerns that the bullying was not being substantiated by administrators at the school level (Johnson, 2012). Further investigation by Brown, Aalsma, and Ott (2013) found that parents of the victims were unsuccessful in advocating for assistance for their bullied child. In turn, a choice to relocate could possibly cause secondary trauma as the parents attempted to
help their child. If parents were not financially able to relocate, they were left dealing with continued unrest as their child continued to be harassed and bullied (Brown, et al, 2013).

**Methodology**

This paper draws from a larger project that used narrative inquiry to conduct interviews with seven female victims and their parents. In the larger narrative study, the young girls and their parents provided organic information of their own personal experience of the impact from female relational aggression. The girls also accepted an opportunity to participate in a photo-voice project allowing them an additional avenue to share their own personal experience as the victim of relational aggression.

This paper will draw from the experiences of one poignant case to critically examine the impact of relational aggression on victims and their families. The researcher transcribed the interview of the young girl and mother and performed a thematic analysis. The themes that emerged from the young girl’s data were: negative thoughts, emotional coping, and mental health difficulties. Themes that emerged from the mother’s data were emotional coping, relationship damage, and despair.

Due to the age and vulnerability of the youth, ethics approval was required and approval was received for behavioral research ethics review, recruitment poster, parent or guardian participant consent form, and youth consent form from the University of Regina research ethics board.

**Recruitment and Data Collection**

Recruitment was implemented by social media postings on a social work and an anti-bullying Facebook page, along with a full discussion of the purpose for this research study. Parents were requested to contact the researcher by phone to inquire further about the research
study and a private phone call ensured confidentiality. Seven adolescent girls and their parents volunteered as participants for the narrative inquiry project. For the purposes of the case study, one young girl and her parent were chosen as participants for in-depth analysis and review. Data collection consisted of an in-depth interview with the young girl and her parent. The interviews were conducted separately, with each interview taking approximately one to one and a half hours. As well, data was collected from the child participant through the use of a photo-voice project, allowing the young girl to choose from any avenue of journal writings, poetry, pictures, and drawings. This allowed her to share her own personal story through an art-based avenue. This young participant used quotes and poems to share her own personal story of being a victim of female relational aggression.

In the interview with the adolescent participant, the young girl was asked to share her story of what occurred for her as the victim of female adolescent relational aggression. She spoke about how the relationship with her aggressor began and how it evolved towards relational aggression. The young girl then discussed the tactics used by the relational aggressor and how it affected her personally on a short and long-term basis. The young girl was asked if she attempted to seek out assistance to help resolve the problems due to relational aggression and if this was successful. If she did not seek out assistance, she was asked why she did not ask for assistance for her difficulty. She was also asked if any resources such as counseling, the family physician, or any other agencies were sought out for assistance due to the impact of the relational aggression. The questions in the interview were not asked in any sequence, as the research study wanted the narrative inquiry to be organic in nature. The interviewer allowed the participant to share the story in her own way with questions inserted at fertile moments of the interview.
The parent questionnaire was similar to the youth participants, but moved further by asking the parent how the incident of female adolescent relational aggression affected her or the family, in regards to such things as conflict, relationships, etc. The parent was also asked if she had access to any agencies such as counselling, the family doctor, or other agencies in respect to the female relational aggression towards her child.

**Data Analysis of Parent and Child Interviews**

Once the interviews were transcribed, a manual approach to thematic analysis was utilized to determine recurring themes within the data collected. Thematic analysis was chosen for this case study because it assists the researcher in reviewing the information and moving towards a discovery of themes within the data. This in turn helps to analyze the qualitative information and methodically advances the learning to understand an individual’s full experience (Boyatzis, 1998).

The data from the interviews and photo-voice project were codified and arranged in a systematic order of categories. Themes coming from the art-based photo-voice project were consistent with the young girl’s narrative and similar themes emerged from the data reviewed. Three dominant themes emerged from the young girl’s interview and photo-voice project. The first theme was negative thoughts about the victim’s character and appearance. The second theme was emotional coping in dealing with her feelings. The third and most important theme was mental health concerns, which had the youth dealing with a fluctuation of emotional difficulties from anxiety, self-injury, refusal to eat, lack of focus, isolating self from society to suicidal ideations.

Three dominant themes emerged from the parent’s interview. The first theme that emerged was emotional coping due to her daughter’s outbursts towards her caused by relational
aggression. The second theme that emerged was relationship damage due to the considerable amounts of stress placed upon the parent and child due to the entire situation of relational aggression. The third and final theme was despair, which described how this parent felt in her attempts to assist her child, and in her efforts to stop her daughter’s damaging journey only to discover there were few options to end it.

