

# School Safety Alert

School Principal's Legal  
Alert  
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*Three books deal with  
cliques and aggression  
among girls.*

*"Odd Girl Out: The  
Hidden Culture of  
Aggression in Girls," by  
Rachel Simmons  
(Harcourt, \$25).*

*"Queen Bees &  
Wannabes," by Rosalind  
Wiseman (Crown, \$24).*

*"The Secret Lives of  
Girls," by Sharon Lamb  
(The Free Press, \$24).*

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## Relational Aggression: A New Twist to an Old Activity

Yesterday Susan was laughing with friends over lunch. Today she's sitting alone in a corner of the cafeteria. Last week you noticed kids barking at Lisa while she walked the hallways between classes. And the guidance counselors tell you they're seeing a steady stream of girls who are upset over a sudden turn in their peer relationships and don't know why it happened or what to do about it.

Should you dismiss the seemingly petty dramas that some girls act out on a daily basis in the cafeteria and hallways, and in class? It's possible you have a more serious problem on your hands. It's a form of bullying called "relational aggression." And the victims take it just as seriously as physical abuse.

Relational aggression is behavior that uses social relationships to harm or retaliate against others. This could include spreading rumors, purposefully ignoring a peer and telling others to do the same, hurting another person's feelings, or tarnishing a peer's social status.

Research in this area is relatively new, though the phenomenon certainly is not. Aggression – behavior intended to harm others – takes many forms. The physical forms have received the most attention. And since girls tend to be less forceful than boys, administrators sometimes view them as less aggressive. Not true, researchers are now saying. School-aged girls are far more aggressive than once thought. It's just that their preferred vehicle for aggression is social relationships.

It's a little hard to put your finger on this type of bullying – after all it's not like the girls are fighting in the hallways. But administrators, teachers, parents, and even victims can do something about it. The following advice is adapted from The Ophelia Project, a Pennsylvania-based organization that strives to create a safe social environment in schools.

### What to Tell Parents

- Involve girls in activities outside school so they're exposed to different groups of people.
- Encourage relationships with adults who appreciate them for who they are.
- Always be available to talk to girls; never make

them feel their issues aren't important.

- Talk about both sides of the issue. Girls will tell you about being the victim of aggression, but won't tell you when they initiate or participate in it.
- If your daughter is the "girl in the middle," firmly but lovingly encourage her to take the high road and support the victim or at least not to take part in the aggression. This is hard for girls because they may be the next targets if they don't go along, but that doesn't change what is the right thing to do.
- Be a good role model. Don't gossip about anybody, including other parents of their children, even when they may be aggressors against your child.

### What to Tell Girls

- Remember that everyone feels his/her social life is missing something – you're not the only one.
- Reach out to help others when they're the victims. Do what you think is right, not what's "cool" or acceptable.
- Reject the idea of revenge. Remember that you're a bigger person for being able to do what's right, rather than trying to become more popular.

### What to Tell Teachers

- Work inside your school to adopt zero tolerance for relational aggression.
- Discuss techniques to defuse relational aggression with other teachers. Attend relational aggression workshops or read up on the topic.
- Make sure all your students know what relational aggression is, how it hurts, and that it is not acceptable in your class.
- Develop a behavioral contract with the students to stop hurting each other.
- Elicit students' help in developing a motto for the positive treatment of everyone.
- Be a positive role model of values and behaviors.
- Don't ignore children who hurt each other.