Spring 2013

The Impact of Group Counseling on Students Who Have Been Identified as Adolescent Female Relational Aggressors

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The Impact of Group Counseling on Students Who Have Been Identified as Adolescent Female Relational Aggressors

Michelle Jones

The College at Brockport State University of New York
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Acknowledgements

I cannot even believe that I am finally here. It has been a long road, a long difficult, journey, but completely worth it all the same. I would like to start out by thanking my husband, Scott first and foremost. Without his support I would not have made it to this point. We started off this journey as a family of three and now four and a half years later, we are going strong with our sweet family of four. Thank you for giving me your unconditional love and support, especially at the end of each semester when I was certain that I would not make it into the next semester, when I did not believe in myself, you always did. Thank you to Lily and Dylan for being patient when I was not always around for fun outings with Daddy. Thank you especially to friends and family who made an effort and always took time to listen and help sort through moments of worry and stress, no matter what was happening in your lives.

I would also like to send a huge thank you to my parents, especially my Mother, for sacrificing so much time, especially these last two semesters, caring for Lily and Dylan. I realize it was not always easy, and I thank you one thousand million times. I could not have achieved this accomplishment without your support. I would also like to thank my in laws for their continued support and help anytime we needed it!

This experience has been amazing! I cannot say enough about the faculty, especially Dr. Kitty Fallon and Dr. Summer Reiner! Kitty, you are the little voice inside my head when I am sitting with anyone that needs support, I am forever changed from experiencing the class Self and will always remember. Thank you for offering support during personal crises. Summer, these last three semesters have been unforgettable!! What will we do without each other now!!!

I can’t thank you enough for your unconditional, inspirational, positive regard!!! You are one amazing lady; I look forward to being your colleague. Thank you to the Gates Chili Middle
School Counseling Department for welcoming me to your team for the year! It was an awesome experience!!!

To all of the future counselors in the program, believe in and trust the process, it is by far worth the ride!
Abstract

Relational Aggression, a form of bullying frequently experienced and instigated by middle school girls, involves social alienation, rumor spreading and the manipulation of a relationship to cause psychological harm to an individual (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). The purpose of this research project is to study the impact of group counseling on female middle school students, who have been identified as instigators of relational aggression. Relational aggression can be devastating to a victim’s self-concept as it, “undermines some of the most significant personal needs and goals of youth: the need for social inclusion, a positive sense of esteem and identity, and the development of meaningful friendships” (Ripley & Oneil, 2009). The study was conducted in a middle school with 5 students in the 8th grade. The researcher facilitated counseling group sessions that occurred once per week for a total of 8 weeks for forty minutes in duration. The researcher implemented activities and lessons adapted from textbooks in an attempt to improve female relationships by helping girls develop empathy, teaching healthy conflict, teaching girls to diffuse their anger without disrespecting one another, and developing authentic relationships with their peers. A pre/post survey was administered to measure group participant’s knowledge and awareness on the subject of relational aggression. A Paired t-test was performed and data was collected and analyzed by the researcher to conclude if group counseling had an impact and negative behaviors decreased.
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Upon entering adolescence, teens undergo numerous physical, emotional and physiological changes that can complex the formation of an identity of self (Crothers, Field & Kolbert, 2005). Girls begin to gain a sense of independence from parents or guardians; friendships often serve as a support system and contribute to the well-being of adolescent females. Borysenko (1996) explained that female friendships serve as a “precious link to the outside world and a lifeline to hold onto during the vicious sea of change” during adolescent development.

Relational aggression, a type of aggression that intends to hurt others through the manipulation of relationships and includes negative behaviors including gossip and ostracism, can have a negative long lasting impact on female adolescents (Baird, Silver & Veague, 2010). This type of aggression has been linked to poor psychosocial outcomes including depression and can lead to suicide (Baird et al., 2010). Over the last decade, research has uncovered that relational aggression occurs primarily in female friendships and can be quite devastating to young girls on a quest for a sense of belonging and acceptance. Contrary to physical aggression, relational aggression often goes undetected by educators because of its covert nature. Teen girls use social intelligence to avoid direct conflict and manage to destroy reputations and relationships, all the while remaining undetected. Researchers conclude that prolonged exposure to relational aggression may have a negative, irreversible impact on the psycho-social development of adolescent females (Crothers et al., 2005). Teen girls’ sense of self-worth is tied closely to their ability to form close connections to other females (Crick, 1995).
The purpose of the research study is to examine and evaluate the impact of group counseling on adolescent females that have been identified as instigators of relational aggression. The specific goals of the research were to identify if group counseling can increase student understanding of the impact of relational aggression, increase participants’ conflict resolution skills and increase levels of participants’ empathy. It is hypothesized that students with a known history of instigating relational aggression will decrease acts of aggression and increase levels of empathy upon participating in group counseling.
Review of the Literature

For teen girls, adolescent development is defined by the expansion of friendships and the importance of peer networks (La Greca & Harrison, 2005; La Greca & Prinstein, 1999). Adolescent self-identity is influenced by acceptance of peers and can have a significant impact on future psychological adjustment (Hartup, 1997). Studies suggest that forms of peer victimization, (e.g. bullying, relational aggression) are consistently linked to feelings of depression, loneliness and suicidal ideation in adolescent females (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Vernberg, 1990; La Greca & Harrison, 2005). Recently, relational aggression, or bullying that occurs through emotional harm in a relationship, has received more attention in popular press and scholarly studies (Young, et al., 2006).

In 2007, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that teen suicide was the third leading cause of death among adolescents in 2004. It has been reported that teens, who have experienced bullying in any form, are at risk for suicidal ideation, attempts and completed suicides (Baldry & Winkel, 2003). The Bureau of Justice Statistics Indicators of School Crime and Safety confirmed that 28% of youth beginning at the age of ten reported bullying incidents over the last six months, at least once or twice per week (Hindjua & Patchin, 2010). Perhaps the most deadly outcomes of relational aggression in the United States are the school shootings that began in the mid-1990’s, which prompted legislation to address bullying in schools (Carlson, 2009). Most often occurring in school, the need for a greater understanding of relational aggression among school personnel is present (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004). School Counselors also have a vital role in academic achievement, social and relational achievement (Burt, Patel & Lewis, 2012). School counselors are in a position to create change by
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implementing intervention strategies to prevent problem behaviors. The purpose of the study is to evaluate the impact of group counseling on instigators of relational aggression.

The Context

The following is an excerpt taken from the National Bestseller, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, written by Rachel Simmons (2002):

The first people Stephanie met after transferring to the new school were Marissa and Lori. Stephanie felt queasy about starting a new school; it had been a huge relief to find the two new friends. On a Saturday night in late fall, Stephanie was invited over for her first sleepover at Lori’s….The three girls spent the evening together like typical teenage girls do. However, on Monday after study hall, Stephanie could sense that things had changed in a way she did not understand. She decided to sleep on it. The next day, Marissa and Lori ignored her in homeroom. Later that morning, two girls informed her that people had been talking. Something was going on behind her back. Still, no one had spoken to her. Marissa and Lori were nowhere to be found. Stephanie was out, gone from the group. No one would acknowledge her. She was invisible (Simmons, 2002, pg. 108).

The passage is an accurate depiction of a typical scenario during an incident of relational aggression. The following research project is a study of relational aggression among female adolescents. What is most commonly known as, “girls being girls” and considered a rite of passage, can be devastating to adolescent girls (Doyle, 2010).
**Defining Relational Aggression**

Relational Aggression is defined as a form of bullying in which hidden or covert acts of aggression are used to manipulate peer relationships in order to cause emotional harm (Young, et al., 2006). Researcher Nicki Crick, PhD. from the University of Minnesota, first coined the term in 1995, and slowly over the next decade, awareness has begun to spread with regard to the harmful effects of this type of behavior. According to Young et al. (2006), relational aggression “has more recently emerged as a point of contrast to physical aggression and has received increased attention in the popular press and in scholarly journals” (pg. 5). While Card, Stuckey, Sawalini and Little (2008) suggested that boys and girls may have more similarities than differences in their uses of relational aggression, research on girls has received less attention than aggression in boys (Reynolds & Repetti, 2010). Young et al (2006) reported that educational journals and publications have only just begun to investigate the topic.

Increasingly prevalent in middle school, bullying among adolescent females typically occurs and includes behaviors such as rumor spreading, social isolation and back-stabbing (Baird, Silver & Veague, 2010). Relationally aggressive behaviors occur most often in middle school, possibly because students feel a greater need to belong to a group of peers (since students are unlikely to have all of the same people in every class; Radliff & Joseph, 2011). By using rejection and character assassination, instigators attempt to sabotage peer relationships (Gomes, 2010). Other nonverbal forms of relational aggression may include dirty looks, eye rolling or ignoring (Radliff & Joseph, 2011). The relational aggressor’s motive is to inflict harm among victims through the manipulation of friendships and intent to permanently damage interpersonal relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).
Lacking any physical evidence, and because consequences are often mislabeled as the “normal” pains of peer relationships, this form of aggression can be difficult to detect (Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton & Young, 2010). The common perception of relational aggression of “girls being girls”, in the same vein that physical aggression among boys is labeled as “boys just being boys”, leaves school officials unlikely to respond or pursue cases of suspected social aggression (Radliff & Joseph, 2011). Students who use relational aggression are often sophisticated and discrete and are skilled at hiding their behaviors from teachers and adults (Young et al., 2010).