**Discussion of Themes from the Young Girl**

**Negative Thoughts:**

The internalization of negative thoughts demonstrates the effect of female relational aggression on the victim. The child victim doubted who she was and was ashamed of the negative character she thought she portrayed to her peers and blamed herself for being treated so abusively. The young victim stated, “I used to feel beautiful, confident, and good about myself, now I feel bad about myself and do not know who I am anymore. There must be something wrong with me that I am missing and that my friends see. I have no sense of worth.” In talking with this young girl, you could see the hurt as she shared her story.

**Emotional Coping:**

The internalization of negative emotions presented as despair, rage, anger, and sadness. The young girl described episodes of screaming and crying when she was alone and even at times when her family was at home. She felt she could not control her emotions that ranged from crying to raging in anger. The young girl shared that, “When I look in a mirror I want to rip everything apart in my home. I do not know who I am, I cry every night. There are times when my Mom is not home and I swear at myself.” Her mother also stated that she struggled when watching her child deal with difficult emotions and watching her child’s emotions go from crying to anger and back to crying.
Mental Health Difficulties:

Mental health difficulties included anxiety, depression, panic attacks, self-injury, lack of sleep, not eating, and suicidal ideations. Due to this child’s extreme feelings, she sought out support from her family physician, private counselling, mental health and addictions, the hospital, and then psychiatry. In the interview, the child shared a couple of statements that strongly demonstrated what she was going through. She stated, “I feel scared about even being around family, scared of a crowd of people, scared in public, scared to talk to people. I wanted to die. Nothing could fix this.” Near the end of our interview, she said, “I do not know why it went bad, I have not had it back for half a year.” In this statement, she was referring to who she was before becoming a victim of female adolescent relational aggression. Her Mom stated, “I think there is more to come, she is deeply affected. To what extent I do not know - I do not know if she even knows entirely.”

The results of this qualitative research study support the findings of Ismaili (2014) and Gomes (2011) in that the impact of relational aggression by females on other young adolescent female victims subjects the victims to feelings of depression, anxiety, suicide ideations and attempts. In addition, my research showed there were sleep problems, lower self-esteem, social isolation, feelings of shame, school attendance drops, and at times reaching out to bully others as an avenue to exhibit her own resolve. These results parallel those of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, and bullying of others, as well as sleep issues, lower self-esteem, social isolation, feelings of shame over the situation, and attendance drops.

Discussion of Themes from the Parent

Emotional Coping:

The parent spoke of being the person to whom her child expressed her anguish and
struggles, but, as she explained, this was done using unhealthy avenues such as rages and crying episodes. The parent felt she was impacted in having to cope with her own emotional struggles in this situation. She dealt with an array of emotions ranging from sadness, anger, and frustration to extreme hurt. She talked about difficulty in her ability to focus on everyday activities due to her own intense emotions. This was demonstrated when the parent said, “I too am affected as I am the target of her emotions from the relational aggression and I too am affected with my own emotions.”

**Relationship Damage:**

The second theme that emerged from the parent’s interview was relationship damage. The mother spoke of her relationship with her daughter before the female relational aggression began and their relationship now. She recounted that her daughter had become emotionally distraught and they were not connecting and sharing as they once had. Their relationship moved to the point where both the parent and young girl were struggling in their ability to interact with one another. According to the mother, their interaction grew in destructive paths as they were in conflict almost daily because the relational aggression would not cease. The mother talked about the conflict in their relationship by saying that, “It had to go somewhere and I was the target, punching bag, person to vent all what she was dealing with in the only way she knew how.” The mother discussed how their conflicts would escalate, thereby continuing to damage their mother-daughter relationship.

**Despair:**

The feeling of despair was discussed in detail throughout the interview. The parent stated she was dealing with despair by using words such as hopeless, helpless, and powerless. The parent had to deal with these emotions in several ways: on the receiving end of her daughter’s
emotions and as a bystander, watching what her daughter was dealing with, as well as desperately trying to find avenues of help to stop the relational aggression. The parent described her role as an onlooker: “Being an onlooker and seeing my child suffer and hurting is hard as a parent to see this.” Two forceful statements made by the parent that encased the word powerless were: “I feel that we are not bigger than social media; social media is bigger than any human being. The relational aggression cannot be stopped when it is directed in this avenue,” and “The girls are well manipulated in ensuring no adults are around to view their passive aggressive avenues of being aggressive to my daughter, which makes it hard to catch them and put a stop to it. My daughter is fearful of retaliation, as she has seen what they will do so she will not reach out for help.” The defeat and despair in the parent’s words were evident in these strong statements.

Based on a thematic analysis, it was revealed that the impact on the parent was that she struggled with emotional coping due to the stress directed towards her by her daughter who was dealing with relational aggression. The relationship conflict that occurred for the victim and her mother caused a disconnection in their relationship and resulted in continued conflict between the two. The despair the mother felt in her attempts to assist her daughter while trying to stop the damaging effect of relational aggression was further compounded by the fact that few options are currently available to stop the ongoing abuse resulting from relational aggression.

