

# Relational Aggression and Why Kids Engage In It

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Relational aggression is an insidious type of bullying that often goes unnoticed by parents and educators. Consequently, teens and tweens that engage in relational aggression are often able to bully, control and manipulate others all under the radar of adults. In fact, some kids are so skilled at this type of bullying that no one would ever suspect them of hurting others.

In general, girls tend to be more relationally aggressive than boys, especially during fifth grade through eighth grade.

Sometimes relational aggression is referred to as emotional bullying or the mean girl phenomenon and involves social manipulation such as:

Excluding people from a group

Spreading rumors

Breaking confidences or sharing secrets

Recruiting others to dislike a target

## Signs of Relational Aggression

While the tactics used in relational aggression vary from one bully to another, here are some common behaviors to look out for:

Talking badly about others

Backstabbing one another

Making fun of others for who they are, the way they dress or how they look

Excluding and ostracizing others

Leaving hurtful or mean messages on cell phones, social media, desks, and lockers

Cyberbullying or shaming others online

Intimidating others

Using peer pressure to get others to participate in bullying

Establishing rules for anyone who wants to be part of the social group

Forming cliques

Spreading rumors or engaging in gossip

How Cliques Can Lead to Bullying

## Why Do Girls Engage in Relational Aggression?

One of the top reasons girls engage in relational aggression involves establishing and maintaining social status within the school. For instance, girls will use relational aggression to socially isolate someone while increasing their own social status. Any number of factors drive this behavior including everything from envy and a need for attention to a fear of competition. Here's an overview of the motivating factors for relational aggression.

## Alleviates Boredom and Creates Excitement

Female bullies thrive on telling juicy stories or sharing negative information. As a result, girls will create excitement in their lives by spreading rumors, sharing secrets or creating drama. They enjoy the attention they get for knowing something others don't know. And they like being able to bring down their competition with a juicy story that ruins another person's reputation.

## Peer Pressure

Some girls compromise their values or principles just to fit in with a group or to gain acceptance. They might spread rumors or gossip in order to feel like part of the group or become more popular. They also might participate in group bullying or ostracize another person in order to be accepted by the group. Many times, they do these things out of fear of losing their own social position within the group and at school.

## Low Self-Esteem

Relational aggression is sometimes a cover-up for low self-esteem. For instance, a bully may feel insecure about her own clothes or appearance and will attack others before they have a chance to attack her. Other times, girls will bully others hoping that doing so will make them feel better about themselves.

## Eliminates Competition

Sometimes girls will bully someone simply because they are jealous of her. Perhaps they feel she is prettier, smarter or more popular with boys. Whatever the reason, girls will often target someone to make her seem less desirable to others. Often, they will use tactics like rumors, slut shaming, and name-calling to make another girl look bad.

## Learned Behavior

Sometimes girls gossip and talk poorly about others because that is what they see adult women doing. Whether it is a television program, an older sister, their mother or even a group of teachers, girls often model their behavior after what is in front of them.

## Emotional Effects

It's not uncommon for parents and educators to underestimate the impact of relational aggression. But for those on the receiving end, it is just as painful as any other type of bullying. In fact, many girls report that relational bullying is just as hurtful as physical aggression. The difference is that relational aggression leaves bruises on the inside, not the outside. In some cases, victims of emotional bullying show more signs of distress than those bullied physically. For instance, victims of relational aggression often:

Feel rejected, socially inept, inadequate, unattractive and unlikable

Suffer from depression

Contemplate suicide

Develop low self-esteem

Experience eating and sleeping disorders

Suffer academically

Struggle to make healthy friendships

If you notice any of these characteristics in your child, be sure you dig a little deeper and discover what is going on. You also may want to consider talking with her pediatrician or finding a counselor that specializes in bullying issues.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, contact the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at **1-800-273-8255** for support and assistance from a trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call 911.

### [How to Promote Bully-Proof Friendships](#)

## A Word From Verywell

There are a number of things you can do to help your teen cope with mean girls and [navigate relational aggression](#). For instance, make sure you take the time to listen. Discuss the fact that while she cannot control what other people do or say, she can control her response. Be encouraging, patient and empathetic. Relational aggression is a confusing and painful experience. Also, have her evaluated by your family doctor or a pediatrician if you notice signs of depression or if she is expressing thoughts of suicide. These things should never be ignored.