Researchers Crick and Grotpeter (1995) discovered that over the past two or three decades, research relating to aggression has evolved and now includes a broader spectrum of types of aggression, including nonphysical forms, which can damage one’s status or social standing within a group. Researchers found that relational aggression is usually a strategy for attaining social status and alliances (Puckett, Aikens & Cillessen, 2003). Relational aggression has been known to damage one’s peer/romantic relationships, social standing or sense of belonging (Linder J. R., Crick N. & Collins W., 2002). Baird et al. (2010) reported that while not every adolescent female is a ringleader or the outsider of their social scene, nearly all will experience some form of relational aggression during their adolescent years. This subtle form of bullying can be difficult to detect or monitor, which in turn does not permit proper discipline.

The hidden culture of “destructive bullying that is epidemic and distinctive” among adolescent girls (Simmons, 2002, p84.). Simmons (2002) reported that historically in our society, females have remained silent when it comes to their own experiences. “It is only in the last thirty years that we have begun to speak the distinctive truths of women’s lives, openly
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addressing rape, incest, domestic violence and women’s health” (Simmons, 2002, p. 3).

Roecker-Phelps (2001) explained that relationally aggressive behavior can begin as early as preschool and may last through high school and well into adulthood.

**Importance of Female Friendships in Adolescents**

According to Crothers et al. (2005) female friendships are perhaps the most important relationships girls and women develop over a lifetime. Very little research has been documented regarding the importance of female friendships, especially during the middle school years. The development of strong female friendships can be imperative for adolescents, as tightly knit groups of friendships can outline and adhere to normal groups of behavior and allow girls to navigate and survive within the larger school environment (Zwolinski, 2008). Girls have more of a tendency to develop close, intimate self-disclosing relationships with each other (Ma & Huebner, 2008).

**Positive outcomes.** Upon entering adolescence, the nature of young girls’ friendships changes along with its social, emotional and psychological consequences (Bukowski, Newcomb & Hartup, 1996). Researcher Kara Sammet (2010) conveyed that strong, authentic friendships are associated with positive developmental outcomes for adolescent females. Impett, Sorsoli, Schooler, Henson and Tolman (2008) found that young girls who have authentic friendships among peers in the eighth grade are more likely to experience an increase in self-esteem over a five year period than their peers with less authentic relationships. Psychosocial well-being among adolescent girls depends on acceptance among peers, specifically female-female relationships (Sammet, 2010). Hartup and Stevens (1997) agreed that friends serve as emotional resources for developing adolescents. Increasing evidence has suggested that strong peer
relationships, especially in middle school, play a crucial role in academic success (Buhs, E. S., Ladd, G. W., & Herald, S. L., 2006; Kindermann, 2007; Wentzel, 2009).

**Developmental task.** Social competence is an important adolescent developmental task, as navigating peer relationships and effectively dealing with conflict resolution increases one’s interpersonal skills (Yoon et al., 2004). An important part of the social lives of young adolescent females is perhaps the need for emotional closeness and intimacy found within female-female friendships (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990).

According to Furman and Buhrmester (1992) adolescents seek emotional and moral support from friendships, surpassing the support of parents. During adolescence, emotional development can be a distressful period during middle school, having friends provides emotional stability that contributes to the development of self-concept. According to Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, during the stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion, adolescents begin to explore their independence; the development of the self-concept is at its peak during this developmental stage (Schlein, 1995; Stevens, 1983); it is through peers that students are able to achieve a sense of identity (Field, Crothers & Kolbert, 2006).

**Gender Identity in Aggression**

The relationship between gender identity and relational aggression was examined (Crothers et al., 2005). The question as to why girls use relational aggression instead of physical aggression was considered. The researchers suggested that gender role expectations established by society, may contribute to relationally aggressive behaviors in female adolescents. In recent published literature and media, there has been an increase in focus on girls and how they express anger, hurt or frustration (Cannon, Hammer, Reicherzer & Gilliam, 2012). Society does not
permit girls to act out anger in an open, productive manner; instead it is hidden and expressed through indirect ways.

**Stereotypes.** According to O’Neal and Egan (1993), societal stereotypes have restricted adolescent girls from expressing anger; this emotion would not portray girls as to living up to societal gender expectations. By acting out in a violent or aggressive way, females would not be perceived in a “lady like” manner. Simmons (2012) reported “good girls” are expected not to experience anger, as anger causes problems in relationships, which would forgo her expected role as a caregiver and “nice” girl. Girls are expected to exercise self-control, and always be kind and portray acceptable femininity which will restrict their desire to express anger or frustration (Crothers et al., 2005). Females who act out in an aggressive manner with another girl gain attention, adding to the “cat fight” mentality of portraying girls as enemies. If a girl is to act out in an assertive or confrontational way, she is then labeled as a “bitch”, “lesbian” or “manly”; girls that express anger in relationally aggressive ways are labeled as the “Mean Girl” (Cannon et al., 2012; Simmons, 2012).

**Covert is accepted.** Responding in a direct or confrontational manner is not consistent to a feminine identity (Bem, 1981); girls may be forced to respond in a covert and manipulative method in order to establish power or control. Crothers et al. (2005) echoed the belief that young girls do not have the freedom to behave in authentic ways when expressing anger, which may result in attacking peers in covert and relationally aggressive ways. Furthermore, girls who tend to identify with traditional female norms, tend to avoid direct forms of conflict, and resort to covert forms of aggression (Kolbert et al., 2010). Those who engage in relational aggression are
at risk for suffering from depressive symptoms and may experience guilt for acting out in an indirect manner, as any form of aggression does not fit the feminine identity norm.

Researchers Crothers et al. (2005) included a qualitative questionnaire within the study and asked: 1) How do you think girls are supposed to handle conflict? 2) How do most girls and boys your age resolve conflict? Is there a difference? Respondents to the first question reported that most girls are afraid to admit what they really believe about certain things, as they are afraid of rejection from a social group. Many of the respondents from the study concurred that most girls indirectly address conflict to remain perceived as “lady like”. One respondent admitted that girls are not allowed to fight with one another; they are expected to behave in a ladylike manner with “legs crossed and mouths shut” (p. 260).

**Impact of Relational Aggression on Adolescent Females**

Reports indicated that over 160,000 students are absent from school for fear of being victimized by a classmate (National Education Association, 2001). While some acts of relational aggression are experienced as nothing more than a social nuisance and will be easily forgotten in one afternoon (Baird et al., 2010), findings suggested that relational aggression can lead to a pattern of emotions (Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000), and has devastating effects on young girls. Peer victimization through relational aggression can predict future adjustment issues and may remain well beyond adolescent years (Prinstein et al., 2001). The adjustment issues include: internalizing problems, academic deficits, teacher-student conflicts, lack of school engagement (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), depression, suicide, loneliness (Bearman & Moody, 2004; Weber & Kurpius, 2011), social anxiety, the inability to develop normal friendships (Storch, Masia, & Warner, 2004), and other long-term effects.
**Pattern of emotional reactions.** A study by Owens et al. (2000) interviewed a qualitative sample of teenage girls to determine the effects of indirect or relational aggression. The researchers discovered a pattern of emotional reactions that victims of relational aggression undertake during an incident. Initially, the victim underwent a response of *confusion*, most often occurring after social exclusion, which then led to *covering up*, or denial, as the victim did not want to admit the abuse happened to them. The initial reaction, or defense mechanism, eventually led to psychological pain that included: hurt, fear, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, anxiety and fear of future relationships.

**Long-term effects.** Relational Aggression can be just as damaging to the developing adolescent psyche, than physical aggression, if not more so in some cases. According to Keenan, Coyne and Lahey (2008), relationally aggressive behavior and victimization can deplete mental health and socio-emotional development and functioning of adolescent females. Relational aggression can have lasting effects as demonstrated in a study (Werner & Crick, 2005) of college women, who experienced relational aggression in the past. They reported suffering from depression, peer rejection, interpersonal conflict, sadness, pessimism, life dissatisfaction, identity problems, and self-harm behaviors. Chronic victims of relational aggression may believe that they are deserving of the abuse (Ladd & Ladd, 2001). They are also at risk for alcohol and substance abuse problems in the future (Hartup & Stevens, 1997), the development of eating disorders, antisocial behavior, and borderline personality disorder (Linder et al., 2002).

**Negative effects on perpetrators.** Not only did adverse effects from relational aggression harm the victim, researchers uncovered that perpetrators also experienced negative effects (Crick, N., Casas, J., Mosher, M., 1997). Perpetrators are more likely to experience social
and emotional maladjustment, than peers that do not participate in relationally aggressive behaviors. Instigators reported experiencing significantly higher levels of loneliness, depression and negative self-concept. Prinstein et al., (2001) suggested that girls, who are relationally aggressive, are more likely to display personality traits that are present in oppositional defiant and conduct disorders.