The results of this research study support the findings of Pappas (2011) showing that the victim’s parent was left feeling powerless and not knowing how to deal with the relational aggression, also leaving the victim’s mother feeling frustrated and helpless. The results of my analysis also support Johnson (2012), displaying the theme of despair which was explained by the mother of the victim in words such as feeling helpless, hopeless, and powerless. As well, my
results support the findings of Brown et al. (2013) showing the mother was unsuccessful in advocating for assistance for her child.

**Current Intervention Projects**

Some intervention programs currently used in the United States are: Stop Bullying Now, It has a Name: Relational Aggression (Ophelia project), and Salvaging Sisterhood. Each intervention is attaining success at varying levels (Goldberg, Smith-Adcock, & Dixon, 2011).

Interventions for victims of female relational aggression include ensuring victims have healthy avenues for expressing anger. This can be done by ensuring the victim has access to counselling with the possibility of bringing the victim and bully together to discuss how the acts of aggression made the victim feel and discuss the victim’s needs concerning the relationship.

Use of group therapy with those affected by relational aggression is used to educate the girls on dealing with differences of opinions. Group therapy can help to develop problem-solving skills, healthy boundaries, self-awareness, and empathy (Goldberg et al., 2011).

An intervention by the name of tootling, as described by Young et al. (2006), focuses on teaching pro-social skills and bolstering these particular skills instead of focusing on reacting to negative behavior. Tootling teaches positive reinforcement skills and empowers the classroom to evolve into a more positive environment. Students strive to find positive situations in which they can assist others (Young et al., 2006).

The Ophelia Project, founded in 1997, focuses on building a healthy climate for young girls (Young et al., 2006). This is accomplished by constructing a positive school environment with involvement from parents and community members. The project also works with parents, educating them on defining relational aggression and what they can do to break down this type of behavior. Those parents then work with other parents, making it a community project that
Preventing relational aggression is critical. Goldberg et al. (2011) recommend seven components to prevention work with relational aggression. These components are: (a) in-depth education on relational aggression and the significant damage to victims of relational aggression; (b) help to provide girls with assertiveness training to enable them to protect self and to voice their needs and feelings in a healthy manner; (c) encouragement of empathy and how to use these skills in recognizing how others are feeling within a group; (d) advocacy of friendship, to see other female youth as a potential friend and not an adversary; (e) leadership in a healthy avenue joining friends together and including everyone in community activities; (f) strengthening the involvement of girls in extra-curricular programs such as sports, arts and community programs; and lastly (g) educating girls on pure friendships that contain loyalty, similar interests, and support for each other with no hierarchy of social status (Goldberg et al., 2011).

Interventions are critical when providing solutions for victims of female relational aggression. Some schools utilize one intervention, called TipTxt, by Blackboard (Javier, Dillon, DaBreo, & Mucci, 2013). This program allows victims of female relational aggression to send a free confidential text that is forwarded to school officials so they may assist with any difficulty. The benefit of this tool is that it allows students that would have remained silent to acquire assistance in solving problems with relational aggression (Javier et al., 2013).

Other solutions include programs that teach students about cyber-bullying and its effects, setting up an anonymous phone-in line, involving police with cyber-bullying education, and developing a positive school culture where students are kind and empathetic towards all. Jackson, Cassidy, and Brown (2009) suggest that we need to be aware of what cyber-bullies and
cyber-victims have in common to develop potential solutions to the relational aggression via
are impacted by policy and programming on cyber-bullying may provide the needed vision for
reasonable and workable solutions” (Jackson, Cassidy, & Brown, 2009, p. 78).

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study encompass the voice and experience of the young girl and her
mother. The purpose of this study was to create a holistic, comprehensive understanding of the
impact of peer victimization on young girls and their families. Female adolescent relational
aggression is a form of indirect covert bullying that includes the damaging avenue of social
media also known as cyber-bullying. It is widespread through our communities and its effects
are damaging to victims in areas of psychological difficulties, physical difficulties, mental health
problems, substance use, risk-taking behaviors, self-injury, suicidal ideations, suicide attempts,
and, for some, suicide.

The information collected from the child and parent interviews demonstrates that the
issue of relational aggression cannot be just confined to the school environment. No longer can
we look within the vacuum of the school concerning the female relational aggression as it has
evolved to occur within the family home and in the community due to the expanding
cyberbullying aspect of relational aggression. This has in turn impacted families.

Support and prevention is critical. Schools, mental health agencies, and community
programs must come together to provide effective prevention to assist young female adolescents.
List of References


Fite, P. J., Stoppelbein, L., Greening, L., & Preddy, T. M. (2011). Associations between relational aggression, depression, and suicidal ideation in a child psychiatric inpatient


