

Surviving Relational Aggression: Tips for Adults and Girls

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Establishing and maintaining healthy [friendships](#) is one of the most important tasks [adolescents](#), especially girls, face in their daily lives. Many girls spend a large portion of their day either engaging with their friends or thinking about their friendships. Navigating this world can at times be likened to an elaborate game of chess, where each move is thought out and methodical, and strategies change based on

the moves of others. For many girls, [mood](#) and self-esteem are inextricably linked to the outcome of these moves—the status of their friendships with others.

The social world of adolescent girls is often defined by a “survival of the fittest” mindset. In trying to survive, girls often employ strategies that can be harmful to others, even those they consider their closest friends. The use of these strategies is called relational aggression.

IDENTIFYING RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

In order to begin to address relational aggression, one must first recognize what it looks like. This behavior (which may often be used by adolescent girls but is not necessarily specific to girls) can be defined as actions intended to cause harm to another person by damaging their relationships with others. This type of behavior is often covert, unlike outright physical [aggression](#), and has the intent of damaging a girl's [self-esteem](#) and social relationships. Relational aggression can be proactive—used as a means to an end—or reactive—occurring as a retaliatory response.

Examples of relational aggression include:

- **Ignoring:** One girl or a group of girls may participate in ignoring behavior. Sometimes the “reason” is clear (an intentional or inadvertent offense, for example), but other times, the target may have no idea why she is being ignored. Ignoring can cause significant stress on the target. In fact, girls who are ignored will spend most of their day trying to figure out the reason behind a friend(s)’s anger and will often be overwhelmed with worry and [anxiety](#). Sometimes the target will even lash out at those ignoring them and attempt to retaliate, often making the situation worse.
- **Sharing personal information:** This often happens when a girl confides in a friend and that friend then goes and shares the confidential information with others. This can be especially harmful when the information is about a third peer, as that relationship is also likely to be damaged.
- **Teasing and put-downs:** Teasing and put-downs are used frequently, even in friendships. Often these are subtle and used under the guise that “real friends tell their friends the truth, even if it hurts.” When a girl stands up for herself, she may be labeled as sensitive and told to “lighten up.” Teasing and put-

downs damage a girl's self-esteem, however, and this may be especially true when the hurtful comment comes from someone who is supposed to be a friend.

- **Rumors and gossip:** Rumors and gossip spread like wildfire in middle and high schools. Gossip, often used as a tool to destroy the reputation of someone a girl is mad at or doesn't like, may be about something a girl did or said (or is purported to have done or said) but might also be used to instigate a fight between two girls with rumors that one girl wants to fight the other. Rumors and gossip are destructive and can impact friendships and self-esteem significantly.
- **Exclusion:** Girls use exclusion as a way to both maintain social status and keep others from obtaining social status. Girls within a friendship group can also exclude their own friends. These alliances within a friendship group can change from week to week and sometimes, day to day. In some cases, a girl may never really know where she stands in her group, and this uncertainty can cause [stress](#) and anxiety.
- **Cyberbullying:** [Cyberbullying](#) is pervasive. Girls can no longer go home after school to seek refuge from drama. Relational aggression is present constantly, and many more people might be included. Girls might post harmful and untrue statements about someone else or send angry, rude, and vulgar messages directed at one person to an entire group. Some also pretend to be someone else in order to elicit certain information that is later shared with others.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT RELATIONAL AGGRESSION?

For adults:

Adults can be a great support for girls who are experiencing relational aggression within their friend groups. Parents and other adult role models can also help girls find more effective ways to maintain healthy relationships by:

- **Teaching empathy.** Help girls understand the impact of their behavior on others to help them make better choices and have greater [empathy](#) for others. Using their own experiences to remind them of what it feels like to be on the other side of relational aggression can help them gain some perspective.
- **Teaching communication and problem-solving skills:** Adolescents are still learning how to best [communicate](#) and solve their own problems. Teaching them basic skills can help them learn how to better manage challenging social situations.
- **Modeling behavior:** When adults model patterns of positive interaction and behavior, teenagers may be better able to learn how to develop and maintain healthy relationships through exposure.

For girls:

The following skills may be helpful for girls attempting to survive the adolescent social world and thrive in environments where relational aggression flourishes.

- **Be assertive:** Learning how to stand up for yourself while being conscious of how your behavior can impact others can help you develop healthy relationships.
- **Know your values:** Explore what qualities are important to you in a

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friend relationship. The knowledge of what is important can help you determine which friendships are healthy and which are toxic. You do not have to stay in an unhealthy friendship. Find ways to limit contact with toxic friends and seek out relationships that make you feel happy and good about yourself.

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- **Strengthen your self-esteem:** Work on ways to feel [confident](#) about who you are, no matter what others say about you.
- **Develop coping skills:** Explore healthy [coping skills](#) that can help you deal with difficult social situations. Participate in activities outside of school, or find recreational activities you enjoy.
- **Talk to someone:** The adolescent social world can be difficult and pose any number of challenges. Find an adult you trust and feel comfortable talking to. Whether you would simply like a space to vent or you want advice on how to deal with difficult situations, getting that support can be extremely beneficial. A [therapist](#) is a great resource for this, but your [school counselor](#) might also be a helpful adult to seek out.

References:

1. Mean girls-Realities of relational aggression. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.d11.org/pip/Parents/Mean%20Girls.pdf>
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