Technology and Relational Aggression

In 2005, researchers Kowalski and Limber recorded that out of a sample of 3676 students 18 percent reported having experienced cyber bullied over the past two months. After experiencing cyber-bulling and being repeatedly exposed to threatening and abusive emails and text messages from students at her school, a student ended her own life at age 12 (Bhat, 2008). Previously, her mother reported the incidents to school authorities, which resulted in the escalation of incidents.

Advances in Technology. Over the past century, technology in our society has undergone many changes and has advanced rapidly (Dempsey, A. G., Sulkowski, M. L., Dempsey, J., & Storch, E. A., 2009). Cyberspace was used by nearly 90% of adolescents, with 50% of teens using the Internet on a daily basis (Dempsey et al, 2009). The Internet is also a venue for peer victimization to occur, leaving teens susceptible to harassment around the clock (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). While traditional peer aggression was avoidable when a victim was able to escape the school or a social gathering that it was occurring (Dempsey et al., 2009), the Internet allows an aggressor to reach a victim at any time. Additionally, adult supervision and online monitoring rarely occur when cyber victimization happens (Wang, Bianchi & Raley, 2005).
Social Media. Through both the use of cellular phones and computers, peer victimization through cyberspace was a considered a special case (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Dempsey et al., (2011) reported that cyber technology provide new tools for youth, who already engage in aggressive behaviors in the physical world, to reach victims in cyberspace. Social networking sites have become popular venues for teens to express their thoughts and feelings behind a computer screen (Blood, 2002). Websites including: Facebook, Myspace, Twitter and Youtube allow cyber-bullies the ability to threaten, harass and humiliate their peers without facing their victims (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Aggressors perceive themselves as remaining anonymous, which would give them more confidence to act in volatile ways (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Another study by Kowaski and Limber (2007) indicated that, although the roles of bully and victim exist within cyber bullying, by utilizing technology, adolescents are typically both the bully and the victim; most victims of cyber bullying have been on both sides of the spectrum.

Bullying Techniques. Four techniques teens used to commit relational aggression in cyberspace were described including: harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing and exclusion (Willard, 2007). Offenders committed denigration by publishing embarrassing photos, rumors or personal information about the victim on social media websites (Dempsey et al., 2009) Impersonation was executed by sending emails or text messages directly from the victim’s computer, cell phone or Facebook page. Exclusion was committed when victims were alienated or shut out from participating in online social activities such as a game or chat room.

Distinction. According to a study conducted by the researchers, it was important to consider the distinction between the terms cyber aggression, cyber bullying and cyber harassment (Dempsey et al., 2011). Cyber bullying, a subtype of cyber aggression, involved a
repeated intent to harm and an imbalance of power, similar to physical bullying. Cyber aggression, involved intent to harm a victim, but not necessarily repeated acts of aggression. Cyber harassment involved the intent to harm a victim by posting threatening or embarrassing statements on a Facebook or Twitter page (Bhat, 2008).

Influence of Media. Another side explored when considering the use of technology and relational aggression, not a direct means for an aggressor to reach a victim, which may inspire aggressors, is within the media. Several research studies connected viewing violence in the media to influencing physical aggression, however very few studies examined the impact of viewing relational aggression (Keenan et al., 2008). Results from a study suggested viewing aggression in the media is translated into aggression in real life, not always in the same form. Coyne, S, Arche, J and Eslea, M (2004) suggested that viewers of relational aggressive content should be warned when watching programs containing high levels of indirect aggression similar to the way viewers are warned of graphically violent content. Television may hold some responsibility to influencing individuals to act in an indirect relationally aggressive manner based on what is portrayed in the media.

The Role of Empathy in Relational Aggression

Empathy can be described as an affective and emotional response to another person’s situation (Hoffman, 2001) and are often congruent with the other person involved (Eisenberg, Fabes, Murphy, Karbon, Maszk., 1994). Davis (1994) posited that empathy is a two-dimensional construct with cognitive and affective components. Cognitive empathy is having the ability to recognize and understand the feelings of other’s (Stavrinides, Georgiou, & Theofanous, 2010). Affective empathy is the ability to actually experience the feelings of others.
Empathy in adolescence. Del Barrio, M.V., Aluja, A., and García, L. (2004) reported that it is both the cognitive and affective components within empathy that teens are able to establish and maintain genuine friendships and may also improve the quality of family relationships. The cognitive element of empathy refers to the skills adolescents have in recognizing other’s emotions and taking other’s perspectives while experiencing other’s feelings as their own connects the affective piece (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1982). Nickerson, Mele and Princotta (2008) suggested that advanced development in the social cognition, which occurs in early and late adolescence, allow most individuals to take into account the perspectives and experiences of those around them. More cognitive evolved forms of empathy are displayed throughout adolescence for most teenagers (Strayer, 1987). It is during adolescence, when empathy is developing at its peak that it played a major role in social competence (Hoffman, 1987).

Lack of empathy. Lack of empathy may be an indicator for aggressive or anti-social behavior (Jollife & Farrington, 1987). Aggressive behaviors might be facilitated in those who are unable to appreciate the feelings of others. Children displaying aggressive behavior may show lower levels of affective empathy, but not cognitive empathy (Stavrinides et al., 2010). Research collected by Frey, Hochstein and Guzzo (2000) reported that a classroom based social-emotional learning program may be effective in fostering the development of empathy, problem solving and anger management skills.

Empathy and bullying. A study of 205 sixth grade students found a negative relationship between aggression and a child’s ability to be in touch with what another child’s
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experiences (Stavrinides et al., 2010). The researchers suggested that having lower empathy might lead to bullying behaviors.

Davis (1994) proposed two separate forms of aggressor empathy: empathy mimicry and empathic concern. When an aggressor experiences empathic mimicry, she or he will observe an emotion of a potential victim, whether it is sadness, fear or any other expression of distress and is then more likely to share in that emotion while becoming distressed or sad themselves, which will prevent the individual from aggressing again (Lovett & Sheffield, 2006). Empathic concern involves the aggressor taking on the perspective of the targeted victim and will imagine the experience from the victim’s perspective, thus not following through with the aggressive behavior (Lovett & Sheffield, 2006). Anderson and Bushman (2002), however, suggested that some aggressors, who experience empathy mimicry, experience distress that may increase aggressive behavior. Thus, the relationship between aggression and empathy is more complex and less obvious (Lovett & Sheffield, 2006).

**Educator Perceptions of Relational Aggression**

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects within the issue of relational aggression is the perception of the problem among educators. A widely accepted belief among teachers is that most relationally aggressive behaviors are normal among students and the behaviors are something that adolescents “outgrow” (Yoon, Barton & Taiariol, 2004; Young et al., 2006). Typically, adults believed girl meanness was a natural part of the social rite of passage, and that victims should learn to deal with it (Simmons, 2002) rather than disciplining aggressors (Young et al, 2006).
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Teachers ignore. Researchers uncovered the perception among educators that relational aggression is less serious (Craig, Henderson & Murphy, 2000). Kicking, hitting, biting or any other form of violent physical attention generally received more attention from educators (Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007). Teachers were surveyed and responded to hypothetical situations involving relational aggression (Yoon & Kerber, 2003). Researchers found that teachers were likely to ignore behaviors and become less involved than in situations of physical violence (Craig, et al., 2000). Teachers also reported feeling less sympathy toward victims of relational aggression than to victims of physical aggression. Researchers Owens et al. (2000) reported that some teachers believed that victims somehow brought the abuse onto themselves.

Victims are to blame. Teachers were likely to blame the victim’s lack of social and conflict resolution skills. Adults were not likely to address the emotional needs of students that have experienced relational aggression (Young et al., 2008). Victims perceived their plight as going unnoticed and felt less safe (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001). Students reported that teachers are not willing to involve themselves; lack of teacher interference may reiterate the previous sentiment that relationally aggressive behaviors are accepted and usually “out grown”. However, ignoring incidents has resulted in devastating consequences (Yoon et al., 2004; Casey-Cannon et al., 2001).

Findings highlighted by Crothers et al. (2006) suggested that middle school students preferred to have teachers or school counselors involved in intervening bullying situations. Limited research has been published identifying the school counselor’s role in bully prevention and interventions. Traditionally, the school counselor existed in a school environment to support...
students’ development from an academic, career and social standpoint (Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007).

**School counselor’s perception.** Researchers Jacobsen and Bauman (2007) identified that school counselors held differing views on the severity of three different types of bullying. A sample of 183 counselors completed an online survey indicating responses to three types of bullying including: physical, verbal and relational (Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007). The researchers reported that findings suggested physical and verbal bullying was interpreted by school counselors as more serious than relational bullying. It was concluded that school counselor’s responses were not congruent with what they were trained for; to be aware of the emotional and psychological state of student functioning. Findings also indicated that counselors in schools, which did not have an anti-bullying policy in place, indicated more likelihood to intervene than counselors who worked in a school without an anti-bullying policy. Counselors were more likely to intervene in bullying situations than other counselors.

