Chapter 14

How Can We Help?
Indirect Aggression among Girls and What to Do about It

Laurence Owens
Flinders University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, human aggression was thought to be almost entirely the preserve of males. This is because males usually displayed overt physical and verbal behaviour that is noticed. Over the last two decades, researchers have broadened their conceptualisations of aggression to include more indirect forms. This research revealed that girls, especially in the teenage years, exhibit more indirect aggression than boys and that this form of aggression is very hurtful to girls. Interventions are therefore important but because of the covert nature of indirect aggression, they are proving elusive. This chapter summarises the research on indirect aggression, including work of the author, and the recent efforts to find effective interventions. Interventions will need to take account of the nature of teenage girls' friendships, the functions of indirect aggression, and girls' own relational strengths and language and social skills.

INTRODUCTION

Until the late 1980s aggression research rarely considered female aggression. Exceptions were two experimental studies (Feshbach, 1969; Feshbach & Sones, 1971) relating to aggressive responses to a newcomer, which revealed that girls used more exclusion and rejection than boys. This lack of consideration of female aggression was likely due to the focus on observable measurements of overt aggression, usually physical and verbal. In the late 1980s, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, and Peltonen (1988)

undertook a study in Finland which broadened the conceptualisations of aggression to include not only direct physical and verbal aggression, but also indirect forms such as spreading rumours about others and excluding peers from the group. When they measured aggression in this way they found that while boys generally exhibited more physical- and verbal-aggression, girls used more indirect-aggression. Through the 1990s, Bjorkqvist and colleagues conducted a number of studies exploring age and sex differences in aggression where they replicated their original finding that girls were more indirectly

aggressive than boys and they also found age differences with older girls being even more indirectly aggressive than their male class-mates (Bjorkqvist, 1994; Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992; Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Lagerspetz & Bjorkqvist, 1994). On the other side of the Atlantic, a team of American researchers also began to investigate female aggression, and they called the more typical female behaviour relational aggression (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Their studies were far—ranging, involving correlations with psycho-social adjustment and they explained the behaviour by recourse to social information processing theory. Another U.S. research team investigated a similar phenomenon which they called social aggression (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Paquette & Underwood, 1999) (see also Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariepy, 1989). Following the lead of Bjorkqvist et al., Owens and colleagues in Australia found that teenage girls were more indirectly aggressive than their male classmates (Owens, 1996; Owens, Daly, & Slee, 2005). Owens and colleagues then studied this behavior in an intensively qualitative way to gain a more detailed understanding of the nature of teenage girls' aggression (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000a, 2000b; Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000). The explosion of research into this phenomenon resulted in a number of controversies: What is the correct definition and term — indirect, relational or social aggression? What explains this phenomenon — deficiencies in social information processing or socialisation processes or developmental factors? Is the behaviour predominantly reactive or is it deliberate and planned? What is the best way to intervene to redress this form of aggression? This chapter traces the history of research into indirect aggression, examines the controversies mentioned above, and examines the question of how best to intervene to redress indirect aggression.

BACKGROUND

Aggression has generally been defined as behaviour that is intended to hurt or harm others. In the past, the most reliable way of measuring or assessing aggressive behavior was considered to be via observational methods. Observation is concerned with what is visible: in relation to aggressive behaviour this meant direct or overt physical- and verbal- behaviours, such as hitting, kicking, shouting, and swearing at another. Observational techniques are not likely to reveal more hidden or covert behaviours such as spreading of rumours or organising other students to harass individuals. However, in 1988, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist and Peltonen (1988) developed a 24-item peer report instrument called the Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales (DIAS), which measured direct physical- (7 items) and verbal (5 items)- aggression, and also indirect-behaviours, such as talking about others and excluding peers from the social group (12 items). The authors defined indirect aggression as: "a kind of social manipulation: the aggressor manipulates others to attack the victim, or, by other means, makes use of the social structure in order to harm the target person, without being personally involved in attack." (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992). The authors believed that peers would be the ones who would know about others' indirect aggression that could not be seen by outside observers.

Lagerspetz et al. (1988) asked participants to estimate the amount of aggression perpetrated by their same-sex class-mates. Because this instrument did not rely on behaviours that researchers could observe but instead on reports by the students engaged in peer relationships, it was able to reliably tap the amounts of the more subtle socially manipulative behaviours, and so served to broaden existing conceptualisations of aggression. In their studies using this instrument, the Finnish research team (e.g., Bjorkqvist, 1994; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, et al., 1992; Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992) consistently found that while

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