**Prevention and Intervention Strategies for Relationally Aggressive Behaviors**

There is a lack of literature in existence on specific strategies or intervention plans recorded in schools throughout the country that prevent relational aggression. Yoon et al. (2004) reported the absence of prevention and intervention strategies in place within schools. An article published by Leff, Waasdorp, & Crick (2010) suggested that programs attempting to address relational aggression should utilize similar designs already in place. Very few school-based mental health professionals and counselors have utilized evidence based programs to combat bullying (Lund, Nielsen, Hansen, Kriegbaum, Molbo, Due & Christensen, 2009). Historically, mental health staff was not involved during selections of intervention programs, administrators
were often in charge of selecting programs to be utilized in school districts. Developing early intervention programs for relational aggressors and victims can improve the mental well-being of students and the school community (Leff & Crick, 2010).

Create awareness. Yoon et al. (2004) discussed that in order to combat relational aggression, there needs to be a more concrete understanding of the issue from faculty, administrators, parents and caregivers. Bullying behaviors need to be taken seriously, especially since most behaviors are presented in school settings and indicate that educators should have a better understanding of how to deal with the issue (Elinoff, Chafouleas, & Sassu, 2004). In order to create a broader awareness, educators need to be trained on identifying the signs of relational aggression and the devastating effects of these behaviors (Yoon et al., 2004). Key stakeholders, including teachers, school counselors and administrators are instrumental to combating the issue of relational aggression (Radliff & Joseph, 2011). Merrell, Ervin & Gimpel (2006) suggested that school districts implement a calendar of meetings to be held throughout the year to include school personnel, in-service teacher and staff meetings, school wide assemblies and parent informational nights to inform and create awareness about relational aggression.

Identifying signs. The first step for school officials to address relational aggression in a school is to identify students who are potential instigators of this type of abuse. Identifying instigators of abuse is a difficult task, especially because this type of aggression is not always observed by adults within a school (Young et al., 2006). Changes in behavior of students can be monitored by teachers and parents; behaviors such as withdrawal, sadness, anxiety and increased aggression can be indicators of bullying others or being victimized by peers. Students that instigate relational aggression are often savvy at successfully committing the act of aggression
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without getting caught and may respond in a defensive manner with phrases such as, “I didn’t do anything. Is it a crime to ignore someone?” (Young et al., 2006, p.3). The process of identification is not a clear cut or straight forward process as measures to examine relational aggression have been created for research purposes only (Young et al., 2006; Young et al., 2010).

Several characteristics of instigators that may assist school officials in identifying relationally aggressive girls were explored. Moretti, Holland, and McKay (2001) explained that girls who have a negative view of themselves are more likely to correspond with peers in a negative manner. Putallaz, Grimes, Foster, Kupersmidt, Coie and Dearing (2007) explained that limited pro-social behaviors or girls who are part of a social group in which shifts in the hierarchy often take place are often included when identifying likely instigators (Dodge, 1991). Carney and Merrell (2001) suggested that students wishing to gain popularity with their peers are more likely to bully others. Students who are identified as potential relational aggressors may benefit from small group or individual counseling facilitated by school counselors or school psychologists (Elinoff et al., 2004).

**Drama techniques.** According to research conducted by Fleming (1998), drama education has the power to invoke change in the behavior of adolescents. It is perceived that in order to experience reality from another persons’ perspective, the student learner must act out the experience of someone besides themselves (Burton, 2010). Researcher Neelands (2009) suggested that through drama, teens will develop a clearer understanding of another student’s experience and will be able to act out and imagine new ways of living together and create a stronger sense of community.
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An innovative program developed in Australia to prevent bullying in schools known as, “The Acting against Bullying Applied Theatre Program” (Burton, 2010). The program was designed as the result of 10 years of research into conflict and bullying (Burton, 2010). Using a combination of improvisation, theatre and peer teaching, the program evolved into a positive intervention implemented in both primary and secondary schools (Burton, 2010). It is hypothesized that through role play and creative drama, conflict resolution skills will be internalized and adopted (Graves, Frabutt & Vigliano, 2007). Limited evidence exists to support this claim although theory suggested it may be an effective tool to promote change (Graves et al., 2007).

Interventions specific to school counseling.

Power-Elliott and Harris (2012) suggested that school counselors played a unique role within the larger school system. Furthermore, school counselors have been identified as logical resources in combating school violence given their training and roles fulfilled within school systems (Riley & McDaniel, 2000).

Researchers Jacobsen and Bauman (2007) suggested that school counselors needed extensive training with regard to bullying and relational aggression harassment. With the proper training, school counselors are considered assets in training other school personnel in anti-bullying efforts (Casey-Cannon, et al., 2001; Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Fried & Fried, 2003; Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007). School counselors are instrumental in fostering stronger and more supportive student-teacher relationships, which can be effective in prevention of relational aggression (Young et al., 2006). In 1999, New York State’s Task Force on School Violence recommended that school counselors develop strategies encouraging stronger communication
between parents and school officials (Riley & McDaniel, 2000). In addition to improving relationships, school counselors can provide direct services to students, individual and group counseling to students (ASCA, 2005). School counselors use counseling theories to guide their work.

**Social Information Processing Theory.** Counseling theories may be applied to relational aggression intervention and prevention efforts. School counselors have the ability to adapt counseling theories to specific counseling groups. Social Information Processing Theory posits that, in social situations, social cues are processed and behavioral reactions are based on how they are processed (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Based on this theory, behavioral responses will either be socially competent or aggressive (Felix & McMahon, 2007). While Social Information Processing Theory can be explored to comprehend aggressive behaviors, additional theories can be adapted and applied to counseling groups.

**Relational Cultural Theory.** The human developmental theory known as, Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), emphasized that relationships are the foundation to wellness and survival as an individual (Cannon et al., 2012). A study was examined in which the RCT model was implemented within a group counseling setting of adolescent girls by school counselors (Cannon et al., 2012). The purpose of the RCT model within a group counseling setting is to facilitate mutual empathy and growth (Jordan, 2001), which may impact incidents of bullying behavior. Through facilitating an RCT group, it was hypothesized that participants would have the ability to engage in more genuine and authentic relationships by fostering empathy. Miller and Stiver (1997) posited that RCT Counselors view adolescents’ disconnections from one another as the primary barrier from achieving emotional growth. Therefore, the counseling
process within RCT is viewed as one that will empower the client away from unhealthy and potentially harmful relationships (Jordan, 2004), invoking greater connectedness towards one another. RCT empowers clients to move away from unhealthy conflict in an effort to provide clients with the tools to support them in working through “good conflict” (Walker, 2004).

**Group counseling.** In a group study conducted by McClung (2006), female adolescent participants were invited to participate based on a known history of being both a victim and perpetrator of cyber-bullying; the group participants were all in the eighth grade. Both victims and instigators were invited to participate in the counseling group. The following key concepts used during the group implementation: identifying non-mutual relationships, connections and disconnections, feeling empowered by the group experience, honoring emotions, authenticity and fostering empathy (Cannon et al., 2012). The results of the group fostered a greater awareness of relational aggression; members reported feeling empowered from becoming more relationally competent individuals (Cannon et al., 2012).

**Summary**

Over the last two decades, an increase in bullying and aggression has occurred in schools (Burt et al., 2012). Relational Aggression continues to be linked to psychosocial maladjustment in adolescence through adulthood (Dellasaga & Nixon, 2003). Researchers concluded that a negative relationship exists between low empathy and relational aggression (Stravrinides, Georgiou & Theofanous, 2010). Evidence suggested that perpetrators of relational aggression have low empathy towards victims (Crick, 2006). Considered an essential component to reducing aggressive behaviors, the development of empathy is imperative for instigators.
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Teachers, school counselors, and administrators are key players in intervening and preventing relational aggression. Limited literature exists on interventions that school counselors have used to combat relational aggression. The purpose of the research study is to assess the impact of group counseling on instigators of relational aggression.

Research Questions

1. Does group counseling increase student understanding of the impact of relational aggression?

2. Does group counseling increase participants’ conflict resolution skills?

3. Does group counseling increase participants’ empathy?

It is hypothesized that students with a known history of instigating relational aggression will decrease acts of aggression and increase levels of empathy upon participating in group counseling.

Method

The purpose of the research is to assess the impact of group counseling on female adolescents who have been identified as instigators of relational aggression. The study is a pre-test/post-test design in which a self-report survey entitled, “What is Your RA (Relational Aggression) Quotient?” by Cheryl Dellasaga was administered to participants during the first counseling session and again during the final counseling session to determine if a decrease in relationally aggressive behaviors has been met and empathy has increased. The purpose of the counseling group is to teach relationally aggressive girls how to effectively communicate with one another, develop conflict resolutions skills, and create awareness about relational aggression which will have an impact on school climate thus decreasing acts of relational aggression and
increasing empathy. The following section includes information on the Research Setting, Participants, Instrumentation and Procedure.

**Setting**

The research was conducted at a suburban middle school near Rochester, New York, consisting of students in grades six through eight. Seventy-two percent of students identified as Caucasian, 16% identified as African American, 6% Hispanic and 5% of Asian descent. With over 1001 students in attendance, and 55% qualifying to receive free or reduced lunch, the middle school qualifies as a Title 1 school. As described by the US Department of Education, the purpose of Title 1 funding is to, “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.” (Ed.gov, 2004, page 1). The funds exist to meet the needs of students living at or near poverty levels in an effort to close the achievement gap.

**Participants**

The study sample included five female 8th grade students participating in the group counseling sessions. The sampling procedure was purposive as the students were recommended by school counselors based on a known history of instigating relationally aggressive acts against other students. The researcher held a meeting with school counselors in the building to explain the study and was provided with names of potential participants who received disciplinary action for relational aggression. Seven students were recommended to the researcher that met the criteria. Four of the students identified as African American, two of the students identified as Caucasian and one student identified as Hispanic. Five students agreed to participate in the
research study, four of which identified as African American and one of which identified as Hispanic. Two of the participants were transfer students from a nearby urban school district.

**Intervention and Materials**

The researcher facilitated a counseling group that met for a period of 8 weeks, for approximately forty minutes in length. A pre-test self-report survey titled, *What is Your RA Quotient?* (Dellasaga, 2003) was administered during the initial session and again during the final group counseling session. During each session, participants took part in lessons and activities designed to develop communication and conflict resolution skills, increase empathy and build healthy relationships. The lessons and activities were borrowed from, *Salvaging Sisterhood*, a small group counseling and classroom curriculum workbook written by Julia V. Taylor (2005).

For the purpose of the study, the counseling group represents the independent variable, while the instigators of relational aggression represent the dependent variables. The group counseling intervention is intended to have an impact on acts of relational aggression, resulting in a decrease of acts as a direct outcome of the intervention.

**Measurement Instruments**

A 50 question self-report survey entitled, *What is Your RA Quotient?*, from, *Girl Wars: 12 Strategies that will End Female Bullying* (Dellasaga, 2003), was administered during the initial group session and again during the final group counseling session. The reliability or validity of the instrument was not reported. The questions on the survey were divided into four categories intended to measure behaviors including: Aggressive Behavior, Bystander Behaviors that Support Aggression, Behaviors Checked off By the Victim and Power Behaviors that Stand
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Up to Relational Aggression. Data was recorded based on the four categories of behavior to determine whether or not the lessons and activities were effective in educating the participants and decreasing aggressive behavior, while increasing empathy.

Data Collection

Participants were invited to participate in the group by the counselor via an individual meeting. The researcher explained to the student that they were being invited to the group because they had a history of being disciplined for acts of relational aggression. The counselor presented the participant with a letter of parental consent and child assent to be taken home for parental review. The child was required to assent and the parent was required to consent in writing for the student to be eligible to participate in the study. The researcher explained to the participants that they were not required to participate in the group, and that each individual was free to leave the group at any time during the eight week session. Participants were told to place the completed survey in a box located at the front of the room, 100% of participants completed the survey. During subsequent sessions, students participated in eight group counseling sessions of lasting approximately 40 minutes in length during the regular school day.

Table 1 is a representation of each group counseling session content and topic.

Table 1

*Group Counseling Sessions and Corresponding Activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session One</td>
<td>Administer Pre-test/Establish Group Rules/Norms, Ice Breaker-Never Have I Ever</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Session One. All five group participants were present for the first session.

The researcher introduced the group by discussing rules and reiterating that group participation was voluntary and confidential. Next, the researcher asked the group if they were familiar with the term *Relational Aggression*. The researcher explained that they would be taking an anonymous survey that would not be graded. The pre-test, *What is Your RA Quotient?*, a self-report questionnaire, was distributed among participants. The students were instructed to check off or mark an X next to a behavior that had been engaged in over the last week relating to relational aggression. The researcher reiterated again that the test was not being graded and they were encouraged to respond as honestly as possible.

Next the researcher introduced an ice breaker activity to get everyone in the group acquainted with one another. The ice breaker activity titled, *Never Have I Ever* was introduced to the group. Participants were instructed to stand in a circle, and one at a time recite the phrase: "Never have I ever" followed by a statement about something that they have never experienced,
such as, “Swimming in the ocean”, or “Riding on an airplane”, or “Riding a bicycle”. Group members that have done whatever the speaker has never experienced are told to race into the middle of the circle. The phrase was repeated by each member for about ten minutes before the dismissal from group. For the closing activity, participants were each asked to identify one thought they were leaving with, which represented a “ticket out the door”.

Session Two. Four participants were in attendance, one participant was absent from school for the second group counseling session. The researcher started the group by reminding students about group rules and confidentiality. The group was then introduced to the first activity from the workbook, *Salvaging Sisterhood* (Taylor, 2005), titled, *What’s My Reputation*. The activity was a short lesson, in which, the researcher facilitated a discussion about what a reputation is and how a reputation can be positive or negative. The objectives of the lesson were intended to encourage the participants to self-disclose what they believe their own reputation to be with other students and teachers. Participants pondered how their own behaviors and actions may influence others perceptions of them. The final objective was to create an awareness of how damaging a reputation can be, especially one created by rumors or gossip. The lesson then transitioned into brainstorming what events might change a reputation and whether or not gossip or rumors can ruin or help a reputation. The group was then asked to discuss whether or not it is fair for others to be judged based on a reputation, especially if it is someone they do not know. Group members admitted to spreading rumors, and also admitted to having experienced rumors being spread about them. Participants also admitted to starting untrue rumors on the social media website Facebook or Twitter in the past year.
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Next, a worksheet titled *What’s My Reputation* was administered to the group, in which participants answered questions pertaining to their own reputation and how they believed they were perceived by friends and teachers at school.

The closing activity was a short discussion about whether or not the group would change anything about their own reputations. The researcher asked the group how the students believed that reputations were related to relational aggression. The group brainstormed ways in which participants would be able to keep their reputation positive in the future. The “ticket out the door” was to discuss briefly something new they learned during the group session.

The researcher met individually with the student, who was absent from the group, to inform of the group content that was missed and to allow her to complete the *What’s My Reputation* worksheet.

**Session 3.** All five group participants were in attendance. Session three began with the researcher welcoming the group and reminding the girls about group rules and confidentiality. Next, the researcher introduced the group activity, *Internet Gossip* taken from the workbook, *Salvaging Sisterhood* (Taylor, 2005). The researcher discussed some of the harmful effects of Internet gossip and how incidents of Internet bullying are becoming more prevalent in middle school. The objective of the lesson was intended to encourage group members to consider the destructive nature of Internet gossip. The group also identified ways in which they take part in Internet gossip and rumors; the group brainstormed possible ways in which they could change harmful Internet behavior.

The researcher distributed pencils and paper to each participant. Group members were asked to recall a recent conversation that took place over Internet chat that involved gossip about
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another classmate. Participants were instructed to write out the conversation on paper, including every part of the interaction that they could recall. After about ten minutes, group members were asked the following questions:

- Did you get tired writing out the conversations?
- Did you say something that was misunderstood?
- Have you ever written anything you wish you could take back?
- How often do you gossip online?
- Have you ever sent out an email to a group of people that you regretted sending?

Next the researcher asked the group if they could imagine hand writing everything that was sent online over the past week. Members were asked to contemplate what how much would actually be sent and whether or not they would read it first before sending an unkind rumor.

During the closing activity, the researcher asked members if they believed that they had a better understanding of the power of gossip on the online and how Internet rumors can get out of control. Methods of stopping Internet gossip were discussed and girls were challenged to hand write every conversation they would normally have on the Internet over the following week. The girls were also asked to be aware of how gossip online can get out of hand. In closing, participants “ticket out the door” was to name one way to stop Internet gossip and rumors.

**Session Four.** Three participants were present; two group members were suspended from school for the duration of one week. The researcher introduced the group by welcoming group members and restating group rules and confidentiality. The researcher questioned participants as to whether or not they had attempted to hand write out every conversation as an alternative to sending messages online. The members disclosed that they had not followed through with the challenge, but were conscious of their own Internet usage and admitted to making an attempt to refrain from gossip online. The researcher introduced the next activity titled, *But I Really Do*
Feel Bad!, adapted from the workbook, Salvaging Sisterhood (Taylor, 2005). The purpose of the lesson was to introduce the group members to the concept of empathy and identify ways in which empathy can be used in friendships.

Next, the researcher asked the group members to define empathy and use some examples of a time when they believe that they have practiced using empathy. The researcher explained to the girls the meaning of the concept empathy, to have the ability to understand what someone else is experiencing or to experience life in “someone else’s shoes”. The following situations were read by the researcher and discussed with the group:

- Imagine you are adopted and at school someone keeps making fun of you, saying your parents do not want you.
- Someone makes fun of you every day about things you cannot help.
- You just moved to a new school and nobody is friendly in the cafeteria. You try to sit down with a group of girls and you are told “no”, you cannot sit there and as you walk away the entire group is laughing.
- Your best friend will not speak to you because of a rumor that she believes you started.
- Your parents cannot afford to buy you new clothes and people call you “poor”.

The researcher asked each participant to identify if they were able to connect to any of the above scenarios, whether or not this may have happened to any of them before. Next the researcher asked to describe a time when they may have been an instigator and what they could have done differently. The group was then asked to brainstorm ways in which they could empathize with other people and their specific situations. The group took turns recording methods of practicing empathy on a chalk board located in the front of the room.

The closing activity involved processing what it was like to discuss the term empathy and think about the different scenarios. The researcher challenged the participants to attempt an empathic behavior over the next week. The “ticket out the door” was for participants to identify a time of which they may have used empathy either at school or at home.
**Session Five.** Four participants in attendance, one participant is suspended from school until the end of the academic year. The researcher introduced the group by disclosing that one participant will no longer be attending the group sessions. The members revealed that they were aware that the student would not be returning to school for the remainder of the year. Participants disclosed they heard a rumor that the member was suspended from school for cyber threats. The researcher explained to the group the severity of cyber bullying and the fact that it is not tolerated at school, no matter how the bullying started. Participants admitted feeling disappointed over the loss of their fellow group member, thus the researcher elected to stay with the group process, and discuss how the incident could have been handled differently. The group brainstormed effective methods of avoiding conflict online. In closing, the researcher asked the group members to share one thing learned during the group session.

**Session Six.** All four members were in attendance. The researcher introduced the group by reiterating group rules and confidentiality. The researcher checked in with each member and asked them to reflect on their experiences of attending the counseling group sessions so far. The researcher reviewed the past topics and explained to the participants that what they have learned so far is meant to help them be more aware of their own behaviors and how they affect others in negative ways.

Next the researcher introduced the activity, *I Messages* adapted from the *Salvaging Sisterhood* (Taylor, 2005) workbook. The researcher passed out a worksheet titled; *I Messages* intended to develop communication and confrontation skills. The researcher explained the importance of using *I Messages* during a conflict as a way to express how they are feeling rather than being told by anyone else how they should be feeling. The remainder of the worksheet
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included a series of “I feel…” statements of which participants were instructed to imagine an incident of which a conflict or argument may have occurred with a friend. The purpose of the exercise was to develop communication that is purposeful without being disrespectful or insulting while expressing feelings in a healthy way.

In closing, the participants were instructed to use *I Messages* with friends and family over the following week. The “ticket out the door” was to share one way members believed using an *I Message* would be helpful.

**Session Seven.** Three members were in attendance, one member was absent from school. The researcher introduced the group by beginning the termination process and acknowledging that the session was the second to last meeting. Group members were asked to share any thoughts or discoveries about using the *I Messages* over the last week. Two members disclosed that they had attempted to use this type of communication with a friend, but did not believe the exchange was any different than prior to the last group meeting.

Next, the researcher introduced the group activity, *I’m Sorry, So Sorry* (Taylor, 2005). The objective of the lesson was intended to encourage the group members to admit mistakes and learn how to apologize. The activity allowed group members to practice using empathy and learn to accept responsibility for mistakes.

The researcher distributed the worksheet, *The A+ Way to Make Everything OK*, taken from *Salvaging Sisterhood* (Taylor, 2005) and supplied members with markers and poster board for the activity. The worksheet described a situation in which a student named Jesse was caught cheating on a science test by copying a fellow student Rhonda’s answers. Group members were asked to contemplate the following process questions:
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• What would you do if this situation happened to you?
• Could you ever forgive your friend if she cheated off of your paper?
• Could you ever apologize if you were the one caught?
• Would you be sorry if you didn’t get caught?
• Explain how you believe Jesse should apologize to Rhonda.

The group members were then instructed to use the markers and poster board to brainstorm the previous question by each answering one of the questions. At the completion of the brainstorming activity, the researcher hung the poster board on the wall. In closing, the researcher asked the group to discuss a time when they may have hurt someone else’s feelings. They were then asked to discuss how they might use the A+ worksheet in the future. The “ticket out the door” was to share one item learned from the group session.

Session Eight. Four members were in attendance. The researcher introduced the group session by reminding the girls that this was the final group meeting. The researcher asked each girl to answer the question, “What was one important thing that you learned about yourself in our group?” Next the researcher asked the girls to discuss ways in which they will use what they have learned in the future. Members were asked if they noticed anything similar or any themes that were connected in others responses. The closing activity was for members to share one “hope for the future”, in friendships or in their school. Next, the researcher distributed the post-survey, What is Your RA Quotient? in which group members were encouraged to answer honestly and reminded that the survey was anonymous and would not be graded. After completing the final survey, members were invited to join the researcher for a pizza party.

During the final weeks after termination of the group, the researcher met with participants individually to discuss their group experience. Each individual was encouraged to ask any
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questions or disclose any thoughts or feedback regarding their experience in the group to the researcher.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of the post study questionnaires, means from the pre-test and post-test were totaled and compared to determine the impact of group counseling on instigators of relationally aggressive behaviors. Participants were administered a pre-test and post-test survey entitled, What is Your RA Quotient?. The 50 item self-report survey was divided into four categories of behaviors including: Aggressive Behaviors, Bystander Behaviors that Support Bullying, Behaviors Checked off By a Victim and Power Behaviors that Stand Up to Relational Aggression. In order to best compare the data of the pre-test and post-test surveys, a Paired t-test was conducted on each of the four behavior categories. A Paired t-test is used to compare means of the same sample before and after an intervention. The t-test results were used to determine if group counseling had an impact on negative behaviors connected to relational aggression in adolescent females. The t-test values, degrees of freedom and significance level were analyzed for each of the four categories of behaviors, and compared in the pre and post-test survey. For the purpose of the t-test, the confidence interval was set at 95%, which means that if the same population was analyzed over a period of time, the difference in numbers will rise by chance less than 5% each time the subject is tested.
Results

The researcher performed a paired t-test for each of the four behavioral categories. The paired t-test for the Aggressive Behavior category revealed statistically significant results $t(21) = 2.284$, $p = 0.033$, favoring post-test results, suggesting that aggressive behaviors decreased after the counseling group intervention. Results for the Paired t-test for the Bystander Behaviors that Support Aggression category reported $t(8) = 1.146$, $p = 0.296$ which suggested a decrease in Bystander behavior, but not enough to be significant. Results for the category of Behaviors Checked off by a Victim were $t(9) = 1.306$, $p = 0.2280$, which revealed results in favor of the post-test scores but were not considered significantly different. Lessons conducted during group counseling sessions were intended to increase levels of empathy in participants. For the category of Power Behaviors that Stand Up to Aggression, results reported $t(10) = 2.753$, $p = 0.022$, once again favoring post-test results and with students reportedly standing up to bullies.

Results indicated a decrease in aggressive behaviors according to the pre-test and post-test data, while the results were in favor of the post-test, the data reported was not significant enough to determine if the results were by chance. Results for the Power Behavior categories reported the most significance and suggested that levels of empathy were increased in participants. During the course of the group counseling interventions, one participant was placed on long-term suspension for cyber bullying. The other 80% of group members did not receive referrals for discipline during the 8 week timeframe while the research was conducted.
The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of group counseling on students that have been identified as instigators of relational aggression in an effort to decrease acts of aggression, and increase empathy levels. The development of strong female friendships can be imperative for adolescents, as tightly knit groups of friendships can outline and adhere to normal groups of behavior and allow girls to navigate and survive within the larger school environment (Zwolinski, 2008). Relational aggression can have a devastating impact on female adolescents that can impede social development throughout the life span. Young girls have a tendency to develop close, self-disclosing relationships with one another during adolescence. According to Crothers et al. (2005), female friendships have the most significance in building relationships throughout a lifetime. Studies suggested that relational aggression can lead to a pattern of negative emotions and behaviors.

Seven students were recommended to attend the group counseling sessions by counselors at the middle school. Five out of the students recommended participated in the research. The counseling curriculum consisted of lessons and activities designed to increase awareness about relational aggression, develop empathy, teach effective communication skills and resolve conflict in a healthy productive manner. The reviewed literature suggested that individuals with higher levels of empathy were more likely to take on the perspective of others and less likely to instigate aggressive acts (Lovett & Sheffield, 2006). Cognitive and emotional components of empathy were believed to reduce aggressive behavior (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004). It was hypothesized by the researcher that incidents of relationally aggressive behavior would decrease while increasing levels of empathy among participants after the conclusion of the group
counseling sessions. The group allowed the participants to contemplate how their behavior might affect others in a negative way, in a safe, non-judgmental environment, thus creating awareness of the impact of relational aggression. According to results collected by the researcher, findings from results of paired t-tests indicated a decrease in Aggressive Behaviors and Bystander Behaviors that Support Aggression. Furthermore, 80% of participants were assigned disciplinary referrals for bullying during the course of the treatment.

Scores from the paired t-test indicated a decrease in relationally aggressive behaviors; it was difficult, however, to determine how significant the impact of the group counseling curriculum was due to the small sample size of research study. Furthermore, one group member was suspended from school for the remainder of the school year, thus her results were not included in data analysis, which skews the actual results regarding the success of the program.

During the final group session, members disclosed that they enjoyed attending the group sessions and planned to make an effort to resolve arguments using the “A+” method learned during the curriculum. The girls reported enjoying coming to the group sessions and all agreed that if another session were to be facilitated by another counselor the following school year, they would be likely to return.

According to literature, very few school based interventions have been utilized by mental health professionals and counselors to combat relational aggression (Lund et al., 2009). Most studies in existence were aimed to stop physically aggressive behavior. Faculty, administrators, parents and caregivers need to have a more concrete understanding of the issue of relational aggression (Yoon et al., 2004). The findings from the current study suggest that group
THE IMPACT OF GROUP COUNSELING

counseling is a helpful method for addressing bullying behaviors. The content delivered aimed to improve participants’ empathy and to reduce their bullying behaviors.

Limitations

The small group consisting of five students (for four sessions) and four students (for the remaining four sessions), made it difficult to determine the how significant the group counseling interventions were on such a small sample size. The instrumentation used by the researcher may have also contributed to the limitations of the study. Respondents checked off or marked an X by a behavior they had engaged in over the past week. It was suspected by the researcher that a Likert type scale may have been more effective at producing a wider range of test results.

Another limitation was the number of absences from the group. Given the group was psycho educational in nature; students who missed group did not receive the full experience of learning the material with her peers. Finally, one student was long term suspended from school as a result of cyber bullying and threats made over the Internet. While this may have been beneficial for the other group members to realize how serious consequences of actions can be, it was disappointing to the researcher to have lost one member to relational aggression.

Two or three group sessions did not start on time due to incorrect pass distribution or students forgetting to come down to counseling. On three occasions, the researcher located the missing student by contacting the classroom teacher, which resulted in a delayed start time for the group session. This made it difficult for the researcher to implement the curriculum of a lesson in its entirety due to the shortened length of the group session.
Implications and Recommendations

School counselors are key stakeholders in creating awareness about relational aggression. With the proper training, school counselors can assist in training other school personnel in anti-bullying efforts (Casey-Cannon, et al., 2001; Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Fried & Fried, 2003; Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007). School counselors may consider incorporating relational aggression awareness training into the bullying curriculum in order to create a school wide awareness.

School counselors have been identified as logical resources in combating school violence and bullying given their training and roles fulfilled within school systems (Riley & McDaniel, 2000).

The research study suggests that group counseling did have an impact on relationally aggressive behaviors. In order to create a greater impact, it is proposed that several counseling groups take place throughout the school year, to reach a larger number of students. It is also proposed that the group sessions be extended for a longer period than just 8 weeks. Through continued implementation of a curriculum based on relational aggression, school counselors may see improvement. The results from this study were communicated to school counselors within the internship site; it was suggested by the researcher, that the curriculum used for this study be implemented the following academic year.
Conclusion

Relational aggression continues to be a serious problem for female middle school adolescents. In some cases, relationally aggressive behavior and victimization can deplete mental health and socio-emotional development and functioning of adolescent females (Keenan et al., 2008). Harmful effects can be devastating and long lasting, sometimes significant even through adulthood. The research study showed a change in relationally aggressive behavior among female adolescents after attending group counseling. As a result, students reported being more likely to make an attempt to resolve conflict in a healthy manner.
References


THE IMPACT OF GROUP COUNSELING


*Research In Drama Education* (14) 173-189.


http://www.readperiodicals.com/201107/2406904081.html#ixzz2THtVI1cy


Appendix A

What’s Your RA (Relational Aggression) Quotient?

* This quiz was taken from:

Girl Wars: 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying, Appendix C

Copyright © 2003 by Cheryl Dellasega, Ph.D., and Charisse Nixon, Ph.D.

Check off each time you have done the following this past week.

1. ____ Called another kid names that make fun of them?
2. ____ Said something about someone else that you knew wasn’t nice?
3. ____ Walked away when your friends started talking about someone else you knew?
4. ____ Laughed when someone else made fun of another girl?
5. ____ Wrote a note or graffiti about someone else that wasn’t nice?
6. ____ Felt put down by someone but not spoken up about it?
7. ____ Asked your friends to stop talking about another friend who wasn’t there?
8. ____ Let someone else talk you into doing something you didn’t really want to do?
9. ____ Refused to talk to someone so it would upset her?
10. ____ Invited a new girl to sit with your crowd at lunch?
11. ____ Repeated a rumor you heard about your friend?
12. ____ Started a rumor about a girl who was mean to someone else?
13. ____ Made fun of another girl’s clothes, hair, or appearance?
14. ____ Stood up for another girl your friends were making fun of?
15. ____ Sent an email to someone that said something negative you wouldn’t say in person?
16. ____ Been the target of a rumor?
17. ____ Threatened someone because she made you mad?
THE IMPACT OF GROUP COUNSELING

18. ____ Gone to sit with someone who was by herself and sad?
19. ____ Listened to gossip about another girl?
20. ____ Received messages in a chat room that hurt your feelings?
21. ____ Tried to sit with a group of girls at lunch and had been told you couldn’t?
22. ____ Excluded someone to make her feel bad?
23. ____ Cried or felt sad because of something mean another girl did to you?
24. ____ Helped another girl with her homework, even though your friends say she is stupid and will never be able to understand the assignment?
25. ____ Made a new friend?
26. ____ Been a part of a crowd of girls who watched as your leader made fun of another girl?
27. ____ Deliberately done something you knew would hurt someone?
28. ____ Took something that belonged to someone else just to bother her?
29. ____ Wanted to speak up and defend another girl, but didn’t because you were afraid?
30. ____ Had to sit by yourself in a class because your friends decided to move away from you?
31. ____ Complimented a girl you don’t know very well on her outfit?
32. ____ Tried to convince others to be mean to someone or to ignore her?
33. ____ Done something to embarrass a girl you don’t like?
34. ____ Threatened not to be friends with someone if she didn’t do what you wanted her to do?
35. ____ Stayed and watch one girl be mean to another?
36. ____ Dared someone to do something she didn’t want to do?
37. ____ Insulted someone verbally because she looked at you the wrong way?
38. ____ Wrote something unkind about a girl you didn’t like in a public place, without signing your name?
39. ____ Called a girl you don’t like an unkind name when she could hear you?
40. ____ Listened in when a friend called another girl and tried to get her to talk to you?
41. ____ Made up something to get a former friend in trouble?
42. ____ Given a friend a compliment?
43. ____ Teased a girl you know but not very well?
44. ____ Deliberately ignored a girl you don’t like when she said hi to you?
45. ____ Stayed friends with someone because you were afraid of what she would do if you weren’t?
46. ____ Been teased by someone else about the way you look?
47. ____ Excluded someone from your group because your friends told you to?
48. ____ Looked or gestured at someone in a way meant to hurt or insult her?
49. ____ Been in a chat room but not participated when a girl you knew got picked on by your friends?
50. ____ Forgiven a friend who hurt your feelings?
Appendix B

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARENTS OF MINORS

This form describes a research project being conducted at Gates Chili Middle School. The purpose of the project is to study Relational Aggression among Female Adolescents. The person conducting the research is a graduate student at The College at Brockport, State University of New York, Counselor Education Department. Relational Aggression is a form of bullying that involves gossip, rumor spreading and social alienation with the intent to cause emotional harm to an individual. You are being asked to give permission for your child to participate in a counseling group of which the research will be conducted. The group counseling sessions will take place at the middle school during the normal school day for 8 weeks. Activities and lessons will take place during each session in an effort to raise awareness about the harmful effects of relational aggression, teach healthy conflict among friends and help girls develop empathy or a better understanding of the experiences of others. Students participating in the group will take a survey entitled, “What is your Relational Aggression Quotient?” during the first and final session of which data will be collected in order to determine whether or not the counseling sessions had an effect on participant’s awareness of relational aggression. Students will not place their names on the “What is your RA Quotient” survey; therefore, identities will remain anonymous when recording data. Participants will be encouraged to keep group session content confidential, but it will be made clear that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary; your child’s grades in school will not be affected by this study. Your child is free to stop participating at any time during the study. If you agree with the following statement and give permission for your child to participate in this study, please sign below.

I understand that:

1. My child's participation is voluntary and she has the right to refuse to answer any questions on the questionnaire and has the right to refuse to participate in the group sessions. She will have a chance to discuss any questions she has about the study with the researcher at any time.

2. My child's confidentiality, regarding questionnaire results, is protected. Her name will not be written on the survey. There will be no way to connect my child to the written survey. If any publication results from this research, she would not be identified by name. Results will be given confidentially and in group-form only, so that neither the participants nor their schools can be identified. Participation will have no effect on grades status.

3. There may be minor risks associated with this study. Your child will be in a group situation, in which she may choose to share personal information with other group participants. Group participants will be encouraged to keep the information shared confidential, but confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. The benefits of this research include learning new ways of relating to other girls and a pizza party.
THE IMPACT OF GROUP COUNSELING

4. My child's participation involves attending up to 8 weeks of group sessions, once per week for 20 minutes during the normal school day during study hall period, on relational aggression and completing a written survey of 50 questions and answering those questions by checking off answers. The survey will be administered during the first and final group session. It is estimated that it will take 10-15 minutes to complete the survey. My child has been invited to participate in this group by school counselors based on a known history of instigating relational aggression among friends.

5. Approximately 5 students will be invited to take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a research project by the primary researcher. Any data collected from this study will only be reported in aggregate (group) form.

6. Data and consent forms will be kept separately in a locked filing cabinet by the researcher and will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been completed.

I understand the information provided in this form, agree to participate in this project and to have my child__________________________ participate.

child's name

If you have any questions you may contact:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary researcher</th>
<th>Faculty Advisor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Jones</td>
<td>Dr. Summer Reiner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>Department Counselor Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:Mjone3@brockport.edu">Mjone3@brockport.edu</a></td>
<td>(585)395-5497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="mailto:Sreiner@brockport.edu">Sreiner@brockport.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature of parent/guardian          Date
Appendix C

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT FOR MINORS

This form describes a research project that is taking place at Gates Chili Middle School. You are being asked to participate in a counseling group at the middle school of which activities and lessons will take place regarding Relational Aggression. Relational Aggression, is a form of bullying that involves gossip, rumor spreading or ignoring friends in order to cause emotional hurt. You have been invited to participate as you have had a history of instigating Relational Aggression among friends. The group will take place for 8 weeks, once per week during the normal school day during study hall period. Your participation in this group is voluntary and will not effect your grades at the middle school. You will be asked to complete a survey at the beginning and final session of the counseling group sessions. You will not place your name on the survey and your identity will remain anonymous. You are free to change your mind and withdraw from the counseling group at any time during the 8 week session. By signing this form, you agree to participate in the research study.

I understand the information provided in this form, agree to participate in this research project.

_________________________________________ ______________________
Signature of participant Date

_________________________________________ ______________________
Birth date of participant Date

Signature of a witness 18 years of age or older

If you have any questions you may contact:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary researcher</th>
<th>Faculty Advisor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Jones</td>
<td>Dr. Summer Reiner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Number</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:Mjone3@brockport.edu">Mjone3@brockport.edu</a></td>
<td>(585)395-5497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="mailto:Sreiner@brockport.edu">Sreiner@brockport.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

The College at Brockport
State University of New York
Grants Development Director

Date: December 13, 2012
To: Michelle Jones
From: Colleen Donaldson
Institutional Review Board Director
Re: IRB Project # 2012-59

Project Title: A Study of Relational Aggression among Adolescent Females

Your proposal, "A Study of Relational Aggression among Adolescent Females" has been approved as of 12/4/12.

You must use only the approved consent form or informational letter and any applicable surveys or interview questions that have been approved by the IRB in conducting your project. If you desire to make any changes in these documents or the procedures that were approved by the IRB you must obtain approval from the IRB prior to implementing any changes.

If you wish to continue this project beyond one year, federal guidelines require IRB approval before the project can be approved for an additional year. A reminder continuation letter will be sent to you in eleven months with the specific information that you will need to submit for continued approval of your project. Please note also that if the project initially required a full meeting of the IRB (Category III proposal) for the first review, then continuation of the project after one year will again require full IRB review.

Please contact Colleen Donaldson, IRB Administrator, Office of Academic Affairs, at (585) 395-5118 or cdonald@brockport.edu immediately if:
- the project changes substantially,
- a subject is injured,
- the level of risk increases
- changes are needed in your consent document, survey or interview questions or other related materials.

Best wishes in conducting your research.
Directions: Your reputation, simply defined, is what other people think about you. It may be good, bad, or a little of both. Answer the following questions in one sentence.

★ What do your best friends think about you?

★ What happened to make them think that?

★ Is it  ❑ TRUE  ❑ FALSE  ❑ KINDA BOTH?
   If it is false, what would have caused your friends to believe that?

★ What do your peers think about you?

★ What happened to make them think that?

★ Is it  ❑ TRUE  ❑ FALSE  ❑ KINDA BOTH?
   If it is false, what would have caused your friends to believe that?

★ What do your teachers think about you?

★ What happened to make them think that?

★ Is it  ❑ TRUE  ❑ FALSE  ❑ KINDA BOTH?
   If it is false, what would have caused your friends to believe that?
Appendix F

Internet Gossip

66

LESSON 5: GIRL TALK

Time: 45 minutes

Objectives:

- Girls will consider how destructive gossiping on the internet is.
- Girls will learn to identify ways they take part in gossiping on the internet.

Materials:

- Notebook paper
- Writing utensil
- “Declaration of Me!” Cards

Opening: 5 minutes

- Journal discussion from previous week

Activity: 35 minutes

- Ask the girls about personal experiences with gossiping on IMs or email.
- Ask each girl to think about the last conversation they had over IM that was gossip in nature. Pair the girls up and have them physically write down what they would IM each other – back and forth. Tell group members NOT to talk!
- Chances are, in about ten minutes, the girls will be tired of this activity. If not, stop them. Discuss the following points:
  - Did you get tired of writing out the conversation?
  - Did you say something that was taken out of context?
  - Have you ever written anything you wish you could take back?
  - How much do you gossip on the internet?
  - Have you ever sent out an email to a lot of people that you wish you didn’t? What happened?
Appendix G

**Say What?**

LESSON 7: COMMUNICATION & CONFRONTATION

**Time: 45 minutes**

**Objectives:**
- Girls will learn how to be more assertive and to constructively use “I messages” to express their feelings.
- Girls will learn to listen to each other by paraphrasing.

**Opening: 5 minutes**
- Journal discussion from previous week

**Materials:**
- Feelings worksheet from previous week
- “I messages” worksheet
- Writing utensil
- “Declaration of Me!” Cards

**Activity: 35 minutes**
- Have the girls reflect on the group so far. Review the past topics. Explain to girls that we have learned thus far about feelings and have become more aware of the negative ways we sometimes act.
- Explain to the girls what an “I message” is – an effective way to communicate what we feel, want, and/or need. Tell the girls that “I messages” are a way to place blame, but to talk about how they feel.
- Give girls a few examples of “I messages.”
- Hand back the feelings worksheet and “I messages” worksheet.
- Have each girl complete the worksheet, using examples from previous discussions and/or role plays.
- Discuss appropriate vs. inappropriate times to use “I messages.”
- Have each girl pick a “Declaration of Me!” Card.
- Thank the girls for sharing!
"I" Messages

LESSON 7: COMMUNICATION & CONFRONTATION

"I messages" are cool because you say exactly how YOU feel! Nobody can tell you how you should feel. Now, let's practice using them.

You must ALWAYS begin with saying "I." Not you, me, she, he, etc. REMEMBER, by saying "I" – YOU avoid BLAMING.

After the "I," state your feeling (you can use your feeling worksheet if you need help with a word).

"I feel__________________________." 

* Next, tell the person what made you feel that way.

"I feel______________________, because__________________________." 

OR  
"I feel______________________, when__________________________." 

* NOW – tell the person why you feel that way.

"I feel______________________, when you__________________________, BECAUSE__________________________." 

* FINALLY, after the "I message" tell the person what you want.

"I feel______________________, when you__________________________, BECAUSE__________________________." 

AND “I want you to__________________________.”  

OR “I need you to__________________________.”

Practice this everywhere! With your siblings, parents, teachers and friends. It is a great way to talk about your feelings without gossiping or getting angry, which can lead to a serious friendship implosion!
Appendix I

The A+ Way to Make Everything OK

LESSON 6: EMPATHY

Directions: Choose two girls to act out the following role play and discuss the questions following the role play.

Jesse got caught cheating on her science test and is in serious trouble. Her parents are mad at her, her science teacher does not trust her anymore, and her best friend, Rhonda, won't talk to her because she was looking at her test! Rhonda got accused of letting Jesse cheat, but she really had no idea! Jesse told the principal that it was all her fault, but Rhonda is still really mad. Jesse was up really late and forgot to study and at first does not see the big deal; it was just a stupid science test! After a few days, Jesse begins to realize what a big mistake she made. Rhonda won't sit next to her in any of her classes and is still really mad at Jesse.

• What would you do if this situation happened to you?
• Could you ever forgive your friend if she cheated off of your paper?
• Could you ever apologize if you were the one caught?
• Would you be sorry if you didn’t get caught? Why or why not?
• Demonstrate how Jesse should apologize to Rhonda.

Let’s learn “The A+ Way to Make Everything OK”!

• Accept that you made a mistake, it’s OK – we all do!
• Admit to your friend that you are responsible.
• Ask to speak to your friend alone when there will be no interruption.
• Apologize to your friend for hurting her feelings.
• Affirm your friendship.

Now, using the A+ Method, how could Jesse apologize to Rhonda?

Next, creatively design an “A+ Way to Make Everything OK” poster. When you are finished, hang it up somewhere that you can look at it in case you forget!

When you are drawing, discuss times when you have been hurt or hurt somebody else and had to apologize! Using the “A+ Way”, how could you apologize differently?